

On the Provenance of a *Kunstammer* Elephant: Animal Diplomacy and a Prop Artist in the Early nineteenth Century St. Petersburg*

Sobre la procedencia de un elefante de la *Kunstammer*: diplomacia animal y un artista de utilería a principios del siglo XIX en San Petersburgo

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Resumen

El museo del Instituto Zoológico de la Academia de Ciencias de Rusia, en San Petersburgo, exhibe una pieza de taxidermia y un esqueleto de un elefante asiático (*Elephas maximus* Linnaeus, 1758), montados en 1806-1807 para la *Kunstammer* de San Petersburgo. La precisión anatómica y la técnica de esta pieza de taxidermia son excepcionales para principios del siglo XIX, aún se desconoce el nombre de su creador. Un estudio cuidadoso de los documentos de archivo conservados en los Archivos de la Academia de Ciencias nos permitió reconstruir la identidad de los científicos y artistas involucrados en su creación: el artista de utilería y artesano de papel maché Carl Thimpont (fallecido en 1829), mientras que el anatomista Piotr Zaslavsky (1764-1846) supervisó la construcción del esqueleto. Probablemente ambos consultaron los dibujos realizados por el anatomista Petrus Camper en 1802. El elefante fue un regalo diplomático del emir de Bukhara a Catalina II. El animal llegó a San Petersburgo en el otoño de 1796, fue mantenido en la colección de animales del Imperial Hunting Yard y murió en abril de 1806.

Palabras clave

Taxidermia; Elefante; *Kunstammer* de San Petersburgo; Principios del siglo XIX

Abstract

The museum of the Zoological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg exhibits a taxidermy piece and a skeleton of an Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus* Linnaeus, 1758), mounted in 1806-1807 for St. Petersburg *Kunstammer*. The anatomical accuracy and the technique of this taxidermy piece are exceptional for the beginning of the nineteenth century yet the name of its creator has not been known. A careful study of archival documents survived in the Archives of the Academy of Sciences permitted us to reconstruct the identity of scientists and artists involved in the making: it was a prop artist and papier-mâché craftsman Carl Thimpont (died 1829), while anatomist Piotr Zaslavsky (1764-1846) supervised the construction of the skeleton. Likely, they both consulted the drawings made by anatomist Petrus Camper in 1802. The elephant was a diplomatic gift from the emir of Bukhara to Catharine II. The animal arrived to St Petersburg by autumn of 1796, was kept in the menagerie of the Imperial Hunting Yard, and died in the April of 1806.

Keywords

Taxidermy; Elephant; St. Petersburg *Kunstammer*; Early Nineteenth Century



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The principles on which modern taxidermy is based (in English it is called modelled taxidermy while the Russian equivalent is “sculptural taxidermy”) became widespread relatively recently. Donna Haraway’s famous essay “Teddy Bear Patriarchy” discusses one of the founding fathers of this method, Carl Akeley (1864-1926) (Haraway, 1984). Mikhail Zaslavsky (1921-1993), who authored a few Russian books on taxidermy and was an eminent taxidermist himself, stated that modelled taxidermy developed in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries (Zaslavskiy, 1979). Zaslavsky characterized the works of earlier masters unflatteringly, noting their lifeless appearance, stiff straight legs, barrel-shaped torsos, and the lack of musculoskeletal relief. However, in the same book, Zaslavsky talked about some exceptions. For example, he described the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus* Linnaeus, 1758) made for the St. Petersburg Kunstkammer in 1806-1807 as “a magnificent example of taxidermic art”, which was made on a sculptural mannequin – “an achievement of the twentieth century taxidermy” (Zaslavskiy, 1979: 133)–. This elephant still decorates the exhibition halls of the Zoological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the heir to Kunstkammer’s zoological collections. The exceptionality of this mounted elephant was noted already in the 1830s, when zoological collections were moved from the Kunstkammer to a new building erected for the museums of the Academy of Sciences. The head of the Zoological Museum Johann Friedrich von Brandt spent considerable resources ensuring that this anatomically accurate animal would be moved to a new building without any harm, and in his correspondence on this matter he consistently emphasized the exhibit’s value.¹

