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Wild Animal Skins in Victorian Britain

Zoos, Collections, Portraits, and Maps

To my lifelong friend Susan Mitchell (née Poole).

Our friendship was not only founded before we were born by a community of blood, but is in itself near as old as my life. It began with our early ages, and, like a history, has been continued to the present time. Although we may not be old in the world we are old to each other, having so long been intimates. We are now widely separated, a great sea and continent intervening; but memory, like care, mounts into iron ships and rides post behind the horseman. Neither time nor space nor enmity can conquer old affection; and as I dedicate these sketches, it is not to you only, but to all in the old country, that I send the greeting of my heart.

Robert Louis Stevenson, 1879
(Stevenson's dedication of *Travels with a Donkey*
to Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson)

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Chapter 3

Stuff and Nonsense: Skin and Victorian Animal Portraiture

Introduction

"The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World"

Fifteen years after Elizabeth Hornby, with her father (Vice Admiral Phipps Hornby), her mother, aunt, and siblings, returned to England following their extensive travels in South America, Edward Lear composed "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World" (1867).¹ Although Lear dedicated this piece of nonsensical fun to his close friend "Gussie's" young nieces and nephews,² he seems, at least in the writing of the story, to have been thinking more specifically of the Hornbys' adventures on the *H.M.S. Asia* as well as this family's intimate attachment to Knowsley Hall, the Earl of Derby's estate just outside of Liverpool. Indeed, it was at Knowsley that Lear met the Hornbys. Between 1831 and 1837, Lear had either visited or lived at Knowsley Hall in the employment of both the 12th Earl of Derby and the Earl's son (then known as Lord Stanley), who was to become one of the most generous and influential patrons of the natural sciences in Great Britain.³ (As I explained in the previous chapter, in 1834, upon the death

¹ For an account of the Hornbys' travels, see previous chapter. To read "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World," see Jackson 91–106.

² "Gussie" is the nickname of Augusta Bethell (1838–1931). In 1862, when she was 24, Lear began to take particular notice of her. (He had known her since childhood.) By 1866 he seriously considered the possibility of marrying "Gussie," but supposedly her sisters disapproved and Lear lost his nerve.

³ Both the 12th Earl of Derby and his son shared an avid interest in natural history. The son especially was to become a leader in the natural history world. As I explained in the previous chapter, he was elected Vice-President of the Linnaean Society in 1817 and was President from 1828 to 1834. He was also a founding member of the Zoological Society in 1826 and its President from 1831 until his death in 1851. It was through his association with the London Zoological Society that he first met Edward Lear and admired his lively and accurate bird portraits. At that time Lear was preparing his volume of parrots (*Illustrations of the Family of the Psittacidae, or Parrots* [1832]), drawing illustrations for Jardine, and working for the bird illustrator, and former taxidermist, John Gould. At Knowsley, Lear became acquainted with people such as the painter Joseph Wolf, John James Audubon and his son, as well as various taxidermists, curators, and global dealers who worked for Lord Stanley. At one point Lear almost accompanied Audubon on his bird collecting travels in

of his father, Lord Stanley acceded to the earldom and became the 13th Earl and was known as Lord Derby. The switch of names can be confusing; for the sake of clarification, in this chapter I shall always refer to the 13th Earl as Lord Derby.)

Lear was at Knowsley because he had been commissioned to paint watercolor portraits of the animals and birds enclosed within the estate's 170-acre menagerie as well as those exhibited in the Knowsley Museum.⁴ Initially Lear was considered to be no more than an employee, but after catching the attention of the Earl's grandsons who enjoyed being entertained by his nonsense verses (later to be part of his 1846 *Book of Nonsense*), Lear was asked to dine with the family. Although at first this invitation was confusing to Lear (on one occasion he did not know whether he was a guest at his lordship's table or the housekeeper's), over time, he became friends not only with his employers but also with the new Lord Derby's extended family, among whom were Elizabeth Hornby's parents (her mother was Lord Derby's sister) as well as Elizabeth and her siblings, who annually spent extended summer months on the estate.⁵ These friendships endured: in 1841 Lear took a walking holiday with Phipps Hornby; furthermore, the Hornbys as well as Lord Derby helped patronize Lear's later travel writing and landscape painting. Lear, though, as we shall see, never completely forgot his marginalized status.⁶

From its very opening "The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World" draws upon Lear's immersion in the Knowsley Hall culture, devoted as it was to studying, collecting, exchanging, identifying, breeding, and preserving animals and birds from various parts of the globe. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Knowsley menagerie with its thousands of specimens

North America. However, it seems that Audubon became aware that Lear was not robust enough so the invitation was carefully withdrawn. (See Peck, "The Natural History of Edward Lear" 52.)

⁴ Many of these illustrations appeared in the exquisite and rare *Gleanings from the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley Hall*. Robert McCracken Peck gives a sense of the menagerie's size: "The Knowsley menagerie, which Lear came to know intimately, would eventually include several thousand specimens representing 619 different species of birds alone. Among these were 114 species of parrot, 52 species of game birds, 51 species of raptor, and 60 species of wildfowl. The outdoor facilities in which the birds and animals were kept and where Lear spent so much of his time painting from life, eventually covered an area of 170 acres and required a staff of thirty to maintain. The living creatures were complemented by an extraordinarily comprehensive natural history library ... [There was] a collection of mounted and preserved birds and mammals which numbered almost 20,000 specimens by the time it was dispersed in 1851" (as quoted in Fisher 43).

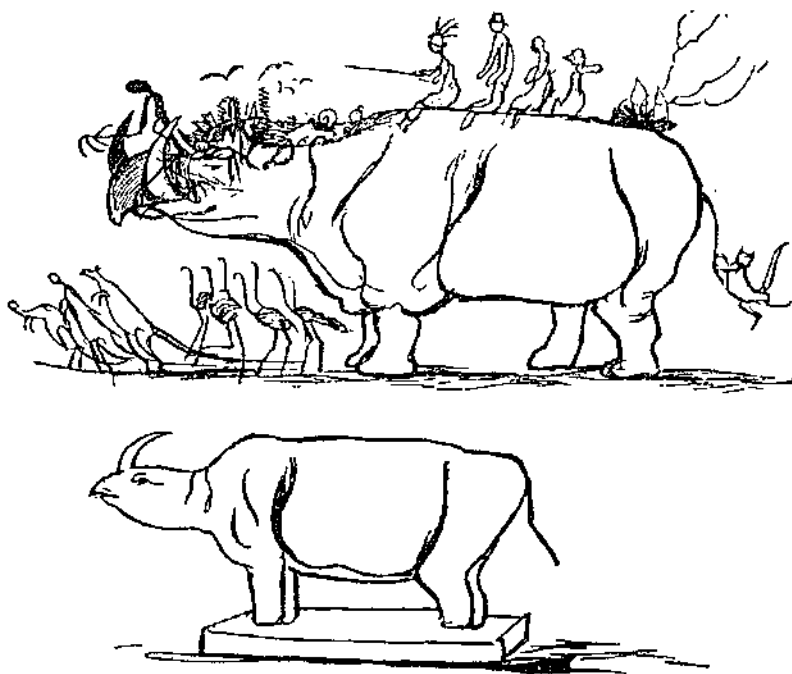
⁵ The family relationships were more complicated than suggested. Phipps Hornby's mother was a daughter of James Smith-Stanley, Lord Strange, and sister to Edward Smith-Stanley, 12th Earl of Derby. Hornby's sister Charlotte Margaret later married her cousin Edward Smith-Stanley, 13th Earl of Derby. This close association between the Earl of Derby and the Hornby family played a significant part in Phipps Hornby's career and politics.

⁶ For a reproduction of a cartoon showing Lear and Phipps Hornby setting out together from Knowsley Hall, see Clemency Fisher's *A Passion for Natural History*, 94.

was an almost larger-than-life expression of a more general impulse in England to amass and display exotic specimens gathered through trade routes opened up by colonial expansion. In the story, Lear whimsically recasts the adventures of the innumerable curators and collectors who worked for Lord Derby, including Elizabeth and her father during their time in South America. Representing this ethos, the story's children, Violet, Slingsby, Guy, and Lionel, sail across the sea from land to land, island to island; they admire new species, such as the "Co-operative Cauliflower" which hurries off in a "plumdomphious manner" (Jackson 103), explore foreign landscapes, and survive adventures in the wild. Occasional moments in the story obliquely replicate details from Elizabeth's diary and letters. For instance, the narrative humorously evokes her longing to extend the voyage on the *H.M.S. Asia* so as to see more of the world;⁷ it also calls attention to the fact that the boat is steered by "Pussy," a detail that recollects Elizabeth's nickname, "Pussy," embossed in gold on the cover of her travel journal. And when the cat on board destroys the exotic parrots by biting off their tails, what jumps to mind are the many entries, written during the *H.M.S. Asia's* return voyage, in which Elizabeth complains of her sister's cat preying upon and sometimes devouring the live specimens she and her father were attempting to take back to the Knowsley Hall Menagerie.

In the mode of nonsense, which typically undoes the threat of danger, Lear delightfully stretches the truths he is representing throughout this story so that toward the end of the narrative when the children lose their sailing vessel to the jaws of a ferocious aquatic creature, they improbably, for 18 months, travel home across land on the back of an elderly rhinoceros, which is also transporting "a crowd of kangaroos and Gigantic Cranes" (Knowsley was famous for its kangaroos and cranes; furthermore, captured animals were often transported on the backs of large animals). Once they all arrive in England, however, this obliging rhinoceros does not fare so well: he is summarily slaughtered, flayed, and stuffed. The narrative brusquely concludes: "As for the Rhinoceros, in token of their grateful adherence, they have him killed and stuffed directly, and then set him up outside the door of their father's house as a Diaphanous Doorscraper" (Jackson 106)—only in the topsy-turvy world of nonsense, it seems, can a rhinoceros's celebrated thick skin become "diaphanous" or transparent.

⁷ In a November 21, 1844 letter to her uncle, Lord Stanley, Elizabeth writes: "I wish they would order us home by India for now having gone abroad I think it would be pleasanter to go right round the world than only half round and back again" (920 DER [13] 1/85/12, National Museums Liverpool).



Figures 3.1/3.2 From Edward Lear's "The Story of Four Little Children Who Went Round the World"

Lear's harsh, abrupt conclusion immediately empties "The Story of Four Little Children Who Went Round the World" of its harmless, humorous play, and baldly exposes the fate of numerous grand, exotic mammals whose bodies were mounted and exhibited by hunters and scientific institutions. The exaggerations of nonsense disappear. Lear's rhinoceros is yet another victim of the self-appointed license to show off colonial authority.⁸ It shares a place with those trophies prominently

⁸ It is interesting to note that occasionally this imperative to demonstrate dominion was extended to those with fewer means, who were encouraged by taxidermy manuals to capture and stuff something small or ordinary, like a squirrel, in order to demonstrate their bravery and command. A poem in J. Gardner's 1866 *Bird, Animal, and Fish: Stuffing and Preserving*, a manual composed for amateurs, encourages such behavior. In the poem, the stuffed squirrel speaks:

It took six boys to catch me,
And then I bit them so,
That they were forced to choke me,
Or else to let me go.
And now I'm dead they've stuffed me,
To let all people know
How brave and active they were all,

featured at the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition, and joins the company of the 16 tigers shot in India by the Prince of Wales (Edward VII), later exhibited to the public in the lecture room of the London Zoological Society (1877). It also becomes still another trophy rhinoceros head on the wall of that Society's meeting rooms at Hanover Square.⁹ More particularly, Lear's rhinoceros is subjected to the imperative to "civilize" or tame the exotic other by converting it into a domestic commodity, in this instance, into an item upon which the paternal colonial might wipe his muddy boots.

Wardian Furniture

The conclusion of Lear's story cannot be dismissed as mere nonsense; in its hyperbolic way, it tells the truth, for the practice of removing an animal part (such as a foot) or its skin and converting that section into something ornamental was almost routine. Shaped into a doormat, a utilitarian, subservient object, Lear's rhinoceros is transformed into what was popularly known as Wardian furniture. These furnishings were named after the well-known London taxidermist Rowland Ward, who made a profit by turning animal parts into ornamental household articles. One of the more popular items in his stock was the elephant's foot liqueur stand (the interior of the enormous foot was fitted as a spirit-cellar while the lid contained boxes of cigars).¹⁰ Ward also constructed pieces of furniture out of rhinoceros hide. In an advertisement at the back of *The Sportsman's Handbook to Practical Collecting*, Ward boasts of having, after "six years" labor, perfected the process through which he was able to make the thick rhinoceros's skin pliable for ornamental purposes. He announces that, as a result, the rhinoceros hide can now be worked "not only into sticks, trays and smaller articles of use or ornament but into the construction of Cabinets, Tables, etc. etc." Proudly, the advertisement continues: "There is, for example, among the articles [out of rhinoceros skin] ... prepared for His Highness the Maharajah, a beautiful little table of the most exquisite polish and beautiful grain, which looks as if it had been

And what six boys could do! (10-11)

As a sideline to this observation, I recently opened a 2012 mail-order catalogue from Wireless and discovered, listed as a "Customer Favorite," a "Perfectly cute and kitschy" Mounted Squirrel Head trophy, "sculptured in super-realistic resin (no squirrels were harmed in the making of this trophy)." On the following day yet another holiday catalogue (*What on Earth: A Collection of Funwear & Delightful Diversions*) arrived and what should I find but a fake "life-like rhinoceros trophy head" for \$39.95: "If you're asked where you got it, say you bagged it yourself. Imagine how exotic you'll seem" (12). Are we "faux Victorians"? In spite of our contemporary criticism and disapproval of taxidermy, we are apparently still drawn toward the aura of power hovering around the mounted trophy.

⁹ See [May 23] 1885 satirical *Punch* cartoon, "The Meeting of the Zoological Society, Hanover Square," showing a rhinoceros's head, sporting a frilly bonnet and glasses, mounted on the wall of the Zoological Society rooms (*Punch* 88: 251).

¹⁰ A rarer item was a hall-porter's chair constructed out of a small elephant.

polished out of some beautifully veined *transparent* stone or clouded amber” (179 [italics mine])—perhaps this transparency is the source of Lear’s choice of the word “diaphanous” to describe the doorstop’s appearance. Yet another established taxidermist in London, Gerrards, also featured ornamental furniture made by “Mounting Hippopotamus & Rhinoceros Feet in Silver, Electric Plate, Brass, Copper & Copper Bronze” (Morris 116). The resulting umbrella stands, ink wells, lamps, and ashtrays fashioned out of the rhinoceros’s feet are, to say the least, a strange, distorted form of portraiture.

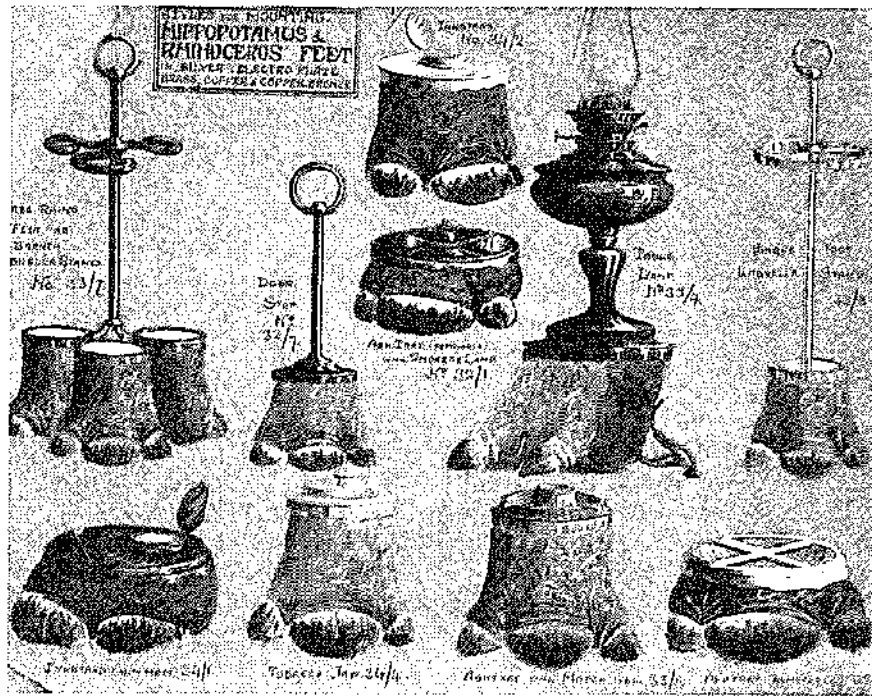


Figure 3.3 Wardian Furniture

However fascinating the transformation of the rhinoceros into a piece of Wardian furniture might be, this rather bizarre Victorian phenomenon is not nearly as absorbing or as informative as Lear’s deliberately matter-of-fact reference to the flaying and stuffing of the rhinoceros’s skin—especially after such a point has been made of the creature’s generosity. The startling ending to “The Story of Four Little Children Who Went Round the World” makes one wonder about the popularly accepted practice of taxidermy and prompts one, more generally and inclusively, not only to think further about the centrality of skin in animal portraiture but also to examine Lear’s own position with regard to the importance of skin in his work as a natural history illustrator.

