**Taxidermy stitching together nature and culture**

Taxidermy is a powerful and challenging subject; it is the dream of arresting age and beauty, an encounter with nature frozen in time. From the Wunderkammer of the sixteenth century to contemporary museum dioramas, taxidermy has evolved from noblemen’s novelty objects into a rich material culture in its own right, but the vocabulary used to describe and catalog taxidermy collections has not seen the same evolution. It has historically been common for researchers and collections staff to refer to taxidermy mounts as *specimens*. However, in the past decade, the accuracy of the implications of this term has been questioned, and new vocabulary has started to enter into discussions. “To what extent is a natural specimen an artefact? Where does the border between nature and culture lie?” (Alberti, 2008; p. 74). With advancements in preservation and representation techniques and the proliferation of taxidermy in contemporary culture, taxidermy has become more complex than the unsophisticated mounts in the Wunderkammer would have suggested. Taxidermy animals are artifacts, constructed by man and a product of our society. From wonder cabinets, natural history exhibits and trophy collections taxidermy is an artifact of man on display.

This paper will refer to a taxidermic animal as a *mount*. Mounts are commonly referred to as stuffed animals, but this is incorrect. Early in the development of taxidermy, animals were stuffed with straw, sawdust and cotton in a crude attempt to approximate the animal’s shape. (Milgrom, 2010; Poliquin, 2009; Desmond, 2008; Marte, Pèquignot, Von Endt, 2006; Asma, 2001). Taxidermy today is more correctly described as skins mounted on a mannequin form. The word
*artifact* will be used to describe taxidermy, rather than the word *specimen*, acknowledging the human element in the fabrication of this once-animate object.

There are many artistic choices that occur in the taxidermy process; taxidermy is a hands-on human interpretation of the natural. (Milgrom, 2010; Poliquin, Patchett, Foster, Alberti, Rader 2008; Asma, 2001; Hauser 1999). The illusionism of the taxidermic mount and means of display reveal the ways in which conceptions of nature are constructed and sanitized. From hunting trophies to museum dioramas, “what is on display is not so much nature but another era’s vision and manipulation of nature” (Poliquin, 2008; p. 126). It is humanity’s cultural, intellectual and political interactions with animals that are on exhibit. In a critique of natural history collections Haraway (1992) points out that taxidermy, unlike other museum objects, are represented as beings that are born, rather than objects that are made. It is this interpretation that has positioned mounted animals as specimens in museum catalogs. However these beings are seamlessly transformed after death, the practices of collection, display and presentation reinforce the face that taxidermy should be catalogued and conceived of as artifact.

Taxidermy originated as a means of preserving rare, strange, exotic and wondrous products of nature. In the sixteenth century, wonder was on display in the Kunstkammer, Wunderkammer and Studiolo. Ferrante Imperato’s cabinet of curiosities and Olaus Worm’s museum are two early and well-documented examples of visually powerful and wondrous taxidermic hoards (Yanni, 2005; Findlen, 1994, Olmi, 1985). Poliquin (2009) believes that these collections were intended to
“provoke wonder at nature’s dizzying varieties” (p.22). Naturalia collections were abundant feasts for the eyes of insatiable monarchs, aristocrats and scholars (Poliquin, 2009; Yanni, 2005; Findlen, 1994; Olmi, 1985). Naturalists were inspired by works such as *Naturalis Historia* by Pliny the Elder to “extend their curiosity to the farthest reaches of the known world in order to catalogue its wonders” (Findlen, 1994; p.61). Wondrous creatures hung from the walls and ceiling: Desiccated reptiles; crustaceans and creatures from the sea; disembodied white bear heads and displays of exotic, brightly colored birds. It was horror vacui, marvels of nature collected and artfully arranged by man. Collectors longed for more spectacular specimens at which they and their guests could marvel. One of the driving forces behind this insatiable collecting was the desire to possess nature as a means of organizing knowledge about the universe (Yanni, 2005; Barrow, 2000; Findlen, 1994; Olmi, 1985). Despite this great demand for taxidermy, early mounts were extremely crude. Stuffed with straw, cured in aromatic spices such as alum, cinnamon, tobacco and frankincense, and baked in ovens to kill pests, these mounts were shriveled and faded. Even with these precautions, they would quickly succumb to the ravages of insects such as moths, dermestid beetles and carpet beetles, as well as sunlight, heat, humidity and wear and tear (Milgrom, Burns, 2010; Poliquin, 2009; Desmond, 2008; Marte, Pèquignot, Von Endt, 2006; Asma, 2001). In this era of early taxidermy, the mounts were not as figuratively accurate as they are today. The techniques to create and preserve these animal objects were still in their infancy. The effect of the lack of skill present in these attempts to represent a living animal is
to highlight the fact that these animal objects, taken apart and reformed by man, are cultural artifacts.

