

FÉNYKÖVI

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The

Rambler

... Visits
An Artist

By JOHN McKELWAY

One of the city's most impressive sights, to The Rambler at least, is that tremendous elephant moving easily along in the marble rotunda of the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History.

While not in its natural habitat, the elephant lacks little outside of life. It almost has a smell of hay about it, fanned in gusts by motionless ears.

It is considered something of a landmark in the art of taxidermy and, one supposes, engineers might have more than a passing interest in the structure.

The big boy was brought down by a big game hunter by the name of J. J. Fenykovi, a Hungarian who became a very rich man after founding an arc-welding industry. He now lives in Spain. His firm built the American Embassy in Madrid.

The elephant is known only as the "Fenykovi elephant." It is the largest elephant ever measured, topping the last record-holder by a foot.

Mr. Fenykovi spotted the tracks of the beast back in 1954, hunting rhinoceros in Southwestern Angola, the Portuguese colony in Africa.

He came back the next year with an expedition determined to find what he was looking for. In November of 1955, in an all-day battle which ran from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and took 19 shots, he had his prize.

At death, the elephant probably weighed about 12 tons.

IT TOOK TWO WEEKS to get the two-ton skin out of the African bush. A truck-load of salt was used as a preservative.

Smithsonian officials negotiated for the skin with Mr. Fenykovi and, eventually, it arrived here in a big box. Included in the package were the leg bones and skull and the two tusks, each weighing 100 pounds.

It was turned over to William L. Brown, the Smithsonian's taxidermist. About 15 months later, the exhibit was unveiled—in March of 1959. Mr. Brown, who had been on the job for over 50 years, retired a few months later. Smithsonian officials cited the taxidermist for "exceptional services rendered in the performance of duty."

The Rambler dropped in on Mr. Brown the other day. He is now 72 and lives with his wife in a small row house at 2113 T street S.E.

He offered the visitor an ash tray which had as a base a deer's foot. On one wall a leopard's head watched us.

Mr. Brown, smallish with pale blue eyes and a fine thatch of white hair, emphasized he worked on the elephant with a colleague, Norman N. Deaton.

"When the skin came," he said, "it was as dry as a board. It had been out in the African sun and in the box all that time.

"But we located a tanner who was known for his work on elephants. It's funny, I guess. He lived in Waynesboro, Va., of all places. He was a Negro. He finally got the skin so that we could work with it."

They built a clay model of the elephant, using 10,000 pounds of clay. They had to pipe steam into the room to keep the clay from cracking and they worked in this environment for several months.

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IN TIME, A FRAME was constructed of paper mache, wooden ribs, wire screening and burlap. The hide was damaged on one side, and the taxidermists fashioned in the wrinkles.

It turned out the Fenykovi elephant is not Mr. Brown's proudest achievement.

He tossed off his modesty momentarily to talk of his hippopotamus, also at the Smithsonian, in a glass case. He mounted it over 20 years ago. The specimen came from the Washington Zoo.

He had done a small model of the animal in clay and it stands in a prominent spot in the living room.

"I often sit here and look at it," he said.

The detail is incredible, the work of an accomplished sculptor.

"I had a gift," said Mr. Brown, simply.

And after some time he said:

"You know, I think I've led the most interesting life of anyone I've ever known."

The huge African elephant in the Museum of Natural History stands 13 feet 2 inches at the shoulder, the largest land animal known in modern times. J. J. Fenykovi, a Hungarian engineer, first saw its two-foot tracks on a hunting trip to Angola in 1954. The next year he returned, killed the animal after an 11-hour hunt and removed the skin, which weighed 2,000 pounds.

