



## Creationist Museums in South America: New Venues, Old Formats

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This article introduces the recently established creationist museums in South America managed by the Seventh-day Adventist Geoscience Research Institute in Loma Linda, California. The article raises a series of questions about this phenomenon and what it might mean for our understandings of the relationships between science and religion and the public's relationship to both. It compares the Ibero-American museums to their counterparts in the United States, followed by the history of creationism in Brazil and how this Brazilian development connects to recent South American Adventist creationism endeavors. Based on secondary sources and internet research, it focuses on the new Argentinean creationist museum established in 2023 in Libertador San Martín, Entre Ríos, analyzing how the instructions issued from Loma Linda are put into practice in that particular setting.

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## Introduction

Many authors have noted the major changes in the pattern of religiosity in the traditionally Roman Catholic population of Ibero-America during the early twenty-first century. For instance, in Brazil, the data from the 2010 census indicate an increase in the number of evangelical church members whose practices are closer to preaching a literal interpretation of the Bible (Silva and Mortimer 2014; de Sousa 2016). This shift is accompanied by the expansion of belief in creationism or special creation, i.e., the claim that the universe and life were created by divine intervention as told in the book of Genesis. This has generated public controversy in relation to creationism in Brazilian education, a debate that went public through the national and international press and social media (Dorvillé and Selles 2016; Cruz 2014).<sup>1</sup>

Brazilian secular scientists describe this shift as a risk to society's understanding of evolution (Silva 2017) and connect it with the so-called "science denial" stance of the recent presidential term of Jair Bolsonaro (Silva 2023). This assertion is happening in a historical moment when "the conflict between science and religion has resurfaced in many areas of the globe. Consequently, the clash between creationists and evolutionists has also re-emerged" (Silva and Mortimer 2014, 97). While scholars have analyzed the expansion of creationism as a way to understand local nuances in the relationship between science and religion (see Silva 2014; Florio 2007), secular natural scientists in Ibero-America tend to treat creationism as a foreign phenomenon, a mere import from the United States (Numbers 2006, 418; Silva 2023).

This article, written by a historian of museums and paleontological collections, attempts not to enter into the controversy but rather to chart one specific aspect of that expansion beyond Brazil: the very recent establishment of creationist museums in rather fringe spaces, a development mostly ignored by the Ibero-American press and natural science institutions. Therefore, the main goals of this article are, first, to introduce the historical trajectory of creationism and creationist museums in South America managed by the Seventh-day Geoscience Institute (GRI) based in Loma Linda, California, and second, to raise a series of questions about this phenomenon and what it might mean for our understandings of the relationships—obvious, obscured, or unrecognized—between science and religion, and the public's relationship to both. The article thus presents some biographical information that shows how those in charge of these establishments are connected to the GRI Loma Linda, where they studied Earth sciences, and to whom they turned for advice and support. It compares the Ibero-American museums to their counterparts in the United States, followed by the history of creationism in Brazil and how this Brazilian development connects to recent South American Adventist creationist endeavors. Finally, by focusing on the new Argentinean creationist museum, it analyzes how the instructions issued from Loma Linda are put into practice in

that particular setting. Based on secondary sources and internet research, the article revisits Ronald Numbers's (1992, 2006) work on creationism in the light of recent events.

### **Ronald Numbers: *The Creationists* and Creationist Museums**

In *The Creationists*, originally published early in the 1990s, American historian of science Ronald Numbers (1942–2023) presents a history of anti-evolutionism among Protestant groups from the United States and other Anglophone countries. This seminal work claims that attempts to fit twentieth-century scientific flood geology to the fossil record and create a model reorganizing Earth history around the catastrophic event of the Biblical flood were a complete novelty.

In 2006, he revised and expanded this book, changing its subtitle from *The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* to *From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*. In so doing, he emphasized the growing prominence of this topic in the years since his first publication. In the first edition, he notes that some creationists purport to see evidence of a plan or design in the natural world and that life was not a product of accident (Numbers 1992, 296). While the flood had not disappeared from the explanatory frameworks and still played an important role in creationist geological science, in his second edition, Numbers was able to show that by the beginning of the new millennium, intelligent design had become pivotal in creationist research and educational programs.

Numbers paid special attention to the internal tensions and variety of chronologies proposed for creationist understandings of the age of the planet and the history of life (Numbers 1992, chapt. 14). Thus, far from a monolithic view, Numbers showed that some groups advocated for a young Earth—i.e., that the Earth and its lifeforms were created between about 6,000 and 10,000 years ago—while others accepted a much older span of time by trying to adjust and marry radioisotopic dates to the Genesis accounts. In particular, he referred to the Institute for Creation Research in the San Diego area and the Seventh-day Adventist GRI, “which for years set the standard for creationist research,” both focusing on “the place of creationism in the Baptist and Adventist traditions” (Numbers 1992, 283). The GRI was founded in 1958 as the Committee on Teaching Paleontology and Geology, “responding to the concerns of Adventist science teachers about the absence of qualified earth scientists in the denomination” (Numbers 1992, 291). The founders—trained in comparative anatomy, geology, paleontology, prehistoric archaeology, and geochemistry—were varied in their views. While some insisted on using the historic Adventist interpretation of Earth's history and the inspired writings of the founders, others expressed willingness to reinterpret the biblical and prophetic accounts of creation and the flood in the light of scientific evidence, in particular by extending the age of the Earth to billions of years

and reducing the number of fossil-bearing strata deposited by the flood (Numbers 1992, 292). This latter approach hoped to use the new institute as a vehicle to move their church to a more scientifically defensible position (Numbers 1992, 292). However, according to Numbers (1992, 296), early in the 1970s, the Adventists's brief experiment with open-mindedness came to an end: the GRI invested in polishing the scientific image of creationism, began publishing the journal *Origins*, and moved to Loma Linda. There it became an unparalleled creationist institute, complete with laboratories and affiliated graduate programs that counted on the Adventists's generous financial support and gave birth to modern flood geology (Numbers 1992, 290–1). Even though Numbers has remarked on the growing influence of the GRI in Ibero-America, in particular its training of scholars from the subcontinent and promotion of new creationist institutions, no further research seems to have been done on geological creationism in Ibero-America.