Questions come to mind: what were the Victorians saying about the nature of skin when they chose to fill and shape it into some semblance of what once was living? Why, for instance, in 1829, was John Gould asked to stuff George IV’s “pet” giraffe, which before arriving in England had initially traveled from Sonnaar to Cairo on the back of a camel, and why was Joseph Wolf hired to stuff Queen Victoria’s pets? Furthermore, why did amateurs and more modest individuals consult taxidermy manuals so that they could preserve a favorite canary? (One cannot help but recall the person who comes to pick up the stuffed canary from Venus’s shop in *Our Mutual Friend*.) On a more professional level, why, for example, did the 13th Earl of Derby, as well as many of the zoos, hire taxidermists and illustrators so that they might stock their museums and libraries with mounted specimens and stacks of natural history drawings? Knowsley’s museum of “dead subjects” (animals and birds which had died in the menageric) consisted, for instance, of 611 stuffed quadrupeds and 11,131 stuffed birds. And, what prompted the sailors and naval officers, as well as Elizabeth Hornby, on board the *H.M.S. Asia*, to stuff many of the creatures they had gathered on their travels? Could they have not been content merely to save the skin alone?

Essentially, one wonders, what does taxidermy contribute to an understanding of the significance of skin for the Victorians? Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, what exactly does the common practice of using a stuffed specimen as a model in order to paint or draw a particular mammal or bird reveal about the crucial part skin played in animal portraiture?

In order to address these questions, I shall devote the first part of this chapter to expanding my discussion of the Victorians’ fascination with animal skins, and then I shall move on to consider the role of skin not only in the art of taxidermy¹¹ but also in the rendering of natural history illustrations. As an example of this preoccupation, in Part Two, I shall return to my initial focus on Edward Lear, and discuss his rendering of skin in his animal illustrations. In this section, however, rather than focusing on “The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World,” I shall concentrate upon Lear’s immaculately executed watercolor portraits of birds and mammals, done for patrons such as Lord Derby. Lear’s paintings and prints of these creatures reflect not only the Victorians’ attraction to and dependency on skin, but also the consequential demand that natural history artists pay minute attention to a creature’s exterior markings and texture. In Part Three, I shall conclude by exploring Lear’s critical reaction, through his nonsense drawings, to this strict requirement. For Lear, it seems, the key to a true portrait of a creature lay not so much in the overpowering details of a meticulously executed skin as in the intimacy of that skin, which allows the portrait to breathe and move. Unfettered by the scientist’s classifying gaze or the collector’s/colonial’s prerogative that transforms an animal or bird into yet another commodity, such as the “diaphanous doorstop,” Lear was interested in another kind of portraiture.

¹¹ Taxidermy is based upon two Greek words: *Taxis*: to arrange; and *Dermis*: skin.

Part One: Skin, Taxidermy, and Illustration

Victorians and Skin

As I have established in earlier chapters, even when imperfect or fragmented, skin was considered by the Victorians to be a primary source of identity, the essential signature of difference. Through its markings and colorings, skin offered an immediate visual key to cultural and racial identity, and, as such, instantly exposed both animals and humans to the judgment of others. Animals were particularly vulnerable to this kind of scrutiny, particularly when exhibited outside their natural contexts (in zoos, museums, and estates) and displayed in cages or cases without a narrative or a prop, except perhaps a label, to define their position or reveal their character. These creatures were consequently viewed almost exclusively through the medium of the textures, colors, and patterns of their skins. In a sense, these features provided the defining vocabulary for the Victorians' lexicon of taxonomies.¹² It was therefore not unusual to find William Swainson, in his 1838 *Animals in Menageries*, distinguishing "the tiger of Bengal ... from all other ferocious animals," by means of "its beautiful skin, marked throughout with narrow dark stripes upon a yellowish buff ground" (104). Even Richard Owen, who was more interested in the anatomy of natural history specimens (getting beneath the skin), chose not to ignore the skin's surface in order to distinguish one species from another. In his *Memoir on the Gorilla*, for instance, Owen discriminates between a gorilla and a chimpanzee according to the ways in which the respective hairs on the gorilla's and the chimpanzee's epidermis reflected the "bright sunlight."¹³

Skin was not mute. It "spoke" to the Victorians and insisted upon being heard by those who gazed upon it. The brilliant narrow and contrasting stripes of the tiger's fur or the light on a gorilla's hairs created a vocabulary and a voice to which scientists, collectors, and even the general public listened. These markings reverberated in people's consciousness and were eminently louder than any growl, cry, song, or howl; though I hasten to add that occasionally sounds were added to stuffed creatures. One instance I have run across is from a nineteenth-century *Illustrated Guide to the Jungle*, which vividly describes Rowland Ward's taxidermy constructions at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886. I was fascinated to read that in his depiction of a group of tigers attacking a person, Ward

¹² It would be remiss to overlook the fact that in addition to being interested in skins, scientists were also fascinated by the skeletons and viscera of these animals. For instance, A.D. Bartlett was not only intent on keeping the skin of an "orang-utan" but also committed to preserving its skeleton and the viscera "to secure accurate information to the naturalist" (*Wild Animals in Captivity* 5).

¹³ "[T]he degree of admixture of different-coloured hairs," reveals that a living gorilla, "seen in bright sunlight, would in some positions reflect from its surface a colour much more different from that of a chimpanzee" (Owen 11).

inserted an "apparatus" that sent a "nerve tingling" cry of "'Bagh! Bagh!'" and a "despairing shriek" from the tigers' victim (*Illustrated Guide to the Jungle* 33). The assemblage recalls the remarkable painted wooden figure of "Tippo's Tiger" (1793) in which a mechanical organ was placed inside the modeled tiger's body (one turned a handle to activate the organ) so as to capture the despairing sounds of the victim as well as the aggressive growls of the tiger.¹⁴

The powerful vocabulary of an animal's skin even occasionally helped portray a person's identity. For instance, in *Our Mutual Friend*, Charles Dickens summons the dark, heavy density of a rhinoceros's skin to describe Mr. Noddy Boffin (the "Golden Dustman") so as to distinguish him from the novel's menagerie of characters (the bird of prey, the crocodile, etc.). To illustrate how "thick" and "dense" the illiterate Boffin initially appears to be, Dickens compares Boffin's garments (his second skin: his clothes) as well as his complexion to a rhinoceros's hide. Dressed in a pea overcoat, and carrying a large stick, the "broad, round-shouldered" Boffin wears "thick shoes, and thick leather gaiters, and thick gloves like a hedger's." He displays "an overlapping rhinoceros build, with folds in his cheeks, and his forehead, and his eyelids, and his lips, and his ears." The narrator concludes: "A very odd-looking fellow altogether" (46).

For many Victorians, skin, though, was not simply a language of branding. It also stood metonymically for a being's entirety. In this mode, skin functioned as an index to character as well as a site of identity. Consequently, for William Swainson, the stripes on the Bengal tiger's fur did not merely distinguish the creature from other animals but also revealed the tiger's "savageness and butchery" (*Animals in Menageries* 104). Similarly, the rhinoceros's thick, irregularly folded skin, in addition to being the identifying attribute of this unusual mammal, was sometimes conceived to be the site of the rhinoceros's temperament; it registered his bad temper. In Rudyard Kipling's fable "How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin," the awkwardly layered armor-plated hide records the rhinoceros's failed efforts (his continuous rubbing) to rid his body of the irritating stale cake crumbs lodged under his skin as a punishment for stealing a cake. Continuously exasperated, the rhinoceros develops a disagreeable disposition. Kipling's narrative might be fictitious, but the concentration on the animal's skin as a metonymic text is not.

Human skin, of course, was not exempted from this kind of focus. It too was regarded as a guide to portraying character. A skin's coloring was thought to disclose an individual's disposition, an orientation, which, as several critics have recently noted, influenced Victorian novelists' depiction of temperament. Consider the blush on a cheek or a sudden paleness of complexion, which visibly signifies to the reader the presence of a conscience, and, thereby, reveals, for instance, the moral identity of characters in such novels as *Oliver Twist* or *Mary Barton*.¹⁵

¹⁴ "Tippo's Tiger" can be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

¹⁵ For further and more nuanced thought on this matter of "the blush" see Mary Ann O'Farrell's *Telling Complexions* which explores the frequent use of the blush in Victorian

The Victorians, however, also recognized that skin registers more than the identity or character of what it envelops. It also carries with it, dead or alive, an intimacy, a smell, a feel, which can bring the observer closer to what was or is a living, breathing subject. In South Africa, when the celebrated Victorian hunter Roualeyn George Gordon Cumming lifted and smelt the skin of a dead wildebeest, the skin's "delicious odor of the grass and wild herbs" where the animal had lain evoked the living creature (*Five Years of a Hunter's Life*, 1: 81). And again when Cumming bent over the skin of the eland he had just shot, the skin's "most delicious perfume of trees and grass" recalled the breathing animal (*Five Years of a Hunter's Life*, 1: 253). On more familiar ground, the intimate sensation of touching and smelling the skin of a pet ushered its being into consciousness and affirmed its presence.

This attribute reminds one that in the human imagination, skin is often closer to the texture of life than is any well-constructed skeleton or carefully preserved viscera—recall the piece of elephant trunk attached to Maharaja's skeleton in the Belle Vue Museum (see Chapter I). For instance, Joseph Wolf, an official illustrator for the London Zoological Society, vividly experienced the inclusive and resurrecting power of skin when he found himself attempting to draw a new species of antelope for the Society from nothing but a "peculiar-looking long, narrow skull, with a label attached to it." Only when Wolf ambled into another room and found the antelope's crumpled skin draped on a "kind of wooden horse" was he able to begin recreating "a life-like image" of the creature (Palmer 240). For Wolf, as well as for many others, this draped hide carried with it the texture of the antelope's life. Though removed from the antelope's body, it was somehow still integrally attached to the being it had once covered.

A few years ago I was reminded of this reality when I was walking around the "Skin" exhibit at the Wellcome Institute, London, and paused before the removed tattooed skins of nineteenth-century sailors. The fact that these pieces had once been attached to living people took me aback.¹⁶ The life, though I had not witnessed it, was uncannily present. The experience was related to what Rachel Poliquin, a recent commentator on taxidermy, calls a raw experience. I should, I suppose, make allowances for the fact that I was gazing at human rather than at animal skins. Undoubtedly there is more self-identification and more at stake. One shudders when one learns, for instance, of the book of sonnets written by a nineteenth-century Russian poet to his mistress, bound in the tanned skin

novels to indicate character and inner emotions or desires, and also look at William A. Cohen's *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*.

¹⁶ Poliquin in her recent study of taxidermy, *The Breathless Zoo*, recognizes the fact that when we are in the concrete presence of what had once lived, we are "haunted" by "the presence of death" that casts "an uneasy shadow" (41). Another interesting study of taxidermy is Merle M. Patchett's 2010 PhD dissertation, "Putting Animals on Display: Geographies of Taxidermy Practice." Patchett received her degree from the Department of Geographical and Earth Sciences at the University of Glasgow.

from his amputated leg, or of a young French countess who, in 1802, wished that after her death, a large piece of skin cut from her shoulders should be sent to her lover and serve as a binding for one of his books (Connor 45). Animal and bird skins are, however, not exempt from this immediacy. They too carry the intimate remembrance of a living being.

What is intriguing to me about the Victorians is their desire to cling to the aura of life residing within a skin after death. Contrary to what Poliquin proposes in her fine discussion of taxidermy, that Victorians, when stuffing a creature, were primarily recognizing the attendance of death, I suggest—and this is perhaps a minor difference—that, instead, they were acknowledging the remnant of life they believed remained within and exuded from the sight and feel of that skin; in a sense, they were reviving what had been lost. Preserved, resurrected, repaired, shaped, and filled to form a mounted specimen in drawing-rooms, interiors of estates, or in crowded museums, the taxidermy specimen realized the vitality within the remaining fur and feathers. As those Victorians who arranged either to mount exotic animals or to stuff their pet canaries (or in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's case, his pet wombat) would attest, these remains extended the life and, depending on circumstances, allowed an individual either thoroughly to study a newly-discovered specimen or privately to retain an attachment to a familiar, beloved pet.¹⁷ Lines from a clumsily written poem in Gardner's 1866 amateur taxidermy guide address the latter possibility. Readers are encouraged to stuff their companion dogs, cats, and birds so they can prolong the breath of skin and keep remembrance alive:

So, if you ever have a pet—no matter what it be—
Dog, cat, or bird, or squirrel—just take the advice from me—
Learn how you may preserve the form which in its life it bore
'Tis well to keep the memory green of dear ones gone before. (7)

For the Victorians, skin was more than merely life's envelope; it figuratively conveyed life itself. It was not "breathless" but revitalizing; it exhaled life.¹⁸

¹⁷ On a recent tour of the working spaces behind the public areas of Buffalo's Museum of Science, I was fascinated to discover shelf after shelf of unclaimed mounted pet dogs and cats. The curator explained that these had been there for years. Apparently, pet owners at first thought it a good idea to bring their beloved animal back to life, so to speak, by having it stuffed, but upon reflection, had second thoughts, so had just left them there. When looking at nineteenth-century taxidermy papers, I have been struck by the fact that taxidermists insisted that they be paid ahead of time if someone brought in a pet to be stuffed. The reason for this was evident in my visit to the back rooms of Buffalo's Museum of Science.

¹⁸ My point contradicts Poliquin's sense that taxidermy is "breathless." Appropriately, she entitles her study of taxidermy *The Breathless Zoo: Taxidermy and the Culture of Longing*.

In this respect, I suggest that the art of taxidermy is quite different from Frankenstein's method of creating a being from the inside outward by first collecting parts, assembling them, and then, finally, covering the assemblage, as if tying up the bits, with yellowish skin (perhaps collected in a slaughter yard). Frankenstein begins with the body's interior and works out toward the skin surface.¹⁹ Unlike the taxidermist, he does not commence with the life-giving, life-containing skin. Frankenstein does not acknowledge that existence comes through skin.

Because life, so to speak, begins with and resides within the skin proper, Victorian taxidermists went to great lengths to make certain that they did not abuse it when mounting their specimens and forming sculptured portraits of their subjects. Even though these artisans or technicians, when removing the skin from an animal or a bird, had, almost literally, to invoke a second death by penetrating or violating the skin's boundaries, they made sure that the cut was clean, and not "fatal" so that the fur or the feathers were neither damaged nor discolored by bodily fluids; retaining the skin's natural life-giving appearance was primary. An opening section in Captain Thomas Brown's taxidermy manual addresses this priority:

When a quadruped is killed, and its skin intended for stuffing, the preparatory steps are to lay the animal on its back, and plug up its nostrils, mouth, and any wounds it may have received, with cotton or tow, to prevent the blood from disfiguring the skin. A longitudinal incision is then made in the lower part of the belly, in front of the pubis, and extended from thence to the stomach, or higher if necessary, keeping in as straight a line as possible, and taking care not to penetrate so deep as to cut into the abdominal muscles. In some instances, the incision is made as high as the collar bone. In this operation the hairs must be carefully separated to the right and left, and none of them cut, if possible. The skin is also turned back to the right and left, putting pads of cotton or tow between it and the muscles, as the skinning is proceeded with. (7)

For similar reasons, taxidermists were also interested in dealing with "good skins," those which had not be ruined by a bullet, a knife, or by a hunter's "coarse," heavy hand, which, as Brown complained, had "disordered," stretched, deranged, and sullied the specimen's feathers or skin and compromised what once had been alive (4). In her letters home to her uncle, Lord Derby, Elizabeth Hornby grumbles about "two handsome" fly catchers that were "so much shot that they are not very good specimens" and could not be stuffed (National Museums Liverpool, 13th Earl's Letterbooks V.8, March 25, 1848).²⁰ In another missive from Valparaiso she

¹⁹ The same can almost be said of Mr. Venus in *Our Mutual Friend*, who assembles bodies out of bits and pieces and articulates skeletons as well. For him skin is not necessarily an inclusive beginning; it is only incidental to what he is constructing. In this respect, Venus's shop resembles Frankenstein's laboratory more than it replicates a taxidermist's.

²⁰ All of Elizabeth Hornby's letters come from National Museums Liverpool. In subsequent quotations, the date or reference number only will be given.

