

MICHAEL AITKEN'S OPHTHALMIC HISTORY TOUR

Most optometrists, young and old, like to find their way to Europe for a conference or a vacation. We all know that there is amazing history to be experienced everywhere in Europe but perhaps not so well known is that there is also a great deal of optometric heritage. Spectacles were invented in Italy and Europe was home to Helmholtz, Donders and Snellen and many of the others who laid the foundation of our profession.



Museum of the British Optical Association

The College of Optometrists
41-42 Craven Street London
Telephone: 020 7839 6000

Tube: Charing Cross or Embankment

E-mail: optometry@college-optometrists.org

Web: <http://www.college-optometrists.org/>

Entry free. Tours by appointment

There are many general museums in Europe which include optometric historical exhibits, and a number of specialised ophthalmic museums. I have been searching them out and visiting them for some years. This essay is about some of the gems I have found.

LONDON

Museum of the British Optical Association. Every optometrist should visit the outstanding Museum of the British Optical Association when they are in London. It is housed in the College of Optometrists. The collection was begun over 100 years ago and is very comprehensive – not just antique spectacles but all kinds of vintage optical instruments, and one of the world's greatest collections of antiquarian ophthalmic books. There are titles by the giants of the history of optics like Kepler, Galileo, Newton and Helmholtz and treasures such as the small but rare manuals by 18th century English opticians. Make an appointment for a tour with Neil Handley, the very capable and enthusiastic curator. You will be assured of a welcome.

The Science Museum London has so much to offer but students of optical history are likely to be impressed by the highly ornate silver microscope made about 1761 by Royal Optician, George Adams, for King George the Third. Adams (1750-1795) was one of our precursors. The Nathan Library has a copy of the second edition of his 1792 book *AN ESSAY ON VISION briefly explaining the fabric of the eye and the nature of vision*.

The 4th and 5th floors have extensive exhibits on the art, science and history of medicine including some impressive ophthalmic displays.

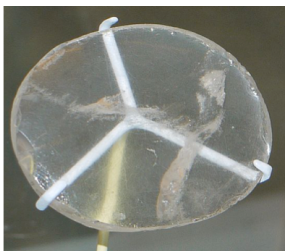


Science Museum London

Exhibition Road South
Kensington

London SW7 2DD

Tube: South Kensington



British Museum London

Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DG

Tubes: Tottenham Court, Russell Square

Open every day 10 am to 5.30 pm

Entry free

The British Museum is one of the great museums of the world. Look at the Elgin marbles of course and the huge collection of Egyptian artefacts but also look for the famous Nimrud Lens. This rock-crystal lens, nearly 3000 years old, was found in the 19th century at Ninevah in modern day Iraq. It is the earliest known ground and polished lens.

Royal College of Ophthalmologists

The College is in a converted industrial building, not nearly as impressive as its old quarters near Regents Park but the collection is superb and beautifully displayed. Over 200 items are on display dating from the 18th century. The curator is Richard Keeler, a member of the Keeler family whose company has made ophthalmic instruments since 1917.

18 Stephenson Way, London NW1 2HD

Tube: Euston Square Street

Phone 20 7935 0702



162 City Road, London. Tube: Old St

<http://www.moorfields.nhs.uk/aboutus>

Visits are by appointment E-mail

ophthlib@ucl.ac.uk

Moorfields Eye Hospital Museum.

There is a new ophthalmic museum at the famous Moorfields Eye Hospital. It is a part of the Hospital Library. The museum has an excellent collection of ophthalmic instruments including an original 1851 Helmholtz ophthalmoscope and also the first binocular ophthalmoscope made in 1861.



