

Restoration of the Foster Victorian Bird Display: A Case Study

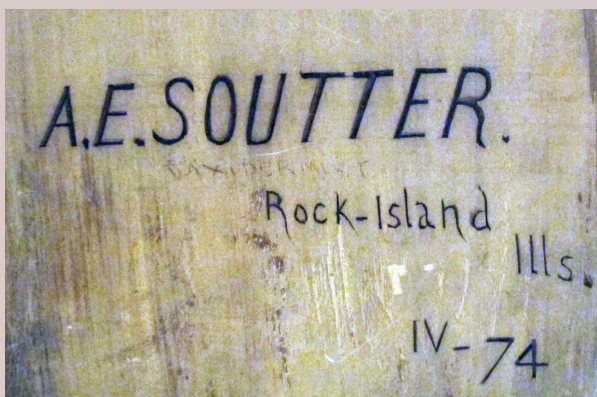
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In 2018, an antique bird display case was donated to the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. It is a typical Victorian-style display, with an array of small hummingbirds, song-birds, a grouse and a duck. The birds sit on and around a fanciful fake tree and imagined landscape. These birds have no relationship to each other – they are mostly North and South American, with one canary from Africa thrown in for good measure. However, they are pretty, with bright, iridescent colors. The entire display is encased in a cabinet with glass on the top and three glass sides with a wooden backing board.

The display was family-held in three different locations in Pennsylvania since the 1880's. Sun streamed through a window onto the mounted birds for much of that time. The backing board warped and cracked over time, causing one of the glass panes to break. Soot, air pollution and dermestids got in, causing rampant damage. The birds and landscape were filthy, the grouse and duck, although laced with arsenic were chewed on, and badly damaged. Two birds, a Scarlet Tanager and a Cock-on-the-rock, showed significant light damage.

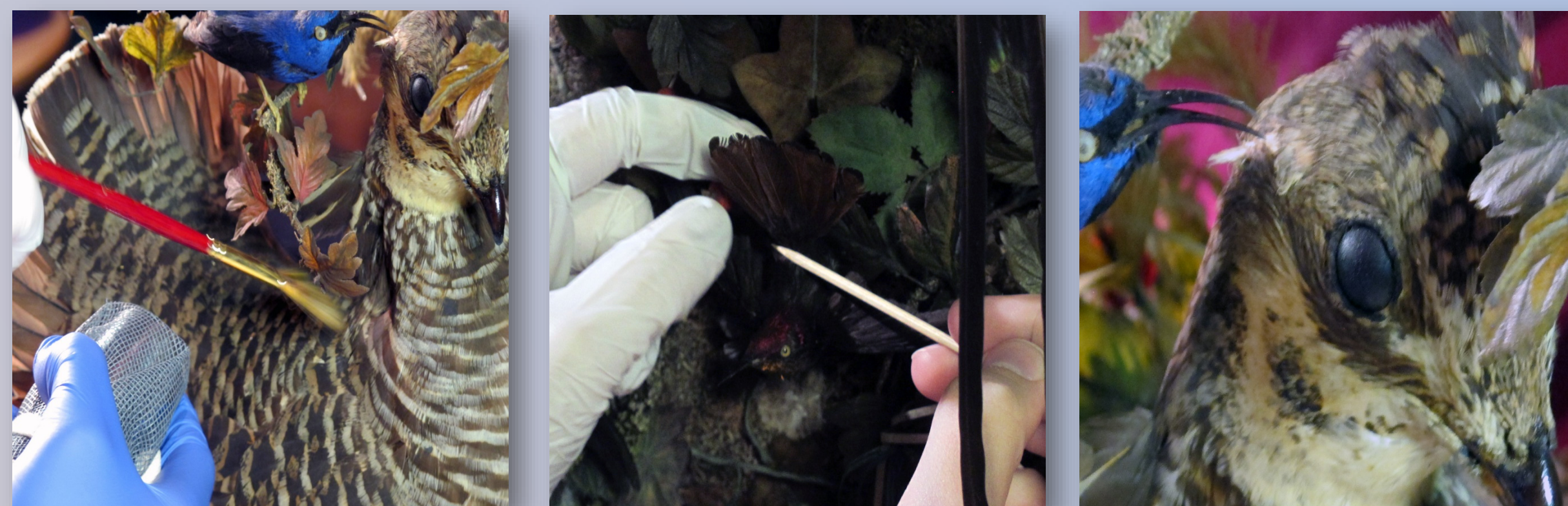
The donors provided funds for the restoration. Our director was eager to have it in his office. So, Conservation got to work. Anderson and her interns did the treatment in the public view, talking to patrons, school groups and interested staff. Specimens tested positive for arsenic. They were cleaned and recolored. The duck got a pair of new (and more accurately positioned) legs. Plants were cleaned, repaired and generally spruced up. A local artist was hired to paint a new Victorian-style background on a more stable board.

