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ART + DESIGN

GIVING | WINTER of 2019 | ISSUE 21

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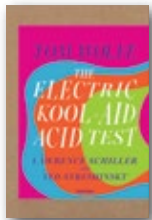
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Beauty AND Beasts



Artful Taxidermy Inspired by Old Masters

by **ANGELA DANSBY**

There's a new story of beauty and beasts: *Our First Book: Fine Taxidermy* by Darwin, Sinke & van Tongeren (Lannoo Publishers, 2018). It's influenced by naturalist Charles Darwin and features the art of Dutch taxidermists Japp Sinke and Ferry van Tongeren, who combine 17th and 21st century art by preserving modern wildlife in poses depicted in Old Masters' paintings.

"Taxidermy is dedicated to showing the beauty and magic of nature, something with which Charles Darwin would surely have agreed," says Sinke.

The former advertising executives turned taxidermists are known for their fantastical works mounted on antique stands.

Neither imagined their current career paths, but perhaps the law of attraction was at play because van Tongeren always had an interest in natural history and taxidermy, collecting animal skulls as a child. And Sinke learned to draw anatomically correct animals in art school—a skill that he now uses to sketch taxidermy poses.

While traveling in countries like Borneo after selling his advertising business in 2011, van Tongeren began photographing exotic roadkill, which inspired him to learn the art of taxidermy upon his return. He recruited Sinke to join his artistic journey and the duo invested two years in creating a taxidermy collection.





Their efforts paid off as contemporary English artist Damien Hirst—famous for his own artworks with preserved animals—bought all 39 of Sinke’s and van Tongeren’s first works in 2015 for his personal Murderme collection. These works will eventually be displayed in Hirst’s Newport Street Gallery in London.

Sinke and van Tongeren are changing the face of taxidermy with greater artistic expression. Their work is inspired by Golden Age paintings of animals and still lifes by Flemish and Dutch Old Masters such as Peter Paul Rubens, Frans Snyders, Jan Weenix, and Melchior d’Hondecoeter.

“These great artists set out to portray the wonder of the exotic animals brought back to Europe by explorers of Africa and Asia,” says van Tongeren. “We are constantly trying to reinterpret the Old Masters of the 17th century into three-dimensional masterpieces of the 21st century.”

These masterpieces are posed like those in the paintings, such as with wings open and heads down, which “emphasize human characteristics and are more expressive and flamboyant than traditional taxidermy,” says van Tongeren.

“Most taxidermists begin with nature, whereas we begin with art,” he explains.

Practically speaking, taxidermy starts with lawful sourcing of animals and documentation of their provenance. All animals used by Sinke and van Tongeren die of natural causes in captivity; none are caught in the wild, and, by law, roadkill is off-limits. They source from breeders, zoos, and animal shelters.

“If we wouldn’t work with these animals, they would end up in the fire or trash can,” says van Tongeren. “It’s a shame to destroy them. For some rare species like Siberian tigers, we can ‘save’ them when they’re dead. It’s very valuable to get these animals into private collections.”

In this way, Sinke and van Tongeren

are preserving biodiversity. They “give immortality to nature’s fragile beauty in a time when so many species are endangered or have disappeared because of human activities,” notes Jonathan Kugel, gallerist and collector.

The artists also photograph animal skins being washed in soapy water as ethereal “unknown poses,” as well as still-life arrangements made with their taxidermy.

Our First Book documents it all in a series of “firsts” for Sinke and van Tongeren. Their exquisite work is represented by Jamb gallery in London and J.F. Kugel in Brussels and Paris. More information is at finetaxidermy.com and 1stdibs.com. ▲

“Most taxidermists begin with nature, whereas we begin with art.”

