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Author(s): Ebony Andrews

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Reflexive Displays: Interpreting Taxidermy Practice

Ebony Andrews

Postgraduate Researcher in Museum Studies

School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds,
Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, LS2 9JT
Email: fh08ela@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

This article explores reflexive approaches to interpreting natural science collections with particular reference to the making of natural science taxidermy specimens. Through an investigation into the natural science displays of a number of recently redeveloped museums, this article draws attention to some of the ways in which museums are currently interpreting taxidermy practice. These approaches are often nuanced and subtle, and using case study museums as examples, this paper aims to explore some of the ways in which museums may develop or further integrate reflexive displays into current or future exhibitions. The case studies featured in this article have been chosen primarily because they have recently been redeveloped, and therefore their displays may be considered to be indicative of contemporary trends in museology.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to draw attention to additional or alternative ways in which taxidermy specimens may be used in natural science galleries or elsewhere in museums. This topic is approached with a view to broaden the scope for audience engagement with natural science collections, and underscore their value in the ever shifting landscape of museum object interpretation.

Today taxidermy continues to be used by many museums to interpret scientific ideas and concepts. Most prevalent is the display of taxidermy to represent discrete species, for example, to illustrate animal characteristics and exemplify evolutionary adaptations. Indeed, as a medium of representation, taxidermy is most suited to these applications. However, over the last decade the redevelopment of various museum natural science galleries has evidenced a heightened focus on interpreting taxidermied specimens through socio-cultural and socio-historical narratives. One example is the new natural science gallery at Manchester Museum entitled '*Living Worlds*' which opened in 2011. In the new gallery, taxidermy is used to communicate ideas about the different relationships between humans and non-human species alongside other, more conventional scientific themes. *Living Worlds* reveals an interdisciplinary approach to the presentation of ideas about nature and the natural world by transgressing the traditional disciplinary boundaries more commonly associated with the natural sciences (The University of Manchester, 2011) (fig. 1).

Compared to a more traditional model of a natural science gallery, it may be fair to say that Manchester's approach is progressive, perhaps even radical. However, the approach employed by Manchester is reflective of a wider shift taking place in twenty-first century museums whereby visitor 'experience' is fast becoming the predominant economy of museums (Dudley, 2010; Black, 2012). As the development of information technology has progressively outmoded more traditional and didactic approaches to interpreting collections, attentions have been turned to how museum services can be differentiated from other information sources and leisure/learning experiences. Compounded with the necessity to justify public funding and the value of museums to society, these factors have encouraged institutions to become more reflective about what museums are and what they do (Black, 2005). It is within this context that this article seeks to expand on reflexive displays in relation to the making of specimens in contemporary museums.

Reflexivity?

Reflexivity might be described as reflecting upon past and present museological practices, and responding to those practices by interpreting them for audiences through public exhibitions and displays. With this (admittedly) working definition in mind, there is evidence to suggest that UK museums are already affording the interpretation of certain areas of museology increased importance within their galleries. For instance, through displays concerning and questioning the principals and rationale behind collecting, classification, conservation and other key museum practices. One subtle example can be found in the Darwin Centre at the Natural History Museum, where a display entitled 'Sorting into groups' works not only to describe

what classification is, but also to problematise the practice via the following statement: ‘There are many ways to organise things. But while there are no correct or incorrect ways of classifying them, some are more useful than others’ (excerpt quoted from a text panel located within the Darwin Centre, NHM, London). Through this statement audiences are prompted not only to think about the ways in which museums classify, but having been informed that there is no right or wrong way to do so, they are also invited to challenge the notion of classification and its functions in light of its inherent subjectivity.



Fig. 1. ‘Experience’ case featured in *Living Worlds*, The Manchester Museum (2011).
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It could be argued that interpretation of this kind is becoming increasingly commonplace in UK museums, particularly in recently redeveloped institutions. However, although there has been a gradual rise in reflexive displays concerning the philosophies and principles behind topics such as classification and collecting, this seems to be less so of practices relating to the production or preparation of museum natural science specimens. Specifically, and in relation to taxidermy, the journey that an organic, once sentient life-form takes to become a product of the material culture of science (Alberti, 2008). Therefore, the remainder of this article will extend this line of enquiry to the interpretation of natural science objects, and to taxidermy and taxidermy practice in particular. For brevity this paper focuses on the interpretation of taxidermy practice, however it should be noted that the same may also be applied to other types of specimens and preservation techniques such as dried or wet preparations for example.

What might it mean to be reflexive in the presentation, display and interpretation of museum taxidermy mounts? As a starting point, one could begin with semantics. The words ‘animal’, ‘object’, ‘mount’ and ‘specimen’ are used interchangeably throughout this article, as they often are in discussions concerning the natural sciences. Yet, tensions resonate between these words as they do not all refer to, or equal, the same thing. Indeed, in some contexts ‘object’ may figure as the binary opposite of ‘animal’. Moreover, a ‘specimen’ is often interpreted as an embodied set of objective scientific data, yet a ‘mount’ is a model, a work of artifice subject to the agency of the taxidermist who created it. Indeed, in talking about taxidermy, it is easy to be provocative when considering its materiality and hybrid nature/culture status (Marvin, 2006; Poliquin, 2008; Alberti, 2011). Yet, it could be argued that the liminal status of taxidermy is precisely what makes it so interesting to visitors, and therefore ripe for exploration as a means of widening opportunities for audiences to engage with natural science collections.