Himself the son of a Seventh-day Adventist family, Numbers was a leading scholar in the history of (Earth) sciences and religion as well as Seventh-day Adventist's concerns with healthy living (Shank 2025). When Numbers first published his work, the Seventh-day Adventist church had five million followers around the world. While the Adventists today count twenty to twenty-five million followers worldwide, we are witnessing two phenomena that were almost absent when Numbers published his books: first, the growing number of facilities that use the natural history museum format and collections to promote creationist ideas regarding the rhythm, pace, and mechanisms ruling the history of the Earth and life; second, the demonstrated demographic change in Ibero-American religiosity.

The United States, Australia, and Great Britain host a variety of creationist venues that, under the covering umbrella of the word “museum,” are of different scales and linked to diverse evangelical Christian groups (Table 1). These facilities include small rooms in modest private spaces as well as monumental and multimedia installations. According to Lindsay Barone (2015), they are conceived as new pulpits of the creationist dogma and, as most museums today, appeal to the language and techniques of politics and the industry of tourism and entertainment. While cultural scholars such as James Bielo (2018), Gretchen Jennings (2011), John Lynch (2013), and Steven Watkins (2014) have analyzed this phenomenon from a more nuanced point of view, several members of the scientific community disqualified these premises as “infamous” and “mere promotions of pseudoscientific biblical literalist creationism against evolutionary science” (Oberlin 2020).

American creationist museums are part of the wars between evolutionists and creationists, which, as Hesley M. Silva (2023) shows, is parallel to the cleavage that characterizes current political practices in the Americas and Europe. These museums mirror that divide. Dismissed by the secular scientific community, they present themselves as an alternative to “evolutionist

museums,” a solution for a public eager to see evidence or proof of what they learned from reading the Bible. The creationist venues promote a creation-based worldview not through the elaboration of new material evidence but by changing (again) the interpretation of what in the nineteenth century became the quintessential evidence of evolution: fossils and prehistoric remains (on the historical changing of the meaning of fossils, see Martin J. Rudwick 1976). In the creationist museum, plant fossils, invertebrate fossils, human and nonhuman vertebrate fossils, and antiquities are displayed as evidence of rapid catastrophic events and to show how “evolutionary scientists” cannot agree on the reconstruction of fossil forms because they do not know how things actually were. There, believers have the opportunity to “see for themselves” what they had hitherto only read about. Among the most successful creationist facilities are those erected in Kentucky by Australian entrepreneur Kenneth Ham (b. 1951), to whom Numbers (1992, 332) originally devoted no more than a couple of lines. Ham was presented as “a charismatic public speaker and former biology teacher” (Numbers 1992, 332) who had recently joined the staff of the Institute for Creation Research in California. Fourteen years later, Ham’s actions in America merited more than five pages (Numbers 2006, 401–6). By then, Ham had founded Answers in Genesis, Inc. (AiG), a young Earth creationist group, marginal among creationists and biblical literalists but with strong ties to the local Republican Party. Today, the pages devoted to Ham are uncountable, as reflected in the abundant bibliography on the two AiG venues, The Ark Encounter and the Creation Museum, established early this century as, respectively, a reconstruction of Noah’s Ark and a display of the historicity of Genesis and the biblical flood through exhibitions of fossilized skeletons, invertebrate fossils dinosaur replicas, and robots (Phelps 2016; Watkins 2015; Huskinson 2020; Nash 2019; Oberlin 2020; Trollinger and Trollinger 2016; Roberts and Eyl 2018). The AiG facilities are not the only ones in the United States, nor outside of it, as Table 1 shows.

Unlike the monumental AiG premises, a good number of American creationist museums are located in small venues. Family owned, they are sold or merged with other collections when the original owner dies, moves, or decides to transfer ownership. They are located in domestic settings, mimicking most traditional museum displays but also relying on a tradition of Protestant families’ missionary work. Some offer field excursions and activities for schools containing—in their words—evidence of the flood and the coexistence of dinosaurs and humans. They combine the natural history museum format with travelling evangelists’ practices and an early twentieth-century idea: the establishment of a network of “travelling museums” in the form of exhibition kits to be presented in churches, schools, and community halls (cf. García 2007).

Even when they represent different branches of creationism, these exhibits located in provincial settings are far from being disconnected or isolated. Even a rapid analysis shows that they are not only recent but

have dramatically increased in the last twenty years (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup> They are connected with national and transnational networks based in North America and other Anglophone countries. Some are the endeavors of isolated parishioners or entertainment entrepreneurs, while others are integrated into some of the branches of creationist science, such as the Creation Research Network (with facilities in Australia, Great Britain, and the United States),

Name/Country	Location	Date
Australia		
Jurassic Ark	Queensland	ca. 2016
Creation Discovery Centre	Tasmania	2017
Canada		
The Creation Truth Ministries Travelling Museum	Alberta	2020s
Big Valley Creation Science Museum	Alberta	2007
United Kingdom		
The Creation Research Centre	Shropshire	2023
United States		
Museum of Creation and Earth History	Santee; CA	1992 & 2008
Northwest Science Museum	Idaho	2014
The Creation Discovery Museum	Pompano Beach, FL	1990s
Creation Experience Museum	Branson, Missouri	2008
The Glendive Dinosaur and Fossil Museum	Montana	2009
Boneyard Creation Museum	Nebraska	2023
Lost World Museum	Phoenix, New York	ca. 2006
Museum of Creation Truth	Oklahoma	no date found
Taxidermy Hall of Fame & Creation Museum	North Carolina	1990s
Akron fossils & Science Center	Ohio	2005
Grand River Museum	South Dakota	no date found
Mount St. Helens Creation Information Center	Washington	2014
The Creation Museum	Kentucky	2007
Ark Encounter	Kentucky	2016

**Table 1:** Creationist museums/exhibitions by country. Personal elaboration based on the information provided by the following web pages: <https://jurassicark.com.au/history-of-jurassic-ark/>; <https://creationdiscoverycentre.com/>; <https://creationtruthministries.org/museumexhibits.html>; <https://bvcs.com/>; <https://creationresearchuk.com/history/>; <https://creationsd.org/about/museum-history/>; <https://www.northwestsciencemuseum.com/>; <https://creationstudies.org/museum/>; <http://www.northwestsciencemuseum.com/resources/NWSM-Prospectus.pdf>; <https://creationexperiencemuseum.com/>; <https://creationtruth.org/>; <https://www.akronfossils.org/>; <https://visitcreation.org/type/museums/>; <https://choctawcountry.com/attractions/museum-of-creation-truth/>; <https://roadtrippers.com/magazine/creation-museum-southern-pines/>; <https://www.thegrandrivermuseum.com/>; <https://www.mshcreationcenter.org/>.

the Institute for Creation Research, and/or GRI. Although the majority of creationist installations are still located in Anglophone countries, there has been a very recent expansion into traditionally Catholic Ibero-American countries (Table 2). These new premises are proliferating and linked to the rapid expansion of the Seventh-day Adventist church and their attendant educational institutions. They are operating in countries where museums traditionally have been secular state-run institutions.

