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Peter May Research Castings International Beamsville, Ontario, Canada

*This modern day sculptor and businessman
finds his future in the past*

*By
Wilson Bannister*

On the southern shore of Lake Ontario, just upwind of the Niagara Falls, is an old shoe warehouse. It's been converted and upgraded with hydro-electricity. Cranes and furnaces and forges have been moved in. Here Peter May, owner of Research Castings International (RCI), and 17 employees do what they do better than perhaps any company in the world; they cast skeletons—big skeletons—dinosaur skeletons. You've, no doubt, seen their work in museums around the world, at Disney World or in the movie *Jurassic Park*. The list and the reputation keeps growing as the company has gone from its part-time beginnings in 1987 to the multi-million dollar operation of today.

No Boyhood Fascination

The driving force of RCI is the soft-spoken, multi-talented Peter May, 46. Born in England, he emigrated to Canada with his family in 1965 at the age of eight. Surprisingly, his interest in dinosaurs does not stem from a boyhood fascination. "I had no exposure to dinosaurs when I was growing up," he laughs. It all started with his first job after art school.

With a fresh B.A. degree in sculpture from the University of Guelph in 1977, May applied for his first job at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto. The museum needed a technician in

river paleontology to do molds and casts and restorations of bones. As a sculpture student he had made molds; so he took with him to the interview the one rubber mold he had made in school. "I was so proud of making a rubber mold," he remembers. When he got to the interview, however, May found himself more excited about how the molds were being made at the museum. "They were using RTV's, latex rubbers, fiberglass jackets, things like that and I'd never seen any of that." That excitement may well be what landed him the job and gave him his first exposure to paleontology.

May was a quick study. Soon he was doing field work excavating dinosaur fossils as well as molding and casting. While his technical expertise grew, so did his reputation and in 1982, May was offered the opportunity to help establish the Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology near Drumheller, Alberta. As head technician in charge of molding and casting, May was active in setting up the molding, casting and mounting shops for the new building. He was instrumental in the creation of most of the original displays. The Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology opened its doors to high acclaim in 1985 and was granted "Royal" status by Queen Elizabeth in 1990. Thirty-five complete dinosaur

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The display of a Barosaurus defending its youngster from an attacking Allosaurus is the tallest free-standing dinosaur exhibit in the world. To make the complete display of fiberglass and polyurethane foam, RCI took molds from the original fossils, sculpted missing bones as well as molded and cast a section of the Hell Creek Badlands in Montana.

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skeletons are on display at the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology, in the largest assemblage of its kind in the world.

Part-time Job

May returned to the ROM in 1986. All the work at the Tyrrell had connected May to people from museums around the world. Many were now asking him if he could build dinosaurs for them. These museums had neither the facilities or the trained staff to do the work themselves, so May started Research Casting as a part time business in 1987. The need was greater than he realized. Within four years, the company had orders for a million dollars' worth of dinosaurs from institutions in Japan, England and the United States. It was time to make Research Casting his full-time endeavor.

Landmark Exhibit

One of those early contracts is still one of the most memorable. "And it was probably one of the most impressive ones we did," says May with pride. He is referring to the thirty-two foot long, five-story tall Barosaurus that RCI installed in the main rotunda of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. The display of a Barosaurus defending its youngster from an attacking Allosaurus is the tallest free-standing dinosaur exhibit in the world. To make the complete display of fiberglass and polyurethane foam, RCI took molds from the original fossils, sculpted missing bones as well as molded and cast a section of the Hell Creek Badlands in Montana. "Now it's become a landmark up in New York, so that's something to be proud of," says May.

Jurassic Park

Another of the first contracts for RCI turned out to be very high profile. Anyone who has seen Steven Spielberg's movie *Jurassic Park* will recall the RCI's

A hanging platform and ground anchors had to be designed and built on the site and all the climbing gear had to be found locally and purchased. To help make up for lost time, May and his daughter Amelia measured, mixed and lowered the rubber to the workers on the platform below. Local riggers, who were experienced climbers, were hired to help lift the mold to flat ground. In the end, the project only took one week longer than expected, says May. "We had about a weekend to admire castles and watch the World Cup."

The Whale Hall

A current on-going project at RCI is the collection and mounting of twelve

flesh from bones. Often this can be done with the help of a backhoe. But in the case of the 56-foot Fin Whale retrieved at Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia the whale was too far from shore to access with any type of vehicle.