Museum displays: some observations

Visitors know that taxidermied animals are not the same as living (or dead) animals. As curators are all too aware, when observing visitors observing taxidermy, it soon becomes apparent that the same questions about taxidermied animals arise time and time again. Moreover, museum staff are well accustomed to hearing questions such as 'is it real?' and 'what are its eyes made of?' when working in natural science galleries. It could be argued that the persistent recurrence of such queries is indicative of an area of untapped potential that natural science departments could capitalise on. The popularity of the recent '*Polly Morgan – Live and Stuffing*' event held as part of Museums at Night 2012 at the University of Liverpool's Victoria Gallery & Museum, is suggestive of the general public wanting to know more about the making of taxidermy specimens. (Notably, although more commonly associated with the fine art world, on the night, Morgan's final work was a starling mounted in a natural pose).

There is evidence to suggest that some museums are beginning to express an awareness of a need to answer the types of questions visitors ask about museum taxidermy. For instance, in the natural science gallery of the redeveloped Leeds City Museum, the questions: 'Why do you have all this stuffed stuff?' and 'How do you stuff something?' are addressed by a modestly sized text panel situated near the gallery entrance (extract from a text panel in *Life on Earth*, Leeds City Museum). The panel summarises the taxidermy process in two sentences: 'To stuff something you must remove the skin and then place it over a model of the animal's insides. The eyes are made from glass'. In the absence of further imagery to interpret these ideas, it could be argued that the processes described may remain quite abstract in the mind of the visitor. Although it should be recognised that the imaging of taxidermic processes should be undertaken with due consideration of twenty-first century sensibilities, it is likely that such abstracted ideas or concepts will provoke more questions than they answer. This, of course, could be interpreted as a positive or negative outcome, depending on how motivated the visitor is to follow up their trip with further self directed study.

Also located within Leeds natural science gallery are a series of A4 sized '*Find out More*' cards, one of which addresses taxidermy practice in much more detail than the aforementioned text panel (fig. 2).

The information on the laminated card combines text and images and interprets the complexities of the taxidermy process in a concise manner. The taxidermist pictured on the card worked on a number of mounts featured in the gallery. Therefore, there is a direct relationship between the information on offer, and some of the taxidermy mounts currently displayed within the gallery space. Although information is made available to audiences concerning the role of the taxidermist in the making of museum specimens, along with a view of the completed mount itself, what is omitted is the relationship between the two; the *work*. A narrative to this end could enliven and make visible extant networks between practice, people and objects.

At Weston Park Museum, Sheffield, there is little mention of taxidermy practice in the public displays. Rather, information is presented in A4 ring binders for visitors to interrogate if they wish to do so. Within these folders a range of issues are explored through questions like: 'Where did all the museum's animals come from?', 'With what do taxidermists stuff animals?' and 'Hunting today' (extracts from *Find out more* folders located in *What on Earth!* and *Arctic World*, at Weston Park Museum, Sheffield). Through this information the Museum touches on some of the ethical and political issues bound up with natural science collections, particularly in relation to specimen acquisition, in both contemporary and historical contexts. While it is significant that museums such as Weston Park are reflecting on the social and cultural mechanisms that brought museum collections into being, it is also important to note that in these instances the information is presented in files and folders, and as such, may be viewed as supplementary or somehow of lesser importance by visitors. This is an interesting phenomenon, since as many visitor assistants would attest, some of the most frequent questions visitors ask about taxidermy relate not only the themes that mounts are being used to interpret, but also to the provenance, construction and materiality of the objects themselves. Audiences and the things that they would like to find out are in constant flux. This can be accommodated, in part, by audience consultations, a number of which were undertaken during the redevelopment of Weston Park. However, the case in point serves to re-sensitise the ongoing debate over agency, authorship and who decides what ideas and tropes are given precedence over others in public galleries.

At Leeds City Museum and the Great North Museum: Hancock (GNM:H), Newcastle, there are instances where the labels of specimens on permanent display are suggestive of the subjective hand of the taxidermist. For instance, at Leeds a taxidermied tiger is described as being of a 'slightly strange and over-sized shape [...] due to its time as a rug' (extract from a text panel in *Life on Earth*, Leeds City Museum). While at the GNM:H, a taxidermied wombat is characterised as a 'strange creature' on account of it being

mounted up erroneously on its hind legs: ‘Wombats move around on all four legs, but the taxidermist had never seen a wombat before, so he didn’t know this’ (extract from a text panel in *Explore!*, GNM:H). These fragments of information are suggestive of the role that taxidermists play in the making of museum specimens, along with some of the issues and challenges that the relationship between animal, museum and craftsperson can give rise to. However, these thought provoking, yet nuanced comments consistently resist full disclosure as to what taxidermy is, how and why it is performed, and perhaps most importantly, why it features so heavily in contemporary museums.