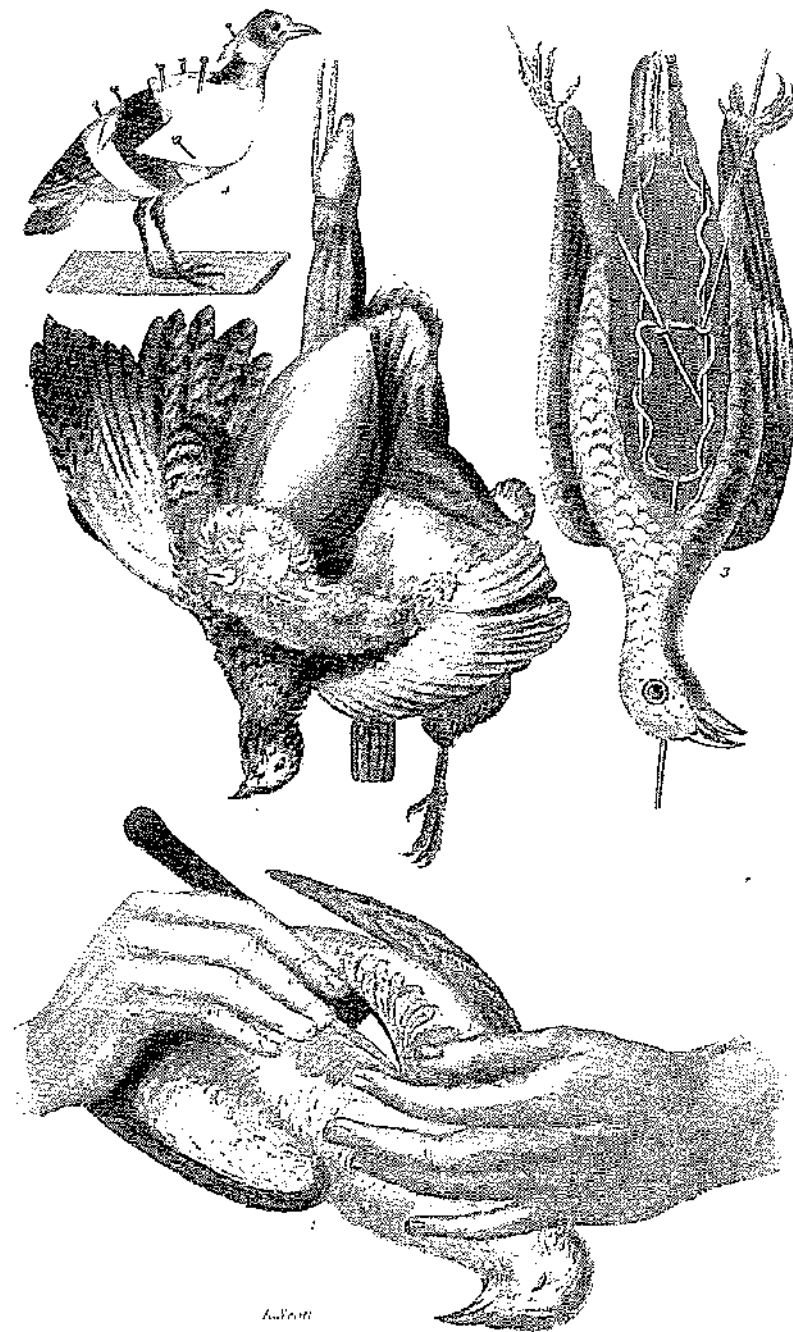


Figure 3.4 Plate III from *The Taxidermist's Manual*
Source: Brown 1833.

also warns her uncle that among the specimens sent back to England are: "Several [birds] ... shot by amateur sportsmen" which are consequently "a good deal damaged & ... very difficult to stuff" (August 29, 1850, 920 DER [13] 1/85/16).²¹

Once the skin had been removed, the stuffer, as a taxidermist was then called, had to exhibit skill in rendering the animation residing within the skin. There were, of course, many methods to flesh out the life of the skin. One conventional way was to construct the general shape of the body out of wire and then wrap cotton tow around this support in order to replicate the folds, bumps, and swellings of the creature's appearance. The skin was then fitted over this frame.²² As technology

²¹ As were other stuffers, A.D. Bartlett, the taxidermist and superintendent of the London Zoological Gardens, was sensitive to this predicament identified by Hornby. He wrote: "The first object of a taxidermist is to render all the damage or wounded parts of a skin as perfect as possible, and this can be done by a skilful operator in such a manner as to render the detection of the damaged parts next to impossible" (*Bartlett's Life Among Wild Beasts* 6).

²² J. Gardner in *Bird, Animal, and Fish: Stuffing and Preserving* instructs:

Now comes the "stuffing" and "setting up" process, in which great taste and skill may be displayed. In the first place you must procure six lengths of stout wire (about as thick as twine will do) of ten inches each. Soften the ends of the wires by making them red-hot, and then sharpen the points with a file. Next, make a body of tow, wrapped tightly round the length of one wire. This body of tow you must make as nearly the size of the animal as may be, shaping it into the requisite form, larger in the centre and smaller towards the two ends. Place this false body inside the skin up to the neck, so that the sharpened point of the wire comes through the nose. Pass a wire through each of the fore-feet into the body, and clench each one on the other side. Serve both fore and hind-legs in the same manner, and then proceed likewise with the tail. We have now, as it were, a new skeleton for our stuffed pet. The next process is to fill up all cavities left by the artificial body with loose tow or wadding. Then neatly sew up the skin, so that the stitches do not show through the fur. The proper sort of artificial eyes can be purchased at any respectable bird-stuffer's. They are fastened in their places with wire, or with putty. Eyes of various kinds, especially for the larger kinds of animals have a bit of wire at back. If not convenient to stuff the squirrel directly, the skin, after it has been prepared, can be placed on one side and kept for any length of time. All that is necessary when you want to stuff your specimen, is to damp and soften the skin. (12)

Another description of this process is in William Swainson's 1840 taxidermy manual:

Commencing with Quadrupeds, the operator should begin by opening, cleaning, and filling the mouth with cotton or tow, to prevent any blood or moisture from exuding. All wounds should be treated in the same manner. The animal is then stretched on its back, and the hairs being tuned to the right and left, the skin is to be opened in a straight line down the middle of the abdomen, commencing from the arch or hollow of the pubis, and ending with the stomach: the upper part of the slit may be extended to the collar bone; but as the operator gradually acquires dexterity, he will be able to decrease or shorten it. Care must be taken not to injure the muscles of the belly, by making the first incision too deep, otherwise

progressed, however, this method was gradually replaced by meticulously measured artificial bodies or "manikins" (made of such materials as wood, papier-mâché, plaster, and even peat) to which taxidermists could bind cotton tow before enveloping them with the treated skin. A plate from John Rowley's *The Art of Taxidermy* illustrates one version of this technique. The photograph shows a manikin for a zebra. In order to see the life-giving effect skin renders, it is helpful to look at the plate which follows, showing the manikin finally covered with the removed and treated hide. For all purposes the stuffed zebra has now recovered a semblance of its life; its skin has made up for what it lost in dying.

This reality was made even more convincing to me when, recently walking around the Zoology Museum at Cambridge University, my attention was drawn to a child gazing at a free-standing stuffed zebra—no cage or glass case enclosed the specimen. I watched the child repeatedly and tentatively extending his arm and fingers (and then hurriedly withdrawing them) as if daring himself to touch the zebra. I identified with the child, for I too was caught wondering whether or not the zebra was really dead. I also feared the specimen might react to my touch. The vibrant and shaped skin caught us both within the paradox of what one might call a living death.²³ We had, as Poliquin so rightly acknowledges, experienced a "compelling strangeness" which "arises in large part from the contradictions between the *perception* of this object on display—mute and manufactured—and the *recognition* that this is no mute and manufactured object" (50). Through the zebra's mounted skin, we had stepped into the "animal zone"—the face-to-face physical presence, the illusion of immediacy one experiences standing close to an animal one ordinarily would not get near without impunity. For me, and I believe for the child, however, this vibrant stuffed skin did not completely remove us, as Poliquin suggests, from the idea of harm (we were not exempted from our vulnerability before a wild beast) nor were we excused from the condition of

the intestines will fall out and soil the fur. The operator then proceeds to separate the skin from the flesh, both to the right and left of the belly, placing pads of tow or linen between, and sprinkling powdered chalk on the flesh as the surface is absorbed: the anus is next detached from the rectum, the tail cut off interiorly at the last joint, and each thigh separated at its junction with the bones of the pelvis. Hitherto the animal has remained upon its back; but it must now be laid on its side, the posterior part towards the right, and give more facility for skinning the back: this last part is always the easiest. For quadrupeds of a small or middling size, it is sufficient to take the skin in one hand, and the body in the other, and by drawing them in contrary directions, to unskin the body as far as the scapulae, or rather to the shoulders. (*Taxidermy, a Bibliography and Biography* 31)

²³ Poliquin quite rightly observes: "taxidermy embraces viewers within an aura of wonder. That atmosphere of compelling strangeness arises in large part from the contradiction between the *perception* of the object on display—mute and manufactured—and the *recognition* that this is no mute and manufactured object. Viewers can never escape the startling realization that this static thing in a very real sense is an animal still: the eyes may be glass, but the animal stares back" (50).

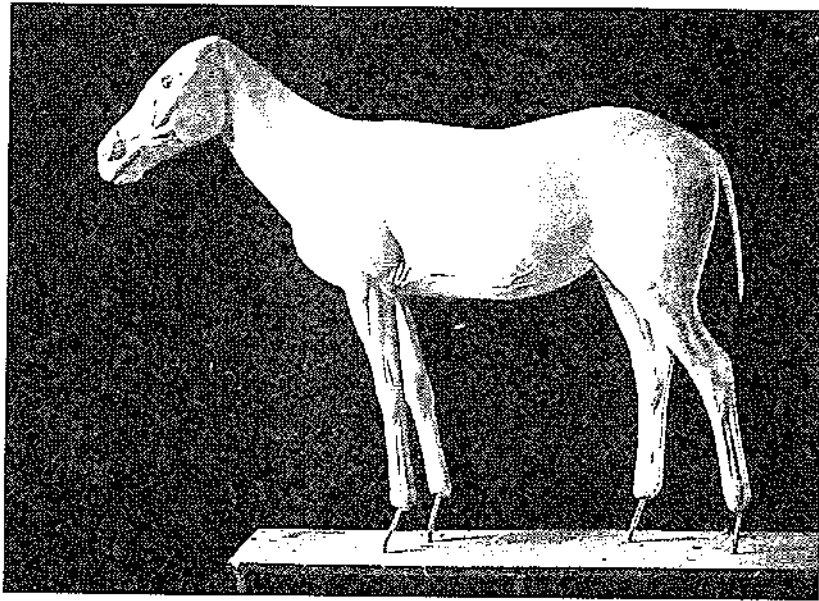


Figure 3.5 "Manikin for Zebra, Completed, Ready for the Skin"
Source: Rowley 1898.

time.²⁴ Although most historians and commentators on taxidermy remark on the fact that taxidermy removes a specimen from the vagaries of time so it can, more or less, be adored, studied, or preserved from extinction, that effect is not always possible. The reality of decay (the instability of skin) compromises that ideal. As a consequence, both the child and I (even perhaps the zebra) remained close to the boundaries of temporality (in the next moment, the zebra might flinch) and fear (in a minute, we might be bitten). As my experience had instructed, when I gazed at the removed tattooed human skin at the Wellcome Institute, the usually and seemingly rigid distinctions between life and death (within what Connor calls this "corpse of a corpse"²⁵) became muddled.

My experience in the Zoology Museum reminded me of the 1856 *Punch* cartoon, already mentioned in the previous chapter, featuring a person admiring a private collection of stuffed specimens (see Figure 2.6). The drawing shows "Old Mr J—N—S" regarding what he thought was a stuffed cat, but, much to his "discomfiture" and surprise, the taxidermy rendition of the cat turns out to be a very much alive Great Horned Owl which, upset at being approached (the man had probably tried to stroke it), angrily attacks him. In our own time, contemporary

²⁴ Poliquin suggests, "Taxidermy exists because of life's inevitable trudge toward dissolution. Taxidermy wants to stop time" (7).

²⁵ See Connor 11.

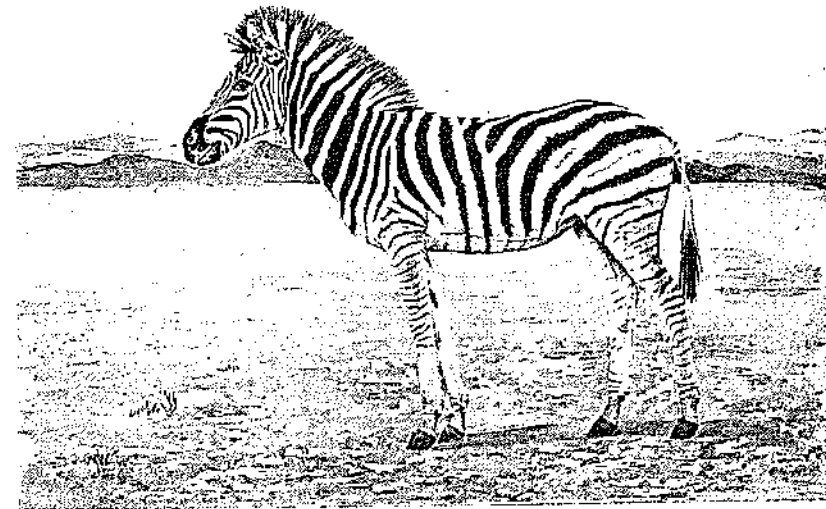


Figure 3.6 "The Specimen Completed"
Source: Rowley 1898.

artists working with the medium of taxidermy often play with this baffling, uncanny phenomenon, when the stuffed skin keeps one unbalanced between life and death. For example, a taxidermy piece entitled "I'm Dead 2007" by David Shrigley shows a stuffed kitten standing on its hind legs and holding a wooden sign or picket, which reads "I'm Dead." This ironic (perhaps, postmodern) announcement, of course, helps the observer avoid "Old Mr J—N—S's" dilemma and mocks the observer's attempts to navigate the visible confusion between life and death.

Skin and Accuracy in Taxidermy and Natural History Portraits

Because the Victorians invested so much in the force of skin, and by extension, the art of taxidermy, one cannot read far in the literature without being interrupted by people's disapproval of badly displayed or treated skins as well as their displeasure of hideously, distorted, and inaccurately mounted specimens. This criticism was not just reserved for the professionals, but also was part of the popular perception. An April 2, 1881 *Punch* cartoon "You have stuffed my parrot very badly" shows a disheartened and dissatisfied customer picking up her stuffed pet parrot from a taxidermist. Badly preserved, the specimen is already losing its feathers. This

specimen is an example of what the taxidermist and naturalist Charles Waterton critically referred to as “death in ragged plumage” (325).²⁶

Some of the art’s most vociferous critics were the taxidermists themselves who complained of “ragged moth-eaten old specimens ... stuffed by some incompetent hand” (Browne, *Artistic & Scientific Taxidermy* 12), “hideous” monkeys (Buckland 319),²⁷ or misshapen creatures, and even forgeries or falsehoods such as the time Du Chaillu was accused of painting a gorilla’s face to cover up a wretched skin.²⁸ Some even spoke of taxidermists as being nothing but “upholsterers.” Elizabeth Hornby was part of this culture. When visiting a museum in Santiago, she complained in a letter to her uncle: “The creature [Hucrnal?] is very badly stuffed indeed ... The other specimens of natural history were miserable. Viley stuffed & badly arranged” (October 25, 1850, 920 DER [13] 1/85/17). These accusations were often aired in public. *The Morning Chronicle* found fault with a stuffed tiger’s tongue.²⁹ And in at least four issues of the *Illustrated London News*,

²⁶ Charles Waterton knew that it was the natural tendency of all cured flesh to shrink; hence, specimens were often “withered, distorted, and too small.” He complained that “the feathers begin to drop off, and you have the hideous spectacle of death in ragged plumage” (325). Waterton (1782–1865) was a natural historian who traveled several times to South America. He was a highly skilled taxidermist who sometimes displayed an eccentric sense of humor by creating satirical tableaux of animals dressed as famous people.

²⁷ After Frank Buckland’s monkey “Jacko” died from bronchitis (Buckland had taken this monkey to Oxford with him and had been dismayed when it tore his notebooks), rather than turn him into a “hideous” stuffed monkey, he made his skin into a tablemat and mounted his skeleton (Buckland 319). Other taxidermists also registered their discontent with the art’s inaccuracies. Montagu Browne in his *Artistic & Scientific Taxidermy and Modelling* criticized an 1892 study of an owl exhibited at the Royal Academy: “the painting was simply perfect and learned—but the bird! A ragged moth-eaten old specimen stuffed by some incompetent hand” (12).

