



D'em bones

Maxilla & Mandible's curious shop

by Michael Bloom

Are you faced with the thankless task of buying yet another Christmas present for the man who has everything? Or are you contemplating some really daring and extensive punk-industrial style redecorating? Let me give you two words to remember: Maxilla and Mandible.

Those are, of course, the anatomical terms for the upper and lower jawbone. But Maxilla & Mandible, Ltd., is also the name of a business establishment in New York City that calls itself "The Natural History and Science Emporium." Since 1983, Maxilla & Mandible has

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supplied biological specimens and curios not only to educational institutions but also to artists and interested citizens.

It is located, appropriately enough, a couple blocks from the Museum of Natural History. It occupies a storefront on Columbus Avenue, among chi-chi little boutiques and restaurants, from which it stands right out by hanging a human skeleton in its display window. That's merely the most obvious example of the shop's proclivities; everything else on display makes it look like a cluttered prop room for the Addams Family.

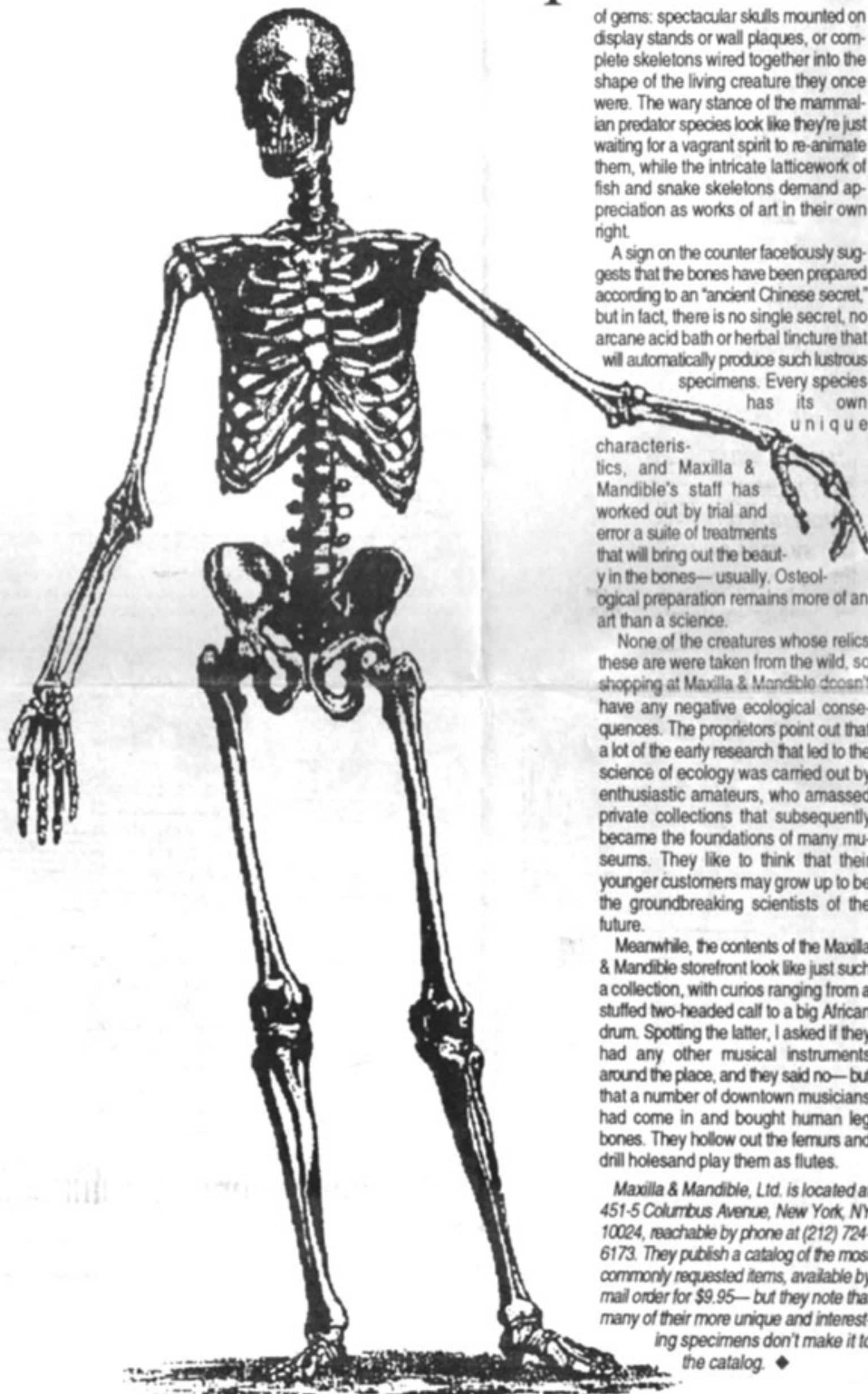
Inside, the shop is piled to the rafters with stuff. Much of the inventory is the sort of gewgaw you'd see in any decent

