Still Life

In search of taxidermy's meaning.

BY TOM DICKSON

SUPER MODELS
A full-mount bugling bull and several cow elk anchor an amazingly realistic diorama, complete with grasses, shrubs, and a painted background, at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

HEMIS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

When I was a boy, our family would drive from St. Paul to the Black Hills each August to visit my dad's parents. Somewhere in central South Dakota along Interstate 90, we'd pass a faded sign announcing, "Wildlife Museum Ahead." Despite my begging, Dad wouldn't take the exit until, one summer, I wore him down and we pulled into a one-stoplight town. The "museum" was in a bar.

While my mom and siblings waited in the car, Dad and I went in. There on a tall table stood three taxidermied animals: a badger, an albino fawn, and a snarling coyote.

I was particularly transfixed by the coyote. Even though one of its googly eyes was missing and sawdust leaked from the corner of its mouth, I was thrilled to be so close to what at the time I considered a deadly predator. I knew then that I wanted to be a taxidermist.



FOR BETTER OR WORSE Two ocelot mounts show the awkward evolution of taxidermy techniques, from a freely interpreted animal based on fur and sketches from 1818 (left) to an anatomically accurate mount derived from meticulous studies of the original species from 1934 (below).

Later that year I responded to an ad on the back of *Outdoor Life* offering a "Free Book...That Explains Everything" from the Northwestern School of Taxidermy. Unfortunately, the entire series of instructional booklets cost, for me, an unaffordable $55. The next year, as an 8th grader, I signed up for a free after-school taxidermy shop class. But my sensitive 13-year-old self couldn't stomach skinning the roadkill squirrel provided to each student and I dropped out.

It turns out I didn't actually want to do taxidermy. What I wanted was to look at taxidermy mounts.

But why? What appeal did a reconstituted coyote or badger skin hold for me? In fact, why would anyone pay to see stuffed dead animals in a museum? Or, even more puzzling, shell out hundreds of dollars to mount the pelt or head of a creature they killed themselves and display it in their living room?

Tom Dickson was editor of Montana Outdoors *from 2002 to 2024.*

I've long been drawn to taxidermy, but only recently did I discover what a strange, storied world it is.

Derived from the Greek words *taxi* and *derma* ("the arrangement of skin"), taxidermy is the art of preserving a dead animal's body by mounting the tanned hide over an artificial structure in the shape of that creature. When done properly, taxidermy "recreates and conveys a poetic appreciation of an animal's essence—what makes a dove a dove and a lion a lion," writes Rachel Poliquin in her far-ranging study of the art, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing*.

Early taxidermists hardly had such lofty ideals, focusing mostly on keeping prized animal corpses from rotting. Ancient Egyptians were the first to master a form of the craft. They preserved dogs, birds, and cats by removing bodily fluids, dehydrating the carcasses, wrapping them in linen, and coating the fabric in resin before placing the packaged animals in tombs to accompany royalty in the afterlife.

Taxidermy as we know it today had its rough origins in the 16th century, when European explorers began sailing to new worlds and returned with tales of exotic creatures. Over the next two centuries, reports of unusual birds and mammals—Panamanian toucans, Asian gibbons, Tasmanian wallabies—fueled a demand to see the creatures alive or as a semblance of their former selves. The first preservation efforts were clumsy and crude, the gutted skins simply stuffed with sawdust, wool, or other common materials that failed to ward off destructive insects. Often early taxidermied specimens were made by people who had never seen the creatures when alive, resulting in stiff, shriveled carcasses arranged in awkward poses.

Yet the demand for mounts only grew. By the end of the 18th century, advancements in chemical preservatives prevented decay and beetle damage, greatly improving long-term preservation and aesthetics. This made mounts even more desirable to collectors. In private estates throughout the United Kingdom and Europe, the well-to-do collected specimens for display in their parlors and drawing rooms. Hummingbirds, with their dazzling plumage, were especially prized.

CAROLA RADKE, MFN BERLIN





NOT EVERYONE'S CUP OF TEA English 19th century taxidermist Walter Potter tested the limits of taste, creating scenes using pets and other small mammals displayed in his museum. One has 18 kittens at a tea party (above), another guinea pigs playing cricket. Left: While many would-be taxidermists took the famous Northwestern School of Taxidermy correspondence course, relatively few became professionals.

