

The Art of Taxidermy: A Glance into the Natural World

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The L.C. Bates Museum in Hinckley, Maine is no stranger to taxidermy. Visitors experience the natural world through various galleries that are filled with preserved species. Derived from the Greek words *taxis*, meaning arrangement, and *derma* meaning skin, taxidermy refers to the preservation of an animal's body. The art of taxidermy involves various techniques in which an animal's body is both preserved and displayed (Dickinson 130–40), allowing viewers to experience an animal's natural state. Visual cues, such as arrangement and positioning, offer a close look into an animal's life; something we would not usually be able to experience in the natural world. These visual aspects also begin to tell the viewer a didactic story. This informative narrative fosters a unique relationship between the viewer and the specimen. Questioning these interactions allows for an additional story to come forth, and one is able to consider how this relationship affects the viewer in a personal manner. Through these two narratives, the viewer receives a more in-depth experience with the animal. Special places like the L.C. Bates Museum, offer such an experience, which is hard to come by in today's world of increased urbanization. Understanding taxidermy's long history of portraying the natural world, while dissecting a viewer's complex experience of specimens, allows us to better grasp how the art of taxidermy continues to provide a unique glance into the world we live in.

To understand the art of taxidermy, it is important unveil the science and history behind the process. The preservation of animals has been part of human culture since prehistoric times. The earliest methods can be seen in the curing and tanning of animal skins as a means of survival

(Waateringe et al. 1). The Egyptians greatly advanced the techniques of preservation through their embalmment practices (Poliquin, *Breathless Zoo* 22). Another milestone took place between the 15th and 17th centuries, during the so-called “Age of Exploration,” when scientists and explorers began to travel the world (Arnold 1–3). It was during these expeditions that the vastness of the natural world was first revealed. These explorers and naturalists, who were mostly European, discovered many unfamiliar flora and fauna. Figures such as Christopher Columbus and Sir Hans Sloane, collected “exotic” specimens and brought them back to Europe. Soon after, collections began to exhibit these unfamiliar species (Poliquin, *Breathless Zoo* 11–21). These “cabinets of curiosities” housed the wonders of the natural world, helping spark the art of taxidermy.

Unfortunately the specimens displayed in these “cabinets of curiosities” could only last a short while before decaying. During the 17th and 18th centuries, René Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur, a French entomologist, was at the forefront of the quest for a solution of preservation (Simmons and Snider 118). Réaumur found it was helpful if specimens were washed and treated with various chemicals, however they were still eventually decaying (Dickinson 130–40; Farber 550–53). It wasn’t until the late 18th century that naturalists and scientists perfected preservation techniques (Farber 560–61; Simmons & Snider 117–22). Ornithology, the study of birds, was one of the major fields in which preservation techniques were perfected. One such ornithologist, Jean-Baptiste Bécœur, is recognized as a pioneer of modern-day taxidermy. Bécœur was the first to use arsenic, an extremely successful insecticide (Dickinson 130–40; Farber 554–62;

Simmons and Snider 119).¹ By 1830, Bécœur's method involving arsenic and arsenic soaps was widely accepted. Another reason it became popular can be attributed to the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, which once held one of the largest and most important collections of preserved birds in the world (Farber 561). The museum in Paris used Bécœur's method of protecting the specimens from decay, but also of preserving the animal's "most natural look." Another ornithologist, Tesser Samuel Kuckahn, advanced taxidermy by stressing the "natural" display of animals. In 1770, in four letters written to the president of the Royal Society in London, Kuckahn outlined the preservation of dead birds. The second of these letters highlights why it is so important to be both observant and meticulous when collecting a natural specimen, explaining that "[o]ne must take into account the season and age as well as the sex of the bird. Most importantly, however, he should note the bird's behavior so as to be able to recreate a realistic pose in the finished museum specimen" (qtd. in Farber 554–56). By the middle of the 19th century, the art of taxidermy was being practiced worldwide thanks to people like Bécœur and Kuckahn. Scientists such as Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace used these techniques to greatly advance our knowledge of the natural world and science as a whole (Farber 562–63). This knowledge was then spread to the general public through taxidermy displayed in Natural History Museums.

The Natural History Museum in London (founded in 1881), the Field Museum in Chicago (1893), and the Museum of New Zealand (*Te Papa Tongarewa*) in Wellington (1992) are just some of the most renowned natural history museums in the world. Taxidermy fulfills a key role

¹ Arsenic was the best method for preserving animals well into the 1980s, but was banned due to its toxicity to humans (Marte et al. 144). Many of the taxidermy found at the L.C. Bates Museum was done using this method, which is why there are strict handling protocols at the museum.

in these museums, displaying the natural world and educating their public. As Kuckahn suggested back in 1770, it is crucial to “recreate a realistic pose in the finished museum specimen” (Farber 556). Everything from the positioning, location, shaping, and coloring of a specimen will affect a viewer’s understanding and relationship to the subject. It is up to the taxidermists to recreate this natural pose allowing the animal to “come to life”. Taxidermists must be aware of each and every decision that is made about a subject, they must use critical thinking to understand what repercussions each action will have (Philips 1). A tilt of the head in a certain direction, the lifting of a foot or even a certain gaze in an eye will change the meaning of a specimen (Kalshoven 34–44). Altering these visual cues will also change the viewer’s experience and relationship with that animal.



