

Brian Wizard's

HOW TO MAKE A MOUNTED DRAGON HEAD



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No dragons were actually hurt during the creation of this artwork, although one coyote did volunteer for the better of three possible outcomes.

My second art project for 2019 was the creation of a mounted dragon head, similar to a big game trophy mount. The first task for me as an amateur taxidermist was to gather the materials. The main ingredient would be a coyote's skull. I needed a volunteer.

In this part of the world, coyotes are a sheepherder's bane. The snow melted, the grass greened, and that sets the stage for the delivery of grazing sheep to meander through the forest. Before the sheep arrive, the county sends out its sanctioned trapper to reduce the coyote population, giving the multiple herds of 1500 sheep each a better chance of survival. It's a money thing.

I was out doing a perimeter check when I found the volunteer coyote snared in a leg trap, the poor bugger. I could only imagine how this coyote was mentally running through all of the possible outcomes. I bet he didn't see this one coming.



I leveled with the beast, explaining, “This is where you’ll die by starvation, dehydration, or predation.” The coyote already knew that. To lift its spirit, I suggested, “I could help you live on as a mounted dragon head.”

This was when I withdrew my sidearm from its holster, explaining the how-to details. “What I need from you, sir, is your skull. Through it, your spirit’s legacy can live on as a mounted dragon’s head held in high esteem by all who view it throughout eternity. May I?”

The coyote did not say no.

From twelve feet away I put a 9 mm bullet into its right eye and it dropped like a wet rag.



Here’s a good rule to survive by after you have shot a beast: wait a while to see if it is truly dead. I could have rushed over and grabbed the coyote for what would come next, but I didn’t. I waited.

SNAP! Quicker than it dropped, it bounced back to life, dazed and confused, as well as agitated. I am a compassionate man. That bullet had to have hurt and most likely still did. I put four more into the coyote's center mass, with one hitting the heart. It was a mercy killing. The hydrostatic shock caused by the bullets' impact removed all the pain, as I extracted the cleaver from the back of my truck. Several chops later, off came the head.

I took it home and boiled it in a pan of water over the fire pit to loosen the skin and soften the brain. I then placed it into the ground and let the ground bugs do their job of de-fleshing. A few weeks later, I pulled it out of the dirt. The dried skin easily peeled away and the skull was void of brain, eyes, and other soft tissue.

Next came the important part for display purposes, soaking it for twelve hours in a fifty-fifty mix of water and two-percent hydrogen peroxide. This turned the skull, and more importantly the teeth, milk white.

With the foundation of my art piece secured, the next part of the process was to create my own renditions of scales, eyes, tongue, and blades (which I envisioned between the horns).

This sent me to my workbench to make the magic happen and release the wizardry.



I envisioned shiny tin embellishments. To create them I had to make clay models and plaster molds. Once the plaster cured and dried, I could remove the clay and then replace it with molten tin.

I hand-formed the clay tongue and then made a cardboard frame to pour the plaster around the suspended model. It takes hours for plaster to set up fully and days for it to dry thoroughly.

In the photo, you see the plaster mold, the complete coyote skull, and the wooden mount, plus the Master Expressive Artist at play. Do you see the wire in the plaster? That wire held the suspended model in place.



How to dig out the clay at the bottom of the plaster mold was the next challenge. I decided to don the surgeon's hat, grab a cutting tool, and operate. I marked where I would make a cut to expose the currently unreachable clay.



I made the cut.



This exposed the otherwise unreachable clay.



I dug out the clay using a flathead screwdriver.



The short end didn't penetrate through the plaster, but the long end did. The melted tin needed a clean and dry void to fill unhindered.

Any moisture in the plaster turns to steam when heated by the hot tin and any bits of excess clay melt and evaporate; both gases cause tin to bubble, leaving holes and indentations that ruin any casting. That sends the artist back to square one to live with the sin of time-wasting double handling. (Doing the same thing twice).

A trick to removing residual clay and moisture in the dried plaster is to heat the inside. I used an oxy-acetylene jeweler's torch.



A quick glance into the plaster revealed a debris-free void.



With the help of sticky-backed copper foil and Gorilla tape, the two pieces were once again whole. The metal tape kept the hot tin from melting the stronger tape, preventing the tin from escaping should the two pieces separate.



Tin is a great casting medium as its melting temperature is only 400 degrees Fahrenheit, which is obtainable by heating it in a stovetop skillet. I added to the heat by applying the oxy-acetylene flame to the top.

