



Angela Braren | Curating Himself:  
The Simson/Tose Dioramas at the  
California Academy of Sciences

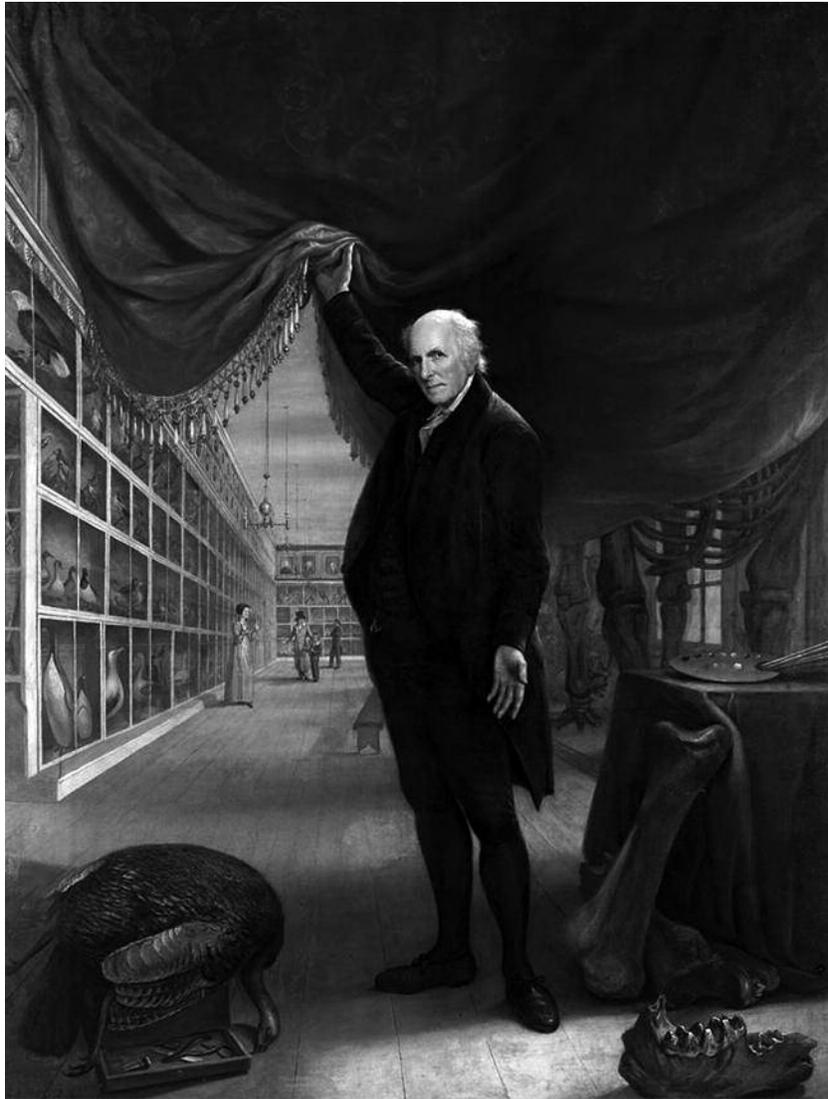


Figure 1—Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822. Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia

INSIDE GOLDEN GATE PARK IS ONE OF SAN FRANCISCO'S MOST treasured cultural centers: the California Academy of Sciences. It is both a popular museum and a leading-edge research institution that offers its visitors entertaining and educational presentations of science. The academy's African Hall displays twelve habitat dioramas that were crafted at the beginning of the twentieth century. On the surface, these dioramas seem to be simple presentations of animals in their native contexts, but in the following pages I will argue that the dioramas in fact reflect two distinct and historical constructions of American masculinity: the aristocratic and triumphant masculinity embodied by the dioramas' founding patron, Leslie Simson, and a modern, administrative masculinity embodied by their original curator, Frank Tose.