²⁸ Because of professional jealousies and because of the aura surrounding a gorilla specimen, people accused Du Chaillu of never actually seeing a gorilla. Bartlett’s *Life Among Wild Beasts* also wonders about Du Chaillu’s integrity. Referring to the gorilla in question, he recalls: “I, however, then and there convinced him that the blackness of the face was due to its having been painted black; finding I had detected what had been done, he at once admitted that he did paint it at the time he exhibited it in New York.” Bartlett continues: “The question that arose in my mind upon making this discovery was, did M. Du Chaillu kill the Gorilla and skin and preserve it? If so, he must recollect that the epidermis came off; supposing he did forget this, he must have been afterwards reminded of the fact when he had to paint the face to represent its natural condition. These facts (to which I had a witness) led me to doubt the truthfulness of M. Du Chaillu’s statement, and it occurred to me that he was not aware of the state of the skin, and probably had not prepared it himself” (*Life Among Wild Beasts* 254).

²⁹ A review of “The Colonial and Indian Exhibition,” in the *Morning Post* (April 22, 1886) complains: “the tigers nearest the entrance were ill-managed about the heads ... the tongues, thickly painted and exhibiting no papillae, being apparently made of slabs of some material, probably of clay ...”



“SI NON E VERO,” &c.

Old Lady. “OH, MR. HACKLES, YOU’VE STUFFED MY PARROT VERY BADLY! ALL THE FEATHERS ARE COMING OUT ALREADY!”

Taxidermist. “WHY, LOR’ BLESS YER, MUM, THAT’S THE PUFFECTION O’ STUFFIN’! YOU KNOW THE MOULTIN’ SEASON’S NOW A COMIN’ ON, MUM!!”

Figure 3.7 “Si Non E Vero Etc.”

Source: *Punch* 1881.

Waterton ardently campaigned against a piece of displayed taxidermy, which to his mind was no more than a grotesquely distorted, repulsive caricature of the real thing. In particular he blasted a stuffed peacock’s shriveled legs and toes, featured at the 1851 Great Exhibition. Waterton, indeed, believed that taxidermists should be trained to observe as carefully as an artist. Addressing his critics, he exclaimed: “Were you ... to pay as much attention to birds as the sculptor does to the human frame, you would immediately see, on entering a museum, that the specimens are not well done” (October 11, 1851: 14).

The reason why Victorians became outraged over a badly prepared and stuffed skin was because, as I have already suggested, so much—name, character, memory—depended upon its colors, markings, and texture. As a result, pet owners wanted their pets to look as they had when alive, but most of all, as discussed in the chapter on collecting, scientists relied upon skins, whether stuffed or not, in order to progress with their efforts to classify species. While field observations were crucial to distinguishing new species, and although scientists were increasingly examining what lay beneath the skin, the ultimate truth of animal order for many still rested on the surface as well as on the existence of at least one preserved specimen, a physical proof that was available for repeated observation and investigation. Collected in museums or private homes, these specimens functioned as works of reference. It was crucial to have a specimen as close to nature as possible.

Because of the importance of accuracy, natural historians were intent upon correcting false information perpetuated, for instance, by the stuffed walrus, still on display at the Horniman Museum (London) and first exhibited at the Colonial and India Exhibition in 1886.³⁰ In this case, because the taxidermist had never actually seen the live animal (the specimen itself had been brought back by the Victorian hunter James Henry Hubbard from Canada), he smoothed out its skin's distinguishing, idiosyncratic folds and wrinkles, and produced a false and "overstuffed" image.³¹

³⁰ The Horniman Museum is in South Forest, South London. The Museum was commissioned in 1898 and completed in 1901.

³¹ By extension, natural historians were upset that established or academy artists were perpetuating errors by using badly mounted specimens as models for their images of animals or birds; as Dr. Livingstone remarked, "painters generally make the lions' faces like old-women in night-caps" (Nott v). After attending an exhibit at the Royal Academy, Frank Buckland, one of the most committed of the Victorian naturalists, wrote that Painting No. 20 showed flying gulls over a heavy breaking sea, but he could not "tell of what species they are." Annoyed, he added, "There are plenty of cormorants and gulls at the Zoological, which would have done for models" (Bompas 267). Buckland also was outraged when he glanced at painting No. 50, "Fox Cubs": "Three heads peeping out of a hollow tree, but I wonder what they are standing upon inside the tree. Foxes' faces, especially cubs, are more difficult to paint than those of babies, the expressions of both are so varied. I never yet saw a fox's head stuffed properly, for the taxidermists generally put in *round* pupils to the eyes, like the eyes of dogs, not slit-like pupils like those in a cat's eyes" (Bompas 268). Some might have regarded Buckland's criticism to be an extension of his eccentric self, but it was not; indeed, it was mainstream, for the established journal *The Art Journal* in its August 1882 review of "Animal Painting at the Royal Academy" grumpily pointed out that in the painting "A Race for Life" the hooded crows pursuing a hare were ridiculous. They depicted "a stumpy or tail-less species not known to us" (254). The reviewer also protested:

It does not seem to occur to men who paint such pictures as these, that it would be well before starting to make themselves really acquainted with the bird's anatomy, and the way the feathers are massed over the various muscles of the body. They never, therefore, realize that the feathers always be in certain well-marked masses, corresponding in some degree to the muscles which they cover,

For the most part, this desire for accuracy concentrated upon the specimen's surface: the colors and contours of the animal's skin or the bird's feathers. Scientists and collectors, especially, were anxious that both taxidermists and illustrators—the intermediaries between the original and its image—exactly replicate the way the bird or animal looked in nature.³² They made a point of having these artists and craftsmen visit zoos/menageries or see the animal in the wild to record a specimen's exact coloring. Taxidermists and illustrators carried boxes of watercolors so as to make notes of the skin's colors before the feathers, fur, and skin faded after the specimen was shot. Among Lord Derby's letters is one, written in 1837, from a man in Aberdeen who, when sending a kiwi skin to the Earl, enclosed a sketch drawn from the living bird in New Zealand (at this point there was no live specimen in England). The correspondent explained that the drawing "may help with modeling the skin" (920 DER [13] 1/151/1A, National Museums Liverpool). Examples of such attention are plentiful. For instance, once Audubon had shot a bird in the field, he often nailed it to a tree in order to make a sketch on the spot and note the colors before the skin faded; John Gilbert, who worked for John Gould, tirelessly made notes on what he had just killed; and Lear spent endless hours not only sketching birds from life but also recording, in the margins of that sketch, the correct lay and colors of the feathers. The exoticism of these alien species was carried by these particulars in a manner similar to the way ethnographic portraits carefully attended to details of costume, personal appearance, and race. The focus on the details of a specimen's outer covering in natural history illustration is no different.

As the letter concerning the kiwi indicates, Lord Derby was among those who relied upon the truthful portrayal of skin if he were to realize his ambitions as a collector. In order to become familiar with and be able to recognize or name the new specimens that had come to his attention, Lord Derby depended heavily not only upon stuffed specimens but even more so upon natural history illustrations which correctly depicted a creature's outward markings. He purchased and commissioned original paintings, collected prints and watercolor sketches, and

and that the feathers of the wings are always in fixed numbers, varying slightly in different species, and lying one over the other with exact regularity; had they studied the subject they would never paint these parodies of birds. (254)

For Buckland and many like him, this transparent scientific likeness was primary.

³² Sometimes a completely accurate illustration was impossible. Robert McCracken Peck's remarks about natural history illustrators who prepared prints for constant reference among collectors speaks, however, of some speculation concerning the subject's actual appearance: "It was the artist's responsibility to bring them [the natural history subjects] back to life ... by fleshing out their emaciated corpses, reconstructing any missing parts, imagining the color of such fugitive parts as eyes and areas of exposed skin which change quickly after death, and, based on careful observations of related species, reanimating the subject with a typical posture, gesture, or pose" (19).



Figure 3.8 Drawing of Kiwi, 1839

Source: Courtesy of National Museums Liverpool. 920 DER (13) 1/151/A.

accumulated now rare hand-colored illustrated books for reference.³³ Educating himself so that he might recognize a species, during his earlier years he even copied some of these drawings. Later he commissioned artists, such as: Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins; Joseph Wolf, who spent two months at Knowsley and was known, like Lear, for placing special importance on the accurate and sensitive delineation of the surface of a bird; Richard Ansdell, an artist from Liverpool who painted a special portrait of "Old Billy," Lord Derby's favorite Red Deer stag;³⁴ and, as already mentioned, he hired Lear to record the exterior appearance of these creatures and fasten their identity.³⁵ For instance, before he sent a small and very rare water buffalo, which had lived in the menagerie, to the taxidermist, Lord Derby made sure that an artist "properly" recorded its appearance on the day the animal died (Fisher 85). The illustration stabilized the instability of skin,

³³ For an essay on the 13th Earl of Derby's collection see Clemency Fisher and Christine E. Jackson's essay "The 13th Earl of Derby as a Scientist" in *A Passion for Natural History* (Fisher 45–50).

³⁴ To learn more about "Old Billy," see Fisher 91.

³⁵ To keep an accurate record of the animals and birds in his menagerie, in 1850 the Earl of Derby privately printed his *Gleanings from the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley Hall*. In the "Preface" to the volume, John Gray wrote: "The following plates are selected from the series of Drawings of Ungulated Quadrupeds made by Mr. Waterhouse Hawkins for the Right Honourable the Earl of Derby, chiefly from the animals living in his Lordship's Menagerie at Knowsley Hall. They have been lithographed by Mr. W. Hawkins, and coloured, or printed in colours, under his superintendence" ("Preface" 1850). Earlier, Lear had done all the illustrations for an 1846 edition of *Gleanings from the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley Hall*.

the crucial medium to life, which could shrivel up and lose color, texture, and shape. The resulting drawings are in the Library at Knowsley Hall and so too is Lord Derby's extensive collection of natural history drawings and paintings. They are perfect examples of Woodall's point that "realism and truth" are "central to nineteenth-century portraiture" (5).

Because scientists and serious amateurs were often dependent upon illustrations, the London Zoological Society and Gardens, as well as many other zoos, commissioned watercolors of its most interesting specimens for its publications, and, from time to time, mounted exhibits of these portraits for the public to view. (For instance, in 1865 a gallery at the London Zoo was devoted to Joseph Wolf's watercolor drawings.) The Zoo also illustrated its "Proceedings" and "Transactions" with commissioned watercolors of its captives. And notably, John Ruskin, in his attempts to educate the people of Sheffield, hung illustrations of birds and animals by Gould, Audubon, and Lear in the rooms of his Museum.³⁶ For most scientists and collectors, photography, when it became an option in the 1850s, was initially a poor substitute for a drawing or a painting. Photographs did not necessarily guarantee what Woodall in her study of portraiture considers "an inherent, objective, visual relationship between the image and the living world" (6). To begin with a photograph did not capture color; it did not replicate texture, nor did it allow the viewer minutely to understand the lay of a bird's plumage (if one looks at older photographs, the exterior of a bird is blurred, approximate).³⁷ It was only later that people preferred to use photographs because of the medium's increasing ability to record movement as well as microscopic detail.

Part Two: Edward Lear and Natural History Illustration

When Lear was at Knowsley Hall, or even earlier at the London Zoological Gardens, and working for Gould, he would have examined numerous examples of these natural history illustrations and possibly watched taxidermists at work.³⁸

³⁶ For a virtual tour of Ruskin's Walkley Museum, Sheffield, go to: <http://www.ruskinatwalkley.org>.

³⁷ John C. Edwards in "The Value of Old Photographs of Zoological Collections" wonders: "we must ask why nineteenth-century zoos made so very little use of photography. The first photographs ever taken in a zoo were almost certainly those taken by the Count of Montizón at the London Zoo in the summer of 1852. The photos were exhibited at the Royal Society of Arts in December of that year where they were admired by Queen Victoria. Montizón's reason for working at the London Zoo seems to have been to display his skill as a photographer, rather than to record the appearance of the animals" (Hoage and Deiss 145).

³⁸ Lear was commissioned by Thomas Bell, dental surgeon at Guy's Hospital and professor of Zoology at King's College, London to do the illustrations for *The Zoology of the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle*, for Sir William Jardine and Prideaux John Selby's *Illustrations of Ornithology* as well as Jardine's *Naturalists Library*, and for John and Elizabeth Gould's

Conscious of the criticism of poorly mounted and represented skins as well as the defective drawings based upon them, Lear paid extraordinary attention to the skins or surfaces of his subjects. He was well aware of how damaging an erroneous image could be to a correct understanding of a particular species. He belonged to a culture that translated surface into cultural knowledge. For instance, during his early association with Knowsley, Lear sent Lord Derby a drawing of an "Emys Ornata" [?]³⁹—Lear's script is difficult to read here. Because the creature had recently died, Lear had not been able to render a sketch from life, but had been required to borrow an earlier illustration. The letter's apology for this fact significantly reveals not only Lear's anxiety that the illustration might be flawed but also his acute awareness of the requirement that this portrait be true to life:

I have taken the liberty of sending the accompanying drawing of which I beg your Lordship's acceptance. It is a coloured lithograph of Emys Ornata/young/ a specimen which your Lordship wished me to figure from a specimen then living at the Gardens [the London Zoological Gardens]:—since, however, the animal died before I was able to sketch it, I thought it might please your Lordship to have a drawing of it—though only in Lithography, so I have accordingly procured the accompanying plate from Mr Bell's work. ([64 C/1], November 27, 1833, The Derby Collection, Knowsley Hall)

Although Lear had no aspirations in the field of science and sometimes grew impatient with the squabbles over the identification of skins, his willingness to attend to the minutest details of an animal's hide or a bird's feathers supported the study of natural history.³⁹ Though he never practiced taxidermy (or even learned the art), he went to extraordinary lengths through his watercolor drawings to render an exact replica of his subject. Beginning with his early work as a medical illustrator, rendering morbid disease drawings for hospitals and surgeons, Lear was sensitive to the need to represent skin (and, therefore, the manifestation of a disease) as accurately as possible if identification or diagnosis were to be possible.⁴⁰ His natural history sketches display the same sort of diligence and commitment.

Birds of Europe. He labored on these various commissions as well as on his own portfolio *Sketches of Animals in the Zoological Gardens* and his privately printed *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots* (begun 1829).

³⁹ "Unlike Gould, Lear had no credentials or even aspirations in the field of science. With the help of others, he did his best to identify the birds he painted with common and scientific names, but even these sometimes proved inaccurate because so little was known about the birds he was depicting" (Peck 32).

⁴⁰ "I began to draw for bread and cheese, about 1827," he recalled late in life, "but only did uncommon queer shop-sketches—selling them for a price varying from ninepence to four shillings: colouring prints, screens, fans; awhile making morbid disease drawings for hospitals and certain doctors of physic" (as quoted in Peck 3).

On December 17, 1834, Lear wrote to Lord Derby about his efforts to capture an exact likeness of the manges opossum's fur:

My Lord, As I understand your Lordship is not expected in town until March, I have sent down the drawing of Manges Opossum, the skins of British mammalia [sic] I did not think there was any necessity for sending—& I have left them at your Lordship's house in Grosvenor Square. I hope the drawing of the Opossum will give you pleasure: I have taken a great deal of pains with it, & from having worked at Opossum a good deal lately, I trust your Lordship will think that I [have] been able to imitate the fur more nearly. ([64 C/2], December 17, 1834, The Derby Collection, Knowsley Hall)

Painfully wanting to capture the most precise image of an animal's or bird's skin as possible, Lear preferred to use living specimens rather than rely upon badly stuffed examples or flawed illustrations. When he could, Lear observed those specimens, which were still fluttering in their cages or trotting around Lord Derby's estate.⁴¹ If none was available, he worked carefully from reliably mounted skins. For instance, he executed his watercolor of Lord Derby's woolly opossum, dated March 18, 1834, from a credible specimen,⁴² and in August 1836 painted a watercolor of a woodchuck from a stuffed skin displayed in the Knowsley Menagerie Museum (Fisher 112).

The color notations as well as penciled notes in Lear's preliminary sketches are but one indication of his assiduous attention to the almost invisible, yet telling, details of a creature's exterior or surface. Surrounding his study of the rock hyrax, for example, are observations concerning the way this animal's hair falls "softly over the toes," as well as comments on the appearance of the rough ochre hair around its mouth, the "fringe of browner ochre lines" above the toes on the right leg, and the creases on the creature's paw.⁴³ Similar marginalia inform other studies. Lear's 1831 preparatory sketch of the red and yellow macaw, for example, displays dabs of possible colors, done in pastels or vivid hues—all dedicated to representing the appearance, especially its feathers, as accurately as possible. The result of such attentiveness is that Lear's natural history illustrations, such as "The Spectacled Owl," almost offer the viewer an exaggerated version of the real thing.⁴⁴ Because the image stands verbatim before its viewer, there can be no confusion, as there had

⁴¹ Sometimes he required the assistance of an interested keeper to help him keep a bird still so he could measure its various parts.

