

PUBLIC LIVES

A Prime Specimen of the Science of Giving

By JOYCE WADLER

HERE are two of the ways Henry Galiano, the self-trained paleontologist out of Spanish Harlem and owner of the Maxilla and Mandible Ltd. natural history shop on the Upper West Side, has driven his wife, Deborah, crazy:

By wearing a T-shirt and not even combing his hair when one of the many television news crews came to interview him last week; by giving away so much stuff — some of it very expensive stuff — over the years.

It was one of those gifts, as a matter of fact, that prompted the visits of the television crews: a fossilized skull, probably belonging to the pre-human species *Homo erectus*, which strolled Africa and/or Asia 1.8 million years ago. It turned up at Mr. Galiano's little shop on Columbus Avenue, behind the American Museum of Natural History, this past winter, in a box of geological curios and tribal masks. Last week, Mr. Galiano gave the fossil to Indonesia, the country of its origin.

Why give away a fossil some scientists think might have fetched \$500,000?

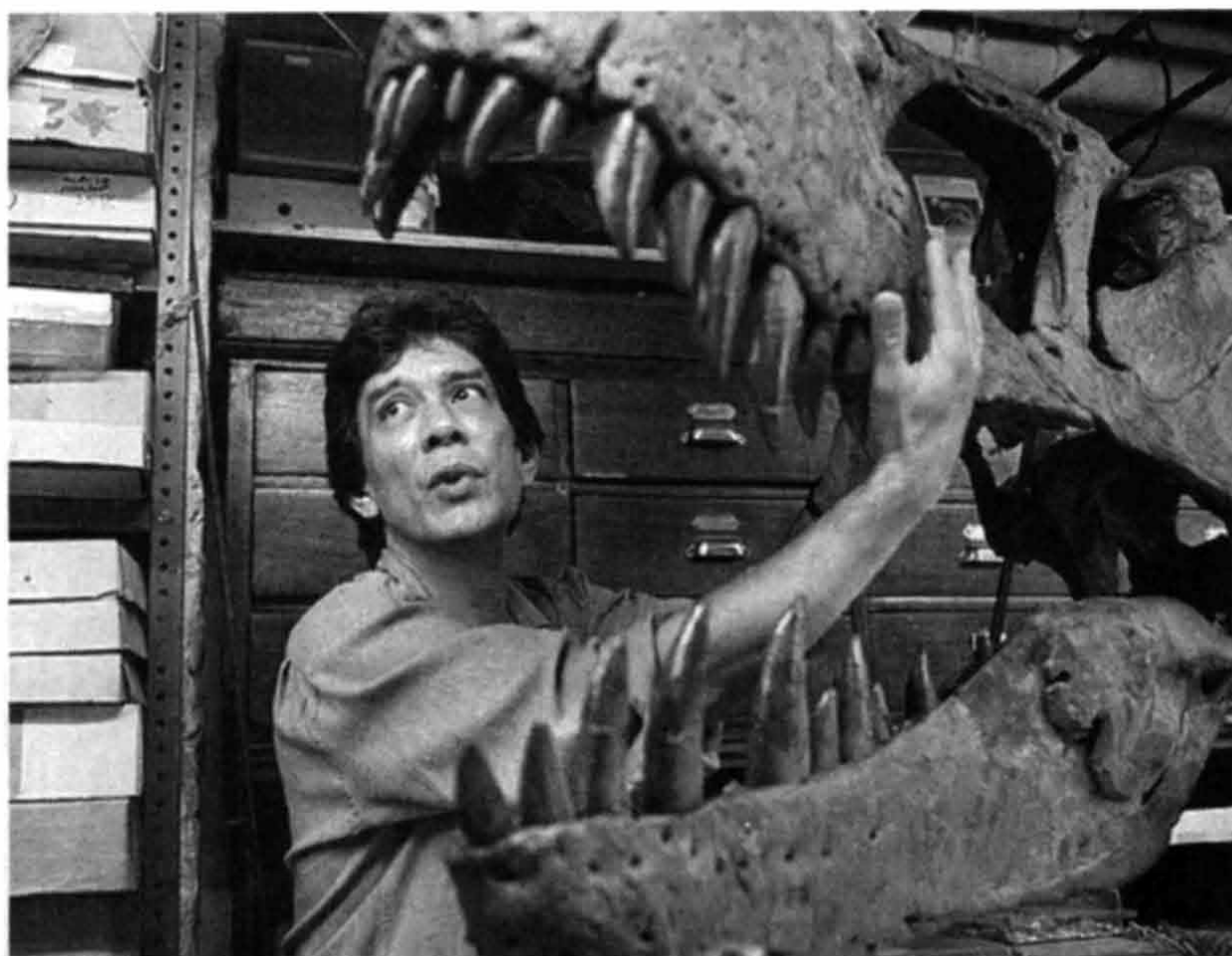
"First of all, that figure is incorrect, it's total fantasy," says Mr. Galiano, 48, an easygoing guy in jeans and sneakers whom it's easier to imagine watching a Knicks game than being co-author of a paper on Phylogeny of Early Tertiary Carnivora. "This piece is so rare, you don't know what it would bring. It would be like selling the Star of India.