Country	Year	Ownership	Location
Argentina	2023	SDA	Libertador San Martín
Bolivia	2019	SDA	Cochabamba
Brazil	2004	SCB	Brasília
	2013/2023	SDA	Bahia
	2023 & 2025	SDA	Engenheiro Coelho, SP
Chile	2025	SDA	Chillán
Ecuador	2020	SDA	Galápagos
México	2002	State run	Acámbaro
Perú	2001	Family owned	Ica

**Table 2:** Creationist museums in Ibero-America: The museums in Acámbaro (México) and Ica (Perú) display artefacts depicting the interactions of dinosaur- and human-like creatures, objects that in recent years had been adopted as evidence of the Young Earth chronology (personal elaboration). SCB: Brazilian Creationist Society; SDA: Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Adventist Ibero-American museums are backed by the GRI, an institution that today acknowledges that it uses both science and revelation to study the question of origins because it considers the exclusive use of science too narrow an approach. The GRI operates in two major areas, research and communication, and plays an important role in the global expansion of faith and science. To achieve that end, it is continuously establishing new branch offices and what it calls “resource centers.” This is a result of strategic partnerships between the GRI and Adventist educational institutions, the world’s second-largest Christian school system, including the establishment of Adventist universities.<sup>3</sup> By 2006, the GRI was operating branch offices in Argentina, working closely with creationist groups in Brazil, and publishing materials in Portuguese and Spanish (Numbers 2006, 400).

### Brazilian Origins

The expansion of the GRI to Ibero-America was forged thanks to an alliance between the Seventh-day Adventist church and the Brazilian creationist circles that emerged in the 1970s. Comparing Numbers’s first edition to his second, in 1992, the only occurrence of creationism in Ibero-America was a single reference to Brazil. In the revised edition, Numbers (2006, 417) reported that

“nowhere in South America did antievolutionism make deeper inroads than in Brazil, where according to a survey in 2004, 31 per cent of the population believes that the first humans were created no more than 10,000 years ago, and the overwhelming majority favors teaching creationism in the public schools.” Numbers also mentioned that between 1994 and 1999, American creationists were invited three times to tour in Brazil, during the last of which an estimated 10,000 Brazilians attended the talks.

This alliance between the GRI and Brazilian creationists is in part connected to the career of the mechanical and electrical engineer Ruy Carlos de Camargo Vieira (b. 1930, Sao Carlos), a graduate from the Polytechnic School of the University of São Paulo. From 1979 to 1985, namely, during the presidential term of General João Baptista Figueiredo,<sup>4</sup> Camargo Vieira was scientific director of FAPESP, the scientific agency of the State of Sao Paulo (Silva Santos 2017, 2021).<sup>5</sup> In 1972, Camargo Vieira moved to Brasilia to join the Commission in Engineering Education of the Ministry of Education and Culture’s Department of University Affairs. That year, he established a creationist group as a result of his 1971 meeting with a Brazilian Seventh-day Adventist pastor who gave him information about the existence of the American Creation Research Society, which was established in 1963 but not affiliated with any religious group or church body. Camargo Vieira focused on the production of materials, articles, books, and handouts to assist teachers, parents, students, pastors, and other people interested in creationism. He operated out of his family residence in São Carlos and was joined by several acquaintances to challenge the thesis that life is a product of mechanistic chance. In April 1972, they published the first issue of *Folha Criacionista (Creationist Paper)*, whose first thirty-three issues were printed as an external service commissioned by the Publications Service of the University of São Paulo’s School of Engineering, where Camargo Vieira taught. In 1972, *Folha* was presented at the Youth Adventist Congress in Manaus. After that, Camargo Vieira began participating in various events, either autonomously or with other parties, to disseminate creationist books translated from English to Portuguese by Camargo Vieira himself, proofread by his mother, and typed by his son Rui Corrêa. In the late 1980s, *Folha* was published in partnership with the Guilherme Stein Jr. Biblical Research Center, named after the first Brazilian citizen to be baptized as a Seventh-day Adventist in 1895.

The institutionalization of the Brazilian Creationist Society (SCB) took place in 2000 when it became a civil, nonprofit, educational, and cultural association supporting multidisciplinary scientific research on intelligent design in nature. While it had the same theological basis as the Seventh-day Adventist church, the SCB adopted an interdenominational character. In November 2004, it inaugurated its Cultural Center in Brasilia, a two-floor, 220 square meter building that included

the George McCready Price Library (named after the Adventist pioneer of the young Earth creationist movement), the Expedition Room, the Cultural Space archives, the Isaac Newton Science Center, the Multimedia Center, the Jandyra Corrêa Vieira Auditorium (named posthumously after Ruy Vieira's first wife, who died in 2003), the Guilherme Stein Jr. Information and Documentation Center, a model of the Foucault Pendulum, an internal garden housing a sector called Architects of Nature with different types of insects and birds' nests, and a mural illustrating the geological strata. The SCB sponsored the construction of "a 1:100 scale model of Noah's Ark" based on the model built by the Australian preacher Rod Walsh from Creation Ministries International, with whom the society cooperated.<sup>6</sup> Over the years, the SCB has expanded its activities to disseminate creationism in Brazil through its partnership with the Italian Union of Churches Conference, supporting the foundation of the Brazilian branch of the GRI, the Origins Studies Center of Brazil Adventist University, São Paulo, and the Museum of Geosciences of Bahia Adventist College. As a result, in December 2012, a memorandum of understanding establishing the Adventist Creationist Consortium was signed. At the end of 2017, after forty-five years, Ruy Vieira gave his chair of the SCB to the current president, geologist Marcos Natal de Souza, who, in addition to working with the SCB and the GRI, was appointed to coordinate creationism activities within the scope of the Adventist church in South America.<sup>7</sup> Natal de Souza graduated in geology from the Minas Gerais University in the early 1980s, obtaining a master's degree in geology in 1999 from the same institution and a PhD in regional geology from Paulista University in 2006. He worked for eighteen years as a professor at the São Paulo Adventist University Center, teaching disciplines such as geology, paleontology, natural resources survey, and science and religion.