Working in four feet of water and racing against an incoming storm, the crew of seven worked for three days cutting the flesh by hand. One person sharpened knives continually all day as four-foot square sections of whale flesh were cut off with keen edges and the help of gravity. On the fourth day, the unflensed head and tail were in danger of being washed out to sea by the impending storm. The waves were ten feet high by the time a fishing

Soon he and his crew will be in China taking molds of artifacts that will be submerged by the Three Gorges Dam project on the Yangtze River.

Bids with four or five museums in Korea are expected to come on board at any time. Just keeping up on all the projects is one of May's biggest challenges these days.

It's an exciting time for Peter May and Research Casting International and he is quick to give much of the credit to the many talented people at the company. "We are doing things a lot better now than I ever did, just the crew I have," he says proudly. "Yeah, and we have fun doing it."



A rough surface is applied to the styrofoam before the plastecine is applied

Canadian whale skeletons. "We're working for the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and we are on call whenever a whale comes up," May describes. The ROM is adding a new addition to the museum that is scheduled to open in 2006-2008. "They're building a Whale Hall," says May. "In the Whale Hall they want to have every type of whale skeleton that there is."

Since November of 2001, three types of whales have died and washed up on Canadian shores to be retrieved by the RCI crew; a Right Whale, a Sperm Whale and a Fin Whale.

The whales have to be completely flensed, the process of removing

boat could drag the head and tail to the nearest safe harbor where flensing could be finished.

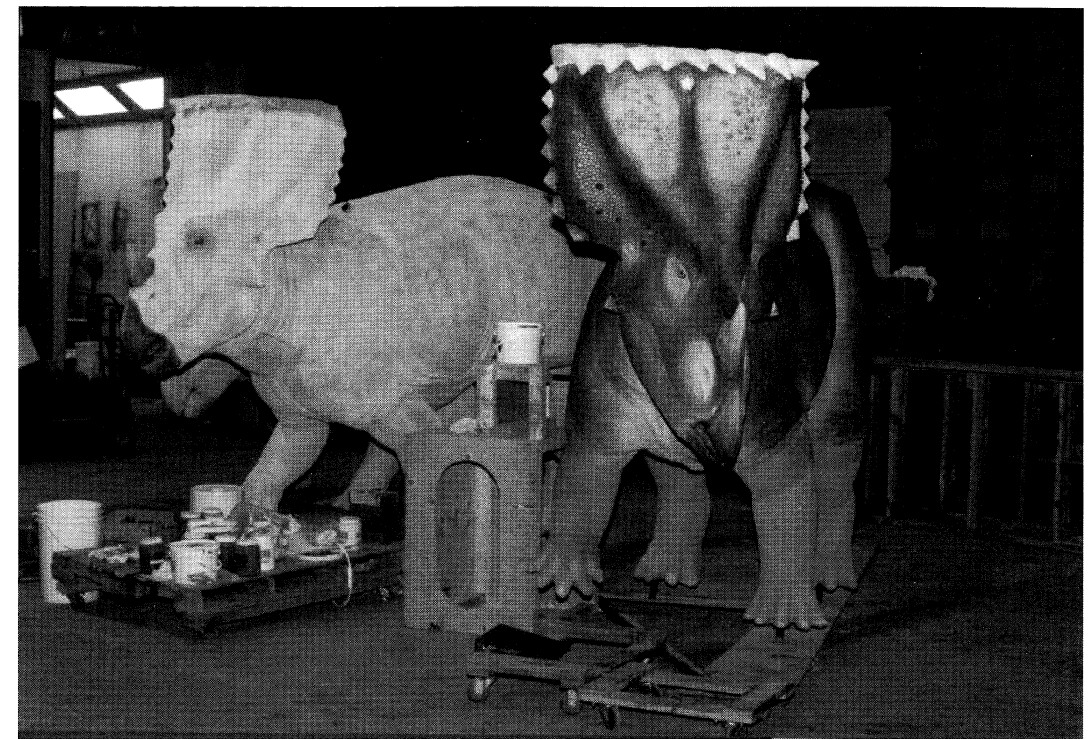
The flensed whale skeletons are put into containers and shipped to the shop where the bones are buried in a bed of horse manure to naturally deflesh and degrease and finally be mounted. RCI has six more years to collect. "The biggest one is the Blue Whale and we are still waiting for that," May says with anticipation. "I'm sure that will be exciting."

