

Death and Taxidermy:

How the Process of Taxidermy Ties in to Modern Society's
Discomfort with Death

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Abstract

“Death and Taxidermy: How the Process of Taxidermy ties in to Modern Society’s Discomfort with Death” examines the relationship between current western discomfort with taxidermy and the strengthening relationship of companion animals with humans. This strengthening of the relationship is facilitating the rising level of grief that comes with losing a pet thus allowing that loss to equate to the loss of a family member. By dispelling the mystery surrounding the process by which a taxidermy specimen is made, where it comes from and why these specimens are vital to educational advancement in the museum, we can discuss why society has decided that these specimens are distasteful in the modern cultural narrative. The philosophical notion of the museum and the practical experience that comes with actually participating in the process of taxidermy have been completely separate until now. This paper seeks to bring these two different views on museums together to spark a new conversation and exchange of ideas.

Taxidermy is defined as: “The art of preparing, stuffing, and mounting the skins of animals and especially vertebrates.”¹

There are plenty of misconceptions when it comes to the process of taxidermy, most of those stem from a lack of knowledge about how taxidermy specimens, or mounts, are made. Due to a general cultural distaste for Taxidermy, the process has remained in the shadows, out of common knowledge for many years as most people would rather pretend the process did not exist. But why? What is the root cause of this cultural aversion to taxidermy? This question was the start of my curiosity about taxidermy’s place in modern society.

I have often found myself reluctant to tell people what my Capstone Project is about. I have this conversation in my head almost every time I think of revealing my research topic: ‘my paper is the only thing I am thinking about and I would love to talk about it. But I do not particularly want to traumatize this person I am talking to. However it would be fun to see their reaction to the fact that I am researching taxidermy and death.’

My sister reacted with an emphatic “Eugh, gross! Why would you want to write about that?” and admitted later that she “definitely was turned off” by the idea of my project being about taxidermy. While my boyfriend was a little more supportive he still did not want to know much about my research, dubbing it “creepy”.

But that begs the question: why? Why would taxidermy elicit adverse reactions from people? Why is discussing death, especially when it is used for educational purposes, be considered abnormal? These are all questions that I had, even before considering what my Major in University would be and I thought that a senior paper might be an excellent way to explore a small section of this truly massive discussion that is constantly transforming in the modern dialogue.

Death, being a natural process should be something that is normal, even mundane, but it is not. Why? How have we, as humans, changed the landscape of thought surrounding death and what effect does that thinking have on the field of museum taxidermy? Are the subjects of death and taxidermy closely linked? How? Is there a mysticism around taxidermy that triggers our fear of the unknown? That is, in turn, akin to that of the fear of the unknown when we think of death? In this paper I will attempt to answer these questions that I have posed and a few that come up along the way.

To begin, we will tackle the largest subject, death, and work down. It is common for humans to believe that death has always been an uncomfortable and even scary subject. In reality, there has been a fluctuation of western society's perception and feelings toward death for centuries. And indeed, there is fluctuation in how other cultures view death in contrast to how most European based societies and cultures feel about death as well.

European-based cultures such as America and the cultures around the UK and Western Europe currently see death as something to be feared and avoided at all cost. This was not always the case: in Victorian era England there was huge enthusiasm surrounding funerals and dying that it took on an almost sensationalized celebrity factor. The Queen at the time, Queen Victoria, had a massive funeral and the papers speak of it as if it were a party with phrases such as "It promises to be the most tremendous pageant of the generation." and "The pageant in London is to be a splendid one."² It is not regarded as a funeral procession; it is a pageant, a spectacle and a glorious one at that.

This 'odd' excitement over a funeral is explained by the idea of "thy death". At the end of the 1600s death took on a much 'romanticized' visage when people became fascinated with the idea of a "beautiful death" and the notion of an eventual tear-filled reunion with the loved

one that has died.³ This idea was just reaching the apex of its ascent in 1901 when Queen Victoria died. The Victorian era, especially in England, is renowned for a certain thrill that people took in the gruesome and macabre. “By the nineteenth century, the deaths of others tended to overshadow one’s own sense of mortality.”⁴ This is just one example of the pendulum swinging in one direction.

