

The art of preservation

Nature's finest specimens come alive again in the hands of these taxidermists BY BILL MORRIS

For Frank Kriz, a son of the Bronx, it all started with a red fox.

"I went hunting when I was about 14, up near Katonah, and I shot a red fox," Kriz, now 65, recalls. "My dad did taxidermy as a hobby, and I told him he had to show me how. He was the toughest guy I ever met in my life — you had to be perfect. So he showed me, and that red fox is how I got started."

Five decades later, his father's exacting standards are evident in the trophies that emerge from the cluttered workshop of Kriz's AFK Taxidermy Studios in the Morris Park section of the Bronx.

"Every one's different," says Kriz, putting the finishing touches on a deer head. "This guy here lost a lot of his ear — fighting, probably."

This head is one of the last from the past deer season. First, Kriz sends the skin to a tannery in North Carolina. When the finished "cape" is returned, he fits it over a Styrofoam mold, stitches it together, then models the eyes and nose and sets the ears. The whole process costs, on average, \$300.

As Kriz works, he's being watched by a menagerie of trophies so lifelike you expect them to start moving. A black bear seems to be leaping through one wall. A large golden lizard is poised on a tree branch. A Technicolor queen triggerfish floats near the ceiling.

There are many common creatures — ducks, pheasants, geese, trout, striped bass — as well as a few exotics, including a caribou and a wild Sicilian sheep known as a mouflon.

Kriz charges as little as \$100 to mount a small fish; he once charged \$5,000 for a full polar bear.

Like all artists, he has his likes and his dislikes.

"I like to do African heads," he says, his blue eyes sparkling. "Kudus, which have spirally horns. My favorite was a Grant's gazelle. Beautiful animal. I just love animals."

But don't ask him to preserve your dog or cat for posterity. "I don't like doing them," Kriz says flatly. "You look at a dog for 15 years and you see a certain smile, a twinkle in their eye. You can't reproduce that. What people get is just a mounted cat or dog. I just finished doing five pigeons — somebody's pets." He shakes his head. "It's unbelievable."

Though he's now a one-man operation, Kriz spent 18 years working for Jonas Brothers, once of the largest taxidermy studios in the world. He was in Anchorage in the 1950s, playing minor league baseball with the Alaska Gold Panners, when he saw a Jonas Brothers ad for a taxidermist's apprentice. Remembering that

red fox, he answered the ad and the rest, as they say, is history.

His most cherished trophy is not particularly exotic. It's a pheasant his father mounted 72 years ago, seven years before Frank Kriz came into the world.

The pheasant rests in the AFK workshop, a timeless reminder of the toughest guy — and the best teacher — Frank Kriz ever met. ♦

TOP-RATED

AFK Taxidermy Studios

AFK TAXIDERMY STUDIOS

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MICHAEL DABIN PHOTOGRAPHS

PERMANENTLY GROUNDED Frank Kriz with a fine feathered, but dead, friend.

HONORABLE MENTION

Maxilla & Mandible

Home of the pickled frog

Henry Galiano's clientele is not people who want to preserve their hunting or fishing trophies. His clientele is collectors.

And collectors, as Galiano knows so well, will collect just about anything. That's why the staff at his upper West Side shop, Maxilla & Mandible, has learned how to preserve and mount just about anything — from beetles to butterflies to a tarantula as big as a man's hand.

"Imagine that," Galiano says, studying the spider, still pinned to its mounting board. "This was somebody's pet."

It costs about \$100 to have an average tarantula gutted, stuffed and mounted. This big guy will cost a little more. The shop will also pickle anything from a frog to a snake to a baby shark, for \$20 to \$30. Preserving and mounting butterflies costs about \$20 apiece.

"People like to see a pickled frog," Galiano says with a shrug.

In the two decades he has run Maxilla & Mandible, Galiano has seen it all. Today, one corner of the labyrinthine workshop is taken over by a terrarium, where an army of carpet beetles is busy cleaning the last bits of flesh off the jaw of a coyote. Galiano blithely spritzes the terrarium with water, keeping the beetles happy.

"We're a collectors' mecca," he says proudly. "There was nothing like this when we got started. I wanted to



STUFFED BY A BAT MAN A winged creature of the night from the Maxilla and Mandible collection.

be responsible for making the public aware of the need to save specimens."

His love for the natural world dates back to his boyhood, when his father would bring him from the family's home in Spanish Harlem to the American Museum of Natural History.

"That's when it started," says Galiano, 52 and bespectacled, with a mop of dark hair. "That museum has an impact on kids. So I developed a passion for natural history."

After studying art and then anthropology in college, he got a job as a curatorial assistant — aka a "flunky" — at the museum. He was in heaven. He frequently stayed after work, sometimes until midnight, studying fossils, poring over volumes in the library. Then, in the 1980s, he struck out on his own.

As its name implies — the maxilla and mandible are the upper and lower jawbones in vertebrates — Galiano's shop does a lot of work with bones, skeletons and fossils.

In fact, he's now co-writing a scholarly paper on a newly discovered genus and species of hyena whose fossils were found in China. He's calling the animal *Nanohyaenoides megalotis*, which is Latin for "small hyena-like animal with large ears."

In addition to collectors, the shop attracts museum curators, natural-history buffs, window dressers and photographers looking for authentic props.

Galiano welcomes them all.

"We're trying to preserve something," he says, "while maintaining its integrity and beauty." ♦

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