

# A SUPREME ELEPHANT

## Movement, Materiality and Mentalities

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This paper examines the movements and transformations embodied in an African bull elephant on display in the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History, Sweden. The elephant was collected and mounted by taxidermist, photographer and naturalist David Sjölander (1886–1953). The elephant mount is considered to be one of the best in the world. A plethora of meaning usually disappears when an animal is inserted in a natural history collection. Presenting and ordering of nature sets the embedding of the natural history museum in culture and society away. However, the motives and actions that killed the old bull elephant and moved it from West Africa to Gothenburg were deeply embedded in the collecting tradition of the natural history museum, in the professional climate in the museum and in the spirit of the taxidermist.

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On December 4, 1948, David Sjölander, taxidermist at the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History, shot an old bull elephant in Portuguese West Africa, today's Angola, in the Huila province. For some time he had studied and noticed the animal's habits and movements, and perhaps he had admired the grace of a heavy elephant body. Sjölander took advantage when the elephant had paused for a midday nap under a shady tree – while waving his ears and now and then throwing sand over his huge body. Then Sjölander shot from a distance of about 10 meters. The bullet entered the body behind the right foreleg, penetrating the elephant's heart and made him fall to the ground with his legs folded under his body. Then the elephant trumpeted a couple of times, tried to haul himself up by fastening his trunk around the tree – and died. To be safe the locals shot an additional bullet into the elephant's hindquarters.<sup>1</sup>

Elephants have followed long, dramatic, spectacular, painful and lethal itineraries into menageries, zoos and museum collections.<sup>2</sup> Historically, individual elephants – the majority have been Indian elephants – have been protagonists of grand occurrences that in their time were discussed, described and depicted, and their remains, most often the skeleton, were displayed in museums.<sup>3</sup> This paper examines the movements and transformations embodied in an African bull elephant – collected and mounted by taxidermist, photographer and naturalist David Sjölander (1886–1953). The elephant mount in the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History is considered to be one of the best in the world, perhaps even the best (Seberg 1989).<sup>4</sup> Until quite recently, animals and the variety in human-animal relations have been mostly neglected in ethnology and culture history studies. The Danish historian Troels-Lund in-

corporated the impact of wild and domestic animals on culture in his seven-volumes opus *Dagligt Liv i Norden i det sekstende Århundrede* (Daily Life in the Nordic Countries in the Sixteenth Century) (1871–1901). Contrary to the marginal position animals were given in for instance Norwegian ethnology in the first decades after World War II, where they were seen as means for human ends, Troels-Lund depicts wild animals as subjects engaged in an on-going territorial battle, in the sixteenth century a lost case for the beasts in Denmark but not yet in Norway. He also focuses on the Renaissance society's frequent and frightening encounters between humans and animals, in which the animals continuously challenged the domesticated area (Thorsen 2006). In 1987 Harriet Ritvo published her work *The Animal Estate: The English and other Creatures in the Victorian Age*, demonstrating the importance of animals as beings and as symbols in constructing the British society, science and empire, and also showing the significance of animals in the period's way of thinking. Two years later, Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* was published, in which particularly her analysis of the African Hall in America's Museum of Natural History (AMNH) came to influence science, animal and museology studies. Haraway was the first scholar to deprive the natural history exhibition of its air of timelessness and disconnection, reading Carl Akeley's impressive dioramas as narratives of race, gender and imperialism. A third authoritative volume, that completely confirmed that natural history has been embedded in culture and society and thus has a history other than what is to be seen in the displays, storerooms and bookshelves of the natural history museum, is *Cultures of Natural History*, edited by N. Jardine, J.A. Secord and E.C. Spary. The motives, efforts and actions that killed the old bull elephant and moved it from West Africa to Gothenburg were deeply embedded in the collecting tradition of the natural history museum, in the professional climate in the museum and in the spirit of the taxidermist.

The human protagonist in this mini-drama, David Sjölander, shared a strong addiction and even an

obsession for the perfect mount with the 22 years older American Carl Akeley (1864–1926). But apart from sharing taxidermy skills and being socialised into the culture of the natural history museum from when they were young men, their conditions of carrying out their trades differed radically in many ways. During his career Carl Akeley worked in two of the most prestigious museums in the United States, the Field Museum in Chicago and later in AMNH. While Akeley was given several opportunities to go to Africa and hunt animals to realise his grand visions, first for the elephant display "Fighting African Elephants" in the Field Museum and later for the African Hall (even if he died before it was finished), David Sjölander mounted animal skins in the collections of a modest museum (more complicated because the taxidermist had not observed the animal in the wild), and birds he collected every summer in Swedish Lapland. The display concept was also different. While Carl Akeley successfully recreated an illusion of the African fauna in their habitats, David Sjölander never designed a habitat diorama. Except for the magnificent African elephant that stands freely in the middle of the Mammal Hall in the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History, Sjölander's mounts were put into the systematic displays.

The biography of this particular elephant exemplifies historian Reviel Netz's statement about the essence of history: "History is not at all abstract: it is a matter of flesh-and-blood individuals interacting in material space." And he continues: "History takes place when flesh moves inside space; it is thus, among other things, about the biology of flesh – as well as about the topology of space." Human beings are not the only creatures who make things happen when their bodies move, animals do this as well. "Thus history is embodied – and not only inside human bodies but in the bodies in all species," Netz concludes (2004: 228). The biographies of mounted animals may be studied as a material transformation that takes place in stages. Diverse movements are concealed in this impressive taxidermy work. Their complexity renders the elephant's biography from a live animal to a mounted skin: its flesh compared to the handling of its hide, bones and tusks,

the different movements within the museum of its skeleton compared to its hide, the construction of a narrative of collecting the elephant and the oblivion of what actually happened during the collecting expedition in Portuguese West Africa. Movement requires energy – and to me a striking element in the dead *Loxodonta's* biography is the extremely heavy, physical work that was involved in moving the elephant itself, when being flayed, skinned, cooked, transported and mounted. As I put together pieces of the elephant's biography, however, it became increasingly clear that I was also reconstructing a fragment of David Sjölander's *vita*. Why did David Sjölander subject himself, at the age of 62, to the toil that appears to have ruined his health? The collecting and mounting of the elephant was to be his last and also his most strenuous work, which, if successful, would require a variety of skills, such as logistics, knowledge about how to travel, hunt and collect in the wilderness, and intimate experience of how to transform a dead animal body into a masterpiece of taxidermy. Sjölander possessed these abilities. Yet there is an element of defeat in Sjölander's Africa expedition that puzzled me as I step by step made my way through the collecting story about the elephant; an old man's efforts to dazzle his audience by means and deeds belonging to a bygone time.