Right after the first decade of the twentieth century, with the advent of hospitals, there was a sharp decrease in the fervor around death, replaced with wanting the dying person to be unaware that they were dying.⁵ This led to the present uneasiness with death in today’s culture. Currently, we are experiencing the beginnings of a change in opinion again, coming from a sharp avoidance of the subject of death, to it coming back in vogue. Beginning in the 1970’s, there was a slow increase in interest in death from a sociology point of view. In his article “The Reversal of Death: Changes in Attitudes Toward Death in Western Societies” Philippe Aries observes:

“On the other hand, sociology and psychology are supplying the first signs that contemporary man is rediscovering death.[...] Today hardly a month passes without the French, British or American press reporting on a book concerned with death, or some observed curiosity regarding it. Death is now becoming what it had ceased to be since the very end of the Romantic era, the subject of an inexhaustible supply of anecdotes- a fact which would lead one to suspect that the newspaper-reading public is becoming interested in death, perhaps initially because of its seemingly forbidden and somewhat obscene nature.”⁶

Aries is writing in the mid-1970’s, when the examination of death was considered an unmentionable subject in most fields, including history, and only beginning to make an appearance in psychological and sociological publications.⁷ It makes sense then that the historical thoughts on death are beginning to shift. As those scholars who were shaping their views on death in the early and mid-70’s move on and make room for newer historians, those

ideas about death being off-limits move on with them, leaving space to discuss death in a more candid and accepted way.

Not all cultures share our current detestation of death and dead bodies. Ancestor worship in many South American cultures is seen as completely normal and the thought of dying is not considered terrifying as it is in most European cultures. The Inca, for example, would often transport their ancestors' mummified remains around the village and consult them on important matters because these remains were believed to be a link between the Incan Gods and the humans still living on earth, and thus able to give divine advice⁸. Many "primitive" cultures around the world still practice this form of ancestor worship or something akin to it. In the Province of Papua lives the Dani tribe who keep their ancestors remains with them to ensure nothing happens to them⁹. An article in *The Huffington Post* describing this particular tribe is titled "Tribal Leader Shows Off 'Smoked' Mummy He Sleeps With," which, in western cultures, evokes a feeling of shock and horror culminating in the response of "how weird and creepy." When really, when one thinks about it, there should not be anything fundamentally 'creepy' about a dead body. This headline says more about western cultures and our views on death more than it says about the Dani tribe. The uneasiness that western people feel when it comes to death is all projected on to the object of the dead body. Clearly this is a learned behavior. This also brings up the obvious revulsion for preserved bodies which will play a vital role in the discussion on taxidermy.

Death has become ingrained into our collective psyche as something horrific and, to a lesser extent, "evil". Today, we have taken it even further and lost the sense that death is a natural occurrence, reinforced by a society that bombards us every day with messages that growing old is unacceptable because it means you are getting closer to death¹⁰.

Another circumstance which has made death more difficult to confront is the expulsion of death from common experience. Death has become a mystery to most of us. It is now a rare phenomenon for the average person to see an untreated dead person. A piece of domestic technology familiar in most nineteenth century households—how to deal with a corpse—has vanished.¹¹

Death is no longer a normal part of life as it was in the past and thus it has developed an ‘otherness’ that seems unnatural and scary to modern humans. Rarely do modern Europeans or North Americans interact with a dead body as they did in the past. People used to die at home, surrounded by family but today they are isolated away to keep the living from having to come into contact with any form of death. This only makes death seem twice as terrifying for those who survive the deceased person because they come to believe that when they die they will also be alone with no one they know around them. The living do not know the exact circumstances of the death: Were they in pain? Did they fall asleep and never wake up? Did I say goodbye properly? Did they get to say everything they wanted? There are so many questions that the living are left with that it makes dying seem that much worse. As author Shelly Kagan points out: “Death *isn't* bad for the person who dies. It’s bad because of what it does to those left behind.”¹²

This displacement of death from everyday life is even evidenced in how people talk in reference to death. In the book *The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying* authors Lynne DeSpelder and Albert Strickland compiled a list of over 60 euphemisms for death.¹³ It is because of this dislocation of death and the subsequent avoidance of direct language that there is such a discomfort with death and even an almost duplicitous denial of death even occurring.

Another contributor is the fact that people are living longer and it is more common to survive things that, 100 years ago, would have killed someone:¹⁴ breaking a bone, getting a serious cut, diseases like cholera, typhoid and whooping cough, cancer. These reasons and

others would constitute a death sentence 100 years ago but that is not certain today. Modern medicine has turned death into an enemy that can be overcome and beaten, as evidenced in the very language we use to describe it. “They are fighting cancer.” “They beat the disease.” “They fought and won.” “She’s a fighter.” These are all things that people say when someone has been seriously injured or has a medical problem that they are continuing to wrestle with. In fact, it has become increasingly difficult to discuss illness or injury without using this type of combative language (see previous sentence). Thus death has been personified as something humans can surmount. This is not the case at all, and this is part of the fear: the inevitability of death despite all that society has ingrained into us.