As part of this complex network, several resource centers have already been inaugurated in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador. These include Cooksonia at the Adventist University of Cochabamba in Bolivia (established 2017) and the Brazilian Centre at the Adventist School of Cachoeira, Bahia (established in its present form in May 2023). In all cases, they are located in provincial and semi-rural settings where there are no other museums, playing a key role in their environment, training young people, and providing them a professional career. Most of these venues insist that creationists accept the evidence of "micro evolution," which is how they term what Charles Darwin observed. The Argentinean center's Instagram account, for instance, quote observations made by Darwin on his 1833 voyage and Alfred R. Wallace's *The Geographical Distribution of Animals* (Vol. 1, 1876).<sup>8</sup> However, the controversial difference remains the rejection of macro evolution or chance in favor of the design of God ruling the process. For that reason, these centers display materials and offer lectures on intelligent design by engineers and architects who work on biomaterials and biostructures such as nests.

These projects are supported by the GRI in Loma Linda as well as the Adventists's regional offices. Thus, in February 2020, several American and Brazilian Adventist leaders attended the third Faith and Science Encounter in the Galápagos to inaugurate Origins—Museum of Nature. It was headed by two Brazilian pastors: Edgard Leonel Luz, an advocate of intelligent design, and the aforementioned Natal de Souza. In 2020, Luz was the director of the Adventist Education Network for eight South American countries. Trained by different Adventist universities in Brazil and the United States, Luz was the main promoter of the venture. He is now the leader for the Education, Religious Freedom, and Adventist Solidarity Action portfolios of the Adventist church in Minas Gerais, Brazil (Paradello 2017).

The new Galápagos center is located on Charles Darwin Avenue, Puerto Ayora, Santa Cruz and is a 230 square meter complex that includes a school and a church, also inaugurated on the occasion (Arba 2020). It was the culmination of a project started in 2016 to promote creationism among the tourists arriving at an archipelago marketed as “the cradle of evolutionism.” The goal was to counterpoint the displays of the Darwin Foundation,<sup>9</sup> located approximately two kilometers away on the other end of Darwin Avenue. To convey its message, Origins appeals to the same objects as the Darwin Foundation, such as the iconic giant turtle shells. One room, however, addresses the concept of creation and intelligent design and, at the end of the tour, visitors pass through a room whose theme is healthy lifestyle.

For the Adventist church, Origins is one of their top influencing projects. Its impact, however, is difficult to assess. At the time of writing (the installations opened just before the COVID-19 pandemic started), it has fifty-seven mixed reviews on Google.<sup>10</sup> For example, in 2023, a certain Isaac Dugdale remarked: “A creationist museum on Charles Darwin Avenue! Free entry—weird vibe—interesting to see how the denial of scientific consensus is presented.” He, as well as other critics of this venue, remarked that the entrance had no clear indication of its creationist point of view. However, most of the reviews are very positive, some only for the quality of air conditioning but others also for the exhibits about the place of God as designer of the universe. In fact, the reviews express the cleavage this kind of establishment creates: for creationists and members of the Seventh-day Adventist church, it is their truth; for the others, it is just nonsense. This is revealed by these contradicting reviews:

It's a religious-based institution. My Spanish is weak and I didn't read the sign on the front of the building closely enough to know that this is run by the Seventh-day Adventists, a small Christian sect . . . The name of the museum itself gives no hint about its religious connections. The information about animals and tectonic forces seemed normal for a small, tourist-focused, free museum and I didn't realize that something was wrong until I got to a few

displays toward the end. I thought it was odd that the child-focused animation displaying the visual differences between marine and land iguanas showed a white, bearded, expedition-outfitted man walking up to the animals without mentioning Darwin. As a matter of fact, his name doesn't appear anywhere in this museum, nor does "natural selection" or "evolution." Instead, the displays use language similar to the most recent version of creationism, Intelligent Design . . . It refers to "design" as if someone or something created it instead of it being the unforeseen result of various natural processes. It actually states that "random forces" could not have produced something so beautiful, which is exactly opposite of the basic premise of evolution. Personally, I am offended that there's a museum in the place that inspired Darwin to develop his scientific explanation for biological diversity that ignores him and implies that a supernatural force actually designed everything in the natural world . . . I guess the first star in my rating is for the great air conditioning and the second is for the non-religiously tainted information, which promotes some general lifestyle advice (about eating well, sleeping at set times, minimizing alcohol, etc.) that I believe is worth promoting.

In contrast, another visitor stated:

As a Creation scientist with a doctoral degree in medicine, it was a very pleasant surprise to see the Seventh-day Adventist Origins science museum display there in the Galápagos Islands . . . How refreshing to see real science and not the pseudoscience of Amoeba to Man, Monkey to Man.

By April 2025, several of these kinds of institutions had been set up in South America (see Table 2),<sup>11</sup> but this is a project in progress, and more are to be expected. Called "resource centers" and/or "museums," the exhibition spaces comprise of one or more rooms devoted to creation and origins from a Seventh-day Adventist point of view. Even when they are shaped by the GRI, they are not totally dependent upon it. Rather, the GRI issues instructions or "Steps in Setting Up a Creation and Origins Resource Center" that explain how a resource center can be established as a local initiative.<sup>12</sup>

The use of instructions is an old and well-known mechanism linked to the emergence of museums to indicate how and what to collect in distant places. Metropolitan collectors and museums print or distribute these instructions to various agents to stipulate the methods for gathering and preparing shipments of specimens from the three kingdoms of nature (Bourguet 1997). From Madrid to Valparaíso, museum directors issue instructions through the bureaucratic administrative channels of the state to people in remote places who dispatch the requested objects to a distant, unknown, urban space. Instructions activate local people, teaching them what to gather and

the value those things could have in other places. In such a way, instructions are also the origin of many local collections. The same mechanism was used by Roman Catholic religious orders and Protestant missionaries: collections were amassed according to centrally issued instructions that indicated they had to be deposited in the order's main city and/or in the local schools they administered (García Jordán 2024; Michaud 2013; Reubi 2004). From vocabularies to zoological specimens and ethnographic and archaeological objects, missionaries collected in the field and mounted their own museums to teach about local nature, show the worldwide expansion of the order, train missionaries in the nature and habits they were going to encounter, and/or contribute to the development of the disciplines in which they were interested. Linguistics, prehistoric archaeology, and zoology, just to mention a few fields, are indebted to these field collectors—secular or religious—trained by instructions that taught them what and how to collect.

