

FrameWork 6/23

Michael Thompson on Sandra Meigs

April 1, 1867 saw the opening of Exposition Universelle de Paris, the city's second major world's fair, and an event that would welcome over 15 million visitors over its seven-month run. This, at a time when Paris's census population hovered somewhere just shy of 2 million. Some 50,000 exhibitors took part in the fair, showing an unfathomable array of artifacts, fantasia, industry, and oddity from the natural and technological worlds. And while these labels and categorizations have shifted greatly today, one thing at the forefront of societal production for the time retains a similar intrigue and curiosity today; a then-newly minted practice called *taxidermy*.

Taxidermy, in its essence, was not a new practice, however. Cultures from across the globe have, for hundreds of years, practiced some variation of preserving, stuffing, or mounting the dead. But it was in Victorian Britain that the practice, as the West understands it today, came to be. Rachel Poliquin's book *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* traces this history and suggests that the Victorian ambition toward a taxidermy capable of uniting and encapsulating the wonder, beauty, spectacle, order, narrative, and allegory of the natural world set the terms that continue to define the genre today.¹

At Exposition Universelle de Paris 1867, this practice was in full swing. French ornithologist and oft-dubious* taxidermist Jules Verreaux's tableau, *Arab Courier Attacked by Lions*, garners wide acclaim and is lauded with an exposition gold medal for its excellence.² Seen front-on (which is side-long to the scene) Verreaux's tableau is cinematic. A man is folded in two, either clambering up the side of his camel or about to slip off, his movement arrested by a lion, lunging upwards towards the man's outstretched dagger, mane and fur seemingly lifted by his momentum as his claws rip into the camel. Beneath the man, a second lion is slain, a fallen, expired flintlock pistol lays across her torso at the sandy foot of the scene. The drama is a grand spectacle, a moment of life or death; death for the man or camel is a life preserved for the lions, and vice versa; two teams against one another, comradery, honour, beauty. And while the spectacular is baked into the drama, it is encouraged with the wonder of an exoticized Orient, prepared for a 19th century European public. Verreaux's work also comes at an important time of industrialization in France. With the advent of expositions like the world's fair, the public is being encouraged to look back, to take stock, and to assess the technological and social leaps being made by European society. In this, Verreaux's work serves well as allegory for these changes, for France's colonial struggle for dominance in Africa, or for a

¹ Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012).

* Verreaux has fallen under scrutiny for the objectification inherent in the scope of his taxidermy, once exhuming the grave of a man in Botswana who was later taxidermized. The man was repatriated to his home nation in 2000, some 170 years after his death. *Arab Courier Attacked by Lions* also contains a real human skull of unidentifiable provenance.

² Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 91.

burgeoning conflict between man and the natural world amidst industrialization, an allegory that is perhaps unavoidable to the whole of taxidermy as a practice.



Arab Courier Attacked by Lions, Jules Verreaux, 1867. Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh, PA.

While Verreaux's work can be taken as an emblem for the political and societal mores of its time, it is also a work of visual art; a sculptural installation, to adopt a more contemporary artistic framework. As such, it also offers a particular insight into the aesthetics and tastes that undoubtedly factored into its success.

In *Arab Courier Attacked by Lions*, the male lion's diagonal lunge across the image plane imbues the tableau with a dynamism, a dynamism achieved by the same diagonal composition popularized in the Baroque and late-Renaissance. The scene also adopts other qualities largely associated with that period, namely highly contrasted lighting, where the twisted figures and folded drapery adopt harsh shadows that imbue the whole of the scene with a dramatic intensity. Verreaux manages to structure his tableau in such a way that a sliver of light catches the courier's dagger, highlighting it against a section of deep shadow. This composition, the focus on the dagger, and the hurried intensity, all suggest an obvious comparison between Verreaux's tableau and both Caravaggio and Gentileschi's famous portrayals of Judith slaying Holofernes. And while these three works even share a similar palette, I don't mean to suggest that Verreaux made the work in direct reference to Carravaggio's,

Gentileschi's, or any other artist's work. Instead, more likely, and more interestingly, Verreaux's adoption of these aesthetic structures places him inside of a larger cultural return to the aesthetics of the Baroque and Renaissance in Neoclassical artists of the time, particularly fellow statesmen like Jacques-Louis David or Ingres, and as such, further evidences a connection between the aesthetics of taxidermy and art history more broadly.



Judith Slaying Holofernes, Artemisia Gentileschi, c. 1620. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Taxidermy rose to such prominence and regard in the 19th century because it was a marker of national success and progress.³ For an object to be convincingly mounted, there first had to be sufficient access to trade and global power to procure the specimens, which then necessitated a great deal of sculptural, anatomical, and chemical knowledge to be brought to completion. Adopting this undertaking meant displaying a mastery over these natural sciences, in the same way that

³ Rachel Poliquin, *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Cultures of Longing* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 90.

Neoclassical artists grasped towards a mastery over the historical themes and techniques that they looked to adopt from their forebearers. The connection between these two media plays out in each case with the latter product becoming a diluted version of its previous, fuller self.

In the case of taxidermy, the animals undergo a kind of alchemical transformation, where it is only through their death that they may be preserved. Where preservation comes in the form of a corporeal likeness and where immortality is achieved only by way of death. A kind of counterfeit existence is adopted, which maintains the visage of life while simultaneously divorced from all functions that actually define something as living. And similarly, did a looking backwards by craftsmen like Verreaux and his artistic contemporaries, present a product at odds with its time. With a renewed interest in classical antiquity, often by way of the Renaissance, work from artists like Ingres or David today appears to sit outside of its time, in a fleeting period of renewed interest in tradition and the historical that is almost irreconcilable with the revolutions in painting that were bubbling around it. Revolutions sparked by the seeds of Modernism in an artist like Manet and the rising tide of Impressionism.

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While taxidermy can well be interwoven with the story of art history, there is a noteworthy difference in the way that the two live on today. We understand taxidermy as many things: a record of natural history and cultural interest, a product of globalization and colonialization, or a reflection of our changing relationship to the environment, its dominance, and an appetite for immortality. The exact same can be said of painting in almost every case, with the caveat that in the hunt for immortality, painting does not necessarily fail. Indeed, a portrait or landscape rendered in paint falls even further short of immortality than a stuffed lion or camel does, but it does manage to preserve its maker. Inasmuch as each brushstroke is a trace of the artist's hand, each painting is a forum wherein the artist determines the trace they leave behind. Here, unlike the case of the mounted specimen, the artist is given the opportunity to construct the visage which they send into the future, the opportunity to construct their remembrance. In each painting, the artist paints themselves in, and in that, hides away, for us, the thing that keeps them alive.