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# Paleo Puzzles: Art exhibit of fossil reconstruction illustrations

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Article by Maeve Doyle

The Biomedical Communications program (<https://bmc.med.utoronto.ca/bmc/>) invites members of the university community to view a display of paleo illustrations created by Diane Scott in the Department of Biology (<https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/biology/home>) at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). The exhibit was mounted for the recent meeting of the Canadian Society of Vertebrate Palaeontology (<https://csvg.ca/>) held at UTM, May 19 to 21, 2016. The display includes more than 40 samples from a collection of palaeontological specimen and fossil reconstruction illustrations.



Scott, a lab technician, fossil preparator and scientific illustrator begins her work with material that, to the untrained eye, resembles a lump of rock. With the aid of a microscope and small tools, she removes as much of the rocky matrix as possible to reveal the tiny animal hidden there. If the fossil is a previously unknown specimen, she researches the literature for similar animals to help her distinguish the important bony landmarks from cracks in the fossil. She photographs the fossil, brings the photograph into digital art software and creates an outline. She prints the outline onto coquille board and, with the original specimen as reference, hand-shades the outline to give it form and texture.

“I just love doing the work. It’s like a puzzle for me. Assembling the pieces of a fossil is like preparing a sculpture,” says Scott.

Scott first demonstrated her talent as a scientific illustrator in 1979 as one of Robert Reisz (<https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/biology/people/reisz-robert-r/>)'s undergraduate students and she has worked with the renowned vertebrate palaeontologist ever since. She has co-authored over 40 peer-reviewed papers and she teaches graduate and undergraduate students how to prepare and illustrate fossils.

“Because of the University of Toronto’s reputation, we receive pieces from around the world to prepare,” says Scott. She might remove more of the matrix to reveal more of the fossil or she might repair damage to the pieces. Fossils are often returned to their institutions in better condition than they were received and many have become museum exhibits. “I am blessed to work with so many pieces from so many places.”

David Mazierski (<https://bmc.med.utoronto.ca/bmc/research/faculty-research/mazierski-2/>), associate professor in the Biomedical Communications program, who curated the paleo exhibit has long-held an interest in the role of palaeontological illustration and its importance in depicting fossil evidence.

“I’ve always admired Diane’s work and it is, in fact, part of the reason I pursued my own studies in vertebrate palaeontology,” he says.

Mazierski worked with Scott to select illustrations from those stored in Professor Reisz’s lab. He rescued three of the oldest drawings which had been taped into the windows of a room in the Davis Building. He repaired the damaged pieces and scanned the collection to create a digital archive of the works to make them available for reproduction.

Next, he mounted and matted the art with archival quality materials and researched each piece to create information placards. These interpretive signs include the importance of the organism that was studied, a geological time scale to place the organism in time, and a citation for the publication in which the piece appeared.

“Going through the collection with Dave really made me appreciate how much I’ve been able to accomplish over the years,” says Scott.

Visitors can view the exhibit (<http://scienceengagement.utoronto.ca/events/>) from Monday to Friday between 8:30 and 4:30 in the Biomedical Communications hallway on the third floor of the Health Sciences Complex at the University of Toronto Mississauga until September 30, 2016.

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