Preservation techniques advanced greatly with Jean Baptiste Becoeur’s discovery of arsenical soap in 1738. This substance, a combination of ground arsenic, camphor, potassium carbonate and powdered calcium hydroxide suspended in soap was far more effecting at keeping pests at bay, greatly slowing the rate of decay of skins, fur and feathers. This pivotal preservation technique was in wide use until the 1980s, when it was discovered that arsenic is highly toxic (Poliquin, 2010; Marte, Pe’Quinot, Von Endt, 2006; Halter, 2001; Hauser, 1999). Presently, borax has replaced arsenic in the preservation process. However, the vast majority of currently held taxidermy collections still contains high levels of arsenic, and collection managers must inspect and test for traces of arsenic and protect museum workers and patrons from extended exposure. “The history of taxidermy is generally recorded as a narrative of technological, scientific, and aesthetic progress, with changing techniques of mounting dead animals for display resulting in ever more “realistic” and “lifelike” renditions (Desmond, 2008; p. 350). In the Nineteenth Century, the techniques invented and taught at the Wards Natural Science Establishment in Rochester, New York were the foundation for natural history museum displays across North America (Milgrom, 2010; Wonders, 1993; Haraway, 1984).

Natural history museums developed in the Nineteenth Century as storehouses of collections of products of nature. Museums organized and catalogued
nature into taxonomies. These methods of categorization were based on a conception of a hierarchy of living creatures, with human at the top (Poliquin, 2009; Yanni, 2005; Findlen, 1994). The museum has always operated on the idea that man is superior to beasts. Through the act of collecting (a euphemism for killing) an animal for museum study, man is expressing his superiority over the animal (Asma, 2001; Wonders, 1993, Haraway, 1984). The American Natural History Museum represents the beauty of nature, captured by the cleverness of man. Donna Haraway writes in *Teddy Bear Patriarchy* about Theodore Roosevelt’s colonial hunting collection practices (see also Wonders, 1993). After his presidency, Roosevelt, funded by the Smithsonian Institute, embarked on an expedition to Africa. The hunt resulted in the collection of over five thousand mammals, four thousand birds, and two thousand reptiles for collections across the United States (Wonders, 1993; p.158). Roosevelt’s dominion over nature was celebrated with a memorial at the American Natural History Museum.

The American Museum of Natural History in New York City has some of the most well researched and documented taxidermy artifacts and displays. This is due to the collection and presentation practices of Carl Akeley, the forefather of museum taxidermy, and a pupil at Wards Natural Science Establishment. Akeley was the first exhibition designer and taxidermist to show detailed animal groupings in elaborately staged and painted natural habitats (Milgrom, 2010; Wonders, 1993; Haraway, 1984). Akeley employed melodramatic modes of exhibition that he described as “a peep-hole into the jungle” (Haraway, 1984; p. 29). At the AMNH, preserved animals are exhibited in the context of moralistic displays. The stage is
set with animals arranged as nuclear families, with mounts playing the roles of the brave, protective patriarch, the nurturing mother or the adoring child. (Wonders, 1993; Haraway, 1984). These painstaking constructions were not reflective actual knowledge of nature, but of a society that is instilling nature with it’s own mores and values.

