



INTERVIEW WITH AN ARTIST

Let's Talk With Sean Murtha About Dioramas



RODERICK MICKENS / AMNH

What does Sean Murtha do at the American Museum of Natural History?

Sean Murtha is an artist in the Museum's Exhibitions department. He mainly paints backgrounds for dioramas.

What's Sean's take on painting dioramas?

► DID ANYONE IN PARTICULAR HAVE AN EARLY INFLUENCE ON YOU?

The bird painter Francis Lee Jaques. When I was a teenager, I found a book I really liked called *20th Century Wildlife Artists*. It mentioned several different artists, one of whom was Jaques. What really struck me was that it mentioned that Jaques had worked on background paintings at the American Museum of Natural History. This was the first time I was able to put a name to one of the background painters.

► HOW DID THAT CHANGE YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THE DIORAMAS?

It made me realize that actual humans had worked on them. Before that, I'd thought the dioramas were just perfect. I didn't even think about what it took to make them until I realized that there were names involved, that people had done them. Then I was able to pick out which ones at the museum were by Jaques or by other artists, and to see different hands at work, even though I didn't yet have names for the other artists.


MORE ON SEAN MURTHA

FIELD OF STUDY	Art
HOMETOWN	Port Jefferson Station, Long Island
FAVORITE MIDDLE/ HIGH SCHOOL SUBJECTS	“Science and art were my favorites, of course.”
LEAST FAVORITE MIDDLE/ HIGH SCHOOL SUBJECTS	“Math was my worst subject, and I’m finding out that in this field math is very important.”
INTERESTS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL	“I’ve been drawing as long as I know. My dad would bring home reams of computer paper, and I would fill it all up.”
THOUGHTS ON HIGH SCHOOL	“I went to high school in Port Jefferson Station, Long Island. I was known as the guy who drew dinosaurs. Everybody thought I would wind up here, but as a scientist.”
THOUGHTS ON ART SCHOOL	“I went to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and I didn’t fit in there very well, mostly because I was stubborn, mostly because I thought I was on the right track—and I was. But it wasn’t a track that went over well in a post-modern environment. I didn’t feel the need to experiment, or to try out more modern techniques. I’m not sure if that’s the way to go to art school, because I think I missed out on a lot.”
MAJOR INFLUENCES	“My high school art teacher, Eleanor Meier, definitely set me on the path. I was just a kid who drew; art didn’t seem to me like something people could do for a living. She said, ‘You’ve definitely got to go to art school. You’ve got to use it, and there are jobs for artists.’”
RECENT WORK	“We’ve been working on the renovation of the new Milstein Family Hall of Ocean Life for close to three years. There are 12 dioramas, and nine were largely redone. I did all the background paintings on those nine.”



AMNH: Do you remember your first trip to the American Museum of Natural History?

SEAN: There were many trips, and I'm not sure I remember the first one. But I do remember what stood out in the beginning: the blowup of the forest floor, with the giant insects. It's still on display. I think almost all kids fantasize about being small, and seeing small things as huge creatures. It was fantastic, and slightly frightening. And of course I remember the dinosaur fossils. I always loved the dioramas, but it wasn't until I was a little older that I began to understand what they were and appreciate them.

AMNH: So when did nature occur to you as a subject for an artist?

SEAN: I would say in about fifth or sixth grade, when I was 10 or 12 years old. I was very well known for drawing dinosaurs in my school—kids loved that stuff—and I was really getting serious about it. But I realized I couldn't draw real dinosaurs, and in order to have something to go by, I'd visit the backyard of a friend of mine who kept chickens. I'd watch their feet and the way they moved and I'd draw them, which led to me falling for birds in themselves. I never really got into birding, in the strict sense of going out of my way to find rare birds and make lists, but it did lead me to explore local places where you find birds, like the wide-open bays and salt marshes of Long Island's North Shore. And going to those places inspired me to paint them.

AMNH: Did Jaques' work—or that of other nature painters—influence your approach to painting dioramas?

SEAN: Definitely Jaques. Later the name of James Perry Wilson came up. As a young person I thought Wilson's dioramas were definitely the best in the museum, and I still do, because they're just so true to life. There's a lot of thinking in his painting but not a lot of expression, and everything is just right. His paintings have no flaws, really. So he became my favorite painter. I was also influenced by the more impressionistic style of Fred Scherer, who, though long retired from the museum, I have been lucky enough to meet and learn from in person.



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AMNH: Tell me a little about the technique and skills a diorama painter needs. What does the process of painting a diorama background consist of?

SEAN: A lot has to do with the large size, although painting large just means mixing more paint and using larger brushes and moving more—you can't sit at the easel. The real trick—and this is something I learned when I began to work here—is the fact that the wall is a curve, not only from side to side but also from floor to ceiling. It's a half-dome. This means that if you're painting a



straight line, or something that's supposed to look like a straight line, like the trunk of a tree that's standing up, it isn't really a straight line. You have to distort it in order for it to look right. If it's lying on the ground, like a fallen tree, it's even worse. You really have to bend things in a way that isn't natural, that isn't the way you'd paint it on a flat surface. There are no courses to teach you this, and it took me a while. I had to cross a bit of a gap, but I managed to find people here who knew the old artists, or who knew old guys who knew the old guys.

