



HUMANS

No pets, no people, no politicians

Stuffing it up with Arrowtown taxidermist David Jacobs.

DAVID JACOBS, FOURTH-GENERATION TAXIDERMIST, HAS ONE FIRM RULE: NO PETS, NO PEOPLE, NO POLITICIANS. AS FAR AS DAVID'S CONCERNED, POLITICIANS ARE STUFFED ANYWAY, AND IF YOUR PET DIES, YOU PROBABLY NEED A PSYCHIATRIST, NOT A TAXIDERMIST.

It's not a new craft, but there's currently a growing fascination with taxidermy. It's even trending online under Crap Taxidermy, which, as the name suggests, is a showcase of terribly executed work. While David says the words "amateur", "enthusiastic" and "taxidermist" should never be used in a sentence together, the crap taxidermists do a remarkable job of illustrating every variety of hangover. It's worth a scroll.

For David, though, this is no trend. Watching him work surrounded by a clutter of antlers and deer hides, I've already got a fully formed image of his great-grandfather, John Jacobs, in my mind, until he tells me it was actually Alice Suzannah, his great-grandmother, who started the family business.

"She was quite an amazing lady," says David, whose studio and showroom sit twenty minutes from Queenstown. "They used to call themselves naturalists, and so we're not confused, that doesn't mean nudists. They must have been nude at some

stage though, because between them they had fourteen children."

During the naturalist era, when people were fascinated with natural history, David explains that every wealthy person's parlour room had a box, like a miniature museum. Folks would collect natural artefacts and put them in these parlour boxes, including birds, reptiles, small mammals, insects and butterflies from all over the world.

In those days, any woman of social standing would have a fur throw to jazz up her Sunday best, and every man wore a hat. The hats were all felted, and rabbits and possums were brought to New Zealand to feed the growing fur and felting industry.

"Yeah, not all their ideas were good ideas," David says as he moulds a piece of clay onto the face of a deer-shaped mannequin ("manikin" in the taxidermy world). "But that was the fashion of the time, and some of the first hunting permits issued were in Central Otago. Industry built up around it and my great grandparents were part of that, eventually settling in Dunedin."

As he works, David is kind, and perceptive, enough to take it back to the basics for me. In Greek, "taxi" means to move, and "dermis" means skin. "So essentially, you're moving the skin. You strip the

animal, and then tan the raw hide into leather. Then you put artificial cartilage into the ears to make them ears, and voila!"

The mannequin, David explains, is made from rigid polyurethane foam, and is essentially the animal without its clothes on. "I take some key measurements before I skin the animal, when it generally still has its antlers attached. The nose to eye measurement is specific to each animal—they're all different, just like people."

The eyes are glass, and he uses clay to do soft modelling on the face. Eventually, he moves the skin back onto the mannequin, using a glue that dries at the exact same pace as the hide.

The bulk of David's work comes from hunters and fishermen, both locals and tourists. This means a lot of deer and fish, but having worked as a hunting guide in Alaska, David's own collection features a significantly bigger trophy: the moose. Apparently, shooting it is the easy part. Getting the animal out, he explains, is no mean feat. "You have to recover all the meat. The hind quarter can weigh up to 80kg, and the heart's as big as a bucket."

While David says hunting remains his number one passion, the repertoire of a taxidermist spreads far wider than the hunted. Working for museums



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and visitor centres, David finds himself working on anything from seals and penguins to kea and kiwis.

This thread of the business originated with his grandfather, Ray, the stifled artist of the family. The youngest son of Alice and John, Ray was particularly gifted, and at the age of 16 he won a scholarship to France to study Fine Art. “That was a hell of a big deal at the time, but my grandparents said no, because, get this – it wasn’t an opportunity that was afforded to his siblings!”

According to David, Ray was incredibly talented, and, with his artistic dreams quashed, he channelled those talents into taxidermy. He took
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up a post as staff taxidermist at the Canterbury Museum, which meant he got to be in charge of painting the backdrops and dioramas for the natural history displays.