Research by Patchett (2008) indicates that taxidermic animals often lose their individuality, and are instead represented as an ideal, transforming the individual animal into an exemplar, standing for a whole species (see also Fitzgerald, 2003; Haraway, 1984). It is these collection and display practices of representing the animal as species that support the vocabulary of specimen. Once the animal reaches the museum it is skinned and dissected, mounted by professional taxidermists and collections staff and placed into fabricated displays, all with the intent to make the animal seem as natural as possible (Alberti, 2008; Triplrtt, 2003). In this sense, museums have been constructing nature (Milgrom, 2010; Poliquin, Patchett, Foster, Alberti, Rader 2008; Kalof, Fitzgerald, 2003; Asma, 2001; Hauser 1999).

What makes entomological collections and scientific skin preps different from taxidermy is the lack of human interpretation, representation and artistry. The only human interaction in the act of making was the selection process identifying which bug, bird, animal or reptile was ideal than killing the animal to collect it. For birds, reptiles and mammals an incision is made and the skin is carefully removed from the body. The skins are rubbed with preservation desiccant, stuffed with synthetic batting, sewn up, and information about the species and its location and
collector recorded. Dr. John Bates from the Ornithology Department at Chicago’s Field Museum explains the differences between research skin preps and taxidermy: “You see, this owl is properly considered a taxidermy mount because we’re trying to achieve a lifelike pose by using armatures or molded forms, but the birds of paradise are just skin preps, not taxidermy proper” (Asma, 2001; p.28). These shifting vocabularies of the nature of taxidermy are of direct significance to museums. The concept of a specimen has been often been positioned as diametrically opposed to the concept of artifact. This conception is so deeply rooted that it is actually enshrined in museum policies, layout, and even architecture: “Many of the classificatory schemes, accession registers and buildings still in use were established to reflect [the opposition of artifact and specimen]. The artifact and the specimen are to be found in different museum cases and accession ledgers” (Alberti, 2008; p.82). These challenges express themselves in practices of cataloging and storage. The vocabulary used to catalog these items must reflect taxidermy as artifact. This applies equally to newly acquired items and the large volume of material in currently held collections. This will also affect the way that collections managers interact with exhibition designers and curators. Museums are in a position to change the way that the public interprets their collections. Museum mounts are intended to be educational resources, empirical evidence of nature on display; however their construction process is hidden from the museum audience. “At times they go too far: their meticulous verisimilitude renders them uncanny, especially in the context of the habitat diorama, which is intended to immerse the viewer entirely in the illusion” (Alberti, 2008; p.81). A taxidermy mount is
positioned as an ideal form of a small facet of nature, but in fact it is a meticulously constructed work of human culture.

Taxidermy frequently takes the form of trophy, the iconic emblem of the hunt. The trophy is often viewed in a negative light as a disembodied head attached to a plaque, the epitome of man’s domination over nature (Milgrom, 2010; Poliquin, 2009; Kalof, Fitzgerald, 2003; Hauser, 1999). On the contrary, taxidermy trophies can present another narrative, one of portraiture. The traditional roles of portraiture were to immortalize and elevate the subject through artistic representation, just as the hunting trophy is a portrait of the animal immortalizing the adventure. The taxidermic mount serves as evidence, the physical documentation of man’s journey into the wilderness. The reading of a hunting trophy differs greatly from museum taxidermy; rather than being stripped of its individuality and representing an entire species as in natural history collections the hunting trophy is a depiction of the individual animal.

