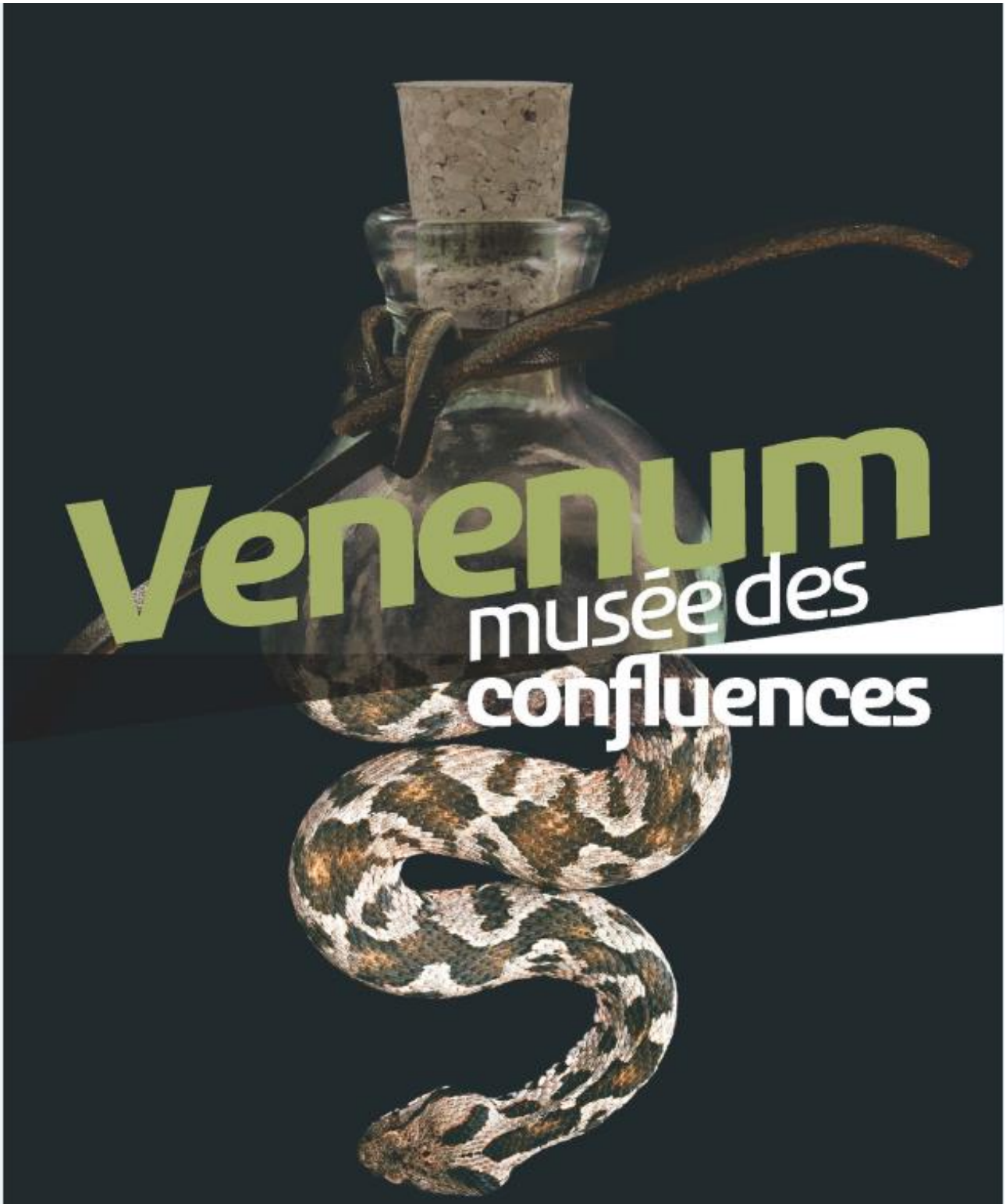

# Venenum
## musée des confluences

## Un monde empoisonné

**Exposition, Lyon** | **15.04.2017 – 13.04.2018**

**venenum.fr**

Cette exposition est reconnue d'intérêt national par le ministère de la Culture et de la Communication

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PRESS RELEASE

# *Venenum, un monde empoisonné*

# [Venenum, a poisonous world]

## Opening April 15, 2017

This exhibition is an exploration of the theme of poison in nature and in human society. Means of defence or power, targeted or diffuse weapons, environmental threats or new hopes for medicine, poisons arouse fear and fascination.

The exhibition *Venenum, un monde empoisonné* describes the roles played by poison in history and culture, science and belief, medicine and criminology.

Located at the confluence of different disciplines, it intersects other collections from the Life and Earth Sciences to the Social Sciences: paintings and sculptures from the fine arts and ethnographic collections rub shoulders and dialogue with the collections from the natural sciences and a few live animals.

The exhibition *Venenum* was designed with the viewpoints and contributions of a multi-disciplinary scientific committee of 5 researchers, including two historians, a cellular biologist, a pharmacologist and an anthropologist.

