

Out of Hours Exhibition

PRETTY AS A PICTURE

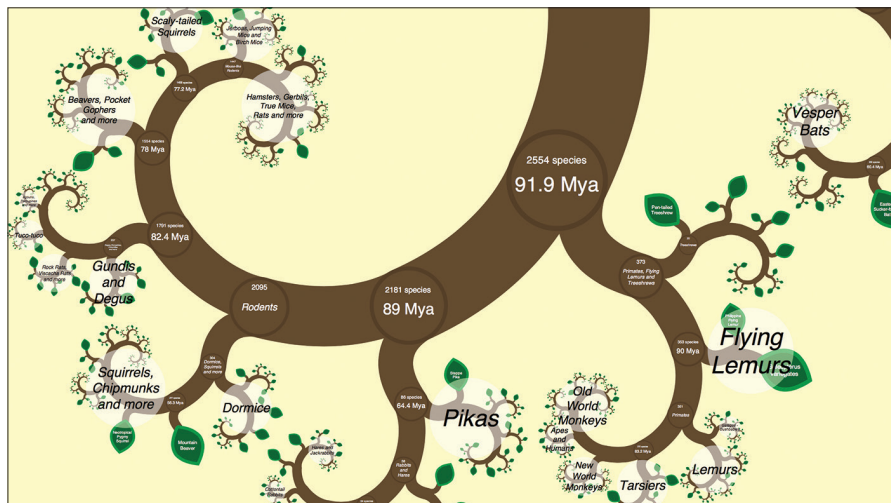
Beautiful Science: Picturing Data,
Inspiring Insight

The British Library, The Folio Society
Gallery, London

20 February–26 May 2014: admission free.

They say a picture paints a thousand words but is it also true that a picture paints a thousand numbers? The British Library's latest exhibition *Beautiful Science: Picturing Data, Inspiring Insight* considers the role of diagrams and data display in the development of scientific theory over the ages. It has impressive works from the archive, mixed with modern artwork and video sound bites from Professor Dame Sally Davies all underlying the importance of data illustration in our understanding of the world. It is divided into three areas: climate, evolution, and public health and opens with a computer animation showing the flow of the ocean currents crunched from thousands of NASA satellite readings.

The result is quite mesmerising and wouldn't be out of place in the Turner prize but perhaps that says more about the Turner prize. This can be contrasted with the intricately drawn logbooks kept by the Victorian skippers charting trade winds and geography from their own observations. The evolution section has Darwin's handwritten *The Origin of Species* lying open at the only illustration in the book, the tree of life. The modesty of this sketch compared with the enormity of the breakthrough it represented, is striking. There is an interactive tree of life to accompany this, where your children (or you) can check on the survival status



One Zoom Tree © James Rosindell, Imperial College London 2012 <http://www.onezoom.org>. This interactive allows viewers to explore the evolutionary relationships between tens of thousands of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians (Tetrapods). It uses a branch of mathematics known as fractal geometry to create an attractive visualisation that can be explored by zooming in, to get ever more detail. The data includes audio from the British Library's wildlife sound collections. © The British Library Board.

of the three-toed sloth. *Circos* is a fun artwork commissioned especially for the exhibition which takes the 46 human chromosomes and transforms them into technicolour circles and compares them with six other species. It is intriguing to note how little genetic material resides in the Y chromosome and how relatively much it has in common with the opossum.

Data collection and illustration were just waiting for the advent of public health in the 19th century. John Snow's cholera map of Soho and Florence Nightingale's 'rose' diagrams are both on display here as is William Farr's rather less accurate but nevertheless eye-catching mapping of the

miasma. This compact exhibition mixes the playful and profound. There are undoubted developments in accuracy and many important breakthroughs in evidence but 'progress' is more of a slippery beast. These exhibits show that science strives after the 'fact' but that art concerns itself with 'truth' and as we enter the era of 'big data' we would be wise to know the difference.

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