MRS. PLES & TAUNG VISIT NEW YORK

One morning in early April, a darkened limousine and police escort waited at New York's Kennedy Airport to take an important group of first-class passengers into the city, a group which included the world's most famous six-year-old. Despite their 19-hour flight, the passengers were in remarkably good shape. The only victim of jet-lag was the man responsible for their safe-conduct from Johannesburg, Phillip Tobias of the University of the Witwatersrand. Tobias was at the same time the oldest and the youngest member of the group, as the others were all fossils, human ancestors who had died thousands or even millions of years ago in the youth or prime of their lives. Carefully packed in a specially constructed case, the "Taung baby" and others were destined for the American Museum of Natural History, their first and perhaps last visit to the New World, to take part in a major exhibition: "Ancestors: Four Million Years of Humanity."

Once at the museum, the fossils joined their counterparts from all over the world in a series of study sessions where scholars and students were able to compare them directly, often for the first time. Here "Mrs. Ples.", the first adult member of the genus Australopithecus to come to light, met her descendants of many generations (about 13×10^4). One such descendant, the original Neanderthal, had spent almost 90 years in a German museum before Mrs. Ples was released from her rocky matrix in South Africa. And early members of our own species, Homo sapiens, from Europe, Asia, Australia, and Africa reposed on a common table for the inspection of the scientists. Those few who could not attend in person were represented by excellent casts.

The scientists attracted almost as much attention as the fossils. Their age range was more restricted but still impressive, from Raymond Dart, 92, who described the first australopithecine fossil in 1925, to young scientists in their twenties from all over the world, like Berhane Asfaw of Ethiopia. Wu Jukang, of the Institute of Vertebrate Palaeontology and Palaeoanthropology in Beijing, who is responsible for ongoing work in China at sites like Zhoukoudian (Chou Kou Tien), and Mary Leakey, who carries on her work at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, were present. Also included were Henri and Marie-Antoinette de Lumley, excavators of the earliest French members of our genus at the site of Arago in the Pyrenees, Donald Johanson and Tim White, Glyn Isaac, David Pilbeam, Elwyn Simons, and about one hundred others around the world.

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The scientific debate continued formally and informally for eight days. New fossils of a distant ancestor from Kenya and of a more recent ancestor from India were presented for the first time. The discovery of the earliest "digging sticks", polished bones about 1.5 million years old from Swartkrans in South Africa, suggested that exploitation of deeply buried large roots and bulbs may have been an important factor in the early hominid diet, facilitating their use of open-country environments. The relationship between Lucy and Mrs. Ples was hotly debated, as was the relationship between humans and the great apes. Cut marks made by stone tools were pointed out on a cast of the recently discovered Bodo skull from Ethiopia, implying that this ancient pioneer of Homo sapiens was scalped before becoming a fossil. The fate of the western European Neanderthals and their genetic contribution to modern Europeans was also reviewed in the light of recent finds of Neanderthals in France and Yugoslavia in the "Upper Palaeolithic" levels.

But the stars of the show remain the original fossils. They will be on exhibit until September 9 at the American Museum of Natural History, before disbanding to return to their respective home institutions. Their pearly teeth, so like our own and yet so different, and their delicate colors absorbed from the earth in which they have lain for millenia rivet our attention, and their vacant eye sockets dare us to explore the enigma of our past. Far from the ancient African savanna or the caves of the last ice age, our ancestors await our scrutiny in New York.

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