FROM LEFT: NORTHWESTERN SCHOOL OF TAXIDERMY ADVERTISEMENT, C. 1950; JOANNA EBENSTEIN

The heyday of taxidermy's popularity came during the Victorian era. During the latter half of the 1800s, a new generation of taxidermists began dressing up stuffed animals—squirrels, rabbits, rats, kittens, and other small mammals that had "hands" and could stand on their hind legs—and placing them in ordinary human settings. Like dolls, the mounts were set in small rooms and appeared to be dealing cards, drinking tea, or playing musical instruments.

> *"The earliest museums really were, for lack of a better term...freak shows."*

A master of anthropomorphic depictions was Hermann Ploucquet, a German taxidermist whose displays at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London delighted audiences. Families waited for hours to see his displays of boxing mice, piano-playing kittens, and a death-defying fox named Reynard—just as adults and children marvel today at animations in movies like *Puss in Boots* and *Zootopia*.

Ploucquet greatly influenced the English taxidermist Walter Potter, who used small mammals to create entire worlds displayed at his own museum. Among the scenes were a village school with 48 bunny students, 20 kittens attending a wedding, and a cricket match played by guinea pigs.

With displays both entertaining and unsettling (where *did* all those dead kittens come from?), Ploucquet, Potter, and their contemporaries elevated the art of taxidermy. Gone was the "old wooden school" of birds and mammals staring straight ahead, blank eyed, legs stiff. Mounts instead displayed gestures, movement, and facial expressions. Ironically, Poliquin writes, the

and Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia began curating their own collections. "The earliest museums really were, for lack of a better term...freak shows," historian Stephen Asma, author of *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads*, told National Public Radio. "The bizarre was collected together with sober specimens with no real order or organization."



TWO KINDS OF PRESERVATION Six bison killed and mounted in the 1880s by the Smithsonian's chief taxidermist William Hornaday are displayed at the Museum of the Northern Great Plains in Fort Benton, Montana. Hornaday was so distraught over how few bison he saw on his hunt northwest of Miles City that he became one of the foremost proponents for preserving North America's remaining wild bison.



DINOS IMAGINED Museum-display designers are using taxidermy techniques and fake skins, fur, and feathers to create approximations of dinosaurs, such as this display of a *Deinonychus* (a cousin to the *Velociraptor* depicted in *Jurassic Park*) at the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman.

anthropomorphic taxidermists inspired museum and trophy taxidermists to expand their imagination and experiment with poses and gestures that made their mounts look more like real animals.

For more than two centuries, natural history museums have featured taxidermied wildlife, giving people the chance to appreciate and value the animals' beauty, majesty, and exceptionality. Museums are where visitors may closely observe large carnivores like tigers and lions that could kill them if alive, and skittish birds and other creatures that would never submit to close observation.

Museums house two types of taxidermied animals: "study skins" used for scientific research that are stuffed, tagged, cataloged, and stored in cabinets for future reference, and display animals mounted with detail and artistry for public observation.

One of the greatest museum masters was Carl E. Akeley, often called the "father of modern taxidermy." In the late 1800s, Akeley worked as head taxidermist for the American Museum of Natural History in New York and Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, which still displays his legendary "Fighting African Elephants." A stickler for anatomical realism, Akeley maintained that taxidermy should produce mounted animals that look not just lifelike but actually alive.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Akeley and his museum colleagues crafted realistic mounts that included details down to the ligaments, gums, skin wrinkles, veins, eyelashes, and nostril hairs. The critical foundation was the "manikin," or form, a structure made of wire, wood boards, and wood shavings overlaid with modeling clay. "Polished taxidermy on the outside depends on exacting, meticulous reproduction of the animal's internal form," writes Poliquin.

Another virtuoso was William Temple Hornaday, who wrote in his 1891 manual, *Taxidermy and Zoological Collecting*, "The sight of a particularly fine animal, either alive or dead, excites within me feelings of admiration that often amount to genuine affection." Like Akeley and other museum taxidermists in his day, Hornaday traveled widely to hunt and kill animals for display.

His most famous trip was to a remote prairie region northwest of Miles City in 1886 to kill American bison for the United States National Museum at the Smithsonian Institution. At the time, almost all the great bison herds had been slaughtered during previous decades for hides, meat, and sport. Hornaday, the Smithsonian's chief taxidermist, became so distraught over how few bison he saw on his hunt—though still managing to kill 23—that he became one of the foremost proponents for preserving buffalo in the wild. (Since 1996, six of the original bison collected and mounted from Hornaday's expedition have been displayed at the Museum of the Northern Great Plains in Fort Benton.)



SKIN IN THE GAME William Hornaday (center) at the Smithsonian's taxidermists' laboratory in 1880. "The sight of a particularly fine animal, either alive or dead, excites within me feelings of admiration that often amount to genuine affection," he wrote.

