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Cover image: Domed 19th century spaniel*

The Nature of the Beast: Meditations on Life, Death, and the Art of Collecting

curated by JD Powe for Morbid Anatomy
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The Nature of the Beast: Meditations on Life, Death, and the Art of Collecting

There is a particular type of joy reserved only for the dedicated collector. Fueled by a passion that borders on addiction, the need to pursue, possess, and preserve transforms the afflicted individual into a state of being that is at once both primitive and transcendent.

Try as one might, such inner demons are stubborn in their resistance to exorcism, leaving the collector to languish in a living purgatory; nestled precariously between the isolation that accompanies such singular dedication to the obscure, and the esteem that necessarily emanates from the very same source.

It would be easy to assume that the practice of acquiring and assembling non-functional objects is a uniquely human endeavor. However, the satin bowerbird (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*) may have reasonable cause for objection. Males of the species are well-known for their fastidious attempts to adorn their display areas, or bowers, with foreign objects of a rich indigo blue. The objects in the male bowerbird's collection, be they petals of flowers, or human detritus such as shards of glass and plastic, are variations on a single narrow theme. To the bowerbird, the whole is surely greater than the sum of its constituent parts; true beauty can only be achieved and appreciated at scale. Guided by the hand of evolution, females of the species have developed a discerning eye for exactly the type of collection he endeavors to assemble; they are the archetypal aesthetes, the ultimate judges of his curatorial and artistic sensibilities. For the male bowerbird, the stakes could scarcely be higher; impress the judges and earn the right to reproduce.



A collection of miniature dogs enclosed in antique glass vitrines, c. 1870 and later, along with mounted animal foot sporting trophies c. 1890-1940*

The human form of this behavior appears decidedly less transactional, though it could be argued that such sentimentality is a necessary illusion. The potential for ancillary benefits notwithstanding, for consummate collectors, the relentless search for objects of interest becomes a *modus vivendi*. Or, to put in more pedestrian terms, it is the journey, and not the destination that truly matters. And, as the "disease" of collecting metastasizes in human hosts, its etiological pathway manifests in a characteristic pattern of symptoms; principal among which is a departure from diversity as the primary principle of organization and an embrace of uniformity and its more subtle variations. This distinction constitutes the meridian line separating casual collectors from the truly afflicted.

I have often been asked, "why taxidermy?" There is no simple answer, but I have embraced the notion that in surrounding myself with death, I have gained a greater appreciation for the fragility of life. As a child, I was fascinated by collecting rocks, shells, and minerals wherever I could find them. However, 15 years ago, I purchased my first piece of taxidermy from an antique shop in upstate New York. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this was the beginning of my journey as a collector.

This specimen, a wall-mounted greater kudu (*Tragelaphus strepciseros*) was majestic and powerful in every way. Monumental in size, the kudu had a greyish hide with bright white striated vertical lines, dark, inscrutable glass eyes, and massive corkscrew-like horns; it appeared to have a sort of understated wisdom as it gazed down from the reclaimed barnwood walls of the shop. It had found me as much as I had found it.

In the decade that followed, I sought out rare and unusual specimens to add to my growing menagerie. I filled room after room with extraordinary and historically important specimens by the greatest artists in the field. Each new specimen conferred a sense of profound joy. Yet, with that joy also came an unmistakable foreboding; a recognition that one day, it would surely come to an end.

It's not that I had collected every conceivable species... that was never the goal. However, I came to believe that I could create meaning in life by putting death on display and creating a veritable Noah's Ark of creatures frozen in time. Over time this dedication enabled me to find and acquire rare and extinct species, such as the passenger pigeon, health hen and Carolina parakeet. Beyond these iconic examples of extinction, I had obtained obscure taxidermy specimens from aardvarks



Taxidermy dogs featuring a beloved farm dog named "Kickstart"*

to zorillas. The more bizarre the species, the more I sought to test my own resolve by seeking it out.

However, as I moved down my wishlist of priorities, my enthusiasm began to wane: each new acquisition seemed to be imbued with diminishing significance. Ironically, my interest was rekindled in the most unlikely of ways. There were entire genres of taxidermy that I formerly eschewed as being too familiar and mundane.

