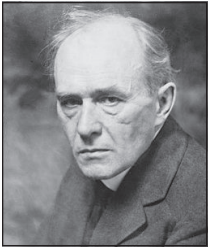


CONNER·ROSENKRANZ

19th & 20th Century American Sculpture

L.L.C.



Carl E. Akeley (1864-1926)

Known predominantly as a taxidermist and conservationist, Carl Ethan Akeley was also an accomplished *animalier*. At the age of sixteen Akeley taught himself taxidermy procedure from a textbook while simultaneously studying painting so that he could create backgrounds for the animals he treated. Within four years he had secured a position as a taxidermist at the Ward's Natural Science Establishment in Rochester, New York. Until the end of the nineteenth-century, taxidermists were seldom concerned with creating lifelike specimens and their procedures left little room for a naturalistic approach. As Akeley's skills developed, he began improving upon the established techniques of the trade and became increasingly dedicated to preserving the natural musculature of each species by fitting the skins over carefully sculpted forms

In 1886, Akeley began working at the Milwaukee Public Museum where, in 1890, he constructed what has been deemed the first habitat diorama for a science museum. In 1896 he was hired by the Columbian Museum of Chicago (renamed The Field Museum of Natural History in 1905) and was soon sent on his first expedition to Africa. In 1902, back in Chicago, he installed *The Charging Bulls* and *The Four Seasons*, the first

museum habitats to feature large mammals before a painted background—this set the standard for naturalistic displays of the species from around the world. The focus of the museum, however, soon shifted towards smaller animals, prompting Akeley to accept a position with New York's American Museum of Natural History on their 1909 expedition to collect African elephants.

While attending a fundraiser for this expedition, Akeley was introduced to John T. McCutcheon, a successful cartoonist for the Chicago Tribune. McCutcheon displayed such enthusiasm for Akeley's work, that he was invited to join the expedition. Also to join Akeley on this safari was his wife, Delia, and a team of explorers sent by the Smithsonian Institution including former president Theodore Roosevelt, who had recently completed his second and final term. At the age of forty-five Akeley embarked on this yearlong expedition, developing a deep admiration for the colossal creatures that would later come to dominate both his museum exhibits and his bronzes. However, he also became increasingly critical of his prospective specimens. He often complained

that ivory hunters had already harvested all of the best



THE CHARGING HERD, 1915, bronze, 13 ½ x 28 ¼ x 12 ½ inches, cast #1 of a proposed 10

examples of African elephants and that he was charged with the onerous task of sorting through the inferior grades to collect the subjects for the grand display he was planning back in New York. Frequently the party would shoot down three or four good bulls, only to abandon them after failing Akeley's meticulous inspection.

Akeley's chief assistant at the American Museum of Natural History upon his return was Robert H. Rockwell, a successful taxidermist sculptor in his own right who also made small bronzes representing animal life. The two worked together with William Leigh, whom Akeley employed to paint the backgrounds to his habitats, to create the grand window displays of the Hall of African Mammals, which were gradually revealed to the public from the early 1920s through the 1940s.

Akeley returned to Africa in 1921 in order to procure gorilla specimens for the Natural History Museum's new window displays. Becoming increasingly conscious of their imminent extinction, he advocated for a preserve dedicated to the gorillas' protection. Consequently, he became instrumental in establishing The Albert National

Park in Belgian Congo (now The Virunga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Africa's first wildlife preserve. He returned again to Africa in 1926; this trip, however, would be his last. While visiting the preserve that he helped to create, Akeley fell ill and died. He was buried on Mount Mikeno in the Belgian Congo, the sight depicted in the gorilla diorama still on display at the American Museum of Natural History.

Henry F. Osborne, the director of the American Museum of Natural History, desired to "fix a reality for time to come and to extend the actual experience of consciousness" and Akeley was certainly well suited for the job. The Hall of African Mammals was already in the early stages of development when Akeley left for Kenya in 1909. However, it was during that expedition while recovering from critical injuries sustained following his own run-in with a herd of charging elephants that Akeley dreamt of an entire hall dedicated to the vast African wilderness dominated by his beloved elephants. Although Akeley would not live to see his dream manifest, the Akeley Hall of African Mammals, named in his honor, was



THE CHARGING HERD, 1915

posthumously completed in 1936.

The display of African elephants at the Museum of Natural History bears a striking compositional resemblance to the 28¼-inch long sculpture, *The Charging Herd*. This seven-figure bronze group was modeled concurrent to Akeley's treatment of the eight elephants that remain on display in the Akeley Hall of African Mammals, and possibly served as a prototype for the final museum display. Cast in 1915 and appropriately dedicated to his friend and fellow-explorer, John McCutcheon, *The Charging Herd* is a relic of Akeley's 1909 expedition.

Kaylee Alexander, July 2014

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The Akeley Hall of African Mammals, Museum of Natural history, New York

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