The habitat diorama finds its origins in the curiosity cabinet. Dating back to the mid-1500s in Europe, both professional and hobby naturalists kept curiosity cabinets. Despite their name, these collections typically occupied entire rooms and included hundreds of eccentric treasures, ranging from preserved fetuses—any kind you can imagine—to mounted butterflies, oil paintings, minerals, and animal horns and tusks. Charles Willson Peale's famous 1822 self-portrait, *The Artist in His Museum*, epitomizes the naturalist with his collection (fig. 1). In the mid-nineteenth century, naturalists began using narrative

Figure 2—Hermann Ploucquet, *Kittens At Tea—Miss Paulina Singing*, 1851



display styles that eventually led to the contemporary habitat diorama. In 1851 Hermann Ploucquet exhibited two works of taxidermy at the Great Exhibition in London that even Queen Victoria found amusing.<sup>1</sup> Ploucquet's "group mounts" featured anthropomorphized animals enacting scenes from everyday life such as getting a shave or having tea (fig. 2). Ploucquet's adaptation of Goethe's fable *Reinecke the Fox* featured mounted foxes in human clothing.<sup>2</sup> The first narrative grouping of mounted animals in a realistic setting came a bit later, in 1880. At a convention of the Society of American Taxidermists—a sort of "brotherhood" of museum preparators and taxidermy practitioners held in Rochester, New York—William T. Hornaday displayed *A Fight in the Tree Tops* to an impressed crowd.<sup>3</sup> *Tree Tops* featured two large male orangutans fighting over a female. In 1917 John Rowley created the California Academy of Sciences' North American Hall, the first ever gallery of habitat dioramas.<sup>4</sup> The Academy took home another blue ribbon when it opened the first-ever *African* hall of dioramas, the Simson African Hall, in 1934.

The African Hall's dioramas have been renovated several times and some have even been removed, but twelve are exact replicas of Simson and Tose's originals. Because the dioramas all have a similar, if not identical, layout in terms of animal positioning, I have chosen to focus on just one of them: *African Lions* (fig. 3). Even today, lions are commonly referred to as "Kings of the Jungle." In the early twentieth century they were one of the most sought-after trophies for big-game hunters like Simson.

In this diorama three lions are displayed: one male and two females. They are positioned in front of a painted background representing the African plains. In this landscape it is sunrise and the sky is a blend of layered clouds toned warm orange and cool blue-gray. The lions are at attention. All three face in the same direction. Something

appears to have caught their immediate interest. The male lion stands squarely; poised on top of a slight hill, he towers over the others. His eyes are half-closed, indicating that he is vigilant but also confident. His mouth is open as if he is producing a soft growl or about to give a loud roar. He has been caught mid-action. The female lions positioned below him have their mouths closed; they do not growl or roar. The female closest to the male is lying down. Her right front paw is curled inward as if she has just been distracted from grooming. Both she and the standing female have erect ears and eyes that are wide open, adding to their overall appearance of fearfulness. On one hand *African Lions* and the other dioramas that fill the African Hall can be understood as representations of the flora and fauna of Africa. But the mounted animals within the dioramas could have been configured in an endless number of ways and in an endless number of movements and gestures. Using the technology of taxidermy, the dioramas' creators configured them in a way that appeared "natural" but actually regurgitated the gender hierarchy of early twentieth-century America by emphasizing male dominance and female submissiveness. The dioramas asserted, and still do, that males ought to wield power and authority.

### Leslie Simson, "The Greatest Hunter"

LESLIE SIMSON (1867–1939) WAS A WEALTHY INDUSTRIALIST WHO spent his leisure time hunting trophy animals—indeed, Simson was often described as "the greatest hunter of big game in Africa."<sup>5</sup> In 1930 he proposed that, if the academy would build a "big enough" space, he would collect the animals needed to fill it and shoulder the expense as well.<sup>6</sup> This proposal was "enthusiastically received."<sup>7</sup> With the academy's full support, Simson's personal hobby would yield a public monument in his honor.

