

# Stuffed animals were the 'photography' of their time

By Sandra Thomas  
Staff writer

In the 16th and 17th centuries, European visitors to the New World had no way to properly describe the strange new animals they discovered during their travels.

So they turned to taxidermy, says Rachael Poliquin, guest curator at the Museum of Vancouver.

"It was pre-photographic technology," said Poliquin. "Besides drawing them, there was no way to show people what these beasts looked like. So they found a means to preserve them so they could say, 'Look at what crazy animals we found.'"

The Kitsilano resident is curating an October exhibit called *Ravishing Beasts*, which features the museum's extensive taxidermy collection.

The animals on display were obtained by the museum between 1894 and 1950 through donations from Vancouver residents and have been in storage for between 50 and 60 years. They include a

rhinoceros head, an albino skunk, birds, Kermode bears and even one man's beloved dog.

Poliquin's interest in taxidermy began recently while completing a post-doctorate fellowship in comparative literature at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, during which she lived in both Kitsilano and Boston. She met another academic at MIT whose expertise was 19th-century animals and her interest was piqued. Shortly after she heard about the museum's taxidermy collection and was inspired to create the exhibit.

Poliquin is also writing a book called *Taxidermy and Longing*. "There are all of these animals lingering in storage that were created for looking at," she said, when asked about the title. "But they've met this sad, tragic fate. I want to take them out to look at again."

Poliquin said part of the exhibit includes the philosophical discussion on the merits of taxidermy. She noted taxidermy could be justified by some because it allows



An upcoming Museum of Vancouver exhibit focuses on taxidermy, including bears and a rhinoceros head.

photo Dan Toulgoet

people to encounter an animal as it once was, which could lead to more empathy for them in the wild.

"I don't want to tell people what to think," she said. "I want to give them the space to ask questions about its uses and values. Ultimately animals die all the

time, which leads to the interesting question, if an animal is already dead, is it OK to stuff it and put it on display?"

Poliquin said there will be examples of the eight genres of taxidermy on display, including hunting, natural history, decorative and pets. She recently put out

a request on her blog for an example of a taxidermy pet and was contacted by the family of Quebec man who had recently moved into a nursing home. Years before, the man had his pet German shepherd/collie mix stuffed.

"The children didn't want it and the home didn't want it, so they contacted me after hearing about my search," she said.

To demonstrate the theatrical genre of taxidermy, Poliquin borrowed a scene from the Gopher Hole Museum based in Torrington, Alta. The museum features stuffed gophers posed as various theatrical characters like bank robbers and world travellers. To complete the exhibit, Poliquin is asking Vancouverites to loan her their mounted deer heads for a display at the entrance of the museum called Bring us Your Head.

Anyone with a deer head to loan can contact Wendy Nichols at [wnichols@museumofvancouver.ca](mailto:wnichols@museumofvancouver.ca) or call 604-730-5312.

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