In the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century elephant was a still rare exhibit for natural history collections, and its size imposed additional restrictions. Not only was it problematic to obtain the body of an adult elephant, to process and mount the skin and skeleton, preserve the huge and thick skin from deformation and pests, but also the very premises to accommodate such large objects.² The luxury of having an adult elephant as an exhibit (mounted animal and / or skeleton) was usually available only to imperial museums, such as in

¹ St. Petersburg Branch of the Archives of the Academy of Sciences (SPF ARAN), f. 4, op. 2 (1834), d. 145. All references to documents from Russian archives are given here in compliance with established academic practice: the name of the archive is followed by collection (fond or f.), inventory (opis’ or op.), file (delo or d.)

² On huge buildings of natural history museums that were erected in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, see: Sheets-Pyenson, 1988.

Madrid or Paris.³ Other collections could afford to acquire only smaller specimens –a skull or an embryo preserved in a jar– the latter was obtained by the royal collection in Stockholm from Seba (Cappellini et al 2014).

Figure 1. The Asian elephant (mounted animal and his skeleton) in the Zoological Museum of the Zoological Institute, St Petersburg



Photo by author

Mikhail Zaslavsky regretted that the name of the master had been lost. Apparently, while working on his book, Zaslavsky used only published data and the documents kept at the Zoological Institute. Yet more information can be distilled from the records found in the Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

³ On mounting of elephants for Madrid and Paris museums see, for example: Ruud (2013); Guerrini (2015). Some Italian museums also have old elephant exhibits, such as the Natural History Museum of the University of Florence (Cappellini et al., 2014).

Those documents show that on April 27, 1806, the Academy of Sciences received a message that an elephant had died at the Imperial Hunting Yard. The instructions approved by the emperor himself suggested that the Academy should immediately organize the skinning and the making of the taxidermy mount. The Academy's administration entrusted the practical side of the matter to Ivan Alekseev (circa 1765-1837), a taxidermist and a housekeeper of the *Kunstammer*, and theoretical supervision –to naturalists Nikolai Ozeretskovsky (1750-1827, the director of the *Kunstammer*) and Pyotr Zagorsky (1764-1846, an anatomist)–.⁴

Zagorsky requested information about the elephant, and the officials of the Hunting Yard provided it. This elephant was sent to Catherine II in 1796 as a diplomatic gift from the emir of Bukhara.⁵ The animal arrived with two mahouts who stayed in Russian service till the death of the elephant. Every day the elephant got four *poods* of the best hay (64 kg) and flatbreads, which were baked of one *pood* (16 kg) of the best wheat flour, while the mahouts made for the beast a “medicine” from a mixture of quite expensive spices with ghee, fish glue and honey.⁶ In 1796, the elephant was 3 *arshins* and 3 *vyershoks* tall (2,26 m), and in 1806 it was 4 *arshins* and 1 *vyershok* tall (2,89 m).⁷ The officials of the Hunting Yard described this elephant as a very intelligent and cautious animal, willingly following the orders of his Bukharian mahouts.⁸ Every spring the elephant suffered from an “inflammation of the entrails” –probably it was musth, since the note mentions also a “secretion of a substance from his cheeks” (most likely “a substance” was temporin)–. At that time, the elephant behaved viciously, did not allow people to approach itself so that food was given to him from afar. During these periods, the animal could hardly eat; it mainly drank milk, 4 buckets a day, mixed with ghee. The elephant died on April 24, 1806, after “suffering from the same illness for about 40 days”.⁹

Other documents add some details to this information. 2027 rubles were allocated for the keeping of the elephant annually;¹⁰ probably the sum did not cover the cost of hay, wheat and firewood, that were supplied directly from the

⁴ SPF ARAN, f. 4, op. 2 (1806), d. 184.