MTN NEWS: SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION ARCHIVES

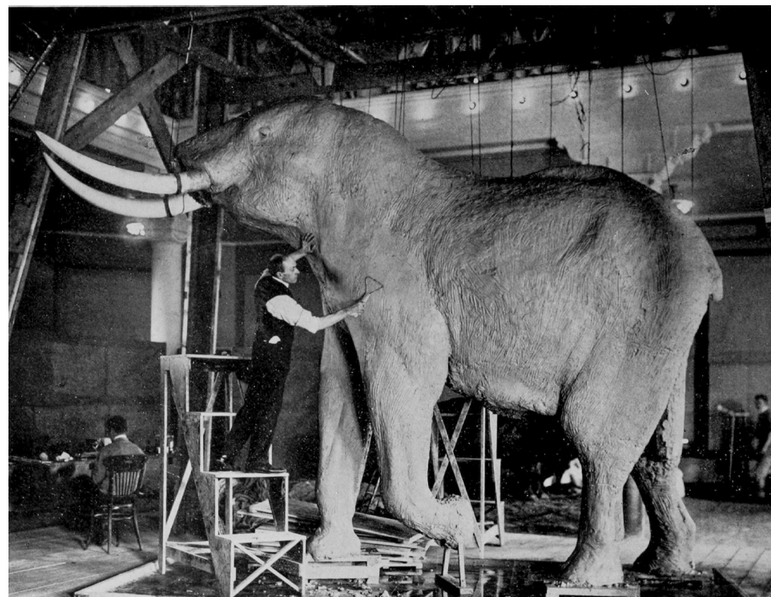
These days, museum taxidermists don't collect new specimens as much as restore aging mounts and displays.

Akeley and Hornaday also pioneered the display of full-body mounts of animals placed in natural habitat dioramas complete with authentic plant reproductions and painted landscape backdrops, sometimes in family groups with both sexes and their young.

Many natural history museums still feature dioramas and taxidermy mounts because most visitors still prefer seeing real animals, even dead ones, over artificial reproductions. These days, museum taxidermists don't collect new specimens as much as restore aging mounts and displays. A subgenre known as "re-creation" or "reproduction" taxidermy uses taxidermy techniques, though with fake skins, fur, and feathers, to create approximations of dinosaurs, Irish elk, woolly mammoths, dodos, and other extinct species.

Of course, the most common taxidermy seen in Montana and other states with a robust hunting culture is the trophy mount. These are the head-shoulder mounts of elk, deer, moose, and pronghorn found staring down from walls of most sporting goods stores and many living rooms, or, full-body mounts of bighorn sheep, mountain lions, or black bears.

Though the mainstay of commercial taxidermy, a quality head-shoulder mount still requires anatomical expertise and artistry. "You have the deer head that is just sticking on the wall and it is looking straight ahead," Paul Rhymer, former taxidermist for the Smithsonian's National Museum of



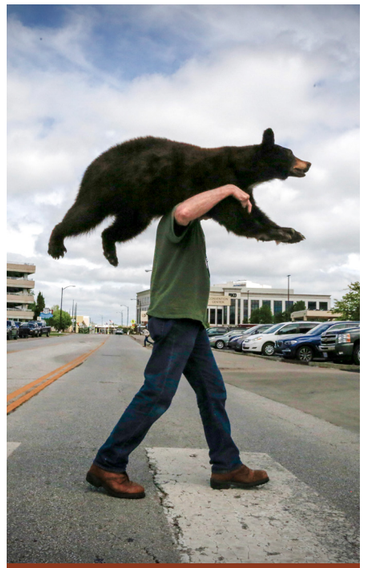
PADDING A PACHYDERM At the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1914, head taxidermist Carl E. Akeley took measurements, made plaster impressions, and used an elephants' own skeletal bones to create lifelike clay sculptures, over which he'd fit the skin.

FROM TOP: LIZ ROLL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; INTERNET ARCHIVE BOOK IMAGES, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS





GOING HEAD-TO-HEAD Every other year since 1983, taxidermists from across the world have converged on the U.S. to compete in the World Taxidermy and Fish Carving Championships. Ribbons (top left) are awarded in categories ranging from Large Mammals to Reptiles. Judges inspect every detail down to an entry's whiskers and teeth (left).



BEARING UP A taxidermist shoulders his work while heading to a contest in Missouri.

AUDE GUERRUCCI

Natural History, told *Smithsonian*, "or there is a way of creating that thing, mounting it and doing something that is not only natural and scientifically accurate but also beautiful."