### Stepping Stones

Contrary to the famous Carl Akeley, who published his biography *Into Brightest Africa* in 1923, and who left behind not only his taxidermy works, but also letters, drawings, photographs and sculptures, there are very few primary sources in the museum's archives to shed light on Sjölander's Africa expedition. It is important to point out that the written and photographic material kept in the museum has disappeared. The family has his notebook from the expedition and a collection of unsorted photographs. I was not able to borrow the notebook for this article. Unfortunately Sjölander removed from the museum documents and photos that could elucidate his work in general and the biography of the elephant in particular. Sjölander was an excellent photographer and had as a young man been employed at the famous

photographic equipment company Hasselblad. In the early 1920s he made nature films in China and Tibet, and for this achievement he was rewarded with a silver medal by the Swedish Academy of Science in 1924. The only two existing photographs from Sjölander's Africa expedition in the museum's archives are taken by Vasco Ferreira, a Portuguese hunter hired for the expedition. One story making the rounds in the museum says that Sjölander put all the material inside the elephant, in other words that the mounted elephant is a kind of sealed archive, a gigantic container for the elephant's and Sjölander's common history. This story is strongly denied by others. Another possible explanation as to why Sjölander could have destroyed the material is that due to his work as a taxidermist he had been poisoned by arsenic and other noxious chemical fumes. Luckily five letters written by Sjölander to director Orvar Nybelin from Portuguese West Africa have been saved. Minutes from the board's meeting and letters from financial donors have been useful as well. Three bills for the collection of the elephant also turned up, and finally with many clippings from newspapers, I have been able to identify some stages in the movement of the elephant from West Africa to Sweden.

### In Portuguese West Africa: Killed, Flayed and Eaten

According to the museum's narrative, the encounter between man and animal was a happy one for Sjölander. The shot and the dead bull elephant represented the fulfilment of a dream he had nourished for more than two decades: to go to Africa to find, study and shoot a bull elephant and finally to prepare it using the dermoplastic method for mounting animals.<sup>5</sup> Sjölander had hoped to go to Africa in 1934, but had to cancel the journey because the museum was short of money; later World War II stopped him. But at last, on the 16th of July 1948, David Sjölander left Gothenburg with the transatlantic steamer "Gullmaren" bound for Africa. Nearly 62 years old, time was about to run out if his dream of collecting and mounting a bull African elephant were ever to come true. He travelled alone and brought with him 20 packing cases containing weapons, ammunition,

arsenic, formalin, borax, carbonate, zinc, cyanide, tent, toilet paper, DDT, a mosquito net, all kinds of knives, brushes, hundreds of glass jars of different sizes, 1,000 labels, matches and potato flour to mention only some of the supplies contained in the cases.<sup>6</sup> He returned to Gothenburg on the 18th of May 1949 with three and a half tons of material; as much as one third comprised hide, skeletons and tusks.

Sjölander travelled for two months and ten days before he reached the town of Moçamedes, the starting point for his collecting expedition, and he had to wait another month before he could continue towards the Sierra de Chella, a mountain range west in Angola. Late in November he neared the river Cacoropopo in the Huila province, and he wrote to museum director Orvar Nybelin, “in this part of Africa, elephants are not to be picked from trees. There are quite a lot of them, but they range widely around.” He came within range of one bull, but the animal disappeared with one bullet between the eyes, one in the ear and two in its side. There had been no rain the last two years, and “the days are as hot as hell,” while his sleeping bag could not keep out the cold. He also tells Nybelin that he had been seriously ill because of polluted water.<sup>7</sup> Nybelin’s dry answer expresses no concern for the wounded elephant: “I’m sorry that you lost the handsome elephant. But I hope that you by now will have succeeded in getting another one.”<sup>8</sup> And Sjölander had.

Director Nybelin received the news in a letter written by Sjölander 20 days later:

I have, in this, the pleasure to announce that the museum’s elephant bull lies “salted” about 14 miles (Swedish miles, i.e. 140 km) southwest of Moçamedes Desert, and is waiting for transport home. Even the skeleton has been taken care of. The tusks, totalling 47 kg are being kept in a safe place in Moçamedes. (...) I have lost two bigger elephants (wounded). The one I have managed to keep is a “medel Svensson” compared to local measures. Tip to tip (the curve) 8.77 m.<sup>10</sup>

The elephant was shot on December 4, 1948, and was displayed to the public for the first time on March

28, 1952. Between the two dates were years of endurance and hard work. First, the elephant that measured 6 metres around the belly – “a meat mountain” according to Sjölander – and 3.35 metres to its shoulder<sup>11</sup> had to be turned around, a movement that required 50 people, a jeep, an iron chain and three hours under a blazing sun.<sup>12</sup> The temperature was over 50 degrees C. Second, the animal was flayed, an operation that lasted until 11 in the evening. Finally, the skin was prepared with four kilos of phenol and 100 kilos of salt – “a Satan’s work”.<sup>13</sup> The meat was “devoured” by the locals who were hired for the expedition in one day, described by Sjölander as “meat mad negroes”.<sup>14</sup> Sjölander worked for two weeks until the hide, the cleaned skeleton and the tusks could be transported to his depot. During the preparation of the hide he was severely poisoned by the phenol. The big, thin ears that were very much torn because of a life in the thorny bush, dried hard as bone before the elephant was fully flayed. Rawhide can also hit back: while drying, it shrinks. In an interview from February 1951, Sjölander claims that he never would wrap himself in a raw elephant skin because he could then be “hugged” to death. Apparently, shortly before, two elk hunters had been killed because they had used a fresh-flayed elk hide as a kind of blanket.<sup>15</sup>

