



This bulletin is produced by the collection department of the Musée de la nature et des sciences with the aim of making our objects and specimens better known to the public. These specimens are particularly interesting and are carefully preserved in the Museum's collections. They are not always presented during our various exhibitions.

## The display cabinet of John G. Bell, a famous taxidermist and naturalist

### A display cabinet that bears witness to the history of the natural sciences and museology in America

Still in excellent condition, despite the 150 years that have passed, this display cabinet was created by John G. Bell (1812-1889), known as the best taxidermist in the United States in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century. It is not surprising that he was also the official taxidermist of the noted naturalist— John James Audubon (1785-1851). Audubon was famous notably for *Birds of America*, a well-known work with 435 sketches of birds from his travels across the United States and Canada.

John G. Bell was fortunate enough to accompany Audubon during his 1843 expedition in the Missouri River region. At the time, Audubon was invited on a trip by the American Fur Company but because of his advanced age, he invited four young men to go with him to help him in what he called his “grand and last journey as a naturalist”. Bell, at the time aged 30 years, was part of this group, which also included Isaac Sprague, an artist from Massachusetts; Edward Harris and Lewis M. Squires, respectively Audubon's friend and neighbour. In Audubon's expedition journal is found the following note: “Friday, 18th – Fine [weather]. Bell shot a superb male Elk”.<sup>1</sup>

John G. Bell was also one of numerous notables who saw their names attributed to various species of birds in recognition and thanks for their collaboration with John James Audubon. Thus, during the course of the year 1849-50, the taxidermist who was taking part in an expedition in California, discovered 4 new species of birds, which were described by John Cassin. They included Lawrence's Goldfinch (*Carduelis lawrencei*), the White-headed Woodpecker (*Picoides albolarvatus*), Williamson's Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*) and the Sage Sparrow, the Latin name of which refers to Bell *Amphispiza belli*.

Bell's shop, situated at the corner of Broadway and Worth in Manhattan, was also an important place for natural history in the mid-nineteenth century. In addition to its use for taxidermy, the store was also a social club, a place for talks and a place where naturalists of the day enjoyed getting together. Bell gathered around him many notables who left their marks on the history of ornithology, including the young Frank Chapman (1864-1945), founder of the Christmas Bird Count at the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century; Spencer Fullerton Baird (1823 -1887), the second director of the Smithsonian Institution; John



**This display cabinet contains 36 birds, 43 eggs and 3 nests. It was created before 1850 by John G. Bell for the Peale Museum.**

Cassin (1813-1869), one of the most important ornithologists of his time who described nearly 200 new species; George Lawrence (1806-1895), co-author of *Birds of North America*, published in 1858; John Eatton LeConte (1784-1860), naturalist and father of John L. LeConte, the famous entomologist; and even Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), a young naturalist who became the 26<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. In an article entitled “My life as a naturalist”

<sup>1</sup> Haley & Steele, 2001



published in May, 1918, in *The American Museum Journal*, Roosevelt noted that he had learned the art of taxidermy from John G. Bell; he described him as follows: "Mr. Bell was a very interesting man, an American of the before-the-war type. He was tall, straight as an Indian, with white hair and smooth-shaven clear-cut face; a dignified figure, always in a black frock coat. He had no scientific knowledge of birds or mammals; his interest lay merely in collecting and preparing them. He taught me as much as my limitations would allow of the art of preparing specimens for scientific use and mounting them".

## A display cabinet developed for the Peale Museum

The display cabinet developed by Bell is also closely associated with the history of museology, since it was designed for the Peale Museum, the first major museum in the United States. This museum, which presented both art and natural history collections, was founded by Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), a famous artist, but also a naturalist, inventor, educator and politician. In his museum in Philadelphia, Peale was the first to present natural science specimens using the classification system proposed by Linnaeus in *Sytema Naturae*. He was also known as the conservator who founded the American tradition of making science interesting and more accessible to the general public. From 1794, the Museum was housed on the premises at the Philadelphia State House, a building that was later renamed Independence Hall. It was within these walls that the American Declaration of Independence was adopted.

