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THE ART OF GETTING STUFFED

Taxidermists seek a new image by Ann Hills

WHEN the Queen previews the Darwin Origin of Species exhibition at the Natural History Museum later this month she will see some three dozen exhibits by craftsmen who would like to be thought of as "artists of conservation".

The exhibits will be lifelike

specimens of birds and animals—stuffed ones, in fact, though that is not how their contrivers would put it. Says Graham Teasdale, who has a two-year waiting list of clients for his specimens: "Taxidermy is pure art—you have to be a sculptor. A wild duck mounted on a turntable should carry a heading like a piece of intricate carving or Royal Worcester."

Certainly the prices seem to be in a similar league. "A lion, depending on the mount, could fetch up to £5000. Small birds might be worth £80 or £90."

The change of image sought by taxidermists matches the changed conditions of their trade. They can no longer find their raw material by going out and slaughtering suitable creatures—too many of them are protected. A section of the controversial Wildlife and Conservation Bill, if it becomes law this summer, would make taxidermists accountable for every specimen of a protected species they handle, and require them to affix their trademark to each.

Roy Hale, of the Natural History Museum, can already give a confident account of his Darwin exhibits: "The mule was bought from a knacker's yard. A wolf from Whipsnade Zoo—it met its end in a cull. A jaguar came from there too. A stuffed polecat in the show was found dead on a Hereford road, and two drake shovelers, both in breeding plumage, had been shot legally during the winter season."

Mr Hale works at his craft in an airy building just off London's North Circular Road, a white-coated faintly medical figure in a clinical studio setting. "We don't like to get involved with dubious sources," he says. "We try all the known establishments first."

He was last year's chairman of the Guild of Taxidermists, a five-year-old body with 280 members, including some biologists. Most of them welcome the legal moves to control the trade, under which



Museum expert prepares drake for show

every taxidermist would have to be registered in future.

Any reservations concern the dangers of a black market or of deterring genuine finders of dead specimens from offering them. There are also doubts about how the regulations could be enforced without

a prodnose bureaucracy. Museum owner Bob Reid adds: "There is a large second-hand and antique trade. When is an antique piece of taxidermy not an antique?"

Mr Reid owns the North Wales Museum of Wildlife, called Encounter, and he has just put on show there a rare albatross sent home by the British Antarctic Survey. He considers it educational to show the public specimens of endangered wildlife so long as they are respectably come by.

This is a diametrical change of outlook from that of the Victorian taxidermist Potter, whose tableau "Burial of Cock Robin" mustered no fewer than 98 species (many of them protected today) collected from the farm where he lived.

The exhibit is still on view in the High Street of Arundel, Sussex. There, too, is Potter's "The Kittens' Tea Party", for which he retrieved drowned kittens, and "The Guinea Pigs' Cricket Match".

Such extravaganzas are unthinkable in the age of conservation, which drove the famous Rowland Wards of Piccadilly out of business in 1977. But if stuffing is a declining industry (there are only 14 museums with taxidermists on the staff), it is technically more advanced than ever.

A tigress is now light enough to be carried by one man, which reduces labour costs of displays. Bones are wanted only for measurement—apart from skull and teeth, which usually remain. The skins are folded round plaster or glass-fibre moulds and wooden shapes, with metal rods inside the legs. Corpses are kept till needed in industrial freezers.

So much expertise and so little scope for exercising it. Should anyone be wondering how to dispose of deceased creatures, from toads to red squirrels, which came to a lawful end, Roy Hale and colleagues would gratefully receive them. It is not a decent burial but it has a semblance of immortality. ●

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