

ANTS Interview by Marc Tassone

Recently I had the pleasure of discovering a company that produces high quality Paleoart and they're right in my own backyard (Albuquerque, New Mexico). The company is ANTS. A company that specializes in casting fossilized artifacts. They are currently working with the following museums: The Yale Peabody Museum, New Mexico Museum of Natural History, The Maxwell Museum Of Anthropology, and The San Diego Natural History Museum. Their mission is to produce only the best museum quality castings possible. Many of you may be familiar with them already. They have produced the famous and highly accurate 1/12th scale Allosaurus skeleton kit.

Now I must admit that I wasn't interested in skeletal restorations when I first heard about ANTS. Yet, after seeing the Allosaurus piece and seeing how they approach each project, I confess to a new appreciation for this facet of Paleoart. With the gracious indulgences of both Merrick Burkhardt, Head of Product Development and David Naquin, Head of Marketing, I was shown the behind-the-scenes workings of this highly professional and creative environment. ANTS' most consistent and strongest asset is their devotion to perfection. This commitment so impressed the Leakey's that they have allowed them the use of their name on ANTS Leaky Ancestor Series Line, a series of detailed 1/2 scale skulls of human evolution with detailed anthropological information provided by Dr. Richard Leakey.

The following is a taped interview. Unfortunately Dr. Stephen Wager the President of ANTS was unavailable for the interview but we hope to be able to sit down with him soon. When I showed up at ANTS, Merrick was hard at work meticulously preparing a wax Allosaurus skeleton for the foundry. I was greatly impressed with the care and skill Merrick used as he applied the wax spruces during our interview.

Marc: So you do skeleton subjects due to their factual nature?

Merrick: Basically, that's what we do. Skeletal stuff is not conjectural, its factual. I can go to Yale and take pictures of a Triceratops just because I know they have it or to the American Museum where I can look at the anatomy and come back and do a composite restoration, kind of a generic Triceratops instead of a specific specimen, but that said it's not a made up thing.

Marc: Where did you learn to sculpt?

Merrick: I'm not really a creative sculptor.

Marc: But you did work on the 1/12th Allosaurus skeleton.

Merrick: Yes, its not like I sculpted a specific bone it's more like Steve sculpted the entire thing from scratch. Steve Wagner (ANTS Founder) basically did the entire piece from nothing. I've gone through and corrected things that we've had problems with and things we've decided were not anatomically correct. But in terms of building something up from nothing, I haven't done too much of that.

Marc: What products do you plan to release for the remainder of '98 and 1999? Do you think some of Lasha's pieces will see release this year?

Merrick: That's a good question. Our plan right now on Lasha's sculptures is that we're comfortable releasing two of them right now. From a logistical standpoint we're planning on taking two of them all the way to completion; which ones we're not sure. The Indricotherium and I'm not sure which other one. Basically taking them to completion is not just making a cast, but providing the scientific information to go along with each piece including a booklet that will explain the animal's history and the content of the subject.

We may offer unfinished versions as there are two different populations of customers, the modeling enthusiast who is interested in building and creating dioramas and the broad museum market where you have people who want and expect an exact replica that can stand the test of time and scrutiny plus provide interesting content on the subject to illuminate that piece so it's not just a rubber animal; so that it's got some educational value to it and museums want to see that. You can buy a rubber dinosaur, but what they want are products that have some real value to them both in terms of quality and education.

Marc: Educational, yet stimulates continued curiosity and learning.

Merrick: Yes, basically we want the person to take the museum experience home with them where they continue to learn even after they leave the museum.

Marc: What aspects of ANTS and working at ANTS are the most rewarding for you?

Merrick: Basically, we want to make cool stuff and have a good time doing it. I do enjoy working with the museums. Its challenging to make the real pieces and it's fun to sculpt pieces. I like restorations and we're not just doing the bone stuff or the animal subjects. We also will be doing architectural repli-

cas and historical artifacts and art replicas.



Marc: You're not just limited to Paleoart. When you say museum you mean the entire museum spectrum history, literature, architecture everything.

Merrick: Anything that's interesting to work on essentially.

Marc: I'd be interested to see a replica of the Rosetta Stone.

Merrick: (Chuckles) That's one we've been working at. I think that would be really cool. What we're working on is not the Rosetta Stone, but a similar piece. It's literally in the mail and we'll be making a mold of that. It will have literal translations and educational material included with it.

Marc: Merrick, I want to thank you for taking the time to give PT this interview. I know you guys are really busy and I'm sure the readers are really going to appreciate it.

Merrick: No problem

Leaving Merrick to finish his work. I went down the hall of the ANTS facility to speak with David Naquin, ANTS Marketing Director. David was also kind enough to show me the casting and prep room where ANTS works its magic. I was also fortunate enough to speak with the entire casting and mold making staff. All of who share the same commitment to perfection.

Marc: What is your role at ANTS, David.

David: I do marketing, and I coordinate some aspects of product development and production and anything that isn't being done by someone else.

Marc: You actually come up with ideas and say this is a neat idea, can we do it?

David: But no one listens to me.

Marc: (laughs)

David: I'll be talking to a museum and find out what kinds of things they might want a product for and then try to figure out how we can get them something. We're trying to get a Cuneiform Tablet cast for the University of Pennsylvania. They have a traveling exhibit that opens in October and they have a little piece they would like us to produce for them.

