ARTISTIC AND SCIENTIFIC TAXIDERMY AND MODELLING

A MANUAL OF INSTRUCTION IN THE METHODS OF PRESERVING AND REPRODUCING THE CORRECT FORM OF ALL NATURAL OBJECTS INCLUDING A CHAPTER ON THE MODELLING OF FOLIAGE

BY

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We may even presume that the earliest man—whose existence is only known by the imperishable flint weapons he fashioned, and by the stains of his cave-fires—not only flayed the various wild animals he overcame with his stone and wooden implements for the sake of the clothing they afforded him, but, perhaps, inflated or stuffed some of their skins with grasses as "stales" or decoys, or used the skins as coverings when stalking animals of the same species, and he may certainly have used skins for many other purposes, and have prepared them also, as savages of later days have done and still do.

From these long-vanished peoples to the Egyptians and Mexicans, with their methods of tanning the skins and embalming the bodies of their dead, and of cats, dogs, various birds, and so on, is an easy step, and they were, probably, the first "animal preservers," testimonies of whose work satisfactorily performed are to be found in many museums.

Dr. Shufeldt, of the United States National Museum, considers that the supposed gorillas mentioned by the Carthaginian navigator Hanno, B.C. 500, as having been killed and flayed in Africa and afterwards conveyed to Carthage, where "they were preserved for many generations, are, no doubt, the *Gorgones* described by Pliny."[1]

Supposing these to have been preserved merely as flat skins, this would only mark the well-known fact that the ancients were perfectly well acquainted with tanning; indeed, this is an art which every savage must know, to say nothing of such a civilised people as the Carthaginians; but if they, however roughly, attempted to set up the skins, that would be indeed the dawn of taxidermy as we understand the meaning of the word.

Little is known of the beginnings of the practice of the "stuffing" or "setting-up" of animals for ornament or for scientific purposes;

[1] *Rep. Smithsonian Institution* for 1892, p. 370.

and it is highly probable, from what we gather from old works of travel or natural history, that the art is not more than some three hundred years old. It was practised in England towards the end of the seventeenth century, as is proved by the Sloane collection, which in 1725 formed the nucleus of the collection of natural history now lodged in the galleries at South Kensington.[1]

This assumption as to the three hundred years' limit derives some corroboration from another statement made by Dr. Shufeldt, who writes:[2]—

Probably, as Mr. Goode informs me, the oldest museum specimen in existence is a rhinoceros still preserved in the Royal Museum of Vertebrates in Florence. This was for a long time a feature of the Medicean Museum in Florence, and was originally mounted for the museum of Ulysses Aldrovandus in Bologna. It dates from the sixteenth century.

Davie also says[3]:—

It is told that the first attempt to stuff birds was when the Hollanders in the early part of the sixteenth century began their commercial intercourse with the East Indies.

A nobleman brought back to Amsterdam a large collection of live tropical birds and placed them in an aviary, which was heated to the proper temperature by a furnace. It happened that the attendant one night before retiring carelessly left the door of the furnace open, thereby allowing the smoke to escape, which suffocated the birds. The nobleman beholding the destruction of his large collection, which was the pride of the city, began to devise means for the preservation of the dead birds. To this end the best chemists of Amsterdam were called in for consultation, and it was decided to skin the birds and fill their skins with the spices of the Indies for their preservation. This was done, and they were then wired and mounted to represent life. For many years they were the hobby of the nobleman and the pride of the inhabitants.

[1] *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 9th ed., vol. xxiii. p. 89.
[2] *Rep. Smithsonian Institution* for 1892, footnote to p. 371.
[3] *Methods in the Art of Taxidermy*, Historical Introduction, pp. ii., iii.

Again, he says :[1]—

The oldest work in my collection is a *Natural History* published at Paris by the Royal Academy in 1687, on the dissection of various animals. In this work mention is made of the fact that the Hollanders were the first to bring into Europe live specimens and skins of the cassowary and a number of other strange birds which they secured on their first voyages (1517) to the Indian archipelago. These were stuffed at Amsterdam.

It must be conceded that to the writings of educated naturalists, who were often medical men, we owe the genesis of the present methods of mounting animals. So far, however, as can be at present ascertained, one of the earliest writers upon, and exponents of, this delightful art was Réaumur, who, in 1748, published a treatise on preserving skins of birds. From that date onward, the growing importance of the subject has continuously produced a large mass of literature relating to it, of which a bibliography—by no means complete, owing to the difficulty of exhaustively cataloguing various treatises scattered in the pages of current literature,—will be found at the end of this volume. Of the works there enumerated, some are written by practical men for practical men and beginners ; very few, less than can be counted on the fingers of one hand, by educated men who were also workers ; the great majority are mere compilations.

There is no doubt that some of the works mentioned in the bibliography, especially those written by such men as the Abbé Manesse, Waterton, and Captain Thomas Brown, gave a great impetus to taxidermy ; but unfortunately, although those writers knew enough to be dissatisfied with their own and others' work, yet their processes were, except in rare instances (to be considered later), founded upon ancient methods which had no definite rules, but left almost everything to the fancy

[1] *Methods in the Art of Taxidermy*, Historical Introduction, p. iv.

of the "stuffer"—(*empailleur*, objects being formerly stuffed with straw),—who was, as now, usually an uneducated person working by "rule of thumb" ; hence one can sympathise with, and fully endorse, the lament of Waterton, who writes :[1]—

Twenty years have now rolled away since I first began to examine the specimens of zoology in our museums. As the system of preparation is founded in error, nothing but deformity, distortion, and disproportion, will be the result of the best intentions and utmost exertions of the workman. Canova's education, taste, and genius enabled him to present to the world statues so correct and beautiful that they are worthy of universal admiration. Had a common stonecutter tried his hand upon the block out of which these statues were sculptured, what a lamentable want of symmetry and fine countenance there would have been. Now, when we reflect that the preserved specimens in our museums and private collections are always done upon a wrong principle, and generally by low and illiterate people, whose daily bread depends upon the shortness of time in which they can get through their work, and whose opposition to the true way of preparing specimens can only be surpassed by their obstinacy in adhering to the old method ; can we any longer wonder at their want of success ; or hope to see a single specimen produced that will be worth looking at ?

Again, he continues :[2]—

Were you to pay as much attention to birds as the sculptor does to the human frame, you would immediately see, on entering a museum, that the specimens are not well done.

This remark will not be thought severe when you reflect that that which once was a bird has probably been stretched, stuffed, stiffened, and wired by the hand of a common clown. Consider likewise how the plumage must have been disordered by too much stretching or drying, and perhaps sullied, or at least deranged, by the pressure of a coarse and heavy hand—plumage which, ere life had fled from within it, was accustomed to be touched by nothing rougher than the dew of heaven, and the pure and gentle breath of air.

[1] *Wanderings in South America* (edited by Rev. J. G. Wood, 1893, p. 333).
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 335.