



Middlebury

Ellery E. Foutch

Associate Professor

Program in American Studies

efoutch@middlebury.edu

Axinn – 15 Old Chapel Road

Middlebury, VT 05753

802.443.5768

middlebury.edu

June 2023

Greetings, Alumni College Students!

I hope this note finds you well and enjoying a restorative summer. I am already looking forward to meeting all of you and to our class, Mastodons, Mermaids, and Dioramas: Capturing Nature in American Culture. I have taught this course in a variety of contexts—first, at a postdoctoral teaching fellowship at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and later at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, before launching the class for Middlebury students. In each iteration of the class, we’ve worked closely with local collections, from the Wisconsin State Herbarium and Geology Museum housed at UW to the watercolors of naturalists Mark Catesby and John James Audubon kept in the Print Room of Windsor Castle; Middlebury students now research specimens kept in the laboratories and classrooms of Bicentennial Hall! While we won’t replicate the writing-intensive experience that my students labor over, I hope we’ll still have animated discussions about the intersections of art and natural history, past and present.

In preparation for our time together, I’d like to encourage you to visit a museum in your area, if possible, paying attention not only to *what* is on display, but *how* it is displayed. Are the rooms quiet or noisy? Are the galleries dimly lit or brightly illuminated? How does the museum (and its architecture) shape your experience or expectations? What seems to be the expected age or educational level of the audience, and what causes you to infer this? How much space is dedicated to pedagogical versus retail experiences?! When I have designed this as an assignment for students, I have asked them to visit **both** an art museum **and** a science or natural history museum, in order to compare and contrast the experiences. I hope you’ll come to class ready to share your observations (and maybe even photos!).

In one of our earliest sessions, we’ll also talk about a predecessor of the museum known as the *Wunderkammer*, or chamber of wonders (sometimes referred to as cabinets of curiosities). The [Wadsworth Atheneum](#) and the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) have wonderful online resources related to these kinds of collections and objects, so I hope you’ll browse those sites and see some of the amazing objects that defy easy categorization.

At the risk of inundating you with too much of me before we even begin, I’ve also included an [excerpt from my book-in-progress](#) about 19th-century obsessions with perfection and its preservation—in this instance, it’s the tale of an obsessive butterfly collector, and it evokes some of the broad themes we’ll be discussing about complex desires, hopes, and fears related to collecting and representing the natural world. If you’re itching to learn more about the histories of museums in the United States, I’d encourage you to pick up Steven Conn’s *Museums and American Intellectual Life, 1876–1926* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), especially his chapter “‘Naked Eye Science’: Museums and Natural History.” Copies of the book are readily available at [abebooks.com](#) and many local libraries.

I look forward to learning with you!

With all best wishes,

Ellery E. Foutch

Associate Professor