“The Corner Case Contains an Arctic Scene”

The Changing Interpretations of a Polar Bear and the Arctic at the Horniman Museum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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Abstract: Following examples such as The Arctic and the British Imagination by David and Imagining the Arctic by Lewis-Jones this work focuses on the changing interpretations of the idea of the Arctic as it follows the interpretation of a taxidermied polar bear over approximately sixty years in three different exhibitions. Beginning in the 1880s this polar bear represented the resources available in the Arctic at international exhibitions. When the polar bear entered the Horniman Free Museum (London) in 1890 the interpretation changed to represent the wildlife of the Arctic in an “Arctic Scene”. Finally, in the twentieth century, the polar bear’s interpretation changed again to stress the evolutionary differences between large mammals, specifically those of the Arctic. Although the museum sold the polar bear in 1948, the analysis of this object in these institutions presents a model for understanding the construction and colonial interpretations of the Arctic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Keywords: Polar Bear, Collecting and Interpreting the Arctic, Horniman Museum (London), Colonial and Indian Exhibition, Biography of Objects

Writing in 1883 Thomas Frost noted “the attempts which have been made to penetrate the Realm of the Ice King and explore its secrets hold a high place in the records of maritime adventure” (1883:5). Interpretations of the Arctic changed dramatically through the nineteenth century. As McCannon and Riffenburgh note, that by the end of the nineteenth century the Arctic began to represent ideas of human achievement and limitless potential (Riffenburgh 1993:33; McCannon 2012:132). These notions, including the quest for the North Pole, prompted numerous explorations and interpretations of the Arctic in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries which defined the Arctic, its peoples, and its resources
in numerous ways. However, these interpretations changed dramatically from the end of the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century.

This work follows the shifting interpretation of the idea of the Arctic through the changes in interpretation of a taxidermied polar bear (Fig. 1) for approximately sixty years across multiple institutions. Similar to works by McCannon, Byrne, Cavell, and Spufford this work follows shifts in interpretation of the idea of the Arctic (McCannon 2012; Byrne 2013; Cavell 2008; Spufford 2003). Relying upon primary sources, such as newspaper articles and museum publications, this work argues that this polar bear served as a symbol of colonial conquest over the Arctic during this period. Starting with its inclusion in international exhibitions such as the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in the 1880s this work next follows this bear’s interpretation in the Horniman Free Museum (London) in the 1890s through its interpretation at the Horniman Museum and Gardens at the start of the twentieth century through 1936.\(^1\)
Although the owners of the polar bear in these three periods interpreted the polar bear differently, throughout this work I argue that each of these interpretations emphasised different aspects of the colonial Arctic.

This study differs significantly from other works which have focused on objects in Arctic exhibitions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United Kingdom as I follow one object across multiple exhibitions in order to demonstrate how interpretations of the Arctic changed over time. Poliquin notes the inclusion and interpretation of taxidermied polar bears in several museums and exhibitions in the nineteenth century but focuses on when and how these animals were killed and Victorian taxidermy rather than discussing the inclusion of these objects across other exhibitions (2012:3). Works by Lewis-Jones describe the Royal Naval Exhibitions of 1891 and detail several exhibitions on the Arctic but do not focus on the multiple interpretations of objects in the exhibitions (2005; 2017). Like Lewis-Jones, David discusses multiple museums and exhibitions which focused on the Arctic in the nineteenth century, including the polar bear in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition and the Horniman Free Museum, but does not discuss the changes in interpretation or follow this object further (2000). This article adheres closer to works by authors such as Cracium who notes the inclusion of Franklin expedition related relics in the mid-nineteenth century in several exhibitions and follows the changes in the interpretation of groups of objects across the exhibitions, but does not focus on one specific object (2014).

This work also differs from other works which focus on the interpretation of taxidermied polar bears including those that discuss the three institutions at the centre of this work. Henning focuses on photographs of taxidermied animals including polar bears (2006). Similarly, Baker discusses the use of taxidermied animals in art works and Marvin discusses their interpretation in zoos as representing bears and in photographs to represent the hunted (Baker 2006; Marvin 2006). Hensen mentions the inclusion of taxidermied polar bears within exhibitions in the late nineteenth century to highlight North American resources (2010). Paddon discusses the interpretation of taxidermied animals, including polar bears in their respective museums, (2011). However, these works do not address the polar bear at the three institutions in this work.

Other works include this polar bear, but do not present information on the changes in its interpretation. Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson present a survey of taxidermied polar bears in the United Kingdom, but only discuss the history of the polar bear at the Horniman briefly when they share communications they received from the museum regarding the sale of the polar bear (2006a and 2006b). Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson only briefly discuss the polar bear by reprinting correspondence they received from the museum on the disappearance of the polar bear (2006a). Levell mentions this polar bear in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition and the Horniman Free Museum, but only in a footnote and, like David, does not provide information on its interpretation or follow the object further (2000).

