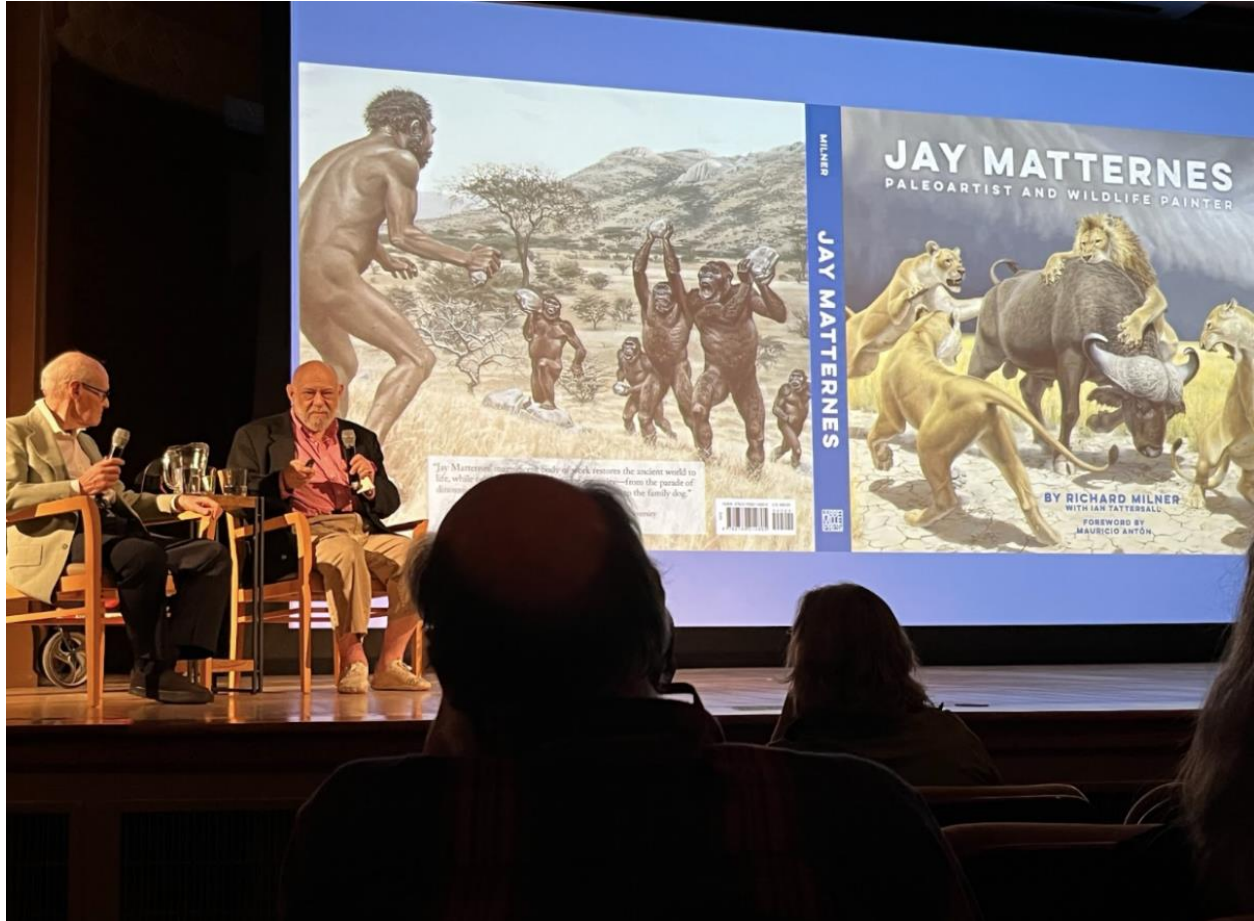


Paleoartist Speaks About Life's Work at the Smithsonian Museum

By [Eric Feichthaler](#), Special to The Hoya • October 25, 2024



Eric Feichthaler for The Hoya | Paleoartist Jay Matternes, known for his realistic drawings of prehistoric mammals, spoke at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in an event on October 17, 2024.

Jay Matternes, a paleoartist known for recreating mammals from ancient time periods, gave a talk about the significance of his art at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History on October 17.

At the event, titled "An Evening With Paleoartist Jay Matternes and Author Richard Milner," Matternes discussed how he uses his artistic skills and scientific knowledge to depict the prehistoric natural world. The event also featured Richard Milner, the author of Matternes' biography "Jay Matternes: Paleoartist and Wildlife Painter" who explained Matternes' creative process and shared stories about his art.

Matternes described his paleoart and the extensive knowledge required for crafting it, emphasizing the importance of understanding both the past and present of the natural world. "You have to use your best judgment of what it might have looked like on the basis of comparisons with modern animals. You cannot understand the past unless you have a thorough understanding of modern fauna," Matternes said.

The event began with remarks from Kirk Johnson, a paleontologist and the director of the Museum of Natural History. He explained that Matternes' murals in the museum had provided an important window into the past for visitors before their temporary removal.

"We closed the hall in 2014 and completely tore everything out of it ... I felt horrible because those six amazing Jay Matternes murals were coming off exhibit," Johnson said. Following this, Milner told some stories about Matternes' works, including a time when zoologist Jane Goodall — renowned for her studies of chimpanzees — asked Matternes to draw a realistic scene of the chimpanzees trashing her camp. Matternes did not witness the event, but he was able to use his expertise in anthropology and zoology to create a vivid interpretation of the trashing.

"Jay is a highly skilled anatomist and comparative anatomist. He has done sketches of all kinds of animals including apes. He knows every muscle in the human body and the corresponding muscle for the ape, and he draws them like nobody can," Milner said.

Milner also described Matternes' artistic process of drawing the entire skeleton, entire muscular system and a complete illustration of the animal, all with a charcoal pencil. Milner said that other scientists, such as primatologist Dian Fossey, greatly admired the way Matternes translated natural scenes into a new medium.

"She wrote in a letter to Jay, 'I would not have believed that an artist could capture something of the essence of an animal better than a photograph,'" Milner said.

Matternes said his works extend far beyond the anatomy of the animal. Every time he displayed a new picture, Matternes would speak about the time period, season, time of day, plant life and geology that he depicted in great detail.

"Jay does every leaf of every tree. Jay does clouds incredibly well since he also painted backgrounds for dioramas," Milner said. Milner described how Matternes' work is unique compared to other paleoartists. "He does water like nobody's business," Milner said. "Water, clouds, animals, rocks, nobody can do that."

Matternes attributes the rich detail in his work to his practice of visiting the locations he paints in order to experience their ambience firsthand. He recounted an expedition to a cave in France containing prehistoric art that he was commissioned to recreate.

"Jay said he would be happy to do it, but he must visit the cave himself. He climbed through a couple miles of underground caves. Then you get to this thing where you crawl on your belly for hours, and Jay did that," Milner said.

Matternes' artworks hold particular significance in the scientific community, notably his reconstruction of the ancient hominid *Ardipithecus ramidus* from only a partial skeleton. Over 15 years, he collaborated with scientists to ensure anatomical accuracy, and the project team maintained strict confidentiality until the artwork was complete.

"The Manhattan Project ... was kept secret for seven years. Seven years to conceal the existence of the atomic bomb and 15 years concealing the reconstruction of *Ardipithecus*," Milner said.

When taking questions from the audience, aspiring science illustrator Morgan Duyos asked for Matternes' advice for those pursuing the career.

"My advice is to draw, draw everything. Draw your folks, draw animals, draw everything. As an illustrator, I am very involved with the subject I depict, both emotionally and intellectually," Matternes said.