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Lucy, Ardi and Selam find new home in Ethiopia

On the 40th anniversary of the discovery in Ethiopia of humankind's most famous fossil representative, Lucy, the little 3.2 million-year-old Australopithecus has become one of the stars of the National Museum of Ethiopia's new Gallery of Paleontology and Prehistory, which opened on December 3 in Addis Ababa. This permanent exhibition is the result of a scientific and logistic collaboration between two CNRS laboratories, the Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes (CFEE, CNRS/Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et du Développement International) and the Institut de Paléoprimatologie et Paléontologie Humaine: Évolution et Paléoenvironnements (IPHEP, CNRS/Université de Poitiers), with support from the French Embassy in Ethiopia, and under the auspices of the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Tourism).

The new permanent exhibition, covering an area exceeding 360 square meters, is expected to become the focal point of the National Museum of Ethiopia. The many fossils on show, both originals and reproductions, trace the principal stages of human evolution and of prehistory. Alongside Lucy, discovered at Hadar in 1974, the entire Ethiopian fossil record — the richest in Africa — is on display. This includes other celebrities, such as Ardi, the oldest hominid skeleton known to date. The 4.4 million-year-old fossil was discovered in Ethiopia and its study, whose results were published in 2009, provided crucial information about the last common ancestor of humans and chimpanzees as well as the evolutionary trends of different lineages. The exhibition also houses Selam, another exceptional fossil found in 2000 in the same region as Lucy. The nearly complete skeleton of this 3.4 million-year-old baby Australopithecus has shed new light on the pattern of growth of the species *Australopithecus afarensis*. The Gallery also hosts the oldest representatives of our own species, *Homo sapiens*, dating back 160 000 years, as well as the world's oldest tools.

The Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes (CNRS/Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et du Développement International) was responsible for overseeing the creation of the Gallery, as part of its twenty-odd-year partnership with the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The scientific design was the result of a collaboration between IPHEP researchers, as well as researchers from the Laboratoire Archéozoologie, Archéobotanique: Sociétés, Pratiques et Environnements (CNRS/Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle), the Laboratoire Travaux et Recherches Archéologiques sur les Cultures, les Espaces et les Sociétés (CNRS/Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès/Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication), the University of Tokyo, the Middle Awash Research Project and various other international teams working in Ethiopia.

The CFEE is both an important player in scientific research in Ethiopia and an essential platform for French researchers from every discipline. The Scientific Director of the exhibition, Jean-Renaud Boisserie, a CNRS researcher at the CFEE and then at the IPHEP, has been heading a research program in Ethiopia since 2006. The paleoanthropological mission to the Omo Valley, or "Omo Group Research Expedition", dedicates itself to the study of a series of deposits that are the only ones of their kind in the world, and focuses on the evolution of the environment, fauna, and hominids as well as their culture in the region. This multidisciplinary team is one of the very few that discovers hominid fossils every year, and its objective is to elucidate the relationship between climate change and human evolution.

In addition, the new Gallery portrays the impact of drastic environmental change over the past few million years on the evolution of life. The aim is to raise public awareness of this burning issue, in Ethiopia and the world.

On the left - Reconstruction of Lucy, skeleton of Australopithecus afarensis, dated to 3.2 million years ago. This reconstruction welcomes the visitors at the entrance of the new exhibition.
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On the right - The room of the ancient hominids. Forefront, the skeleton of Ardi (Ardipithecus ramidus, 4.4 million years ago). At the back, the skeleton of Lucy and its reconstruction.
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Room entitled "Biodiversity of the past", displaying original fossils of various vertebrate animals (forefront, fossil pigs).
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