



Chicago Natural History Museum

EMPEROR PENGUINS, mounted by the author. These birds were collected by the Second Byrd Antarctic Expedition.
The habitat group was prepared by the latest known methods in museum taxidermy.

PRACTICAL TAXIDERMY

A Working Guide

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Chapter 1

THE EARLY HISTORY OF TAXIDERMY

Taxidermy is the art of preserving the skin, together with the fur, feathers, or scales of animals. The word is derived from the Greek words *taxis*, meaning order, arrangement, or preparation, and *derma*, meaning skin. A skin may be so prepared for use as a specimen for study, as an exhibit in museums and private collections, as an ornament, or article of apparel. Formerly, such mounting of animal skins was called "stuffing" and, in many cases, this was actually what was done (Figure 1). The skin was simply stuffed with straw, excelsior, or other similar material until it looked something like the living animal. Now, however, the stuffing process is entirely obsolete, and great care is taken to model the specimens so they look as lifelike as possible. The old-fashioned "bird-stuffer" has been replaced by the taxidermist, or preparator, and the verb "to stuff," as applied to the art of taxidermy, abandoned. The modern taxidermist mounts, or models a specimen; he does not "stuff" it.

The art of taxidermy as we know it today does not appear to be an ancient one, and is probably not more than 300 years old. This statement, of course, applies only to the mounting of specimens. The curing of skins for use as wearing apparel, rugs, and so forth, was perfected in very early days. Tracing back to the beginnings of taxidermy, one might say that prehistoric man was the first to practice this art by tanning animal skins for use as clothing. The early tribes which inhabited ancient Britain had no other means of covering their bodies and often used the skins of animals as adornments for their persons and in their homes. Our own American Indians preserved the heads of porcupines, foxes, raccoons, loons (Figure 2), and other birds and animals as decorations on clothing and equipment and for use

in ceremonies. The ancient Egyptians also practiced taxidermy of a sort when they embalmed the bodies of dogs, cats, birds, and other animals, although this embalming was accomplished by the use of spices and oils and not by taxidermy methods. Many mummified remains of these birds and animals have been un-



FIGURE 1

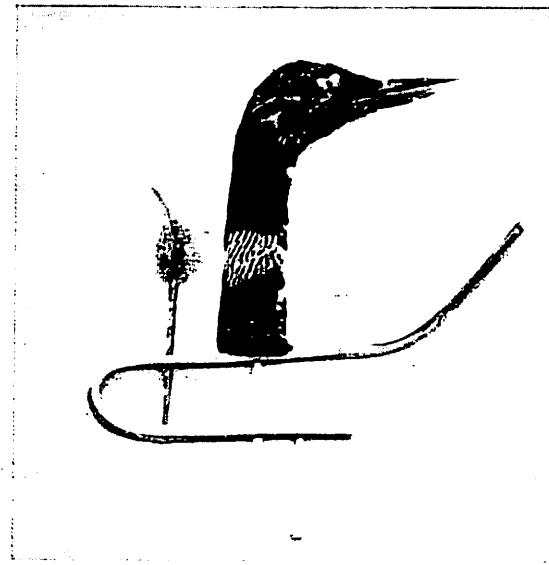


FIGURE 2

earthed in the tombs of Egypt and are on exhibition in museums throughout the world.

The first attempts at taxidermy date back about 350 years. Specimens of birds were collected in India and skinned, and the skins preserved with spices. These were then brought to Holland where they were arranged and held in a somewhat natural position by wires run through the body and anchored to a perch. The oldest specimen of a mounted animal in existence today is a rhinoceros in the Royal Museum of Vertebrates, Florence, Italy,

prepared around the year 1600. The methods used in the mounting of this specimen are not known.

That a crude kind of taxidermy was practiced in England toward the end of the eighteenth century is shown by specimens in the Sloane Collection, which in 1753 formed the nucleus of the British Museum in London. At the great exhibitions held in the middle of the nineteenth century throughout Europe, many examples of British taxidermy were exhibited. In America, the Society of American Taxidermists was founded March 24, 1880, but was disbanded three years later, largely because of a lack of cooperation among the taxidermists of the day. This was the first and only organization of its kind in the United States and lasted only long enough to hold three competitive and general exhibitions; the first in Rochester, the second in Boston, and the third in New York City. These exhibitions gave the public a chance to see the art of taxidermy as it was practiced at that time and brought about much higher standards for exhibits by individuals and museums.

For some time, taxidermy had been carried on throughout the world by a small group of men who were more or less secretive and jealous of their methods with the result that many techniques were not widely known. Later, as the need of museums for highly skilled taxidermists became more and more apparent, information came to be circulated more freely. The publication of books and pamphlets on the subject also contributed to breaking down previous secretiveness.

All the early works published on the subject of taxidermy, such as R. A. F. Réaumur's treatise and the *Guides and Instructions* for collecting and preserving natural history specimens, by E. Donovan and others, are now outmoded and only of historical interest to collectors. For field work and the preparation of specimens for scientific purposes, the instructions contained in the publications of museums are of great assistance. The actual mounting of specimens, however, is so intricate and requires such specialized training that it is rarely undertaken successfully by amateurs. A few works have been published dealing with

this branch of taxidermy. The reader who wishes to continue taxidermy as a profession will find much that is helpful in John Rowley's *Taxidermy and Museum Exhibition*, published in 1925.

Rowland Ward's, Ltd., the first important taxidermy studio, was founded about 1850 in London, and is still in existence. The work turned out by this studio helped to improve the methods being used in all branches of taxidermy of that time. Associated with the beginnings of taxidermy in America was the Scudder Museum in New York, the collections of which were later acquired by the famous Peale's Museum of the same city. In 1861, Ward's Natural Science Establishment (in no way connected with Rowland Ward's) was founded by Henry A. Ward at Rochester. This famous institution turned out many of the well-known taxidermists and preparators of the time and was a center for the development of the newer methods practiced today. It was at Ward's that the old "stuffing" methods of mounting animals gave way to the modeling and casting techniques considered later in this book. With such leadership, the art of taxidermy has been developed in America to a higher degree than in any other country of the world.