



Iconic Eccentricity: The Meaning of Victorian Novelty Taxidermy

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Rachel Youdelman

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Abstract

Whimsical, anthropomorphic taxidermy of the Victorian era has been dismissed as marginal novelty. Yet why do we feel it also to be, in some undefined way, emblematic of Victorian visual culture? Anthropomorphic works—such as studious rabbits intent at their desks in a rural village schoolroom, athletic toads playing a frenetic game of stick-and-hoop, or elegantly attired kittens attending a wedding—represent a conflation of human and animal, of death and life, which simultaneously evokes fascination and repulsion. A closer look compels questions about the internal processes driving its creators and attracting its audience: why did such grotesque anthropomorphic expression flourish at this precise point in history? Its encoded meanings reveal, on scrutiny, rich strata of information about the meaning of anthropomorphism within the Victorian psyche, suggestive of wider anxieties surrounding the tension between theology and traditional cosmological perspectives, and the shifting association between humans and animals in Victorian England.

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