### The Photograph: What is the Point?

“The camera, an eminently democratic machine, has been crucial to crafting stories in biology,” Haraway states (1989: 44). There is only a single photograph in the photograph archive of the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History that shows David Sjölander and the dead elephant in Africa. The motive seems at first glance to fit into the genre “white hunter with his trophy”, a genre well represented in the archive. A series of elephant trophy shots taken about 1910 in South-Eastern Rhodesia, today’s Zambia, by Magnus Leijer, a Swede employed in the British administration, may serve as an illustrative example of the genre and its conventions. Following the practice of so many other white big game hunters in his time, Leijer used both his rifle and his camera. The trophy photographs mediated the hunter’s domination of animal and na-

ture and served as supplements or representations of displays of the material animal remains: “Displays of the remains of ‘wildlife’ and ‘big-game’ in particular were used in a range of settings – from scientific institutions to entertainment venues – to convey a variety of meanings, including the colonial prospects of the territory traversed and the manliness of the intrepid hunter” (Ryan 2000: 204). It is important to note that dead big game was also photographed to serve as documentation for the taxidermist when mounting the skin (Ryan 2000). Sjölander must have taken many photographs that would serve as support for the taxidermy work to come.

The Leijer trophy photographs of killed elephants can be classified according to three conventions. One is the newly killed animal before being dismembered and it is often the only body exposed. The second one is the proud, male, white hunter together

with his dead prey, smiling towards the camera and with his gun leaning towards the animal. On several of these pictures the hunter demonstrates the utmost humiliation of the elephant by sitting or even standing on its carcass. The third convention is the dismembering of the elephant, pictures showing the process of cutting up the body and displays of tusks, head and feet, filthy work executed by native people. As stated by Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald in their analysis of trophy photographs in hunting magazines, “the elephant is a particularly popular dismembered animal” (Kalof & Fitzgerald 2003: 114).

The picture must have been taken immediately after the animal had been shot, and shows Sjölander pointing at the elephant’s head: Was he trying to show where the lethal bullet entered the animal? Sjölander has placed his rifle on the trunk so that it leans against the animal’s head, close to the still



Ill. 1: Dead elephant with the hunter on the top. Notice that the animal’s tail has been cut off, the hunter is holding the tip of the tail. (Photo: Magnus Leijer ca. 1910. Copyright: The Gothenburg Museum of Natural History, GNM 5220 309)



Ill. 2: David Sjölander and the newly shot elephant. (Photo: Vasco Ferreira, 1948. Copyright: The Gothenburg Museum of Natural History, GNM 4576 1)

open, left eye. A closer look reveals, however, that the composition differs in many respects from the typical trophy photograph. The hunter does not pose triumphantly with a smiling face towards the photographer. He stands turned towards the enormous dead body, and his right hand points at a spot on the elephant's head, but since he killed it with a bullet to the heart, he cannot be pointing at a bullet hole. Neither is there much resemblance between the stereotype of a gentleman hunter and Sjölander. With the exception of the pith helmet, he is dressed as if he had been walking in the Swedish countryside: thick, clumsy trousers fixed by braces, a shirt with a white cloth in one pocket and a square object in the other and heavy tied shoes. He has a camera hanging on a strap over his left arm. What is he pointing at?

To understand the photograph we have to look carefully at the mounted specimen. When we look

closely at the part of the elephant's head at which he is pointing, we see a spot that is shinier than the rest of the body. I had noticed this several times while contemplating the mounted elephant, but I supposed it was due to decomposition of the skin. I found the explanation in Cynthia Moss's book *Elephant Memories* that just happened to be standing on the shelf beside my desk in the museum. Moss writes that

African elephants (...) secrete from the temporal glands frequently and the females more than the males. (...) Calves of both sexes from about six months old also secrete, but as males get older they do so less often, and as full adults they usually secrete only when they are in musth, and then the liquid seems thicker and of a different consistency. (Moss [1980]2000: 110)



Ill. 3: Cleaning of an elephant skull with tusks. (Photo: Magnus Leijer ca. 1910. Copyright: The Gothenburg Museum of Natural History, GNM 5520 347)

Suddenly I understood the photo. In fact Sjölander is pointing at a physiologic detail that would be very important to reproduce if the mounted elephant should be outstanding: The bull elephant's left temporal gland. These glands produce a viscous secretion.<sup>16</sup> Sjölander is pointing at such a gland opening, and he has reproduced them and the shiny secretion on the mounted skin, most visible in the right temple. This is a picture of the taxidermist's trophy, and he is already involved in the process of transforming the dead animal into a specimen.

### **From Portuguese West Africa to Gothenburg: Bulky Luggage**

The elephant's bones, tusks and hide had to be moved out of West Africa to Gothenburg together with the numerous other items collected – plus the expedition equipment that was the property of the museum

and thus had to be brought back to Sweden. What is later referred to as “Sjölander's Angola collection”, consisted of skins from 35 mammals, three complete skeletons of respectively an elephant, a rhinoceros and a baboon, 59 craniums, and 61 bird-skins from 33 species (Mathiasson 1983: 50). A letter to Professor Bertil Hanström in Lund from the Natural History Museum clarifies that he also had collected hypophysis material from seven mammal species and kept it in glass tubes, three species of snakes kept in tubes or jars, 19 tubes and jars with lizards, two jars and a tube with frogs, two pickled tortoises, five jars with fish (five species), one jar with fresh-water crabs and one jar with various scorpions.<sup>17</sup> On his way to Portuguese West Africa, Sjölander had also collected moths, but these were sent back to Sweden with “Gullmaren” before he travelled on to Huila:

During the long waiting period on the Cameroon River outside Duala, and when the rainy season there was at its worst, I passed the time killing moths that were hiding from the rain with smoke. [Sjölander smoked a pipe.] As I said, I smoked them to death because it was impossible to get to my jars with cyanide in the cargo hold. These moths are pretty much reduced because of rain and being killed by tobacco. This collection is now on its way to Sweden, the same for a funny creature captured on the beach at Pointe Noir, French Congo. It lies in liquor and smoke perfume and this may explain the wonderful smell. (...) Send some postcards showing the museum, the exterior. Surely it will impress the Portuguese down here in Portuguese West Africa.<sup>18</sup>

The luggage was unruly and bulky in volume. Sjölander writes to Nybelin that the bones of the elephant were so huge, that some had to be sawed.<sup>19</sup> The skeleton kept in the museum's storeroom for bones proves that this has been done. Moving jars and tubes, bones and hides safely from the inland to the coast must have put Sjölander to the test, physically as well as mentally. As far as I can see from the last letter kept in the museum's archive, written on December 30, 1948, Sjölander planned to hire a heavy truck to transport his gear from Caporopopo to Moçamedes, and from there he intended to travel back north with the same steamer that had taken him south to Portuguese West Africa. If he ever reported to Nybelin about this last stage of the expedition, there is nothing to be found in the museum. But the elephant turns up for a last time on June 1, 1953, when the board considered whether the museum should reimburse three bills paid by Sjölander. One is for 300 kilos of ceramic clay, the second for the transport of the clay, and the third is dated Gothenburg June 10, 1949 when Sjölander paid 286 Swedish crowns for a complete cleaning and removing of rust from a Paillard H 16 film camera. On the other side of the receipt Sjölander has written with a pencil: "Camera damaged in River Caocuvular when the ferry capsized in River Caocuvular 1949."

Sjölander, the bones and hide of the elephant and

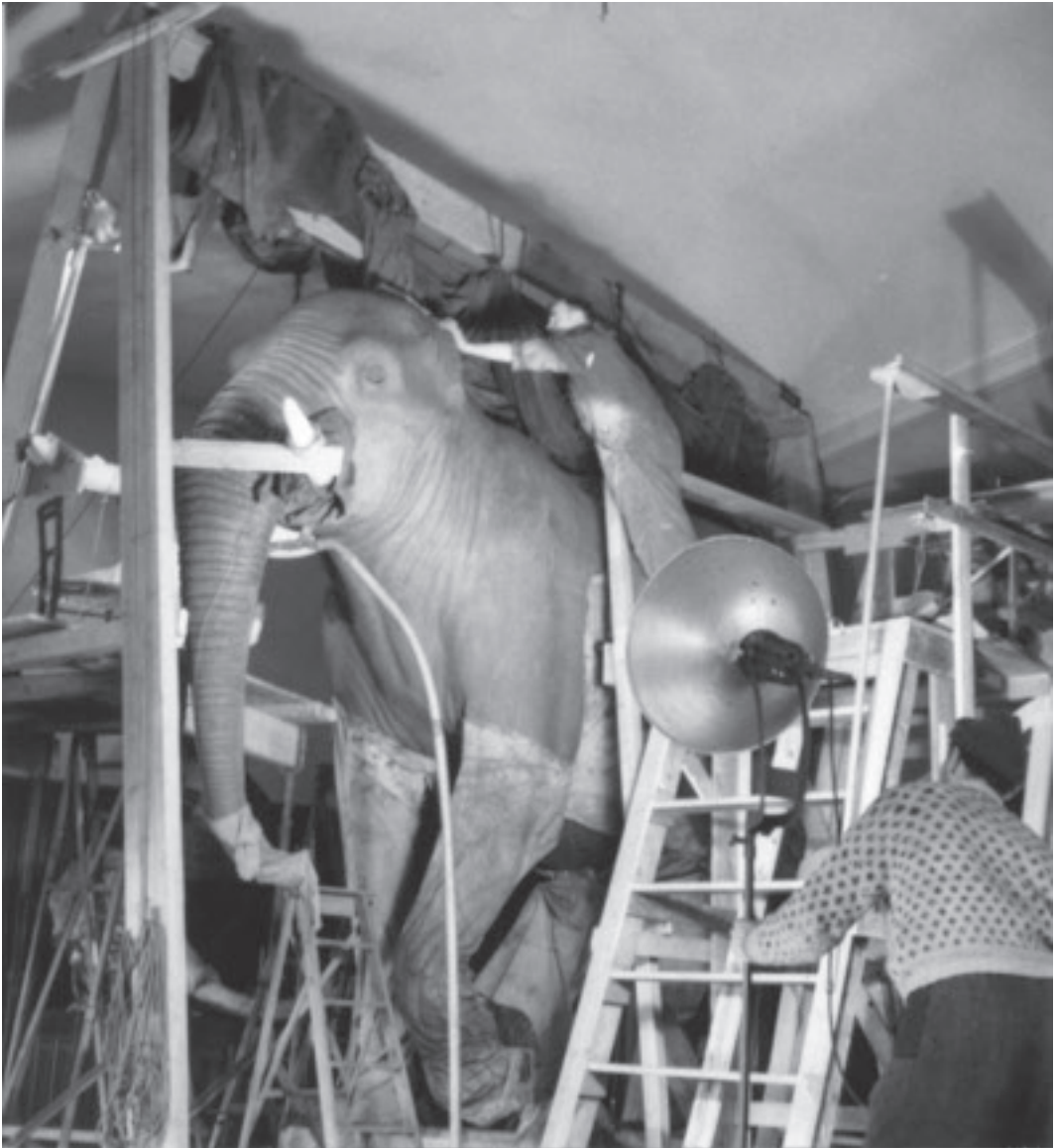
the other animal remains reached Gothenburg in the middle of May 1949, but in an awkward way. Since the steamer "Gullmaren" would not land at Gothenburg, the luggage had to be discharged and declared in the Scanian (Swedish province) town of Ystad. Then hides, bones and jars were loaded on a truck and transported the remaining 400 km to the museum.