Musée de la Lunette
Place Jean Jaurès 39 400
Morez, France
Opposite the Town Hall
Tel: 03.84.33.39.30
Open every day
except Tuesdays and public holidays
Admission free



Madame Heyman Collection
In several museums in Paris, not on display.
Planned future display in Chateau d'Ecouen
d'Ecouen, France
In meantime view slide shows at
<http://www.antiquespectacles.com/heyman/heyman.htm>
or look at the book *Lunettes et Lorgnettes de Jadis* held in
the Hewett Collection of the Nathan library



Nationaal Brilmuseum
Gasthuismolensteeg 7
1016 AM Amsterdam The Netherlands
A short walk from the Dam
Open Wed to Sat 11.30 am to 5.30 pm
Admission free
<http://www.Brilmuseumamsterdam.nl>

FRANCE

I had always made a beeline to the wonderful Pierre Marly Museum whenever I was in Paris but it is now in Morez in the Jura region of eastern France to where it was transferred after Essilor bought it. It is housed in a new general optical museum. Morez was the centre of clock making for 200 years and is now known as a centre of spectacle making. It is said that the pince-nez was invented in Morez.

A small but spectacular part of this collection can still be seen at Pierre Marly Opticien in central Paris at 50 Rue Francois, 1er, just south of Champs Elyées.

The Musée des Lunettes et Lorgnettes celebrates Morez history of spectacle making. It includes the Pierre Marly collection. Marly was optician to crowned heads, public figures and celebrities, for whom he designed spectacles in the second half of the 20thC. The collection contains glasses from the 13thC to the 20thC. It includes lorgnettes, glasses, telescopes and binoculars of all shapes and sizes. There are glasses made for cats and dogs and wooden Eskimo sunglasses. Maria Callas' contact lenses and glasses belonging to Princess Victoire of France (daughter of Louis XV), the Dalai Lama, Marlene Dietrich, Sammy Davis Jr. are in the collection as well as other exhibits about spectacle manufacture. There is also an art gallery.

Some idea of the brilliance of the Marly collection can be gleaned from Marly's book, *Spectacles and Eyeglasses*, a copy of which can be found in the Nathan Library Hewett Collection.

The Madame Heymann Collection is at present scattered in the vaults of several Paris museums and items can be viewed only by special arrangement.

Madame Heymann (b1844) was a collector of fine optical objects and the collection is outstanding.

Many of the items in the collection have been located, listed and photographed. Details of the locations and slide shows of many items, are at: <http://www.antiquespectacles.com/heyman/heyman.htm>.

The Nathan Library has a copy of the 1911 illustrated catalogue of the her collection *Lunettes et Lorgnettes de Jadis*, one of only 50 known copies to have survived from the original 300 print run.

I am told the collection may go on public display at the Chateau d'Ecouen on the northern outskirts of Paris sometime in the future.

AMSTERDAM

I have recently discovered and visited a private optometry museum in Amsterdam. It is the **Nationaal Brilmuseum**, that holds a very interesting collection established by a private practitioner. It is displayed in two upper rooms in a 1620 building. The ground floor is a spectacle frame shop in the style of a 1930s optician. It sells cult frames, modern frames and frames in the style of ages past. The manager is Mijke Teunissen, a fourth generation optician.

GERMANY

There are two major optical museums in Germany, both associated with Carl Zeiss. One is in Jena, a major centre of the optical industry since the mid 19thC, and the home of Zeiss. The other is in Oberkochen near Stuttgart that displays a collection of spectacles and many other optical devices spanning 700 years. Both museums are worth a detour.



Optical Museum Jena

Carl-Zeiss-Platz 12, 07743 Jena, Germany
Open Tuesday to Friday 10 am to 4,30 pm and on
Saturdays from 11 am to 5 pm,
Closed public holidays

The Optical Museum in Jena houses optical instruments from the 8th C to modern days. It is not directly connected to Zeiss but centers around a collection from the Carl Zeiss research departments and the work of Carl Zeiss, Ernst Abbe and Otto Schott.

It covers three floors with the ground floor covering the history of spectacles, microscopes, telescopes, photography and ophthalmic instruments. It is set up to provide a technical and cultural-historical survey of the development of optical instruments integrated with the story of the development of the city of Jena as a centre of the optical industries.



