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Taxidermy Forms on the Market

Written and Photographed by Ron Schaefer

The 1800's marketed the beginning of a new interest in taxidermy both museum and private collections. Wired bones have comprised the basic procedures in mounting any animal from mouse to moose. Strenuous, monotonous labor, low wages and long hours to say nothing about using the most carcinogenic chemicals of the day, no safety precautions were even thought of or practiced then. Taxidermy was not much an art then as it was a guarded craft where few if any was ever allowed to witness the procedures involved in attaining a facsimile of a life like mounted animals and birds. In fact, the very first taxidermy publication in the United States by S.H. Sylvester 1865 called "The Taxidermist Manual" had these very words on the first page: "A person having this work book should not leave it exposed to the eyes of the curious. The same caution should be used in the practice. Work by yourself that none may know the mysteries of the art." Taxidermy in those days was thought of as a profession and a professional business. Taxidermists went to work in a suit and tie. The business was looked upon as respectfully as a physician and was revered as a trade.



Taxidermy is as art of adjusting skin". What the artist is trying to capture is using a skin from an animal and recreate that animal as close to living again. This is not an easy task. Let's look back on the history of taxidermy and how far it has come and why the taxidermy industry is in the state it is today.

Prior to the 1900's taxidermists had primitive materials to work with. There were no manikins available back then. You had to make your own manikin. The only materials available were the bones, wire, mud, clay, excelsior and twine. The top of the line shoulder mount you could get back then was not even a shoulder mount it was a neck mount, meaning you had a mounted head and about two to three inches of neck. They were also very heavy. This neck mount style went on until the 1960's. The length of the neck grew very slowly over time to just about the beginning of the shoulders. Nothing was shared with any one especially another competitor.

Some taxidermists started molding these manikins they made. Instead of making each manikin from scratch every time you have to mount a head, some started to mold their sculptures by making a two piece plaster mold. How this was done was the taxidermist sculpted whatever they were going to mold (deer, elk, sheep) as they were going to mount it, then plaster was poured on one half of the sculpture and reinforced. The sculpture was turned over to the other side and same to the other side of the sculpture. The two half's were pulled off the sculpture and now you have a two piece mold that is hollow inside to make a manikin. One of the plaster molds half a construction type of paper was moistened with watered down dextrin. This acted as glue between layers. The paper was layered until they reached a thickness of around 1/4 inch on smaller deer size animal and about a 1/2 inch thickness on an elk size animal. Paper molds came in about the early to mid 1940's.

Around the mid to late 1960's to early 1970's polyurethane foam started to replace the paper manikins but didn't really take off until the 1980's. In the taxidermy industry change was not liked. In the past the only way to learn this trade was to work for another taxidermist. Very few could figure out the handed down secretes of the trade on their own. Once you learned there was no reason to change even if the change was for the better. The older plaster molds were slowly being replaced by fiberglass molds mainly due to the supply companies finding fiberglass is longer lasting then the plaster molds. Never the less foam was so much easier to work with to alter and was so much lighter compared to the paper manikins in the early to mid 1950's.

Around the early to mid 1970's to 1980's taxidermy, competitions started to become popular. This was hard to except for the older



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generation. Sharing secrets was unheard of. This is where the taxidermy field started to turn and make better taxidermy manikins. Taxidermists and artist showed some incredible talent at these competitions that astounded fellow competitors. As competing grew popular, the demand for better manikins and supplies for the industry became a standard. This put pressure on the manufactures to produce better and more anatomically correct manikins. As the old style manikins were slowly being replaced with fiberglass molds with better symmetry and more accurate anatomy. Hundreds of the same forms being made every year and all trying to compete with each other how is a taxidermist to determine which is better than the next? Manufactures realized as new manikins were introduced to the market the manikins with more noticeable muscle sold better. So every year supply company's started to follow suit by adding more muscle to their new manikins or existing manikins. At what point do you start to add too much muscle or over detail the anatomy? We definitely have this problem today.

Lets look at this in another perspective. The human body has been dissected and analyzed under microscopes and we have complete models on our entire skeletal system, organs and muscle structure for the medical industry. Their anatomy models do not vary and are very precisely made. The same holds true for the veterinary industry, very precise medical models. You do not see new models every year changing the anatomy. If by chance they did the next year you would see another model made with even bigger muscles? Yet in the taxidermy industry you have this. (down fall in the industry)

To keep up with the demand for new manikins supply companies now farm almost all sculpting out to dozens of wholesale sculptors to try to keep up with the demand.

Let's look at sculpting and how this process is achieved. In the past museums and dedicated professionals collected the bones of a specific animal, cleaned the bones and wired the skeletal system back together. Clay was then added to the skeletal armature and was put together and with measurements taken from a deceased animal.