To follow the changes in interpreting the polar bear's interpretation this work utilizes an object biographical approach, advocated by scholars such as Hoskins and Appadurai amongst others, which demonstrates how an object's meaning changes over time (Appadurai 1986; Hoskins 1998). Hoskins notes how a biography of objects approach allows for the interpretation of self and identity over time through the object (1998:11). Appadurai notes
that objects move through institutions, space, or time their meanings may change (1986:56). Gosden and Marshall also utilise this methodology in their interpretation of objects and argue that “the central idea [of the biographical approach] is that, as people and objects gather time, movement, and change, they are constantly transformed, and these transformations of person and object are tied up with each other” (1999:169). Similar to Hoskins and Appadurai, Gosden and Marshall, I argue that objects can change their meaning depending upon who interprets the objects or the context in which the object appears.

Museum scholars such Tythacott and Alber- ti as well as others provide examples of using this approach to examine objects within a museum. Tythacott explores the use of five Chinese statues from the mid-fourteenth century to today, including their use at the Great Exhibition in 1851 and in Liverpool Museum starting in 1867, and considers their production and acquisition as war trophies. She describes how objects possess the meaning constructed for them by culture, and how this meaning can change. She states, “objects do not have real, innate, or fixed identities. Rather, meaning is a cultural construction forged in relation to interpretative frameworks” (2011:7). This idea – that the meaning of objects changes based upon societal constructs – forms the underlying theoretical basis of this work. Patchett, Foster, and Lorimer describe a biography of objects approach when they describe different interpretations of a taxidermied harrier (2011:115). Similarly, Alberti discusses how animals on display are interpreted by both the viewers and producers of these displays (2011:8). Consequently, all these works provide models on how to think about the changing interpretation of this particular taxidermied polar bear over approximately sixty years.

Accounts from the mid and late nineteenth century highlight how polar bears represented prized game as well as the untamed resources available in the Arctic at the time. McCannon provides a framework for understanding the allure of the Arctic at this time. He writes, “[the Arctic] was seen by some as an adventure-filled frontier offering liberation, whether from political oppression of the stifling propriety of ‘civilized’ life and the opportunity to win unimaginable riches” (2012:126). Within this passage McCannon highlights the view of the Arctic in the nineteenth century as a place where someone could gain fame and fortune.

Newspaper articles from the late nineteenth provide insight into how polar bears served as a symbol of the riches and fame available to the adventurous in the Arctic. An article titled “Great Sport in Alaska”, dated 7 January 1896 stressed hunting polar bears as great sport when it stated, “there’s nothing in the whole range of wild sport that anywhere equals that to be had from going after either grizzlies or polar bears in Alaska” (1896:39). Similarly, an article from Scientific American in 1887 describes polar bears as “the largest beast of prey in the North”, offers tips and safety measures for killing polar bears including keeping a safe distance from these animals, and describes how polar bears attack seals and walruses (1887:279). Both works stress the idea of a polar bear as a great prize for game hunters. Moreover, Frost details an encounter with a polar bear in the eighth chapter of his work and notes how the bear would make an excellent trophy (1883:87). Like the two articles above Frost noted the idea that polar bears represented an outstanding prize from the Arctic. Engelhard later expands on this idea and notes that “trophy hunters” during this period sought to kill
and display polar bears abroad (2017:93f). All these sources note how polar bears symbolized the polar bear as an outstanding resource and sports trophy of the Arctic in the late nineteenth century.

Although the exact date and location where this polar bear was killed and taxidermied are unknown, it appeared in multiple national and international exhibitions including the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in the 1880s. The exhibition, held in South Kensington (London) in 1886, included the polar bear in the Canadian section and is likely the place where tea merchant and Member of Parliament Frederick Horniman first saw the polar bear, sought to showcase the items, peoples, and resources available through the British colonies. The Official Catalogue to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition described the purpose of the exhibition as “one great Imperial display, of the resources and industries of the Empire of India, and of the Colonies that constitute what has been well called Greater Britain” (1886:9). Writing in 1886 in the Illustrated London News George Augustus Sala described the purpose of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in a similar fashion. He wrote, “[the exhibition is] intended to show to Britons at home of what stuff their brethren and fellow subjects in distant climes are made” (1886:472). Both works illustrate that this exhibition showcased the materials and peoples of the British colonies.

Contemporary accounts of the exhibition confirm the inclusion of the polar bear, displayed with other animals, in the Canadian section. The book Reminiscences of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition describes the polar bear as part of a game trophy within the Canadian section of the exhibition from J.H. Hubbard and emphasized the large size of the animals on display including a very large moose (1886:74). Furthermore, an image from this book shows a taxidermied polar bear standing over a seal in the same pose as the image seen in Figure 1 of this work (The Canadian Court). Additionally, an article, and an image of a polar bear in the same pose with a seal under its left paw appeared in The Penny Illustrated Paper dated 15 May 1886. As with Reminiscences of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition this work confirmed the presence of the same polar bear and described it as a part of this animal trophy (1886:306, 312).