⁵ The way elephants made from Bukhara via Orenburg to St. Petersburg in the mid-nineteenth century was described in details by Galina Matvievskaia (2008).

⁶ About how and why elephants were delivered to the St. Petersburg imperial court in the eighteenth century, how they were fed and treated, why their diet necessarily included expensive spices and exotic medicines, see Pirogovskaya, 2024.

⁷ *Vyershok* (4.445 cm) and *arshin* (71.12 cm) are obsolete Russian units of measurement

⁸ The neatly filed nails, which one still could see on the mounted animal in Zoological Museum, and tusks filed down to 2/3 of their length indicate a trusting relationship between the elephant and his mahouts.

⁹ SPF ARAN, f. 4, op. 2 (1806), d. 184.

¹⁰ Annual salary of a professor of an imperial university in the early nineteenth century was 2,000 rubles.

crown domains. When the animal was indoors, it was chained by its hind leg - it was a common practice in menageries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Two Bukharian mahouts got rather decent salaries. After the death of the elephant, the mahouts got generous reward for their service and were sent back to their homeland.¹¹ Most of the documents describing the life of this and other elephants kept in St. Petersburg indicate that the Russian imperial court invested significant efforts in the well-being of this kind of live diplomatic gifts.

Since the task to mount an elephant for the *Kunstkammer* was obviously extraordinary, the emperor's instruction allowed the Academy, if necessary, to invite an outside craftsman. Indeed, the maker was found outside the Academy and his craft was rather unusual: it was a prop artist and papier-mâché craftsman called Carl Thimpont. Usually, Thimpont worked for the Administration of the Imperial Theatres and for some architects.¹²

Thimpont finished mounting the elephant during the fall of the same year. The naturalists of the Academy were very pleased with his work. The next year Thimpont was invited to mount two brown bears (those taxidermy pieces were lost but we could assume they were made with the same method –the skin mounted on a sculpture–). He was also offered a permanent position at the *Kunstkammer*.¹³ However, this did not happen: perhaps Thimpont was not happy about the salary.

The processing of large bones usually takes several months, so the skeleton mounting began only the following year. At the Academy's meeting on March 11, 1807, Peter Zagorsky showed his preparatory drawings based on the images from the book published by Petrus Camper a few years earlier (Camper, 1802) to his colleagues. This approach was approved as a theoretical basis for skeleton mounting and soon the skeleton was installed next to the taxidermy piece¹⁴. Probably Thimpont used the drawings from the same Camper's book.

¹¹ See: Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), f. 478, op. 1 (1/1000), d. 4, 15; op. 2, d. 10; Pirogovskaya, 2024. In fact, one of the mahouts, Akhmet Makhmutov, remained in the Russian Empire. He settled in Kazan and started a family (RGIA, f. 478, op. 3, d. 185).

¹² Carl Thimpont was born in Warsaw; in December 1829 he committed suicide in St. Petersburg (RGIA, f. 497, op. 1, d. 4299). On his usual work see for example: RGIA, f. 497, op. 1, d. 1082; f. 487, op. 6, d. 2154.