Today's times but for the majority of sculptors on the market the bone is rarely followed. Majority of sculptors today use a pre-existing manikin, then they make their changes to the manikin. The sculptor may have one skin to try and fit their sculpture during the changing process to keep them within the boundaries. But this is rarely done today as well. (another down fall) The sculptor then has to make smaller and larger sizes of the same species. To go bigger or smaller sculptors use a standard size increase or reduction theory. I was told for every inch in the neck circumference bigger or smaller the bone and muscle mass needs to either increase or be reduced by a certain number percentage. This is where I personally feel the sculptors go aerie in their theory. The theory is for every one inch size increment around the base of the animals neck/head junction circumference the animal is supposed to be enlarged or reduced by a certain percentage. Each sculptor has a different general percentage theory and will aggressively defend their numbered or percentage theory rather vigorously. Defend all you want, what speaks the truth is how my client's skins will fit the manikin purchased. If you need to alter a manikin to get the skin to fit on the form the form was not sculpted properly.

When sculpting manikins for the taxidermy industry the original matching skull for every specie and size being sculpted should be used. This is very important in keeping your sculpture accurate for taxidermist standards. The skin is supposed to keep the taxidermist in the boarder lines from getting out of proportion by either making the muscle anatomy too thick, shoulders too big or adding too much length on the shoulders. Sculpting this way proves all the size proportions or percentage theories other sculptors use incorrect and makes taxidermists wonder how many sculptors are actually qualified for sculpting. The sculptor has to use at least the original skin and skull in every manikin they make to keep manikins accurate. When talking with sculptors I have yet to find one sculptor using skins on every size manikin sculpted. In other words the sculptor is guessing. (major down fall)





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With supply manufactures putting pressure on their hired sculptors to meet deadlines unfortunately this leads to assembly line production on sculpting. Each sculptor seems to rush the system and over look critical anatomy. I remember talking to one sculptor while he was working on a life size African animal. I asked him "have you ever seen that animal alive before, do you have references?" He replied no, then laughing he replied "I guess it will fit, it looks good to me." I asked "do you have the skull or original skin?" Again he replied "No." With how bad the majority of manikins fit today, sadly that comment and method is used quite often in sculpting.

Each sculptor has their own style and look and that shows through in every manikin they make. The older generation of sculptors their manikins seem to be heavier and thicker in body and the heads seem quite thicker, beefy or blockier. The mouth and nose detail looks very identical from specie to specie and manikin to manikin. This is their style of generation and how they were taught to mount and their mounting habits translated back into their manikins they sculpted. The older generation sculptors were active taxidermists and they would actually mount on their own manikins. They could see if their manikin was too big or too small. This was a good practice. Today's sculptors rarely ever mount on their own manikins, (this is another downfall) many are no longer an active taxidermists so they would never know if their manikins fit. If the sculptor would use a matching tanned skin and set of horns and bones they would have a better chance of knowing if their sculptures were accurate, but this just doesn't happen.

If a sculpture works mainly on North American animals and then they are asked by the supply companies to sculpt African species, what ever African specie they make will have a lot of North American characteristics instead of African resemblance. If a sculptor is known for whitetail deer and sculpts up exotic animals, their line of exotics animals will have many whitetail characteristics instead of their own specie characteristics. If a sculptor happen to be a taxidermist who worked in a production studio their manikins will be larger and tend to lean to the over sized proportions.

Sculpting consists of three factors; skeletal, muscular and skin. Elements lost in sculpting are:

Knowledge – Majority sculptors are not trained enough or lack knowledge in anatomy. Unfortunately there are no requirements needed to become a sculptor.

Sub species! – Sub species are not taken in consideration. Supply manufactures want a one size to fit all manikins. The cost factor to make a form for every subspecies is not cost prohibitive. Sculptors will try to use a little from three to four same sized subspecies of animals and try to make a uniform one size fits all form. This will fit some animals but will not on most. Sub specie manikins for African animals is almost unheard of! When dealing with African species the taxidermist is very limited on manikin selection.

Artist rendition – Every manikin on the market is an artist rendition of their knowledge and wants. A sculptor can be very close on knowledge and anatomy but then they add their own opinion or rendition and could make the manikin a nightmare to work on.

