

# Bone store serves history

*The NYC shop deals in skeletons and remains that relate to natural science*

By J.A. Brown

Columbia News Service

**N**EW YORK >> Henry Galiano was feeding the carpet beetles. They were hard at work — eating the dried flesh off a python skeleton.

"They're mainly for the little things," said Galiano, whose decades of experience in such matters has made him oblivious to the rancid odor coming from the glass case where the teeming insects do their work. "Bigger animal skulls and things require a lot of scraping by hand."

You might expect that what Galiano jovially terms "the smell of death" coming from a back room of an Upper West Side store might attract the attention of the police, or at least the Department of Health. In fact, once it's cleaned properly, that python will be displayed proudly in the window of Maxilla and Mandible, the self-proclaimed "Natural History and Science Emporium."

The shop is also how Galiano, 51, shares with the world his life's passion for everything "from insects to skulls to fossils to rocks and minerals and meteorites."

"I think everyone loves natural history in a way," he said. "People have fish in a tank, or a potted plant in their apartment, the grain of wood on a nice chair — it's all natural history. That is beauty, right there in nature."

Since the store opened in 1983, Galiano has developed a global network of suppliers and sold natural-history lovers everything from scorpions encased in clear acrylic plastic (\$29) to giraffe skeletons ("about \$10,000"). Workshops behind the store produce exhibits for museums — a current project is a model of a saber-toothed tiger — as well as preparing specimens for the store.

Smaller animals like the python — in this case, purchased dead from a pet store — are fan-dried before being given over to the beetles. The job can test Galiano's skill as an engineer as well as an anatomist. Larger skeletons are boiled and scraped before being reassembled using a supporting metal frame.

Galiano's casual appearance belies his professorial expertise in paleontology, the study of fossils. In fact, he took a different route than do most scientists in the field who spend years in formal training.

The son of a Puerto Rican mother and Cuban-Chinese father who ran a beauty salon in



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**Henry Galiano rebuilds skeletons and cleans up fossils for major museums and scientists.**

Spanish Harlem, Galiano fell in love with fossils when his father took him to see the dinosaurs at the Museum of Natural History. "I could spell brontosaurus when I was 4," he said.

He never finished a college degree, but his passion landed the 21-year-old Galiano an unsalaried position for a year working at the museum. Eleven paid years followed in the department of vertebrate paleontology, making him an expert on the evolution of vertebrates.

The job also convinced him a market existed for a commercial supplier of natural history. "We would get calls frequently requesting to buy, to rent, have access to natural-history stuff," Galiano explained. "There were people out there, and the museum could not help them."

After leaving the museum when funding for his post ran dry, Galiano took a trip to a downtown Manhattan flea market and found people eager to buy the things he'd accumulated in his apartment — from stuffed birds discarded at the museum to deer antlers and a

coyote skeleton he picked up on vacation in South Dakota.

"That day, with two boxes of what to me was junk, in four or five hours we made about \$1,000," Galiano said.

So taken that within 18 months he had established enough of a client base to stop running the business out of his apartment and open up Maxilla and Mandible — named for the upper and lower jaw bones of vertebrates — right around the corner from the Museum of Natural History itself. It was the first store of its kind, although similar ventures have since sprung up across the country.

Although Galiano is a businessman, he's a soft touch for the higher cause of scientific research. Over the years, he has given away dozens of specimens to museums because of their scientific importance. Scientists have an unwritten rule to the effect that they won't study anything that is in a private collection because it might not be available for others to study to verify their conclusions.

Amanda Bielskas from the Museum of Natural History said Galiano has donated many specimens. One such gift was a 50 million-year-old bat fossil. The price Galiano paid? A cool \$25,000. He just sees such generosity as part of his contribution to the mission of science.

"I make sure nothing falls through the cracks," he said. "I'm always out there on behalf of science." The museums, he said, "can get stuff, obviously, but what I do works with what they do, and it fills the gaps."

But after nearly two decades, Galiano is in the natural-history business for love more than money. Despite reducing the size of the store, his newest venture — appraising specimens for auction houses such as Butterfield & Butterfield and Sotheby's — still lets him get up close to the specimens that fascinate him.

"It puts me right in the middle of things, the hub — that's the fun part, seeing the coolest, most interesting stuff," he said. "Every day has to be an adventure, and every day has to be a learning experience."