Sidedoor

Episode 5: Butting Heads

TC: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian. I'm Tony Cohn, and with my co-host Megan Detrie…

MD: Hey guys!

TC: We bring you three stories about squabbles big and small: from the Aesthetic Movement's most enduring home renovation nightmare, to a debate that rests the future of an entire ecosystem on the shoulders of one very adorable animal. Our first story about butting heads, though, starts 66 million years ago.

Hans Sues: Two types of dinosaur skulls that suggests the animals may have engaged in head-butting.

MD: That's Hans Sues, a curator and paleontologist at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

Hans Sues: One has a really thick skull roof that is two feet in length—the skull roof is a foot thick over the brain. Its associated specializations that suggest the skull was used as a battering ram for fighting. Somewhat similar to the thick skull roof we see in some big-horn sheep today. And the other is a horned dinosaurs including the triceratops that have horns over their nose and often the eyes area that would allow the animals to lock horns, wrestle a little bit.

MD: The reason for all this head butting? Sounds a tiny bit familiar.

Hans Sues: These fighting behaviors are usually to impress mates and defend territory, so you could show a mate what a fit male you are.

MD: Those instincts are really in us too. We all want to defend our home, impress people and do a bit of flirting.

TC: At least those dinosaur battles served a purpose. Let me tell you about two people mostly fighting over their egos. This is a story about a life-long grudge between former friends that all began over a dining room.

MD: A what?

TC: Yup, a dining room. Today, it's the best surviving example of an interior from the Aesthetic movement. But back when it was painted in late 1800s, it was the first shot in what would become a war. Meet James McNeil Whistler, a modernist painter and society darling and Frederick Leyland. Leyland was a shipping magnate who fancied himself a patron of the arts… mainly in the form of commissioning works from Whistler. The two men struck up a close friendship, and well…

LG: Whistler described their relationship as "Once friends, forever enemies."

TC: That's Dr. Lee Glazer, curator of American Art at the Smithsonian's Freer Sackler Museum of Asian Art.

LC: Whistler and Leyland were sort of birds of a feather in that they both had huge egos, huge ambition and really neither one of them was very nice.

TC: It was 1876. Leyland was looking to redesign his dining room. Whistler was working on the job but only to advise on the color of the shutters. And then, as contractors so often do, the guy in charge had to drop out. So suddenly Whistler is in charge of the entire thing. So Leyland goes away for the summer, and leaves Whistler to finish the job. The dining room that was initially envisioned as a sunny, Chinese pavilion, with yellow leather walls and shelving for Leyland's huge blue and white porcelain collection. That yellow Chinese pavilion met…

LG: Whistler's imagination. He proceeded to cover every surface of the room with this blue and gold and green pattern derived from the peacock's feather.

TC: See in England at the time, the trendy thing was for artists and architects to collaborate on rooms that were hyper-beautiful, total works of art.

LG: Whistler really wanted to break into that market and he really saw his work on Leyland's dining room as his opportunity to do that.

TC: And he really went for it.

LG: The effect of being in the peacock room it's a little overwhelming in its sheer gorgeousness and there is something a little over the top about it um, threatening maybe to tip into something that is other than beautiful, it is sort of just teetering on the edge of decorative perfection.

TC: He titled it “Harmony in Blue and Gold, colon the Peacock Room.”

LG: He did write the entire Leyland family letters over the course of that summer hinting at what he called the gorgeous surprise that would await them. He said things like “I'm up on the ladder at 6 in the morning I don't come down until 9 at night. I'm blind with sleep and blue peacock feathers.”

TC: Only this wasn’t the agreement. Leyland comes home in the fall of 1876 and finds his once tasteful dining room is now a horror show of peacock feathers. Whistler had been using Leyland’s house as a kind of public workshop, inviting over the press to watch him work. And on top of that, by today’s standards, the bill is roughly two hundred thousand dollars. These guys fight it out in a way only rich people from the 19th century England would: with catty letters. Here are some of the best burns. Megan, you be Whistler and I’ll be Leyland.

MD: You got it.

MD: “Whom the God’s intend to be ridiculous they furnish with a frill.”

TC: “I will publicly horsewhip you”

MD: “You seem to me… to be rapidly developing a capacity for becoming a bore”

TC: “Your swaggering self-assertion has made you an unbearable nuisance… An artistic Barnum”

MD: Again, here’s Lee.