Marc: But it's a little slab.

David: It's a little slab, but the text on it is related to children. And there is a translation, a children's poem or children's story. I don't know exactly what it is, but it would make an attractive gift or souvenir for a child.

Marc: That would encourage the child to learn more about history.

David: Exactly, education is very important to us as a company. We feel that we should educate, not just provide fine replicas.

Marc: Do you see yourself eventually moving into the kit market on some level?

David: That'd be great! And I think we have an item now that we can sell as a kit, Lasha's Deinonychus. That's essentially a piece we could release as a kit.

Marc: Pieces that really strike me are the Megatherium, and the Deinonychus piece. I'll be surprised if you can keep those on the shelf.

David: When production gets me samples, I can send them out to people like Monstrosities. The minute I have a piece, out they go.

Marc: I know Monstrosities would be a good one and you could send a review piece to Prehistoric Times because it's a popular animal and it's a great pose. There are so many things a guy can do with it. You can put feathers on it and paint it however you want to.

David: I'd do it in a minute, all I need is a piece.

Marc: You guys are pretty much like the Lexus of casting because you cater more towards museums and serious collectors. A lot of your pieces are gorgeous. You don't have a lot of competitors in what you do except for Skullduggery and they do a lot of good stuff also. But I don't know too many other companies off hand that do what you do, as well as you do.

David: We work well in the small market. And where Skullduggery uses plaster, we use resin and that is the major difference. We feel that gives us an edge, also they're moving into a mass market and lower price point market.

Marc: Are you happy with your place in the market?

David: We want to stay at least where we are, we understand there is a need for inexpensive pieces, but what we don't want to do is compromise our quality standards, which are high. So, yes, we have a friendly competition that keeps both companies focused on what each does best.

Marc: So a collector can say to his wife, "Honey, I need this Allosaurus skeleton. Why, it's not just another kit, but it also comes with an 80 page book that tells you everything about the subject. You can sit down with our children

and share the learning experience. It stimulates interest and it stimulates a desire to learn more".

David: And you get to put it together!

Marc: I was impressed the last time I was here because all I do is build kits and through building I have learned a lot about them. I have always had a fascination with dinosaurs and I used to have an extensive collection of books. This is a really nice organization, very focused and you pay a lot of attention to detail. Nobody here is just "talking talk," everybody her knows the deal, this is it. And I think that is one of your strong points.

David: We are trying to branch out, you saw our little facial casts which is a whole other market. We got into doing this for the art market, which is entirely different one for us.

Marc: What is this for?

Garth: Those are models for artists to practice sketching and drawing and the hand the same way because they are difficult to draw and this gives you a very accurate detailed model to work from without having to make your "friend" sit still for an hour.

Marc: Exactly, its still life cast.

David: It's a life cast, it's taken right off somebody and we do the same with the lips and we have a whole series of about 20 different ones.

Marc: So it's not just for someone who sees this article in PT who may think it is Paleoart, Merrick was saying you're going to be doing architectural stuff some cuneiform, maybe the Rosetta Stone?

David: (laughing) We are trying to borrow a copy and do a cast form but the Louve has it right now and they don't want to send it to us.

You know what we have happening today? You haven't heard this one have you? UPPER DECK is evaluating our hand casts today as to whether or not they will give us license to do Michael Jordan or any other sports figures they might have.

Marc: Alright. That would be cool, so maybe you'll be doing Mark McGuire too.

David: I would love to do Mark McGuire holding a bat.

Marc: Now aside from the life cast of those sports figures that might take you in the sports direction, where do you see yourself in 5 years?

David: We would like to produce a large and diverse group of products that

replicates hundreds of important objects. One of the things is reduced scale items like these where we are taking original fossils and reproducing in half scale. We need to be able to work with any type of museum object and if it's too large we can reduce it down so it becomes something someone can afford to have an accurate detailed copy of in their home.

With this particular cast (holds up a 1:2 scale copy of A. boisie) we know that you can take calipers to this piece and the original piece and come out exactly to scale. So that if you want to measure the eye socket here you know the exact size of the original at half scale

Marc: What other pieces do you want to make?

David: We're constantly open to new ideas. The whole idea with kits is something we really haven't given much serious thought to.

Marc: What if you get a guy who wants to produce a figure and he sends you a cast to make a mold?

David: Not a problem to do. We would consider doing casts for kits, which is essentially what we are doing right now for museums. Where they have the original and we are making the reproduction pieces for them to sell. Here we would just be working with another artist and that's what we're doing with Lasha's stuff, essentially that same process and that would be wonderful to do. But, we're looking to make sure it's a quality and an accurate piece as opposed to doing rubber dinosaurs.

Marc: Right, you want to do good collector pieces that someone could have fun building and painting.

David: We love to work with other designers, it's just a question of working everyone into the mix.

The rest of my time was spent touring the ANTS facility, a small, yet highly efficient casting room. I also got a chance to see future projects, like the Pentaceratops Horn core that they are currently casting--what a beauty. If you want to learn more about this exciting and collector friendly company. You can reach them at www.ants-inc.com or e-mail at ants@ants-inc.com or give them a call at 505-842-8409. I enjoyed this opportunity to visit with so many committed and professional individuals. Their name may imply diminutiveness but the actions are those of giants.

Next Issue, Marc interviews ANTS' incredible new sculptor, Lasha. Tschondia.



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