

Research Project

In the footsteps of Sarasin and Christ: digitization of fern collections at the herbaria in Basel and Zürich

Third-party funded project

Project title In the footsteps of Sarasin and Christ: digitization of fern collections at the herbaria in Basel and Zürich

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The world's herbaria document the diversity of plant life across the globe and through time. Many of the first descriptions of plants were based on material stemming from rather adventurous collection expeditions and remarkable personalities. Therefore, many historic collections are simultaneously of exceptional cultural, historic, and scientific value, often interwoven with colonial history. This is particularly true for tropical regions.

The Sarasin cousins (Karl Friedrich (Fritz), 1859-1942; and Paul Benedict, 1856-1929) from Basel are such remarkable personalities with profound impacts both on cultural and natural history. Being born wealthy in the upper societal echelons of Basel, their gay love was taboo, prompting them to spend their fortunes to make a career as scientific explorers in Asia, primarily in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Celebes (now Sulawesi, Indonesia) and New Caledonia (incl. the loyalty Islands, where Fritz was the first-ever plant collector; Schär 2015). By traveling and collecting in the largely uncontacted interiors of these places collaborating with colonial rulers, their expeditions had a political note, but also resulted in profound impacts on natural history. The collecting expeditions of the Sarasin cousins resulted in rich collections; estimated at ca. 300'000 specimens of gastropods, arthropods, birds, mammals, and spiders, as well as 680 ethnographic objects and 600 photographs from Celebes alone (Schär 2015). These specimens form important parts of the collections of the Natural History Museum and Museum of Cultures in Basel.

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Strikingly less known, but equally important, are the estimated 3000 botanical collections of the Sarasin cousins. These specimens were sent back to Switzerland, where they were examined and identified by specialists, resulting in a flurry of new species. Hermann Christ (1833-1933) of Basel, the world's primary fern specialist at the time, despite being professionally a lawyer, described at least 36 fern species from Celebes alone ("Filices Sarasinianae", Christ, 1894-97). These plants were then donated to the Herbarium of the University of Basel, but remained unincorporated. In Zurich, Hans Schinz (1858-1941) and colleagues treated the angiosperms from New Caledonia, a significant part of which were then donated to Basel for reasons unknown. The importance of the Sarasin collections is underlined by regular re-discovery of Type material (e.g. Chen et al. 2021), always in association with Christ's previous

work on these specimens. Overall, Christ's influence on fern taxonomy is paramount, already from his ca. 310 papers and ca. 1800 basionyms that he published.

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