However, some may argue that in recent years there has been a surge of mediums that deal with death, like television shows about crimes and many movies that depict death and even corpses right in front of us. Given this information it is easy to see why many people would come to the conclusion that as a society we have come a long way in terms of thinking about death. But this assumption is not entirely true. In the article *Corpses, Popular Culture and Forensic Science: Public Obsession with Death* Author Ruth Penfold-Mounce discusses her argument that these fictional representations of death exist in a different intellectual space which allows them to be accepted:

The conjunction between death and morbidity and the aesthetically pleasing is noted within artistic representation by Bronfen (1992) who argues that death portrayed in artwork is acceptable because it occurs in a realm clearly delineated as not real life. This unreal space in which death can be explored and consumed lies at the heart of this article’s argument that experiencing ‘death by proxy’ is a safe and acceptable way to explore death and the dead in contrast to actual death and corpses which continues to be inappropriate and uncomfortable viewing.¹⁵

This illustrates that while it may appear that society is becoming more comfortable with death, in reality it is not so and that through, what Penfold-Mounce calls ‘death by proxy’, the

viewer is able to dissociate and keep the viewing of death at arms-length. Because of this dissociative effect, there is still quite a bit of distress when it comes to actual death of a being or even speaking about death. There is comfort in the ability to watch a TV show and know that the corpse on screen is a prop made solely for the show and thus the viewer is able to pretend it is real without any actual personal risk while still feeling that thrill of fear.

But, this is human death. Animal death is a completely different animal, or is it? Animals, and indeed companion animals, such as dogs, cats and birds have closed the artificially imposed gap that existed for centuries between the human domain and the animal kingdom.¹⁶ Humans have viewed animals as “possessions” and “lesser beings”, especially in European cultures, for centuries. This is evidenced by the many different permutations of taxonomic history or the science of classifying animals into groups such as ‘The Great Chain of Being’ which many pre-renaissance scholars used as a finite classification system which placed humans above animals and closer to God.¹⁷

Animals were either game animals or work animals and if they ceased being able to perform their functions they ceased being, period. Then that work animal was used for food. This way of life coupled with the modern human’s complete and utter detachment from the food they consume, fosters a sort of disjointed reality. Most humans have blinders on in regards to meat production and where food comes from. That is a whole different discussion in and of itself, and there is extensive work done on the subject (there will be a short section of notes for further reading on this subject at the end). The main point of that observation is that humans no longer need to hunt for their own survival, thus separating them from the idea of hunting, and indeed killing, the game animal.

Hunting for sport has also come to the fore and the general public has denounced it as inhumane and something to be disliked. Reading through a Jonas Brothers pamphlet that states: “Wolverine. One of the few animals that seem to kill just for pleasure.” Stephen T. Asma notes his thoughts on the pamphlet: “The irony of this quip inside a hunting catalog seemed to have been missed completely by the brochure writers.”¹⁸ Trophy hunting is seen as vicious and abhorrent judging from the language that Asma uses to describe the incongruity in the writers for a hunting and taxidermy magazine being able to identify senseless killing in an animal but be completely unable to recognize it in humans. This point of view on hunting for sport is mirrored in more mainstream media like The Independent with such incendiary headlines as “Eleven charged in 'demented' US wildlife poaching ring”¹⁹ and CNN with “Trophy hunting: 'Killing animals to save them is not conservation’”²⁰ Other news outlets have similar headings in their archives, like NPR: “Death of Beloved Lion Heats Up Criticism of Big Game Hunting” referring to, of course, Cecil the lion so loved in Zimbabwe.²¹ Headlines like these detail the general public’s growing distaste for trophy hunting. There is also the distinction that must be made between game animal and trophy animal. Where the game animal is being killed for a purpose: food, clothing and other uses that animal parts can have; the trophy animal is simply being killed for superfluous reasons: its hide or head for the glorification of the hunter.

