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Communication

Man-modelled Mounts: the Human Body as Reference in Taxidermy

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Drawing on hands-on experience and on fieldwork among taxidermists in the UK and the Netherlands, I will explore the role of bodily analogies in taxidermy, the art of arranging skin, in the light of a recent aesthetic, artistic, and scholarly re-appreciation of this skilled practice.

Taxidermists claim to be in the business of replicating nature. In order to regain a natural appearance, the dead animal undergoes a drastic process of dismantling at the expert practitioner's hands. Its flaccid body is removed and replaced with a form or manikin sculpted from foam or crafted in wood wool. Reference materials are said to be vital during the process of sculpting and mounting. These include measurements of the animal's body, photographs of the relevant species, and clues on posture and behaviour from field observation. Taxidermists will emphasize that reference materials are essential in getting it right: it is the animal's natural posture and behaviour that is to be captured. Practitioners insist on going back to the 'source', the live animal—or rather, a specimen of the same species. More so than the live specimen observed through first-hand observation, however, it is the animal as it is captured in measurements and photographs that serves as a model. Moreover, during the process of crafting, taxidermists take their own body as point of reference, mimicking the magpie's or the squirrel's posture both to get their anatomical bearings and to imagine how the skin would sit if it were animated by a breathing, fleshed-out torso such as their own. It is through their own bodies that taxidermists seek to capture movement in their mounts and to bring out nature's expert design. A taxidermist's performance in striking poses could be considered one of the skill sets that make up taxidermic practice.

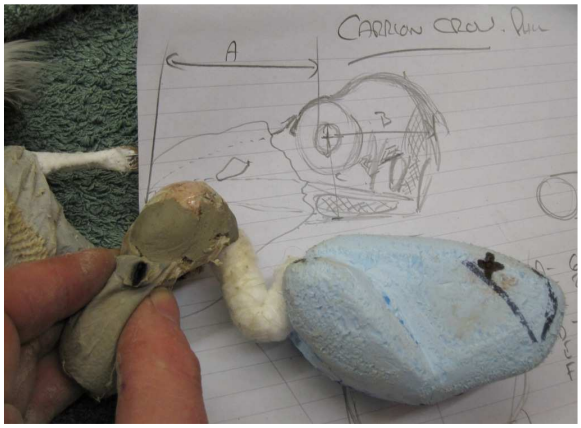
During one of the workshops I attended at the UK Convention of Taxidermists, a bird taxidermist was constantly striking poses, referring to his own body to explain how novices' mounts could be improved. On another occasion, when I was learning to mount a bird myself and struggling to re-member its dismantled carcass, my instructor constantly reminded me to find my bearings by thinking of my own arms as I got all confused in the plumage turned inside out over the wing bones. He too mimicked postures while referring me back to photographs of the relevant species. What also struck me was that bird taxidermists, in judging a piece, would *feel* whether legs and wings were well-placed or well-wired before doing an optical evaluation. 'If the wing bone sits like this, one of them said to a beginner in a workshop, this bird wouldn't be able to fly'. The bird taxidermists were insisting on, and acting out, a physical affinity with the live animal that they tried to recreate on their very bodies and transpose onto the manikin, at the same time expressing admiration for the deft and quite particular engineering of a bird's body.

In this context of mimicry and bodily analogies, the term 'manikin' used for the form on which the skin is mounted is interesting in itself. According to the Webster, the term derives from 'manneken', Dutch for 'little man', and refers to an (anatomical) model of the human body,

used in medical schools or by tailors and artists. As a model of an animal body in taxidermy, the tailor's model is an apt analogy: in taxidermy, the skin needs to be draped over the manikin, much like a garment. Bird taxidermists will say that it needs to be put on like a coat rather than a jumper, made to sit comfortably.

A demonstration by a former world-champion fish taxidermist will provide a counter example in my paper: getting the eyes right on a fish mount, the audience were told, involves letting go of one's knowledge of human eye movement; in fact, an analogy with car wheels moving on an axle was said to be appropriate here. But in this case, too, the human body acted as a point of reference or a frame for comparison.

Are such analogies primarily about solving puzzles of engineering and function, or is more to be made of taxidermists' bodily affinity with the animals they mount? Do taxidermists seek to animate dead bodies by appealing to a shared morphology of life? Is their mimicry in any way instructive in thinking about evolving human – animal relations? To what extent does taxidermy create awareness of, or perhaps celebrate, the skilled human body at the expense of lifeless fellow creatures? I will explore these questions with brief references to anthropological approaches to skill, ecology, and material culture.



Manikin for a crow