Taxidermy Talks: Analyzing and Reanimating Artifice, Death, and Wonder within the American Museum of Natural History

Sovah Woydak

NYU Gallatin Senior Project Written Component

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Introduction

Every year the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) welcomes around five million visitors from New York city and around the world. On any given day, the halls are filled with tourists, families, and school groups, many of whom move eagerly between the habitat dioramas that form the core of the museum's public displays. On one such day, I joined a free public tour that began at the Alaska Moose Diorama. As our tour group gathered around, a young girl slipped through the circle of visitors and ran up to the diorama's glass front, pressing her small palms against it. At that moment, she seemed to be feeling the same thing I was—the distinct sense of wonder that draws so many people to the museum. Standing in front of a diorama that so precisely captures a species, the mind is caught between awe at the natural world and fascination with the conditions that made encapsulating it in such a small space possible. By pressing her hands against the glass, the little girl brought into focus the boundary that exists between these frozen scenes and the living world outside. In recognizing that boundary, one is reminded that the diorama is a simulation of nature, made possible by an act of death and reanimated through layers of artistic and scientific reconstruction.

Public statements and interpretive materials associated with the museum consistently reflect the sentiment expressed by retired AMNH exhibition artist and author of *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History* Steven Quinn: "The goal of the exhibit is… to recreate, within the walls of the Museum, the wonder of encountering nature in all its beauty, and in doing so, nurture an appreciation for… these often endangered ecosystems."[1] This framing positions the museum, and the creation of the diorama,

[1] American Museum of Natural History. "Dioramas." *Hall of Ocean Life: Educator Resources*. Accessed April 15, 2025. https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/ocean-life/educator-resources/dioramas.

as a translation tool that brings nature to the public, offering a solution for understanding the natural world and therefore inspiring its conservation. On the other side of this framing is a body of scholarly critique that argues that the dioramas within AMNH are not neutral renderings of truth, but interpretive centers. Rather than displaying what is known, the diorama works to produce knowledge about the world, shaping how we come to understand nature, culture, empire, and art through both its physical construction and curatorial framing.[2] This paper argues that the unique capacity of the habitat diorama to evoke wonder remains unmatched, even amid shifts in museum practice toward "edutainment" and interactive digital engagement. I position that this form of wonder, though compelling, is unproductive if the diorama is seen simply as informing of nature itself. The diorama becomes meaningful when its constructed and ideological framing is recognized by the viewer, revealing not just nature, but historical attempts to possess, control, and preserve it. Through this recognition, the diorama becomes an active tool in prompting deeper reflection on the systems that shape our relationship to the natural world, therefore encouraging more productive forms of engagement with it in the current day.

To foster this kind of critical recognition, in which the viewer becomes aware of the diorama's constructed and ideological nature, I propose a curatorial intervention in the form of an alternative audio guide entitled *Taxidermy Talks: A Critical Listening Guide to Wonder, Death, and Display in the American Museum of Natural History*. The guide stages imagined conversations between taxidermied animals inside AMNH dioramas and their living counterparts, as they converse on life within the sealed space and how it contrasts with the world outside. This intervention adopts the familiar format of a museum audio guide, a medium widely recognized as an authoritative institutional voice. *Taxidermy Talks* repurposes that authority to

[2] Stephanie Rutherford, *Governing the Wild: Ecotours of Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 7.

present a dialogue that unfreezes the diorama, prompting deeper engagement with the realities of death and artifice embedded within each scene. These dimensions, I argue, are core to the diorama yet frequently obscured by a broader, unexamined sense of wonder.

The imagined conversations expand the dimensionality of the diorama, shifting it away from a static repository of nature, and transforming it into an adaptive medium that invites viewers to reflect on the production of knowledge within AMNH and connect that process to the living world beyond the museum. The guide incorporates a mix of satirical, humorous, and serious dialogue, all aimed at encouraging an understanding of the diorama not as a stand-in for the living animal, but as a starting point for critical reflection on how institutions have historically and currently thought about nature, and how museum visitors participate in those relationships today. The guide stops plan to be indicated through the placement of small mirrors on the corresponding diorama embedded with NFC technology, allowing visitors to activate the audio by passing their phone over them. This proposed approach offers an alternative to the heavily used QR code and invites a moment of recognition of one's own positionality within the museum, as visitors must see their reflection in the mirror in order to engage with the guide. *Taxidermy Talks* and its suggested implementation strategy set a precedent for how natural history museums can use simple, cost-effective techniques and existing institutional knowledge to expand visitors' experience with diorama displays.

This paper begins by defining the scope of the natural history museum and examining the historical and cultural conditions that led to its emergence. It then turns to the creation of the dioramas at AMNH, situating them within a body of scholarly critique that challenges the museum's production of knowledge. From there, the paper traces shifts in museum display trends over time, arguing for the diorama's continued relevance as a uniquely effective medium for

capturing visitor attention. It then considers renovations at AMNH to better understand how the institution is negotiating its public role and scientific authority, laying the groundwork for interventions like *Taxidermy Talks*. The final section of the paper examines how *Taxidermy Talks* builds on the curatorial strategies established by Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*, and then offers a detailed account of the guide's implementation alongside an analysis of its central themes—artifice, death, and wonder—as exemplified through descriptions of selected audio stops.

The Footprint of the American Museum of Natural History

In order to frame the significance of *Taxidermy Talks*, it is important to understand the influential role the American Museum of Natural History plays across the worlds of science, culture, and art. Though most visitors don't realize, only about 3% of the museum's collection is on public display. The remaining 35 million specimens are stored across labs, storerooms, vaults, and archival spaces, areas rarely seen by the visiting public.[3] Dioramas make up only part of AMNH's vast overall footprint, which spans 23 interconnected buildings and 46 exhibition halls.[4] The vast scope of its research infrastructure positions AMNH not only as a cultural museum but also as a prominent scientific institution that has contributed meaningfully to the field of natural science since its founding in 1869.[5] In the Book *Dinosaurs in the Attic: An Excursion into the American Museum of Natural History*, author and former AMNH employee Douglas J. Preston takes a trip into the vaults of the museum describing their contents and

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[3] Douglas J. Preston, *Dinosaurs in the Attic: An Excursion into the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), xi.

[4] American Museum of Natural History. "Permanent Exhibitions." Last modified April 24, 2025. https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent.

[5] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 9.

connecting collected objects to narratives of heroic exploration by a variety of key players in the museum's history. In the book Preston notes that insects and spiders alone constitute 45 percent of the museum's holdings and this collection is one of the largest in the world, a figure that highlights the institution's role in shaping our understanding of global biodiversity.[6] In the book *Governing the Wild: Ecotours of Power* which takes a more critical lens of AMNH, Stephanie Rutherford states that according to staff members she interviewed the museum is seen as "the most-visited museum in the country and largest tourist attraction in the US.[7] Through these routine facts about the museum's collection and perspectives of the staff who work there, the institution emerges as a monumental force in shaping how both the general public and academic communities engage with and understand the natural sciences.

The Social and Scientific Foundations of the Museum

Long before the founding of the American Museum of Natural History, natural science took shape as a discipline centered on defining how the world was observed, classified, and understood. According to Rutherford, emerging during what Foucault termed "the age of the catalogue," natural history as a discipline took root in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, driven by the desire to impose order on the natural world through systems of naming, collecting, and display that rendered subjective observation into standardized fact.[8] Rutherford explains that the ultimate goal of these standardized practices within the discipline was to "reveal nature's plan" in order to better control it and derive benefit from it.[9] Once systems of naming and

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[6] Preston, *Dinosaurs in the Attic*, 150.

[7] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 13.

[8] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 3.

[9] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 7-8.

collecting were in place, display was a natural follower. The precursor to museum spaces were private collections which served as tools in reinforcing sovereign regimes and were restricted to the elite (see Figure 1).[10] In the 19th century, the notion of display shifted with the rise of the World's Fairs, where exhibitions were used to construct national identities by showcasing each country as the most progressive and modern, while appealing to the broadest possible public audience.[11] In these presentations, display techniques were used to represent a nation's relationship to, and possession of, natural resources.

Nineteenth-century science and collecting began to merge with ideas of entertainment and spectacle. This shift is exemplified by P.T. Barnum's scientific sideshows, which blended performance, and pseudo-scientific display creating parody with the sole aim of amusing and entertaining a crowd. In 1841, Barnum opened the American Museum in New York City, a space that combined sideshows, oddities, taxidermy, theatrical performances, and fabricated "scientific" exhibits (see Figure 2). In *Concrete Jungle : A Pop Media Investigation of Death and Survival in Urban Ecosystem*, contributor D. Scott Gregory notes that the hybrid identity of Barnum's museum gave it a certain epistemic authority, even though it was rooted in illusion. Gregory draws a line of inspiration between this blend of scientific credibility and artistic illusion and the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History, which would emerge roughly twenty years later.[12] Building on this era's fascination with spectacle, artists like Louis Daguerre began creating large-scale circular paintings that surrounded audiences, using semi-transparent scrims to produce varied lighting effects and movement within the scenes. He

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[10] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 5.