Although some works which describe this game trophy note that the polar bear did not belong to Hubbard, but to the government of Canada, works that describe the polar bear agree on its interpretation. These works describe the polar as a game trophy representing Canada and Arctic wildlife while also extolling the prowess of Hubbard as a hunter (see works such as Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886 A Revelation of Canada’s Progress and Resources 1887:21; Latey 1886:150; “The Colonial and Indian Exhibition. Third Article- Canada” 1886:6). When describing the bear, an article in The Penny Illustrated Paper dated 15 May 1886 notes:

Mr. J.H. Hubbard… well deserves to be called the Canadian Nimrod. This plucky young shot is, as he is best pleased to be thought, a thorough sportsman; and judging from his truly splendid collection of animals that have fallen to his gun, from the walrus and Polar bear to the marten and canvas-back duck, few will deny him this title. (“Our London Letter” 1886:307).

The work Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886 A Revelation of Canada’s Progress and Resources described this trophy and Hubbard in a similar manner:

Mr. Hubbard is mighty hunter; every one of the animals so effectively arranged in the lofty and
crowded trophy was shot by himself, and they may be taken as a representative sample of the abundant game which still roams over Canada’s northern territories (1887:12).

By stressing Hubbard’s hunting skills, these works highlight the polar bear as representative of the game available in the Arctic. As noted by Ritvo and David, and tying in with the themes of the exhibition, the display of the polar bear and other animals in this way represents the resources available to and in the reach of the British Empire (Ritvo 1987:242; David 2000:169). These works confirm that this exhibition interpreted this polar bear to represent the game and resources available in the Arctic and as a symbol of colonial conquest which made these resources available.

Although the animals also appeared in the Canadian Court at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, Hubbard displayed this collection of animals in other national and international exhibitions in the 1880s. The Antwerp Universal Exhibition, 1885. Official Catalogue of the Canadian Section notes the inclusion of the Hubbard Collection while noting colonial connections of these animals by stating they all came from Manitoba and that they represent “the opportunities for hunting and shooting that province affords” (1885:42). Moreover, this work does not mention the polar bear directly, it notes how these animals represented the game in Manitoba available to hunters from outside of Canada. An article in Bradford Daily Telegraph from 1 June 1887 notes the inclusion of the polar bear as part of the Canadian trophy from the Colonial and Indian Exhibition at the Yorkshire Jubilee Exhibition at Saltaire as well as Hubbard’s prowess as a hunter (1887:4). As with the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, this article stressed how this collection of animals represented the game animals, resources, and trophies of the Arctic.

After the inclusion of the polar bear in these exhibitions in the 1880s it appeared again in late 1890 on exhibition in the Horniman Free Museum – the museum opened and run by Frederick Horniman (1835-1906). Operating between 1884 and 1898 the museum changed dramatically although it possessed a strong focus on providing education.3 However, instead of representing the resources and trophies of the Arctic the museum reinterpreted the polar bear to represent the animals of the Arctic following its goals of representing foreign places and peoples. Through this interpretation, though, and the interpretation of other taxidermied animals in the two Zoological Saloons the museum instead highlighted the exoticism of foreign animals and lands.

“AN ARCTIC SCENE”

Fig.2. Frederick Horniman c. 1891.
Image © HORNIMAN MUSEUM AND GARDENS.
Interpretations of the Arctic during this period also possessed strong colonial overtones. Cavell points out how Canadian studies of the Arctic now highlight British imperial culture and counters the false conception of it as “exploration literature” in these works (2008:4). Mirsky also summarizes this point in her work about the Arctic. When writing about Arctic exploration she states, “It was the age of discovery. All around Europe lay virgin lands, trembling to be touched. Discovery was the key that opened the doors to trade. It was the age of new, undreamed wealth… characterized by the ruthless robbing of lands and waters” (1949:10). Here Minsky outlines how exploration turned into the taking of Arctic resources by individuals and imperial powers.

My prior research makes clear that this museum possessed a mission to educate the public about foreign lands and peoples similar to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition. A museum document from the late nineteenth century also confirms this idea. This document, an invitation to the museum dated 23 December
1889, states, “this vast collection of fine Natural History and Art Specimens should be visited by those who wish to be instructed” (Horniman Museum Scrapbook of Press Cuttings and Other Items 1888-1901 page 4, item 7). Although this invitation does not provide information on the specific objects beyond the broad categories of art and nature Horniman and the museum collected, or even the information visitors will receive, it privileges the educational benefit the museum wanted to provide to its visitors. An Account of The Horniman Free Museum and Recreation Grounds Forest Hill, published in 1901, also emphasized the importance of this idea. Early in this work, the unknown author provides a history of the museum prior to 1901 that clearly states the collecting and exhibition motivations for both Horniman and the museum. It claims, “Mr. Horniman began… to collect in England and abroad those articles which either appealed to his fancy or seemed to him likely to interest and teach a lesson to those whom circumstances, or inclination prevented from visiting distant lands” (1901:11). Laying emphasis upon how Horniman wanted to provide educational content and instruction this work goes on to relate that Horniman decided to open a public museum in his home as the objects he collected and the number of people who benefited from viewing these objects increased (1901:11).