Fig. 1. *Great Horned Owl*. Taxidermy. Hinckley: L.C. Bates Museum. Photo: Colbey Derwin

For example, in the Audubon Gallery of the L.C. Bates Museum, there is a great horned owl that is perched above the rest of the birds (fig. 1). Its wide eyes stare down at the viewer, its wings are spread open, and its claws are gripped into the wood as if it about to soar over the audience.

These aspects of display were chosen by the taxidermist for a reason. Its location, position, form, and contrasting color display, offers a sense of awe, not only about the intensity of the owl, but about its athleticism. A viewer begins to understand the capability of such a creature by viewing the owl this way. However, another owl found in the *Audubon Gallery*, is perceived very differently (fig. 2). The snowy owl poses, still and wise. Its eyes gaze into the viewer's offering a sense of curiosity and also of acknowledgment. With this owl, there is no sense of action or intensity as it sits quietly at eye level. The smallest details in which an animal is portrayed will change the viewer's experience. The taxidermist is responsible for telling a story about the animal, but it is up to the viewer to determine how this story affects them personally. Taxidermy offers a relationship with animals we would never be able to experience in nature, which is at once "provocative and unsettling, and necessarily productive in considering our relationship with animals both alive and wild or dead in museum" (Poliquin, *Matter and Meaning* 133).



Fig. 2. *Snowy Owl*. Taxidermy. Hinckley: L.C. Bates Museum. Photo: Colbey Derwin.

Prior to using photography and film to capture the natural world, taxidermy helped forge the relationship between people and the animals they would never be able to see with their own eyes. These interactions forced viewers to believe in what they saw. There was no reason to question how an animal looked or behaved because it was the most realistic representation at that time. While an abundance of illustrations of various species were available on paper, taxidermy was the closest look into an animal's natural world (Simmons and Snider). This sense of truth is shaped by the taxidermist, and whether it is done knowingly or not, personal and cultural bias are reflected in their work (Andrews 227–35; Poliquin, *Breathless Zoo* 9). The construction and content of an animal's display reflects human culture. An example of this can be seen in a study conducted with three natural history museums in the United Kingdom, which determined that changes in museum display are evidence of museums' function in relation to wider cultural shifts, such as those found in politics, ethics, education, and science (Andrews 227). Taxidermy may give us an up-close look into the natural world, but realizing the paradox of creating something natural through a sense of illusion must be taken into consideration. The stories a taxidermist chooses to tell through specimens are not only unique, but they are unique to each individual viewer. This story is “the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems” (Brown 5).

When a viewer interacts with a preserved animal, there are two stories being told: the story already mentioned, which educates and helps the viewer understand their relationship with the animal through visual cues; and then there is a story told beyond the viewer's gaze. This specific narrative highlights the journey of that animal's life. Asking questions such as: Where does it come from? How did it die? Why is it here? allows the viewer to connect with the animal on a

deeper level, helping them understand why this animal is significant (Poliquin, *Matter and Meaning* 123–33).

Nowadays, documentaries and television shows are replacing taxidermy (Patchett 12). Although we might be able to see more species in their natural habitats, our connection with them through a screen is much shallower than that offered by taxidermy displays. Many museums are losing the possibility of this closer type of interaction as they deem taxidermy a “relic” (Andrews 227–35; Patchett 2). This makes places like the L.C. Bates Museum special, as here viewers are still able to experience taxidermy, engaging with the narrative formed through visual cues and receiving a deeper look into an animal’s life.



Fig. 3. *Bald Eagle*. Taxidermy. Hinckley: L.C. Bates Museum. Photo: Colbey Derwin]



Fig. 4. *Lammergeier (Vulture)*. Taxidermy. Hinckley: L.C. Bates Museum. Photographed: Colbey Derwin.

The art of taxidermy has changed significantly since its beginnings, however the basic idea of preserving the most natural look of a specimen has remained constant. Taxidermists are responsible for creating this “natural look,” which in turn creates an informative narrative about the animal. This narrative helps create a unique relationship between the viewer and the animal, and it is in this interaction, where someone forms or reinforces their opinion about a species. A bald eagle will almost always pose powerfully and stoically, while a vulture appears as a scavenger and holds a mischievous look (figs. 3 and 4). How we perceive these animals form our relationship and opinion of them, in turn changing how we react towards them in the real world. Places like the L.C. Bates Museum, which still uses taxidermy, are special because they not only help construct a full picture of an animal’s life in its natural habitat, but offer a better understanding of how we as humans relate to these animals. A rare experience, especially as taxidermy is becoming less common in natural history museums today. When viewers gaze upon

a taxidermied animal, they may not be realizing how complex this interaction really is. It is an interaction, filled with illusion, truth, bias, and questioning. Rachel Poliquin, a taxidermy specialist, best summarizes the complexity of understanding animals by viewing them in taxidermied form: “[i]f taxidermied animals were easy to read, the process of looking at taxidermy would hardly be worth the effort” (Poliquin, *Matter and Meaning* 133).

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