Hunting trophies have often posed a challenge for museums. Many museum taxidermy collections are comprised of a significant amount of donations from the public. Many of these donations are trophy heads, which often outlive their original owner and are unwanted by those who inherit them. These mounts are regularly donated to museums for tax credits. In 1997 Hafner, Gannon, Salazar-Bravo, & Alvarez-Castañeda, in the American Society of Western Mammalogists, surveyed 267 mammal collections in North America and found that 40% of the mounts came from
donations of this kind. The disembodied head of a trophy is a reminder of why this animal was killed: for sport rather than study (Milgrom, 2010; Kalof, Fitzgerald, 2003; Simpson, 1999; Wonders, 1989). These mounts are less likely to be put on display than full body mounts, thus they stay in storage for longer periods of time. The taxidermy trophy is the product of mans victory over nature, nature altered by man into decorative material culture.

**Fabricating the Natural**

There is nothing natural about taxidermy. Museums house faded pandas whose fur is deceptively dyed with Clarol’s *True Black*. These representatives of nature are staring at us with glass eyes and outstretched resin tongues. They are examples of material culture, a product constructed by humanity, not empirical evidence of nature. Collection catalogs need to reflect this new vocabulary and acknowledge the animal’s preparator and the chemical aids used to sterilized nature for public consumption. Kitty Hauser, in *Coming Apart at the Seams*, takes a critical look at taxidermy. “In the long history of mimesis there can surely be no finer example of a non-consensual act of representation, of nature’s forced transformation into culture, than the stuffed animal” (Hauser, 1999; p. 8). Hauser speaks of animals that have been poorly stuffed: “It is not so easy to bestow eternal life on one of these animals, after all: stitches, seams, a discolored beak or foot, a moldy ear, thinning fur, sagging skin or an awkwardly placed limb all testify against the illusion of life” (Hauser, 1999; p. 10). Hauser ’s belief is that because a taxidermic mount is not a pristine representative of nature it acknowledges the fact that this mount was man made. However it is the shriveled gums, the tightly pulled eyelids
and the wincing smile that is so fascinating. The illusionism becomes uncloaked, revealing the human interaction with the animal, the varying levels of skill and taste, and the different ways of posing the animal speak. These traces speak to the nature of taxidermy as animal artifact.

Between 1958 and 1960 the British museum oversaw the expunging of the Saffron Walden taxidermy collections. The Saffron Walden Museum justifies the museum’s purge in their 1960 Annual Report: “Local museums must exhibit local nature, not the haphazard remains of eccentric Victorian ramblings. The imperial history of the animals was an embarrassment and besides the animals were in dreadful condition, many of them were more than a hundred years old, all very dirty and some very dilapidated. Most of them were so badly stuffed as to be mere caricatures of the creatures they were supposed to represent” (Poliquin, 2008; p. 124). Under terms of the Carnegie trust, the museum’s vast collection practices were being reconsidered, and only British animals would be saved from extermination. In May 1960 “Over 200 animals, birds, reptiles, and fish were hauled to the city dump and set on fire.” (Polquin, 2008; p. 124). The eradication of the Saffron Walden taxidermy collections is not a unique twentieth-century episode. The International Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History (ICOM NatHist) has established a working group on the Art of Taxidermy and its Cultural Heritage Importance in the hopes of raising awareness about the loss of many natural history collections around the globe (Noris, 2005). Destroying taxidermy because of it is old age and inaccurate portrayal of the animal would be like a curator discarding the Venus of Willendorf.
We can look back on History and observe the evolution of taxidermy from shriveled, desiccated collections of aristocrats to the noachian hoards of the natural history museum. Taxidermy has evolved with the culture that produced it. In our making of these animal objects we must acknowledge our role in the process and finished product. The word *artifact* is a signifier that allows us to see that the nature of taxidermy is not purely natural.
References


Halter, A. S. (2001). Standards for Management of the Recent Mammal and Bird Collections at Texas Tech University,


Rader, K. (2008). From natural history to science: Display and the transformation of