Documents from the museum show that it expanded from seven or eight rooms when it was a private museum in the 1880s to fifteen rooms in January 1890 focused on history and insects to twenty-four rooms in December 1890 with a natural history section (Greenwood 1888:150f; Horniman Museum Scrapbook of Press Cuttings and Other Items 1888-1901: page 2 item 002 and page 5, item 013; Guide for the Use of Visitors When Inspecting the Contents of Surrey House Museum: 1, 16; “The Horniman Museum Opening by Sir Morell Mackenzie Munificent Gift Intimated” 1891:2). Between 1890 and 1898 the changes to the museum included opening to the public two days a week in December 1890 to four days a week by June 1895, adding new rooms and objects, and operating as the Horniman Free Museum. The undated twelfth edition of the museum’s guidebook described the museum as containing twenty-three rooms broadly divided between the categories of art and nature including rooms focused on history and ethnography, and organized by geographic region such as the Elizabethan Bed-Room, Old English Parlour, Oriental Armoury, Egyptian Mummy Room, First, Second, and Third Indian Room, First and Second Indian and Ceylon Room, the Ancient Urn Room, the Orchestral Organ and Musical Room, the Horse Armoury, the Porcelain and Glass Room, the Long Natural History Gallery, the Ethnographical Saloon, and the First and Second Zoological Saloons (Guide for Use of Visitors When Inspecting the Horniman Free Museum and Gardens: 2, 16).

Newspaper articles from the early 1890s provide accounts of when the polar bear arrived in the museum. Articles from The Marlborough Times, and Wilts and Berks County Paper, dated 3 January 1891, and The Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser from 26 December 1890, noted that the museum contained the Hubbard collection previously seen in the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition as part of its zoological collection (“The Horniman Museum” 1890:6; “A Gift to the Nation” 1891:6). Consequently, the objects were in the museum when it opened to the public in December 1890. Furthermore, the article “A Suburban Museum” by A. Visitor specifically notes the polar bear as part of this collection, that these are the same objects seen in the Colonial
and Indian Exhibition and notes that Horniman purchased this collection (1891:6).

Contemporary accounts of the museum detail Hubbard's involvement with its Natural History collection. The article "Surrey House Museum" dated 26 December 1890 notes that Hubbard arranged the taxidermied animals at the museum (1890:2). Another article regarding the opening of the museum is more explicit when describing Hubbard's involvement. It states, "Mr. Horniman... referred to the efforts Mr. Hubbard and others in working practically night and day so that the Zoological section of the Museum might be open on Bank Holiday for the use of the public" ("The Horniman Museum. Opening by Sir Morell Mackenzie Magnificent Gift Intimated" 1891:2). Through these works it is clear that not only is it the same polar bear from the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, but that Hubbard was directly involved in arranging these objects at the museum.

Although differing from the evolutionary exhibition methodology, or the linear exhibition methodology which emphasized evolutionary progression and clear narrative storytelling, respectively the Horniman Free Museum was comparable to these two methodologies in one respect (for more information on these methodologies see Greenwood 1888; Balfour 1906; Penninman and Blackwood 1970; Hein 1998; Petch 2001). This museum too stressed a lesson: to compare societies from around the world and implicitly foreground the superiority of British society over that of others. Both Bennett and Hinsley point out how the layout of the World's Fairs and other international exhibitions in the nineteenth century encouraged visitors to compare and contrast cultures and view colonized cultures as the other (Hinsley 1991:345; Bennett 1995:79). Bennett expands upon this point when he writes:

Reduced to displays of 'primitive' handicrafts and the like, they were represented as cultures without momentum except for that benignly bestowed on them from without through the improving mission of the imperialist powers. Oriental civilizations were allotted an intermediate position in being represented either as having at one time been subject to development but subsequently degenerating into stasis or as embodying achievements of civilization which, while developed by their own lights, were judged inferior to the standards set by Europe (82).

This attitude of superiority expressed through the objects displayed in the world's fairs and exhibitions of the nineteenth century was not only represented in the Horniman Free Museum, but also reflects anthropological ideas of the late nineteenth century which contrasted cultures based upon their perceived development and used pseudo-scientific theory to reinforce ideas of cultural superiority among British viewers (Altick 1978:268; Hill 2005:115; Owen 2006:30; Qureshi 2011:186).

