

The Museum of Vision Marks 30 Years

Anniversary offerings include online exhibits

By René Luthe, Senior Associate Editor

■ As part of its mission to preserve the history of ophthalmology, the Museum of Vision this year marks its 30th anniversary with a new searchable database and oral histories on its Web site, as well as special online exhibits. While the Web site (www.museumofvision.org) was launched in the mid 1990s to complement the actual Museum in San Francisco, it underwent its first major makeover this year.

"It hadn't changed much until this year, when we really rethought what people needed to see on the site," Jenny E. Benjamin, the Museum's director, explains.



Ophthalmic instruments from years gone by are of interest to today's eye surgeons. IMAGES COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF VISION

The additions were no easy task, as the Museum's collection of artifacts numbers approximately 38,000. Photographing and cataloging the items required years of effort in order to make the online database viable. Currently, the number of items in the database is "only" 18,000.

"So we have about 20,000 items that are still waiting to be placed online. I tell people who are disappointed that what we have online is only a taste of what's here, so just wait," Ms. Benjamin says.

Launched by the Foundation of the American Academy of Ophthalmology in 1980 shortly after its own inception, the Museum was the Foundation's first major project.

The Museum does not have a purchase fund, so its artifacts are all donations. Most come from ophthalmologists, though eyecare companies have also donated items.

"Usually, things come from doctors who are closing their practices," Ms. Benjamin explains. "Practices are often handed down from one generation to the next, so some of these items are family heirlooms."

Other items, such as amulets from ancient Egypt, are considerably older. More recently, the Museum received the personal papers of Marshall Parks, MD, considered the founder of pediatric ophthalmology, as well as the contents of his office.

"We're not just collecting things, we are collecting stories," Ms. Benjamin explains. "We are trying to keep an entire picture of the history of ophthalmology."

In keeping with that goal, another important addition to the Web site is previously unpublished biographies and an oral histories section. Past exhibits can also be found on the site, including the popular "To Fool the Eye," a collection of "quack" items. It was very popular with the public when the exhibit was at the Museum, Ms. Benjamin says, but physicians tend to favor examining the old-style instruments that are also displayed online.



A vintage illustration in the collection shows instruction in instilling eye drops. IMAGES COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF VISION

Some backstories are familiar. A World War II airplane canopy in an exhibit case with an original Ridley lens, for example, immediately conjures the story of Dr. Harold Ridley working for the Royal Air Force during WWII when he noticed that shards from airplane canopies made out of a particular plastic were well-tolerated by the eye.

"Of course, Dr. Ridley took that and an idea for replacing the lens during cataract surgery, and created the intraocular lens implant," says Ms. Benjamin. "He went straight to the company that made those airplane canopies and said, 'I want that plastic.' When physicians see those items together, they exclaim, 'Oh!' and know the story without being told."

The next exhibit, celebrating the Museum's 30th anniversary, will debut at the AAO's 2010 meeting in October. Ms. Benjamin anticipates that it will be online by November, as well as installed in the Museum.