

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

PRESS RELEASE

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CONTEMPORARY GLASS ARTWORKS REFLECTS ORIGINS OF GENETICS

Glass spheres, blown and stretched to produce new forms, represent plant cells dividing and splitting in a unique new exhibition of genetics in the Czech Republic. *'The Genius of Genetics, a celebration of Gregor Mendel through science and art'*, which opens to the public on 21 May 2002, will pay tribute to Gregor Mendel (1822-1884), the abbot of the Augustinian abbey, who experimented with peas and developed the early concepts of heredity in the 19th Century.

The British artist, Rob Kessler, who has created the glass forms, is one of seven contemporary artists from around Europe who are contributing to the exhibition, which will combine modern works of art with historical items to be displayed in the Abbey of St Thomas in the town of Brno, two hour's drive from Prague and Vienna.

Gregor Mendel is regarded as the father of genetics and the exhibition is the first phase of a major initiative to reinstate the abbey where Mendel lived and worked as an international symbol for genetics. The curators are Ms Marina Wallace, co-director with Professor Martin Kemp and, directors of the art-science company, Artakt, and Dr Caterina Albano who were responsible for the highly-acclaimed exhibitions, *'Spectacular Bodies,'* at the Hayward Gallery in London last year and *'Head On: Art with the Brain in Mind'* currently at the Science Museum in London. A comprehensive catalogue with essays by Ms Wallace, Professor Kemp and the renowned geneticist, Professor Luca Cavalli Sforza, and a forward by Professor Kim Nasmyth, also a geneticist and the originator of the project in Vienna, will accompany the exhibition.

There is a remarkable collection of items and documents belonging to Mendel in Brno, such as scientific slides, photographs and the plans for the glasshouse in the abbey garden but until now they have not been fully displayed. Bringing art and science together, the exhibition merges history, an interactive web site and new works of art to generate broad appeal to the public and specialists alike.

The exhibition is in three sections focusing respectively on Mendel's biography: his background and motivations; his research interests and methodology; and his research, the enigma of generation and the development of cell theory. The modern images, all exploring aspects of genetics, include works by Christine Borland, Susan Derges, Herman de Vries, Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, Matilda Downs and Gerhard Lang. "The artists share a fascination with the patterns observed in nature and with the scientific search for explanations of physical and biological systems," says Ms Wallace.

Eva Jiricna, the renowned Czech architect who is based in London and Prague, is designing the environment for the exhibition. "The setting and the personality of Gregor Mendel make this a very exciting project," says Ms Jiricna. "As a little boy, he grew up in a small village with no great aspirations but as an adult, through sheer determination in his research, what he discovered changed the world."

The long-term plans include the restoration of Mendel's experimental garden and the creation of a genetics museum and a conference centre within the abbey in Brno, which would provide a dynamic new forum for schoolchildren, the general public as well as researchers to discuss the ethical implications of genetic research.

The originators of the project are Professor Kim Nasmyth, director of the Research Institute of Molecular Pathology in Vienna, Austria, and Anna Nasmyth, with the support of leading international figures in the world of genetics as well as the present abbot of the abbey, Lukáš Evžen Martinec, the City of Brno and the president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel. The organising body of the exhibition is the Vereinigung zur Förderung der Genomforschung (an Austrian society for the promotion of genome research) in Vienna. They need to raise 1.5 million Euros for this high-profile international enterprise.

Mendel's remarkable work was barely recognised during his lifetime. His observations were first published in 1866. In the years following his discovery, genetics has been transformed from laboratory science into a major area of public excitement. Ms Wallace says, "We want people to rediscover the excitement of genetic science, as it emerged 150 years ago."

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Notes to Editors

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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. Martin Kemp is Professor of the History of Art at Oxford University. Marina Wallace is Senior Lecturer at Central St Martin's College of Art and Design in London.

Eva Jiricna Architects is an architectural and design practice based in London with an international portfolio of residential, commercial and retail interiors; furniture, products and exhibitions; private and public buildings. The practice is at the forefront of innovation in form and technology, applying the classic principles of design in a thoroughly modern language. Eva Jiricna, a Czech born architect based in London for over 30 years, founded the practice in 1985, and now has a satellite office in Prague. Her contribution to architecture and design has been recognised over the years with a C.B.E. in the Honours List 1994, election to the Royal Academy (R.A), and designation as an RDI (Royal Designer for Industry)." www.ejal.com

The artists

Christine Borland, UK, *A Treasury of Human Inheritance, Huntington's Disease*, 2001. Silver, steel, agates.

Susan Derges, UK, *Vessel*, 2001, and *Pollen Store*, 1994. Two series of photograms

herman de vries, The Netherlands, *Ilex Canariensis*, 1994. 2400 samples of earth.

Matilda Downs, UK, *Map of Cow Markings*, 2001. Silk screen print with pencil on paper. *Atlas of Cows*, 2001. Screen print, pencil and photo lithography

Cornelia Hesse-Hönegger, Switzerland, *Flies* (*Drosophila melanogaster*) red eyes, 1986, *Flies* (*Drosophila melanogaster*) wings growing out of the eyes 1986, *Flies* (*Drosophila melanogaster*), eye painted back, 1986-87. X-rays at Zoological Institute at University of Zürich

Rob Kessler, UK, *On Closer Inspection*, 2000. Gilt prints on china. *Mitosis*, 2002, Blown-glass forms.

Gerhard Lang, Germany, *The Typical Marking of the Cow Herd in Sch-ntal*, 1994
Photographs and large composite

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

Pictures of Brno and images of the design concepts are available.

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