Another trick is not to pour overheated tin into the mold. Let it cool until a film forms on top. Cooler liquid tin solidifies quickly, slowing down its tendency to run through any cracks in the plaster.

I melted the tin and did the pouring. With the tin cooled, it was time to liberate the conceived idea from its womb. Birth is always violent to some degree. Smashing the plaster with a hammer was the method for this baby's birth. I let Marjorie have the honor.



She smashed the plaster apart and out came the tin tongue. It needed some TLC to shape it, clean it, and make it pretty.



To hold the jaws shut and the tongue in place, I used wire to tie it all together. Here it is in early development, upside down.



Shaping the head took multiple layers of wire mesh, caulking, and a two-part epoxy paste.



The dragon head needed embellishments of horns, blades, distinct nostrils, and shiny eyes. I used caulking as filler beneath, over, and around the wire, as it much cheaper than the epoxy.



Slowly the head developed into its own beast.



The horns were tricky, as they needed to be strong and secured, which I did with wire anchors.



I carved out the eye sockets and nose holes, and then added wire anchors to hold the caulking and epoxy in place.



More clay models, plaster molds, and castings would produce all of the envisioned embellishments.



I had to hold plaster inserts in place while pouring the tin for the horns. I wanted thin-sided tin horns; hence, the core inserts to control the thickness.



Ta dah!



I envisioned a dragon with blades between its horns. I made three models, cast them, and then did a final shaping with a file and handheld drum sander.



Again, there was no double handling.



The wizardry was working.



I wanted to make a statement about the source of the dragon's fire. It's not the stomach, so the fire does not blow over the tongue. The fire-producing gland is beneath the tongue, spewing forth the flames from underneath the elevated muscle.



Dragon eyes can be fluorescent. To make that happen I chose fluorescent Pietersite stones, mined in China, but shaped and polished by the local lapidary, Mike.

I made some plaster castings of the stones to insert into the clay models of eye sockets, as the water-inclusive stones would crack from the heat of the melted tin.



I glued the plaster eyes onto sticks so I could hold them in place when pouring the tin after I removed the clay.



It was a successful pouring,



as well as casting.



I inlaid Pietersite eyes in tin sockets.



"I see," said the once-blind dragon. I did the same to cast the nose.



The next task was the mounting of the head onto the wood plaque. I cut out paper models depicting how the scales behind the head would fall over the wood.



Following the paper pattern, I created double layers of wire mesh foundations.



I squeezed caulking beneath the wire to give the scales some depth, and then smeared a layer of epoxy over the wire, one layer at a time.



I covered the caulking with plastic food wrap and set the skull onto the scales to make an indentation in which it would sit securely.



Soon they would be ready for joining as one piece.



I found this slab of wood a long time ago, knowing I would use it one day. This particular piece of wood had been finished commercially using a large belt sander. The initial sanding grit was very coarse and the subsequent grits were too fine to remove the marks of the initial sanding. I couldn't sand out all of the deep marks due to my lack of attention span and enthusiasm, so I turned to altering the surface by using a small, high-speed cutter. That was so much easier than sanding. I hate sanding.



It worked and created an interesting background texture.



The attachment plan was to slip an epoxy-joined nut and narrowed washer into the skull hole, epoxying it in place, and then hold it upright with a piece of all-thread bar encased in clay.

The bar would slip through the hole in the wood, and then a nut over a few washers on the other side would tighten the two pieces securely into one.



The clay held the bar upright so it would align with the hole. Once the epoxy cured, I removed the clay.



There we have it.



I do love it when a plan comes together. It was time for a test hanging. I inserted two eye-screws and tied picture frame wire in place.



I liked the look of the success in the making. The piece needed some cleanup, a coat of primer, and then a final color.



In the end, it became a green dragon, with shiny tin embellishments and fluorescent eyes mounted on a tung-oiled piece of wood. The good news is that the buyer of this piece can color the dragon however he or she would like.



There was just the one last ceremony to perform: mount the piece in my cabin, open a beer, and give the Coyote Dragon a toast to its new inanimate existence.



I'll drink to that.



Oh, yeah, there's always the bragging. After all, one thing, if not the only thing, that comes with winning any game of art production is the right to brag.



Now go make your own. You're one step ahead of me, as I had no instruction manual.

Cheers,

Brian Wignall

A note about pricing:

My shop price is \$100 an hour, which helps pay for the cost of personally building the workshops, deck, purchasing all the tools and supplies, as well as my expertise.

This piece took 72 hours, hence the \$7200 price tag. Remember my bottom line: "No reasonable offer refused."