museum gift shop. There are small fossils, trilobites and ferns and other relics of erstwhile lords of creation. There are many species of seashells, and a bowl full of desiccated sea horses. There are attractive rocks: little polished pebbles of semi-precious minerals like turquoise or onyx, and well-formed quartz crystals of the sort new agers have embraced unto their bosoms, as well as geological conundrums like geodes. There are poster-sized charts of the sort educators and iron pumpers use to explain the relevant biology. The needs of serious collectors are also served here, with an array of display cases, insect pins, magnifying lenses, lightweight but heavy-duty butterfly nets, and other tools of the trade.

But the specimens available here quickly outstrip anything you're going to be able to collect in your neighborhood. There are insects from every inhabited continent—scarab beetles bigger than slot cars, butterflies so ostentatious they put rainbows to shame, nightmare-inducing arachnids such as tarantulas and scorpions, and the only slightly less sinister praying mantis.

And that's only the beginning. Near the basket of peacock feathers is a bin of ostrich eggs—whole shells, six inches long or so, punctured at the ends to empty out the meat. They're pretty sturdy (native tribesmen use them as water bottles), and they make a whopper of an Easter egg. Another basket contains sharks' jaws, bristling with teeth sharp enough to impale the casual browser. Almost as bloodthirsty, spiny blowfish hang in the air—preserved spiked balloons. The seashells build up to a beautiful climax of chambered nautilus shells, split lengthwise to reveal the perfection of their logarithmic proportions. Mounted animal trophies adorn the walls, enough to furnish all the old men's clubs in the world: zebra hides, elephant tusks, caribou antlers, stuffed antelope heads, and the skull of a cape buffalo, whose horns look menacing even on bleached bones. And there are the odd remnants: next to the gracefully tapered horns of the gemsbok are bins of leftover ribs and vertebrae, a carton of human femurs, and a smattering of skulls.

For it is bones that constitute the shop's primary stock in trade—as they say, Maxilla & Mandible is the world's only osteological specialty store. Flensed, cleaned, and bleached to the pearly luminosity of a Georgia O'Keeffe painting, the bones take on the aspect



of gems: spectacular skulls mounted on display stands or wall plaques, or complete skeletons wired together into the shape of the living creature they once were. The wary stance of the mammalian predator species look like they're just waiting for a vagrant spirit to re-animate them, while the intricate latticework of fish and snake skeletons demand appreciation as works of art in their own right.

A sign on the counter facetiously suggests that the bones have been prepared according to an "ancient Chinese secret," but in fact, there is no single secret, no arcane acid bath or herbal tincture that will automatically produce such lustrous specimens. Every species has its own

unique characteristics, and Maxilla & Mandible's staff has worked out by trial and error a suite of treatments that will bring out the beauty in the bones—usually. Osteological preparation remains more of an art than a science.

None of the creatures whose relics these are were taken from the wild, so shopping at Maxilla & Mandible doesn't have any negative ecological consequences. The proprietors point out that a lot of the early research that led to the science of ecology was carried out by enthusiastic amateurs, who amassed private collections that subsequently became the foundations of many museums. They like to think that their younger customers may grow up to be the groundbreaking scientists of the future.

Meanwhile, the contents of the Maxilla & Mandible storefront look like just such a collection, with curios ranging from a stuffed two-headed calf to a big African drum. Spotting the latter, I asked if they had any other musical instruments around the place, and they said no—but that a number of downtown musicians had come in and bought human leg bones. They hollow out the femurs and drill holes and play them as flutes.

Maxilla & Mandible, Ltd. is located at 451-5 Columbus Avenue, New York, NY 10024, reachable by phone at (212) 724-6173. They publish a catalog of the most commonly requested items, available by mail order for \$9.95—but they note that many of their more unique and interesting specimens don't make it to the catalog. ♦

