





The whale skeletons hanging in the spectacular Whale Hall overlooking the city of Bergen are some of the University Museum of Bergen's finest pieces of jewellery.

In a culture-historical context, the Whale Hall is unique and worthy of preservation and the skeletons are of high value as natural science materials.

"... the high value of the Whale Hall cannot be emphasised enough"

The Directorate for Cultural Heritage

Whaling and the Museum

The majority of the whale skeletons were collected and brought to Bergens Museum when whaling was an important source of income along the Norwegian coast. This was before the extensive industrial whaling started in the Southern Ocean. A lot of the animals were collected in Western Norway, at Skogsvåg and Bildøy on the island of Sotra. People living there have been hunting whales from time immemorial. To catch the whales they used a seine net that trapped the whales in the bay, and then they were killed. Other material arrived from the hunting grounds in the north when the industrial whaling started in earnest at the end of the 1800s.

In the 1800s, Bergens Museum made whale skeletons into a kind of speciality. Skeletons were sold to other museums, or they were exchanged for exciting, foreign material. This is why skeletons from Bergens Museum can be found in a number of other natural history collections – on both sides of the Atlantic

Thus, on the 2nd July 1844, a young, merely 6 feet and 6 inches long Pilot Whale was caught in a closing net at Tellevaagen on the western part of Sartor-Øen in Sund Præstegjeld (Parish), about 5 Norwegian miles from Bergen. When pulled ashore, it grunted loudly, almost like a pig. The following day, the whale was acquired for Bergens Museum; its skeleton is now part of the Museum's collections.

W. F. K. Christie, Bergens Stiftstidende 4. april 1847



A Unique Collection

The irreplaceable skeletons represent a diversity of species, and today most of them are protected by law. In addition to being important exhibits, they are also of great scientific value. The Museum's collection has, for example, made it possible to compare the genetic diversity of the whales before and after modern whaling and the subsequent reduction in population. With the development of new analysis methods, the whale skeletons may in future be useful to scientists in completely different ways than today.



Preserve and Secure

To preserve and secure the whale skeletons, the University Museum carried out a comprehensive conservation project from 2010 to 2012. This unique work has added new splendour to the whale skeletons and the Whale Hall. An international team of conservators and specialists on bone material and anatomy has cleaned, stabilised, and restored the skeletons. The skeletons were very dirty.

Fats and oils had been leaking from the bones and left a sticky, thick layer on the outside, and particles and dust from air pollution from Bergen had been deposited on the bone material. The light that flows through the large windows in the Whale Hall and variations in humidity, leads to a slow deterioration of the bones.





Clean and Restore

The work involved cleaning of bones, improvements and replacement of earlier restorations, as well as structural reinforcements. It was essential that the cleaning methods did not damage the bones or reduce the scientific value. Thorough testing of possible methods was therefore important before the work could start in full. The surface was first vacuum-cleaned. The bones were then treated with a solution of ethanol, water, and ammonia. When the solution had been allowed to work for a while, fat and dirt could be gently removed – often by using a toothbrush or a cotton swab.

Brittle parts of the bones had to be reinforced with appropriate glue, and detached bits had to be glued together and sometimes replaced by balsawood.



A Diversity of Species

The Whale Hall houses skeletons of 18 different whale species. They represent the majority of whales in the North Atlantic (both toothed and baleen whales). 23 whale skeletons are mounted hanging from the ceiling. In addition, there are several crania and other bone material in the exhibition. 11 of the skeletons are more than 5 m long, and the largest one is a 24 m long blue whale. All of them are more than 100 years old, and some of them were hanging from the ceiling at the opening of the grand fisheries exhibition in Bergen in 1865.