AMNH: What materials do you use?

SEAN: The materials are the same as those used in traditional painting. It's canvas, just mounted on a plaster wall. I tend towards larger brushes, but I still do the same things I would do for a smaller painting. One thing that's different is that with the kind of painting that hangs on the wall, modern taste goes towards a texture that's somewhat loose, and brushwork that shows the hand of the artist. But with a background painting, you don't want to draw the eye to the surface. You use a big bristle brush that looks like a large toothbrush, and you bang it on the wall rather than brushing it across. That creates almost a miniature stucco effect and takes out the brushwork. It gives everything an even texture that doesn't create any kind of glare or shine. It doesn't give away the fact that there's a wall there, and your eye is fooled into thinking that the space just goes on.

AMNH: How do you integrate the background with what's happening in the foreground?

SEAN: In the background painting, you begin with the sky and work your way down. Usually you start without any foreground because you need room for ladders and things. When you get to the point where the two meet, you stop, and someone else comes in and builds the foreground. Often, at that point, I'll have them come in and put down about a foot of finished foreground at the back edge near the painting, some sand or grass, and then I'll continue painting the last foot or so, down to that, to match the colors.

AMNH: Ideally, what effect should a diorama background painting have on the viewer?

SEAN: The objective, believe it or not, is to make you forget that you're seeing a painting. You're there to see the specimen, the mounted animal, and the painting is just there to let you know that it lives in the forest or on cliffs or whatever. The background painting is not supposed to draw too much attention. I can't say to put as little of yourself in it as possible, because everyone has his own trademark style. But you really don't want it to look like a painting, and that's the hardest thing to pull off.

AMNH: Who decides the content of the background painting—the time of day, the weather, the season, and the other elements?

SEAN: It becomes a team effort. You've got curators, planners, the artist, all of whom decide what they want. A case in point is the harbor seal diorama in the Milstein Family Hall of Ocean Life. In the old hall there were these two sleepy-looking harbor seals sitting on a floe of ice. In the background you saw a little open water and some mountains in the misty distance. They were being shown in



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Greenland. But harbor seals are one of the few animals in the whole hall that also live near here. I had seen them myself at Montauk Point, at the very tip of Long Island, which I mentioned offhand in a meeting. That kind of stuck, and we thought this was actually a design concept that it would be interesting to focus on the harbor seal as an animal that you might be able to see within a short drive. So we decided to do Montauk Point in the wintertime. That was a lot of fun.

AMNH: You've been hard at work on the dioramas in the newly renovated Milstein Family Hall of Ocean Life. What was the toughest thing to get right?

SEAN: I think the toughest one was the elephant seal diorama. It's set on Guadalupe Island in Mexico. In the old one there were two males and one female in the foreground, and it was noted that at breeding time the two males would have been fighting and not sitting side by side, as they were. So we took one out, and turned the one that was rearing up menacingly towards the wall, and on the wall we painted another seal facing him. That was tough. I think it's the first time that a major focus of the action has been in the background painting. Also, it's large, and we put a lot of detail in it: little islands in the background and vistas of distant coastline, as well as a lot of little rocks in the foreground and lots of seagulls. That one took about a month and a half.



AMNH: Do you work off photographs?

SEAN: Yes, we get pictures off the Internet and from books, and also use personal photographs. Steve Quinn, the Project Manager in Exhibition, was the source of most of the pictures for the elephant seal diorama. He's been there, he takes good photographs, and he had the best ones we found.

AMNH: How do the photographs get translated onto the grid?

SEAN: If we're able to go to the site which happened twice in the Hall, once in Montauk and once in Monterey we take a series of pictures that overlap from right to left and can be transferred to a grid and then to the wall. If it's a place we haven't been, we only have photographs of separate scenes. I create a scaled-down sketch in color that goes to meetings with curators and designers. That's the time to make changes. Once it's been approved, I have a final sketch that goes onto the grid on the wall. Photographs become references, but because they have to be blended or moved around, there's a lot that's kind of made up. It's largely up to me to assemble the scene. That's when I draw on the experience of being in places that I can think of as parallel or similar, even if I haven't been to the one in the drawing.

AMNH: Tell us about restoring Jaques' Andros Island mural so that it could go back on view in the renovated Hall.

SEAN: That was really a dream come true. The Andros coral reef was the centerpiece of the hall before the blue whale was put in. It was built as a two-story diorama, with the lower half underwater, showing all the coral

and the fish, and the upper story being the surface of the water and views of the island and the sky. That upper half was all done by Jaques, and it's a beautiful painting, of clouds, mainly, and distant islands and water. It had been sealed behind a wall in the '60s, and holes had been made in it, catwalks cut through. When we got in there, we found that probably 10 or 12 square feet were missing in different places. We plastered the spots and I got in there, painting. I had to match Jaques' colors and style, and that was a great thrill because he was a hero of mine from my youth. It actually wasn't that much of a stretch because some of his style was in my style, due to learning from him. It's fairly seamless; I bet most people who look at it won't see the patches.

