



THE ART OF DEATH

Why would Dior display a stuffed panther at their Paris shop? Why would parents buy a stuffed animal for their children? And why would someone put a dead vulture next to his bed? Formerly a matter of big-game hunters showing off their prey, taxidermy has become fashionable and socially accepted in Paris. This would not have been possible without the special ethical and aesthetic values of Anne Orłowska

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Stepping inside Design et Nature is like attending a tea-party at the Dolittle residence. An Arctic fox slumbers under the protective regard of an enormous polar bear. Mice dance ring-a-ring-o'-roses. Crows and doves flock about in the eaves above your head, while birds of paradise preen themselves with lazy contentment on nearby branches. There is no need for wallpaper: butterflies and insects in hundreds of luscious colours provide the décor. Amidst this bizarre zoo, at a desk in the far corner, sits Anne Orłowska, the mistress of this menagerie.

"Taxidermy has become very fashionable these last three or four years," she says, "because people are finally coming round to see that it is as much about life and creation as it is about death."

It was never the childhood dream of Anne Orłowska to work with dead animals. Yet she owns one of Paris' best-known taxidermy shops, stuffs animals for artists and fashion designers, and has displayed at Maison et Objet, the largest interior design exhibition in Paris, for the last few years.

A Parisian by birth, Anne studied law at university and afterwards embarked upon a career in advertising. Then, 10 years ago, a chance encounter presented her and her sister Nathalie with the possibility of buying Deyrolle, the legendary taxidermy boutique on the rue du Bac. Despite admitting she knew nothing about the trade, the opportunity stirred her curiosity. Taxidermy, she came to realise, had more to do with education and art than with death. Deyrolle was a major supplier to the national education system, but also attracted a hip, artistic crowd. "Some people just find it beautiful. It's a particular aesthetic taste. Artists are very inspired by nature, as are fashion and jewellery designers. Architects, too. The setting was extremely varied, very alive."

When, five years ago, Nathalie decided to pursue other interests, they sold Deyrolle and Anne opened Design et Nature on the rue d'Aboukir. The boutique is small, but the collection spectacular. At her second shop, Anne continues to protect her ethical values. "We only use animals that were born in captivity and have died naturally," she explains. "We work with a lot of circuses and zoos and we respect all the guidelines set down in the Washington Convention, which states that with protected animals it must be proven that not only they, but also their parents and grandparents died in captivity. I like to think we are giving the animal a second life."

There is no second life for pets, however; it is a matter of taste. "People have very emotional relationships with their cats and dogs. After they are naturalised they really look as their pet once did. I think it's very disturbing for the owners. People can have the impression that their animal is there and of course it isn't really."

Anne also distinguishes herself through her aesthetic values, which emphasise cheerfulness and movement. "I prefer to make animals that look friendly," she says with a smile, "because they are animals you can live with."

The artistic possibilities are fascinating. Just above Anne's desk hangs the head of what seems to be a unicorn. "We can invent completely extraordinary animals. We have even made chimeras. One had the head of a baboon, turkey wings, reptile eyes and the tail of a fish. Taxidermy is really an art. Chimeras are made by some very well known artists, notably in Switzerland and Belgium. One Swiss artist invented a lovely animal: it had a peacock's head on a kangaroo's body with ostrich legs. We can do everything now – a peacock's body, pigeon



wings and the tail of a white fox, if you like; all you need is the idea... and a superb taxidermist!"

Anne, in fact, has seven or eight superb taxidermists, each with their own speciality, be it birds, bones, fur or insects. The process of stuffing, or "naturalising", an animal has changed drastically since the days when a hide was filled with rags or straw and then sewn shut. These days, for the larger animals, the taxidermist sculpts a form in resin, in the pose that Anne or her client decides. Then the skin, the only part of the animal that is kept, is attached. For smaller animals and birds, the taxidermist uses wood fibre instead of resin and sets the form with steel wire. These new techniques eliminate the possibility of deformation, and make the end product a whole lot more hygienic. Coupled with advances in the production of tongues, claws and glass eyes, the options open to the modern taxidermist are limited only by the imagination.

"Now we can respond to any demand," says Anne. "If you want a panther, you can have it standing, sitting or lying; the head to the right or to the left; the eyes closed or the ears back as if it was about to attack.

"Last week I sold two tigers to one of my clients, a gallery owner, who has a very beautiful flat on the Place Des Vosges. He had already bought seven animals from me. His flat was decorated by the first actor to play Tarzan and it amuses him a lot to have these animals around him. He finds it absolutely magnificent."

Is that, then, the level of clientele she caters for: the rich Parisian elite? "Not only. There's no particular profile, it's really very varied: people with children (because children love animals), collectors, artists. I have many clients who work in fashion and interior design, of course. A lot of designers and architects buy things to compliment their creations. Of course, the larger works are normally bought by people with a certain buying power because the polar bears, the tigers and the panthers can sell for between €20,000 and €25,000. The price doesn't depend on the size, but on the rarity of the animal. In general though, for my customers, money isn't the problem; the problem is finding beautiful and exceptional animals."

She points out a vulture in the centre of the shop, a creature much more dignified than its reputation would suggest. "That one has been bought by a decorator. He's going to put it next to his bed." She considers this eventuality in silence for a moment, and then adds, with a chuckle "I did warn him, though. I said, 'I don't know where you'll find a woman to share your bed, not with that peering down at her.'"

This art form, after all, is not to everyone's taste.