Condition Upon Arrival: Poor



Created by A. E. Soutter
Rock Island, Ill. 1874,
Signature on reverse of
backboard.

Picking, Cleaning, and Grooming



The case was isolated and frozen prior to treatment. Once the case was removed, detailed treatment began. This included cleaning the specimens and grounds to remove soil and picking out insect frass. This was done with brushes, sponges and swabs. One of the most satisfying actions is to clean the birds glass eyes. Feathers were groomed.

Ruby-Topaz Hummingbird

Before
Cleaning



After
Cleaning

Bufflehead repairs



The bufflehead duck had been removed from the case because of severe insect damage. Both legs were badly damaged by dermestid beetles. The original legs had been painted the wrong color. Steve Rogers (Birds Collection Manager) had an un-accessioned bufflehead in the freezer. He prepared and attached the legs onto the mount, which was replaced into the landscape.



Re-coloring

Two birds were badly light damaged. We worked dry pigments into the feathers to bring back the original color. This is a messy process. Intern Cara Kaminski created tents out of tissue to keep the other birds clean. The Cock-on-the-rock required localized humidification to re-form his crest.



Scarlet Tanager Treatment



The wings and tail of the scarlet tanager drooping had sagged over the 147 years of display. Insect pins were used to reposition these elements in a more natural position.

Landscape repairs

The landscape was filthy, with scattered loss of plaster-created ground and dried plant material. Interns cleaned the plants with soft brushes, damp swabs and sponges. The plaster ground was patched and tinted. New foliage was purchased at a local craft store and adhered into place.



Initial condition



Cleaning process



Refreshing landscape

Cock of the Rock Treatment

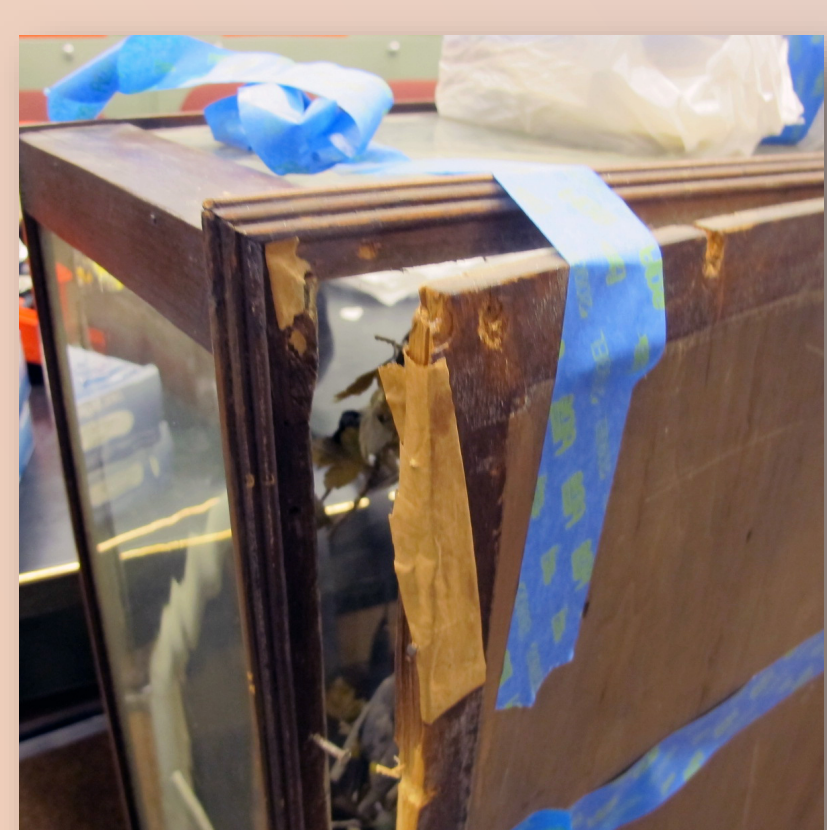


Before Treatment



After
Treatment

Case and Backboard Repairs



The case was cleaned, broken glass replaced and glazing repaired.



Pittsburgh artist Hugh Watkins created a background scene on a stable board to replace the original backing.



Thanks to:

Section of Birds:
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Cara Kaminski
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