⁴² Clemency Fisher states: "There is no evidence that the animal was ever alive in the Knowsley Menagerie" (130).

⁴³ For a reproduction of this sketch, see *Harvard Library Bulletin* 22.2–3 (Summer–Fall 2011): 133, fig. 34. Richard Owen did an autopsy on the animal after it died. Before this animal died, it was considered to be of sufficient rarity and so was exhibited at the London Zoological Gardens from 1828 to 1863.

⁴⁴ For a reproduction of "The Spectacled Owl," see Susan Hyman's *Edward Lear's Birds* 83.

been for *Punch's* "Old Mr. J—N—S" between a stuffed cat and a live owl (see Figure 2.6). The studied density of Lear's magnified precision allowed for no such error.

Under the Skin

Significantly, however, Lear's extraordinarily precise rendition of a bird's feathers or a mammal's fur in these portraits is not what necessarily distinguishes his watercolors and prints from those executed by other illustrators, who often worked as diligently as he to perfect these details. Rather, what makes Lear's illustrations valuable, if not endearing, is the fact that through his subject's posture and eyes, he permits, from time to time, a subtle glimpse of something vibrantly alive "under the skin" or inherent within the dense details of the subject's fur or feathers. An attitude or an expression of individuality comes through the opaque density of these minutely rendered particulars and removes the subject from being simply an exemplum of its species. No longer is it "a mere piece of property" (Freeland 32)—as the children's rhinoceros becomes in "The Story of the Four Little Children." For instance, Lear's "The Red and Yellow Macaw" defiantly turns its head toward the observer (one almost sees the twisting of its neck), as if responding to the artist's gaze; the pleading direct glance of the "Bay-headed parrot," from *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae, or Parrots*, and the mocking glance of the "Spectacled Owl" also engage the viewer, and suggest that more is at play than the carefully rendered lay of their feathers. In these illustrations, and many like them, Lear and his subject seem to be conversing with one another; moreover, his subject seems to be consciously posing. Its position is not one superimposed, so to speak, by the portraitist. In this manner, these watercolors/prints compromise, if not defy, the conventional animal portraits in which there is no looking back and, therefore, no negotiation. No longer is the subject present only to be stared at.⁴⁵

In this sense, Lear's natural history illustrations challenge Cynthia Freeland's assertion that it is impossible to render portraits of animals. In her *Portraits and Persons*, she asks the question: "Can there be portraits of animals?" and answers in the negative because, from her perspective, "portraiture involves an act of posing or self-representation" (17). I suggest, however, that in Lear's work, animals seem almost to pose or bargain with the artist concerning how they will be represented. A transaction between the artist and animal becomes a possibility, for both bird and artist do appear mutually to be conscious of one another. They give the impression of being equally involved. Lear's portraits of animals and birds are truly proof of contact.

Because of this "contact," it is no wonder that when John E. Gray, curator of the British Museum, wrote to Lord Derby concerning the proposed publication of *Gleanings From the Menagerie and Aviary at Knowsley Hall*. Gray adamantly favored Lear's watercolors, for their vitality and grace as well as for their "very accurate representations of living specimens" ("Preface" 1846 edition). He wrote

⁴⁵ Although it is often written that Joseph Wolf was the most distinguished of the bird illustrators, his drawings rarely intimate an existence beneath the skin.

to Lord Derby: "I have been considering with care the drawings you have sent up to me. The Drawings of Lear are in such a different style, & so superior in artistic style to those of Mr. Hawkins [Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins] that I think they should hardly be mixed with his ... 30 very useful & beautiful Plates might be selected from Lear's [*sic*], which would be most useful to Scientific Man" (December 14, 1840, National Museums Liverpool).

Part Three: The Reversals and Revenge of Nonsense

When one turns to Lear's nonsense drawings after glancing at his commissioned illustrations, the subjective and implied communion between observer and creature becomes even more explicit. In his limericks, for instance, the Raven and the Old Man of Whitehaven literally exchange delightful glances, imitate each other's movements, and dance in synchronized rhythm; similarly, the Old Man and the owl imbibe ale together while sitting on a fence in a parallel posture, as if animal and human have spontaneously, but consciously, negotiated some sort of understanding. Released from the restrictions and expectations of convention associated with natural history illustration, in these nonsense sketches Lear revives the subjective life inherent in the skin of an animal or a bird, and, thereby, rebuffs the colonial's and the collector's commanding gaze upon the skin's surface. Through his nonsense, Lear momentarily liberates portraiture as well as his subjects from the prerogatives of classification, ownership, and commodity.

The Nonsense

From time to time critics have recognized that Lear's nonsense drawings, especially those initially written or sketched to entertain Lord Derby's extended family, are indebted to his immersion in the Knowsley culture and his professional commitment to natural history illustration. Clemency Fisher, for instance, comments that in the cartoon accompanying "The Pelican Chorus," both the pelican and the composite bird "with the upper half Blue Heron and lower half Stanley Crane" were based upon live specimens inhabiting the Knowsley Menagerie (120).⁴⁶ Inevitably, his other work as a naturalist crept into his nonsense. It is therefore not unusual to see the storks, parrots, and owls of his studies transformed into nonsensical caricatures. The "Black Stork" which Lear rendered for Gould's *The Birds of Europe* (V.4) finds its way into the illustrations accompanying "There was an Old Man of Dumblanc" and eventually into *A History of Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-Popple*. These transformations are often acknowledged. What is not necessarily documented or discussed, however, is that when dashing off his nonsense drawings, Lear turned

⁴⁶ A cursory glance through *A Book of Nonsense* and its various sequels reveals the cranes, the owls, the pelicans, the apes, the zebras, and the crocodiles, which were all part of the menagerie culture surrounding Lear.

his natural history assignments upside down in order to empty the commissioned illustrations of the suffocating details that take the life out of the portrait. His subjects can once more breathe and more fully realize the life residing within their skins. In a sense, his nonsense *unstuffs* the specimens standing either in the museums, preserved by taxidermy, or hanging on the walls of the Zoological Society.

When drawing his nonsense, Lear showed absolutely no interest in including the painstaking details of his commissioned work—those surface particulars that scientists and collectors felt were necessary to name, identify, classify, own, and control a species. In his nonsense sketches, Lear deliberately emptied his meticulous studies of birds and animals of every vigilantly rendered feather or mark, and left merely an effortless fluid outline of his subject. Through these inversions, Lear created a certain spontaneity, which he understandably could not afford to let dominate his commissioned pieces. To experience this difference, compare, for instance, the watercolor of his painstakingly detailed “Spectacled Owl” with the hastily and casually sketched owls sitting in the nest with the depressing “Old Person of Crowle,” and place the same natural history illustration either next to the owls perched on a railing while being taught to drink tea (“There was an Old Man of Dumbree”) or beside the owl sitting on the fence with the old man (“There was an Old Man with an Owl”).

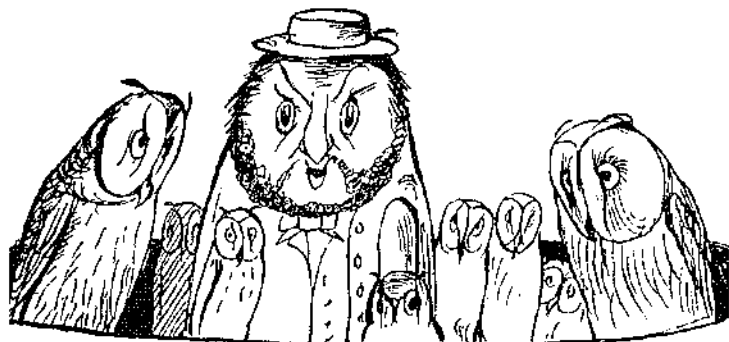


Figure 3.9 Lear’s “Old Person of Crowle”
Source: *More Nonsense, Pictures, Rhymes, Botany, Etc.* 1872.

Metamorphosed into nonsense, the “Spectacled Owl,” which had formerly filled the illustrated page with the density of its skin’s particulars, is now reduced to an inscribed outline. The carefully rendered details have receded into an approximation and gathered into simplified lines. In a way, the resulting inscribed image suggests the indelible impression left just underneath the surface of Lear’s own psyche or buried within the skin by the intense demands of his immersion in the natural history culture. Like the tattoos once worn by the sailors, on display at the Wellcome Institute, these cartoons register the lasting

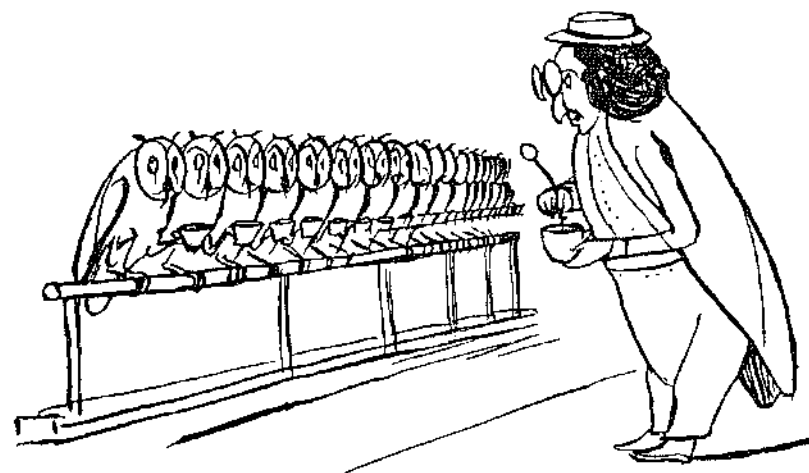


Figure 3.10 Lear’s “There was an Old Man of Dumbree”
Source: *More Nonsense, Pictures, Rhymes, Botany, Etc.* 1872.

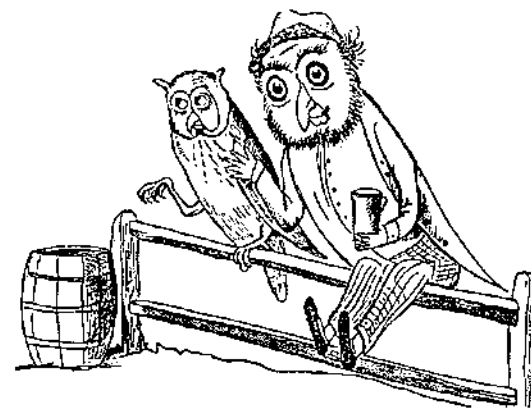


Figure 3.11 Lear’s “There was an Old Man with an Owl”
Source: *The Book of Nonsense.* 1915.

influence of time, place, and work. They carry a memory of the labor associated with pieces such as the “Spectacled Owl,” in a manner which reminds one, admittedly in a rather tentative way, of the permanent blue lines once staining the skins of coal miners. These lines were witnesses to these men’s labor. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* George Orwell talks about the coal dust, which lodged in the creases of the miners’ skin, and left indelible lines no matter how often these people scrubbed their faces and backs.

The Reversals

Released from the densely particularized envelope which scientists and collectors relied upon to define and limit their identity, the creatures frolic on a frameless page and reveal the energy dormant within their skins.⁴⁷ Liberated from the required and suffocating details, their skins can once more breathe; consequently, Lear's natural history subjects are now able to dance a quadrille, to leap, to rebel against being "civilized" by being taught to drink tea, to seize a man's nose, or to sit on an old man's nose as well as a young lady's bonnet. No longer are the owls, the parrots, the zebras, the ravens, and the Barbary apes captives of the critical imperial gaze. (I like to think that Lear, through his nonsense, could have actualized the dormant life inherent in the stuffed Zebra's skin that I saw in the Zoology Museum at Cambridge University.) No longer are they static commodities, official representatives of a species, passively waiting to be stared at or studied; instead, they themselves are the ones who look and move as conscious, liberated beings. In "There was an Old Person of Crowle," for example, all the owls turn to look disapprovingly at the depressing old man who sits in their nest (and screams out with the rest). The colonial gaze is reversed; the tables are turned. Instead of being the victim of such scrutiny, the bird, ridiculing the imperialistic notions of observation, now stares back and gravely focuses on the person. Lear's drawings consciously react to the reality which John Berger was much later to recognize: that "Animals are always observed ... They are the object of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them" (Berger 14).

With the loss of the imperialistic gaze, Lear also topples the colonial's mistaken sense of his own importance and superiority. He mocks what he was seeing while working with ornithologists, zoologists, collectors, keepers, hunters, breeders, and exhibitors. He turns their myth of superiority upside down. For instance, the Old Man who said "Hush!" looks at a bird and has no choice but unconsciously to mirror it. He is not its better; he is just like what he is observing. Indeed, he sits in the nest with the bird. Similarly, the old man of Dover looks like the bees which pursue him. He cannot outstep either their image or their sting; he is the one preyed upon. And the old person of Nice who associates with geese as well as the old man of El Hums who lives on nothing but crumbs must suffer the "tolerant" or amused glances of the birds these so-called superior figures unknowingly imitate. As always with Lear, the birds possess the controlling eye. They, like the bird in the bush, stare right back in a manner that recalls a preparatory pencil sketch of an unidentified parrot in which the bird gazes disapprovingly at a stout man who stands face to face before the bird.

⁴⁷ Lear seems to have tucked his nonsense into parts of the day not connected to the labor accompanying sunlight; he often squeezed it into the corners of his correspondence and of the pages of his diaries. (Colley, "Edward Lear's Limericks and the Reversals of Nonsense" 286.)

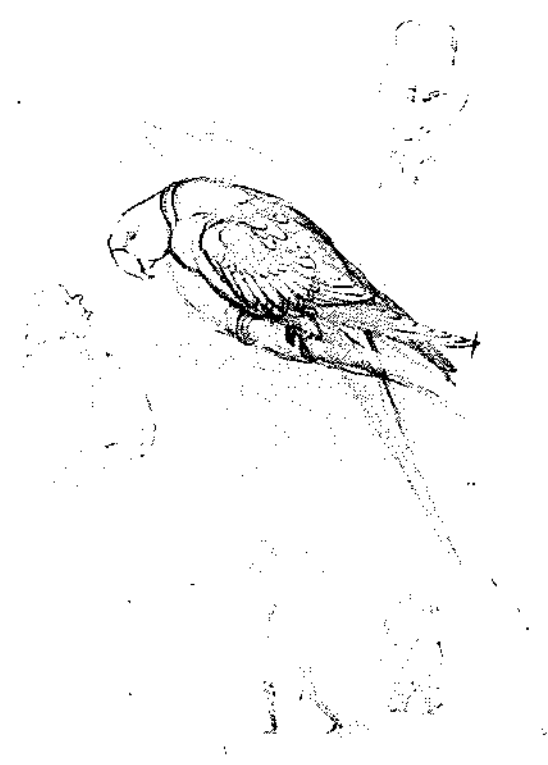


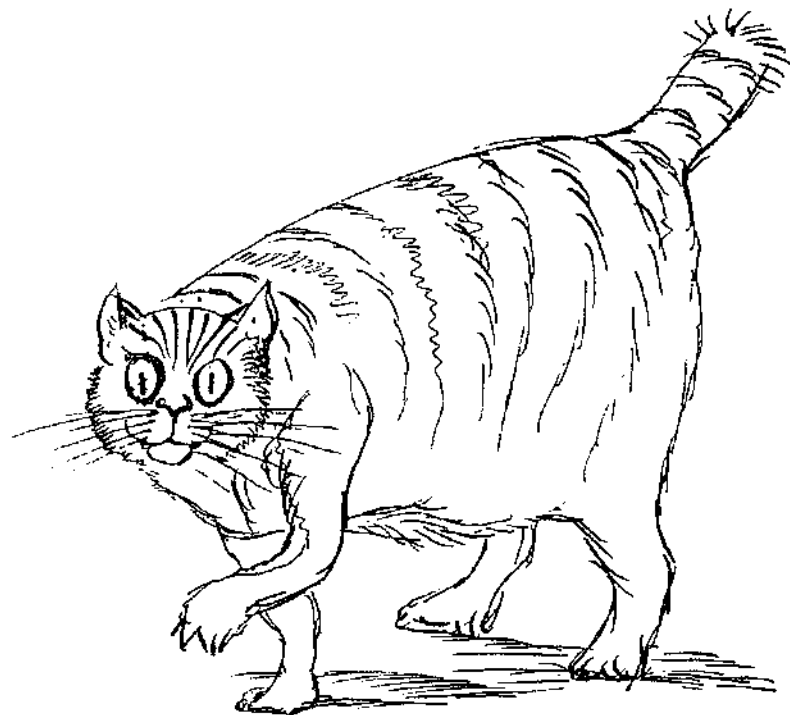
Figure 3.12 Sketch of unidentified parrot by Edward Lear
Source: Houghton Library, Harvard University.