There are places in the United States where hunting is seen as a necessity, and indeed there is truth to that statement for those that live far outside of a city or town where a local super market is inaccessible, places like Alaska spring to mind. But these are a minority. According to the American Community Survey data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau at the end of 2016: Rural areas only house 19.3% of the population while the rural space covers 97% of the United States land.²² The rest of the 80.7% of the population live in or near cities which occupy only

3% of the nation's land. The population density of these cities pushes out any need for hunting; it makes it nearly impossible actually, and therefore the effect is twofold: First, animals become a beautiful and rare thing in the eyes of the general population, rendering trophy hunting 'barbaric'. Second, the need for hunting is nullified and thus allows for those in the city to distance themselves from the game animal.

The work animal and the game animal are not as common as they were before the industrial revolution made them almost obsolete in developed countries. These advancements and the widening array of exotic pets has molded the idea of the companion animal into something that it has not been before in social consciousness: animal family member.²³

I believe that the modern discomfort with Taxidermy comes from our strengthening relationship with companion animals and the projection of that relationship on to the specimens in the natural history museum. "It appears that the concept of a pet as a "part of the family" is being taken more literally today than in the past..." Jane C. Desmond writes and goes on to discuss that about 65% of households in the U.S. own at least one pet and half of those households with pets regard their pet as a full-fledged family member and thus entitled to all the respect and care that a human family member should receive.²⁴

Therefore, the death of an animal family member can be recognized as a type of death that can be equated to a human family member dying. Herman Feifel argues in the introduction of his book *New Meanings of Death* that one of the reasons that close family death may affect modern humans so hard is because we lack the elaborate support structure that was very common before the industrial revolution²⁵. Often times, extended families lived at least in the same town if not in the same house in the pre-industrial era and thus provided emotional support to the

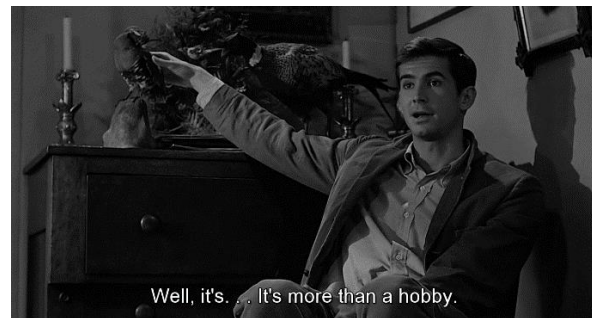
family if a member died. Modern families often do not have that support system and thus when a family member dies, animal or otherwise, there is only the support of the immediate family.

I believe that because we have such a close bond with domestic animals and have become less familiar with the wild and dangerous side of animals people subconsciously link all animals to their family pet and view every animal as a potentially docile and loveable creature. I find that this is particularly true if the animal has fur and resembles a commonly domesticated animal. For example: big cats and wolves are seen as analogous with house cats and domesticated dogs, respectively. This is why taxidermy is seen as incredibly distasteful and disrespectful to the animal. Somewhere there was made the collective connection and that brings up questions about how people would react to their own deceased family pet 'stuffed' and displayed. Needless to say, this train of thought would make most people uncomfortable.

Society is still operating under the collective thought process that there is a sort of sacred factor in a body, even if it is dead, and that tampering with it is somehow taboo and offensive to that being's memory. This way of thinking comes from a long history of 'freak shows' and criminals being used in surgery theaters.²⁶ To be dissected and examined in the surgery theater, even if it is for educational purposes, was considered the fate of those shunned by society. To have the same done to a being that was esteemed and admired has become a serious offence to the psyche because it implies that society is now insulting that being's memory.

Another contributor to the discussion that could tend to make people uncomfortable with Taxidermy arose relatively recently, in the 1960's. That connection being: taxidermy was somehow an indication of mental illness. Nowhere is this more prominent than in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* where one of the first clues to the audience that the plain, unassuming, and arguably handsome, motel owner might not be all that friendly is his room full of taxidermy

birds. The sheer volume of mounts is exaggerated by the low camera angle and lighting, casting looming shadows on the walls and ceiling makes them seem very imposing and ominous. The uneasy feeling that this image of taxidermy gives is so ingrained into modern western society's culture that breaking away from that detrimental image is still a work in progress for many hobbyists and natural history museums.



Scenes from *Psycho*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1960)²⁷

Coming from this background of seeing Taxidermy only as disrespectful and an indication that the person doing the Taxidermy might need psychological help may prompt some people to ask “why do museums need collections of animal specimens at all? Wouldn't a picture do just as well and not hurt an innocent animal?” The answer, to put it quite simply, is no.

