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Title: Case Study: Gender and the Natural History Galleries at The Manchester Museum

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Source: Smith, R. (2006). Case Study: Gender and the Natural History Galleries at The Manchester Museum. *NatSCA News, Issue 9*, 44 - 45.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/255>

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**Rebecca Smith, Curatorial Assistant- Natural Sciences,  
The Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester**  
**Case study: Gender and the natural history galleries at The Manchester Museum**

This case study was based on research I carried out as part of my part-time MA in Art Gallery and Museum Studies at Manchester University. We had been asked to critique an object, gallery or institution from a particular standpoint – I chose the natural history galleries as these are my favourite part of the museum (as I still work almost full-time, it made sense to choose an institution that I knew well). I chose a feminist standpoint because recent news stories and developments in the workplace had touched upon how fragile the results of the women's movements had become.

I surveyed the galleries looking at all the specimens, and using our database (KE EMu) for additional information. The key points I surveyed were: the number of male and female specimens; the number of species represented by male, female and juvenile specimens; the relative position and posture of male and female specimens; the information provided in the text relating to gender, and the style of language used. When I discussed the findings of my survey with colleagues, I received mixed reviews. Some thought that I was making a fuss about nothing, and that my results were due to lack of thoroughness, or personal bias. Other colleagues were more interested, and took the time to look on the galleries themselves. We decided to mount a temporary intervention on our natural history galleries to highlight the findings, to coincide with International Women's Week. In the following slides, I will explain the results I found, and how we represented these in our intervention.

One of the limitations of my research was that in some cases, it is difficult to determine whether specimens are male or female, particularly in the limited time I had to complete my research. However, where the sex of specimens was determinable, there are clearly more male than female specimens on both the bird and mammal galleries.

I was also interested to see how well each species was represented. On the mammal gallery, only a small proportion of species were represented by a male and female specimen. The bird gallery had better representation, but in both cases only 5 species were represented by just a female specimen. To draw attention to this bias in numbers and representation, and to touch upon the hidden females that live in the stores, a beautiful specimen of a female Nyala was put on temporary display for the duration of the intervention.

In the bird gallery, where there were more species represented by males and females than the mammal gallery, it was interesting to note the postures and positions these were in. Where a male and female of a species were displayed together, in the 69% of pairs at unequal height, the male was usually positioned above the female.

Where there was a difference in the posture they had been mounted in (35% of pairs (this was more subjective)), males were usually more erect or dominant in posture. In many cases, the difference in height and posture was historical, and a taxidermist had determined this when specimens were mounted together. However, in species where the female and male specimens were mounted separately, the positioning of male specimens above females still occurs. To show this in our intervention, we simply used vinyl circles to highlight examples, with a text explanation at the side of the case.

It was interesting to note the way in which language is used in the text on the galleries. The mammal gallery contains a number of specimens that have a particularly strong identity, some of which are very popular with visitors. It is interesting to compare the interpretation of these specimens. The fact that Mr. Potter's Cow is named through her (male) owner is rather telling. The text for Maharajah and Old Billy refers to 'him' and 'his', whereas Mr. Potter's Cow is referred to simply as 'the cow' or 'the specimen'. Her gender is not referred to in the text, and she is thus represented as an object rather than a once living individual. This is particularly inappropriate since the remains of Maharajah and Old Billy are skeletal, whereas Mr. Potter's Cow is a taxidermy specimen, and is therefore more lifelike to her audience.

More generally, the text tends to present the perceived roles of male and female animals in an androcentric way. The words 'female' and 'mother' are more or less interchangeable in the mammal gallery text. The word 'parent' is used often in text, although the word 'father' is not used once on either the mammal or bird gallery. Statements such as *'The more powerful males have harems of between 5 and 20 fe-*

*males* [Californian Sea Lion] and '*Males with a territory have harems of about 50 females*' [Northern Fur Seal] suggest that males have ownership of females, rather than females being the decision-makers in the courtship process. As there is text with almost every specimen in the galleries, we decided to draw attention to some of this by enlarging it and displaying it in front of popular specimens, so that it was less likely to be ignored.

To some extent, the specimens that are on the galleries are constrained by biases in collecting as well as display. An example of this is shown in the case of Lord Egerton's antelopes. A sample of his notes are shown to the side of the case, which indicate that out of 22 animals collected, only 4 were female. There may be various reasons behind this. More recent choices affecting which specimens are to go on display also play a part on the bias seen on the galleries today.

Undoubtedly the most contentious part of the intervention was to conceal the male specimens in the antelope case. Some visitors felt that they had been denied the chance to see what they had come for. This was something that concerned me about this part of the intervention. However, the point that many female specimens are permanently concealed by being kept in store was an important one, and the antelope case intervention was also balanced by the additional female Nyala being on show.

The intervention was on display for 5 weeks, rather than the original 1. I am rather relieved that it's down now, as the social acceptance of anti-women jokes was getting quite tiring! I hope that it may have prompted visitors to question the authoritative voice of museum interpretation, which can be out of date in some surprising ways. At the very least, it has promoted debate in our museum about the function of our displays, and ways to update galleries in a low-cost but eye-opening way.

Feel free to email any comments to [rebecca.m.smith@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.m.smith@manchester.ac.uk)

This research can be seen in full on the Manchester Museum's website:  
[/www.museum.man.ac.uk/information/pdfs/feminist\\_critique\\_nat\\_hist.pdf](http://www.museum.man.ac.uk/information/pdfs/feminist_critique_nat_hist.pdf)



Concealing male specimens in the antelope case