Charles Wilson Peale passed on his passion for art and for the natural sciences to his sons and, with the experience he acquired in Philadelphia, tried to promote the museum across the United States. In 1814, Rembrandt, his older son, inaugurated the first building designed specifically to house a museum, in Baltimore. He directed it for around eight years, while Rubens, the younger son, took up the reins in 1829. Rubens was more interested in the natural sciences than in art, and he founded, in 1825, the Peale Museum in New York City, situated at 252 Broadway Avenue. Much the same type of objects as were housed in the museum in Philadelphia were presented there: large cabinets of mounted animals, cases of butterflies and other types of insects, and, as well, portraits painted by his own family. In 1840, Rubens changed the name of the museum to the New York Museum of Natural History and Science. The financial disaster which shook the United States after 1837 took its toll, and the entire collection was sold in 1843.

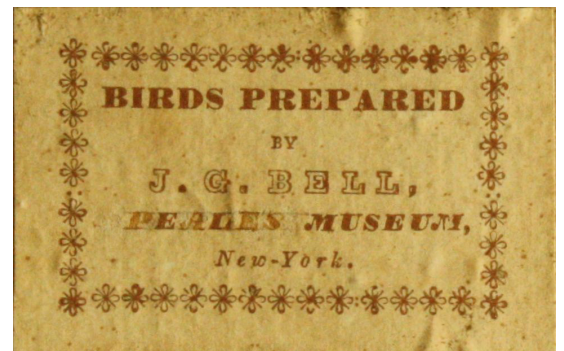
In the face of the difficult economic situation and the growing rift between scientific natural history on the one hand and the type of show represented by P. T. Barnum<sup>2</sup>, on the other, the Peale Museum in Philadelphia closed its doors and its collections were sold around 1850.

## The display cabinet comes to the Musée de la nature et des sciences

The Musée de la nature et des sciences acquired the John G. Bell display cabinet in December, 1996. It had been part of an old collection



One of the 36 birds shown in the display cabinet. This is a Blue-crowned Motmot (*Momotus momota*).



The label at the bottom of the display cabinet

in the natural sciences received from the Brome County Historical Society, in Knowlton, Quebec. No one had paid much attention to the history of this display cabinet, but the label bearing the name of John G. Bell, placed on the bottom of the case, gave us more information about its travels. A bronze plaque added to the bottom of the case suggests also that the case was purchased from the Peale Museum when it closed. A family from the Knowlton area had kept it for many years before giving it to their local museum. On the plaque, we can read the following dedication: "*In loving memory of Ellen Greene Foster (who died at Knowlton in February 1933, aged 97 years) In remembrance of her childhood. NFB*". This information is another link to history, this time to Canadian and Eastern Townships history. It appears that Mrs. Ellen Greene Foster was the mother of George Greene Foster, born in Knowlton in 1860, and named senator to the Canadian Parliament in 1917. This display cabinet is steeped in history!

<sup>2</sup> Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810 — 1891) was an American entrepreneur who specialized in big shows. He founded the Barnum circus in 1871.



## COMPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

**Accession number:** 1996.897.21-56

**Date of acquisition:** Decembre 5, 1996

**Name of the object:** Display cabinet holding 36 mounted birds, by John G. Bell

**Date of collection:** before 1850

**Name of the donator:** Brome County Historical Society

**Taxidermist:** John G. Bell

## Mounted specimens shown in the display cabinet

- 1996.897.21 - Carouge à épaulettes - Red-winged Blackbird - *Agelaius phoeniceus*
- 1996.897.22 - Colin de Virginie - Northern Bobwhite - *Colinus virginianus*
- 1996.897.23 - Colin de Virginie - Northern Bobwhite - *Colinus virginianus*
- 1996.897.24 - Gélinothe huppée - Ruffed Grouse - *Bonasa umbellus*
- 1996.897.25 - Bécasse d'Amérique - American Woodcock - *Scolopax minor*
- 1996.897.26 - Jaseur d'Amérique - Cedar Waxwing - *Bombycilla cedrorum*
- 1996.897.27 - Carouge à épaulettes - Red-winged Blackbird - *Agelaius phoeniceus*
- 1996.897.28 - Paruline à capuchon - Hooded Warbler - *Wilsonia citrina*
- 1996.897.29 - Oriole à gros bec - Altamira Oriole - *Icterus gularis*
- 1996.897.30 - Piranga écarlate - Scarlet Tanager - *Piranga olivacea*
- 1996.897.31 - Oriole du Nord - Northern Oriole - *Icterus galbula*
- 1996.897.32 - Guit-guit saï - Red-legged Honeycreeper - *Cyanerpes cyaneus*
- 1996.897.33 - Motmot houtouc - Blue-crowned Motmot - *Momotus momota*
- 1996.897.34 - Passerin indigo - Indigo Bunting - *Passerina cyanea*
- 1996.897.35 - Ariane à queue bleue - Blue-tailed Hummingbird - *Saucerottia cyanura*
- 1996.897.36 - Mango à cravate verte - Green-throated Mango - *Anthracothorax viridigula*
- 1996.897.37 - Mango de Prévost - Green-breasted Mango - *Anthracothorax prevostii iridescens*
- 1996.897.38 - Ariane à queue bleue - Blue-tailed Hummingbird - *Saucerottia cyanura*
- 1996.897.39 - Colibri rubis-topaze - Ruby-topaz Hummingbird - *Chrysolampis mosquitus*
- 1996.897.40 - Colibri de Cuvier - Scaly-breasted Hummingbird - *Campylopterus curvierii*
- 1996.897.41 - Perruche à collier - Rose-ringed Parakeet - *Psittacula krameri*
- 1996.897.42 - Cassique à ailes jaunes - Yellow-winged Cacique - *Cacicus melanicterus*
- 1996.897.43 - Loriot doré - African Golden-Oriole - *Oriolus auratus*
- 1996.897.44 - Choucador pourpré - Purple Glossy Starling - *Lamprotornis purpureus*
- 1996.897.45 - Barbican à poitrine rouge - Bearded Barbet - *Lybius dubius*
- 1996.897.46 - Martin-chasseur à poitrine bleue - Blue-breasted Kingfisher - *Halcyon malimbica*
- 1996.897.47 - Carouge à tête jaune - Yellow-headed Blackbird - *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*
- 1996.897.48 - Piranga écarlate - Scarlet Tanager - *Piranga olivacea*
- 1996.897.49 - Cossyphé à calotte blanche - White-crowned Robin-Chat - *Cossypha albicapilla*
- 1996.897.50 - Euplecte franciscain - Northern Red Bishop - *Euplectes franciscanus*
- 1996.897.51 - Spréo améthyste - Amethyst Starling - *Cinnyricinclus leucogaster*
- 1996.897.52 - Pyréneste ponceau - Black-bellied Seedcracker - *Pyrenestes ostrinus*
- 1996.897.53 - Euplecte à croupion jaune - Yellow Bishop - *Euplectes capensis*
- 1996.897.54 - Manakin à tête d'or - Golden-headed Manakin - *Pipra erythrocephala*
- 1996.897.55 - Durbec des sapins - Pine Grosbeak - *Pinicola enucleator*
- 1996.897.56 - Calliste diable-enrhumé - Turquoise Tanager - *Tangara mexicana*



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**How to refer to our bulletin**  
Musée de la nature et des sciences. 2012. The display cabinet of John G. Bell, a famous taxidermist and naturalist. Curator's Notes!, Number 4, March 2012.

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