To fully answer this question, some background on what Museums are and what they are meant to be is in order. An extensive amount of writing has been done in the last decade examining the question of ‘what is a museum?’²⁸ Trying to pinpoint the role that museums play in our modern society and culture is a subject of increasing interest because of the swift growth in pictorial and video technology and medical science. The term ‘museum’ comes, first from a section of the Library at Alexandria in the third century B.C.E.²⁹ which referred to a subdivision dedicated to the study of various sciences but lacked the display and exhibition portion that we

so often associate with museums today. These ancient museums were forums or spaces in which academics of the day met to discuss as well as research various sciences with the aid of the library's resources readily at hand.

Museums began their modern life as "Cabinets of Curiosities" that wealthy people would show to their friends. These Cabinets of Curiosities remained something only the wealthy could afford until the 1800s. The Victorian era was the time when the verve for collecting took hold and more moderately wealthy people could own a collection of their own.^{30 31} The explosion of enthusiasm for collecting of natural history specimens grew at such a rapid pace and the thirst for knowledge outpaced even that; groups and societies for the purpose of intellectual discussion took root as well, laying the groundwork for the 'museum' as we know it.

Eventually, collections would outgrow and outlive their owners, prompting the need for buildings to house them. Many of the Victorian collectors wished, via their will, to share their collections, and indeed the knowledge gleaned from the collections, with the wider public thus necessitating some sort of communal building in which to display the assortment of artifacts and specimens. These collections would go on to be the foundation that the modern museum's collections are built on and many museums still have pieces from the original collections donated to them, providing an invaluable resource into the record of natural history as a field of study. Since their very inception museums have been a place of scientific discovery and continue that tradition today.

As stated, museums not only collect new specimens, they get contributions from private collectors whose collections are either getting too large or the collector has died. These private collections can be composed of a wide variety of specimens, some being incredibly old and valuable for educational purposes. Maybe the animal in question is incredibly rare and

specimens are not often found. Sharing this specimen with a Museum allows not only the public to learn about a rare or even extinct species, it also allows experts to examine the specimen for research purposes while ensuring the specimen is properly cared for and preserved.³² In his article “The Endangered Dead” Christopher Kemp argues that many previously unknown species are already collected and housed in museum collections waiting for an expert to come along and identify it as a new species.³³

Museums also collect specimens that might simply be thrown out otherwise. Plenty of birds fly into buildings and are donated to the local Natural History museum for inclusion in the collection.³⁴ The knee-jerk reaction of many people when they see a multitude of taxidermy specimens is to think that these animals were killed specifically for the purpose of display, which is not the case.³⁵ Donation and collection of naturally occurring specimens; that is animals that have died before the museum got involved, is the core of the modern museum and only in the past were animals killed specifically for the museum collection. That practice has long since died out.

In response to the question of pictures being sufficient for museum visitors to appreciate a species, they are not. A picture might be satisfactory to some but if it were enough for the general public, there would not be zoos. Zoos deal with many of the same criticisms as natural history museums because they occupy the same type of natural education space. Many of the arguments against zoos have to do with the notion of ‘fairness’; people believe that locking up a wild animal who should be free is unfair. These arguments are sound on the surface and were indeed sound in the past when animals were captured from the wild and held captive solely for the purpose of human entertainment, much like they were in the Menagerie at the Tower of London.

However, zoos today play a vital role in conservation efforts and saving the animals they contain. Many of the animals that live in zoos cannot be released into the wild because they could not survive on their own for any number of reasons, be it inability to hunt due to a physical ailment or some sort of developmental reason. Museum collections can be tied to this line of thinking as well. The idea that the animals in a museum's collection died solely for display purposes is a fallacy³⁶; the animal's remains would have simply been thrown away otherwise. Instead they are being used to further scientific discovery.

Pictures of animals are nice, but an actual specimen yields so much more information³⁷ and with that data specialists can figure out how to help the species; such as learning mating habits so as to not disrupt the mating season, ecological conservation of the food chain pertaining to the species and how human interaction has affected the species. There is not much that humans now can do to help the Dodo bird but we can still learn about the species by studying its remains and how we, as humans, can improve our ways of interacting with new species to conserve their populations. In *Changing Perceptions of Nature* Stephen Hewitt sums up the importance of Museum collections nicely:

Green and Scharlemann (2003) observed that natural history museums, with their commitment to long-term preservation and documentation of specimens, provide an excellent resource for ecologists. Alongside traditional methods that provide data on taxonomy and geographic range, molecular techniques and chemical analysis now enable investigations into diverse fields including population dynamics, environmental pollution, climate change and even the geographic origins of particular species and changes in their diets over time.³⁸

The influence of Museum collections is only getting more complex as time goes on, with the development of new technologies more information is coming to the fore about different species and how the environment is changing. This allows humans to understand what is happening on the planet and make the necessary changes. This sort of data would be impossible

to collect without the physical specimen housed in the museum and being properly maintained while still being available for specialists.