Trophies differ from other forms of taxidermy because they are created in tribute to the adventure and the person who killed the animal as much as the animal itself. Over a lifetime of hunting, a hunter may select only one or a few specimens to have mounted—an elk or deer with a particularly noteworthy set of antlers, an especially big fish, an exquisite drake or rooster showing its brightest plumage.

These statements of pride and memory usually contain a story—finally killing a large-antlered specimen after years of trying or a particularly challenging hunt requiring stealth and stamina. Or they simply acknowledge and celebrate luck: "I looked down and there was the biggest mule deer buck I ever saw, just 100 yards away." The stories behind hunting mounts add significance beyond the taxidermied animal itself.

These days, some mounts are bought and sold on eBay solely for their aesthetics in interior home décor, the hunters and their adventures long forgotten. Trophy mounts for trophy homes are meant to add rugged authenticity to a house and its owners. But without the background stories, they become little more than dead heads on a wall.

Taxidermy practiced at its highest level is judged in state, national, and international competitions. The "Olympics" of the craft is the World Taxidermy and Fish Carving Championships, held biannually and attracting several hundred entries from the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, and Russia. After examining entries up close from all angles with penlights and dental mirrors, judges



GOLDEN GOOSE Missoula's Dale Manning (above) won Best in World in the Waterfowl category at the 2013 World Taxidermy Championships for his snow goose mount.

TOM BAUER/*MISSOULIAN*

name Best in World winners (the Carl E. Akeley Awards) in roughly 20 different categories and divisions. Champions receive cash prizes as well as status and publicity that can translate into higher fees for their commercial work.

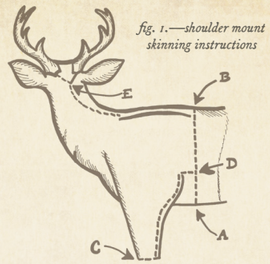
Montana has produced several world champions since the competition began in 1983. Missoula's Dale Manning won Best in World in 2013 for a snow goose landing in a cornfield and another in 2019 for an American coot. Filling the cement floor and wood countertops in Manning's garage, where he also stores his fishing boat, are more than 100 mounts ranging from bull elk to Canada geese to squirrels. The walls are covered in blue ribbons and trophy plaques.

A past president of the National Taxidermists Association, Manning says competitions require that "you do something dramatic, something original the judges have never seen before that shows the essence of an animal." He points to his world championship snow goose, two decades later still looking like it could fly out the door.

Manning, 65, grew up in Missoula, where his dad was a University of Montana professor. As a teenager, he learned the basics from the Northwestern School of Taxidermy mail-order course. After class during high school, he worked for a local taxidermist, and in college, mounted birds in his dorm room.

Recently retired, Manning says he made a "decent living" over the previous 40-plus years he spent mounting other people's trophy deer, ducks, elk, mountain lions, polar bears, African antelope, and other hunting achievements. Taxidermy is usually not the

> *"The goal is to make it as real looking as when it was alive."*



HOW IT'S DONE

Whether for museums or a hunter's den, the process of taxidermy is basically the same:

1. Remove the skin: A few incisions are made with a sharp knife or razor in the dead animal's hide or skin, which is then peeled off the carcass or skull.

2. Flesh and tan the hide: The hide is scraped of meat and fat, treated with salt to draw moisture out, then sent to a commercial tannery. There it is preserved (tanned) using chemicals or natural acids that kill bacteria before being dried, rubbed with oil for softening, then stretched.

3. Mold the form: Commercial or custom-made polyurethane foam forms ("manikins") are carved, cut, and reshaped into walking, standing, sitting, sleeping, flying, or other lifelike positions. For full-body mounts, a wood-and-wire frame replicating the body shape may be built. Modeling clay is used on the head mold to set glass eyeballs and emphasize facial features like the cheekbones, brow, and mouth.

4. Mount the skin: The tanned hide is stretched tightly over the mold and secured in place with pins. One taxidermist likened it to pulling a snowsuit over a toddler—"except the mold doesn't wiggle." Special glue is used to adhere the pelt to the mold. Seams are sewn to be invisible.

5. Add finishing touches: Antlers or horns are affixed. Whiskers, eyes, and other purchased body components are added. Areas around the eyes, nostrils, and mouth are painted to hide blemishes. The fur is blown dry and fluffed. Feathers are combed and lightly brushed.

6. Secure to a base or habitat: The finished specimen is mounted to a wooden base, or for full-body mounts, a stand, often made of artificial rock adorned with dried or plastic vegetation to replicate a realistic habitat.