Echoing the museum and its curator Richard Quick, Henry Woolhouse, writing as A. Visitor (it is not known if this is the same A. Visitor as described above), noted the quality of the objects in the Locomotion Model Room, but confirmed that this hierarchy served to reinforce the idea of British superiority in his description of the gallery (Woolhouse 1897:3). Woolhouse noted that all the models were included in one case and that they were too many to describe in detail. He referred to objects as both "finely executed" and "beautifully carved" (Visitor 1896:3). However, Woolhouse also stated that the objects in this gallery led to a perception of British superiority based upon technological advancements. He wrote:

Here I saw models of canoes and other ancient boats, and when I contrasted them with our modern
'floating cities;' I marvelled at the advancement made. Here I could see the foundation stones, a little further along I observed the building enlarged until the corner stones came into view, and then my mind wandered to our great shipping centres where, in imagination, I could see the completed structures which are the backbone of our commercial prosperity, and which have gained for us the proud position of 'mistress of the seas' (3).

Through this analogy of a building, and despite admiring the craftsmanship of the works on display, Woolhouse interprets the objects in this gallery to reinforce the idea of British superiority, similar to works above.

The Zoological rooms in the museum possessed a similar interpretation and encouraged visitors to compare animals from around the world. Although Hubbard helped install these taxidermied animals, including the polar bear, at the museum, the interpretation of the objects within in the museum differed from the international exhibitions of the 1880s described above. While mentioning the polar bear, and other taxidermied animals in the museum, a newspaper article from 1893 notes, “[the animals] are all set up in a realistic and natural manner, and with characteristic surroundings” (“The Horniman Museum” 1893:5). As the museum's labels from this period are lost, the museum’s series of guidebooks between 1890-1897 provide insight into the museum's interpretation methodologies. Instead of highlighting these animals as large game trophies, the museum's interpretation focused much more on displaying animals from around the world. The third edition of museum's guidebook, dated December 1890, details that, like its other galleries, the museum divided the taxidermied animals in the “Zoological Saloon” by geographic area of origin with sections including birds of the British Isles, the Canadian Rocky Mountains, as well as tropical birds and insects (Guide for the Use of Visitors When Inspecting the Contents of Surrey House Museum: 13-15). This guidebook states that the museum included the polar bear in the Canadian section, surround by examples of Canadian birds and furbearing animals, when it notes, “the large group in the corner shows the Polar bear with his paw upon a species of the Harp Seal [emphasis original]” (15). Unlike Hubbard's game trophy at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition here the museum emphasized the polar bear as originating in the Canadian Arctic through its placement with other Canadian animals.

This interpretation of the polar bear contrasted sharply with other collections of taxidermy in the museum. The museum also included drawers that visitors could open in which the museum displayed its insect collection in the Long Gallery and Ethnographical Saloon (Guide for the Use of Visitors When Inspecting the Contents of Surrey House Museum 9-11). Furthermore, the museum also displayed collections of small taxidermied animals (such as frogs and kittens) depicting humorous scenes such as Frogs at Play, Kitten Pies and the Crab Party (Guide for Use of Visitors “The Horniman Free Museum”:16; Teague 2001:130). However, unlike the polar bear and other animals in the Zoological Section the museum did not include, interpret, or place these objects within their natural settings.

Contrasting with the polar bear’s earlier interpretation in international exhibitions, the museum relied much more on the construction of scenes to facilitate its interpretation of its collection of taxidermied animals such as the polar bear. Henson describes how museums during this period shifted to display natural history in this manner (179). This practice by the museum adheres with established museum and taxidermy practices of the era. George
Brown Goode, then Assistant Director of the Smithsonian, stressed this idea of placing taxidermied animals with other animals from the same geographic area to best illustrate nature. Writing in 1895 he stated:

The Museum of Natural History is the depository for objects which illustrate the forces and phenomena of nature, — the named units included within the three kingdoms, animal, vegetable and mineral, — and whatever illustrates their origin in time (or phylogeny) their individual origin, development, growth, function, structure, and geographical distribution — past and present (28).

Within this section Goode stressed the notion of displaying natural history based upon their geographic areas. As seen above the museum followed this advice in these two rooms, likely based on their knowledge of contemporary museum theory possibly based on a relationship it possessed with Goode (Nutting 2021:321).

However, as scholars point out, this manner of exhibition and interpretation emphasized the idea of these animals as exotic. Sheets-Pyenson writes how museums such as the La Plata Museum displayed materials from outside Argentina for the purposes of com-
paring them to native materials and varieties (1986:290). Furthermore, Ritvo points out that as nineteenth-century scientists began to sort natural history specimens by their geographic place of origin, this exhibition methodology emphasised the exoticism of these animals as compared with domestic animals and often highlighted the superiority of native animals (Ritvo 1997:44-45). As demonstrated below, a visitor to the museum during this period, upon seeing the polar bear and other Arctic animals did begin to compare them in this way.

