

## ROM dinosaur tech makes no bones about giant skeleton work

By WADE HEMSWORTH  
The Spectator

PETER MAY hasn't got any skeletons in his closet. Instead, they're spread throughout his workshop.

The Oakville man has 'saurs all over. As chief technician in vertebrate paleontology at the Royal Ontario Museum, he's responsible for overseeing the dinosaur department.

Mr. May was doing industrial layout for Stelco at Nanticoke 11 years ago when he noticed an newspaper advertisement looking for a technician at the museum.

He called on a Friday, was interviewed on a Monday, and hired the next day.

"I didn't even know what vertebrate paleontology meant," he laughed.

Now he's got a job title nearly as long as the giant creatures whose bones he resurrects.

### The ideal job

For kids who tour the ROM, little else but the dinosaurs matters. To them, Mr. May has the ideal job.

But as a child in England, dinosaur worship passed him by.

"I guess I missed dinosaurs in school," he said.

One would assume that Mr. May, who came to Canada at age 8, has some kind of graduate degree in paleontology, geology or archaeology.

Nope. He's got an undergraduate degree in Fine Arts from the University of Guelph.

As a dinosaur builder, sculpting skills come in handy. There's a lot of work making molds and casting bones.

A sculptor's eye helps the technician design displays for maximum effect.

But you've also got to be a woodsman, excavator, geologist, historian, and construction worker. Maybe even scientist.

"I could probably pass as one," said Mr. May.

There are so many different kinds of skills involved in his job that no school could prepare someone to do all of them.

Even the ROM crew found themselves out of their depth in the

on the flood plain of the dammed Peace River, they were swamped 1½ hours into their journey.

The boat sank, they lost their tools, and after pulling out of the 4C water, they had to send for more supplies.

The intrepid paleontologists had to finish their Ichthyosaur excavation with hammers and chisels.

Building one of the skeletons now on display at the ROM's Dinosaurs show, scheduled to run until Jan. 2, takes months of field and lab work.

Mr. May and his team must locate the fossilized skeletal remains of a dinosaur, and then free them from the surrounding rock.

To do that often means "quarrying" a bed of stone to uncover the fossils.

### Bone to pick

Once the bones are exposed from the top, the diggers carefully undercut the fossil as far as they can reach. They build a plaster cast around it and pop it out when the cast hardens.

From there it's back to the lab to do the finer bone-picking.

The bones themselves are carefully preserved, once molds of them are made for building models.

Of course, not all of the bones are always there, and sometimes Mr. May has to make an educated guess about what's missing, or borrow parts from other similar dinosaurs to complete the model.

"It's like a kid with a Meccano set. You get to build things," the Kirstie Crescent man said.

But he must be doing something right, for he and fellow technician Andrew Leitch are making a success of Research Casting International Ltd., their private dinosaur building business, which they run out of an old Planter's Peanut factory in Toronto. They've filled more than 20



Gary Yokoyama, The Spectator

Peter May finds himself dwarfed by his work with dinosaurs at the Royal Ontario Museum at times. Here the chief technician in vertebrate paleontology is framed by a giant ground sloth.

orders for customers all over the world so far.

"You can buy (a) Brontosaurus for \$100,000. It depends on how big you want to go. You can get T-rex for eighty, ninety thousand dollars."

Mr. May figures the company is doing so well because it makes

dinosaur building easy for everyone. They pride themselves at International Casting on building giant lizard skeletons that fit together easily.

Their creations arrive boxed up in crates with picture books showing how to put them together.

Not a bad holiday gift idea, if you've got a Redwood for a Christmas tree and the sky for a ceiling.

In the lobby of the ROM, the ceiling is high enough to accommodate a giant sloth skeleton, one of Mr. May's most public projects.

After assembling it in his peanut factory shop, he and his crew made a

police-escorted parade out of bringing it through downtown Toronto and up to the Queen's Park entrance of the museum.

They tried to bring the bones through the front doors, but the Eremotherium's hips were too wide, so they had to come through the shipping entrance.

### Slothful greeting

Now, the sloth stands in the lobby, greeting visitors to the Dinosaurs show like a giant linebacker.

In the lab and wandering through the show, Mr. May acts and looks like a tradesman. He talks about dinosaur bones like a framing

carpenter describing joists and beams.

Wearing work clothes, it's easy to believe that it's all just business to him.

But sometimes his work brings out the philosopher inside.

"If you're doing a mount of one of these animals, it becomes part of your soul. You end up dreaming about it, what it could do."

He points to a skeleton in the wall, contemplating humans' false pride in having succeeded the dinosaurs as global rulers.

"We just end up being part of the history of the world, and these guys were very successful."

**FULL NAME:** Peter John May  
**DATE OF BIRTH:** June 16, 1955.  
**OCCUPATION:** Chief Technician, Department of Vertebrate Paleontology, Royal Ontario Museum  
**MARITAL STATUS:** Married with two children  
**CAREER HIGHLIGHT:** Being part of a team to discover a previously unknown form of marine reptile.  
**FAVORITE TV SHOW:** Night Court