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NatSCA News

Title: The Trophy Head Project, National Museums Northern Ireland

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Source: Kerr, J. (2012). The Trophy Head Project, National Museums Northern Ireland. *NatSCA News*, Issue 22, 66 - 70.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/113>

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The Trophy Head Project, National Museums Northern Ireland

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Abstract

In 2010 a collection of 77 trophy heads were moved from an off-site store to a new facility. Having survived unsatisfactory storage for many years they then had to undergo asbestos decontamination and be frozen as a precaution against (or to remove) active pests. Following this treatment they have now been fully supported on racks (Fig.1) and are undergoing a programme of conservation cleaning and repair. Some are even now back on display at the Ulster Museum. This upgrade in storage has been so successful that there are plans for the other trophy heads in the collection to be given the same treatment.

Introduction

In 2008 one of the Ulster Museum's off-site stores was no longer viable and plans were made to decant to a new facility. The store had been used to house specimens too large or awkward to be stored in the main Collection Store including a number of trophy heads. Just as the majority of the packing was completed we suffered a major setback. A section of the ceiling collapsed and was discovered to contain asbestos. To cut a very long story short, specialist asbestos contractors were employed to clean the loose dust off the specimens before they could be removed from the building. The contractors were given training in handling specimens and were continually supervised by conservators via C.C.T.V. Staff waiting in an adjoining room then bagged the specimens for freezing in mobile units hired for the duration of the move. Although there were no signs of an active infestation some dead adults of Webbing Clothes Moth *Tineola bisselliella* were found on the surface of the heads. By June 2010 the trophy heads were safely secured onto the new racking (suitable for their considerable weight) using picture hooks and bungees (Hendry 1999). There are a wide range of species including warthog, moose, deer, gazelle and buffalo (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Selection of trophy heads on new racking.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this project (still on-going) is to give the trophy heads physical and chemical stability and if required, bring them up to display standard. Maintaining this new, more stable, pest-free environment is a priority.

Conservation Treatments

This is a record of the treatment of a Dorcas Gazelle (*Gazella dorcas* - Lh102074) and a Warthog (*Phacochoerus africanus* – Lh102038). These are examples of the variation in condition of this collection and how conservation methods found in the literature have been used and adapted.

Dorcas Gazelle

Technical Assessment

Most of the damage to the specimen was as a result of poor support and unsuitable environmental conditions (Fig. 2). Although the loose dust had been removed by the asbestos contractors there was a layer of dirt obscuring the markings and the remaining eye and horns were also coated. The seam along the throat was split (Fig. 3) although the fill appeared stable. As with most of the trophy heads, the ears of the Dorcas Gazelle were curled and distorted. Three small exit holes indicated old pest activity but there were no signs of major damage. The left eye was missing. It was useful to download images of the gazelle from the internet to see the original position of the ears and any unusual markings such as pre-orbital glands and original coloration.



Fig. 2. Dorcas Gazelle before treatment.



Fig. 3. Dorcas Gazelle - split seam.

Cleaning

Wearing a '3M 8810' dust mask, the trophy head was dry brushed in the direction of hair growth towards the vacuum cleaner nozzle (covered with gauze). The horns were also brushed using a short, flat brush more appropriate for this surface. Fortunately the hair was in good condition and allowed further cleaning. The surface was gently swabbed with a 5% solution of Dehypon LS45 (low foaming non-ionic surfactant) and immediately dried to prevent absorption into the skin. It was wonderful to see the original colours and markings revealed. The eye and horns were also swabbed.

Repair

It was decided to fill the split along the seam. Although the original filler (which looked like plaster) appeared sound, it was further consolidated with Paraloid B72 in acetone. Glass microballoons GB03 in Paraloid B72 were used and once hardened, metal files were used to add texture. Acrylic paints were used to blend the repaired area with the fur (Fig. 4).

Fortunately we have a small cabinet of taxidermy materials left over from the days when the museum employed taxidermists. This included a selection of eyes and I was able to find one that matched the gazelle. It was held in place using Polyfilla which was matched to the other eye socket using acrylic paints.

Re-shaping

Fortunately, the ears were not split and it was decided to humidify them in order to gently ease them into the correct position. This was achieved by soaking a small amount of cotton wool in de-ionised water and placing it in a polyethylene zipper bag. The bag was then loosely sealed by the zipper around the ear and the cotton wool supported using a clamp on retort stand to avoid putting any extra weight on the ear. It was important that the cotton wool didn't come into contact with the ear as this could cause expansion and initiate chemical reactions (Carter 1998). The bag was left on for several hours and the ears tested regularly to check if they could move easily without causing damage. It was crucial not to leave the bag on for too long to prevent mould growth. When the ears became flexible they were gently uncurled and held in position using clamps. After a few hours the ears appeared stable in their original orientation and the clamps removed (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4. Dorcas Gazelle - seam after fill and retouching.



Fig. 5. Dorcas Gazelle after treatment.

Warthog

Technical Assessment

Although most of the skin appeared stable, the plaster used to fill around the mouth was cracked and some pieces were missing (Fig. 6). Cotton wool had been used to bulk out the filler. The ears were badly damaged and distorted with pieces missing (Figs. 7 & 8). The head and tusks were very dirty.



Fig. 6. Warthog before treatment.



Fig. 7. Warthog - damaged left ear.



Fig. 8. Warthog - damaged right ear.

Cleaning

The head was dry brushed with a soft brush as before. The tusks and eyes were swabbed with de-ionised water.

Repair

The loose plaster and cotton wool fill was removed from around the mouth using tweezers and a museum vac and the exposed surface was consolidated with 10% Paraloid B72 in acetone (Carter 1998). As there was quite a large gap to fill, ethafoam was used and topped with a layer of glass micro balloons GB03 mixed with Paraloid B72 (mixed to a consistency that allowed easy application). Using the glass micro balloons produced a smooth surface which could be given texture using a stiff bristled brush and dental tools. Once set, acrylic paints were used to retouch and particles collected from the original fill helped create a matt appearance and helped blend the repair with the surrounding skin. As this specimen was to be used for display this treatment was deemed appropriate.

Re-shaping

The left ear (Fig. 7) was complete although a lot of the fill was missing and it was split in several places. The fill was replaced with ethafoam and the tears repaired using Japanese tissue paper adhered using ParaloidB72 (Carter1998). Acrylic paints were used on the Japanese tissue paper (Tosa Usushi) to match the skin. The right ear (Fig. 8) required more work and Japanese tissue paper was needed to replace the missing pieces of skin. The warthog is now displayed in the 'Discover Nature' education suite at The Ulster Museum (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Warthog after treatment, on display at Ulster Museum.

Summary

This has proved to be a very rewarding project. As the original markings are revealed and the damage repaired, the trophy heads have once again become accessible to the many people that visit the museum and its stores. Having the heads visible, both on display in the museum and on open racking in the collection store has raised awareness and appreciation for this collection.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for their assistance and useful comments for this paper. Many thanks to all the staff who helped me lift, carry, pack, transport and hang these awkward and sometimes heavy specimens.

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