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'Elephants Are Not Picked from Trees': Animal Biographies in the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History

Liv Emma Thorsen

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"Elephants are not picked from trees" are the words of Swedish taxidermist and conservator David Sjolander, spoken while he was in Angola looking for a fine bull elephant specimen in the autumn of 1948. At the age of 62 Sjolander was to satisfy his lifes dream of shooting the elephant he for so long had wished to prepare and exhibit. The African elephant was to be the main attraction in the Mammal Room of the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History. Liv Emma Thorsen, professor of cultural history, has reconstructed the collection history of four mammals exhibited in the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History that attracted much attention when they were displayed to the public for the first time: The elephant, gorilla, Tonkean macaque and walrus. The book examines how the museum acquired animals for its exhibits from 1906 to 1948, and how living animal bodies became museum exhibits. Using photographs and documents from the Gothenburg Museum of Natural History, the book shows that these museums are in possession of valuable material for writing the cultural history of animals, and that the museums of natural history display a nature that is historically, socially and culturally construed.

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