[11] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 6.

[12] Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, eds., *Concrete Jungle: An Urban Ecology Reader* (New York: Juno Books, 1996), 196.

would eventually term this form of entertainment the "diorama" (see Figure 3).[13] Born in an era before film and photography, dioramas served as an early form of virtual reality and introduced viewers to immersive visual experiences.[14]

Constructing Authority: Dioramas, Display, and the Logic of the American Museum of Natural History

The American Museum of Natural History faced a rocky start under the leadership of its key founder and first superintendent, Albert S. Bickmore. Bickmore, who was a dedicated naturalist and professor, envisioned a space grounded in rigorous scientific study, one centered around fossil invertebrates and other esoteric natural specimens. His intellectual ambitions did not align with the expectations of a broader public and within 10 years, the museum was almost bankrupt after many exhibitions failed to attract visitors.[15] In 1881, Morris K. Jesup was appointed president and is credited with saving the museum by blending popular interest with the museum's scientific agenda. As Gregory notes in *Concrete Jungle*, Jesup launched the museum into success by negotiating a balance between science and public appeal, shifting the museum's collection to focus on "lions and other big mammals" to capture visitor engagement.[16]

Over the next 50 years, under Jesup's leadership, the museum was launched in "a golden age of exploration." Museum leadership orchestrated and funded thousands of expeditions, competing to bring back specimens and cultural objects from the most remote corners of the

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[13] Stephen Christopher Quinn, *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: American Museum of Natural History/Harry N. Abrams, 2006), 12.

[14] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 10.

[15] Preston, *Dinosaurs in the Attic*, 21.

[16] Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, eds., *Concrete Jungle,* 195.

earth.[17] As Preston notes in *Dinosaurs in the Attic*, exploration was considered to be both high risk and high reward, where death and injury were a danger outweighed by the chance of getting one's name engraved into the halls of the museum.[18] This sentiment reflects a foundational ideology embedded in AMNH dioramas, in which white men with power and resources essentially played God, deciding not only which animals would be killed and preserved, but also which species were deemed worthy of display and public attention.[19] Among the most influential figures behind this vision was Carl Akeley, a pioneer in taxidermy who revolutionized the practice by sculpting animals with detailed skeletal and muscular structures before applying their hides (see Figure 4). Previously, animal skins were stuffed which failed to achieve the level of realism that dominates AMNH dioramas today.[20] Akeley led several explorations mostly to Africa where he gathered species to assemble the Akeley Hall of African Mammals.[21] Other central figures included Roy Chapman Andrews, best known for leading the Central Asiatic Expeditions; Theodore Roosevelt Sr., a major donor and early supporter of the museum's vision; and later figures like Franz Boas and Margaret Mead, who led expeditions and are credited with founding the discipline of American anthropology.[22]

Alongside the specimen collectors in the museum's history was a team of artists who meticulously crafted the background paintings and scenery that brought the dioramas to life as immersive habitat groups. As Elizabeth Rogers notes in "Representing Nature: The Dioramas of

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[17] Preston, *Dinosaurs in the Attic*, 23.

[18] Preston, *Dinosaurs in the Attic*, 83.

[19] Sovah Woydak, conversation with David Brooks, April 2025.

[20] Donna Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908–1936," *Social Text*, no. 11 (Winter 1984), 20.

[21] Preston, *Dinosaurs in the Attic*, 79.

[22] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 12.

the American Museum of Natural History," the surrounding scenery and backdrop of each diorama was based on meticulous field notes, sketches, and photographs, a fact often overlooked by visitors but central to the dioramas legitimacy in the eyes of science.[23] Chief among these artists were figures like James Perry Wilson who invented and perfected the mathematically driven seamless transition between taxidermy species and a curved backdrop. Background painters perfected the technique of warping scenery across curved surfaces to appear perspectivally accurate when viewed head-on by visitors (see Figure 5).[24] Each of these key figures helped solidify the museum's immense institutional presence, which, as Rutherford puts it, "positioned it as an unquestioned space for the generation and dissemination of objective, scientific knowledge."[25]

In her essay *Fabricating Authenticity Modeling a Whale at the American Museum of Natural History, 1906 –1974,* Michael Rossi challenges the idea that there can be a pure scientific meaning of authority when it comes to the models of AMNH. In tracing the history of the museum's first whale model, Rossi shows that the scientific meaning of authenticity at the museum was never fixed or timeless, but subject to constant negotiation, reinterpretation, and maintenance.[26] He explains that, when confronted with the unpredictability of nature, available materials, working methods, and varying skill levels, the standards by which "accuracy" was achieved often shifted considerably. While immense scientific care was undoubtedly invested in

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[23] Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, "Representing Nature: The Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History," *SiteLINES: A Journal of Place* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 10–14, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/24889430.

[24] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 12.

[25] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild,* 12.

[26] The current whale in the Hall of Ocean Life is not the focus of Rossi's analysis; rather, he examines a model constructed in 1907, which was replaced by the present version in the early 1960s. See Michael Rossi, "Fabricating Authenticity: Modeling a Whale at the American Museum of Natural History, 1906–1974," *Isis* 101, no. 2 (June 2010), 338-361, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/653096.

the construction of each diorama within AMNH, they cannot offer a pure rendering of scientific discovery. Rather, the museum, and the many explorers involved, meticulously manufactured science itself.[27] It is this act of manufacturing that, I argue, the viewer must be made aware of in order for dioramas to become productive tools for understanding human–nature relationships, rather than simply speaking on behalf of the animals inside.

AMNH did not originally open with its halls full of habitat dioramas. In its early years, specimens were arranged in large collection displays with little information about where they came from or how they related to the environments they once inhabited.[28] In response to the lack of clear public labeling, Jesup is noted to have often remarked "I am a plain, unscientific man; I want the exhibits to be labelled so I can understand them, and then I shall feel sure that others can understand."[29] Under Jesup, the museum began transitioning to grouped and themed displays with labels indicating the origin of each species. However, as Quinn notes, curators in many halls intentionally limited the amount of text near the dioramas to avoid disrupting the illusion of a "wilderness experience."[30] AMNH's first true diorama featured a pair of American robins nesting in a flowering apple tree which they called a habitat group (see Figure 6).[31] This presentation was driven by a growing awareness that unregulated commercial hunting had severely depleted bird populations. The extinction of the passenger pigeon, once the most common bird in North America, which vanished entirely by 1914, spurred scientists and government leaders to take

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[27] Timothy W. Luke, "Museum Pieces: Politics and Knowledge at the American Museum of Natural History," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 16, no. 2 (December 1997), 1–28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41416329.

[28] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 10.

[29] Preston, *Dinosaurs in the Attic*, 23.

[30] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 19.

[31] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 17.

action.[32] At AMNH, this response took the form of preserving species through the medium of the diorama, freezing them in idealized scenes of abundance amid growing ecological anxiety.

The robin habitat group proved very popular and in 1902 the Hall of North American birds opened as the world's first museum hall devoted to habitat diorama display.[33] In his article "Museum Pieces: Politics And Knowledge At The American Museum Of Natural History," Timothy Luke argues that through the legibility offered by the diorama format, the museum brought together both the objects to be known and the subjects who must gain knowledge, creating a space where visitors were not simply presented with facts but were taught how to think about nature through a curated and hierarchical framework of observation and judgment.[34] Donna Haraway echoes this line of critique in her article "Teddy Bear Patriarchy," where she explores how parts of AMNH, particularly Carl Akeley's African Hall, instruct viewers on how to think about race, gender, and power— preserving a specific 20th-century vision of white male authority through scientific display amid broader social anxieties about change.[35] Harway notes that each diorama almost always contains "a large and vigilant male, a female or two, and one baby, just enough to constitute a developmental series, but not enough to suggest social disorder or uncontrolled sexuality" (see Figure 7).[36] Thus the viewer is taught to see nature in terms of fixed ideals of gender roles and naturalized hierarchical social and sexual orders under the guise of biological accuracy.

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[32] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 15.

[33] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 16.

[34] Luke, "Museum Pieces," 17.

[35] Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy," 21.

[36] Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy," 24.