This is by no means an attack on animal photography, indeed photographs are essential to the process of taxidermy to insure natural accurateness of the specimen (if the specimen is being displayed and not simply for use in the collection).³⁹ This raises another point about museums that many people might not know. Museums have collections that are not meant for public viewing. The specimens are not mounted in any way to look alive, they do not have glass eyes or much of a form at all.



Above: Specimen meant for the collection. Below: Specimen meant for display



These collection specimens are the specimens that experts see most often when conducting their research so the display specimens are not destroyed or handled too often. But even the display-quality specimens go into storage and most museums have vast collections and the public only views a small portion of the collection at a time.^{42 43}

Having massive collections allow Museums to be hubs of academic exploration and learning for specialists. Large museums can fund research on site and construct labs and facilities scholars need in order to conduct their research.⁴⁴ Because the Museums collect several of each specimen, there is the ability to compare and contrast multiple individuals from one species in one physical space and arrive at conclusions based on data that will inform our understanding of that species.

In her editorial in the *Journal of Biological Education*, Sue Dale Tunnicliffe asserts that having taxidermy animals in a diorama in a museum allows for an “emotional access” to topics that the museum is featuring. This allows visitors to connect the exhibit with their own past and makes the experience a more memorable and educational moment.⁴⁵ While photographs and video of the animal are indeed an excellent resource, there is still something about stepping into a room and believing that there, in front of you, is a real tiger. Of course, it is merely a momentary sensation, but it is something real that cannot be experienced through the medium of film. I feel that taxidermy in a museum setting gives a much needed perspective on an animal and allows humans a dose of wild reality that is not available through a screen.

It was at this point in researching the subject of taxidermy in a museum setting that I noticed a very interesting disconnect between what I term “writers” and “do-ers”. Academic writers are people who quite enjoy writing about a subject but do not have much practical, hands-on experience. This is very much the case with the subject of Taxidermy and museum

display. People who write about taxidermy in the philosophical context ask questions like “why do we have taxidermy?”; “What does Taxidermy add to our society and culture?”; “Is Taxidermy a good thing or a bad thing?”; “Is Taxidermy an art? Why or why not?”; and other questions that follow in this same vein. These scholars are introspective and well-read but lack practical experience. This led me to wonder: What aspects of the discussion on taxidermy could they be missing that could that knowledge contribute to the discussion?

And on the other hand there are the “Do-ers”, those who actually do taxidermy, whether for a living or a hobby. Where is their input on the subject that they have so much practical knowledge on that could be enriching the discussion between the writers? What do they believe to be the significance of taxidermy in the modern museum? What are their thoughts on taxidermy’s relationship with death? Do they consider what they do to be art? Why? How would they explain the import of specimens to the museum? And on the other side of the coin, what could the Do-ers learn from the writers? How could these questions intersect and be influenced by differing experiences and thought processes? This is a discussion that I would be most interested to hear, but as of this point, I have not found that anyone has been trying to talk about it.

Many of the previously mentioned “Do-ers” have written books but they are all instruction books on how to prepare specimens with hardly, if any, assessments on a wider spectrum of discourse pertaining to the philosophy of Taxidermy, much less their thoughts on death.

Having found this vacuum in the academic community I would like to propose: myself. I would not argue that I am the natural choice, being a serious novice on the subject of practical taxidermy. However, I feel that given a dead bird and a scalpel, I could probably prepare a crude

specimen. I have observed the process up close and engaged with those carrying out the process. I feel that I am qualified to become a bridge between the two parties to begin a conversation.