Optical Museum Oberkochen

Carl-Zeiss-Straße 22
73447 Oberkochen, Germany
Open Monday to Friday 9 am to 5 pm and on
Sunday from 9 am to 12 noon
Closed public holidays

The Optical Museum in Oberkochen is owned by Carl Zeiss, the headquarters of which is just up the road from the museum. The museum holds instruments from the Carl Zeiss Group produced before German reunification and also includes the company's most recent products.

It displays an extremely diverse collection of optical devices that spans a time period of over 700 years. It holds a rich collection of different types of eyeglasses and optical visual aids. The themes of the collection are the development of the telescope, binoculars and the microscope since the 17th century and the history of high-end photography equipment.

Both museums are easily reached by train: in Oberkochen the train station is 500 m from the museum; the Jena museum is a kilometre from Jena Pardies station or from the Jena West station.

ITALY

Spectacles were invented in Italy about 1286. Glass workers in Venice developed blown glass spectacle lenses about 1300 and had a thriving spectacle making industry at that time. Italy is renowned for its design and manufacture of spectacle frames. It is not surprising that there are a number of ophthalmic museums and historic sites in Italy.

VENICE

Think about the important role of Venetian glass blowers in making spectacle lenses in the 14thC when you visit Murano.

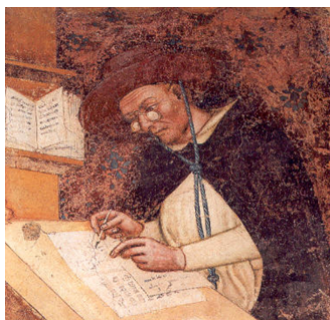
Recently my archivist colleague, Pamela Sutton, discovered Ottica Roberto Vascellari, an optometrist (ottica) who is a collector of things ophthalmic. Part of his collection is at his optometric practice and he welcomes visitors. Check out his excellent website (in English) at <http://www.otticavascellari.it/index.aspx> in order to make contact when next in Venice. Arrange a time to visit with the owner Roberto Vascellari, who speaks English

Venice is a good starting point for visiting several nearby ophthalmic museums and sites. First let's travel north for 50 km to Treviso, an easy train ride from Venice.



Private collection of Ottica Vascellari

S.Polo 1030 - 30125 – Venezia, Italy
Tel: +39 041 52.29.388
Visitors are welcome to view the collection
<http://www.otticavascellari.it/museo/museoCollezione.aspx>



Church of San Nicolo. Treviso

The first painting of a person wearing glasses by
Tommaso de Modena 1352
Viale Cesare Battisti
31100 Treviso, Italy



Guglielmo Tabacchi Gallery, Safilo

Settima strada N. 15, Padua
Open Daily 9 am to 4 pm Free
<http://www.galleriaguglielmotabacchi.com/>
Phone: +39 049 6985111



Collezione Ottiche e Occhiali museum

C.so Patrioti, Agordo, Italy
Tel.: 0437.62641
http://www.luxottica.com/en/company/communication/eyewear_museum_in_agordo/



Museo dell'Occhiale

Via Arsenale 15, Pieve de Cardore, Italy
39 0435 500213
Open daily Closed 3 hrs for lunch
Entry fee €4
<http://www.museodellocchiale.it/index.php>

TREVISO

About 800 m from the Treviso Central train station is the Church of St Nicolo where you will see wall paintings by Tommaso de Modena.

A portrait of Ugo di Saint-Cher in one of the chapels was painted in 1352 and depicts the earliest known representation of eyeglasses. I remember back in 1966 my young wife having to hold a ladder so that I could climb up and photograph this great piece of ophthalmic history. You were allowed to do those sort of things in those days.

