

Collecting American Animals in Early Modern Europe

This paper examines the collection of animals from the Americas in the early modern period. It explores the collecting of animal body parts, animal bodies, and animal paintings and sketches. With respect to paintings, Phillip II sent Francisco Hernández to the New World to document and research flora and fauna. Hernández ordered indigenous painters to depict 200 native animals to be sent to his majesty. Phillip II ordered the painting of American colorful birds and other beasts on the ceiling of his private chambers in the Escorial, many that directly based on the Hernández expedition to America. Phillip's interest formed part of a growing interest across Europe in the American animal.

The paper makes two arguments with respect to collecting. First, the early modern fascination with collecting of the animal and its image, most especially American animals, leads to a classification mentality that informed the formation of the eighteenth-century fields of natural history and taxonomy. Second, the early modern fascination with American animal collection intersected with the formation of an early ethnography—the collecting of strange races, inspiring the creation of a new artistic genre, caste paintings. The elite intellectual men interested in collecting provided a market for the new artistic mode of caste paintings whose classificatory epistemic would fuel eighteenth-century racial formations.