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## Skeletons In the Closet

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# Skeletons In the Closet

## Abstract

Among the collections cabinets of the Renaissance, fish, in the forms of *naturalia* and *artificialia*, can be widely found. They were sought after for their beauty as well as their relation to the natural world. In the famous frontispiece to Ferrante Imperato's *Dell'istoria naturale* (1599), fish of varying kinds are hung against and atop the ceiling on either side of a large alligator. They are mixed between an assortment of crustaceans and shells, also sea creatures, including the prized nautilus shell found so abundantly in Renaissance culture. As seen in this frontispiece, fish could be found as decoration in collection cabinets, featured creatures of study in natural history books, and the subject of paintings. The cabinet here at Gettysburg features fish in those two forms of *naturalia* and *artificialia* to properly emulate the era. A skeleton of the Gar fish is displayed alongside the skeleton of a Perch. Each representing two sides of the commercial spectrum. Paired with the skeletons are prints of copper engravings done by Mark Catesby (1682-1749) from the second volume of his book *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (1754).[excerpt]

## Keywords

naturalia, perch, fish, anatomy, gar, Mark Catesby

## Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

## Comments

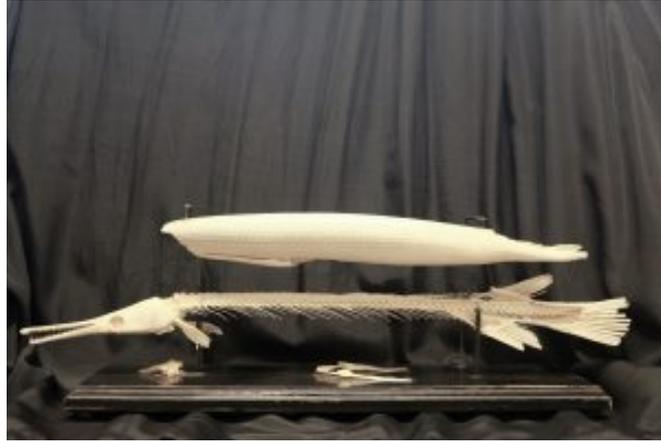
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Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/skeletons-in-the-closet/>

Audio guide on fish skeletons included.

# Skeletons In the Closet

By Kevin Michael Isky



Gar Fish Skeleton, Photograph by Kevin Isky



Perch Fish Skeleton, Photograph by Kevin Isky

Among the collections cabinets of the Renaissance, fish, in the forms of *naturalia* and *artificialia*, can be widely found. They were sought after for their beauty as well as their relation to the natural world. In the famous frontispiece to Ferrante Imperato's *Dell'istoria naturale* (1599), fish of varying kinds are hung against and atop the ceiling on either side of a large alligator.<sup>1</sup> They are mixed between an assortment of crustaceans and shells, also sea creatures, including the prized nautilus shell found so abundantly in Renaissance culture. As seen in this frontispiece, fish could be found as decoration in collection cabinets, featured creatures of study in natural history books, and the subject of paintings. The cabinet here at Gettysburg features fish in those two forms of *naturalia* and *artificialia* to properly emulate the era. A skeleton of the Gar fish is displayed alongside the skeleton of a Perch. Each representing two sides of the commercial spectrum. Paired with the skeletons are prints of copper engravings done by Mark Catesby (1682-1749) from the second volume of his book *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (1754).



Frontispiece engraving, Museum Wormianum, 1655

In the prior few centuries, known as the Middle Ages, artistry was focused rather on symbolism and tended to be highly stylized.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, this was not conducive to Renaissance naturalists wishing to realistically portray and catalogue their specimens. So, with the Renaissance came a shift towards accuracy and realism. The realism itself was stirred, in part, by a desire to catalogue and collect wondrous specimens from across the world. Trade had expanded exponentially from European countries such as Spain, The Netherlands, England and France, to lands that were not previously explored by Europeans such as Japan, China, the Ottoman Empire, and the New World. These exotic lands had much to offer. Animal specimens, plants, cultural items, and other curiosities overwhelmed the hearts of Renaissance scholars and regality alike, leading to a flood of worldly items into Europe.