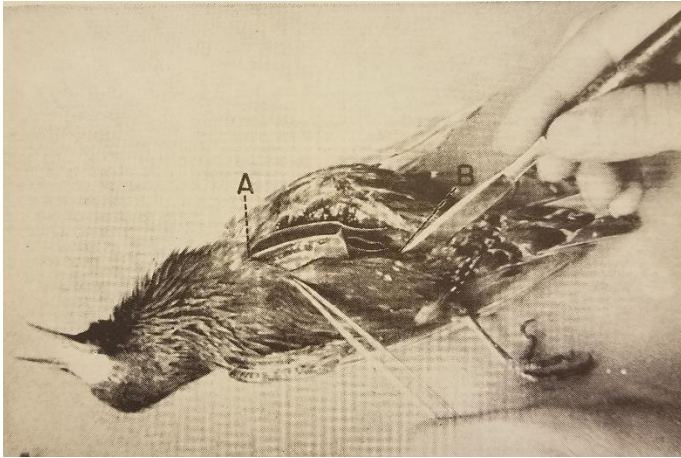
To further aid in this discussion I will include a brief step-by-step on how to prepare a bird specimen for a museum collection. While the discussion in this paper is focused mainly on display-quality specimens, no one can think that the first specimens they make will be museum quality. Skill of that level takes decades to master, so the brief tutorial to follow will focus on a simple collection level bird skin specimen.

The process of actually preserving a specimen should not take more than a few hours. Over all the process is similar for many animals. For the sake of simplicity, focus will remain on birds since many taxidermists agree that birds are the easiest animals to work with.⁴⁶ The process as well has remained much the same since the mid-1850s. The earliest resource I found was “The Taxidermists Manual” by Captain Thomas Brown, F.L.S first published in 1856.⁴⁷

The first step in any preservation in a museum is to carefully document any information pertaining to that specimen. Much of the information that museums have about older specimens comes from the collector’s journal. Naturalists in the Victorian era kept detailed journals and logs of specimens that they found. This process is much the same in the museum documentation process today. The logs of all the relevant information are stored apart from the specimen collection and are kept track of using a coding system. A numbered tag on the specimen corresponds to a numbered document where all the information that was recorded at the time of preparation is written. These documents detail all the measurements of the specimen before the preparation process, as well as where the specimen was found, by whom etc., so that any future scholars can put that specimen into a wider scope of data.

All information is recorded no matter how insignificant it may seem at the time. This step is crucial for future learning and scholars. Careful measurements are taken before anything is done to the animal. Once the animal is measured and documented properly it is time to start. In order for taxidermy to be done properly, all materials and tools should be gathered and arranged a head of time or the skin may dry out and be too brittle to work with by the time all materials are gathered. A basic tool kit would include: wire cutters, a scalpel, a small jar of water, saw dust, acid-free cotton, forceps, needle-nose tweezers, thread, medium gauge needle, super glue and a tooth brush. A tray can also be used but is not needed. Gauze is also optional.

First, in the case of birds, one must break the wings and the legs. This is done gently with wire cutters, tweezers or forceps. This is done because of the fact that attempting to skin these appendages as well would completely destroy the specimen. There is no fat or much tissue that can decay in the wings or legs so one does not have to worry about them rotting away. Because feathers are more delicate than the fur of a small animal more liberties can be taken when skinning a small mammal. Next a small incision is made, usually from the top of the breast down to the middle stomach. Ideally the incision will be as small as possible to avoid ruining the feathers or fur of the animal.



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Cotton, gauze or sawdust should be handy in order to avoid any possible blood contamination of the specimen's feathers or coat as well. Next, gently part the skin from the body. This is a slow process, the goal being to come away with the skin completely detached from the body which is encased in the connective tissue sack only coming together at the base of the skull. Work gently, only touching the outside of the specimen when absolutely necessary, the more the specimen is handled the less natural it will look. This must be avoided.

Remove the body at the neck. Retain the body for reference size later. This is the time where any damage to the skin can be repaired, whether that be from a bullet or the scalpel of the taxidermist. At this point the skin is still attached at the base of the skull and the next few steps require a slow and careful touch.



Using either fingers or forceps, locate the ears, under the skin where they connect to the skull. Gently disconnect the ears from the skull and maneuver the skin up and over the back of the skull so it is inside out. Now that the back of the skull is visible it must be cut open to remove the brain. The back half of the skull is cut and removed to expose the brain which is then scooped out. Once the brain is removed the eyes can come out. Special care should be taken not to damage the eye lid or puncture the eye for it might ruin the feathers. The tongue is removed and also discarded. Clean the front half of the skull thoroughly while the skin is folded inside out over the beak.⁵¹



Once the body is removed as well as the brain, eyes and the skull has been cleaned, the fat remnants on the skin needs to be removed. Fat is a tissue that easily rots and it must be removed from the skin in order to preserve it. The skin can be wetted with a small amount of water to keep it from getting too dry when it is turned inside out.