In a sense these reversals, which put the colonial and collector "in their place," express Lear's impatience and discomfort with the imperative to colonize and order the animal world. Though Lear was friends with those responsible for collecting, organizing, and enclosing exotic species, and even enamored with or dependent upon them himself, he stood on the boundaries of that culture and longed for a time when creatures were not colonized or objectified but, instead, enjoyed a more harmonious, symbiotic relationship with humankind.⁴⁸ Feeling marginalized (did he belong at the housekeeper's or his Lordship's table?) by those who had advantages as well as by his epilepsy, not to mention his sense

⁴⁸ In addition to his dependency upon people such as the Earl of Derby, throughout his life Lear's acquaintances and closest friends (significantly, they were also his patrons who supported his painting and travels) were those administering the various British protectorates. Clearly Lear was capable of subscribing to the colonial system and its prejudices against the non-English. For instance when feeling uncomfortable, he could register his disgust with such figures as "a big, horrid, vulgar, ill-dressed, gross blacky Indian" or speak of "filthy Arab savages" (Colley, "Edward Lear's Anti-Colonial Bestiary" 110).

that people, according to his own words, found him “ill-tempered and queer” (“How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear”), Lear consequently discovered a pleasant and relatively safe companionship with animals. His celebrated attachment to Foss, his cat, is an example. The numerous drawings of him and Foss stepping in an ironic union are, perhaps, testimony enough.

He identified with animals. Often in his self-deprecatory portraits, he depicted himself as a rather stout bird with stubby wings. On other occasions he used animals to portray his state of mind. In the late 1830s, for example, when



PHOS.

Edward Lear
15th July, 1895

Figure 3.13 Sketch of Phos By Edward Lear
Source: Houghton Library, Harvard University.

he arrived in Italy to study landscape painting, he exclaimed, “I am extremely happy—as the hedgehog said when he rolled himself through a thistlebrush” (Noakes 58). In addition, Lear was fond of referring to himself as an animal. When he was working on his parrot studies, he proclaimed, “for the last 12 months I have so moved—thought—looked at,—& existed among Parrots—that should any transmigration take place at my decease I am sure my soul would be very uncomfortable if anything but one of the Psittacidae” (Noakes 33). Ideally Lear would have preferred a more fraternal partnership between man and animal. His drawings of the old man of the Border dancing with his cat or the old man in the tree who contentedly allows the birds to pluck his long hair for their nests are part of this desired symbiosis in which man and animal are in harmony.



Figure 3.14 Edward Lear’s “There was an Old Man on the Border”

Moreover, as his nonsense obviously testifies, Lear was sometimes uncomfortable with the scrutiny, classification, and implicit authority to which a creature was subject, so he ridiculed imperialistic notions of ownership and observation. He enjoyed poking fun at the rage to classify and, thus, control the natural world. His nonsense botany, in which, for instance, he identifies the “Manypeeplia Upsidownia” and draws people like petals hanging upside down on a stem, as well as his sets of Coloured Birds (“The Dark Blue Bird,” “The Pink Bird,” and “The Light Green Bird”), illustrated for a child he knew in Corfu (Mary de Vere), are examples of how he relished unsettling the order of things.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ One of the most endearing pieces of zoology is his “Portraits of the inditchenous becstes of New Olland” (1838), which shows Lear’s humorous sketches of animals he and John Gould saw in Rotterdam, Berne, Berlin, and Amsterdam, either in 1828 or 1830.

Conclusion

Clearly, “The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World,” discussed in the chapter’s opening is one instance of this critique of such colonial practices. The rhinoceros’s fate is a reflection of Lear’s discomfort that in the end an exotic creature is nothing but a utilitarian skin, figuratively transformed into a doorstep and made into an emblem of England’s dominion over remote territories and nations. The story represents Lear’s own ambiguity when sketching at the London Zoological Gardens, accompanying John Gould on his visits to zoos, and studying the animals inhabiting the Knowsley Hall Menagerie. Uncomfortable with the scientific and imperialistic practices of caging, classifying, and turning these animals into commodities, in his illustrations he yearned to revive the life residing within his subjects’ skins by ridding them of the suffocating details required by his commissions. He wanted to restore their intimacy and character. And, as in the case of the rhinoceros as well as other taxidermy specimens, he desired to take out the stuffing and let the skin once more recover the texture of its life and breath. In his nonsense, he makes explicit his desire to create another kind of portrait from those done to satisfy collectors and scientists—portraits that do not depend upon the stranglehold of particulars but, rather, acknowledge the intimacy of life inherent in skin.

Chapter 4

Touch: Reaching through the Bars

To make the sight as true as touch
William Hazlitt, “The Indian Jugglers”

Introduction: Reaching through the Bars

Nineteenth-century descriptions of Victorian British zoological gardens and menageries are remarkable for their multiple accounts depicting the public’s eagerness to reach through the bars or wire mesh of cages so as to be able to touch or “caress” the enclosed creatures. (These nineteenth-century texts are fond of choosing the word “caress” to portray this activity.) Desiring to stroke, pat, embrace, and fondle these exotic animals, children and adults introduced their hands into the dens so as to sense the animal’s hide brushing up against their fingers or to feel the lick of the creature’s tongue.¹ The 1829 *Picturesque Guide through the Regent’s Park*, for instance, describes three young wolves who “have been seen to lick the hand of a visitor and fawn like dogs” (50), and *The Pictorial Museum of Animated Nature* (1843–1845) mentions a lion seen “licking a man’s hand” (1: 24). Drawings and photographs from the period frequently capture these encounters—indeed, it is striking just how often these moments are featured in nineteenth-century pictorial representations of zoos.² One turn-of-the-century postcard, for instance, shows a person reaching his or her hand through the bars in order to have contact with a rhinoceros. In this image, the reaching hand is as prominent as the animal’s open jaws. (One wonders what will happen next.)

¹ The impulse to touch the wild is still alive and well. Recently while visiting the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, I watched and listened to adults and children asking to “touch” a live tawny owl on display in a special exhibit. Longingly, the public extended their hands toward this owl, which was attached to a keeper’s wrist. I also participated in this desire when, on a trip to South Africa, I stood somewhat self-consciously, yet excitedly, in a queue of tourists so that I could place my hands on the back of a cheetah, stroke it, and have my photograph taken while doing this. In this respect, it is also interesting to be reminded of a July 10, 2013 article in *The New York Times*, “Step Right Up, Kids, the Tiger Will Look Good in Your Photo,” in which the reporter, Andrew E. Kramer, talks about the Nikulin Circus in Moscow where children are photographed (with their parents’ permission) sitting right up next to and with their hands on one of the circus’s tigers.

² Few modern keepers can suppress a shudder when they are shown photographs of children embracing, for instance, a sub-adult male chimpanzee in the children’s zoo at the London Zoo. These keepers are well aware of the fact that this animal is capable of ripping them limb from limb.

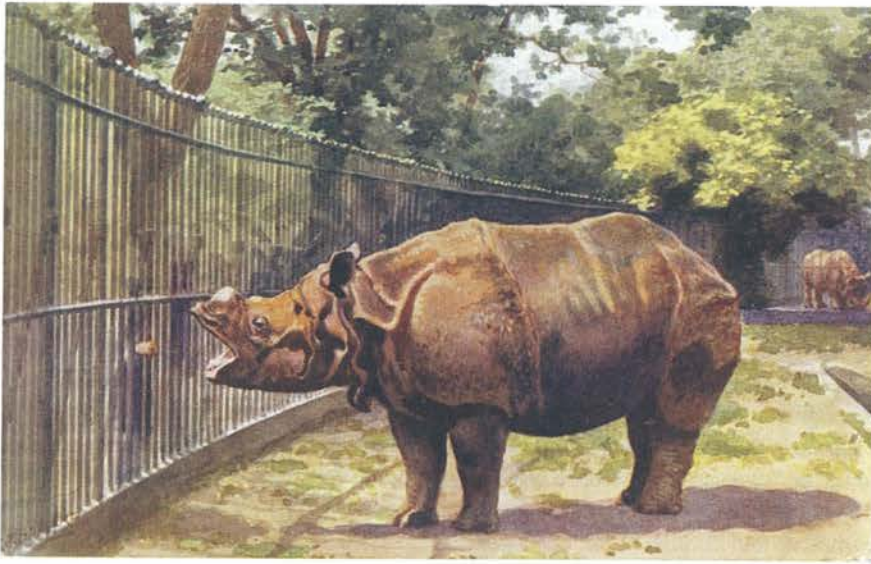


Plate 1 "Rhinoceros, Zoological Gardens, London"

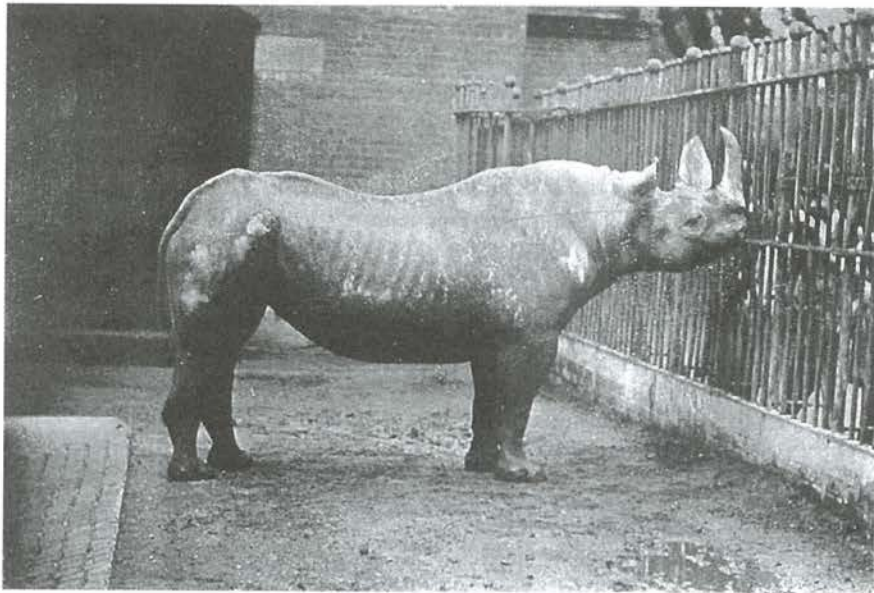


Figure 4.1 "Child extending hand through bars of rhinoceros enclosure"
Source: Nott 1886.

A photograph taken around the same time shows a child's hand nuzzling a rhinoceros, and in yet another picture (this time an earlier nineteenth-century drawing), a woman bends down so that she might put her fingers through the beaver's enclosure and stroke the creature's fur. Within the context of the zoo, there were additional opportunities for touching when keepers took young lions, tigers, and apes for walks through the zoo grounds so that children could pet and play with them. Elephant and camel rides through the grounds also encouraged visitors to fondle yet more of the zoo's inhabitants.

Notable too are the numerous anecdotes about zoo employees who habitually stroked their exotic captives. These narratives emphasize the animal's pleasurable reaction to their keeper's touch. They speak of the bear who affectionately responded to its keeper's "caresses"; the lemur who was always pleased to be stroked; the hippo who loved to be scratched; a young lion who evinced pleasure at being repeatedly petted; the tigers who delighted in being tickled and rubbed; the giraffe who bent its head down to caress his keeper; and the hyena who "suffers himself to be caressed" (Blunt 102).³ A drawing of "Moti [the leopard] and Its Keeper" and a photograph of an employee stroking a tapir at the London Zoological Gardens illustrate these seemingly gratifying encounters. These moments and these images vicariously register the public's desire to touch these exotics.

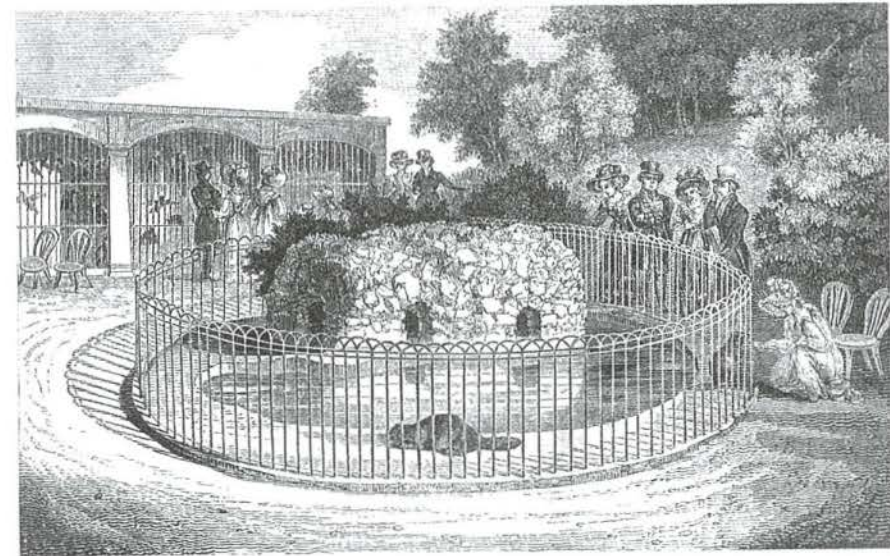


Figure 4.2 Beaver Enclosure
Source: *Zoological Keepsake* 1830.

³ There are also sentimental accounts of this touching. One is about a chimpanzee who put her arms round the director's neck, placidly kissed him three times, stretched out her hand to him, and died.



Plate 2 "Camel Ride"



Copyright.

Photo by F. W. Boud.

NO. 3. BEST OF FRIENDS—HIPPOPOTAMUS AND KEEPER

Figure 4.3 "Best of Friends—Hippopotamus and Keeper"



Figure 4.4 "Moti and its Keeper"

Source: Scherren, *Walks and Talks in the Zoo* 1901

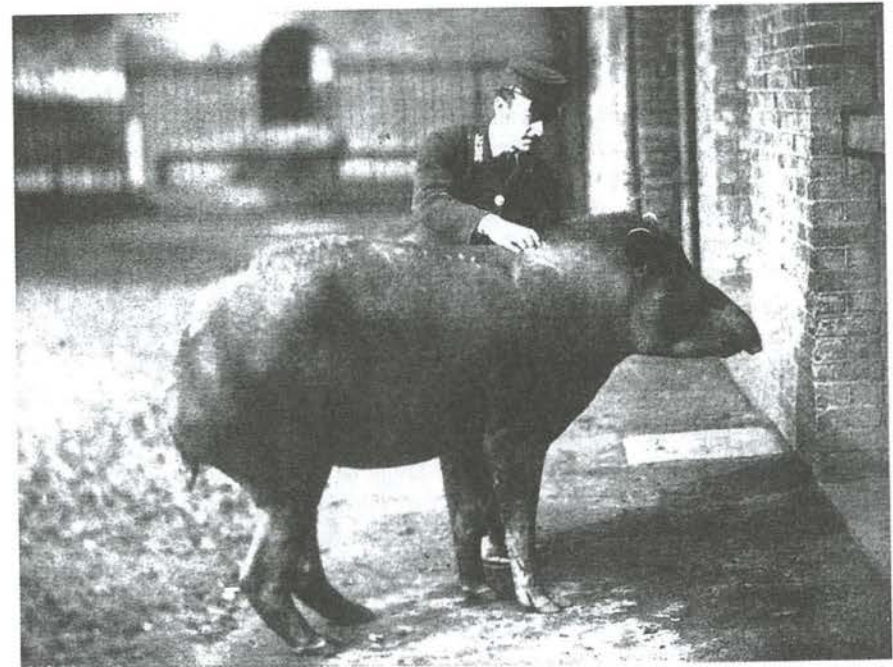


Figure 4.5 "Keeper Stroking Tapir"

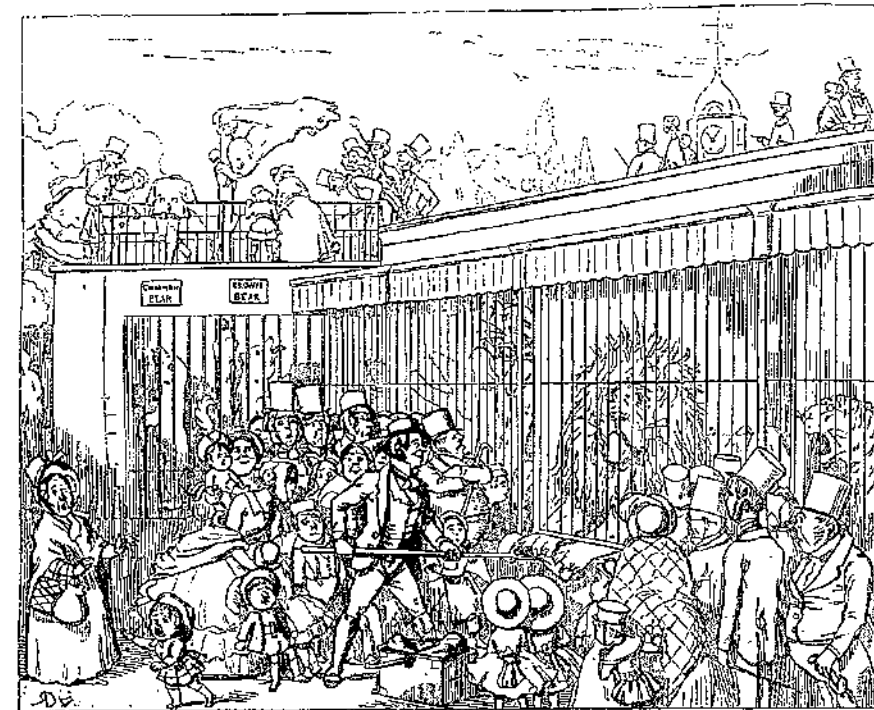
Source: Nott 1886.