"Once I found out what it was," he continued, "I just had to find a home for it, so it could be studied. It belongs in Indonesia. It's a national treasure, that we think was somehow spirited out. So after me and my buddies had a chance to study it, we gave it back. They were so happy."

This is the pleasure of New York, that next to a store of extravagantly priced linens, and across from a Starbucks, you can find a shop dedicated to the treasures of the earth, many reasonably priced, from a *Papilio ulyses* butterfly (\$19) from New Guinea to a lock of hair (\$250) from the woolly mammoth, which roamed the earth in the Ice Age.

What's even more interesting than what is in the shop, is what is not.

Mr. Galiano, who at the peak of his business a few years ago was grossing \$1 million and who, after having been seriously ill last year and reducing the business is now earning much less and is by no means a rich man, has given away about 100 fossils and specimens to institutes and museums over the years. A spokeswoman for the Museum of Natural History, Holly Evarts, says Mr. Ga-



Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times

Henry Galiano, with a toothy blast from the past at his Manhattan shop.

liano has been "a huge supporter."

One of his gifts to the museum was a 50-million-year-old bat fossil.

How much did Mr. Galiano pay for that fossil?

"Not much. A few thousand, quite a few thousand. O.K., I'll tell you, \$25,000," says Mr. Galiano, who, one can't help note, succumbs quite quickly to a bit of bullying.

Wow! That's a lot of money to give away!

"That's how my wife feels," Mr. Galiano says. "I'm just so passionate about museums and science. I make a living out of natural history, I need to put back, to balance things out. I could sell to a private collector, but I have to go to sleep at night, and if I robbed paleontology of some important, critical information about the evolution of bats and mammals, I'd feel I'd done something wrong."

MOST paleontologists have years of formal training. Mr. Galiano, raised on East 107th Street and Lexington Avenue, did not. His mother, who was born in Puerto Rico, and his father, who was Cuban-Chinese, ran Marida's Beauty Salon in the neighborhood. His "love affair" — this is what Mr. Galiano calls his relationship with the American Museum of Natural History — began when Mr. Galiano was a boy and his father took him to see the dinosaurs. At 5, Mr. Galiano says, he could tell you the proper name of a dinosaur, spell that name, and draw the dinosaur. Later, he attended a number of colleges in New York, taking courses in art and science, and planning a career as a commer-

cial artist. But it did not happen. Sketching places, buildings, people held no interest.

At 21, with no college degree, Mr. Galiano worked for a year in the department of vertebrate paleontology at the museum for no money. The payback, he says, was being able to handle the fossils. Eleven years on salary followed. Then Mr. Galiano went into business for himself.

There have been problems. A few years ago, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service charged Mr. Galiano with interstate trafficking in endangered wildlife, including the skulls of seven crocodiles and an Asian elephant. Last year, he paid a \$25,000 civil fine. Discussing the case, Mr. Galiano is remarkably nondefensive.

"Oh, yeah, I call that the Big Extortion," he says. "Those specimens were all legally obtained, from animals that were bred in captivity. I've never broken the law in my life."

Mr. Galiano's role, as he sees it, is as a bridge between the commercial and the scientific. He sees things that museums miss. He passes them along.

"Being so young when I started, I kind of grew up at the Museum of Natural History and learned from those guys how to respect natural history and specimens. They taught me everything surrounding science is based on a reality, a specimen; those specimens are the facts. You can argue about them, you can hypothesize all you want, but these objects are real. They're the proof of our evolution, our history, and to me that history is more precious than man-made things."