**Exhibition open from April 15, 2017 to April 13, 2018** – musée des Confluences, Lyon. www.museedesconfluences.fr

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This exhibition has been recognised as being of national interest by the Ministry of Culture and Communication / Directorate General of Heritage / Museums of France Department.

PRESS CONTACTS

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HISTORY – The first part of the exhibition concentrates on the uses and perceptions of poison from Antiquity to the 20th century.

The stories of Greek mythology are imbued with them, like the sorceress **Medea** who tries to poison her stepson Aegeus, or when **Hercules** falls victim to the tunic poisoned by the blood of the Centaur. Poison also occupied a very real place in ancient societies of that era: it was used to commit suicide, like **Socrates**, who was sentenced to drink hemlock and **Cleopatra** who was bitten by a snake. It was also an instrument destined to eliminate relatives in order to claim power, a means used by the dreaded Emperor **Nero**.
Reconstructed in works of art, these events have inspired painters and sculptors since ancient times up to the 18th and 19th centuries.

The death of Socrates by Jean-Baptiste Alizard, (1762) - RMN-Grand Palais / image Beaux-Arts de Paris

In the Middle Ages, poison was reserved for those "without weapons". Clergy and women settled their scores with this insidious weapon. This was the era of the terrifying Merovingian Queen **Fredegund**. Many stories of **Saint Benoit** tell of attempts at poisoning that he foiled. During banquets, poisoned dishes were tracked down with objects that were supposed to be able to detect lethal substances.

However, the Golden Age of poison was the Renaissance, when it served as an instrument for the intrigues of the powerful. The **Medici** and the **Borgia** clans used poison without moderation, on the family and on rivals!

In the 17th century, cases of poisoning revealed vast networks of wizards, sorcerers and Satan worshippers. At that time, these practices were the rule in the quest for power. At the dawn of the 20th century, famous poisoners such as: **Hélène Jégado**, **Violette Nozières**, **Marie Besnard**…


… hit the headlines of the Petit Parisien, the Petit Journal and the magazine Détective.

The March 1953 issue of the magazine "Semaine du Monde – Dimanche Magazine" was devoted to Marie Besnard, accused of serial murders by poisoning.

This era also saw the appearance of the first use of poisons in war, with their sinister past, in the trenches of the Great War of 1914/18 as well as in the Nazi extermination camps.


Signet ring with a hidden compartment, designed to conceal a cyanide pill. It belonged to Lieutenant René Drap, alias René Laune, who in May 1944 parachuted into the Region of Étampes - Photo D. Soulier, Collection Sussex - MM PARK - LA WANTZENAU

NATURE – After this dive into history, the visitor enters the "garden of poisons", which reveals the omnipresence and the great variety of poisons in the natural environment.

Photographic plates of the natural sciences illustrate the diversity of venomous and toxic species, but some are displayed in a vivarium. We can get a close-up view of **living specimens** such as the fearsome tarantulas, snakes, scorpions and poisonous fish… Presented **naturalistically**, **some mammals** that appear completely inoffensive are however venomous: the platypus, the shrew and certain primates. Next to them are the most well-known **poisonous animals**, such as the multi-coloured Amazonian frogs, the *fugu* puffer fish and certain crabs. The plant kingdom has not been forgotten: **an interactive herbarium** reveals the toxicity of many species of plants and mushrooms to avoid while collecting wild fruits.

*Synanceia* or stonefish (Mauritius). Considered to be the most venomous fish in the world, its sting can cause a heart attack. - Photo Mathias Benguigui, musée des Confluences

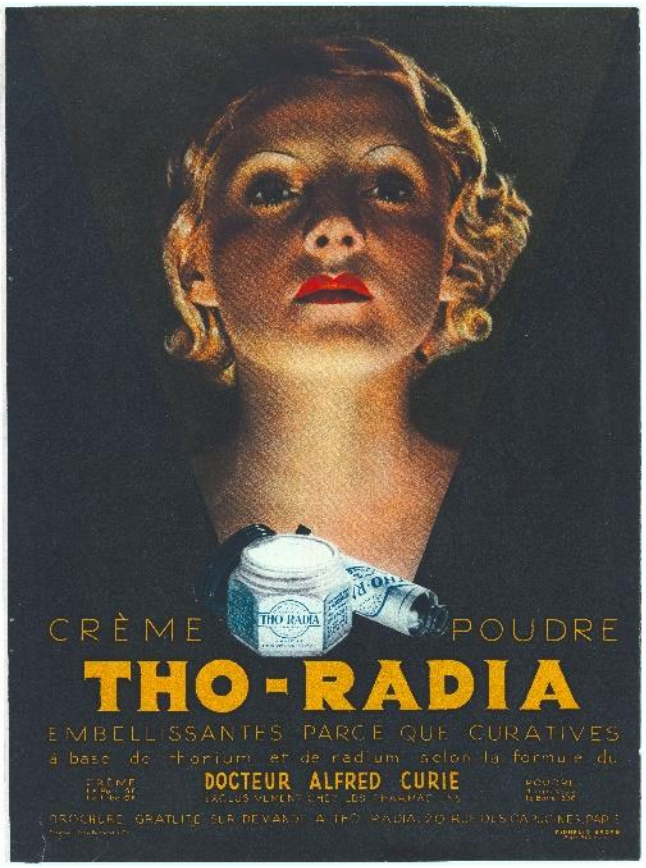
Poison is also found in **minerals**. Displayed as innocent stones, arsenic, antimony, lead and mercury are in fact real killers and mirror the poisons that **pervade our environment**.

