

This Taxidermist Is Both Artist And Scientist

By Ellen Berman

"Science should be exciting — both educational and entertaining. If it's not — you've failed. A high caliber of art is involved." The speaker is Ed Thompson, for eight years the museum curator at Fernbank Science Center, and his profession is taxidermy. He describes taxidermy as a very high form of scientifically accurate sculpture, combining precise techniques with aesthetics.

One of three museum taxidermists in the city, and about 10 in the country, Thompson is an easy-going, friendly fellow who instantly destroys the stereotypical image of the bloodthirsty butcher making his living stuffing dead animals. To the contrary, he reveals that there are actually two different professions in taxidermy. The commercial taxidermist mass produces head mounts and trophies for a paying public; while the museum taxidermist concentrates on scientific accuracy, depicting animals in the wild and showing such things as hibernation, camouflage, and mutation. This is where quality counts. "First I'm a naturalist; I like to think of myself as an artist."

Thompson points out that many wildlife illustrators, including the famous painter of birds John James Audobon, used taxidermists. "I like to spend as much time in the field as possible. In order to depict a marsh in an early morning setting, you have to have been in it yourself. You want to actually show the *feel* of an area. Most all exhibits show an art background. But your freedom of expression is decided by nature itself. You're depicting nature."

The profession requires skill from many fields. The taxidermist must be a combination surgeon, artist, carpenter, and sculptor. He must have a thorough knowledge of anatomy and animal motion. That Thompson is an expert is no secret. He began at age ten, when as a 4th grader he was offered the use of an empty display case. The first mounted animal he had ever seen was the one he created. Seeing the excitement it stimulated in his peers, he knew his career was set. By the time he was in the tenth grade he was teaching his biology class. His only formal training includes a year of photography and art at William and Mary and a correspondence course in taxidermy. He also worked as a volunteer in the natural history museum in Old Salem, Massachusetts, his home town, where a friend was curator.

As head of the Fernbank museum's six-member department, Thompson used to hide behind his displays and listen to the public's comments for help in constructing future exhibits. Admitting he has never done a completely satisfying piece of taxidermy, he explains that exposure to other people's thought and constructive criticism, especially that of the specially qualified staff, is essential to continued improvement.

The museum's displays are used in three different ways: in exhibit halls, for instructional purposes, and for travelling exhibits. The portable exhibits are available on a loan basis to different groups. Among these exhibits are unique albinos and waterfowl displays. The exhibits also allow inner-city children a chance to observe creatures in a natural setting; something they might not ever have a chance to see otherwise. As a teaching tool, the exhibit is unique in that it can stop the animal in any season and at any point in the food chain.

Due to the gas crisis, field trips to the center have been sharply curtailed, but Fernbank remains a strong attraction for instructors throughout the state. Attendance continues to increase annually.

Thompson's work depicts many rare species of wildlife (some already ex-



Ed Thompson in one of his exhibits.

ting) in their natural environment. While it is illegal for commercial taxidermists to mount endangered or protected species, Fernbank has special permits allowing the mounting and display of such animals for educational purposes.

Animals for display come from many different sources. Most are acquired by public donation. Many are hit and killed by automobiles while crossing roads. Many night-migrating birds are killed when they fly into brightly-lit towers and tall buildings. Other species, such as the rare Bald and Golden eagles are obtained from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The mounts are hauntingly realistic, yet the only real part of most renderings is the skin. The heart of the display is an artificial mount, called a mannequin, formed of shredded wood, and cotton, wrapped with string, and covered with papier-mache. Red resin paper coated with glue recreates the animal's shape. The paper is then shellaced to make it waterproof and wet clay, taken from a previous plaster mold is fashioned around this base. If the animal had noticeable veins, Venetian blind rope is tacked in place to represent these.

The skin, preserved by tanning, is then stretched over the form and pinned, taped, glued, and hooked in place. Ear liners are installed, otherwise the skin balls up. Making glass eyes, like cutting gemstones, is an art in itself. The finest are imported from Germany. Wire holds the neck, legs and tail in place. On large animals steel rods are used to hold them in position and securely bolted to the base of the mount. Alive, a deer weighs about 130 lbs. When mounted over a light, hollow mannequin, it weighs less than 50.

Thompson says that because of

viewer emotionally with the work. If the viewer does not become emotionally involved with the display, he feels it has failed in the same way that a work of art fails if it does not emotionally involve the viewer.

With an annual budget of \$2 million, the Fernbank museum department is indisputably the best developed one in the Southeast. Still, Thompson says, "We have to be very innovative. We get as much mileage out of each exhibit as possible. We try to keep abreast of all other techniques being developed around us."

Thompson believes that the facilities available to northern children put them ahead of southern children. "We've given away a lot of our natural history heritage. There are more natural history exhibits on Georgia outside the state than here. The story of Georgia's natural history needs to be told to Georgians. Citizens don't realize what they've got: 400 species of birds, 50 species of snakes."

While Fernbank and the museum in the state capitol building partially fill the void, Thompson is not satisfied. Pointing to the science museums in Milwaukee and Denver, he states, "Atlanta overall is about 110 years behind the rest of the nation as far as a science museum is concerned. We're not truly a sophisticated international city until we have one. A great natural history museum would be an economic boon to this city." He believes Atlanta is ready to build a major natural history museum, noting that the people, expansion plan, property, and an ongoing budget are presently available.

The most important function of a museum like Fernbank, Thompson believes, is to make people more aware of wildlife as a necessary part of the ecosystem. Wildlife is important not only as a partner in, but as a barometer of life. Whatever destroys animals eventually destroys us.

Shirley Libby