

Using taxidermied animals to support the National Curriculum for English, History, Art and Design at KS1-4



These notes have been produced to help you think about how you can make use of taxidermied animals ('stuffed animals') in museums to support teaching of the National Curriculum. Taxidermied animals are some of the most widespread and spectacular natural history specimens in museums. They present a wealth

of opportunities to support learning in a wide range of different subjects. They also afford an excellent opportunity for students to learn in different ways, and to support groups of students with diverse educational needs.

Some background about taxidermy

Taxidermy means 'arranging skins'. Taxidermied animals generally consist of a real animal skin arranged over an artificial body to look [something] like the animal that once

owned them. They tell us something about animals, about the people who made them, and about our modern society too. Taxidermied animals provide particularly rich opportunities for students to explore subjects, be creative, form opinions and take part in discussions and debates.

Some practicalities



Old taxidermy usually involved chemical preservatives, including arsenic that was applied in a soap-like paste to the inside of skins. Because of this, and because you can't be certain what chemicals have been used, it is best not to allow people to handle old taxidermy without protective gloves. It is probably fine to include

old, uncased taxidermy as part of demonstration sessions that don't involve disturbing the hair or feathers. Taxidermied animals in smaller display cases (tableaux that used to be in private collections and homes) should be fine for inclusion in public events, so long as you take care to protect the glass (which is thin and is often attached using a kind of paper tape).

If you want people to be able to handle taxidermied animals as part of educational sessions or public events, it is easy to purchase modern pieces made to order from taxidermists (see the Guild of Taxidermists' website for contact details). Indeed, you should avoid the temptation to use old, worn-out looking animals, unless you can put them in context as what they are: old (often) representations of animals.

English

Taxidermy specimens in museum displays form interesting, unusual and attractive materials that can be used as a basis to develop students' vocabulary, language, and writing and verbal communication skills. The nature of visiting exhibitions can also be used to promote students' skills in giving short presentations to peers.

Art and design

Taxidermy specimens are themselves the product of human skill, ingenuity and creativity. They exhibit great variety in shape and form, are highly sculptural and many are incorporated into imagined 'mini-landscapes'. Skins and feathers are a rich source of inspiration and information on textures, patterns and surfaces. The possibility of transforming dead, bloody, greasy bodies into beautiful tableaux should give many budding artists hope!

History

There are two areas in which taxidermy animals can most readily support the history curriculum. Firstly, trade, empire and travel in the 19th and early 20th centuries can be explored through the growth of museum collections, scientific discovery and description, and big game hunting. Secondly, a study of the local area can include or be built around taxidermied animals from the local area.

Key stages 1-2

English, KS1-2

- Students **explore the names of animals** on display in museums as new words and working out how to pronounce them.
- Students **explore and imagine sounds made by animals**, and use these to work out how they could be written
- Students **write descriptions of the animals they see** on display. What colour are they? What patterns do they show? What do they look like?
- Students find animals on display with **names beginning with a particular letter**, or whose name includes a particular letter, using labels accompanying specimens as the source of information.
- Students **write their own labels for specimens**, with a name for the animal, description of the sound they make, and

where they live; they write a longer text panel, either singly or in groups, to accompany a display case in a museum gallery

-Students **use resources after their visit** to a museum, to find out more about particular species

-Students **choose a word** and apply it to a specimen in a museum gallery, writing a label for that specimen

Art and Design, KS1-2

-Students **draw, paint, photograph or otherwise represent specimens seen on display**. They could be given set features to look for, in terms of pattern or surface

-Students explore taxidermy through a short presentation on taxidermy, and they then **produce small models of animals**, or imagine the framework that supports the inside of a taxidermied animal

-Students work in groups to **produce a mini-diorama**, with artificial habitat made from a range of materials

-Students **investigate the variety of methods and techniques** involved in the production of a taxidermied animal, including model-making, sculpture and skin preservation

History, KS1-2

-Students **study scientific exploration**, and the role of museums in receiving specimens from expeditions

-Students **study the rise of empire** and the role of science and geography in describing and understanding animals and natural resources

Key stage 3

English, KS3

-Students **write labels and text panels**, with a knowledge of who those panels are aimed at. They will need to **plan the type of words** that are appropriate for that level. What type/level of language should be included? They have to **draft, edit and proof** the panel.

-Students choose a specimen, investigate it, and as part of the process of research, **give an oral presentation** on the specimen to their classmates.

-Students **act as a tour-guide** for a particular specimen or exhibition, telling listeners what they have found during their research, or they tell class-mates why they have chosen that particular species to investigate further

-Students **write short stories** on the life of a particular specimen, from the time when it was alive, to how it ended up in a museum

Art and Design, KS3

-Students **produce mini-exhibitions**, based on work they have produced that is inspired by specimens on display

-They investigate particular species of animals, and **supplement what they have seen with investigations** of the life and movement of the animal

-Students select a specimen they have seen on display, and **produce work that represents it produced in different styles**

History, KS3

Britain 1745-1901

- Students investigate taxidermied animals from around the world, exploring how they **came to Britain as a consequence of formal and informal empire**
- Students **investigate scientific collection, naming and preserving specimens**
- Students **investigate old manuals with instructions for collecting and preserving specimens**
- Students **investigate the exploits of collectors who formed collections**, notably wealthy big game hunters and women collectors
- Students **investigate the discovery of evolution by natural selection** by Darwin and Wallace, and the role of museums for presenting evolution to the public
- Students **undertake a study of their local community** including stuffed animals as an element of this
- Students **undertake a study of a foreign country**, including taxidermied animals as an element of the study, linking them to trade, hunting, wealth and power
- Students **use taxidermied animals as part of a study of a prehistoric period**, eg. the Neolithic

Key stage 4

English, KS4

- Students **work together to write for a visitor leaflet, or text for a website**, to a museum gallery with taxidermied animals,

working in groups on particular cases or particular specimens. Depending on the group, emphasis could be on factual information or on creative writing.

All ideas welcome

These notes have been produced to show the diverse ways in which you could include taxidermied animals as part of educational visits to museums. But, it's up to you to find ways that work for you. Hopefully these notes will help support you in your work, or at least to give some confidence that, far from being irrelevant, taxidermy specimens have enormous potential. Good luck!

These notes have been produced as part of a programme of support for North West museums with natural history collections, led by Manchester Museum in association with World Museum Liverpool, Tullie House Museum and Museum Development North West. If you have any comments, please email henry.mcghie@manchester.ac.uk

