

Store owner has a bare-bones job

This New Yorker can sell you the skeleton of just about anything.

May 5, 2002

By J.A. BROWN
Columbia News Service

NEW 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.

"You have to clean the bones, mount the bones," Galiano said. "And that's even easy compared to getting the skeleton right. If you have a pose or a gesture or something, it has to look like an X-ray, it's got to look perfect."

Dressed in jeans, denim shirt and sneakers, 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 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. "People were so taken with what I had."

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."

Galiano's most significant find came in 1999 when a box of curios delivered to the store turned out to contain a 1.8 million-year-old skull of the pre-human homo erectus. Despite a rumored resale value at the time of \$500,000, he gave it to the Museum of Natural History for study. It was then returned to its original home in Indonesia, where it now resides at the Medical School of the University of Yogyakarta.

"Henry was really the hero of the whole thing," said Eric Delson, a paleoanthropologist at Lehman College of the City University of New York, who led the research. Because there are very few similar fossils, the skull is an important piece of evidence for understanding how modern man evolved, Delson said.

"I could have sold it. I mean, it was my property," Galiano said. "But how could I do that after the anthropologists at the museum were drooling over it so much? I just couldn't say, 'Look, guys, give it back, I'm going to sell it.' "

Besides, Galiano's good deed didn't go unrewarded. The subsequent publicity was such that to this day he receives photo "evidence" of fake fossilized human remains from people around the world hoping for slice of the paleontology pie.

"Sales were great during that time, so in a way I made out anyway. I probably could have made more selling it for pure cash, but the overall return was satisfying, let's say," he admitted with a smile.

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."