In *Windows on Nature,* Quinn describes the dioramas in terms of their frozen state as he writes "time has stopped. Birds soar in suspended animation. Animals gaze in perpetual fixed attention. Clouds hover motionless in azure blue skies. Behind the glass, all of nature is locked in an instant of time for our close examination and study."[37] For Quinn, in the face of environmental change, the diorama's timeless and unchanging scenes make them poignant and powerful advocates for conservation.[38] This ethos appears repeatedly in the institution's logic, where nature is preserved by freezing an idealized version in the hopes of inspiring conservation. Henry Fairfield Osborn, who succeeded Morris K. as president of the museum, stated that the museum's mission was "to bring a vision of the world to those who otherwise can never see it."[39] This statement speaks not only to the general public, who would never encounter these species in their remote habitats, but also to the reality that many of these animals were vanishing, and the only way for posterity to know them would be through their preserved forms in the diorama.

Today, the museum and its affiliated publications acknowledge that many of the locations depicted in dioramas no longer exist in the pristine conditions shown. This reality is often used to underscore the diorama's value as a rare opportunity for future generations to experience these environments as they were once observed. While the dioramas themselves may have a more tenuous link to inspiring conservation action than the museum often suggests, many of the individuals who created them were actively involved in advocacy for the protection of the species they depict. Frank Chapman's Bird Hall and Carl Akeley's gorilla diorama both raised

[37] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 8.

[38] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 6.

[39] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 12.

public awareness and directly contributed to major conservation efforts, including the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the creation of Africa's first national park.[40]

Haraway defines how the anxieties of the time were not just centered on the loss of species, but also on broader fears of change. She argues that the museum worked to preserve a specific vision not only of nature, but also of race, class, and gender relationships in the face of extraordinary social transformation. As she writes in her description of the grand Roosevelt Memorial atrium, "A hope is implicit in every architectural detail: in immediate vision of the origin, perhaps the future can be fixed. By saving the beginnings, the end can be achieved and the present can be transcended."[41] This framing reveals how the museum constructed an image of the past as a moral and cultural anchor for the future, a strategy Haraway connects to deep social anxieties over race, class, and sex. She further argues that the museum aimed to "insure preservation without fixation and paralysis" allowing it to function as a stabilizing force for social order while still presenting itself as a forward-thinking scientific institution.[42] Through systems of ordering and accumulation, the museum positioned itself as a place where everything could be cataloged and preserved, ensuring its position within modernity while buffering against any of its consequences.[43] Under Harway's analysis, the dioramas of AMNH do not function as forward thinking scientific artifacts but as biographies of 20th century United States "male supremacists monopoly capitalism."[44] These critical perspectives on the museum underscore the

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[40] Quinn, *Windows on Nature,* 16.

[41] Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy," 20.

[42] Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy," 57.

[43] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild,* 7.

[44] Haraway, "Teddy Bear Patriarchy," 21.

need for a project like *Taxidermy Talks,* which activates the diorama in a way that provides space to question the production of scientific authority and to renegotiate the viewer's relationship to it.

Edutainment, Display, and the Crisis of Engagement

Henry Fairfield Osborn suggested that spending time in the American Museum of Natural History allowed one to "lose oneself in communion with nature."[45] Today, the museum relies more heavily on video and technology-based displays to create a sense of immersion, as it works to keep exhibitions aligned with current trends. This shift is not only about staying relevant, but also reflects the reality that traditional dioramas could not be constructed today due to cost, materials, and changing ethical standards. In *Concrete Jungle*, Gregory notes that many museums today face what he calls the "Jurassic Park" phenomenon, where they are forced to compete with locations like theme parks, with their drive-through safaris, rides, and interactive exhibits, for entertainment value.[46] Rutherford expands on this by noting that, with the rise of television and other interactive media, the diorama lost its status as the leading form of museum display. She states that despite this shift, AMNH has maintained a unique role as a key disseminator and translator of scientific knowledge for the general public.[47]

Museums like AMNH have increasingly embraced the concept of "edutainment" in recent exhibition design, prioritizing audience engagement over the straightforward presentation of information. A pivotal player in this shift emerged in 1978 with the founding of Ralph Appelbaum Associates, a multidisciplinary firm led by Ralph Appelbaum. According to a 1999 New York Times article, the firm includes architects, designers, editors, model builders,

[45] Quinn, *Windows on Nature*,18.

[46] Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, eds., *Concrete Jungle,*195.

[47] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild, 12.*

historians, childhood specialists, a poet, a painter, and an astrophysicist, essentially everyone needed to complete an exhibition from start to finish, fully self-contained within the firm.[48] What is now considered standard practice in museum spaces, such as incorporating multimedia installations and interactive components, was once a major innovation introduced by Appelbaum. The firm's work centers on the experience economy, where success is measured by the ability to create powerful, lasting memories. By blending the didactic content of museums with compelling storytelling and "flashy modern hardware," Appelbaum helped redefine how audiences engage with exhibitions.[49]

Appelbaum Associates has made a significant impact at AMNH both in renovations and in comprehensive exhibition design. Notable among these projects is the firm's work on the Hall of Biodiversity, the museum's first mission-driven hall, which opened in 1998. Scholarship on the hall describes it as the most Disney-like of the museum's exhibits and frames it as a direct response to both internal and external pressure to address contemporary environmental issues. [50] The Hall of Biodiversity is, in many ways, a condensed showcase of everything the museum has to offer. As Rutherford explains, it is structured around four central questions. The first, *"What is biodiversity?"*, is explored through The Spectrum of Life, a massive wall display composed entirely of specimens pulled from the museum's storage (see Figure 8). This section features nearly every preservation method in the museum's arsenal, from taxidermy and skin mounts to pickled specimens. The second question, *"Why is biodiversity important?"* is addressed through

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[48] Deborah Solomon, "He Turns the Past Into Stories, and the Galleries Fill Up," *The New York Times*, April 21, 1999, https://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/21/arts/he-turns-the-past-into-stories-and-the-Galleries-fill-up.html.

[49] Bradford A. McKee, "What He Says It Is: How Ralph Appelbaum Built a Monopoly in the Field of Exhibition Design," *Architecture* 91, no. 2 (February 2002), The Nielsen Company.

[50] Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, eds., *Concrete Jungle,* 200.

a twenty-first-century diorama of the Dzanga-Sangha Rainforest, which visitors can physically walk through without a full glass barrier (see Figure 9).[51] The third and fourth questions, *"How is biodiversity threatened?"* and *"What can we do?"* are tackled on the far side of the diorama. This area features interactive components including computer stations, simulations, GIS visualizations, and looping films that present human-driven environmental threats alongside proposed individual solutions (see Figure 10).[52]

From my own observations doing research at the museum, supported by Rutherford's analysis, it's evident that very few visitors engage with the screens and text panels dedicated to exploring current environmental threats and proposed solutions. In her critique, Rutherford argues that the hall attempts to create a totalizing inventory of biodiversity, and in doing so, defines what nature is, why it matters, and how it should be managed. This framing transforms complex environmental issues into technical, measurable problems that appear solvable through institutional and individual action. I build on this by suggesting that the hall represents the museum's attempt to remain relevant through edutainment-style updates. These renovations are resource-intensive, yet fall short in sustaining visitor attention or fostering deeper reflection. The areas that do attract attention are those filled with visually captivating specimens, which, as Rutherford notes, reinforce the authority of scientific display.[53] Rather than offering open-ended engagement, the hall promotes a particular way of seeing nature grounded in individual responsibility and the assumption that nature can be managed through informed action shifting responsibility away from political and structural problems. In response, *Taxidermy Talks*

[51] The diorama of the Dzanga-Sangha Rainforest, which opened in 1998, is the most recent diorama created by the museum. See Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 14.

[52] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 14.

[53] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 2.

functions as a low-cost curatorial intervention that reactivates the dioramas without requiring the expensive overhaul that firms executing edutainment style renovations often perform. Stop six on the *Taxidermy Talks* guide takes visitors to the Hall of Biodiversity, where they listen in on a conversation between a living frog and its taxidermied counterpart in the Spectrum of Life. The living frog describes skin irritation after swimming near a farm and mentions finding a bottle labeled "Monsanto." The diorama frog recognizes the name, and together they uncover that Monsanto sponsors the Hall, prompting a consideration on how a company contributing to biodiversity loss helps shape public understanding of it.[54]

Visual Authority and Institutional Change at AMNH

The American Museum of Natural History has a history of renovating and adapting its dioramas, setting a clear precedent for the potential integration of *Taxidermy Talks* as a formalized audio guide within the institution. Many of these renovations have focused on anthropological displays, most notably the abrupt January 2024 closures of the North America, Eastern Woodlands, and Great Plains Halls in response to updated NAGPRA regulations requiring tribal consent for displaying or researching cultural items.[55] There are currently no definite dates set for reopening these halls, however in the meantime, the museum has installed *The Changing Museum*, a graphic-style exhibition featuring timelines, small images, and quotes from visitors and experts explaining the hall closures. Based on my observations, most visitors walk past this section without engaging, underscoring how text-centered one dimensional design

[54] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 29.