The Gar fish is one of those examples of animal specimens brought over from the New World. It is found in some Southern United States, Mexico, Central America, as well as the West Indies.<sup>3</sup> Evident by the display in the Gettysburg cabinet, the body of the Gar is long and cylindrical. It is a predatorial fish, the slim jaw is lined with dozens of small teeth for biting.



Gar Fish Scales, Photograph by Kevin Isky

Covering the body are small, diamond-shaped scales. These scales were especially important due to their array of uses, both by the fish, and Pre-Columbian Indians, and later, Europeans. The scales themselves are coated in Ganoin, an enamel that provides a particular durability.<sup>4</sup> This is useful to the fish which benefits from its wonderful protective quality. Pre-Columbian Indians would tip their arrows with Gar scales, presumably for the durability as well as piercing quality,

also crafting breastplate armor out of these scales for the same protective quality the fish possess.<sup>5</sup> Europeans would coat the tips of their plows in these scales for the same reasons for easier plowing.<sup>6</sup>

The Perch fish is a less exotic example. Types of these fish are found in both the New World and Europe.<sup>7</sup> They would have been a common site at the fish market, and still are today. Unlike the Gar, they did not offer any tangible uses, aside from being a common fish for eating. The differences between the European and New World Perch are minimal.<sup>8</sup> More interesting to scholars, however, would have been the beautiful shape of the Perch's skeleton, which is made of bone rather than cartilage.<sup>9</sup> Although typical of a fish's shape, they are highly intricate and fascinating.



Gar Fish and Frutex Aquaticus Engraving, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*, 30, Mark Catesby, 1754

Mark Catesby, whose prints accompany these two specimens in the Gettysburg Cabinet, drew both of these specimens from life. Specifically, he first created water color paintings of the subjects from his trips to the English colonies of Florida and Carolina from 1712 to 1719, and travelled to the Bahama Islands to focus on fish in 1725.<sup>10</sup> He was a self-taught artist, and took it upon himself to convert his etchings to copper plate engravings to save money and ensure that his engravings retained as much of the original painting as possible.<sup>11</sup> These engravings were part of a larger publication, his book [\*The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands\*](#), and found in the second volume which dealt with animal life, and was considered the first of its subject: flora and fauna of this section of America. However, he did not define his paintings as art, but rather, to quote Catesby, “Rather than artistry. . . essentially they were technical drawings”. Though his work comes after the High Renaissance, this ideology of Catesby's only furthers the naturalist mindset that was so prevalent before his time; he carried the torch, so to speak. An interesting motif of Catesby's was to include plants in the background of the animals he engraved. Although stylistic, these combinations of flora and fauna were neither to scale, nor even of the same setting. A good example of this is the inclusion of the *Frutex aquaticus* in the Gar print. Likely, the plant and the Gar could have been found along the same water source, yet the *Frutex aquatius* can grow upwards of, quoting Catesby, “twelve feet high” which is far longer than the common Gar can grow.<sup>12</sup> The longest of which, the

Alligator Gar, can only grow to about ten feet long. Clearly Catesby knew of this difference between his subjects, and must have included them together for stylistic reasons.<sup>13</sup>



Perch Engraving, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*, 5, Mark Catesby, 1754

The Gar Fish Skeleton and the Perch Fish Skeleton are on loan from the Vertebrate Zoology division of Gettysburg College’s Biology Department in McCreary Hall. Although the specimens themselves are relatively modern—they are from the 20th century—but, do not detract from the overall experience of a proper wonder cabinet. They have been exquisitely preserved and display well, offering an interesting yet educational view into the inner-structure of two Renaissance era fish.

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