New Challenges

Sculptor, paleontologist, businessman, May is always looking to new horizons and greater challenges.

Wilson Bannister is a freelance writer who makes his home in the wooded hills and limestone country of southern Indiana

Find out more about Research Casting International online at: www.rescast.com
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skeletal display that is destroyed by fighting dinosaurs in the movie's climax. That project led to custom sculpting of dinosaurs when RCI was asked to recreate the dinosaurs seen in both *Jurassic Park* and *The Lost World* for the official traveling exhibits. Those dinosaurs were cast and painted exactly as the originals in poses recreating scenes from the movies. The exhibits, which have drawn thousands of visitors to museums around the country are two of the most successful traveling exhibits in North America.

The Old Shoe Warehouse

About five years ago, RCI moved to the present location in Beamsville, Ontario. May wanted to keep the business in Oakville, Ontario where he lives with his wife and three children. When it came time for expansion however, he found property to be considerably cheaper in Beamsville, which is far enough from Toronto to keep real estate prices lower.

The 18,000 square foot main building had been used as a shoe warehouse before RCI moved in. At one time before that, says May, it was a warehouse for a wood stove manufacturer. "It didn't have any heat and barely enough hydro-electricity," he recalls. Today, the company has two buildings at the site. Half of the main building is devoted to layout, machine shop, blacksmithing, woodworking and molding areas. The other 9,000 square feet houses the two year old foundry, shell and sand areas. With a 900 pound capacity, RCI's induction furnace melts bronze, steel and aluminum for investment, sand or ceramic shell casting. Their largest bronze to date is a life-size relief panel of a 35 foot long *Tyrannosaurus Rex* skeleton. "We're doing a little bit of work for artists right now," adds May. "It's all word of mouth." RCI recently cast a large sculpture for well known

Canadian sculptor, Jerry Gladstone.

Mold Storage Challenge

A small storage and casting facility of about 5,000 square feet is in a separate adjacent building. It is used mainly for fiberglass casting. May describes the predominant work of RCI as "mainly casting skeletons." That's about two thirds of what they do and many of those parts are cast in fiberglass.

Mold storage is quite a challenge for RCI which offers a wide selection of reproductions of skeletons, skulls and bones to museums around the world. "I think last count was somewhere around 30,000 molds," says May. The molds are stored in a compact storage facility where they are literally stacked to the ceiling. The only automation is the forklift.

How many molds in a typical dinosaur, say a T. Rex? According to May, "...most animals have about 300 bones. I think it's 280 to 300." The ever growing RCI specimen list includes molds of prehistoric amphibians to modern day whales.

T.Rex named 'Sue'

Most T.Rex skeletons are found with over half the bones missing. In 1990, in the badlands of South Dakota, fossil hunter Sue Hendrickson discovered the largest, most complete and best preserved *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Since 1900, there have been only seven T.Rex skeletons found that are more than half complete and Sue is the best specimen. The skull alone weighs 600 pounds.

After years of legal battles, "Sue" was sold at public auction in 1997 at Sotheby's for \$8.36 million to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. The winning bid was put together by a consortium of buyers including the Field Museum, McDonald's Corporation, Walt Disney World Resort and private



AMNH Hall of Planet Earth: Siccar Point, Molding. This rock mold sits 80 feet above the North Sea.



T-rex. fitting, welding and chasing of the hips

individuals. RCI was chosen to make the molds and several replicas of this fantastic specimen for the consortium.

Rock Work

While the specialty at RCI has been molding and casting bones since 1987, it is not the only thing they do well. Over the past ten years, the crew has made molds of geological formations all over the world. Using these huge molds, RCI has created artificial rock work for several museums. They have cast lava flows in Hawaii, subterranean cave walls in Indiana, and some of the oldest sedimentary rock in Greenland. "One of the hardest ones was when we took the mold off the cliff in Scotland," recalls May. That day the crew learned to expect the unexpected.

They arrived at Siccar Point, Scotland to find that a more representative sample of the Hutton Unconformity had been chosen for them to mold. The new site which very clearly revealed a gap of 20 million years in the Earth's sedimentary record was close to the planned site. However, instead of being accessible with the 40 foot ladders the crew had brought along, the new site was 80 feet above the North Sea.



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