Here is a statistic to look at. A large taxidermy supply company in the early 1990's had over forty thousand taxidermists on their mail out list. An inside source said that eighty percent of their taxidermists on file ordered only five manikins or less a year. Let me repeat that, eighty percent of all taxidermists order less than five manikins per year. If you're mounting five or less animals a year you most likely do not have the experience as a full time taxidermist. These taxidermists in my opinion are hobbyists and yet these hobbyists have more say so power than the twenty percent of full time taxidermists. If twenty percent are full time taxidermists then they are just a drop in the bucket compared to the eighty percent of hobbyists, in a supply manufactures opinion.

Full time taxidermists mount more far more animals per year compared to a hobbyist. Mounting on the same manikins over and over the full timer realizes the manikins offered on the market are inaccurate.





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Example - A full time taxidermist that will mount say 20 – 30 impala a year will notice the same problems over and over. Now if a full time taxidermist so happens to call the supply manufacture and explains their manikins are not accurate, we just become an annoyance to the manufacture. The hobbyists run into the same problems but due to their lack of knowledge and experience they don't think the manikin is the problem but instead an odd size animal they just happen to be mounting. They will make an attempt to fix the problems but with the lack of alteration experience they will not go the extra mile to fix a manikin accurately even though they are trying. They will end up with a different look than they wanted. So if they decide to call the supply manufacture, their phone calls to the manufactures are them wanting the manikins to look different instead of your manikins are inaccurate. If less than twenty percent of complaints come in that something does not fit and your forms are wrong, and eighty percent complain they just request to make a different look or style. This phone call is so much more appealing to the supply manufacture and their pride is not hurt, it makes sense the manufactures will listen to the majority of hobbyist instead of the twenty percent of full time taxidermists even though this is an inaccurate request. (major down fall in the industry)

In the slim chance a supply company so happens to listen to a full time taxidermist's complaint will take a minimum of three years of phone calls for any decision to change and manikins to happen. Let's look at how the changes are made. One call does not constitute a reason for change so the supply manufacture will need years of calls asking for changes (2 years). The sculptor that will be making the new changes requested has to gear up and make new manikins (4-6 months).



The new sculpted manikins are delivered to the manufacture. Now the supply manufacture has to make new fiberglass molds for the new sculptures (3-4 months, depending on how many and how intricate the molds have to be could extend up to 6-7 months). There is a method to introduce all new manikins to the taxidermy market. All new manikins introduced are advertised one to two months before the next hunting season normally around September (2-8 months). The taxidermists see the changes in the new catalogs mailed out and now they have to wait until their client collects that specific specie and size of specie that was sculpted new (3-4 months – if the animal is an African animal the next African season is not until April the following year, 8-9 months) (Then the African hunter has to wait until their trophies are shipped back to the United States 6-8 months - Minimum). Then the skins are sent to the tannery for tanning (4-7 months). The taxidermist orders the new form (1-2 months). If you add up the time laps you are looking at a minimum of three and a half years.

This should fix the problems but with the sculptors not using original skins, skull or bones we are right back to where we were before the changes were made. Now you're back to the 20-80 percent of taxidermists again. The twenty percent full timers will start to call first due to they have the biggest work log and will get the most work in, so they will be the first to recognize the problems normally because they get a higher number of animals in compared to a hobbyist taking in five or less animals a year. They do not recognize this is an every day issue. Now the supply company has to start all over again (minimum another 3 ½ years before any possible change is made). (What a down fall to the industry)

The conclusion is, just because there are so many forms available on the market today, this does not mean in any way the manikin the taxidermist buys will most likely fit. It will be solely up to the individual taxidermist to have the knowledge to recognize, find, alter, correct inaccurate anatomy and make the proper alterations for their client's subspecies they happened to collect. If the taxidermist lacks the knowledge or just does not want to take the time to correct the time consuming alterations then they will just make the skin stretch over the manikin and give a mount that was rushed, inaccurate and is full of flaws back to their clients. The hunter has to educate themselves and visit as many taxidermy studios as they can to see the different styles of taxidermists and the different quality they will receive in return. There definitely is a difference from taxidermist to taxidermist, do not fool yourself in thinking there is not.

Read entire [How to Choose a Taxidermist](#) article.



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About the Author

Ron Schaefer offers full spectrum [Taxidermy Services](#), [Bronze Sculptures](#) and [Wildlife Drawings](#). Ron Schaefer, a Master Taxidermist, located in Texas, is founder and artisan for [Heads Above The Rest](#), Inc.® and has been studying the fine art of moving and adjusting skin since 1975. He specializes mainly in life size African and Exotics with his passion being Cats.

Heads Above The Rest, Inc.® is not a large production firm. Ron Schaefer strives for low volume, accepting a limited number of clients each year, enabling him to maintain high quality craftsmanship and customer care. He leads the industry in higher standards and you will see a definite difference when working with Heads Above The Rest, Inc.®.

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