PADUA

Padua is another short train journey from Venice. There you can visit the Safilo headquarters where you will find the Guglielmo Tabacchi Gallery which houses an extensive collection showcasing the history of eyewear from its origins to the present day. It is the initiative of Vittorio Tabacchi, the chairman of Safilo.

When I visited in 1990 a very personable curator showed me all the antique spectacles but for her the highlights were glasses worn by Elvis Presley and Elton John. Looking at its current website, it is now a spectacular gallery.

While you are in Padua you will also want to visit the 14th Cappella degli Scrovegni for its 30 frescoes by Giotto and, if you have lost something, visit the Basilica of St Anthony, the patron saint of lost things and people (like children or spectacles).

DOLOMITES

The Dolomites in the north of Italy are not far from Venice. It is a well known tourist area famed for its alpine beauty and ski fields. It has been a centre of spectacle frame and glass manufacture since 1878, which is all the more reason for an optometric visit.

Agordo

Head north from Venice and turn left at Ponte nelle Alpi to get to the town of **Agordo**. It is where the Luxottica Group started in 1961 and where its head office is still located. It hosts the **Luxottica Collezione Ottiche e Occhiali museum**. When I visited 20 years ago it was necessary to make an appointment to have this exciting small museum opened for me. It has now purchased a number of significant optical collections so it will be much more comprehensive than when I was there.

Pieve di Cadore

Back track from Agordo and turn north at Ponte nelle Alpi to get to the village of **Pieve di Cadore**. Here you will find the **Museo dell'Occhiale**. (Museum of Spectacles) that was established in 1986 at the instigation of Signor Vittorio Tabacchi, the president of the Safilo Group. It's in a remote but beautiful village, and worth seeking out as one of the most extensive displays of its type in the world with over a thousand items to view. It includes not only antique spectacles but also many interesting modern examples, some formerly worn by Hollywood stars.



FLORENCE

Florence is a place everyone wants to visit for its art, history and architecture but there are also some places of special interest to optometrists.

The **Museo Galileo** (Science History Museum) is well worth a visit. I see from the new website that it has been renovated and the exhibits are no doubt now much better presented.

When I visited in 1966 a kindly curator placed in my hand a finely mounted concave lens. She understood that this was the very same lens owned by Pope Leo X and shown in Raphael's painting (early 16C) that my wife and I had just admired in the nearby Uffizi Gallery. It is thought to be a spy-glass for myopia and is one the earliest representations of minus lenses for the correction of myopia.

Disappointingly I see from the new museum website that the lens in the museum is now thought to be much more recent.

Nevertheless optometrists today can still go and see Raphael's masterpiece in the Uffizi and certainly the painting clearly shows the earliest depiction of a concave lens for myopia.



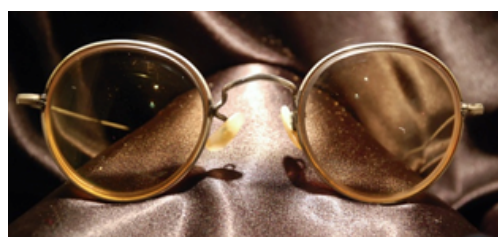
KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN DURING YOUR TRAVELS

When travelling there are always incidentally other items of historic optometric interest to be found, like the monument in **Manchester** to **John Dalton**, famous for his work on atomic theory, but known to optometrists for his observations on his own colour blindness. The **Museum of Science and Industry** in Manchester UK preserves John Dalton's eyes (Pictured left. Ask the curator to see them). Two hundred years after his famous lecture in 1794 DNA analysis of a tissue from his preserved eyes showed he was a deuteranope.

In **Liverpool** at the **Beatles Museum** there is the opportunity to behold John Lennon's million pound granny glasses!



John Dalton's eyes



Michael Aitken
Honorary Archivist
Cyril Kett Museum
Australian College of Optometry

For more information about optical museums
around the world go to:

<http://www.college-optometrists.org/en/knowledge-centre/museyeum/aperture/aperture.cfm>