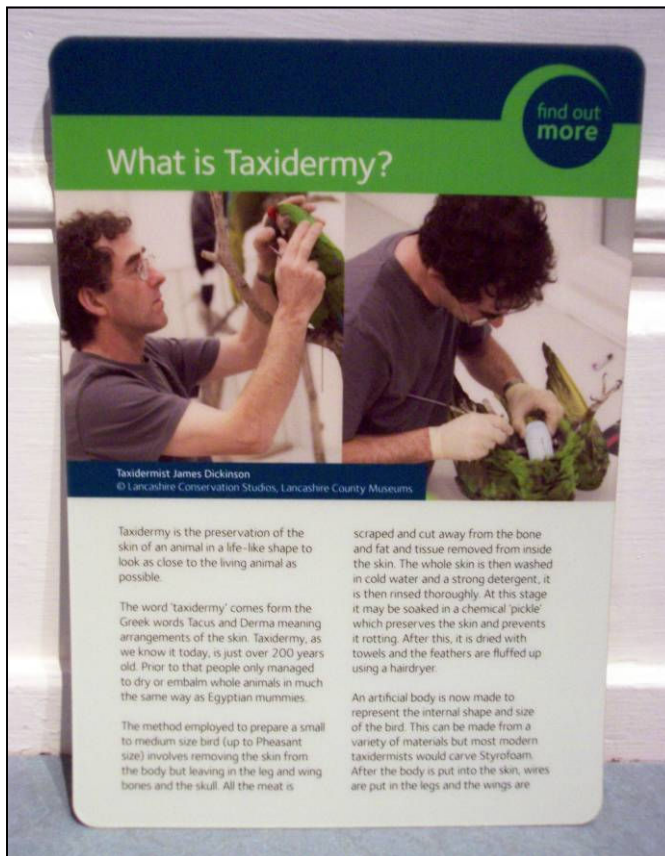


Fig. 2. ‘Find out More’ card in *Life on Earth*, Leeds City Museum featuring James Dickinson (2011).
© Leeds City Museum.

Interpreting taxidermy practice: A realistic goal for museums?

The aim in identifying some of the areas where the aforementioned museums are beginning to interpret the making of museum specimens has not been to critically analyse. Rather, through these examples, this paper has sought to identify and characterise the types of areas in museum galleries where reflexive interpretation could be integrated, or is beginning to emerge and could be developed.

Changing and updating displays is an expensive and time consuming activity, and therefore it is understandable that some museums may shy away from interpreting potentially contentious topics such as taxidermy practice in their permanent displays. However, as long as museums continue to use and display taxidermied animals, visitors will ask questions of them. Therefore, if dealt with in a sensitive manner, interpreting the making of museum specimens could provide considerable scope for enabling visitors to engage and explore the history and cultural structures behind the natural sciences, and the making of museum collections more broadly (Alberti, 2008). Giving greater exposure to some of the ‘behind the scenes’ activities that inform the content of natural science galleries, in the back rooms of museums and elsewhere, could serve not only to demystify the transformative process of specimen preparation, but also provide an alternative platform for explaining the value of specimens and collections. In addition, interpreting the work behind the making of specimens could also serve to promote museological and scientific careers to younger audiences.

In an era where the protection of species and their habitats remains at the forefront of the natural science agenda, interpreting taxidermy practice could also figure as an ideal opportunity to reflect on past practices, particularly in regard to specimen acquisition, and to dispel any myths or misguided conceptions that may persist about museum practice today. Displays interpreting these topics could act as springboards for broader discussions about the relationship between humans and nature. For instance, how and why the relationship has evolved over time, why the protection and promotion of biodiversity is so important, and perhaps most critically, how individuals can play a part in its preservation. These are well established themes, but what is significant is that the routes taken to arrive at them, are different from those of more conventional scientific approaches which can be difficult for some audiences to engage with.

Undoubtedly, there are pragmatic limitations as to how many topics can be addressed within a museum gallery, and a variety of stipulations continue to impact upon gallery content, privileging specific areas of provision over others. However, by interpreting museum objects along with museum practice itself, curators can open up a variety of new and alternative avenues of engagement for audiences, not least by relaying more explicitly the role and therefore importance of museums and their collections to society, both now and in the future. Consultations between museum staff and museum visitors could define the direction of such projects opening up opportunities for interdisciplinary displays (and/or associated projects). These could bring curatorial staff from different departments into collaboration, for example, drawing connections between art, science and social history. Collaborations of this nature, (particularly uniting art and science) may also enable museums to tap into alternative or additional sources of funding.

Finally, it may be worth emphasising a point that curators are already well aware of, but is worth reiterating here, that the types of narratives that accompany specimens on their journey from nature to museum culture, can be some of the most interesting, entertaining and thought provoking. By extending the interpretation of natural science collections beyond scientific tropes to include museum practice, audiences can partake in the stories that help unravel the making of museum objects. Stories which, in at the present time, remain largely undiscovered and underexplored by many museum visitors.

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