AMNH: Did you discover anything unusual inside the Hall or in any of its dioramas while you were working on them?

SEAN: Things were left behind, in this hall less than in others. People always sign their things, and we find that everywhere. In this hall we did find brushes and tubes of paint and cut-out drawings of birds that were taped on the wall while they were trying to plot out their designs. I think they were probably left behind accidentally. Sometimes we do leave things for future generations to find.

AMNH: What have you left behind?

SEAN: I have to keep that a secret.

AMNH: When did it first occur to you that you might work at the American Museum of Natural History?



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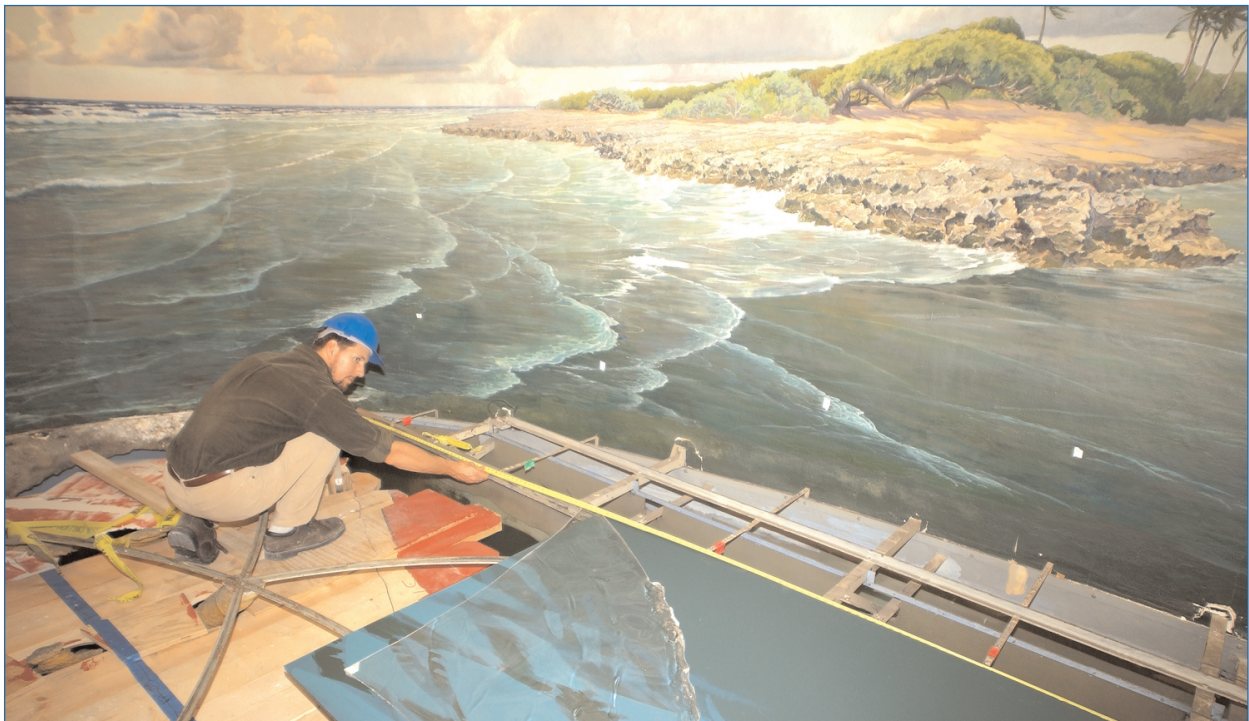
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SEAN: It was really an accident. When I got out of college in 1990, I heard about the fossil halls being renovated. I applied, but I was never very good at making phone calls and finding out who was the right person to contact, and my work's probably still floating around here somewhere. I didn't get a call and wound up taking a job at a children's bookstore. Many years later, in 1996, I was living on my own out of the city, painting in isolation. I realized that I needed some friendships with artists who liked and did what I did, and I found out about a drawing class here taught by Steve Quinn of Exhibitions. When I took the class, he really liked my drawings and asked me what I was doing. At that time the second bookstore I worked at was going out of business, so I was open. He said I should apply for a temporary job here, and I got it. They generally hire a few extra hands when they have a big push for a show. It was putting up the *Amber* show, specifically putting up a little slice of rain forest that you could walk around, a

diorama without the background. I was immediately put to work sculpting tree trunks, which was not my area of training, but it was fun and went well. That led into a full-time job when an opening appeared, and here I am.

AMNH: What's your favorite thing about what you do?

SEAN: I think my favorite thing is that the work is different all the time. Sometimes I can do what I normally do, like painting landscapes, and sometimes I'm asked to do something completely different. I've built a Viking ship, I've sculpted tree trunks, I've dusted dinosaurs. Although the work can be tedious, it can be a nice change. And I love the fact that I commute in on the train with a bunch of guys in suits, and I'm in my ripped-up jeans with paint on my hands.



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