The following section analyzes the GRI's instructions and the local resource centers. It refers in particular to the center established in 2023 as Museum David Rhys in Libertador San Martín, a municipality and Seventh-day Adventist colony in Entre Ríos Province, central Argentina, about sixty kilometers from the provincial capital Paraná and 400 kilometers from Buenos Aires. The town had its beginnings in 1898 as Bella Vista, the name given by a group of immigrants who had arrived there with the aim of opening a new school to teach agriculture and theology (Flores 2018; Ceriani Cernadas 1998). Known as Colina de la Esperanza (Hill of Hope), San Martín's twin town is Loma Linda. According to the 2010 census, the city had 6,545 residents, but its population increases during the school year due to the presence of the Adventist University, which has some 3,400 students. In addition, the sanatorium (established in 1908) attracts patients from all over the region, as does the Adventist Center for Healthy Living. The museum was named after David Rhys Hall (1915–2014), a researcher, educator, and administrator born to a Baptist family in the Welsh colony of Gaiman in Argentinean Patagonia. Interested in Earth sciences, he collaborated with Adventist institutions in Libertador San Martín, beginning the collections hosted in the museum named after him today.<sup>13</sup> The museum houses his collection alongside those of other vocational and professional scientists from the region, including Carlos Federico Steger (1925–2018) from Tucumán. Steger, a theology graduate from the Colegio Adventista del Plata, served as a professor at the Instituto Nacional del Profesorado, a museologist, rector of the South American headquarters of the GRI, and a member of both the Argentinean Paleontological Society and the local Natural Sciences Society. Until his death, he traveled extensively throughout Argentina and abroad, delivering lectures on topics such as the confrontation between evolutionism and creationism, geology, and the flood.

## Step by Step

The GRI's instructions are not about sending specimens abroad but more about the organization of the local museum that will display the evidence for intelligent design, the secrets for healthy life, and information about nature care and geological catastrophism. Thus, these sets of rules first specify the need to identify the primary target audience, which does not go far beyond the Adventist community itself, namely, the campus where the museum is going to be located and the visiting classes from primary and secondary schools. Except for in Ecuador, where the choice of location was based on other criteria, as of April 2025, the rest of the South American museums were located on some of the eleven Adventist campuses, namely at the River Plate Adventists University/RPAU Entre Ríos, established in 1990; the Adventists University of Chile, Chillán, also established in 1990; the Adventist University of Bolivia, established in 1991 in Vinto, Cochabamba; and several other Brazilian campuses. All of them are connected to local networks of Adventist institutes for primary, secondary, and teachers' education.<sup>14</sup>

In these networks, a resource center furnishes illustrative material for school and university classes, addressing a very specific public centered on the campus and offering virtual or actual activities to the region through their own schools. In the case of the Argentinean center, it provides virtual resources to the Adventist schools in the province of Chaco. This endogamous use can explain why the establishment of these museums has been almost invisible in the general press and are largely unknown beyond the Adventist network. Although these centers are celebrated on the Adventists's international webpages and publications, they have a scarce resonance in national or regional media.

In 2022, the Adventist press reported that GRI leaders and school officials had held a ceremony for and preview of the Argentinean facilities. During the event, they shared a brief outline of the project, including its physical plant specifications and goals. Special guests at the ceremony included the GRI's general director, the Italian geologist Ronald Nalin (2020), who was born into a Seventh-day Adventist family in Padua, where he studied and obtained his diplomas before being recruited by the GRI Loma Linda in 2007 and becoming its director in July 2020. In the opening ceremony, Nalin identified the audiences to whom the center is addressed:

This center has two people groups in mind especially. First, students, who often arrive at this higher education institution without knowing enough about earth origins. This place will provide them with the knowledge, the didactic and educational tools, that will help them to find valuable answers to their questions . . . The second group is the general public. Undoubtedly, this center will generate a network of connections with other educational institutions in

the area who will visit the center. It will also draw researchers with geological or paleontological knowledge, who will be able to contribute to the discussions. Interactions such as these are usually very productive. (Paseggi 2023)

Even though the public is not identified as Adventists, the center's internal use is suggested by the attendance of the South American Division Natal de Souza and Argentinean paleontologist and former River Plate Adventist University GRI director Roberto Biaggi at its opening. Despite their presence, the opening of the Ibero-American centers—with the exception of the one in Ecuador—passed unnoticed in the main cities, even those closest to the new facilities.

The GRI's instructions are not explicit about being discreet or prudent, which may be a tacit goal after the controversy creationism generated in Brazil early this century. On the contrary, they recommend the hosting of a grand opening and publicity about the event. Operationally, they advise the planning of regular activities ranging from classroom use to celebrations of Creation Sabbath, a further demonstration that these centers are intended mainly, perhaps exclusively, for the Adventist community. The Argentinean resource center, for instance, celebrates the Creation Sabbath by appealing to what has become common practice in the world of museums: a museum night happening in the South American spring targeted at primary school children accompanied by their parents. According to the photos on social media, these events are well attended. However, there seems to be little interaction with the centers via social media, as neither the museum nor the institute have many followers.<sup>15</sup>

