Welcomes you to the Museum After Dark: Slightly Irreverent Tours

Crap Taxidermy
Some say it’s macabre, others say it’s a second chance at life.

Let’s see what you think.
Taxidermy as ancient as the Egyptians
“Egyptian preservation attempts were prepared in such a manner as to produce no pleasurable sensations in examining them; instead, they were remarkable only for their great antiquity and spiritual beliefs.”

Thomas Brown, 19th century naturalist and malacologist

(I didn’t know what a malacologist was either until I googled it.)
Practical Taxidermy

A MANUAL OF INSTRUCTION TO THE AMATEUR IN COLLECTING, PRESERVING, AND SETTING UP NATURAL HISTORY SPECIMENS OF ALL KINDS. TO WHICH IS ADDED A CHAPTER UPON THE PICTORIAL ARRANGEMENT OF MUSEUMS. ILLUSTRATED.

BY MONTAGU BROWNE, F.Z.S., etc., Curator, Town Museum, Leicester.
In a 19th century manual entitled *Practical Taxidermy* by Montagu Browne, we learn that the ancient Egyptians were the first to create the craft…or art form…of taxidermy. Unlike later forms of taxidermy, Egyptians never actually removed skins from animals as a whole, but rather developed one of the world's earliest forms of artificial preservation through the use of injections, spices, oils, and other embalming tools. As early as 2200 BCE, the Egyptians embalmed dogs, cats, monkeys, birds, sheep, oxen, and any other pets of Egyptian royalty and buried them in their Pharaohs’ tombs. Of course, this type of embalming was not for the purpose of having the specimens look natural for an exhibition, but to ease one’s transition into the afterlife, so they weren’t really worried if the animal looked like it was ready to step foot in a diorama. No, they wanted to make sure that the journey to the afterlife was smooth – so smooth that they even preserved a hippopotamus from time to time.
The earliest known mount in existence today is a crocodile hanging from the ceiling of a cathedral in Ponte Nossa, Italy. A document from 1534 references it specifically, so we know it’s at least that old. Several crocodiles show up on the list of oldest existing mount examples, probably because their thick skin makes them hardier.
Skin Art

First of all, the word taxidermy comes from the Greek *taxis*, or “arrangement”, and *derma*, or “skin.” Skin art, basically. Louis Dufresne of the Museum National d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris first used the term in 1803. Other terminology: a specimen is a full replica of an animal as it appeared in life, while a trophy is, for example, a lion head mounted on a wall. A mount is a general term that can mean either.
Do you suppose this is what this beaver looked like in life? Hard to know! But he was likely made with arsenic, so watch out!

Early taxidermists stuffed mounts with sawdust and rags, which sometimes disfigured them. For many years after the dodo’s extinction, people were wrong about how they looked because of such disfigurement. In contrast, modern taxidermists can purchase mannequins, which they can sculpt into different positions, then stretch and sew skins over them. Arsenic was widely used to repel insects from the late 1700s up until the 20th century – even the 1980s in some places – but it was phased out in favor of less dangerous chemicals like borax.
“I don’t believe them critters was shot; I’ve looked ’em all over and I can’t see any holes. Did she pisen ’em?”

“How could a woman do it?”

“What sort of a woman is she?”

“Did she kill ’em all?”
Women’s Work: Mrs. Maxwell made a collection of the animals of Colorado, procuring herself – either by shooting, poisoning, trapping, buying, or soliciting from her acquaintances – specimens of almost every kind of living creature found in that region, skinning, stuffing, or in other ways preserving them. (as told by her half sister Mary Dartt)

• Naturalist, taxidermist, and markswoman Martha Maxwell is worthy of taxidermy note. One historian wrote, “Martha had come to see her work as the best way for her to demonstrate the abilities of women and thus to support the cause of feminism.” Another historian wrote, “What distinguished Martha from other taxidermists of the day was that Martha Maxwell always attempted to place stuffed animals in natural poses and amongst natural surroundings. This talent was what would separate her work from others and make her animals so popular with exhibitors and viewers alike.” About herself, Martha wrote, “My life is one of physical work, an effort to prove the words spoken by more gifted women….The world demands proof of womans [sic] capacities, without it words are useless.”

• Martha Maxwell was the first woman field naturalist who obtained and prepared her own specimens in the same manner as her male contemporaries and brought innovation to the design of natural history dioramas.
Taxidermy in the Victorian era was a popular way for European scientists and the public to examine foreign species they’d never see otherwise. The practice of stuffing pets began in this era as well, as did anthropomorphic taxidermy, wherein specimens were positioned (and sometimes clothed) as though participating in human activities like boxing or playing in a band.

Like it or not, the art of taxidermy has contributed to broader conservation goals. William Hornaday, chief taxidermist at the Smithsonian in the 1880s, was dismayed at the widespread slaughter of American bison, so he brought some specimens back to Washington and displayed them to draw attention to their plight. His work contributed to the creation of the federally protected bison range in Yellowstone, which was instrumental in saving the species.
Carl Akeley: the Father of Modern Taxidermy and a major tough guy

shown with the leopard he killed with his bare hands
Carl E. Akeley was an American naturalist and explorer in the late 19th century who developed an awesome taxidermy method for mounting museum displays showing animals in their natural surroundings: a diorama! His method of applying skin on a finely molded replica of the body of the animal, instead of using sawdust or rags, resulted in unprecedented realism and changed taxidermy from simply being considered a craft to an art form. Akeley’s goal was to create a panorama of Africa and its big game in American museums.

And he wrestled a leopard with his bare hands, so that’s pretty cool.
Fashionistas of the 19th Century

(I always wanted to wear a squirrel on my head, didn’t you?)
Go ahead, try this at home!
“Unlike clean, streamlined Modern decor, taxidermy is not intended to blend in or serve function before form. There is always a story behind each piece,” Robert Marbury, the rogue taxidermist of the New York’s Carnivorous Club, explains. “Rather than creating a neutral living space, taxidermy works to personalize it.”
Ikea finds the perfect model for children’s furniture....
...and sometimes museums are responsible for scaring small children