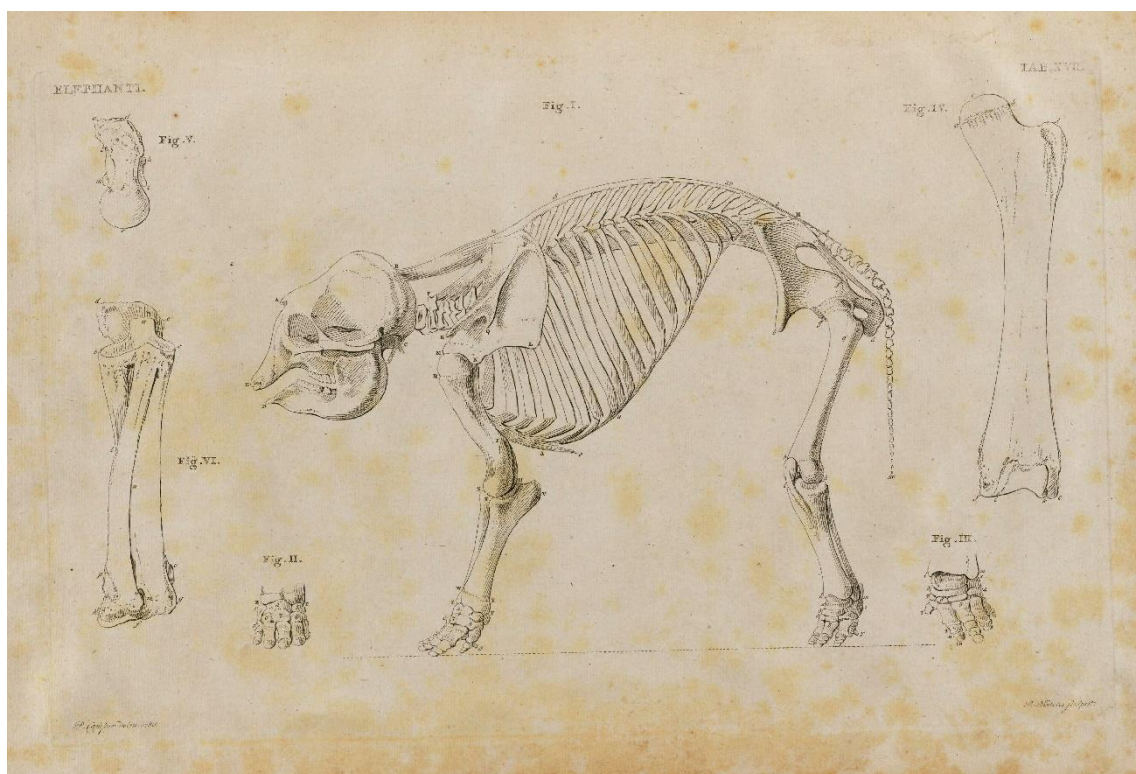
¹³ SPF ARAN, f. 4, op. 2 (1807), d. 302.

¹⁴ SPF ARAN, f. 4, op. 2 (1807), d. 283.

Figure 2. Drawings of an Asian elephant from the Petrus Camper's book (1802)



Figure 3. Drawings of an Asian elephant from the Petrus Camper's book (1802)



The skeleton of the St Petersburg elephant as a museum exhibit was not that exceptional as Thimpont's piece of craft but it played its role in the history of megafauna studies. It was of great use already in 1807-1808 when Wilhelm Gottlieb Tilesius had to assemble the mammoth skeleton brought by Mikhail Adams from the lower reaches of the Lena River. It was the first full mammoth skeleton obtained by naturalists. It is still exhibited in the museum near the elephant - the so-called Lena mammoth or Adams mammoth (Tilesio, 1815; Garutt, 1964).

Only one riddle remains: who exactly came up with the idea to invite a papier-mâché craftsman to mount an elephant? Was it the director of the *Kunstkammer* Nikolai Ozeretskovsky? Or *Kunstkammer's* taxidermist Ivan Alekseev, who understood that mounting an elephant was a task beyond his capabilities? Or a member of Academy Alexander Sevastyanov, who in 1804 published the first text on taxidermy in Russian?¹⁵ Or someone else? The idea, as Zaslavsky explained in 1979, was several decades ahead of its time. It could have become revolutionary if the innovation –a sculptural mannequin on which the animal skin was mounted– had been proposed in a more favourable environment. However, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, St. Petersburg could not boast of a brilliant community of natural historians. The method used by the papier-mâché master, who had a reputation in a different professional milieu, went unnoticed, and soon even his name was lost.

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¹⁵ Sevastianov translated a manual on taxidermy (Manes, 1804).

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