What else is there to be found about the irksome journey from Portuguese West Africa to Sweden? In my sources next to nothing. But in an interview in May 1949, Sjölander states enigmatically: "I wonder, by the way, what the customs officials will say about the tusks I left at the custom house in Ystad."<sup>20</sup> To get a better understanding of what he was hinting at we have to shift locations from the wilderness in Portuguese West Africa to the red brick castle-like building of the Natural History Museum in Gothenburg.

### Material Rebirth 1: Tusks

The African elephants' adornment and sad fate is their tusks. When I initiated my fieldwork in the museum, the elephants' tusks became objects of discussion and investigation: Was the elephant mounted with its own tusks, or were they made of wood? How could it be that a pair of tusks is stored together with the skeleton in "Benkällaren", the storage room for bones in the basement? On his list of collected specimens Sjölander has put "elephant male skin", "elephant male skeleton, male" (sic!) and "elephant male tusks (only)" – did this mean that he brought back a complete skeleton with tusks plus another pair of tusks?<sup>21</sup> Several persons touched the tusks to judge their authenticity, since ivory should feel cooler to the skin than wood, but none of the staff was an experienced "ivory toucher". Then Monica Silferstolpe, who had been working as a taxidermist in the museum since 1965, told me that she was definitely sure that the tusks were genuine, but that they were not those of the mounted elephant. I also learned that it is extremely demanding, and almost impossible, to make a good wooden copy of tusks. After Sjölander's letters from Africa had been discovered, we learned that the tusks weighed in total 47 kg. So if the stored tusks weighed the same, the problem in identifying them would be solved. But to my disap-





Ill. 4: The making of the clay manikin. (Copyright: The Gothenburg Museum of Natural History, GNM 4576 9)

pointment the tusks in the cellar only weighed 37.2 kg. Had the pulp in the tusks weighed as much as 10 kg?

On the other hand, pictures taken while Sjölander was working on the taxidermy show the elephant's skull with tusks that look like those that are stored

in the bone cellar, not those we see on the mounted elephant. And he also talked about tusks to the press when he returned. He had wished to shoot an elephant with bigger tusks. But since this one was an old specimen, its tusks were worn by age and also from scraping the soil that was very hard after many years

of drought.<sup>22</sup> Sjölander had a license to shoot two elephants, and it would appear that he killed a second one. In an interview with the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation on April 24, 1951, he said that he shot an elephant the very last month he was in Portuguese West Africa. From this one he kept the tusks, nothing else. He had not yet decided whether to use them for the mount or not, he said to the reporter, but it would be very difficult to make good copies. This second pair of tusks, I believe, was the ones left in the customs house in Ystad, and they were later used in the making of the African elephant for the display in the Mammal Hall.

### Material Rebirth 2: Body(ies)

The mounted elephant was presented to the public for the first time on March 28, 1952, and was viewed by 5,847 visitors. Never before, nor after, has a single object attracted so many people to the museum in one day (Myhrén 1983: 108). Sjölander had used Akeley's dermoplastic method: First he modelled the body in ceramic clay. Three hundred kilos of clay had been ordered from a farmer, Knut Hallstén in Kvidinge, Scania, for the amount of 900 Swedish crowns. Then the clay model was covered with plaster. When the plaster dried it was taken off in pieces and put together as a negative form. This was used to mould the manikin on which the hide was arranged. The biography of the dead elephant is about tusks and bones, but even more about hide. To make the hide easier to arrange, and lighter, it was shaved from 5 cm to 5 mm. To do this, the hide was soaked in saline dissolution, more concentrated for each bath. Finally, it was treated with tanning agent before it was placed over the manikin. Every wrinkle was carefully folded, and then reinforced by a layer of plaster and lacquered. The seams were then camouflaged. Glass eyes were inserted. At last the body was painted grey and the mount was complete. In November 1951, the Gothenburg daily newspaper *Ny Tid* writes that "The biggest elephant in Europe is ready for make-up and a rhino will be next. Well, only the hide is his own, and even this has been radically shaved to be prepared."<sup>23</sup> The day after the elephant had been shown to the public for the first time,

the influential newspaper *Göteborgs-Posten* reported that the tusks were real but not those of the elephant, and the local newspaper *Arbetartidningen* reported a funny detail saying that the elephant's hair on its tale had been borrowed from a Congolese relative since this elephant was shot in the dry season and therefore lacked this important detail.<sup>24</sup> This adds a third elephant to the mount.<sup>25</sup>

Big animals need space. The elephant was mounted in the Lecture Hall, a room with double doors that led into the same floor as the Mammal Hall. But one year before his work was completed, Sjölander realised that the elephant would be too big to get through the doors. The manikin was cut into parts and moved into the Mammal Hall where the other animals had been rearranged to make space for the elephant in the centre but still offering school children the opportunity to study Swedish mammals. In this rearrangement, the skeleton of an Indian elephant that until then had been the central focus, gave way to an African elephant. The mounting of the hide was not only time-consuming, it was physically strenuous as well: One of Sjölander's assistants fell down from the elephant's back while the skin was being stretched and injured himself severely; another broke his leg during the work.<sup>26</sup> Sjölander himself was not present when he was honoured by the city of Gothenburg for a "manifold and extraordinary lifework".<sup>27</sup> Two and a half months after the unveiling of the elephant Sjölander suffered a cerebral haemorrhage.<sup>28</sup>

### Bones: Embodied History

There is a striking contrast between the handling of the hide and the bones. Today the skeleton is stored in the "Benkällaren", together with bones from numerous other animals, a beastly catacomb. I do not know when it was stored in its shelves or how often it has been given attention. Perhaps the last time was in the 1990s when the bones finally were given a number in the *Collectio anatomica*, the register of bones. The skeleton embodies bits of the bull's life story. The newspaper *Göteborgs-Posten* interviewed Sjölander on December 10, 1951, three months before he finished his major work. Here the story of

how the elephant was felled by one bullet is repeated once more, but for the first time details about its skeleton are mentioned:

(...) we understand conservator Sjölander's joy at having succeeded in killing the huge animal with a single shot (...). This so more because the elephant's skeleton so clearly evidences that the animal had been exposed to several similar attacks before – among others a shot had hit an ear, another, a 16 mm bullet, was left in its right shoulder. All in all, the skeleton was badly ravaged by bullets.

