

Conference Abstract

Lions and Chickens: A specimen biography approach to unprovenanced natural history objects

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Abstract

Taxidermy made for display is often considered less significant in museum research collections. This is because historical taxidermy material often becomes disassociated with key data and through the rigours of public display, end up in poor physical condition.

However by tracing a specimen's biography as a living animal and following its transition into a museum afterlife, much can be revealed about the development of natural history collections and changing attitudes towards animals.

This presentation will investigate several pieces of taxidermy in the zoology collection of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) (http://www.tmag.tas.gov.au/collections_and_research/zoology/collections), where research has uncovered surprising stories and helped reassess the significance and cultural value of this material.

An unregistered lion head, identified as animal celebrity John Burns, tells the story of the golden age of Australian and New Zealand circuses, changing attitudes around animal ethics in the circus and the negotiations between scientific institutions in acquiring exotics species in the late nineteenth century.

A collection of taxidermied domestic chickens from the 1940s is found to mark the modernisation of the TMAG public displays in communicating current research and the development of a dedicated museum education unit.

The colourful afterlife of these specimens in the museum collection highlights struggles with storage issues, changes in collecting priorities and evolution of public display and education at TMAG.

Keywords

taxidermy, circus, John Burns, education

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