LG: It's really hard to know whose side to be on in that argument. Do we value art? Do we value money? Do we value the right of the patron and the homeowner or the creative artist who came in and created a masterpiece?

MD: I mean, is this just the case of a contractor, and friend, who went beyond what he was asked to do, like coming home to find that you got a new swimming pool when you really just wanted a bathtub?

TC: Sure, if the swimming pool is painted electric pink, not the soothing grey you had paid for. Finally, they agree to split the bill, and Whistler is allowed in to finish the work. But…

LG: He was angry about the money but even more he was angry at what he saw as this breach of taste on the part of a patron and who he was really depending on to sort of catapult him into the next level of artistic superstardom.

TC: So, Whistler paints over Leyland's leather walls with a flat blue. Then goes to the wall facing the head of the table. You know, where Leyland would sit for every meal and stare, and paints a mural of two massive peacocks fighting. He titles it… not-so-subtly… "Art and Money."

LG: If you look very closely at the peacock on the right hand side, you will see that he is literally made of money, it's the Leyland peacock and his breast feathers are made up of gold and silver coins and scattered at his feet are silver coins representing the money that he shorted Whistler in painting the Peacock Room.

TC: Of course, upon seeing it, Leyland bans Whistler from the house and cuts him off financially. Not only has Whistler lost a benefactor and friend... He loses kind of everything. He has a string of unfortunate—highly publicized—stumbles, and eventually has to file for bankruptcy.

MD: What happens to Leyland?

TC: He's Whistler's main creditor. So he gets to sell off all of Whistler's things. Which I'm sure was very satisfying. Until Leyland walks into Whistler's house to inventory the goods, and then he sees it a grotesque painting of this half man/half peacock kinda thing, squatting on top of whistler's house, and it has the face of, you guessed it, Leyland.

MD: Whistler's final dig.

LG: They both behaved very badly. And even though Leyland professed to hate the peacock room, ultimately he never changed a thing. He dined at the head of his table facing the unflattering portrait of himself as an angry peacock and the room persisted

that way exactly how Whistler had left it really until after Leyland's death and he even invited tourist and critics of the right sorts to see it.

TC: In fact, it's survived, intact, for over a 100 years, having been dismantled in London and brought to Detroit at the turn of the century, and then again shipped to the Smithsonian when the Freer Gallery of Art was built in the 1920s.

MD: So it all shakes out alright in the end.

TC: But they never hug it out. And Whistler would never step foot in the room again.

MD: But you can. When the Freer Gallery of Art reopens in Washington, DC, next summer The Peacock room goes back on display in full plumage.

TC: When we're invested in something, we're no problem bickering about it. Like talking politics at Thanksgiving with your uncle: everyone thinks they have the answer.

MD: Know what people have been butting heads about in recent years: conservation. You've heard of *Tian Tian, Mei Xiang, Bao Bao* and *Bei Bei*— those pandas everyone is obsessed with at the Smithsonian's National Zoo? Well, some conservationists think they aren't worth the hassle.

TC: What?

MD: Hear me out: With such limited funds, some people say we should be prioritizing conservation differently. They think that it's important to weigh a bunch of factors such as costs, or which animals play an essential role in the habitat – like pollinators, while others believe that it's most important to get people to care, and you do that through charismatic animals.

TC: By charismatic animals you mean the big, symbolic ones like lions, elephants, whales?

MD: Yeah, the kind that land lead roles in the movies. And honestly, these pandas, if you ask me, they are just coasting on that popularity. They spend 18 hours a day eating, hardly move, and rarely mate: they are total freeloaders.

TC: You can say that, but there's no denying people love them.

MD: You know, Bill McShea, a research scientist at the Smithsonian's Conservation Biology Institute has name for people like you.

TC: Gorgeous?

MD: He says you have a sickness called "panda love." This is him giving a talk at Tedx Foggy Bottom back in 2014.

<BS_Tedx Tape>: I've worked in many countries with many animals. When I meet people and start talking to people, sooner or later it comes out that I'm the panda guy at the National Zoo. I have to let you know, I am not so enamored with pandas, to me they are an average animal. If I was a professor I would say they are a solid B no better, no worse. But I seem to be alone in this categorization.