The skeleton also demonstrated that the bull elephant had been in several fights and had had broken ribs, probably while fighting with other bulls. Ironically, the skeleton echoes a parallel to the drama in the highland of Sierra de Chela when Sjölander tried to kill the first bull elephant that disappeared with four bullets in its body.

### The Contents of the Elephant

Nobody can ignore an African elephant on display. But how do we see it? What kind of narrative does the museum offer the visitor when contemplating the displays? The authorised story about the elephant and how it was made into a museum specimen is only based on Sjölander's interviews with the local newspapers and gives his version of the expedition: the elephant killed cleanly by one shot, the heat, his toil, the meat-greedy "natives", or "negroes"; an instructive example of how a plethora of meaning disappears when an animal is inserted in a natural history collection. As Sam Alberti states: "Zoos and museums are engines of difference, classifying and presenting the entangled mess of the natural world in a comprehensible way" (Alberti 2011: 7). This presenting and ordering of nature neatly sets the embedding of the natural history museum in culture and society aside and imbues the museum with an air of timelessness and innocence. But, following Stephen Asma's paradoxical statement that "only dead animals pause long enough for our analytical minds to torture some truths out of them" (Asma

2001: 27), the elephant invites us to ask what is hidden in this pachyderm apart from being a superb piece of taxidermy. Most probably the elephant is not literally a container for Sjölander's photographs and notes from Africa. But it is loaded with content that comprises the collecting practice of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century natural history museum.

The elephant was collected to fill a prominent place in the Mammal Hall. Its main purpose was to be educational, a three-dimensional natural history illustration, so exquisitely executed, that the visitor sees it as close to life. I have not been able to find any explicitly scientific arguments for Sjölander's expedition. Rather the elephant represents a collecting practice aimed at "filling the gaps" or "completing the collections". A new piece was added to the puzzle some months ago, when I learned that in 1904 the new head of the zoological collections, Leonard Jägerskiöld, had procured enlarged photographs to explain animals behaviour in nature to the public, especially of Swedish birds – birds being a prominent topic during the years he was in charge – but also of foreign animals that would be impossible to purchase for a long time. I interpret Jägerskiöld's acquisition of the photographs as a first and preliminary step to getting big African fauna into the museum exhibition. These were the rhinoceros and the elephant.<sup>29</sup> The photograph represented the animal, but at the same time the picture of the beast created an expectation of replacement and a vacancy waiting to be physically filled. Taxidermist David Sjölander's long nourished dream to collect and mount an African elephant was, in other words, also about replacing a photograph with the materiality and volume of a stuffed and mounted beast; it was both idiosyncratic and rooted in the history and time of the institution.

When the museum board met on December 4, 1947, to discuss item 12 on the agenda "Conservator Sjölander's expedition to South West-Africa", the argument that sustained the expedition was that "(...) it would be of great value to supplement certain collections with species from the West African fauna, for instance an elephant and rhinoceros, which are

now lacking in the public division.<sup>30</sup> Sjölander himself stated to the press before he left Gothenburg: “I will take whatever I get down there. (...) I will not be dedicated to a specific field of research, but collect mammals, birds and insects.”<sup>31</sup> And it was the cheapest way to get an elephant. The Africa expedition cost 20,000 Swedish crowns. A skin from an elephant would have cost 12–15,000 crowns, with an extra charge for the tusks.<sup>32</sup>

Killing an elephant efficiently requires knowledge about the anatomy of the animal, and about weapons and ammunition. One also has to be a good shot. In his essay *Shooting an Elephant*, George Orwell has given a grim picture of an Indian elephant’s death caused by an inexperienced hunter (Orwell 1936). David Sjölander embodied “the hunter and the outdoor person, the film photographer, the travelling researcher – and in a certain way as a synthesis of all this – the master taxidermist (...) for sure not exceeded by anyone on this side of the Atlantic if anywhere at all,” to cite Orvar Nybelin.<sup>33</sup> Nybelin’s statement directs our attention towards the importance of hunting in the form of a skilled museum worker at the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century – not only in a minor Swedish natural history museum, but in natural history museums in general. Already in 1899, William T. Hornaday (1854–1937) gave a warning to the heterogeneous group of collectors of natural specimens that wildlife was dwindling and species vanishing:

The rapid and alarming destruction of all forms of wild animal life which is now going on furiously throughout the entire world renders it imperatively necessary for those who would build up great zoological collections to be up and doing before any more of the leading species are exterminated. It is already too late to collect wild specimens of the American bison, Californian elephant seal, West Indian seal, great auk, and Labrador duck. Very soon it will also be too late to collect walrus, manatee, fur seal, prong-horn antelope, elk, moose, mountain sheep and mountain goat. (...) If the naturalist would gather representatives of

all these forms for perpetual preservation, and future study, he must set about it at once. (Hornaday 1899: ix)

