



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

NatSCA Notes & Comments

Title: Natural history displays: the medium and the message

Author(s): O'Connor, A.

Source: O'Connor, A. (2017). Natural history displays: the medium and the message. *NatSCA Notes & Comments, Issue 12*, 1 - 3.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/2371>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

Natural history displays: the medium and the message

Alan O'Connor

Email: alanoc8@hotmail.com



Received: 14/03/2017

Accepted: 01/05/2017

Citation: O'Connor, A., 2017. Natural history displays: the medium and the message. *NatSCA Notes & Comments*, Issue 12, pp.1-3.

Abstract

Some natural history displays may contribute to a perception of the natural world as a thing to be exploited, an attitude which is manifested by the current environmental crisis. This should be taken into account when planning new natural history museums or displays.

Keywords: taxidermy, human remains, display, ethics

In the summer of 2015, I participated in an education event at which the skins of a brown bear, a wolf, and a lynx were used to help inform members of the public about Ireland's extinct fauna. The specimens had been prepared as a stereotypical animal-skin rug might – only the heads had a life-like form, with glass eyes and plastic tongues. Passers-by could handle them if they wished. My colleagues and I answered questions and also engaged in longer discussions, from basic biology to the feasibility of reintroduction.

The specimens were popular (although a few young children were a little afraid of them), but I was given cause for thought by the only strongly negative reaction I witnessed that day. This visitor, approaching within a few metres of the table, regarded the specimens with obvious disgust, uttered an expletive, and walked away. I've since begun to wonder whether his was the most appropriate response to the three specimens.

I worked in Dublin's natural history museum for eight years. It is well said that it's a museum of a museum; the display is largely unchanged since

the early 20th century. The main exhibits are, for the most part, taxidermy, and arrayed with quantity of specimens to the forefront. In my time working there, I witnessed the positive impression the museum has had on visitors. Old-fashioned as they are, the displays are appealing, with the pathos inherent in contemplating the passage of time particularly powerful. Although museums in the UK have, by and large, moved on from the Victorian-style arrangement on view in Dublin (Paddon, 2007), taxidermy remains prominent in the displays of most UK natural history museums that I have visited in the last decade. It's probably fair to say that there is a growing awareness that some of the practices of past collectors would no longer be ethically sound, but what of the ethical implications of the displays, in and of themselves?

The philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously said that "*the medium is the message*". The philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously said that the medium is the message. He wrote that,

"it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action." (McLuhan, 1964)



© by the author, 2017. Published by the Natural Sciences Collections Association. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

The specimens in the aforementioned education event, and in a museum, can be said to be a medium through which the natural world is portrayed.

In his book, *Animals Like Us*, Mark Rowlands (2002, p.196) wrote:

“...we have all come to see, and understand, the world around us in one predominant way: as a resource . . . And whenever something – human or otherwise – is viewed primarily as a resource, things generally don’t go well for it.”

The logic of the situation, and its implications for human beings, is exemplified in our treatment of animals. Almost every facet of this treatment screams out the idea that they are nothing more than renewable resources. They are things to be eaten, things to be experimented on, things to be stared at, hunted or killed for our entertainment.”

Does the way in which dead animals are sometimes displayed in natural history museums contribute to a culture which sees wildlife, and by extension the natural world, as an object of inferior value? And does this contribute in some way, however small, to ongoing species loss and environmental degradation?

I wonder whether the specimens in the education event I mentioned above sent just such a message, and whether taxidermied animals on display in particular are inadvertently sending the same message: that animals are no more than things, with all the negative implications for them and the environment that such an attitude carries.

The reason I mention taxidermy in particular as a means/medium of display is because, in its attempt to create a life-like representation out of the real remains of an animal, a taxidermied specimen will most easily, I think, give rise to those uneasy feelings and associations that I’m trying to elucidate. A taxidermied human would probably be thought of as being more visceral, or uncanny, than a human skeleton. Also, those species which are taxidermied tend to be, in animal-kingdom terms, our next of kin – primates, mammals, other vertebrates, species with whom it might be easier to empathise.

Human remains, which comprise perhaps the most emotionally powerful displays there are in a museum, are now displayed, if at all, in as dignified a way as possible (e.g. in a darkened room, isolated), with sensitivity towards extant

cultures in particular (Kilminster, 2004). They are treated with such dignity and respect not only with cultural sensitivity/customs/manners in mind, but also because placing human beings on display without such due regard is, in a sense, to treat them *as animals*. Dehumanisation, even when it is evoked simply by the language that is used, recalls some of the worst episodes in human history, and has foreshadowed or accompanied the ill treatment of those people it denigrates. Can the logic of the term ‘dehumanisation’ be adapted/extended to encompass our slightly more distant relatives? To imply that similar measures be adapted for the display of at least some non-human remains as for humans may seem radical, but if a change in consciousness toward non-human life (and by extension the entire natural world) is to be wished, then I think it should be considered. As environmental historian William Cronon (Cronon, 1996, in McGhie, 2006) wrote:

“To protect the nature that is all around us, we must think long and hard about the nature we carry inside our heads.”

If certain displays have a negative effect, can it be mitigated? In London’s Natural History Museum, signs amongst the exhibits (as of 2008) informed the visitor that:

“The Museum is concerned about the conservation of animals in the natural world and no longer collects skins for taxidermy displays. The specimens in these displays are from the Museum’s historical collections - consequently some are faded or show other signs of their age. We feel it is more appropriate to rely on these collections for display, even though they may not fully reflect the natural appearance of the living animal.” (Poliquin, 2008)

Signage such as this is, I think, a positive step. Nevertheless, if the medium is the message, that message might still be negative, despite the best efforts of museum professionals to advocate conservation and care for nature, to invoke the historical context in which many specimens were collected, or even to remark what a shame it is that the animals were killed in the first place.

The conclusion I’ve reached is that certain means of displaying animals reinforces a view of animals as objects, and that this has a negative impact on nature via the culture it informs.

Pondering this question has lead me down a multitude of rabbit holes, and I’m very open to

doubt. One might ask at what point in the tree of life can a line be drawn, separating those deemed as being fit for display from those which are not? What method of preservation, or manner of display? One might also ask whether the negative effect I describe is quantifiable. With much thinking yet to be done, I hope my exposition here is of some interest. I'm sure most museum professionals have pondered the ethics of display, and I hope my thoughts assist that process.

In Paisley Museum and Art Galleries, a display panel asks the visitor to consider the museum of 2050. I envision a new natural history gallery in 2050 as one that focuses largely on displays of a geological nature, in which taxidermy has little or no place, and where perhaps botanical displays, fibreglass models, videos, and maybe even small nature gardens, can give the visitor biological insights and an impression of living species. Such a museum, I think, would retain all the positive qualities of a natural history museum, while contemporary wildlife is appreciated close at hand in its living habitat.

References

- Kilminster, H., 2004. Visitor Perceptions of Human remains and their Wider Relevance to Natural History. *NatSCA News*, **3**, 18-21.
- McGhie, H., 2006. Representing nature in museums: the roles of attitude and authority. *NatSCA News*, **9**, 41-43.
- McLuhan, M., 1964. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Paddon, H., 2007. How have natural history collections in case study museums in Southwest England evolved in terms of display and interpretation? *NatSCA News*, **13**, 22-33.
- Poliquin, R., 2008. The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy, *Museum and Society*, **6**, 123-134.
- Rowlands, M., 2002. *Animals Like Us*. London: Verso.