Giant pandas are a bear, and they are an average bear, they aren't the biggest bear, or the smallest bear, they are an average bear. You say no, no, no it's the color, I love that color that black and white stuff, its unique. No other bear looks like that. No. There's an all-white bear, there's an all-black bear. But most bears are black and white, like the panda. Very average. You say no, it's not the color it's the way the face looks, look at that face, and look at those eyes look at that mouth; that is cute. And you're right. You're hardwired to love that face; that face looks a lot like a baby face—the big eyes, the round face, the cupid mouth. Either you're hardwired to love babies or you spent too much time watching cartoons as a young child. Because that's the look they give you in Disney. That could be why you love pandas—too much TV.

TC: Oh, come on. That's just being cynical.

MD: But his argument makes sense. I'm not saying we don't love them, I'm saying they don't come cheap and they take a lot of time, money and management, both in zoos and in the wild. Our Zoo doesn't even own the pandas, and they pay millions of dollars a year to borrow them from China.

TC: And China uses that money to build reserves.

MD: Sure, but some places are trying something new, where conservation isn't just focused on which animals have the most significance for us, but instead look at costs, and how easy it would be to maintain them, and mostly importantly, what they mean for

the habitat at large. Let's look at New Zealand. A few years ago, their Department of Conservation changed their whole approach. They took 700 at-risk species. Ranked them according to their strategic impact. And sadly for folks who feel like you, some of their most adorable animals, like the rock hopper penguin, were low priority. But this refusal not to be blinded by cuddliness… officials say will help them save twice as many species.

TC: Yeah, but cuddliness can be the path to greater conservation. Our attachment to pandas is what is protecting forests in China. Let's hash it out with Bill McShea.

Bill McShea: Pandas are the gateway drug to wildlife conservation. You can get hooked on pandas relatively easily and once you're hooked on pandas we hope you become hooked on other things in that habitat.

TC: When you help pandas, you also help the places they live, and the plants and animals that live alongside them.

Bill McShea: The red pandas and the takin and the golden pheasants, yes you originally like the panda because it's the cutest thing on earth, but you can also like the rest of the package.

TC: Cuteness pays. Zoo loans and donations from panda fans have raised millions which has funded 65 giant panda reserves. Which gave us 20 percent more pandas living in the wild in the last decade.

Bill McShea: We want people to be interested in all conservation, the whole package, the forest the ferns, the moss, the animals, the birds, the whole thing. Almost nobody comes into this from that direction. Everybody comes into it from an individual animal or a connection with an individual person. Pandas lead you to a bigger story, and if you're not going to come in by pandas, how else will you come in?

TC: Megan, let's go meet Marty Dearie, a zoo keeper who works with the pandas, and Bao Bao, the panda, herself.

Marty Dearie: Bao Bao is an interesting mix of her parents, she is very much like her father in the sense that she is very playful, she is very engaged in things that we offer her, but she can be more reserved like her mother.

TC: Millions of people visit the Zoo annually, and even more people watch the panda cams online.

Marty Dearie: The pandas we have here at National are ambassadors to those wild pandas.

TC: There are only 50 pandas living in zoos outside of China. But, that may change one day. Thanks to new reproduction technology, the number of captive-bred pandas reached 300 last year. Here's Bill McShea again.

Bill McShea: You can't say 'oh they are an evolutionary dead-end, what a mistake, I bet you feel sorry now.' No. They are living, they are increasing in numbers; they just need a little more management than most animals right now.

TC: So while Bill McShea may not think they are the most extraordinary animals, he is grateful they exist.

Bill McShea: Thank god there are giant pandas. If there weren't, what would we do in that part of the world? These ecosystems are in trouble, they aren't going to be saved by logic alone. They are going to be saved by some kind of empathy and it's hard to empathize with a bamboo forest but it's easy to empathize with a giant panda. And if that's how I save the bamboo forest, then so be it. I'll take it.

MD: With all the attention, support and research, if we as humans are going to rally behind anything, it's pandas. But I still think you are just looney tunes for the amount of time you spend watching a panda take a bath.

TC: I take that very personally.

MD: You probably should.

TC: Maybe a good fight every once and awhile isn't such a bad thing.