The second step in the GRI's instructions is to identify the person in charge; such a person should have a university degree, preferably in science and/or theology. Branch offices need to be led by a director holding a PhD in a science-related field that, according to the GRI main office, enables them to (a) coordinate research and education about origin and creation topics and (b) promote creation-related activities on the university campus where they are located, in their surrounding communities, and throughout the division territory they serve. The directors of the current resource centers are from different disciplines ranging from library administration to nuclear physics. The Argentinean center is directed by the Brazilian Samuel Andrade Abdala, who holds a geology BSc degree from the University of São Paulo (2014) and an Earth science PhD from Loma Linda University (2020), where he was also a postdoctoral research fellow. He was teaching at River Plate Adventist University when, in 2022, he became director of the resource center and museum. Abdala is an active geologist and, with other Adventist colleagues, presents research at Argentinean geological conferences, though without mentioning any aspect of creationist geology. He attends not only geological events and meetings organized by Loma Linda and the Faith and Science network but also the International Buenos Aires book fair, where he recently presented the translation into Spanish of his "Quadrivium

Sleuths” saga devoted to the meaning of fossils and geology. Originally in English, these independently published books are described as being at the crossroads of mystery, suspense, and adventure, targeted at “students of high school, college, graduate school, but also professionals of all ages—especially those who wonder at how to relate their faith in the Bible with the observations of Science.”<sup>16</sup>

The third step of the instructions is to find a prominent location for the facility, a place accessible for visitors, school groups, and persons with limited mobility. Its size may vary depending on available resources, with the scale ranging from a classroom hallway or entryway to an office, a large room with easy access, an office, or a dedicated building. The choice of Libertador San Martín as the location for the center—and a potential paleontological laboratory—is connected to the Adventist university and may have been influenced by its proximity to well-known sources of fossil material. The Argentinean venue houses a museum with different rooms, a laboratory, and geoscience research classroom and is located in proximity to one of the most well-known mammal fossil-bearing localities in Argentina: the Paraná River and its connected sources. This is a location visited by Darwin and the French traveler Alcide d’Orbigny, among others (Podgorny 2017). Moreover, the city and the Teacher High School of Paraná have been fossil centers since the late nineteenth century, when a local evolutionist and positivist teacher organized a provincial museum and teaching kits to be used in Argentinean primary and secondary education (García 2007; Podgorny 2021). The Escuela Normal de Paraná (established in 1870) used to have a very complete collection and an old tradition of sending students and teachers to do field work to gather fossils in nearby localities. Rhys studied there and developed a passion for fossil collecting before the existence of the GRI. In this case, we have a collection originating from an old Argentinean tradition of fossil collecting thanks to Rhys’s training as a teacher in a secular institution. The location of this resource center, one can say, is at the nexus of the traditions and institutions of the Adventist colony and Argentinean secular educational practices.

The GRI’s instructions also suggest the topics that have to be addressed: design in the universe, on Earth, in living organisms, in fossils, and in the living cell; structure, laws, and beauty in nature, including displays of the chemical periodic table and minerals and crystal systems, ratios, and geometry; evidence of catastrophes in fossil mass burials, rapid preservation, mass extinctions, asteroid impacts, and large lava flows; thinking of Creation in terms of fossil patterns and trends; ecological sequences and abrupt appearances in human nature and origins; appreciation of beauty, morality, and religious sense; biological diversity in the local region and its connection with design; and conservation of natural areas and resources and the divine mandate to care for the Earth. This list indicates the centrality of intelligent design as an organizing principle as well

as how to incorporate impact theories and mass extinction events into the Adventists's view of Earth history.

At the opening of the Argentinean center, Adventist leaders expressed that "one of the stated objectives of the new center is to acknowledge God's creative hand in everything and admire the bountiful evidence found in our region" (Paseggi 2023). Thus, according to Argentinean biologist and River Plate Adventist University GRI activities coordinator Evelyn Maritza Montes-Chañi, they have organized the displays into five areas that represent the origin of life according to the Bible, namely: Creation in Seven Days; Intelligent Design; The Magnificent Universe; Rocks and Minerals; and Animal and Plant Fossils. The goal is that people who walk through the museum "can learn about the Bible, science, and faith, and discover that they are not separate but compatible fields." (Paseggi 2023). Montes-Chañi, who has a doctoral fellowship at CONICET, the National Scientific and Technical Research Council, works at the River Plate Adventist University Center for Health Sciences Research, School of Medicine and Health Sciences. Her work concerns biomedicine and women's nutrition, in particular the effects on bones of consuming plants rich in calcium in combination with sun exposure. With her colleagues, she has published on a healthy vegan diet and lifestyle, topics also represented in the resource center.<sup>17</sup> As in the case of Abdala, they work on projects funded by Brazilian or Argentinean national research agencies and so can articulate the Adventist scientific agenda with strategic apparently secular topics of research or heritage preservation. In particular, the issue of healthy living, as the Galápagos museum review also reveals, is not recognized as an Adventist issue and is accepted as a noncontroversial topic even by lay scientist and state institutions.

In this vein of mainstream topics, the resource centers insist on the importance of biodiversity and nature conservation and use the same displays as secular museums to foster the study of reptiles, amphibians, birds, mammals, invertebrates, vertebrates, fossils, rocks, and minerals from the local area and other regions of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. In so doing, they combine old collections consistently with the instructions issued from Loma Linda, which state that some of the specific themes for the displays should have direct relation to natural features of the local area, region, or country. In the case of Libertador San Martín, they counted on Rhys's and Steger's collections and the mammal fossils found in the area by vocational collectors.<sup>18</sup> Consultations with someone with academic expertise in these areas is also recommended; the central GRI offers to provide guidance or help identifying suitable experts.

As these resource centers are generally low-cost installations, the use of computer screens, TVs, and other electronic devices is discouraged as they are prone to failure and costly to replace or maintain. While their budgets can vary depending on the scale of their actual operations, local centers are reminded that they need frequent repairs because of damage during visits and normal wear and

tear. A budget should include startup costs (building, arranging, or furnishing the space, securing materials, paying professionals), operating expenses (repair and maintenance, utilities, events, marketing), and labor (compensation or expenses for resource center manager).