In 1899, Hornaday was the director of the newly established New York Zoological Park, today the Bronx Zoo, and being a naturalist, taxidermist, conservationist and collector he was one of the American protagonists in moving nature, that is, animals, from their natural habitats to museums and zoos. Carl Akeley headed five expeditions to collect animals for the African Hall in the American Museum of Natural History and never returned from the last journey. The natural history museum nourished a culture of hunters. Knowledge of nature and animals was rooted in a genuine interest and delight in outdoor life on land and sea, accompanied with a rifle and fuelled by an obsession to move nature indoors. Experience and knowledge of nature accumulated from numerous hunting tours was invested in collections and displays. Leonard Jägerskiöld (1867–1945), head of the natural history collections in Gothenburg 1904–1941, writes in his auto-biography that “(h)unting and shooting have been of help in my profession as a zoologist and a museum man. They have also generously supplied me with spiritual rest and bodily refreshment” (Jägerskiöld 1943: 455). On Jägerskiöld’s hunting expeditions zoologist Paul Henrici was his most frequent companion, but he was also often in the company of museum taxidermist Hilmer Skoog, a self-taught man with no formal schooling after primary school, the private taxidermist Gustav Kihlén, and Skoog’s successor, David Sjölander, even he a self-taught man. “A taxidermist’s profession is also to be a clever hunter,” Jägerskiöld claimed, emphasising Sjölander as an extraordinarily skilled marksman and a good hunter (Jägerskiöld 1943: 483, 485). In the natural history museum in Gothenburg men could transform practice in the hunting field into the taxidermy of the glass cases.

World War II turned Sjölander’s Africa expedition into an anachronism.<sup>34</sup> When comparing his expedition to Johannes Fabian’s analysis of “the solitary European leading his caravan” in Central Africa in

the period 1875–1910, several emerging threats appear. In “Out of Our Minds” Fabian tells an anti-myth story about some of the pioneers of European anthropology in which contradictions, incongruities, madness and ecstasies are emphasised (2000: 272). He debunks the myth of scientific collecting as individual, controlled, heroic and rational, strictly aiming at fulfilling a goal defined by instructions given and defined by authorities ignorant of the social and cultural conditions in the African localities: “What should have been a matter of carrying out well-circumscribed tasks almost always turned into a battle of mere survival, with death the outcome almost as often as not” (Fabian 2000: 276). Dependence, says Fabian, was what the European traveller most experienced. He was dependent on funding, on all sorts of equipment, on people – and on his own health and body (2000: 276). In his letters to Nybelin, David Sjölander continuously complained about shortage of cash, still in 1948 it took half a year to transfer money from Sweden to Portuguese West Africa. He was dependent on the local authorities to be licensed to travel with a gun and ammunition, on farmer and hunter Vasco Ferreira to guide him and on the locals to help with his voluminous luggage. When he had at last finished with the local bureaucracy, out in the field, collecting was frequently interrupted for more mundane work, “we needed food, and the negroes are terrible meat eaters, so it was troublesome to steadily have to shoot for food.”<sup>35</sup> Donna Haraway states that “the great halls of the American Museum of Natural History would not exist without the labor of the Africans” (Haraway 1989: 52); the splendid African Elephant would not have been in Gothenburg without the toil of the West African locals.

The fact that Sjölander’s Africa expedition belonged to bygone times is perhaps most evident when compared to the Swedish deep-sea expedition “Albatross” initiated by the Swedish Natural History Museum in Stockholm and with ichthyologist Orvar Nybelin as one of the participating scientists. In time, Albatross (1947–1948) partly overlapped Sjölander’s journey to Africa. The Albatross expedition was the second largest Swedish research expedition

after Nordenskiöld’s Vega expedition (1878–1880) through the North East Passage, and is considered to be one of the important steps in the history of oceanography. Albatross circumnavigated the earth, and the ship and its men garnered big headlines when they called at foreign ports. These were men of a strict specialised scientific expedition who entered the quay Packhuskajen in Gothenburg on a sunny day early in October 1948. The crowds applauded, a brass band played and the “landshövding”, the highest state representative in the county, was present.<sup>36</sup> The expedition was presented the following year through the exhibition “With Albatross across the Ocean” at the Maritime Museum in Gothenburg. Here the public could learn that the brilliant results were due to a national initiative, which combined Swedish science, Swedish engineering and Swedish seaworthiness.<sup>37</sup> The week before the opening of the Albatross exhibition, Sjölander had arrived in Gothenburg with his truck filled with specimens. No masses of people, no brass band and no “landshövding”.

Finally, the elephant talks about its own species and of the mounted animal. The elephant was the last work Sjölander fulfilled and his *magnum opus*, and it ruined his health. Elephants are extremely difficult to mount, not only because they are huge and their hides heavy to handle and arrange, but also because their skin is loose and furless, so the seams cannot be hidden under fur. In the elephant mount, Sjölander’s dream materialised and will remain a testimony to his skills as long as mounted animals attract people.<sup>38</sup> Among the clippings in the museum’s scrapbook concerning the elephant mount when it was first shown to the public in 1952, there is only one critical voice. In his article “Beastly wax cabinets” published in the Stockholm newspaper *Expressen*, Harald Hammer is a spokesman for nature displays to come. Hammer asks if mounted animals “have any legitimacy in today’s museums, are they strictly speaking amusement park attractions without any reasonable meaning? They are only troublesome and take up room from other and more precious items.”<sup>39</sup> Apart from mounted specimens of extinct species, Hammer supposed that science had

no use for the enormous heaps of stuffed animals, stiffly posed like people in old photograph albums. Animals in nature move in contrast to the artificial stillness of mounted animals. It was time to get away from the natural museums' atmosphere of grave chambers and initiate a radical rejection of the old-fashioned museums. Instead, Hammer advocated films that would teach children to recognise animals and birds from their movements and sounds.

Of which value is Sjölander's elephant apart from being an outstanding piece of taxidermy? The elephant inevitably links together Gothenburg and Portuguese West Africa, the museum and African wildlife. Today the African elephant is an endangered species. The population has decreased dramatically since 1945 even if several national parks and wildlife reserves have been established. The elephants in Angola are threatened by extinction as a consequence of the civil war and because of poaching. There were about 12,400 elephants in the country in 1981 compared to 246 in 2006.<sup>40</sup> Elephants are given and transferred to Angola from other African countries in order to re-establish an elephant population.<sup>41</sup> If or when the *Loxodonta africana* should be extinct, the specimen will be of greater value, comparable to the mammoth. But when we pose the question in the plural, what are the values of Sjölander's elephants, two killed and two wounded and a fifth of whom we know nothing other than that it "gave" its hairs on the tail to make the mount perfect, Gothenburg Natural Museum becomes one among the many agents involved in a process that has endangered the species, a process in which museum collectors have mingled with big game hunters and poachers.