With all the transporting of animals, zoos were, of course, not the only venue for these encounters. Captured animals being transported on vessels from foreign ports to England (an experience already discussed in Chapter 2) also inevitably offered opportunities. As one can imagine, these captives were in an awkward and close proximity to both crew and passengers. George Catlin's narrative of his 1839 trip on board a packet-ship, the *Roscius*, from New York to Liverpool (*Adventures of the Ojibbeway and Ioway Indians in England, France, and Belgium*) contains a vividly disturbing example. Catlin had brought with him not only eight tons of crates containing Native American artifacts for an exhibit at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly but also two grizzly bears, which he planned to display throughout Europe. He kept these poor creatures in "a huge iron cage," above deck (1: 2). Unfortunately, the voyage was unusually turbulent. The bears had a terrible time of it; "howling," "bellowing," "growling," and "raging," they were sick, lonely, and miserable (1: 2-5). (Once placed on a train in Liverpool, they continued to howl all the way to Euston Station.) To add to their distress, these grizzlies were subject to the crew's attempts to "caress" and shake hands with them. During their leisure hours, the crew frequently entertained passengers by encouraging the bears to extend their "arms" through the bars so these travelers could finger and grasp the creatures' fur.

Not surprisingly, this contact was not always endearing. In the case of Catlin's grizzly bears the result was, at least on one occasion, disastrous. One of the bears extended her "arm" right through the enclosure's iron railings and "made a side-lick" at the sailor's head. The result was, as Catlin graphically relates, that "one of her claws carried away entirely his nose, leaving it fallen down and hanging over his mouth, suspended merely by a small piece of skin or gristle by which alone he could claim it" (1: 5). As can be expected, similar consequences also awaited those who, motivated by the desire to touch the animal's skin, intermittently reached into zoo enclosures. Loss of life, mutilated limbs, ripped clothing (there were often complaints from "ladies" who had their dresses torn in the monkey house), and lost thumbs or fingers were not an uncommon consequence for visitors to zoological parks. For instance, in August 1861, a woman lost a "thumb and finger of her right hand when bitten by a young wolf," and a nine-year-old boy was badly mauled by a leopard (Blunt 206). These calamities resulted in severe warnings cautioning visitors about the pecculating propensities of the monkeys, as well as notices "respectfully" directing the public "not to touch any of the animals" (Scherren, *The Zoological Society of London* 57). Alarming headlines in the press, complete with graphic pictures, told about "frightful" occurrences in which, for instance, a visitor had been seized by a bear, an employee's arm had been mangled by a tiger (the man was removed with difficulty from the tiger's jaws), and a wolf had bitten off the arm of a little boy who "had taken much pains to introduce it through the bars" (*The Zoological Keepsake* 4). As one late Victorian commentator remarked, "The impudence of caressing wild animals often carries the punishment with it" (*Picturesque Guide through the Regent's Park with Accurate Descriptions* 56).

At times, the touching of these exotic creatures was aggressive, for, as is well documented, visitors also poked their umbrellas, sticks, and whips through the cage openings so as to excite, irritate, or catch the enclosed creature's attention. (There was even a craze of carving one's name on the rump of the rhinoceros.) As a result zoos also had repeatedly to caution the public "against irritating any of the animals, or imprudently venturing on their docility" (*Picturesque Guide through the Regent's Park* 56). At Belle Vue Zoo in Manchester, keepers had the authority "to remove at once ... any person found annoying, teasing, irritating, or injuring the animals in any way" (*Guide, Belle Vue Archive, Chetham's Library*). An 1849 cartoon from *Punch* humorously criticizes this irresponsible recreational behavior. The drawing, "A Prospect of Ye Zoological Societye: Its Gardens," not only shows the crowds pressing up against the cages but also shoving stuff through the bars, poking at the monkeys with the points of parasols, and gleefully annoying the enclosed creatures.

MANNERS AND CUSTOMS OF THE ENGLISH IN 1849. No 35.



A PROSPECT OF YE ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETYE: ITS GARDENS.

FEEDING YE BEASTS.

Figure 4.6 "A Prospect of Ye Zoological Societye: Its Gardens"
Source: *Punch* 1849.

Needless to say, Victorian zoos and menageries allowed a great deal of interaction between the animals and their admirers. There were not always guardrails surrounding the cages, nor were there reinforced bars or additional layers of glass or wire mesh. When considering this circumstance, Harriet Ritvo suggests that zoos purposely allowed access so as to encourage people to think of their wild, exotic captives as the property of empire. From her point of view, the creatures were put on display as "temporary possessions or playthings," as "mascots," to be tamed, domesticated, or "civilized" by the ruling colonial power (*Animal Estate* 219). Although there is some truth in Ritvo's postcolonial perspective, I believe that when visitors felt moved to touch or poke these exotic animals, more than appropriation was taking place. Rather, these individuals were exercising a desire that exceeds the boundaries of a particular historical moment. The irresistible impulse to extend the hand and touch these animals, whether executed endearingly or aggressively, was not simply the consequence of a sense of some imperial privilege. Instead, the act was linked to a much deeper, and daring, desire to reach out, whatever the cost, and feel the exotic other, to go beyond the boundaries of one's own skin and actually finger the fur of a wild creature. This impulse reminds me of Steven Connor's comment that skin is "ever hungry for the touch of new impressions" (141). More is at play. I agree with other skin theorists like Penelope Deutscher, who in her essay in *Thinking Through Skin* observes that "Touching the skin of the other is *not* simply an example of the constant drive to appropriate the other" (Ahmed and Stacey 145 [italics mine]). This gesture is an expression of a larger desire to reach for what is beyond the self. It is not just motivated by the desire to take or possess.

Touch and Cognition

The desire to place a hand through the bars, to link skin to skin, is attached to the idea that touch is one of the more important aspects of knowing and that skin, as Claude Bouillon popularly observes, is "the seat of perception" (49). Skin is the organ that conveys sensations of touch, such as a light brush, contact, pressure, heat, cold, dryness, and pain. It gives us our knowledge of depth or thickness and form.⁴ Those who write about the cognitive role of touch often recall Erasmus Darwin's understanding that we acquire "our tangible ideas of objects either by the simple pressure of the organ of touch against a solid body, or by moving our organ of touch along the surface of it" (*Zoonomia* 1794, as quoted in Montagu 201). A contributor to a recent study of skin, *Sk-interfaces*, revisited this perspective when

⁴ For an expression of this idea, see Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of Skin* 1. The understanding of skin as the place of perception is shared among many theorists who think about the nature of skin.

he proclaimed, "Only something we can physically grasp embodies true reality for us" (Hauser 149).⁵

With these principles in mind, one can appreciate that the Victorian zoo visitors were using touch not so much for appropriation but for knowledge. Putting their hands through the bars gave them direct access to another being, to its texture, temperature, its movements, and its pressure.⁶ This immediate encounter between the skin of their fingers and the warmth of the creature's hide allowed them better to grasp the depth and thickness of the animal form as well as to achieve a more tangible idea of its spatial existence. Santanu Das's understanding, in his moving study on the role of touch in World War I poetry, that the sense of touch defines space and guides the rhythm of experience is apt.⁷ In the context of the zoo, these tactile moments gave access to and verified the creature's presence and briefly linked the viewer with the exotic. Touching was essential to interacting with the foreign; the act broke down the separation between the self and the other. In this regard, when generally thinking about the experience of touch, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey observe that "Skin opens our bodies to other bodies: through touch, the separation of self and other is undermined in the very intimacy or proximity of the encounter" (6). Touching animals in the zoo was not, therefore, the one-way street that Ritvo suggests. It not only gave access to another being; the experience was also mutual. It was a version of what Maurice Merleau-Ponty identifies as a "double sensation" when a person touches his own hand and alternately or simultaneously feels himself touched.⁸ Merleau-Ponty's understanding that "I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching" is relevant (*The Visible and the Invisible* 142). As a consequence, when the public fingered the zoo animals, they were involved in a reciprocal process. When they reached out and felt a lion's or a wolf's fur, they also brushed up against or were touched by their own wildness (the primitive side of their nature)—a rather daring gesture at a

⁵ See Zane Berzine's "Re-Thinking Touch" in *Sk-interfaces: Exploding Borders—Creating Membranes in Art, Technology and Society* (Hauser 147–9). In talks given at the 2013 North American Victorian Studies Association Conference, Pamela K. Gilbert and William A. Cohen spoke of the ability of touch to transmit knowledge. Gilbert reminded her audience of Alexander Bain's *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) in which Bain observes that touch was an intellectual sense like the eye and that notions of size, shape, direction, distance, and extension could all be acquired by touch. A similar paper by Marie Banfield, "Mid-Victorian Psychology and the Aesthetics of Touch" at a conference on The Victorian Tactile Imagination, Birkbeck College, July 19–20, 2013 also recalled this understanding of touch.

⁶ Tiffany Field in her study *Touch* (2003) mentions that "The term touch includes several tactile senses: pressure, pain, temperature, and muscle movement" (79).

⁷ For a discussion of how the hand feels, see the opening pages in Santanu Das's *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*: "The sense of touch defines space and guides the rhythm ... as if new eyes have opened at the tip of the fingers" (1).

⁸ This frequently quoted observation can be found in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* on page 106.

time when evolutionary theories were questioning the boundaries between human and animal and were challenging the old conception that the barrier separating men from brutes is, as William Bingley the popular nineteenth-century naturalist asserted, “fixed and immutable” (as quoted in Classen, *The Deepest Sense* 109).⁹

Reaching through the bars was also connected to the desire for metamorphosis—to be something we are not—to a yearning to take on a second skin, specifically to drape the animal hide around oneself, engage its symbolic value, feel the stimulation of that skin, and reinvent the self through the physicality of the exotic touch.¹⁰ Seeking a second skin, the zoo visitors expressed a longing to be more than themselves, to break down the barriers and confuse the distinction between animal and beast as well as home and abroad.¹¹ This metamorphosis made the person more complete, for the animal skin released and realized a latent quality (maybe power or sexuality), which, otherwise, would remain hidden and not be as tangible. Through the skin-to-skin contact between human and beast, energy was transferred from one body to another. One is reminded of Heracles, who wore the skin of the Nemean lion so that he might gather and retain its strength. One also recalls that in seventeenth-century Europe, Peter Paul Rubens painted his young bride’s naked body, enticingly enveloped within a bear’s skin (*Hélène Fourment with a Fur Coat*), so as to express what he perceived to be her sexual energy as well as his own reawakened animal desires. Furthermore, in Victorian London, Algernon Moses Marsden chose to rest his body and arm against a tiger skin draped over the back of a leather chair, in James Tissot’s 1877 portrait of him, so as to borrow from this exotic beast’s strength or authority. And in early twentieth-century France, the black American cabaret entertainer Josephine Baker posed and displayed her naked body on a tiger-skin rug to “remake herself in the skin of the other” (Cheng 13), as well as simultaneously to mock and adopt the lure of animalized femininity. As Anne Anlin Cheng suggests, Baker’s skin was

⁹ William Bingley was an early nineteenth-century popular naturalist. For instance, in 1813, he published *Animal Biography or Popular Zoology*. Recently complicating this debate, Mary Midgley in *Animals and Why They Matter* asserts that animals and humans “are incurably members one of another” (21). However, she recognizes that “species-bonds are real” (106). She writes: “with an animal, to know the species is absolutely essential. A zoo-keeper who is told to expect an animal, and get a place ready for it, cannot even begin to do this without far more detailed information ... Even members of quite similar and closely related species can have entirely different needs about temperature and water-supply, bedding, exercise-space, solitude, company and many other things” (98–9).

¹⁰ In *The Deepest Sense*, Constance Classen observes: “by putting on animal skins humans [in the premodern world] symbolically took on something of their identity” (105).

¹¹ In *The Book of Skin*, Steven Connor notes that people seek a second skin: “You could be made more entire, more yourself, by taking on another’s skin” (10). One cannot also help but recall the contemporary French performing artist ORLAN and her grafting of other skin cells to refashion her body. In “Harelequin Coat,” for instance, she created a hybrid skin from her own skin cells, the skin cells of a fetus of African origin, and the muscle cells of a fat-tailed dunnott (a marsupial). Skin is a textile she wears and changes.

constantly referring to other surfaces and textures: to animals, cloth, and shadows. Aware that skin is an infinitely dressable surface, Baker was always breaking out of her own racialized skin and taking on or fingering a second skin.

To further demonstrate these qualities associated with touch as well as to offer another illustration of the desire for metamorphosis—the yearning to take on another skin—it is interesting briefly to return to George Catlin’s experiences during his mid-nineteenth-century tour of Europe with his Indian artifacts. At one point in Manchester, Catlin hooked up with a traveling show of “nine wild Indians” (the Ojibbeway) (1: 103), from the backwoods of America, who were on display at various assembly rooms and exhibition halls. It is interesting to note that this group of Ojibbeway was thought to be particularly wild (closer to a wild animal than to a human), for the story had circulated that during their visit to the London Zoological Society all the animals had become excited and started to howl: one of their kind had entered the grounds. In his description of his visit to Manchester, Catlin describes the immense excitement among the crowds who lined the streets to catch a glimpse of these Ojibbeway, dressed in feathers as well as in the white skins of mountain sheep. These occasions bear a similarity to a parade of wild animals being taken to a circus or a menagerie. (The streets in the vicinity of the Indians’ hotel “became so completely besieged, that a strong party of police was necessary to keep back the crowds” [1: 106].) Catlin also records the reaction of those Mancunians who were in the rooms and halls where these Ojibbeway performed. These people came not only to see “Real, Red Indians” but also to mingle with them. As if reaching through the bars erected by the usual segregating social and cultural barriers, they extend their hands so they might actually touch the Ojibbeways’ faces and arms, smeared with bear grease and “streaked in vermilion” and black paint (1: 109).



Figure 4.7 Adventures of the Ojibbeway and Ioway Indians in England, France, and Belgium

Source: Catlin 1852.

According to Catlin, ecstatic ladies were said to crowd round the troupe so as to stroke the Indians' naked skin, and, in turn, be caressed by these wild men. These ladies, it seems, literally and figuratively brushed up against a vestige of their own wildness. They were performing another version of the act of placing a hand through the bars of a zoo enclosure so as to touch a wild skin. They were thrilled to find that the "war paint" left traces on their own faces and hands. In a sense, for a moment, these ladies took on a second, wild skin—that is, until they washed off the traces of paint (cleansed and civilized once more) with soap and water. A passage describing a gathering in an assembly hall in Manchester demonstrates the virulence and contagion of this encounter with a wild skin:

Many ladies were offering them [the Indian troupe] their hands ... some were kissing them ... The women commenced it as *Sah mah* had dashed into the crowd; and as he was wending his way back, finding it had pleased so well, he took every lady's hand that was laid upon his naked arm or his shoulder as a challenge, and he said that he kissed every woman that he passed. This may or may not be true; but one thing is certain, that many there were in the room that evening who went home to their husbands and mothers with streaks of red and black paint upon their cheeks, which nothing short of soap and water could remove. (1: 68)

The Hand

So far the discussion of touch has been primarily focused not just upon skins but also upon the naked hand: the zoo visitor's eager fingers brush against the lion's skin, receive the wolf's attentions, or scratch the hippo's hide; the hands of Rubens's young bride, Hélène Fourment, clutch the bear's fur draped around her naked body; Marsden's elbow lolls upon the tiger's nape; Baker's exposed fingers rest on the tiger's skin; and, as we have just read, the Mancunian ladies' hands push through the social barriers to touch the Ojibbeways' wild skin. For most theorists of touch, the hand is the place of encounter; it is the principal organ of touch and, by extension, the seat of knowledge and perception.¹² As is commonly known, Kant casually referred to the hand as "the window of the mind" (Sennett 149). With its multiple nerve endings, the hand can explore the world, feel its pressure, temperature, movement, and texture as well as inscribe itself upon it (e.g., write one's name on the rhinoceros's rump!). As Raymond Tallis observes, the hand is what grasps, seizes, pulls, plucks, picks, pinches, presses, pats, pokes, assigns, sorts, and classifies, so that one might explore and understand the world

¹² According to Claude Bouillon, the skin of the hand is the most sensitive, for the pads of its fingers contain receptors—2,000 per square centimeter—which can detect several milligrams of pressure (50).

outside the boundaries of one's own body.¹³ It has a "crucial cognitive role" (*Michelangelo's Finger* 22). Through it, as Diderot reminds us, one can even see in the dark.¹⁴ As if tipped with Juno's inquiring/jealous eyes mounted in peacock feathers, each of its fingers sequentially examines the texture, space, and shape of what is exterior to it.¹⁵ Collectively the hand's receptors survey what is within their reach and situate the body as well as the other body within that landscape. The blind man "knows quite precisely through the sense of touch what branches and leaves, or an arm and finger, are" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 224). The touch of the fingers is direct.

