

The Genius of Genetics
Abbey of St Thomas
Mendlovo náměstí 1
CZ-603 00 Brno
Czech Republic

PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A NEW GENETICS CENTRE FOR THE PUBLIC AND SCIENTISTS
Exhibition opening in May 2002, BRNO, CZECH REPUBLIC

In Spring 2002, the city of Brno in the Czech Republic will be focused on genetics. From 16 to 19 May, the Abbey of St Thomas, the home of Gregor Mendel, is hosting the European Molecular Biology Organisation workshop entitled "Genetics after the Genome" with top international scientists attending. Among them will be Nobel Prize winners Christianne Nüsslein-Volhard and Eric Wieschaus. Following the meeting, a public exhibition, "The Genius of Genetics – A Celebration of Gregor Mendel through Science and Art" will open and pay tribute to his life and work and the beginnings of genetics.

Gregor Mendel, once the Abbot of St. Thomas in Brno, is regarded as the 'father of genetics' because of his cross-breeding experiments with peas. The concept of the exhibition, 'The Genius of Genetics, a Celebration of Gregor Mendel through Science and Art' is to combine the creative presentation of historical documents and objects with modern scientific images and contemporary works of art, including an interactive website. Historical items will be presented to the public, some for the first time.

The public will also be able to see various parts of the Augustinian Abbey with its magnificent library, basilica and newly restored refectory, as well as Mendel's garden and bee house. The exhibition will appeal to a wide variety of interests: science, art, architecture, religion and gardening.

The Brno initiative of the Vereinigung zur Förderung der Genomforschung

The lead body of this fascinating venture is the Vereinigung zur Förderung der Genomforschung (VFG – an organisation that promotes genetic research) in Vienna, Austria. As Professor Kim Nasmyth, co-ordinator of the project and director of the Research Institute of Molecular Pathology in Vienna explains, "The intellectual roots of genetics date back to the

19th century and to Mendel's studies in the Augustinian Abbey. His research stimulated a totally new experimental approach in biology."

The EMBO workshop from 16 to 19 May 2002 and the Gregor Mendel exhibition are the first steps towards establishing the Mendel Life Science Centre, the Mendel Museum of Genetics and, eventually, a research centre within the Abbey of St Thomas. Professor Nasmyth is confident that through the initiative "the European scientific endeavours in the field of genome-research will gain a special stimulus." The present abbot, Lucas Evzen Martinec, initiator of the exhibition could even imagine the development of a new world centre of genetics.

Genetics in between science and art

The exhibition is being organised by an international team of curators and scientists. Two highly esteemed curators, Marina Wallace, senior lecturer at Central St. Martin's College of Art and Design in London and Martin Kemp, Professor of the History of Art at Oxford University, were invited to develop the concept. Both are directors of Artakt, which generates projects combining art and science researching and mounting innovative exhibitions that illustrate history from a modern perspective and uses the newest technologies.

The architectural design of the exhibition architecture is being handled by the well-known Czech architect Eva Jiricna, who also works in London. Her models reveal modern architectural elements while retaining the original substance of the Abbey, which dates back to the 14th century. Some of the contemporary artistic installations are being created for the exhibition by international artists Christine Borland, Sue Brind, Susan Derges, Matilda Downs, Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, Herman de Vries, Rob Kessler and Gerhard Lang.

Ethical questions

The rector of the Masaryk University of Brno, Professor Jiří Zlatuška, is certain that many questions will arise while visiting the exhibition, "Gregor Mendel's discoveries represent the first piece of a mosaic of knowledge in genetic mechanisms. They have also revealed unthought-of possibilities in the field of the discovery of biological substances of living organisms and the utilisation of these findings at the beginning of the 20th century. Important ethical questions also occur in connection with Mendel's discoveries: "How far are we, as scientists, allowed to use this knowledge?" The exhibition, however, will answer many questions about Mendel's research, the connections of his work with the development of cell theory, and how his discoveries relate to us.

International collaborations

Prof Zlatuska is very proud of the co-operation of his university with the international team. "Scientific variety of different impulses and findings do not know national borders. The diversity of the surroundings presents a fertile ground for new ideas. Therefore, I am very pleased that the exhibition is being produced by friends and supporters of Mendel's work. And I am also pleased that in this project the connection between Vienna and Brno is working so well." Abbot Martinec is convinced that not only the Abbey of St. Thomas but also Brno itself will profit from the project.

The project has the full support of the president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel and Abbot Lukas Evzen Martinec. The team are in process of raising 1.000.000 € for this high-profile international enterprise.

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Notes to Editors

Sponsors

Boehringer Ingelheim Austria and the Vereinigung zur Förderung der Genomforschung, Vienna

Gregor Johann Mendel (1822-1884) was born into a farming family. He entered the Augustinian monastery and became a teacher. Between 1856 and 1863 he experimented with and analysed pea plants that were the foundations of the laws of heredity. His work was published in 1866 but the significance of his research was not appreciated until 1900. <http://www.netspace.org/MendelWeb>

Artakt is an organisation that generates projects combining art and science researching and mounting innovative exhibitions that illustrate history from a modern perspective and uses the newest technologies. Its directors, Professor Martin Kemp and Ms Marina Wallace were responsible for the highly-acclaimed exhibition, '*Spectacular Bodies*,' at the Hayward Gallery in London last year.

Information about Brno and the Czech Republic: www.antor.com/Czech_Republic and www.visitczechia.cz

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