Contrary to older instructions, the current ones do not say much about how to collect. It is recommended to include materials and examples with a local connection, such as fossils, rocks, and plants found locally, and to find out if official permits are needed to collect, purchase, transport, import, and display specimens. Some countries—the instructions underline—limit commerce in animals, plants, fossils, and bones, even if found on private lands. In countries such as Argentina, and in contrast to the United States, fossils and antiquities have been deemed part of the subsoil and are thus part of the national patrimony. That can explain why it was stressed at its opening that the Rhys Museum would encourage the conservation and protection of the local paleontological and geological heritage. In particular, they refer to the specimens they display of the most iconic extinct South American mammals: the giant armadillo *Glyptodon* (a mounted shell, bones, osteoderms, etc.); pieces of *Mastodon* and *Smilodon* (saber-tooth felids); and a head of *Toxodon*, most of them considered “Darwin’s fossils” (Podgorny 2013; Lister 2018). These pieces are displayed by the center with labels free of religious interpretation and include references to Darwin, as in the case of *Toxodon*, described as one of the mammal fossils that most captured Darwin’s attention. The *Toxodon* model on display is based on an image published in 1988 in *The Macmillan Illustrated Encyclopedia of Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Animals: A Visual Who’s Who of Prehistoric Life*, a work coordinated by Scottish science popularizer Dougal Dixon (b. 1947).

So, these Adventist resource centers appeal to the most conventional paleontological evidence, traditional collecting methodologies, and established scientific authorities to convey their own interpretation of the deep history of life. Even when they rely upon their own networks, they also use state agencies and venues to distribute their books and ideas that, in those cases, are not explicitly creationist. Their impact, on the other hand, does not seem to trespass the boundaries of their own communities, and comparison of their social media with those of analogous secular museums shows that this community is in fact minimal in absolute terms. The expansion of creationism in Ibero-America cannot be seen as “imported” or foreign any longer: the creationist museums, even when very recently opened, are the result of half a century of local geological creationism networks developed mainly in and from Brazil but also in other South American countries.

## Concluding Remarks

I drafted this article in the same way I do a history of private or state-owned natural history collections. But what can historians and museum professionals learn from these creationist venues? These cases are good examples of how

museums are being created to respond to certain groups' beliefs as part of the process of fragmentation that characterizes contemporary society. Further research is needed to see how these centers obtain the objects they exhibit. In the case of Argentina, the objects are part of older collections and the center is located in an area where fossils and amateur bone-seekers abound. What happens in the other centers? Do they rely on local providers/collectors, or do they purchase the objects from the commercial houses that sell fossils and antiquities worldwide? Do the Adventist fellows donate objects to the local museums and/or to the GRI? Does the GRI redistribute objects from collections they have gathered in their central installations? All these questions reflect how people have tended to relate to museums and collecting: far from being mere visitors, the public has traditionally engaged in the creation of museums. Museums' histories—no matter if metropolitan or provincial, monumental or small, religious or secular—show that museum collections are made thanks to donations, presents, purchases, and exchanges (Lopes and Podgorny 2000). Future research should investigate whether those mechanisms are part of the strategies or practices encouraged by the Adventists' museums. As the case of David Rhys suggests, collecting for Adventist educational institutions preceded the GRI and the creationist revival. Therefore, another important question to investigate is what the archives—private and institutional—can tell us about the meaning and intended role of those collections before the establishment of the GRI's resource centers.

In the last twenty-five years, museums have blossomed worldwide. In South America, new museums have been most obviously linked to a discourse of political memory or heritage celebration. The recent Seventh-day Adventist institutions reveal the new role given to natural history collections in creationist communication strategies as well as the transnational network of professionals and procedures that inform and instruct their establishment. Adventist museums offer free admission and are nonprofit institutions. They are used to propel messages about intelligent design and the mechanisms of macroevolution to a mainly Adventist audience. Some projects, however, suggest that attempts are being made to turn some of the existing venues into tourist attractions, for example, *Origins in Galápagos*, where Ecuadorian authorities believe a new museum will serve to diversify the range of attractions on the islands. This poses a question about the role of the state and potential alliances between local/national political leaders and Adventist administrators. However, as the Argentinean case shows, the state can, perhaps, finance projects without realizing what they are funding.

To conclude, I offer some final reflections on certain ideas assumed in the museum imaginary. For many institutions, the exhibition of fossils was sufficient to demonstrate the "truth" of evolutionary theory, a situation that, in fact, veiled the variety of issues and interests—including religious ones—that were and are

related to their extraction, trade, study, and exhibition. The literature, based on nineteenth-century contexts, assumes that paleontology necessarily connects with ideas of progress and development. Creationist museums demonstrate that the display of animal fossils can tell other stories and that there are people willing to buy, sell, listen to, and accept them.

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## Acknowledgments

This article has benefited from the comments and suggestions of two anonymous reviewers as well as Pablo Lara, Richard Fallon, Edward Guimont, David Roe, Pietro Corsi, and José Pardo-Tomás, to whom I am very much indebted. This article is part of PICT 2020- 3693 and PIP 2021-2647. The writing of this article started at the Bogliasco Center and was finished on a fellowship at the Käte Hamburger Centre for Cultural Practices of Reparation (CURE) funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR) under funding code 01UK2401. The author is solely responsible for the content of this publication.