But what happens when the hand is absent? How does a person experience touch without it?

Haptic Visuality: The Absent Hand

The question: "what happens to touch when the hand is absent?" prompts thoughts about the act of gazing at paintings in which the sensation of touch enters through the eyes rather than via the direct avenue of the hand. In order to "grasp" a landscape or a portrait exhibited in a gallery, people seem to search with their eyes and not their fingers. Positioning their bodies well beyond the picture's frame, visitors to a gallery tend to stand at a distance from the work of art. Well aware that when regarding a painting they are looking at a visual imitation (and not the real thing), the removed posture of these spectators tacitly acknowledges that they cannot literally enter the space of the representation. (One cannot actually step into the room of a Vermeer painting and brush against the oak table within it.) Stepping back, viewers conform to their marginality and seem to give primacy to vision. Actual touch seems remote, if not impossible. The flat, two-dimensional canvas seems to proffer no inviting openings, such as those offered by the gaps between the bars of the zoo's enclosures or by the intermittent spaces within the crowded assembly hall in Manchester. In galleries and museums, especially, such contact is taboo and taken far more seriously than the warnings once posted in Victorian zoos.

This condition of "Don't Touch" is now sufficiently ingrained so that even if there is an impulse to place the fingers on the exhibited work, people do not dare (unless their intention is to destroy the work of art). Gone are the days when

¹³ For this list of the hand's capabilities, see Raymond Tallis's *The Hand*, 22–8.

¹⁴ In "Letter to the Blind" from 1794, Denis Diderot writes: "The blind man has no other object, but by touch. He knows, from the account of others, that objects are known by means of the sight, as to him by touch. He farther knows, that there is no seeing one's own face, though it may be touched. He must therefore conclude sight to be a kind of touch ..." (7).

¹⁵ The metaphor or image of the eyes in the peacock feathers attracted Michel Serres in his *Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*. See the "Hornes and the Peacock" section of chapter 1, 38–57.

visitors could walk up to a hung painting and run their hands over its surfaces. Alarms go off and guards rush over. Constance Classen in her study of touch and museums helpfully reminds her readers that, in the early museums touching was “so commonplace as to customarily escape mention” (*The Deepest Sense* 137).¹⁶ She gives many examples, among which is one noted in 1710 by Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, who recalls that before an attempted robbery of the crown jewels from the Tower of London, these treasures were not beyond the reach of the fingers, that it used to be possible “to get one’s hand through the grating and pick up the articles to feel their weight” (*The Deepest Sense* 137). Like the wild animals once also on display in the Tower of London’s menagerie, admirers could reach through the bars and touch what they enclosed. Classen also mentions the remarks of the South Kensington Museum’s director, who, in 1860, complained: “We have great difficulty in preventing them [the multitude of visitors] expressing the emotions they feel in looking at a picture” by touching it and consequently scraping off little bits of pigment (*The Deepest Sense* 145).¹⁷ (Now, I suppose, this impulse is honored through remote means, such as pressing a button placed next to the exhibit, which activates a digitally driven informational display. This device has become a substitute for touch.)

The absence of direct touch in the act of regarding an exhibited painting, though, does not mean that the tactile experience is unavailable, for viewing can have the characteristic of a “hands-on” experience. As several commentators on this phenomenon have remarked, the visual and the tactile sensations are closely wed so that even when we are looking at a painting, it is not clear that we are attending solely to its visual qualities. As one commentator puts it, the eyes rather than the hand “can function like the organ of touch” (Ahmed and Stacey 6). Perhaps aware of the tradition of the primacy of touch as well as taking their cue from Michel Serres’s assertion that the senses are not islands that keep to themselves but are entwined with each other, theorists often remark on the ways in which the eyes function like the organs of touch. They understand that the haptic and the optical are not necessarily two sides of a dichotomy.¹⁸ The two senses can “slide into one

¹⁶ See also Constance Classen’s earlier essay “Touch in the Museum,” which is part of her edited collection entitled *The Book of Touch*, 275–85. At The Victorian Tactile Imagination conference held at Birkbeck College, July 10–20, 2013, Classen delivered a paper, “Victorian Intimacies: Love, Death and the British Museum,” which spoke of how nineteenth-century visitors to the British Museum and other collection sites satisfied their tactile cravings by stroking the antiquities, fingering the paintings, and probing the mysterious swathed bodies of mummies.

¹⁷ For this example, Classen has drawn from Richard Altick’s *The Shows of London* (1978).

¹⁸ For instance, see the introduction to Michel Serres’s *Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (7), and Claude Bouillon’s *Skin: A Living Envelope* (6). More recently critics such as Hilary Fraser of Birkbeck College, University of London, have spoken about theories of the tactile imagination, and in particular, have recalled Bernard Berenson’s *The*

another” (Marks xii). Steven Connor’s remark that painting is “an amalgam ... of seeing and touching” is apt (28).

Aware that painting actually aspires to the condition of touch, a painter consciously raises the tactile sense so that viewers experience touch through their eyes. The artist is conscious of a haptic visuality. Christopher Perricone, sensitive to this phenomenon, suggests that “Perhaps the great artist is he or she who lures us back to the recognition of the fundamental sense of ourselves by appealing to our most fundamental sense [touch]” (235). To support their observations, both he and Mark Patterson, in their fine reflections on the sense of touch, recall a passage from the writings of the late American art historian, Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), who, in his study of the Florentine painters of the Renaissance, suggested that the artist’s task is to raise the tactile sense and embrace the viewer in it. For a painting to be effective, the painter must tap the tactile imagination. The varying muscular sensation inside the viewer’s palm and fingers should correspond to the projections of the represented figure. Berenson observed:

Now painting is an art which aims at giving an abiding impression of artistic reality with only two dimensions. The painter must, therefore, do consciously what we all do unconsciously—construct a third dimension. And he can accomplish his task only as we accomplish ours, by giving the tactile sense, for I must have the illusion of being able to touch a figure. I must have the illusion of varying projections of this figure, before I shall take it for granted and read, and let it affect me lastingly. (As quoted in Patterson 86)

There are, of course, many ways in which the artist constructs this “third dimension” (this sense of touch), and lures the viewer into the tactile realm. One way is through the actual representation of the hand, which serves as the sensation’s envoy. I have often wondered whether the emphasis upon the depiction and placement of hands in portraits is not partially because they represent the sensation and evidence of touch. It is interesting that John Burnet in his *Practical Hints on Portrait Painting* (1850) emphasizes the importance of hands in portraiture and proclaims, “The treatment of the hands in a portrait shows the invention of the painter perhaps more than any other part of the human figure” (37). For him, as well as for many other artists who were aware of its importance in relaying a person’s texture and presence in the world, the painted hand signifies a haptic knowledge of the subject’s body as well as what surrounds and interacts with it. The hand’s presence in the work of art triggers the tactile experience in the viewer’s memory, promotes a sense of direct contact, and replicates the intimacy associated with it. Victorian novelists and poets knew this device well. It was all part of what has recently been referred to as the Victorian tactile imagination. Adding to Helena Michie’s discussion of the lovers’ hands in *The Flesh Made Word*, recent

Florentine Painters of the Renaissance (1896), which proposes that every time our eyes recognize reality, we are, as a matter of fact, giving tactile values to retinal impressions.

work on the novel by such critics as William A. Cohen, Peter J. Capuano, and Bruce Robbins have addressed the metonymic function of hands in Victorian literature and the meaning of such sensory encounters.¹⁹ And one cannot forget Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* and the frequent attention to the touch of the hand as a metonym for both Arthur Henry Hallam's presence and absence.²⁰

Yet another means of creating a tactile response to a painting is by showing the way in which the subject is touched by light and shadow. These illuminations and shadings allow for the texture of touch. Shadows cast from interrupted light give a tactile dimension to a two-dimensional work. They are evidence of some physical presence that lurks near the subject and draws close. Shadows caress the flesh and seduce the viewer by defining the body's shape and allowing the eyes to touch its fleshly volume.²¹

Undoubtedly, however, one of the most significant ways in which a painting aspires toward the condition of touch and proffers a tactile experience is through its very medium. A canvas is itself a surrogate for skin, and the skin itself is similar to the canvas, for it too can be painted and function as a surface waiting to receive the artist's brush. For instance, there are parallels between painting a canvas and coloring the face (cosmetic practices).²² Applying makeup/color and shadow on the skin is not that dissimilar from the artist who strokes the canvas with a brush and adds colors to its surface. Both leave a sign of the hand. Both are evidence of the manual touch. Traces of the fingers' impressing force mark and chart their

¹⁹ See, for instance, Peter J. Capuano's "Handling the Perceptual Politics of Identity in *Great Expectations*" which discusses Dickens's obsession with hands in that novel; William A. Cohen's *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (2009); and Bruce Robbins's introduction, "The Secret Pressure of a Working Hand," to *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below*. At the NAVSA 2013 Conference in Pasadena, California, there were several panels remarking not only on the phenomenon of touch but also on the hand's role in various Victorian texts. One panel, assembled by Kimberly Cox of the State University of New York, Stony Brook, featured papers on "Novel Hand Plotting," "Handling Desire," and "Handling and Handwriting: Late Nineteenth-Century British Art Critics as Graphologists."

²⁰ An example can be found in Lyric X when Tennyson poignantly reflects on the absent hand and worries that the boat carrying Hallam's body back to England might wreck. The speaker fears that the "... hands so often clasped in mine, / Should toss with tangle and with shells" (ll. 19–20).

²¹ For an excellent book on the concept of the shadow, see Victor L. Stoichita's *A Short History of the Shadow*. Steven Connor's remark in *Thinking Through Skin* is worth noting here: "The flesh displayed in posters and magazines ... looks touchable, caressable, for what is to be impressed upon our eyes is the way it has been touched by light" (as quoted in Ahmed and Stacey 38).

²² In her discussion of the nineteenth-century realistic novel within the chapter "Mirror of the Soul: The Epidermis as Canvas," Claudia Benthien remarks that these novels "employed the classical color code of painting" and produced a "literary painting" (103). She discusses the literary technique of "creating a semiotics of character types by means of the skin's structure and shadings" (104).

creation. As Serres observes: "The painter, with the tips of his fingers, caresses or attacks the canvas" (35). The brushstroke is evidence of the painter's manual touch, a sign of the maneuvering hand, which brings the subject into a visible form. In this respect, Patterson beautifully suggests that the artist "touches, he feels, he reckons weight, he measures space, he molds the fluidity of atmosphere to prefigure form in it, he caresses the skin of all things" (87). With the language and pressure of touch the artist composes the language of sight. The skin becomes visible. Through his eyes the viewer figuratively fingers the skin/canvas. Here one is reminded of Serres's sensitivity to the tactile art of Pierre Bonnard's studies of nudes. When Serres gazes at one of these paintings, he understands that Bonnard is not so much appealing to sight as to touch. His portraits capture "the feeling beneath the fingers" (30) and allow the viewer to "touch the skin of things" (35).

Two Victorian Paintings

The context of this compelling haptic visuality, coupled with the impulse to touch wild skins (discussed in the chapter's opening), creates a significant opportunity to look carefully at two Victorian paintings of human figures posed on animal skins: Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *In the Tepidarium* (1881) and, perhaps surprisingly for those familiar with the work, James McNeill Whistler's *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862). For the purposes of convenience and to conform to accepted practice, I shall refer to the latter work as simply *The White Girl*.²³

Both paintings portray an intimate moment of contact between a wild animal's and a woman's skin; each, in a sense, taps into the desire to finger the enclosed, exotic animal's hide, as discussed earlier. And each participates in the cultural anxiety surrounding the confusion over the more fluid boundaries between human and beast following the popularization of evolutionary theory and the subsequent dissolution of a fixed and immutable division between them: the hand was once a paw; human skin had once been animal skin. The eroticism of these paintings partially depends upon the anxiety emanating from Darwin's sense that we (humans and animals) may all be melted together. Touch between animal and human is fraught as well as pleasurable.

Gazing at these paintings selected from Alma-Tadema's and Whistler's *oeuvre*, one wonders exactly how these works of art replicate the sensation of touch. To what extent do these paintings permit the observer to dissolve his subjectivity into the subject? What have these two artists done to prompt viewers to reach into their works with their eyes so that they can virtually extend their hands through the frame and feel the animal skin not only caressing the subject's body but their own as well?

²³ The hyphenating of Alma Tadema is the more common practice, even though there are many instances of the artist's name not being hyphenated.

Presented through the erotic lens, both Alma-Tadema's and Whistler's portraits express the desire to place a hand upon the wild other, to have direct access to the feel or the sensation of it. Both pieces participate in a skin-to-skin fantasy, which, of course, is still very much alive, and continues in the popular imagination to relegate touch to the lowest, basest position by equating it with the more carnal forms of love. Recently, for instance, I happened upon a popularized adaptation of this fantasy when I stepped into a men's room of a restored hotel in downtown Buffalo—the Lafayette. (I had wandered in to see how it was designed.) I was intrigued to find hanging on the wall a 1950s oversized poster of a scantily clothed female astride a polar bear skin. Her extended and searching fingers "caress" the polar bear's head (even though he is skinned, his face registers the delight of her touch). The picture invites the viewer to feel what it must be like to have her naked skin intimately rubbing against the animal's fur (and perhaps the observer's).



Figure 4.8 "The Polar Bear Rider"
Source: Lafayette Hotel, Buffalo, NY.

Although, in their own way, the two Victorian paintings I am going to discuss are earlier versions of this cruder image, I am sure that neither Alma-Tadema nor Whistler would want their pieces placed alongside such an explicit and trite, as well as badly executed, image. I apologize.

In the Tepidarium

Alma-Tadema's *In the Tepidarium* is a politely erotic painting showing a fully naked woman lying, completely in view, on a bear's skin draped over a slab of classically veined marble within a chamber of a Roman bath. (A tepidarium is the room situated between the hot and cold chambers.) The model's figure listlessly lies, exposed, upon the bear's lush fur.²⁴ As if extending the subject's languid sexuality, the fur spills over and touches the floor. Both model and hide recline upon a slab of marble, which, like human skin, exhibits the veins running through it. Each of these surfaces touches the other so as to set up a sort of *frisson*, encouraging the viewer not only to feel (through the eyes) the textures of the painted scene but also to experience the intended attendant tactile pleasures of the skins' intimate contact. Each skin, whether bodily or architectural in nature, brushes up against the other. Through the skill of his brush strokes and his own touching hand, Alma-Tadema attempts to seduce the viewer by letting his model's naked body become a site/sight for touching. With an intricate set of pigments required to depict the flesh colors, he has painted the skin of the canvas in order minutely to replicate the skin of the model, the bear's hide, as well as the architectural skin of the marble slab.²⁵ Through his skill, Alma-Tadema encourages his viewers not only to survey but also vicariously to touch his model's exposed body and visually run their fingers over its surfaces. Indeed, Alma-Tadema often invited visitors to his studio to look at the painted skins through a magnifying glass. The visible contrast among the long, rough, irregular fur of the wild bear, the smooth flawless skin of the woman, and the evenly polished marble contribute to what tactile experience there is. And so do the attendant sensations of warmth and chill: the heat of the living body; the warmth of the fur; and the coldness of the marble.²⁶ The feel/temperature reflects

²⁴ The bear rug was a prop taken from Alma-Tadema's studio. In photographs of his studio, one can catch sight of an assortment of bear and leopard skins either on the floor or draped over the backs of chairs.

²⁵ Based upon reading books about portraiture, I understand that skin poses the greatest challenge to artists. The number of colors required accurately to represent the subtle gradations of flesh have resulted in a plethora of treatises on skin color. Among these are Henry Murray's *The Art of Portrait Painting* (1851); and *Progressive Lessons Intended to Elucidate the Art of Portrait Painting in which is introduced a systematic arrangement of the Colours and Tints used in Flesh, Draperies, and Back-Grounds with Examples* (1824).

²⁶ Russell Ash, in his study of Alma-Tadema's paintings, notes that though Alma-Tadema was able to convey almost any texture, from fur to feathers, it was his painting of marble that singles him out. Helen Zimmern's study of Alma-Tadema also mentions his excessive scrupulousness. When, for instance, he painted a tiger skin for one of his