[55] American Museum of Natural History, "Statement on New NAGPRA Regulations," accessed April 25, 2025, https://www.amnh.org/about/statement-new-nagpra-regulations.

struggles to be a valid solution for effectively conveying information in a museum filled with so many visually dynamic displays.

Beyond this major closure, the museum has undertaken several significant renovations and exhibition updates, largely in response to critiques that many displays present stories in registers of "long ago" or "far away," despite these communities remaining active today. [56] This was certainly the case for the Northwest Coast Hall, which was renovated and reopened on May 13, 2022, with the primary goal of presenting the cultural objects as part of living traditions belonging to contemporary communities. The renovation involved removing the dioramas and replacing them with objects displayed in a variety of glass cases.[57] The museum's emphasis on Indigenous collaboration is reflected in large-scale images, videos and quotes mounted throughout the space. Notably, the layout nods to AMNH original design prior to dioramas where specimens and cultural objects were layered out one after the other in large cases (see. Figure 11 & 12). Another example of recontextualization at the museum can be seen in the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial, where a 1939 diorama depicts an imagined scene of Dutch leader Peter Stuyvesant entertaining an Oratamin leader of the Munsee branch of the Lenape. In 2018, the museum added stenciled text boxes across the front of the glass, prompting viewers to "reconsider the scene" and drawing attention to the many misrepresentations within it.[58]

Other major removals include the long-protested statue of Theodore Roosevelt, which had stood in front of the museum since 1940. Flanked by passive representations of an African man and a Native American man, the statue communicated blatant racial hierarchies and was

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[56] Luke, "Museum Pieces," 19.

[57] American Museum of Natural History. "Northwest Coast Hall: Pacific Northwest Nations." Accessed April 25, 2025. https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/northwest-coast.

[58] American Museum of Natural History, "Old New York Diorama," accessed April 25, 2025, https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/theodore-roosevelt-memorial/hall/old-new-york-diorama.

finally removed in 2022.[59] The museum has also undertaken renovations based on emerging scientific research, for example, updating the blue whale model in the Hall of Ocean Life to reflect more accurate anatomy and coloration, correcting earlier versions that were modeled from images of a dead whale when little was known about whales in their natural ocean habitats.[60] This revision highlights how the museum constructs scientific accuracy, which is often accepted as fact by the public until the institution itself reinterprets and redefines it. Overall, these renovations have primarily been reactive, prompted by legal requirements, public pressure, or the museum's desire to maintain its image as a scientific authority. Many of the changes rely on text, flat images, QR codes and video elements that, I argue, fail to match the dimensionality and immersive power of the original dioramas they aim to overturn.

Broader trends across natural history museums reflect similar patterns of diorama hall renovation. For example, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County recently reopened its diorama hall, which was closed for over a decade due to water damage. With the reopening, the museum commissioned three contemporary artists to reinterpret and contribute new habitat groups as part of the exhibition *Reframing Dioramas: The Art of Preserving Wilderness*. The addition of these new habitat groups push the boundaries of the diorama as a sealed stagnant place. One of the commissioned artists, Saul Becker, added an apocalyptic backdrop of glass, crystal, and metal behind the taxidermy to highlight the ways human activity has altered natural habitats (see Figure 13).[61] Rather than layering one-dimensional text on top, this exhibition offers

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[59] Robin Pogrebin, "Roosevelt Statue to Be Removed From Museum of Natural History," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/arts/design/roosevelt-statue-to-be-removed-from-museum-of-natural-history.html.

[60] American Museum of Natural History, "Blue Whale Model Renovation," *News & Blogs*, May 17, 2013, https://www.amnh.org/explore/news-blogs/blue-whale-model-renovated.

[61] Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, "Reframing Dioramas: The Art of Preserving Wilderness," accessed April 25, 2025, https://nhm.org/pst-reframing-dioramas.

an example of adapting and reinterpreting the diorama in a way that preserves its core elements and craftsmanship, while playfully inviting viewers to explore its visual and cultural context more critically.

The Framework Behind Taxidermy Talks

As an intervention, *Taxidermy Talks* draws foundational inspiration from Fred Wilson's seminal exhibition *Mining the Museum*, organized by Lisa Corrin. During a year-long residency, Wilson reinstalled and rearranged artifacts within the Maryland Historical Society, using curatorial tools and the work of historical artists to offer critical commentary and generate new narratives around race and colonialism embedded in the collection. As Corrin discusses in her writing on the exhibition, "*Mining the Museum* employed display techniques that are second-nature to most curators: artifacts, labels, selective lighting, slide projections, and sound effects" were used in ways that provoked deeper reflection on how we understand and interpret historical truths, often through striking juxtapositions (see Figure 14). Wilson made clear that *Mining the Museum* was less about the inherent meaning of objects and more about how meaning is constructed through the ways museums frame and present them.[62] *Mining the Museum* became one of the fist major exhibitions where institutional narratives were disassembled with their own tools.[63] *Taxidermy Talks* functions as an alternative audio guide, using a medium already associated with museums and imbued with institutional authority. The content of the guide is built from museum-published texts, scholarly critiques of the institution, and my own close observations of the dioramas and how visitors engage with them. As in Wilson's exhibition, I

[62] Lisa G. Corrin, "Mining the Museum: An Installation Confronting History," *Curator: The Museum Journal* 36, no. 4 (1993), 306.

[63] Kerr Houston, "How *Mining the Museum* Changed the Art World," *BmoreArt*, May 3, 2017, https://bmoreart.com/2017/05/how-mining-the-museum-changed-the-art-world.html.

position my outsider perspective as a means of generating institutional critique, not to dismantle the museum's collection, but to invite viewers to critically question the one-sided narratives it presents.

Taxidermy Talks: Designing an Intervention

Taxidermy Talks consists of seven audio guide stops, each centered on a different diorama, where imagined conversations unfold between the preserved animals inside and their living counterparts—creating layered dialogues that disrupt the stillness and silence typically associated with natural history displays. Each stop is marked by a small mirror which can be installed on or near the corresponding diorama in AMNH. This subtle intervention would replace the typical QR codes used by the museum when presenting the public with extra information as I observed codes were rarely scanned by visitors (See Figure 15). The visual cue of the mirror simultaneously becomes conceptual prompt: by catching a glimpse of themselves in the mirror, visitors are reminded that experiencing a diorama is not a passive act of observing natural facts, but an embodied encounter shaped by one's own presence and the institution's presentation. The guide is embedded into the mirror through a coded NFC tag which plays the corresponding stop when a visitor passes their phone over top. In the project's current proposed iteration, scanning a mirror directs the user to a webpage dedicated to that specific stop where the audio can be played. On the page, a brief prompt encourages visitors to focus solely on listening while observing the diorama, keeping the experience embodied and present (see Figure 17). Afterward, users are invited to explore the full site, which includes a landing page with a project description, a link to this paper, and full transcripts of the audio guide to ensure accessibility. *Taxidermy Talks* also has a corresponding Instagram account, which currently serves as the project's primary method for alerting public visitors to its presence. The project is designed to function either as a

quiet, guerrilla-style intervention where visitors only discover it if they know where to to look or, as a more formal museum feature, with the potential for institutional adoption and signage that integrates the guide into the existing exhibition framework.

Currently, the AMNH pure audio offerings are limited. The institution's app, *The Explorer App,* provides a robust information system but primarily offers directional guidance and supplemental content like quizzes, videos, and extra facts, all of which pull the visitor's attention away from the diorama and fully onto their phone screen. While *Taxidermy Talks* also requires a phone for initial activation, its use of pure audio allows visitors to stay visually and emotionally engaged with the diorama as they listen, deepening understanding rather than layering on more information. The museum also offers 75-minute docent-led tours, which I attended to better understand the tone and content they provide. These tours primarily focus on factual information about the species on display and the heroic framed tales of how the museum acquired them.[64]
In her article *Sound as a Producer of Social Spaces in Museum Exhibitions*, Alcina Cortez argues that sound in exhibitions is not merely a supplemental medium, but a tool that actively shapes social, emotional, and spatial experience.[65] Through several case studies where sound was central to exhibition design, Cortez argues that unlike visual media, which often encourages fixed, passive observation and immediate rationalization, sound allows visitors to experience first through feeling.[66] It encourages freer movement and supports embodied, emotional learning. Cortez also highlights how sound can democratize museum space, offering a medium in which

[64] When asked during the tour how the animals were created to look so real, the guide replied that he usually avoids discussing the taxidermy process because people tend to find it gross.