Now that the body is removed, the skin is ready for drying or can be rubbed with a preservative as some taxidermists like to do. Older instructions recommend some combination of a substance like alum and arsenic. This is not necessary because museum collections have protections against dermestid insects like beetles and moths. Most of the scientific collections are housed in special compact storage units that are designed to keep the specimens in a safe, dry and temperature controlled environment.

Once all the necessary cleaning and optional preservation is taken care of it is time to actually stuff. A small amount of cotton is pushed up through the neck and through to the mouth, pulled partially out of the mouth to ensure it is seated properly in the throat. Two small balls of cotton, shaped to look like teardrops are used to simulate the eyes which are placed into the eye sockets of the skull to hold the face skin's shape, round end out. The beak is super-glued

shut, obscuring the cotton inside. Then a gently rolled piece of cotton; roughly the size of the body removed from the specimen, perhaps a little bigger but not by much, is placed inside the body cavity and the skin sewn up around it. Before the seam is pulled tight, examination of the specimen and each of its limbs to see how they lay is important. Cinch the thread tight and tie it off. The specimen is now ready to be pinned for drying.



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A porous wooden board such as a cork board can be used for the drying process. The specimen is pinned, breast up, either wing extended or tucked close to the body. The pins should be used to hold the specimen in place without damaging it. A large pin through the middle of the specimen then others sandwiching it but not running it through. Once the specimen is held relatively securely, while allowing for some small shrinkage, the process is done.

Granted, these steps take a certain amount of finesse to perform them quickly and accurately. The only way to acquire that skill is to practice. Watching the process up close has definitely dispelled some of the common misconceptions about taxidermy and dead animals.

Misconception number one: they smell so bad. Most people believe that anything dead must smell awful. This is not so in a museum environment. When the animal is donated to the museum, the body is frozen if it cannot be prepared right away which means bacteria and bodily fluids are not given enough time to break down the soft tissue in a process called putrefaction which causes odor. The process of putrefaction takes time and the correct conditions; an animal does not die and instantly begin to smell like rotting meat. There is a rather long grace period before the specimen is deemed unusable.

Second misconception: Dead bodies are unsanitary. Yes, animals are not always the cleanest things to the touch, however there is not much chance of catching a truly life-threatening disease. Education is key in this area as Nadine Roberts says:

...there is not a great deal of danger that you will contract a disease from any of the specimens you will be working with. However, the hazard does exist, and the taxidermist who is aware of the possibilities in this area will be better able to guard against them and prevent them.⁵⁴

The easiest way of preventing any possible contraction of diseases is taken care of by some simple procedures that museums put into effect. The first being: no food allowed in the preparation area. This prevents any contamination of the food or the specimen. And the second: wash hands before leaving the preparation area, this prevents any possible bacteria being spread outside of the preparation room.

Third misconception: Taxidermists always wear gloves. Some taxidermists may feel that gloves are necessary but most usually do not. This seems like the exact opposite of what they should be doing. However, gloves tend to limit the tactile sense of the fingertips which could inhibit the ability of the taxidermist when handling a specimen, particularly in the skinning portion where the skin needs to be kept as close to closed as possible to limit stretching, tearing and drying out. Taxidermists need the sense of touch when separating the skin from the body

without pulling the skin open, instead they must feel where the skin meets the connective tissues of muscle so as to separate it properly without overly drying the skin. Gloves are worn in hospitals mostly to protect patients. In taxidermy, the specimen in question is already dead and thus there is no risk to the specimen's health or wellbeing. As for the transfer of disease to the taxidermist, most risk can be avoided by following the afore-mentioned steps to prevent disease in regards to taxidermy.

In museum settings taxidermy can be an incredibly useful tool, it allows viewers to connect to the subject of natural history in a deeper and more meaningful way. The need for natural history collections is only growing; as the population density of people increases, we need to be more mindful of the living animals that share our space or are being pushed out by the expansion of human civilization. In this area museum collections and the research they allow is imperative to conservation efforts all over the world.

The study of museum taxidermy in both the practical sense and in the broader sense must be discussed. The misconceptions stated above are only the beginning of the dialogue that can help society move forward and understand the need for these specimens, why museums use them and why we as a society have demonized such a normal and natural process as dying. The blinders must come off and eventually each one of us will have to face death and dying, it is time to dispel the fear of the unknown and move death back to its rightful place in the natural world.

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