## Notes

- 1 "Europas största elefant är klar för sminkning noshörning snart i tur", *Ny tid*, November 9, 1959 "Museielefanten invigd", *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning*, March 29, 1952.
- 2 The biography of the elephant will be included in "Elephants are not Picked from Trees. Animal Biographies in the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History", work in progress.
- 3 Elephants in Europe: A brilliant example of a highly featured elephant was Hanno, a young Indian elephant

presented to Pope Leo X in 1514 as a gift from the Portuguese king Manuel I, see Bedini (1997). For the history of the elephant in Western culture, see for instance Altick (1978) about Chune; Ritvo (1987) about Jumbo and about British big game hunting in Africa; Turchetto (2004) and Thorsen (2009) about the Indian elephant of Venice; Alberti (2011) about Maharajah in the Manchester Museum; Rothfels (2002) about collecting African elephants; Robbins (2002) about conceptions of the elephant during the French Enlightenment.

- 4 Several taxidermists have stated that Sjölander's elephant mount is considered to be among the best, or the best, in the world. Oral sources say that Sjölander was offered a job by John Rowley, head of the Taxidermy Department of the American Museum of Natural History, N.Y.
- 5 See Bodry-Sanders (1998) about Carl Akeley and his method of mounting animals, as well as shooting elephants. For a critical view on The African Hall in AMNH, see Haraway (1989).
- 6 List in Göteborgs musei styrelse protokoll (Minutes from the board of the Gothenburg Museum) 1948–1956, July 4, 1948. In 1948 the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History was part of the Gothenburg Museum.
- 7 Letter from D. Sjölander to O. Nybelin, November 28, 1948.
- 8 Letter from O. Nybelin to Sjölander, December 13, 1948.
- 9 "Medelstvensson" normally means an ordinary person, here it means middle-sized.
- 10 Letter from D. Sjölander to O. Nybelin, December 25, 1948. Translated by the author.
- 11 Letter from D. Sjölander to O. Nybelin, December 25, 1948.
- 12 "Salongsgevär föga hopp mot hotfullt afrikalejon", *Göteborgs-Posten*, May 25, 1949.
- 13 Letter from D. Sjölander to O. Nybelin, December 25, 1948.
- 14 Letter from D. Sjölander to O. Nybelin, December 25, 1948.
- 15 "Tjuvaktig jättepojke, som fick stryk på friarstråt!", *Göteborgs-Posten*, February 10, 1951.
- 16 "The musth can be defined as a periodical change of the behaviour of elephant bulls, which can last from some weeks up to some months. This is hormonal change. In the musth period a bull produces 40 to 60 times more testosterone (male sex hormone) than in the non-musth period." [http://www.upali.ch/musth\\_en.html](http://www.upali.ch/musth_en.html). Accessed January 9, 2012.
- 17 Letter from the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History to Professor Bertil Hanström, Lund, October 22, 1949; Sjölander's handwritten minutes in the General Register.
- 18 Letter from D. Sjölander to O. Nybelin, September 26,

1948. Translated by the author.
- 19 Letter from D. Sjölander to O. Nybelin, December 30, 1948.
- 20 "Salongsgevär föga hopp mot hotfullt afrikalejon", *Göteborgs-Posten*, May 25, 1949.
- 21 Sjölander's handwritten minutes in the General Register.
- 22 "Salongsgevär föga hopp mot hotfullt afrikalejon", *Göteborgs-Posten* May 25, 1949.
- 23 "Europas största elefant är klar för sminkning, noshörning snart i tur", *Ny Tid*, September 9, 1951.
- 24 "Museielefanten står med skothål i örönen", *Arbetartidningen*, March 29, 1952.
- 25 Where did this tail come from? It could have been a trophy since elephants' tails (and tails in general) seem to have been popular trophies.
- 26 "Konservant slant från elefant", *Arbetarposten*, March 29, 1952.
- 27 "Festlig afton på Börsen Förtjänsttecknen jublera", *Handelstidningen*, June 5, 1952.
- 28 "Känd göteborgare låg sanslös vid fjällstup", *Göteborgs-Posten*, June 16, 1952.
- 29 Berättelse rörande Göteborgs musei zoologiska afdelning för tiden 1:ste Juni–31:ste Dec. 1904. *Göteborgs Stadsfullmäktiges Handlingar 1905*. N:o 35: 8. Annual Report, the Zoological Department of the Gothenburg Museum.
- 30 Naturhistoriska museet Nämndens protokoll 1944–1958. Minutes from the board of the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History.
- 31 "David Sjölander väntar nu bara på lämplig båt", *Handelstidningen*, June 29, 1948.
- 32 "Naturhistoriska museets jätte-elefant invigd", *Göteborgs-Posten*, March 29, 1952.
- 33 "David Sjölander död", *Handelstidningen*, November 18, 1954.
- 34 In 1952, Sjölander's successor, Björn Wennerberg, went to East Africa to collect specimens.
- 35 "Salongsgevär föga hopp mot hotfullt afrikalejon", *Göteborgs-Posten*, May 25, 1948.
- 36 "Grant och högtidligt när Albatross kom hem", *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning*, October 4, 1948.
- 37 "Med Albatross över haven", May 17, 1949 and May 27, 1948.
- 38 Sjölander's elephant has been compared to Carl Akeley's work. Ref.: Interview with Monica Silferstolpe and Christel Johnsson, September 15, 2009.
- 39 "Djuriska vaxkabinett", *Expressen*, June 10, 1952.
- 40 <http://www.alertnet.org/thenewsdesk/L21651692.htm>. Accessed May 10, 2010.
- 41 [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/09/0904\\_TVelephantlift\\_2.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/09/0904_TVelephantlift_2.html). Accessed January 9, 2012.

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