People and Places:
Carl Akeley (1864–1926)

Randy Moore

Figure 1. Carl Akeley. Undated; Library of Congress LC-DIG-ggbain-37036.
Carl Ethan Akeley (Figure 1) was born on May 19, 1864, in Clarendon, New York. He attended school for only three years, but became famous for inventing a new type of taxidermy to preserve and display animals. Whereas taxidermists before Akeley stuffed skins with cotton and straw, Akeley built carefully measured models, over which he stretched the animal’s skin. The so-called “Akeley Method” revolutionized exhibits at museums, and brought distant, unimagined animals to life for the viewing public.

Akeley’s career started with stuffing his neighbors’ pets. However, in 1883, he began working at Ward’s Natural Science Establishment (a biological supply company) in Rochester, New York, where he helped mount PT Barnum’s famous elephant Jumbo, which had died in a circus train accident. (Akeley’s model of Jumbo went to Tufts University, where it was the school’s mascot until it burned in 1975; Jumbo’s bones remain in the American Museum of Natural History.) Akeley then worked at the Milwaukee Public Museum, where in 1890 he helped to create the museum’s first habitat diorama. At Chicago’s Field Museum, Akeley further developed his new taxidermy techniques. His method soon became the standard at most major museums.

Later in his life, Akeley later turned his attention to saving wild gorillas and was the first to film gorillas in the wild. Today, Akeley’s work is displayed in the Akeley Hall of African Mammals at the American Museum of Natural History, an exhibit considered to be among the world’s greatest museum displays.

In 1924, Akeley sculpted The Chrysalis, a bronze sculpture that depicted a human emerging from the cracked-open skin of a gorilla. The sculpture depicted his feelings of kinship with animals; he knew that humans had not literally sprung from gorillas, but understood that they shared a common ancestor (Bodry-Sanders 1998). The Chrysalis, in which humans’ ascent replaced a primal fall, was commissioned for New York’s West Side Unitarian Church, and its display there outraged many creationists.

Akeley died of dysentery in the Congo while collecting for the American Museum of Natural History on November 17, 1926, ten years before the completion of the Akeley Hall of African Mammals. He was buried in a place depicted in the Hall’s famous Gorilla Diorama. During 1979’s hostilities between gorilla poachers and Dian Fossey, Akeley’s grave was vandalized and his bones removed. Some were later recovered, and his memorial was later repaired by Penelope Bodry-Sanders, Akeley’s biographer. The Carl Akeley Award is given annually to the world’s top taxidermists.

**References**


**About the Author**

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