[65] Alcina Cortez, "Sound as a Producer of Social Spaces in Museum Exhibitions," *Curator: The Museum Journal* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12547.

[66] Cortez, "Sound as a Producer of Social Spaces," 326.

feeling and presence can be valued just as much as visual knowledge acquisition.[67] I use Cortez's analysis as evidence to support *Taxidermy Talks* as an effective medium for interrupting the immediate impulse to extract and process visual facts from the diorama. The project instead opens space for embodied experience, inviting visitors to imaginatively enter a conversation from the animal's perspective while remaining aware of their own presence in the space.

The tone of *Taxidermy Talks* offers a counterbalance to the authoritative, scientific voice of the museum, which currently positions itself as the arbiter of what counts and doesn't count in defining the natural world.[68] The guide incorporates tonal shifts across its stops, with some leaning into absurdist humor and others adopting a more serious, matter-of-fact tone, reflecting the tone I observed used on official museum tours. By introducing the voice of a living animal, the audio guide challenges the museum's singular authority, disrupting the notion that an entire species can be meaningfully represented by a single, static scene. The idea of creating a guide from the perspective of the animals draws on the concept of the *umwelt* as explored in Jakob von Uexküll's *A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men*. In the text, Uexküll defines an *umwelt* as the individualized, subjective world that shapes what each organism can perceive and act upon[69] He argues that there is no universal world, only species-specific worlds, and that it is delusional for humans to assume other species exist on the same spatial and temporal plane as our own.[70] Instead of attempting to fill the gap between human ways of sensing and knowing and those of the animals on display, *Taxidermy Talks* plays within, and highlights, the dissonance that

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[67] Cortez, "Sound as a Producer of Social Spaces," 326.

[68] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 10.

[69] Jakob von Uexküll, "A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds," in *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, ed. and trans. Claire H. Schiller (New York: International Universities Press, 1957), 5.

[70] Uexküll, "A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men," 14.

arises when humans try to fix nature in terms of their own *umwelt*. The project itself becomes a kind of human delusion, an imagined perspective of the animal, but it is precisely within this act of imaginative projection that space opens for critical reflection on how we interpret, represent, and relate to the natural world. Rather than following the museum's linear process where "facts, first, have been extracted scientifically from the field, disciplined next technically in the laboratory, and then finally aestheticized formally as knowledge,"[71] *Taxidermy Talks* opens this process into a conversation.

The content of *Taxidermy Talks* centers on introducing three key themes embedded within the diorama: *artifice, death,* and *wonder*. Artifice, in this context refers to the layers of framing, both physical craftsmanship and institutional influence, that work together to construct a vision that appears objective, authentic, and knowable, even though it is carefully staged and ideologically shaped. Death forms the foundation of the diorama's scientific authority and permeates nearly every corner of the museum. Yet for most visitors, it remains at the edges of awareness often masked by the carefully constructed artifice of the display. Wonder is the theme most commonly associated with the diorama—one that, I argue, gives these displays their immense value by captivating attention in a way other mediums of museum display do not. At the same time, I position wonder as a kind of blanket response that, if not expanded upon, can obscure recognition of other qualities within the diorama that allow for a more critical engagement. In the following section, I will break down each theme and exemplify how several of the stops within *Taxidermy Talks* engage with them.

[71] Luke, "Museum Pieces," 3.

Artifice

The most recognizable layer of artifice appears in the diorama's physical containers which possess a variety of engineered qualities all designed to create the most idyllic and believable frame of nature. For example, the floor levels in many key dioramas, such as those in the African Hall, are set below the surrounding floor grade, creating the illusion of a dramatic drop in elevation into an infinite space behind the glass. The front glass in each case is angled which reduces reflection and helps to align the viewers eyesight with the forced perspective of the scene. The backdrops are curved, a technique developed by painters in the museum's history who used mathematical gridding systems to compensate for the curve and ensure that none of the background scenery appears visually distorted.[72] Internal lighting within the diorama is carefully designed to reflect the exact time of day being portrayed, including the creation or painting of shadows cast by surrounding vegetation that, in reality, aren't physically present in the scene.[73] Besides very occasional maintenance, the diorama cases themselves are fully sealed and many have never been opened since their original completion.[74] The animals inside have been prepared and posed with such detail that it is hard for viewers to comprehend what is real and what is constructed. While attending one of AMNH's free tours, the most frequently asked question I observed was whether the displays were real or not. The guide responded with a simple yes or no, depending on whether a real animal skin was used or if the specimen was a model, like the blue whale. As J. Willard Whitson states in *Concrete Jungle* "specimens appear life-like due as

[72] Quinn, *Windows on Nature*, 18.

[73] Quinn, *Windows on Nature*, 112.

[74] Remarks by tour guide during guided tour, American Museum of Natural History, Hall of North American Mammals , New York City, March 20, 2025.

much to the sculptor's artistry as to their covering."[75] There is no "real" to speak of in the museum as everything is made into fact through unsteady manipulation.

Stop five in *Taxidermy Talks* is located at the wolf diorama in the Hall of North American Mammals. The diorama depicts two wolves mid-run across glittering snow, crisscrossed with shadows from the surrounding forest and illuminated by the blue-green shimmer of the northern lights against a dark sky (see Figure 18). Just visible in the snow are a set of what look to be deer tracks, positioning the wolves mid-hunt and suggesting the presence of prey just beyond the viewer's sight. The dialogue centers on a wolf outside the scene playfully teasing the wolf within the diorama for never being able to land from their jump. The conversation eventually shifts to the constructed nature of the display, including the carefully designed lighting and the artfully painted shadows. Through the dialogue, the viewer is both given insight into the construction of the diorama and prompted to consider why the wolf is depicted frozen mid-jump, locked in a moment of pursuit. It invites reflection on how this compares to a living wolf's ability to perform the same action within a changing landscape.

Death

Rutherford positions death as the medium through which the museum makes life, "seeking to make knowable the secrets of nature through actually killing it."[76] In the museum, death becomes a sacrifice where remains get put into public service and come to represent a totalizing version of collective life. Luke notes that "ironically…the self-understanding of life given to the humans living in the world's greatest modern metropolis has been grounded upon

[75] Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, eds., *Concrete Jungle,* 195.

[76] Rutherford, *Governing the Wild*, 21.

building one of the planet's most extensive necropolises."[77] The museum uses death to construct its public displays that educate about life, but more significantly, death is ever-present in its vast non-public collections and ongoing scientific research. In *Dinosaurs in the Attic,* Preston takes the reader into the storage section where the museum keeps its bones. Preston notes that "if all the bones in the American Museum of Natural History were dumped into Central Park, they would form a pile well over three stories high and hundreds of feet in circumference."[78] Preston continues his exploration of bones at the museum by interviewing paleontologist Malcolm Mckenna who states that the "the reason we collect bones is to build up a library of facts…Bones, and indeed all scientific collections, differ from books in that books are opinion and interpretation, while specimens are facts."[79] This perspective reflects the foundational belief within natural history institutions: that dead matter, when collected and cataloged, becomes objective knowledge. Yet this framing obscures the layers of interpretation embedded in every decision regarding how and what parts of species are collected, preserved and displayed.

Stop two in *Taxidermy Talks* takes place in the Hall of New York State Mammals where a bobcat which is displayed in the museum not as a piece of taxidermy but as a scientific skin mount, holds a conversation with its living counterpart. The entire Hall of New York State Mammals features skin mounts, bringing death into direct view for the museum visitor in a way that is less apparent in fully polished dioramas (see Figure 19). In my own observations at the museum, I noticed a tonal shift as visitors entered this section, encapsulated by one visitor's remark: "It's so sad they just hung them up there like that." This statement exemplifies the emotions associated with death coming into focus, even though, technically, mounting the skin

[77] Luke, "Museum Pieces," 9.

[78] Preston, *Dinosaurs in the Attic*,120.

[79] Preston, *Dinosaurs in the Attic*, 126.

rather than taxidermying makes no difference in the animal's state of being dead. Through the dialogue of the audio stop, the mounted bobcat becomes aware of its predicament and questions why it wasn't posed like the other specimens in the museum. The two then debate whether it's more authentic and dignified to be left as is, rather than stretched and manipulated into an idealized form. The living bobcat goes on to question whether the information gathered from the study skin can actually help address any of the negative changes affecting its habitat and survival. Through this exchange, death is brought into play as a tool for constructing authenticity, where the more "authentically dead" something is, the more scientific authority it can hold. At the same time, the conversation opens up questions about which animals are prioritized for diorama display, how each is a product of specific historical contexts, and who benefits from the scientific knowledge produced by the museum.