This interpretation of the polar bear changed slightly before the museum’s closure in early 1898. The undated eighth edition of the guidebook notes that there are two Zoological Saloons again with the taxidermied animals split by geographic places of origin or type of animal including sections for tropical birds with insects from the same areas, groups of small animals from various continents and a forest scene (15). The polar bear received a slightly shorter description in this guide with it only stating, “The corner case contains an Arctic Scene: Polar Bear and Seal” (16). The museum repeated this short description in later guidebooks including the twelfth and fourteenth editions indicating the museum maintained this interpretation until it closed in early 1898 (Guide for Use of Visitors When Inspecting the Horniman Free Museum and Gardens:16, Gratis Hand-Guide for Use of Visitors to The Horniman Free Museum and Pleasure Gardens:15). Although it received a shorter description in these guidebooks, the interpretation of the polar bear also relied upon the animals placed around it from the same geographic area to depict different areas of the world.

The description of animals near the polar bear starting with the museum’s eighth edition of the guidebook during this period provides another interpretation of this polar bear which further emphasized the perceived foreignness of these animals. In addition to the Arctic scene, where the museum displayed the polar bear, the guidebook notes this room possessed sections such as “a forest scene” with animals such as deer, heads of moose and grey bears, and Rocky Mountain sheep, a “rock scene” with eagles, hawks, a Rocky Mountain goat and a Canadian Black Bear, and a display of small animals from India, Africa, and Australia such as an Australian bear, duckbilled platypus and a peccary (15-16). The manner in which the museum displayed these animals clearly shows how it divided this room into geographic regions, and as described above, encouraged visitors to compare these animals from different areas.

In part twenty of his twenty-one-part serialized tour through the Horniman Free Museum, Woolhouse described some of the Canadian Arctic animals he saw in the museum’s Second Zoological Saloon and confirmed this interpretation. He wrote:

In another case is a beautiful moose deer or elk which is the largest of the deer.... Their skins when properly dressed make a soft, thick, and pliable leather. There is also, in another case, a monster walrus, the flesh of which is highly valued by the inhabitants of the Arctic regions. On the other side of the room is a polar bear attacking a seal, then follow a series of cases of birds in endless variety. These include two cases of Canadian prairie chickens and pinnated grouse (Visitor 1897:3).

This description confirms several different interpretations of the animal kingdom within the museum. First, Woolhouse mentioned the polar bear in this location confirming that it represented the Arctic along with animals such as the elk, walrus, and Canadian birds therefore inviting visitors to compare them to animals
from other regions. Furthermore, Woolhouse also touches upon these animals as resources of the Arctic, like the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, as he noted how people utilized the skins of these animals.

“The Polar Bear… differs from all other bears”

Frederick Horniman closed the Horniman Free Museum on 29 January 1898 and demolished it in May of the same year in order to make room for a new and expanded museum building. By the time the museum reopened to the public in a new building on 29 June 1901 it changed dramatically. To this end, the museum, now run by the London County Council, focused the museum's collecting and exhibition methodology to highlight the evolution of human ideas and civilization, similar to the practices utilised by the Pitt Rivers Museum and Liverpool Museum at the end of the nineteenth century. The museum appointed A.C. Haddon as Advisory Curator in 1902 and H.S. Harrison as Resident Curator in 1904. A book on the new museum printed in 1901 noted this approach when it highlighted and described the arrangement of objects in one of the new exhibitions. It stated:

The most interesting feature in the south hall is perhaps the anthropological collection, the various objects in which relate to man, and particularly the products of his handiwork in pre-historic, ancient,
and modern times. The collection commences with the implements of the Stone Age, by the side of which are placed, for comparison, some modern stone implements from the South Sea Islands (An Account of The Horniman Free Museum and Recreation Grounds Forest Hill 1901:28-30).

This passage highlights how, instead of focusing on ethnography and grouping different cultures, objects, and peoples together based primarily on geographic region, the museum after 1901 showcased the evolution of technology by grouping together objects of similar types, regardless of their place or time of origin to compare cultures across multiple time periods. Bennett describes this process which took place at many museums in the late nineteenth early twentieth centuries as museums sought to rearrange their collections into evolutionary sequential order without adding new objects (2004:74).

The museum reorganized the natural history collections in the same manner. The museum’s 1901 annual report described this new methodology when it stated, “the Natural History Department is mainly zoological in character; and for the present the arrangement is chiefly systematic. A series of all cases have been arranged to illustrate the history of animals” (1902:10). As with above, and similar to the Natural History Museum of London this statement from the museum shows that it moved away from organizing collections and exhibitions by geographic area and towards a focus on evolution (Pycraft 1910:2; Poliquin 2012:125, 131). Unlike the methodology of the previous museum, this museum now emphasized comparing traits among animals from different regions.

Scholars of the Arctic note how Western views towards the Arctic changed by the beginning of the twentieth century echoing these evolutionary schemes. McCannon described these changes when he wrote:

By the eve of the First World War, Americans and Europeans alike perceived themselves as having stormed and taken the Arctic, much like crusaders… They had forced wide open the doors of the Arctic’s treasury, hauling out riches by the fistful and devising ways to plunder more in time to come. They had probed its ecosystem’s hidden workings: the patterns of its weather, the life cycles of its flora and fauna, the movement of its glaciers and seas (2012:126).

