Akeley's Africa

The size and elaborate staging of the great dioramas, such as Carl Akeley's gorillas, can still impress. Their cost upset museum authorities, but they aided conservation by promoting the idea of wildlife in its natural habitat.

Martin Kemp

Even in this age of multimedia extravaganzas, the most brilliant of the old habitat dioramas in museums of natural history still attract enthralled viewers. Tableaux of stuffed animals in vivacious poses are re-naturalized in panoramas dense with biological and geological detail, the 'real' foregrounds merging indiscernibly into deep backgrounds painted by specialist artists in shallow niches.

The concept was perfected by the Swedish taxidermist and sportsman, Gustaf Kolthoff. His Biological Museum, which opened in Stockholm in 1893, stands as the supreme surviving example of a habitat panorama. From two viewing platforms the spectator is presented with almost 4,000 zoological specimens, ecologically integrated within eight successive landscape types, the backgrounds of which were painted by Bruno Liljefors, Sweden's supreme nature artist. Scientific demonstration and popular appeal coexist in perfect harmony.

Outside Sweden, the ecological diorama was adopted enthusiastically in America. The diorama halls in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, into which huge resources were poured in the first half of this century, vividly convey the American vision of the sublime wilderness, the definitive expression of which was the African Hall of Carl Akeley.

A taxidermist who devised new techniques for naturalistic animation, Akeley gained public renown as an intrepid explorer, environmental conservationist, ani-

Carl Akeley and Albert Butler's "Gorilla group", with landscape by William Leigh, in the African Hall at the American Museum of Natural History, New York. Photo by Finnin/Beckett.

mal sculptor and inventor, who was said to have killed a leopard in hand-to-paw conflict. It was on his return in 1911 from an expedition to hunt animals for a dynamic tableau of alarmed elephants that Akeley conceived the African Hall, within which "The Alarm" still stands. The grand hall of luminous dioramas, in a framework of rich wood decorated with sculptural reliefs, became the great vehicle for his "biography of untouched Africa", conveying his mission to conserve the wonderful wildlife threatened by human encroachment.

Mountain gorillas, the subject of a dramatic group in a sublime landscape, were in particularly urgent need of protection from

hunting. Akeley's 1922 proposal to the Belgian government to save the gorillas led to the establishment of the first national park in the Congo. The foreground of the diorama contains more than 75,000 laboriously mounted artificial flowers and leaves, while the scenery — hailed by Akeley as beyond compare — was painted by William Leigh, a specialist in panoramas.

A photograph by Akeley portrays the expeditionary force, including Leigh and a fellow painter, armed with brushes, paints, canvases, easels and a small-scale diorama box. Meticulous care was taken in assembling field data on every aspect of the flora, fauna, geology and meteorology of the setting. The goal was, in Leigh's words, "complete pictures, faultless history, perfect science".

Yet the costs incurred by the expeditions and assembly of the dioramas left the museum's education department open to criticism from scientific curators who believed that the museum's primary role should be research — not public displays "totally devoid of intellectual content". Such claims failed to recognize the role the dioramas had played in persuading both biologists and the public of the need to view every living thing as part of the rich and evolving panorama of nature's complexity. □

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Quotes from Karen Wonders, *Habitat Dioramas*, Uppsala University Press, Uppsala (1993).

Akeley's photograph of William Leigh (standing) and A. A. Jansson, making studies for the African lion diorama, 1926–27.