Wonder

The production of feelings of wonder in AMNH is multifaceted. From the institution's point of view as outlined in *Windows on Nature,* wonder is generated in the diorama through their ability to replicate not just nature but the feelings of awe and discovery that nature engenders.[80] While most viewers have enough lived experience to recognize that these displays cannot act as direct stand-ins for the feelings stimulated by spending time in nature, wonder still emerges from the uncanny success of the illusion. The diorama's wonder lies in part in the tension between knowing it's a constructed scene and still feeling emotionally moved by it. Wonder prompts questions about the origins of the animals in the diorama, such as how they arrived, who brought them, and what forces shaped their current existence, but the diorama and museum offer few answers. Wonder also enters the museum through the diorama's ability to

[80] Quinn, *Windows on Nature*, 19.

generate strong memories and become nostalgic, qualities that make them appealing across generations.

In *Taxidermy Talks*, wonder becomes a foundational pillar. I position it as the essential ingredient that allows dioramas to remain compelling over time. It prompts visitors to ask questions and presents an opportunity to become attuned to the dissonance between the wonder felt in the museum and the wonder experience through less curated encounters with nature. Stop seven takes the listener to the monumental blue whale model hanging in the Hall of Ocean Life, one of the only stops that engages with a model rather than taxidermy (see Figure 20). In the dialogue the model whale tells the story of the day when humans suddenly started to change its eye and tail shape, give it a belly button and cover it in 25 gallons of cobalt and cerulean blue paint.[81] The living whale questions how the museum could have claimed authority in creating a model of its kind without knowing what it truly looked like, and wonders how the model can survive without water. The model responds by describing how people look up at them in awe, something that wouldn't be possible if they were still in the ocean. The dialogue moves between two forms of wonder: wonder at the museum's technical achievement and the wonder sparked by encountering a life size model of this immense creature. It also reflects on how wonder can be used to construct scientific authority, even when the facts themselves are speculative.

Conclusion

This paper aims to synthesize perspectives that both glorify the diorama as a productive medium for educating and inspiring environmental stewardship, and critically examine how the diorama constructs knowledge by assembling facts into cohesive narratives that become representative of broader cultural and political positionalities. It contextualizes these perspectives

[81] American Museum of Natural History, "Blue Whale Model Renovation."

by framing them alongside institutional facts and historical developments that trace how natural science emerged as a discipline and how taxidermy evolved into the diorama form we encounter today. Building on this foundation, I argue for the conditions that make *Taxidermy Talks* an effective and necessary intervention. The museum's current mission—"to discover, interpret, and disseminate knowledge about human cultures, the natural world, and the universe through scientific research and education"—demands that its content remain as dynamic as the subjects it seeks to illuminate.[82] I position *Taxidermy Talks* as an achievable format through which to reactivate the diorama. For the 25th anniversary of *Mining the Museum*, Fred Wilson reflected on what, if anything, had changed within the institution since he assembled the exhibition. While the conversation frames the *Mining the Museum* as still powerfully inspiring, it also emphasizes how much work still remains to be done. Wilson acknowledges that the historical society has made some efforts to address the institutional oversights his exhibition highlighted, such as updating labels, but as he notes, "they could do a little better.[83] *Taxidermy Talks* offers the American Museum of Natural History a chance to do better, using a format with endless potential for expansion and adaptation. At the American Museum of Natural History, one can observe nature on demand, without getting wet, dirty, or tangled in its complexity. *Taxidermy Talks* disrupts this sanitized encounter, inviting visitors to dig into the unseen histories, tensions, and constructed narratives behind each scene.

[82] American Museum of Natural History, "About the Museum," accessed April 25, 2025, https://www.amnh.org/about.

[83] Houston, "How *Mining the Museum* Changed the Art World."

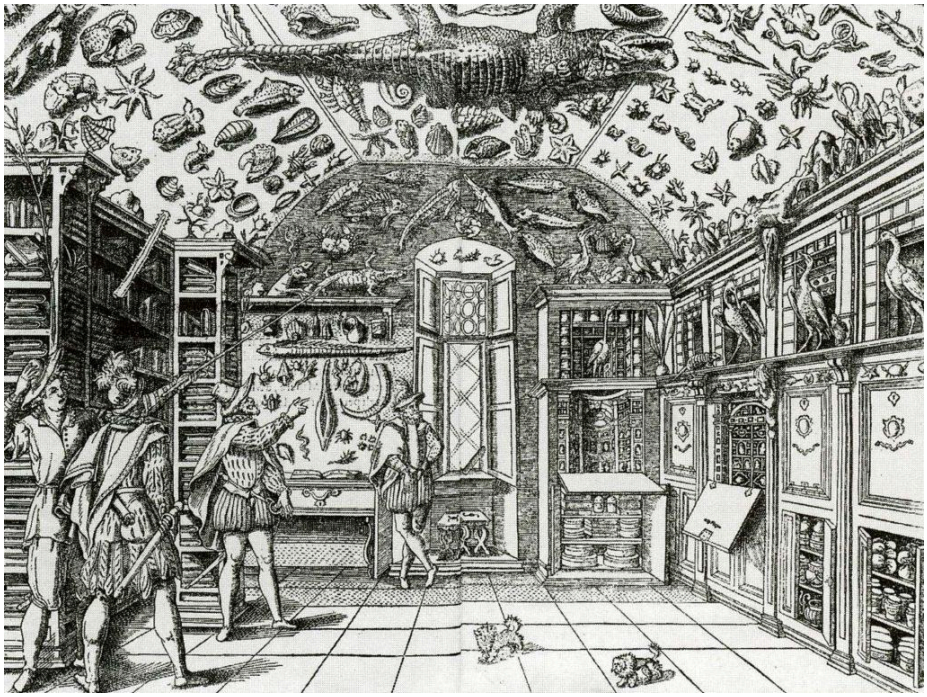

Figure 1. Interior of Ferrante Imperato's cabinet of curiosities, from *Historia Naturale di Ferrante Imperato*, originally published in Naples in 1599. Image via DailyArt Magazine, https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/cabinets-of-curiosities/.

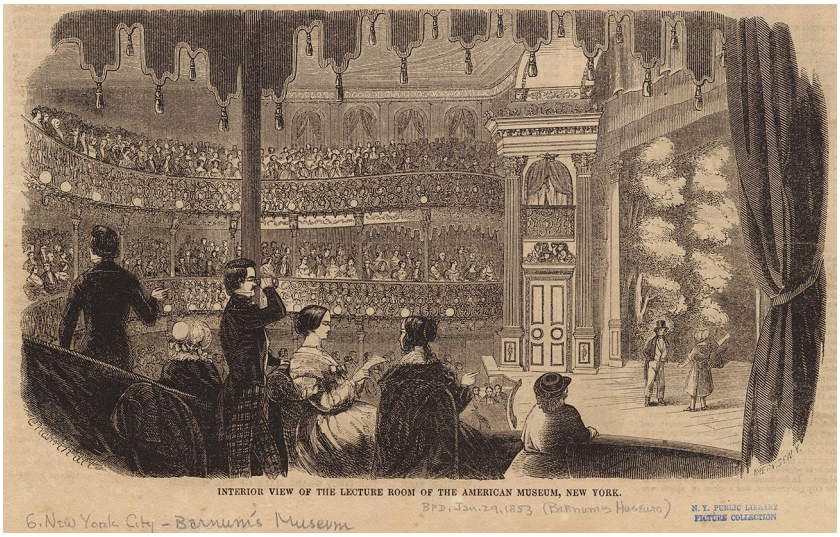

Figure 2. Samuel Putnam Avery, after John Reuben Chapin, *Interior View of the Lecture Room of the American Museum, New York*, 1853. From *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* (Boston: M. M. Ballou, 1854–1859). Picture Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Image via Visualizing NYC.

