

Natural history museum diorama painter dies in Vt.

December 3 2013, by Lisa Rathke



This 2012 photo released by the American Museum of Natural History in New York shows a diorama at the museum depicting American bison and pronghorn antelope, created in 1942. The background was painted by Fred Scherer and James Perry Wilson. Scherer died Nov. 25, 2013, in Townshend, Vt., at age 98. (AP Photo/American Museum of Natural History, D. Finnin)

Painter Fred F. Scherer, who created vivid dioramas of animals and birds in natural scenes for the American Museum of Natural History in

New York City, has died at age 98.

His daughter Deidre Scherer, also an artist, said on Tuesday that he died Nov. 25 in Townshend, in southern Vermont. She said that millions of people have walked by the Natural History dioramas and not known who the artists were.

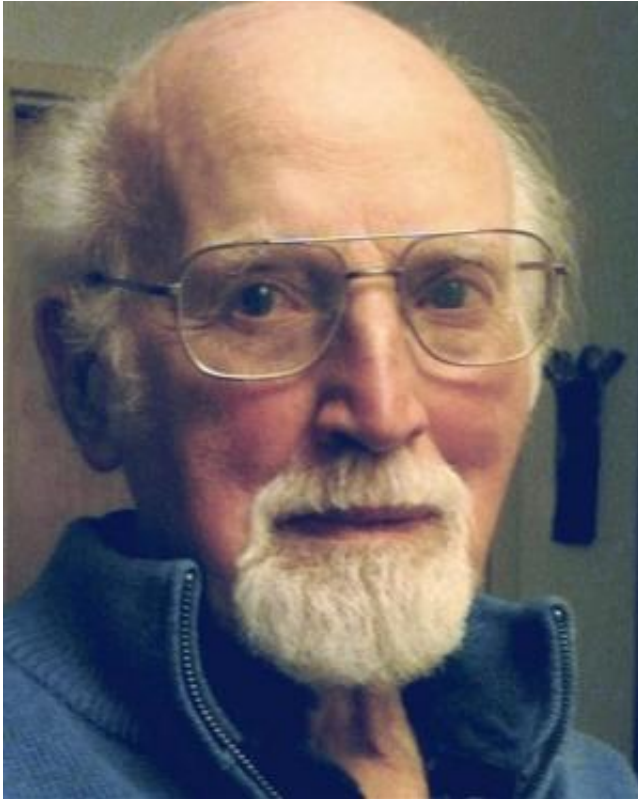
Artist Stephen Quinn, who worked at the [museum](#) after Scherer retired, said he looked up to him.

"Fred was always held in high esteem and one of the great gurus of background painting and mural painting," said Quinn, author of "Windows on Nature: The Great Dioramas of the American Museum of Natural History."

Scherer was born in New York and learned from his mentor, artist James Perry Wilson, how to paint dioramas, three-dimensional scenes that convey sense of place and time of day and create the illusion of being at a specific location.

From 1934 to 1972, he created or collaborated on many dioramas in the museum. He created at least 15 of them in the Chapman Memorial Bird Hall, the African Hall and the North American Mammal Hall, his daughter said.

Scherer, who was curious about the natural world, sometimes would travel to paint in the field, Quinn said. The pieces he did could take six to eight months to complete because he, like Wilson, was so exact, Quinn said.



This undated photo provided by Deidre Scherer shows her father, Fred F. Scherer, a painter who created dioramas for the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Scherer died Nov. 25, 2013, in Townshend, Vt., at age 98. (AP Photo/Courtesy of Deidre Scherer)

"As time goes on, natural history museums with these wonderful works really will be recognized as the great art museums that they really are," said Quinn, who recently retired from the museum. "These exhibits predated sophisticated film and photography, so this was the medium chosen by scientists to teach [natural history](#). So they're really like the first form of virtual reality."

Quinn said that the purpose of the dioramas wasn't to teach facts but to connect with the emotional response people have to nature and that Scherer "could do that with his paintings."

After Scherer retired from the museum, he and his wife, artist Cicely Aikman, lived in Friendship, Maine, for 32 years. While in Maine, he painted dioramas and worked for 20 years as an art consultant for the Maine State Museum in Augusta. He also cultivated blueberry bushes, harvested vegetables from his garden and enjoyed fishing in and around Friendship Harbor with his lobstermen friends, his family said.

Scherer continued to paint and draw into his final days, his family said. He had lived in an assisted-living facility and died of natural causes, the family said.

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