McCannon here notes how, by this time, views of the Arctic changed from a place of mystery for exploration and fortune to a place now understood to fit within established scientific models. Furthermore, Spufford highlights how anthropologists and zoologists began to catalogue the Arctic using the same methodologies in order to compare the physical differences of animals (1996:225). Based upon these sources, it is clear that by this period attention turned from exploration of the Arctic to understanding its physical phenomenon, including the wildlife, such as polar bears.

Scholars within the field of zoology and in the museum sector highlighted this manner of studying and displaying animals. Writing in 1901 Davenport described the advances of zoology in the nineteenth century and stressed this type of methodology. He wrote, “comparing the beginning of the twentieth century with that of the nineteenth, we find the most striking advances have taken place… as a result of the general acceptance of the evolution doctrine, the study of the geographic distribution of organisms and of adaptions” (1901:315).

In this article, written the same year the museum opened, Davenport stressed the idea that zoology now focused on the evolution and differences in the attributes of animals. William Henry Flower, the director of the Natural History Museum (London) between 1884 and 1898 also advocated displaying animals in
this manner. In his essay titled “School Museums” Flower wrote, “in zoology the collection should consist of illustrations of the principal modifications of animal forms, living and extinct, a few selected typical examples of each being given, showing the anatomy and development as well as the external form (1898:59). Like Davenport, here Flower notes that museums should display animals based on their characteristics in order to show the differences between their anatomy.

However, as Bennett notes, this schema and how it was implemented at the Horniman Museum encouraged visitors to make links within nature and culture of uninterrupted progress. Bennett writes:

This [exhibition plan] comprised the central exhibition rhetoric through which the ‘evolutionary showmen’ sought to display the orders of nature and culture, and the relations between them, in ways that would regulate progress by providing a template for its smooth and uninterrupted advance (2004:165).

While grouping nature and cultural exhibitions together within this description Bennett stresses how this manner of displaying natural history stressed the idea of progress. He goes on to note how the Horniman Museum fit within this idea by noting a 1906 report from the museum which emphasized how the museum was in the process of relabelling objects to fit within this series and noted the use of labels.
and handbooks within the museum as the key to understanding the sequences the museum presented (2004:167).

The museum’s 1904 guide to the collection illustrates these changes as well as how it interpreted the polar bear within this new paradigm. This guidebook notes that the museum divided its natural history collection by protozoa and metazoa (single and multi-celled animals) with the latter group divided by classification (1904:28). The guidebook goes on to note how the museum arranged the collection as it described the animals on the north wall of the North Hall by stating, “A Survey of the Animal Kingdom, illustrated by drawings or actual specimens, is designed to indicate at a glance the relative position of one group of animals to another [emphasis original]” (1904:28). With this label, the museum confirms that it moved away from showing animals in their natural habitats and more towards demonstrating the similarities between different animals and animal groups.

Although located in the North Hall next to collections of birds, reptiles, insects, lion, and the walrus (where it would stay through 1936), the guidebook interpreted the polar bear alongside other bears and with a group of land carnivores such as big cats, dogs, and weasels (1904:26, 29). It states:

The Ursidae, or Bears, is the last important family of the land carnivores. They are all much alike in
form, varying chiefly in size. A Brown-bear and cub, the head and skull of a Grizzly-bear, the head of a Black-bear from the Rocky Mountains, and a Polar, or Arctic, Bear with a captured Seal are exhibited. [emphasis original] (1904:29).

As seen through this description, the bear fits into the new schema not based on its place of origin, though that is mentioned, but compared to other carnivores, and bears specifically to emphasize differences between animals within similar classifications as with the animals found on the North Wall. Additionally, like the animals on the North Wall, this description of the bears in the museum’s collection also includes the family name of bears which encourages the viewer to see and compare these animals at a glance. As mentioned above, the information on this evolutionary display methodology stems from the handbook rather than the placement of the polar bear. Moreover, this interpretation stressed how the polar bear fits in a scheme with other bears.

The museum’s second edition of the guidebook (dated 1912) provides a slightly different interpretation following this evolutionary methodology. In describing the polar bear the guidebook states:

The Polar Bear (*Ursus maritimus*) differs from all other bears in having white hair, and also from the greater number of white animals in retaining its white coat throughout the year, instead of changing it in the summer for one of a darker colour. This bear captures and feeds upon seals and porpoises, and is here represented as having just killed a seal. [emphasis original] (1912:74).

Differing from the previous interpretation, but still focusing on evolution, the museum compares the polar bear to other bears based upon its fur. Furthermore, although not mentioning the Arctic, the museum interprets this animal as originating from the Arctic by mentioning that its fur does not change colour, unlike other animals. Moreover, this interpretation
also includes the full species name of polar bears which again highlights the museum’s focus on relating animals to one another.

