Environment & Society Portal

Multimedia Library Collection: Periodicals

"Dead Museum Animals: Natural Order or Cultural Chaos?"

Robin, Libby

Robin, Libby. "Dead Museum Animals: Natural Order or Cultural Chaos?" *reCollections 4*, no. 2 (October 2009).

https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_4_no_2/papers/dead_museum_animals.

In the classic natural history museum, dead animals were used to exemplify various orders of nature. Sometimes the rule was rarity: animals entertained visitors with their 'strangeness', particularly in the original cabinets of curiosities. Sometimes biogeographical specificity provided an order: animals were grouped together because they came from particular continents or from a common environment-type (deserts, savanna-woodlands or polar regions). Most often, museum galleries used evolutionary or morphological principles to order their collections. All the primates or all the ungulates were grouped together, irrespective of where they lived. In the twenty-first century, when many museums aspire to display more than just natural history, the role of such collections is changing. Taxidermy specimens are often still seen as defining objects in museums, whether they entertain or advance science.

Taxidermy has shifted. It is no longer an art in the service of science; rather it is the backbone of art itself, both in and beyond museums. A new twenty-first century school of art dramatically depends on the museum animals embodied in it. Animals taken originally for scientific purposes have, two centuries later, become part of an art movement that speaks to a new ethics for non-human others. This paper considers these specimens a hundred years (or more) after they were collected, as they become enlisted in the service of different work, inside and outside the institutions that have preserved them. The transition of taxidermy specimen objects out of natural history and into art installation sheds light on the changing nature of museums. It also suggests that new ideas are emerging about the ethical responsibilities of people towards animals. (Excerpt from the article)

© Libby Robin 2009. Click here to view the article.

reCollections is an independent, peer-reviewed journal from the National Museum of Australia . It focuses on two main areas: museology and museum practice; and the history and interpretation of objects and the social and environmental history of material culture. It welcomes contributions relating to the role of museums in society,

Periodicals Collection, Multimedia Library, Environment & Society Portal
"Dead Museum Animals: Natural Order or Cultural Chaos?"
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/8629
Print date: 15 November 2026 05:12:21

museum practice, and the history, collection, interpretation, and display of museum collections. Articles should relate specifically to Australia and the Asia-Pacific region, or confront issues that are broadly relevant to museums or material history.

Related links:

- *reCollections* website
  https://recollections.nma.gov.au/
- *reCollections* 4, no. 2
  https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_4_no_2

Websites linked in this text:

- https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_4_no_2/papers/dead_museum_animals
- http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_4_no_2/papers/dead_museum_animals
- https://recollections.nma.gov.au/
- http://www.nma.gov.au/

Periodicals Collection, Multimedia Library, Environment & Society Portal
"Dead Museum Animals: Natural Order or Cultural Chaos?"
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/8629
Print date: 15 November 2026 05:12:21