Figure 3—*African Lions* exhibit, California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco





Figure 4—Theodore and Kermit Roosevelt with Cape buffalo, ca. 1909–10. Harvard College Library

Simson's collection is unique not because he shot many animals, but because it represents a transformation in the culture of taxidermic display that reflects a simultaneous shift in styles of masculinity. Simson came from a long line of men who traveled across the world in search of big game. Before Simson there was Theodore Roosevelt, U.S. President from 1901 to 1909 and a notorious big game hunter. At the end of his presidency he and his son Kermit took a trip to East Africa, where they killed hundreds of animals<sup>8</sup> (fig. 4). As President and politician, Roosevelt warned the American public against letting their boys become decadent and over-civilized. In his 1899 speech at Chicago's elite—and all male—Hamilton Club, Roosevelt instructed American men on how to live “the strenuous life,” an existence based in vigorous effort, a manly and adventurous character, and bold undertakings.<sup>9</sup> “That is the stuff out of which we make good American citizens,” he said.<sup>10</sup> In 1907 a private collector named Baron Rudolph Ritter von Gutmann embarked on an expedition to the Alaskan and Siberian coasts. Along with him he brought Frank Tose, future curator of the academy's African Hall, as an assistant. During the expedition Baron von Gutmann killed large numbers of game. On one particular day Gutman managed to bag six moose bulls, seventeen walruses, three sea lions, one bear, four caribou, two rams, one snow sheep, two bald eagles, and numerous waterfowl, grouse, and porcupines.<sup>11</sup> Gutman

authored a book about his hunting exploits. In it he wrote that the abundant kills made it “the finest day of [hunting he] ever experienced.”<sup>12</sup> Both Roosevelt and Gutman killed and collected an enormous number of animals. (fig. 5) They, and men like them, filled their homes, hunting lodges, and offices with tiger-skin sofas, elephant-foot end tables, and elk-horn chandeliers. Their servants cringed at the task of dusting the tiers of trophy horns lining the walls. Even their wallets were trophies—scrotum-pouch coin purses were all the rage. Simson partook in this tradition of mass killing for prestige. With it he also partook in a certain type of masculinity that reveled in raw power and the triumph over nature. But Simon entered the sport as this tradition was ending and a newer trend was beginning, one that paid attention to the qualities of individual animals.

Since Simson’s animals would be exhibited to the public for informative and instructional purposes, he was very particular about which animals he collected. From his base in the Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi, Kenya, he wrote to the Academy, “I have seen a great many lions lately but no really good male[s] so have not shot one.”<sup>13</sup> Days later he wrote, “Previously I sent only a male and a female. The male being adult but from country where horns run small. In this shipment I send two good males . . . I have a set of good horns, which are at my house in Berkeley and could be used on bull sent as this bull is on the small side.”<sup>14</sup> That Simson’s letters are filled with commentary about his search for an ideal male body worthy of display in his African Hall is not surprising. Male animals were the focus of his collecting and so he was naturally disappointed that the male animals he collected were anything less than ideal trophies; a “good” specimen, for example, could only be great if it had large horns. In cases where a perfect trophy kill could not be obtained, he asked that a composite animal be built for the display. At the time, building a composite

Figure 5—Hides of animals killed on a Theodore Roosevelt expedition, Rochester, New York. CROSBY FRISIAN FUR CO/National Geographic



animal and then installing it in a museum was an odd request: The creators of the dioramas, like other professionals involved with natural history museums, intended habitat dioramas to be scientific displays. They were supposed to show typical specimens in typical scenes. But Simson found the ideal representation of bodies—male bodies in particular—more important than displaying an actual representative example. It is significant that Simson considered the ideal male antelope body to be large and have large horns; both are features that symbolize power, strength, and the capacity to triumph over others. In privileging scale and phallic symbols, Simson's attitudes say much about the ways hunting big game was equated with achieving a ubiquitous twentieth-century masculine ideal.

Simson's aristocratic background and inherited wealth allowed him to go on mass killing sprees like Baron von Gutmann and Roosevelt had done before him. These men claimed their right to resources and access both because of British and German colonial rule in East Africa—the territory most favored by Roosevelt and Simson—and because of the privileged social position that their racial and gender identity granted them. For this reason it becomes apparent that colonial masculinity's power was inextricably linked with colonial rule. In abusing their political affiliations and social standing, these men presented their vision of Africa to a public that in the early days of the twentieth century had almost certainly never been to the enormous continent. As the interpreters of this unknown—and largely inaccessible—realm, Simson and the academy were empowered to establish a particularly Western cultural fantasy of Africa in their dioramas.