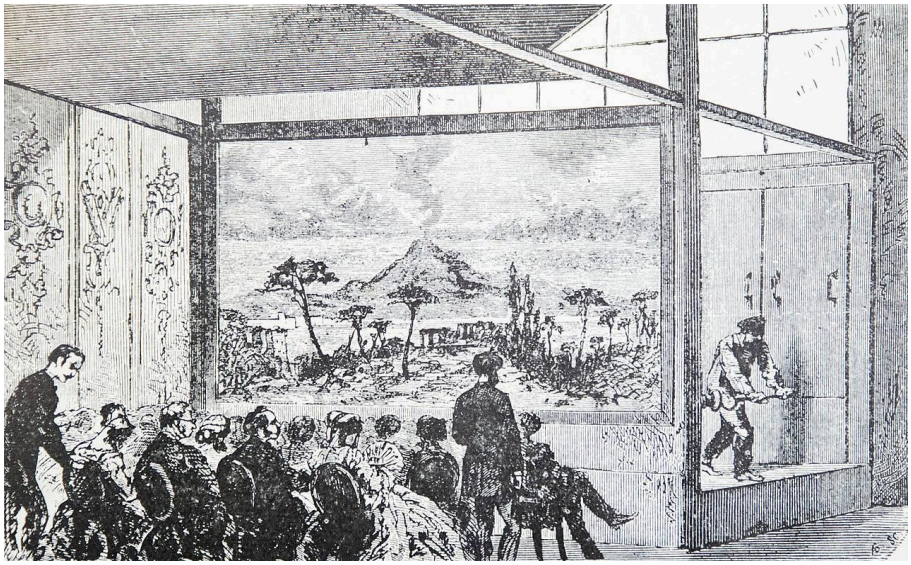

Figure 3. MarieLince, *Illustration of People Watching Daguerre's Diorama*. Image via Wikimedia Commons. Featured in "Daguerre's Diorama: A Precursor to the Daguerreotype," *Lomography Magazine*, https://www.lomography.com/magazine/319995-daguerre-s-diorama-A-precursor-to-the-daguerreotype.

Figure 4. Full mount African lions by Carl Akeley, showing detailed manikins and sculptural clay reference models used in early taxidermy practice. Image via Taxidermy4Cash, https://www.taxidermy4cash.com/akeley.html.

Figure 5. Distortion of background painting on a curved diorama surface. From Stephen Christopher Quinn, *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: American Museum of Natural History/Harry N. Abrams, 2006), 98.

Figure 6. *Habitat Group of the Robin*, photographed by the AMNH Photo Studio. Diorama. American Museum of Natural History Special Collections, Photographic Negative Collection, 6 x 8: 456. Accessed April 25, 2025. https://digitalcollections.amnh.org/archive/Habitat-Group-of-the-Robin-2URM1T9CFW4Z.html.

Figure 7. Example of gender relationships in AMNH dioramas within the Gorilla Habitat Group, Hall of African Mammals. Photo by Alvaro Keding / © AMNH. Image via American Museum of Natural History, https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/african-mammals/gorilla.

Figure 8. *The Spectrum of Life*, Hall of Biodiversity. Photo by Daniel Kim / © AMNH. Image via American Museum of Natural History, https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/biodiversity/spectrum-of-life.

Figure 9. The Dzanga-Sangha Rainforest Diorama at the American Museum of Natural History. Image via American Museum of Natural History (@AMNH), Twitter post, May 1, 2020. https://x.com/AMNH/status/1256372982232031232.

Figure 10. Resource Center in the Hall of Biodiversity, American Museum of Natural History. Image via Ralph Appelbaum Associates, https://raai.com/project/hall-of-biodiversity-american-museum-of-natural-history/.

Figure 11. View of the remodeled Northwest Coast Hall, reopened in 2022. Photo by Fabio Tuchiya. Image via Renfro Design Group, https://www.renfrodesign.com/page/northwest-coast-hall.

Figure 12. Early exhibition hall featuring cases filled with taxidermy specimens, ca. 1900. From Stephen Christopher Quinn, *Windows on Nature: The Great Habitat Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History* (New York: American Museum of Natural History/Harry N. Abrams, 2006), 11.

Figure 13. Saul Becker installation in a habitat diorama hall at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, part of the exhibition *Reframing Dioramas: The Art of Preserving Wilderness*. Image via Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, https://nhm.org/stories/peculiar-garden.

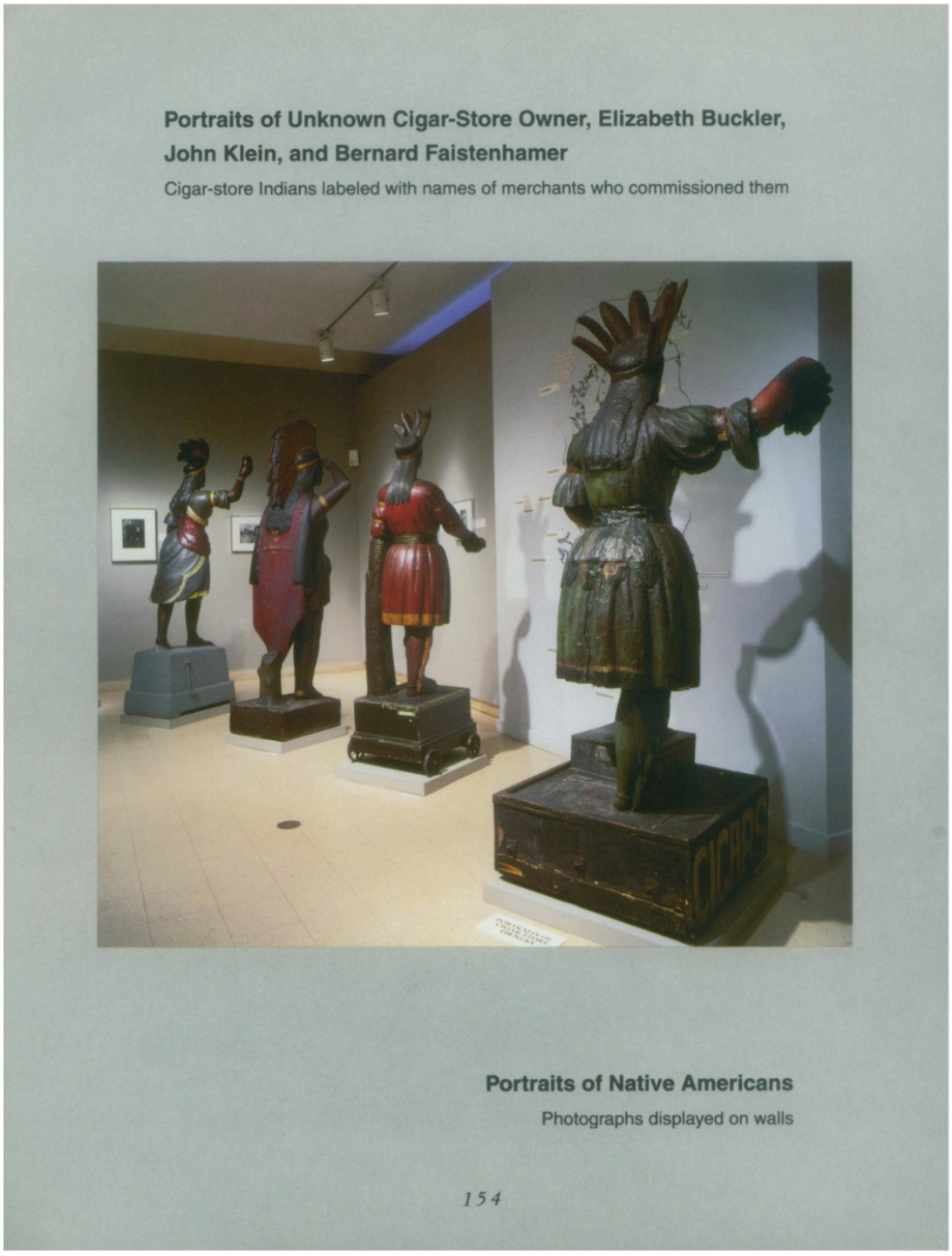

Figure 14. Example of Fred Wilson's use of curatorial strategies to critique representation and historical narrative. From *Mining the Museum* (1992–1993). Image via *Curator: The Museum Journal* 36, no. 4 (1993): 302–313. Accessed via JSTOR, https://about.jstor.org/terms.