One such category was pets, particularly dogs and cats. I cannot recall the first time I actually saw a taxidermy dog, but I do remember experiencing a visceral repulsion. Why would anyone wish to preserve their pet as a lifelike model of the living form? Surely, pets had their proper place as beloved family members, not as inanimate objects to be displayed. Moreover, my ethos as a collector was to reach beyond the typical and familiar; to bring nature's most ambitious and exotic designs into the home where they could be appreciated with a level of intimacy that is not always possible in a traditional museum or even a zoo.

Pets represent the very opposite of this spectrum; they are nothing if not familiar, making them rather unlikely subjects of interest for collectors that hold the obscure and exotic in high esteem. Yet, taxidermy pets also have characteristics that make them quite intriguing subjects.

First, they are surprisingly rare. Relatively few modern owners consider taxidermy as an attractive option for a deceased pet. At best, the practice is widely considered out of step with mainstream cultural norms. At worst, it may be looked upon as macabre; perhaps even perverse.

The very familiarity that caused me to initially recoil at the sight of a taxidermy dog or cat in favor of more exotic fare eventually became what I found to be most intriguing. When combined with the shocking diversity within the broad category of pets, I discovered a profound appreciation for these long-deceased family friends, many of which have achieved a measure of immortality, "surviving" for nearly 150 years after the demise of their erstwhile owners. Looked at together, the canines (and felines) that form a substantial portion of the artifacts in this exhibit offer poignant material testimony in support of the human desire to preserve that which—or those whom—we love. This practice calls to mind other 19th century mourning practices such as using the hair of deceased family members to create memorial artworks commemorating the beloved.

For me, antique taxidermy pets were perhaps the ultimate in acquired tastes, but they were not alone in that regard. It has taken me many years to cultivate interest in certain other genres, including the whimsical anthropomorphic



Yorkshire terrier in case with ball, fancy cushion with gold rope accent, c. 1890*



A pair of preserved antique French poodles, c. 1940, with an antique lion rug that is said to have been hunted by Ernest Hemingway*

displays of animals engaged in human pursuits that were fashionable in Victorian England. What initially seemed unduly childish, I came to appreciate as a form of sculptural narrative: a mechanism for creating cultural mnemonics that were likely to be committed to memory and widely shared via both public exhibitions and word-of-mouth, making them an early version of the modern-day viral meme.

Yet another category that required a lengthy gestation period before full admiration could properly take hold is a rather obscure category of trophy made from the foot or hoof of a sport-hunted animal. While the mounted head of a vanquished stag is familiar fare and is likely what comes to mind at the mention of the word "taxidermy," in many cases, the feet of the animal were also preserved for posterity.

The standard presentation of this genre features the animal's foot set upon a wooden shield suitable for

mounting on a wall. Such displays also contain tantalizing details including the date of the hunt, the location, and even initials representing the club of hounds that were used to track the animal. In rarer cases, other information is included, such as the name of the hunter and duration of the run (i.e. how long the quarry was chased before ultimately yielding to either the dogs or humans in pursuit). Other foot-based forms offer a measure of functional utility, such as letter openers, page turners, and button hooks. Singular examples of this category are not especially noteworthy, but taking a cue from the satin bowerbird, I became fascinated with variations on this theme and the sheer number of animals that were commemorated *post mortem* in a manner that most observers would consider quite inglorious today.

The preservation of animal feet as a material form of remembrance has become a focus of my collecting. It is also another hallmark of the organic transformation from novice to serious collector; my own meridian line separating the pursuit of one of many to many of one. This style of curation reframes the goal from pursuing objects that derive their value from their unique singularity to the very opposite; bewildering observers with a dizzying array of similar objects that, absent such context, might well be assumed to be entirely unique. With a nod to the bowerbird, these extensive iterations on attenuated themes enable us to appreciate even the most modest objects in the context of a broader cultural vernacular.

In as much as *The Nature of the Beast* is a reflection on my personal evolution as a collector, it is also an attempt to describe something more archetypal, akin to Joseph Campbell's notion of the hero's journey. While collecting as a theme is innocuous enough, exploring this territory with taxidermy as a backdrop is discomfiting at times; doing so forces us to confront implicit and unresolved conflicts with the twin pillars of human existential crisis: morality and mortality. It also illuminates the precarious tension underlying our profound respect for nature and our relentless efforts to destroy it.

JD Powe
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Invited Curator Exhibition

* Special thanks to Zach Ishmael, photographer, for images from *Best Friends Forever: The World's Greatest Collection of Taxidermy Dogs*, by JD Powe (Cernunnos/Abrams 2021).

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