For Ray, taxidermy was a sorry substitute for his passion, but for David, it is its own form of artistry. “The skills required are all artistic, like colour matching, understanding of form, sculpture, attention to detail and transferring what you see in the natural world into reality. So yes, it is. The difference between me and a sculptor is that I’ll still use clay, but you don’t see it.”

He points to the deer mannequin in front of him. “You still need to be able to sculpture a form, like this original. It’s definitely right-brain.” And David would know; he’s an official taxidermy judge. Yes, the New Zealand Taxidermy Association (the NZTA, not to be confused with the Transport Agency) holds annual competitions, but for those of you imagining the taxidermy version of MasterChef where you’re given an hour and some roadkill, think again.

“It’s open to everybody, and you progress up in the ranks from novice to professional to master,” says David. Participants can enter various categories (think bird, game, head only and whole animal) and, according to David, there are plenty of

novices, who range from as young as 10 to retired 60-somethings.

He may be both a master and a judge of his craft, but David, who has a Forestry degree, says he ended up in the business by accident. His own father, Terry, followed in Ray’s footsteps, and then encouraged his kids to do anything but taxidermy.

David, who had been studying (or as he recalls it, drinking beer and chasing girls) in the States, checked in on his dad’s business on a trip home for his brother’s wedding. Next thing he knew, he’d helped his father win contracts to create museum displays in Christchurch and Auckland, and at Te Papa.

As his mentor, Terry is an important part of David’s story, and he speaks of his father with reverence. “He’s been a big part of my success. He’s 81 this year, and highly respected for being the founder of modern taxidermy in this part of the world.”

Eventually taking over the business, which was based in Christchurch, David’s five-year plan was to move to Wānaka. Enter the Canterbury earthquakes, and it became his five-minute plan. He describes it as a leap of faith, and within eighteen months he’d found his spot on Arrowtown’s Arrow Junction Road: a workshop and home with mountain views.



WARNING
DO NOT FEED THE MOOSE

DO NOT FEED THE BEAR

ELK HORN



ALL PHOTOS: RAY TIDDY PHOTOGRAPHY

In the early days, no one knew there was a taxidermist in town, and David says he owes his initial exposure to Shrek (everybody's favourite shaggy sheep). "I was asked to preserve it while it was its shorn state, which seemed funny to me, but it was great publicity."

David now does a roaring trade (pun intended) in the Queenstown area, catering mostly to the local recreational hunting community. Building on a solid foundation of hard yakka and family legacy, it's not hard to see why. The move was a deliberate downsize though; he's gone from having twelve staff seasonally to a small, dedicated team of three.

"In my previous life the thing I owned ending up owning me! We've got no intention of being the biggest, just working on becoming the best," says David, who looks every part the contented craftsman. And, as he points out, he gets to call the mountains home while he's at it.

"All the things I love to do are here. In winter I can go skiing, in summer I can go fly fishing; autumn I can go hunting, and in springtime I can ride my bicycle to the Gibbston Valley and drink wine. Business is good here, why not?"
GEORGIA MERTON

GEORGIA MERTON HAS SUCCUMBED TO THE ALLURE OF THE MOUNTAINS AND NOW LIVES IN WĀNAKA. HAPPIEST WRITING ABOUT ECCENTRIC FOLK, INTERESTING FOOD AND OUR ENVIRONMENT. CURRENTLY ATTEMPTING TO MASTER THE ART OF COMPOST.
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...and then colour. The
 ...is really bolted
 ...a temporary
 ...but can
 ...rather more
 ...should be



Fig. 21.—Bird Band with Threads



standing part of their distance out of the water.
 ...the back and another into the breast; and then
 ...from one of these, that on the back, in a
 ...reference, a piece of cotton or wool is wound in a
 ...regular fashion from one to the other, pressing rather
 ...all appears right (see Fig. 20), and further when
 ...regular method of proceeding will be mentioned.
 ...a rule to bind down the back first, then the
 ...the collar down the neck and gradually
 ...the collar down the neck and gradually
 ...the collar down the neck and gradually
 ...the collar down the neck and gradually

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