But Simson joined the trend of triumphant, colonial masculinity a bit too late. In the U.S., a new economic class of Americans was emerging and with it a new style of masculinity.<sup>15</sup> As Gail Bederman

writes in her book *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race In The United States, 1880-1917*, “between 1880 and 1910, then, middle-class men were especially interested in manhood.”<sup>16</sup> These immigrant and working-class men—and suffragette women—were challenging the dominant belief that wealthy white men should determine the nation's destiny. Middle-class masculinity differed from aristocratic masculinity. Instead of relying on the performance of triumph to secure their position, middle-class men expressed their masculinity through their managerial capacities. African Hall is the material residue of this larger, cultural shift in dominant styles of masculine presentation. But this shift did not happen immediately as a simple substitution, nor was it without conflict. Interestingly, these two styles sometimes worked together in a mutual effort to establish authority. We see this in the African Hall project. Simson African Hall was not exclusively the work of Simson, as its name might suggest. Frank Tose's contributions to the project were invaluable.

### **Frank Tose, Chief of Exhibits**

WHEN FRANK TOSE (1884–1944) ACCOMPANIED BARON VON Gutmann to the Alaskan and Siberian coasts in 1907 he did not amass piles of dead animal bodies as his employer did. In fact, Tose wasn't even a hunter. Rather than using a gun on his trips to Mexico, the Galapagos, and Africa, Tose armed himself with notebooks and colored pencils. Tose may have walked alongside the great hunters, but he did not follow in their footsteps. As a scientist and a museum preparator he was a different kind of man. Tose did not kill. Instead, he used the art of taxidermy to create a vision of life out of death (fig. 6). In 1922, with just five years at the academy under his belt, Tose was promoted to the position of Chief of Exhibits and subsequently put

Figure 6—Taxidermist James L. Clark grooming an Asiatic lion, 1930. American Museum of Natural History, New York



in charge of managing the entire African Hall project. The academy thought Tose was the perfect fit. They described him as “gifted in every line of the museum preparator’s art, . . .one of the few men who could, alone and unaided, create a complete and satisfying habitat group—mounting the animals, building the rock work, reproducing the vegetation, painting a convincing background, and achieving a balanced lighting effect.”<sup>17</sup>

The staff Tose was working with was small, so he hired a diverse group of individuals from outside the academy to complete the project. The Jonas Brothers, a famous taxidermy business that remains in operation today, mounted the Hall’s zebras, Hunter’s hartebeest, and gerenuk in their studio in Yonkers, New York. In the fall of 1930 Tose traveled to Kenya, where he met and assisted Simson in the collection of plants and animals for the African Hall. While Simson was hunting and skinning lions and leopards, Tose was preparing field studies of animals in their natural settings. He made sketches in colored pencil, took photographs, and secured plants for the dioramas. But Tose needed to get back to San Francisco. His place was in the museum. Tose stayed in Africa for six months while Leslie Simson would stay indefinitely. Back in the museum, Tose had managed to keep the project on track despite many challenges. In 1930 the U.S. was in a difficult place. The stock market had crashed in October of 1929 and the Great Depression was sinking in its teeth. Since even the academy was pressed for funds, Simson’s project was put on hold. In the letters exchanged between Tose and Simson during this time, Tose constantly assured Simson that the project was on target. Despite the uncertainty, Tose wrote: “Everything is going along fine and the steel is practically all in place in the new building. And as a matter of encouragement we are farther along than either Milwaukee, Cleveland, and comparatively speaking, New York.”<sup>18</sup>

As facilitator of the project, Tose brought Simson's monument to life when many American natural history museums were on the brink of opening halls of their own. Unlike Simson, who emulated a certain style of man that had come before him, Tose did not become Simson. Instead, cloaked in the professionalism marked by his long, pale lab coat, Tose turned to reason, modernity, and light. More specifically, African Hall is built on the basis of Tose's employment of an administrative method. Tose held standards of cleanliness, control, and discipline, and these aided him in establishing order and efficiency. Tose was a manager and he succeeded in getting the job done. This was his greatest claim to manhood. Further, by bringing the Simson African Hall to fruition, Tose also aided scientific and, therefore, national progress. His style of masculinity was one that trumpeted the greatness of the nation not through brute force and bloodshed like the men that came before him, but through creation, delegation, and professionalism. Unlike Simson, self-effacement and restraint brought Tose closer to the new masculine ideal.

