



MUSEO DI STORIA NATURALE

corso Venezia 55, Milan | www.museodistorianaturalemilano.it

GIORGIO JAN (Vienna 1791 - Milan 1866), of Hungarian origin, devoted himself from 1812 to the study of the natural sciences, and soon became assistant professor of botany at the museum in Vienna.

After only two years, at the express request of Duchess Marie Louise, he moved to the University of Parma, where he took over the direction of the Botanical Garden and the teaching of botany at the age of only 25. From then on he felt Italian in all respects and devoted himself to botany, entomology and palaeontology.

In 1832 he met the Milanese nobleman Giuseppe De Cristoforis (1803-1837), with whom he established a society for the study and dissemination of the natural sciences. Their combined collections were housed in ten rooms of De Cristoforis' house in Milan and were the original core around which the Civic Museum of Natural History, the city's first museum, developed. It was founded on 7 May 1838, by an agreement with the Municipality of Milan, and was soon transferred to the former Convent of Santa Marta, which no longer exists. The steady growth of the collections prompted the city administration to designate Palazzo Dugnani as its new headquarters, located in the Public Gardens at the side of Via Manin, where it remained until the construction of the new building in Corso Venezia, the museum's present premises.

At the age of sixty-two, Jan began to take an interest in snakes, taking as his motto

Dante's verse "The serpents were my friends from that time forth". He became an authority recognised worldwide and increased the collection from 110 species in 1847 to 940 in 1857, working with an extensive network of scholars around the world, who sent specimens to have them identified.

This enormous amount of material was used for the description of numerous hitherto unknown species and led to the publication of a monumental work on snakes from every part of the world, the *Iconographie générale des Ophidiens*, admirably illustrated by his assistant Ferdinando Sordelli. Unfortunately, Jan did not see the end of his work, published by instalments at his own expense between 1860 and 1881 and completed by Sordelli, since he died in 1866. Few complete copies of the work remain in libraries around the world, but in recent years the museum has issued a reprint edited by Stefano Scali. One copy is in the museum's library, along with a full set of proofs.

The collection remained on public display until August 1943, when a violent Allied air raid destroyed the museum and most of the collections it contained. For many years it was thought that Jan's collection had been completely destroyed, but patient research is now unearthing some specimens that were saved from the fire. A street in the centre of Milan, near Porta Venezia, has been named after Giorgio Jan. ■