This new interpretation not only fits in with the museum’s new focus, but also an interest in the natural and evolutionary history of Arctic animals. Levere notes that by the early nineteenth century visitors to the Arctic noted differences between Arctic and non-Arctic flora and fauna and by the mid-nineteenth century they took note of the adaptations by polar bears to fit this environment (1993:181-184, 217). Additionally, Engelhard notes that during Arctic expeditions in 1858 and 1859 James Lamont speculated on the evolutionary origin of polar bears and later elaborated on these thoughts with encouragement from Charles Darwin (2017:59f). The interpretation of the polar bear in the museum fits well within the paradigm of comparative zoology, as mentioned above, and marks a sharp change from the interpretation of the idea of the Arctic in the international exhibitions of the 1880s and the Horniman Free Museum in the 1890s.

Although Haddon left the museum in 1915 the interpretation of the natural history collected, and of the polar bear, remained fairly static. The museum’s third guide to the collection (dated 1921) describes the division of the collection as similar to other museum publications since the turn of the twentieth century—by classification of animals or animal attributes such as locomotion, and defences as well as a section including live animals (1921:98). The description of the polar bear in the 1921 guidebook is exactly the same as the 1912 guidebook with one exception which harkens back to the nineteenth-century descriptions of polar bears in the wild. The guidebook replaces the final sentence of the 1912 guidebook with the following, “The bear, which is found in the Arctic regions, feeds chiefly on seals, porpoises, and fish. The specimen exhibited is mounted as though it was in the act of killing a seal” (1921:100). As seen through this description, and label in Figures 7 and 8, this description again highlights the Arctic origin of the polar bear while still focusing on the differences between bears. Moreover, as mentioned above, this interpretation relies upon the text as it is placed next to a lion, a walrus and cases of birds in the North Hall.

The fourth edition of the guidebook (dated 1936) expanded further upon these themes from the 1921 guidebook. This work states:

The Polar Bear (Ursus maritimus), an inhabitant of the Arctic regions, is the only bear whose hair is white. It differs, too, from most white northern animals in retaining its white hair through the year, for as a rule such animals have a darker coat in the warm months. This bear feeds mainly on seals, porpoises, and fishes. The specimen exhibited is represented as standing over a seal which it has just killed. (1936:88).

Like previous guidebooks, this description stresses its connection with the Arctic through the emphasis on its white hair and place of origin and provides the species name of polar bears as tying in with the idea of understanding it within an evolutionary line as well as the scientific laws of the Arctic (McCannon 2012:219).

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the museum’s records and information about this polar bear stop in the late 1940s. On 17 September 1948 the museum sold the polar to a local scrap merchant named T. Allen (Churcher 2014). After this sale the museum does not know what happened to the polar bear.
though it was rumoured to appear in a display in Selfridges and in Southend-on-Sea (Churcher 2014). However, research about the polar bear conducted in 2006 did not find any definitive proof of its history after 1948 or its location.

Following a biography of objects approach this work focused on how this polar bear represented different ideas of the Arctic from its inclusion in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in 1886 through two incarnations of the Horniman Museum into the twentieth century. The interpretations of this polar bear in three locations highlighted different ways of thinking about the Arctic and stressed the idea of colonial control over the Arctic. The international exhibitions of the 1880s highlighted the bear as a trophy and representative of the resources available in the Arctic by including it with large and fierce big game animals found in this region. In the 1890s the Horniman Free Museum changed the interpretation to focus on the mystery of the polar bear and the Arctic aligning with its interpretive focus of providing information on distant lands, but also encouraged visitors to compare and contrast animals from different areas of the world. In the twentieth century, the Horniman Museum and Gardens reinterpreted this bear to showcase its differences with other bears and large animals as well as how it adapted to the Arctic fitting with the museum’s focus on highlighting human cultural and animal evolution. Consequently, this work presents a model for thinking about the interpretation and reinterpretation of places through objects.

Notes

1. The museum sold the polar bear and other natural history objects to T.E. Allen on 17 September 1948 and it has not been seen since then (Churcher 2014). However, polar bears did return to the museum in late 2006 though early 2007 in the Great White Bear touring exhibition from Brydis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson which featured photographs of the taxidermied polar bears in the United Kingdom.

2. For example, an article in The Penny Illustrated Paper titled “The Hubbard Game Trophy” dated 4 September 1886 notes that the polar bear and the walrus belong to the government of Canada (150).

3. Scholars do not know precisely when Horniman first opened his house as a museum. A newspaper article from 22 November 1884 provides evidence that Horniman organized the museum (known as the Surrey House Museum) into themed rooms and stated that the museum was open by appointment only (Horniman Museum Scrapbook of Press Cuttings and Other Items 1888-1901: page 2 Item 002).

4. Although there is not a date listed on this document, this guidebook is likely dated between June 1895 and May 1896. The guidebook describes the museum as being open on Sundays, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. However, this guidebook does not mention the New Oriental Saloon which the Sixth Annual Report records as opening on 25 May 1896 (Quick 1897).

5. This guide notes that the museum is open three days a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday) so is likely dated between December 1893 and June 1895 when the museum opened on these days.
"The Corner Case Contains an Arctic Scene"

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