Restraint played a big part in Tose's affect and art practice. Through taxidermy—a process of pinning, cutting, and stretching bloody, mutilated bodies—Tose restrained chaos and dirt. Tose's displays were a perfectionist's accounts of life—far different from the great hunters' lodges and trophy rooms that existed solely to illustrate power through an abundance of kills. His creatures appeared lifelike. So lifelike, in fact, that Tose said he knew his taxidermy was successful when it looked as though the mounted animal could walk out of the exhibit and into Golden Gate Park.<sup>19</sup> To make this perfect vision permanent, Tose would have needed to use scalpels and knives along with other tools of the taxidermist's trade, such as the popular skin-scrapper, bone cutter, hacksaw, and pinking iron.<sup>20</sup> Taxidermists also sterilized and scrubbed obsessively. They used fine-toothed combs to

go through animal fur. Every detail counted (fig. 7).

If we revisit *African Lions* we can see how the symbolism in Tose's presentation of the animals' bodies imparts an idealization of male power. The male lion is the focus of the diorama. He is elevated over the others and as such he claims his females and his land. Tose stitched closed and glued shut the female lions' mouths. There is no need for them to speak since they are not the rightful agents of Western culture keeping in line with early twentieth-century conceptions of femininity. But Tose opened the male's mouth, exposing his large canines; his capacity for violence will ensure that he is heard. And since it is virtually impossible to use real eyes when mounting animals Tose must have used glass eyes instead. Then, when he fitted them into the lions' skulls he glued the eyelids of the male lion at half-lid and the females' wide-open. It is no coincidence that the male appears confident while the female lions look scared. Tose's displays were not like the great hunters' lodges and trophy rooms full of mounted animal heads and horns, they were reflections of familiar human social dynamics. And in Tose's carefully constructed habitats, female animals were simply the props to the real star of the show: the male animal.

This emphasis on male dominance can be seen even more clearly in one of Tose's paintings. His 1922 untitled oil painting of a small herd of elk in an alpine setting depicts one male and three females. Again, Tose made the male animal the focus of the artwork. The three female elk stand in the middle ground and off to the right; they are alert and look in the same direction. The female elk are painted without detail. They appear more like generic ruminants than any particular subspecies of North American elk. The male, meanwhile, is in the foreground, at the center of the composition. It is easy to discern the dark, coarse fur around his neck, his large antlers, and the

musculature of his legs. Although the elk painting uses a different technology than taxidermy's, Tose uses it to strategically reiterate the gender order that is repeated in the African Hall dioramas—once again, his work asserts that males command power and authority because it is natural and right.

Tose relied on the creation of images of gender inequality to make it as a working-class immigrant and jack-of-all-trades in America. Tose was originally from England and is said to have grown up under “conditions of poverty and adversity.”<sup>21</sup> It was beneficial, if not crucial to his success, that he identify with the new and growing middle-class. As a modern middle-class man Tose relied on the naturalization of male dominance, and reproduced images of it as a means of achieving the American Dream. Domestic life situated Tose at the head of the family of man and ever closer to a masculine ideal. This reorienting, from a triumphant and aristocratic masculinity to a more self-effacing, managerial one was less overt in its ambitions, but a much more manageable endeavor.