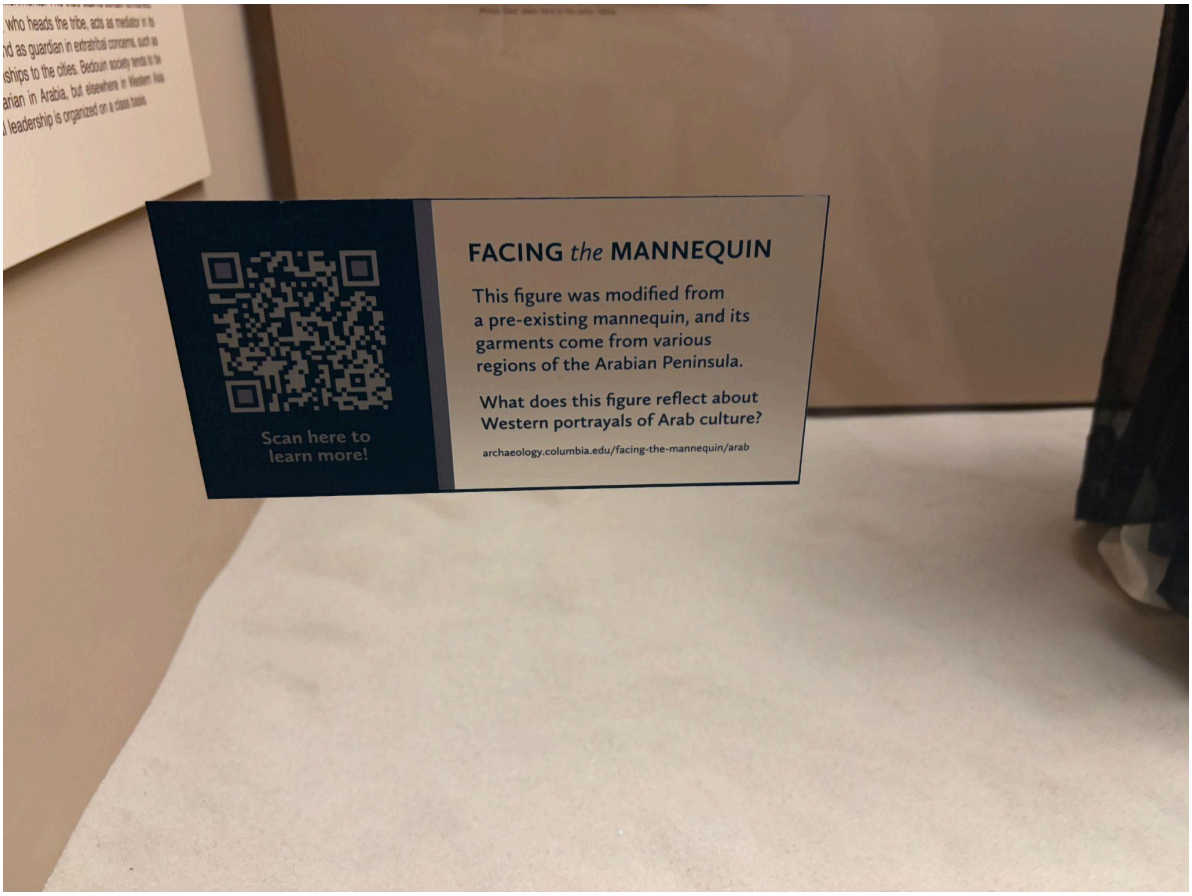

Figure 15. Example of QR code integration onto diorama, inviting visitors to reflect on the representation of Arab culture. Photo taken by the author at the American Museum of Natural History, March 20, 2025.

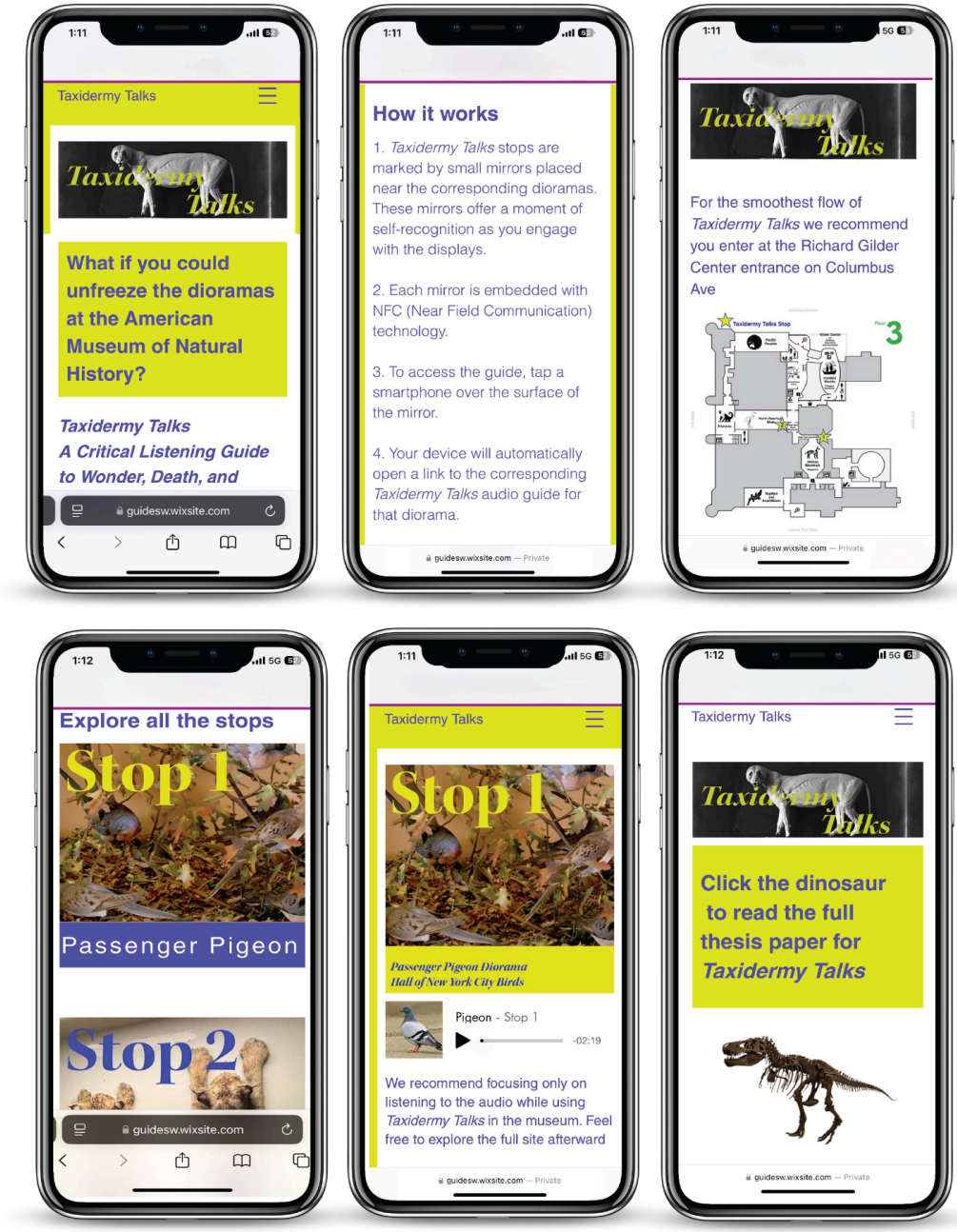

Figure 17. Screenshots of the *Taxidermy Talks* website accessed by tapping the mirror stop markers.

Figure 18. Wolf Diorama in the Hall of North American Mammals. © AMNH / R. Mickens. Image via American Museum of Natural History, https://www.amnh.org/explore/news-blogs/wolf-diorama-updated.

Figure 19. Mounted bobcat in the Hall of New York State Mammals, American Museum of Natural History. Photo taken by the author, March 2025.

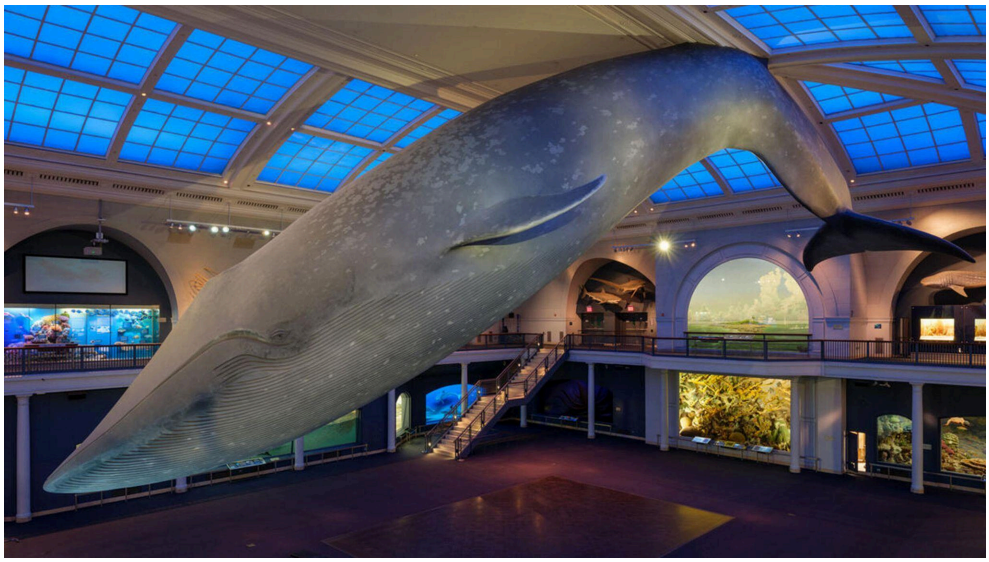

Figure 20. Blue Whale Model in the Milstein Hall of Ocean Life. Photo by Alvaro Keding / © AMNH. Image via American Museum of Natural History, https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/ocean-life/blue-whale-model.

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