Arsenic - arsenopyrite (Poland) Photo Mathias Benguigui – musée des Confluences

USES – Since prehistoric times, people have taken advantage of the poisons present in nature to use them or transform them for multiple purposes. Weapons, products and objects both ancient and modern, from every continent, are evidence of these different uses.

Men rivalled one another with ingenious designs for **poisoned arrows,** discreet and fatal, in hunting and in war. Poison also occupied an important place **in everyday life and items**: **lead** was already being used in the manufacture of cooking tools and makeup among the ancient Romans. At the beginning of the 20th century, the presence of **radium** in certain beauty products was extolled! **Arsenic,** kept in many households, served to get rid of pests, in the house and in the fields.

An inexhaustible source of energy, radium radiation was used in publicity by industries which incorporated it into many everyday items, including health and beauty products.




The Tho-Radia cosmetics brand launched a skin cream "based on thorium and radium", presented as patented by a doctor named Curie in order to promote sales. Radium was first classed as a poison in pharmacopeia and then prohibited and eliminated from use in all cosmetics in 1937. Photo Musée Curie (coll. Imprimés)

**The narcotic or hallucinogenic powers** of certain poisons, such as opium or peyote, are sought after to induce transcendental states of consciousness, or trances. Many initiation rituals include the consumption of poisons.

Ant mat (Brazil - 19th century). In Amazonia, initiation rites expose youths to the stings of venomous ants. This test is designed to build the character of adults who must be courageous and strong but also prepared for marriage and children. Photo Mathias Benguigui – musée des Confluences.

Substances in our surroundings today are no less dangerous: **asbestos, pesticides, fine particles and endocrine disruptors** form an integral part of our landscapes, both urban and rural.

The chemical revolution of the 20th century has filled our environment with new, toxic substances that act over very long periods (Credits: *les Muséastes* – screen shot – scenographic element from musée des Confluences).

REMEDIES – The exhibition trail ends with a paradox: in poison there is a remedy.

Going back to the **origins of pharmacopeia** enables us to discover some of the objects supposed to be "magic" which were used to detect or counteract poison, such as **corals and venom stones**.

Thus, the bezoar is a mineral concretion which forms in the digestive tube of certain ruminants. It was supposed to be an antidote to the bites and stings of venomous animals, and by extension, poisoning. It was applied directly on bites to extract the venom. Bezoar mounted on a ring (3rd century AD). Photo C. Letertre - Musée Dobrée – Grand Patrimoine de Loire-Atlantique.

We gradually came to understand that toxic substances, depending on the dose, had the power to kill or to heal. This history continues to be written each passing day, with **the design of medications** that are ever more finely targeted. At the same time, our knowledge of poisons has led to the growth of the field of **toxicology**, notably for solving criminal cases.

**In the future won't poisons and venoms save more lives than they take?**

Statuette of Shennong, De Groot collection (China - 18th century) - On loan at the *musée national des arts asiatiques Guimet* [Guimet Museum of Asian Arts] - Considered to be the father of Chinese medicine, in 2696 B.C. Shennong wrote a book listing 365 natural medications, including many vegetal, mineral and animal poisons. As he tested them out on himself, one day he experimented with a poisonous plant which proved fatal for him. Photo Mathias Benguigui – musée des Confluences.

musée des confluences

**Novel in the world of European museums, the musée des Confluences creates a dialogue between sciences in order to understand the history of humanity.**

Located at the confluence of the Rhône and Saône Rivers, in the heart of an architecture designed to be a centre for encounters and queries, the musée des Confluences addresses major universal issues: the origin and future of humanity, the diversity of cultures and societies and also the place of humans in the living world. The museum includes a permanent trail of 4 exhibitions whose novel strategy is to offer the visitor an interdisciplinary approach. The sciences are opened up to a dialogue in order to understand and unravel the complexity of our world. Through emotion and wonder, the musée des Confluences invites us to seek knowledge.

## Press area

Press releases, files and images:
http://www.museedesconfluences.fr/fr/espace_presse

## Practical information

**Address**
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**Opening hours**
Tuesdays to Fridays from 11:00 am to 7:00 pm
Saturdays and Sundays from 10:00 am to 7:00 pm
open late until 10:00 pm on Thursdays

**Closed**
Mondays and public holidays (January 1, May 1 and December 25)

**Rates**
Adults full rate: € 9.00
Children and students under 26: Free