On October 31, 1939, the *Berkeley Daily Gazette* ran an article with the headline “Leslie Simson, Noted Explorer, Is Suicide.”<sup>22</sup> The *Gazette* wrote that on the day of his death Simon had directed his Japanese houseboy, Yee, to summon his private physician and “closest friend,” Dr. Thompson, to his house in the Berkeley hills. While Thompson was driving to the house, Simson organized his belongings and wrote a note thanking the doctor for his care and instructing him to “notify the Bank of California trust department to square [his] accounts.”<sup>23</sup> The *Gazette* framed the suicide as a heroic death fit for a heroic life. More to the point, the article attributes the specifics of Simson's suicide to his inability to perform a manly identity. The article reads, “there was not much left in this life for a man who trekked the veldt and braved the hidden dangers of the African jungle.” Here

the *Gazette* implies that Simson had judged his life unlivable because, at the age of seventy-two, he could no longer embark on adventures or take risks, activities associated with the Roosevelt-Gutmann type of masculinity. Further driving the point home, the *Gazette* describes the events of Simon's death as another adventure, Simon's “last journey.” This journalistic send-off is proof of the importance attributed to presenting Simson within a particular context of masculinity even after his death.

The preparations Simson made just minutes before his death are similar to the preparations he would have made before killing an animal. For instance, he ensured that his body and the mess created by his suicide would be looked after and cleaned-up. He also left instructions on how to “square his accounts,” on what to do next. In effect, Simson prepared to stuff and pickle himself. Unwittingly, his demise marked the beginnings of the stuffing and pickling of the aristocratic and triumphant masculinity that he had championed along with Gutmann and Roosevelt. These men were dead, literally. But the contest over what type of man should claim the right to lead the nation continued.

Peale's self-portrait, Ploucquet's stuffed kittens, and the dioramas of African Hall are all visual artifacts of cultural change. They remind us that even gender has a history, and that Simson and Tose represent just one point on the map of that history's terrain. At the turn of the twentieth century masculinity was once again remade, although the new form relied on an old story. The bodies of animals and women were, as they would be countless times in the future, positioned both as props in the battle for male power and as the battlefield itself.

## Notes

- 1 Melissa Milgrom, *Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2011), 167–68.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid, 48–49.
- 4 Karen Wonders, *Habitat Dioramas: Illusions of Wilderness of Museums of Natural History* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993), 141.
- 5 Western Cartridge Company, “As Leslie Simson Would Say to David Putnam—“What These Little Bullets Do Is Surprising!” Advertisement, *Boys Life*, May 1929, 33.
- 6 Leslie Simson, “Collecting Animals in Africa,” in *The Simson Africa Hall of the California Academy of Sciences* 3rd ed. (San Francisco: California Academy of Sciences, 1937), 4.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 “A Photographic Look at the Life of Theodore Roosevelt,” Life of Theodore Roosevelt: Photo Biography, accessed March 17, 2012, <http://www.theodoreroosevelt.org/life/biopictures.htm>.
- 9 Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 193–94.
- 10 Ibid, 203.
- 11 “My Hunting Expedition in the Year 1909,” Lueder H. Niemeyer Fine Arts-Rare Books, accessed March 9, 2012, [http://www.luederhniemeyer.com/bibliophily/15305\\_e.php](http://www.luederhniemeyer.com/bibliophily/15305_e.php).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Leslie Simson, Nairobi, to Frank Tose, San Francisco, August 18, 1931. California Academy of Sciences Library, San Francisco, CA.
- 14 Leslie Simson, Nairobi, to Frank Tose, San Francisco, September 12, 1931. California Academy of Sciences Library, San Francisco, CA.
- 15 Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 15.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 *Academy Newsletter* no. 60 (San Francisco: California Academy of Sciences, 1944), 3.
- 18 Frank Tose, San Francisco, to Leslie Simson, Nairobi, June 10, 1931, California Academy of Sciences Library, San Francisco, CA.
- 19 Frank Tose, Papers, California Academy of Sciences Library, San Francisco, CA.
- 20 Albert B. Farnham, *Home Taxidermy For Pleasure or Profit* (Columbus: A. R. Harding Publishing Company, 1944), see “Chapters 1 and 2,” accessed March 12, 2012, <http://doit101.com/Taxidermy/chap1and2.htm>.

21 *Academy Newsletter* no. 60, 3.

22 *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, October 31, 1939.

23 Ibid.