This article is dedicated to the memory of my late mother, with whom I visited the Rhys Center in July 2025.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Attempts to introduce creationism into public education have become a hot topic, especially since 2002, when the evangelical governors of the state of Rio de Janeiro recommended the teaching of creationism in public schools (Numbers 2006).
- <sup>2</sup> This is another example of how the establishment of museums occurs in waves (Lopes and Podgorny 2001; Sheets-Pyenson 1988).
- <sup>3</sup> The Adventist educational network claims on their webpage that they serve more than two million students worldwide, a small figure compared to the Catholic Church, which, according to 2023 statistics, administers 74,368 nursery schools worldwide attended by 7,565,095 children; 100,939 primary schools with 34,699,835 students; 49,868 secondary schools with 19,485,023 students; 2,483,406 high school students; and 3,925,325 university students. See <https://www.adventist.education/education-statistics/> and <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/iglesia/news/2023-10/las-estadisticas-de-la-iglesia-catolica-2023.html> (accessed March 2025).
- <sup>4</sup> Figueiredo (1918–1999) served as the 30th president of Brazil from 1979 to 1985, the last of the military regime that ruled the country following the 1964 Brazilian coup d'état.
- <sup>5</sup> This section is based on Wellington de Santos Silva's articles and on the biography of Camargo Vieira published by FAPESP. See <https://bv.fapesp.br/linha-do-tempo/pagina/ruy-carlos-de-camargo-vieira/> (accessed June 2024).
- <sup>6</sup> On Rod Walsh, see his webpage <https://creation.com/the-ark-van-ministry> (accessed June 2024).
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.grisda.org/assets/public/resources/unspecified/GRI%20Resource%20Center.pdf>.
- <sup>8</sup> From Darwin, they quote: “The Pampas is one wide sepulcher of extinct gigantic quadrupeds” (<https://www.instagram.com/p/DFY7kJAaAL/>), and from Wallace: “We live in a zoologically impoverished world, from which all the hugest, and fiercest, and strangest forms have recently disappeared; and it is, no doubt, a much better world for us now they have gone. Yet it is surely a marvelous fact, and one that has hardly been sufficiently dwelt upon, this sudden dying out of so many large mammalia, not in one place only but over half the land surface of the globe” (<https://www.instagram.com/p/DHGh7-QOYdI/>) (accessed April 2025).
- <sup>9</sup> The Charles Darwin Foundation was established in 1959 by a group of researchers as an international nonprofit organization. Since 1964, it has endorsed an agreement with the Ecuadorian state, renewed in 2016 for an additional twenty-five years.
- <sup>10</sup> See [https://www.google.com/maps/place/Origins+-+Museum+of+Nature/@-0.7454262,-90.3141491,17z/data=!4m8!3m7!1s0x9aaa5d6ad5309f41:0x3fd9a0c2da15eb4b!8m2!3d-0.7454262!4d-90.3115742!9m1!1b1!16s%2Fg%2F11j36dpcb2?entry=ttu&g\\_ep=EgoyMDI1MDUxMy4xIKXMDSOjLDEwMjExNDUzSAFQAww%3D%3D](https://www.google.com/maps/place/Origins+-+Museum+of+Nature/@-0.7454262,-90.3141491,17z/data=!4m8!3m7!1s0x9aaa5d6ad5309f41:0x3fd9a0c2da15eb4b!8m2!3d-0.7454262!4d-90.3115742!9m1!1b1!16s%2Fg%2F11j36dpcb2?entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI1MDUxMy4xIKXMDSOjLDEwMjExNDUzSAFQAww%3D%3D) for the reviews quoted.
- <sup>11</sup> The newest resource centers (opened in February 2025) are located at the Adventist University of Chile, managed by César Arriagada Campos, a museology expert, and at the Adventist University

Center of São Paulo, directed by Tiago Souza, a medical school graduate. Under this scheme, the GRI is also expanding to Eurasia (branch office in Zaoksky Adventist University, Tula Oblast, Russia under the direction of Aleksei Popov, a nuclear physicist) and West Central Africa, branch office at Babcock University, Nigeria under the direction of Oluwole Oyedeji, a geologist.

- <sup>12</sup> See <https://www.grisda.org/assets/public/resources/unspecified/GRI%20Resource%20Center.pdf> (accessed May 2025).
- <sup>13</sup> Rhys's parents were Baptists and moved to Adventism by the word of the missionary Arthur Nelson from Loma Linda, who gave Bible studies in Patagonia, inviting the children to attend the River Plate Academy in Entre Ríos. In the 1930s, Rhys graduated as a teacher there and was baptized in 1932. In Entre Ríos, he met his future wife, also a teacher, stenographer, and typist, who later became an employee of the academy. She also worked for the Uruguay Academy, the Chile College, the Inca Union College in Peru, and in the Inter-American Division in Miami, where she helped train pastors and secretaries for all these institutions. Rhys, while teaching in Entre Ríos in the 1940s, showed great interest in topography, geology, paleontology, and astronomy. He was a fossil collector and a science teacher, obtaining a diploma as a teacher of geography (1947) from the National Higher Institute of Teachers of Paraná. In 1959, he studied theology and archeology of the Near East at the Adventist Seminary in Washington, DC. In 1975, he obtained his doctorate degree in Earth science/geography from the University of California, Riverside. He then joined the GRI Loma Linda, where he held many research positions and participated in most of the study tours from 1966 on. He promoted geoscience symposia in Spanish-speaking countries and the opening of the GRI chapter in River Plate Academy. He served as a teacher of physics and geosciences in the Costa Rica Adventist Academy between 1982 and 1983. He did dozens of investigations for the GRI and other institutions, presenting papers and conducting seminars in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, United States, Peru, and Puerto Rico. He was chief editor of *Orígenes, Ciencia de los orígenes* [*Origins, Science of Origins*] for more than twenty years (Sholtus 2021).
- <sup>14</sup> For the geographical distribution of the Adventist educational establishments in South America, see <https://www.educacionadventista.com/donde-estudiar/>.
- <sup>15</sup> As for the Instagram accounts, in April 2025, the River Plate Adventist University museum (@geociencias.uap) had thirty-nine posts and 429 followers. A comparison may be made to the Museo de Mar de Ajó, a small provincial and secular museum devoted to natural history, which has around 1,500 posts and 1,037 followers (@museomardeajo72), or the Museo de Miramar, with 500 posts and 1,647 followers (@museo\_ciencias\_miramar). The secular and monumental Museo de La Plata has 225 posts and about 40,000 followers.
- <sup>16</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cy1\\_fxcLPEv/](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cy1_fxcLPEv/) (accessed in April 2025). More information at [https://www.instagram.com/p/DCm2Enev9i/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/DCm2Enev9i/?img_index=1) and <https://bv.fapesp.br/en/pesquisador/578955/samuel-andrade-abdala/> (both accessed April 2025).
- <sup>17</sup> See [https://www.conicet.gov.ar/new\\_scp/detalle.php?id=61594&keywords=montes%2Bcha%20C3%B1i%2Bchani&datos\\_academicos=yes](https://www.conicet.gov.ar/new_scp/detalle.php?id=61594&keywords=montes%2Bcha%20C3%B1i%2Bchani&datos_academicos=yes) (accessed March 2025).
- <sup>18</sup> Contingent findings are common and reported on the Adventist webpages, showing cooperation with the paleontological area of the Center for Scientific Research and Technology Transfer to Production (CICYTTP) of Diamante, which depends on CONICET.

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