

**Taxidermy and Habitat Groups
The Milwaukee-Chicago Connection
and The Birth of the Modern Diorama**

from unedited research notes
of Dr. David J. Wagner
for American Wildlife Art
american-wildlife-art.com

Carl Akeley (1864–1926), along with William Hornaday (1854–1937), were first-generation American taxidermists who received on-the-job training from European taxidermists recruited by Henry A. Ward (1834–1906). (Although he shared the same name with the individual who accompanied Audubon to the U.S. from Great Britain to collect specimens in 1831, the two are not related.) Henry A. Ward was a student of Louis Agassiz (1807–1873) who worked in Agassiz’s museum and established a natural history supply house in Rochester, New York, in 1862 named Ward’s Natural Science. Hornaday, who had graduated from Iowa State Agricultural College, worked there from 1874 to 1881, when Ward exhibited his collection at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Akeley worked there from 1883 to 1886. In 1880, Hornaday conceived the need for the Society of American Taxidermists and became one of its founders. A year later, he accepted the position of chief taxidermist of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum, offered to him by Assistant Secretary George Goode.

From 1889 to 1890 at Milwaukee Public Museum, Akeley came up with the novel approach of grouping mounted wildlife specimens in indigenous habitat settings, while Hornaday was completing a book entitled Taxidermy and Zoological Collecting, in which he recognized the potential of background paintings in dioramas. Carl Akeley, completed the first complete museum habitat diorama in the world, depicting a muskrat colony, at the Milwaukee Public Museum in 1890.

Whereas Akeley attended the 1892 Columbian Exposition in Chicago as a representative of the Milwaukee museum and attempted to recruit sculptor A. Phimister Proctor to participate in its up-coming collecting expedition to Africa, Hornaday had developed his own private practice. Also participating in

the Columbian Exposition was their mentor, Henry Ward, whose natural history collection would be featured as an exhibit. By the time Hornaday's book was published in 1891, he had left the Smithsonian, and was busy working independently for clients who included exhibitors at the fair. Among those he advised were the organizers of "The Kansas Exhibit of Mounted Specimens of the Animals of the State" in the Kansas Building. It occupied about one-third of the building and featured over 100 mammals. For effect, Hornaday recommended that "the dead wall" in the back of the display be painted with "the habitat of each species."

Designed to appeal to the sportsman, the diorama featured big game in the fall at the height of the rut when their fur was thick and antlers were large. Contributing to the ambiance of the exhibit were 20 antlered heads of trophy elk mounted on posts throughout the hall. Though the Kansas exhibit was one of many including one organized by the Smithsonian's National Museum featuring taxidermy at the exposition, it was distinguished from the rest in the view of experts and non-experts alike. The commemorative, souvenir Book of the Fair, for example, praised the Kansas exhibit for having "the best specimens of taxidermy displayed" while a review in Scientific America stated that its habitat groups were "triumphs of the taxidermist's art."

In 1893, Marshall Field agreed to contribute \$1 million to acquire the collection of Ward's Natural Science Establishment, which was on display at the Columbian Exposition, to establish a public museum of natural history for Chicago. From this initiative, the Palace of Fine Arts, ornamented by Edward Kemeys' and Proctor's lions, was designated to become the Columbian Field Museum after the fair. Frederick J. Skiff, who had been chief of the fair's Department of Mines, was hired as the museum's first director.

In 1895, Skiff enticed Carl Akeley to leave the Milwaukee Public Museum to become chief taxidermist at the new Field Museum of Natural History, where he would oversee the production of dioramas with painted backgrounds by painters like Charles Knight. While this was the beginning of the "golden age of dioramas," it would reach its zenith fourteen years later when Akeley would leave

Chicago for New York to work at the American Museum of Natural History. In this way, the Milwaukee-Chicago connection became the progenitor of the modern museum diorama, a new manifestation of American wildlife art.

When the Columbian Exposition closed, Charles Hutchinson and his associates wasted no time taking possession of the building that had housed the World's Congress and converting it to the Art Institute of Chicago. After taking possession on November 1, they began installing collections, many of which they had purchased from the fine-arts exhibition at the fair, and others, which would be donated by Mrs. Henry Field and Mrs. Potter Palmer. They opened the building as a museum with a members reception on December 8, 1893. The new Field Museum opened about a month later, on January 16, 1894. By contrast, The Milwaukee Public Museum was chartered in 1882 and opened to the public in 1884. Its existence can be traced back to 1851 and the founding of the German-English Academy in Milwaukee.