BAD, TACKY, and STRANGE

The best way to appreciate what world champion taxidermist Dale Manning and other experts accomplish is to look, if you dare, at the often-disturbing world of "bad" or "crap" taxidermy. These amateur efforts stand out with unnatural poses, visible seams, saggy skin, and crooked eyes. Many are still on display in European museums, which may lack funds to replace them with better mounts.

Most people consider poorly executed taxidermy creepy or disturbing, but some, like Kat Su, author of the book *Crap Taxidermy*, say they find much of it charming. (Judge for yourself by viewing examples on Instagram @terrible.taxidermy or at the subreddit r/badtaxidermy/.)

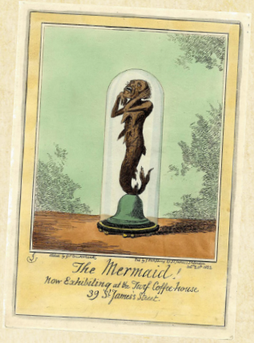


Adele Morse's deliberately unconventional taxidermy blurs the line between "bad" taxidermy and art.



Deer leg nun-chucks, or "buck-chucks"

"Tacky" taxidermy includes anything defying common decency. Examples include using animal parts as furniture or household items—elephant feet as wastebaskets, deer legs as shelf holders—or combining portions of different creatures to build grotesque imaginary beasts. The most famous conjoined freak animal was the "Feejee Mermaid"—which paired the head, arms, and upper body of a mummified juvenile monkey with the desiccated back half of a fish to represent a mythical sea maiden. Promoted by P.T. Barnum in the 1840s, the mount was lost in a fire, then later reproduced and shown at state fair freak shows during the early 20th century.





Jackalope

Similarly in Europe, narwhal horns were attached to taxidermied horse heads to depict "unicorns." And in the American West, jackalopes are still found in bars, old hotel lobbies, and tourist shops. First created in the 1930s by two brothers in Wyoming, jackalopes are mounted jackrabbits adorned with a small set of deer horns.

FROM TOP: ADELE MORSE; SOCIAL MEDIA IMAGE; WIKIMEDIA COMMONS; SKINNY BOY ODDITIES

most lucrative profession, so his degree in economics and business along with the world champion publicity probably didn't hurt.

At the competition level, Manning says, judges look for perfect fur texture and feather alignment, subtle skin transitions, and accurate scale and proportions. Master taxidermists must be anatomical experts, building body and head molds by hand rather than using polyurethane foam models sold from supply stores. Eyes, though, are commercially manufactured. Manning shows me a cheap $5 glass bobcat eyeball then hands me a $125 museum-quality version so realistic it looks like it could blink.

Competition taxidermists will spend hours adjusting a mountain lion's eyelids, the comblike lamellae in a duck's mouth, or the nasal details of a whitetail, Manning says. Just as important are a mount's overall gesture, anatomy, feet and wing placement, and limb angles. "The goal is to make it as real looking as when it was alive." He points to a canvasback mount. "You could set that next to a lake and people would stop and take photographs."



SWORD PLAY Taking a modern twist on British taxidermist Walter Potters' tea-drinking kittens, Montana artist Bob McEachern uses squirrels and other small mammals to create fanciful scenes of ancient warriors. Here he fits a samurai squirrel in armor made of rabbit fur and pine cone seeds.

JACOB J. CREATIVE

More than half a century since that first encounter with the snarling coyote mount, I still am enamored with taxidermy—from a neighbor's bull elk mount to natural history museum dioramas. Poliquin, taxidermy's cultural historian, maintains that taxidermy appeals to so many people because it embodies an unfulfillable longing "to preserve and keep whole what has already passed and faded as if it were still alive."

With knives, thread, clay, foam, and a reverence for wildlife, taxidermists sustain the beauty, scientific significance, and wonder of individual animals that would otherwise disintegrate and disappear.

Many of us long for connection with the natural world—wild animals in particular. Deep inside we retain remnants of a time, thousands of years ago, when paying close attention to wildlife meant life or death. A time when animals truly mattered.

Today, whether wildlife is live in a zoo or national park, or dead and displayed in a museum or living room, we still crave the closer look, to feel that deep primordial thrill of recognition and our ancient relationship with those creatures.

Or taxidermy may simply be no more than a way for someone to preserve the memory of a particular moment that involved one specific, significant animal. In a garage filled with magnificent big game trophies, Manning leads me to a small whitetail buck mount with a humble 3x3 rack.

"It's my son's first deer. His dad's a taxidermist. Of course we had to mount it."