

FIG. 1. The First World Congress of Herpetology was held in Canterbury, England in 1989, and Dennis prepared this drawing of a male Eastern Box Turtle (*Terrapene carolina*) for the historic event.

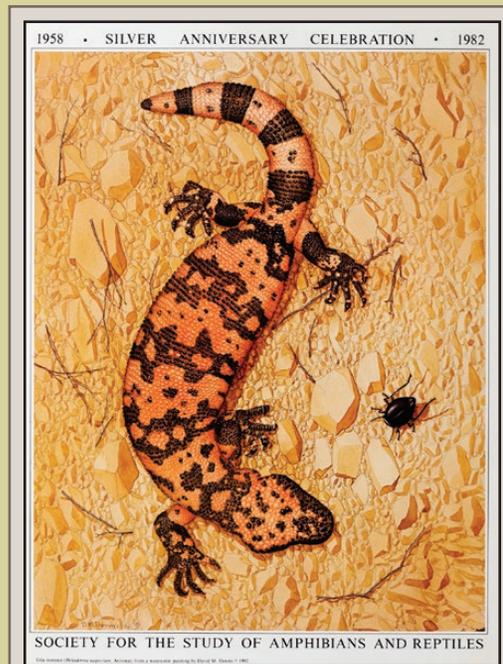


FIG. 2. This Gila Monster (*Heloderma suspectum*) poster was commissioned for the SSAR's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting in 1982, held in Raleigh, North Carolina. Each attendee received a poster as part of their registration package.

*Editor's note.*—David Dennis is among the world's best-known illustrators of amphibians and reptiles. He is also a co-founder of The Ohio Herpetological Society, the precursor of the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles (SSAR). His art has long been associated with SSAR, but he is perhaps best known for his superb watercolors in William Duellman's classic work, *The Hyliid Frogs of Middle America* (1972; revised and expanded in 2001). Below, Dennis shares his story of becoming a professional illustrator.

### My Journey as an Illustrator of Amphibians and Reptiles

For as long as I can remember I loved to draw pictures of animals. As a child of five or six I became fascinated with birds. An elderly lady living across the street from our home owned an Audubon field guide and a pair of binoculars. I think my mother knew this and arranged for me to meet her. I would spend much time at her house looking at that book and talking about birds. I probably made a pest of myself! She was my first mentor. After much begging and pleading, I convinced my mother to buy me a BB gun. I shot them all! Wrens, robins, mockingbirds. I would bring them home to study and draw them, just like Audubon! To do that was illegal, of course, but I didn't know any better and my mentor never found out.

About this time, I also discovered insects and herps. My grandparents would take me with them to visit their parents in West Virginia. I was free to roam the hillsides and streams where I collected green frogs, box turtles, and fence lizards. They even let me bring them home! I didn't know how to take care of them, so I probably let them go or they simply died. I can't remember now.

By chance I attended a reptile exhibition at our local shopping center a short bicycle ride from home. The Columbus Zoo had set this up to promote the establishment. There I met Terry Strawser and also John Mehrtens, who was curator of reptiles at the time. I think they had a boa constrictor and other large, showy reptiles. After letting me hold the boa and talking for a while, they invited me to take a tour of the reptile house. I don't think they really expected me to take them up on the offer. But a week later I hitchhiked the 20 miles to the zoo and showed up at the reptile house. Mehrtens welcomed me in and gave me a behind-the-scenes tour. That did it! I was going to be a herpetologist!

So began my zoo years. I don't know how many times I made the trip to the zoo, but it seemed like when school was out, I was there constantly. Mehrtens soon took advantage of my passion and put me to work, unpaid, cleaning snake cages. What a privilege. I was in heaven! This went on until I was 16 when I actually was hired as a zookeeper in the reptile house. Well that only lasted 2 or 3 years when Lou Pistoia became the new curator of reptiles. Like 20 or more keepers after me, I was fired for not folding newspapers correctly to line the bottoms of snake cages! Yes, I was the first keeper Lou fired! As it turned out, this was a blessing. I was assigned to the bird house instead where Terry Strawser was curator. He was much more than a curator. He was also an accomplished artist both in oils and watercolors. It was Terry who taught me the watercolor technique that I have used throughout my entire illustration career. After the bird house stint, I became the zoo's sign painter and artist, the job I kept for the remainder of eight years at the zoo.

Backing up a bit, when I was 14 and hanging out at the zoo, I would sometimes collect watersnakes below O'Shaughnessy Dam on the Scioto River near the zoo. One spring day in 1954 while collecting Queen Snakes I noticed two boys, one almost my age and the other three or four years younger, out on the rocks in the rapids, each carrying pillowcases bulging with snakes. It seemed I had some competition. I walked over and introduced myself. The older boy said, "Hi! I'm Kraig Adler." And so began a long and productive friendship that continues to this day.

In the late 1950s Kraig and I were heavily involved with the beginnings of The Ohio Herpetological Society (OHS), which later



FIG. 3. Several versions of the SSAR logo (a vocalizing *Hyla versicolor*) were created by Dennis.

evolved into SSAR. Our paper describing *Plethodon longicrus* was the society's first publication with a color plate (1962). Not proper four-color printing, but just two; that was all OHS could afford. My second cousin was a printer and he did the printing. The plate started with a black-and-white print of my ink drawing of the salamander; the second color we applied was the chestnut color for the blotches on the salamander's back. We brought a live specimen to the print shop and hand mixed the inks together to match the color on the salamander's back. Then we ran the already-printed sheets through the press again and it worked! We didn't stop there, for the palms of the salamander's feet were pink as were the mites embedded under the skin. All of these I individually hand colored in with a pink pencil on every plate that had been printed. Presto! A finished color plate.

In 1961 I was an undergraduate at The Ohio State University, majoring in zoology, and working part time at the zoo to pay for my tuition. At that time my main interest in herpetology was reptiles. That was about to change when Barry Valentine joined the faculty at OSU. Kraig and I attended Barry's lecture to a local natural history club on the distribution of salamanders in the eastern United States based on the physiography of the region. Wow! This was exciting stuff, and at my current state of education, something I could actually understand. It wasn't long before Barry took Kraig and me under his wing and let us use his lab to preserve and study specimens we had collected. Later, when Barry found out I had some skill at drawing, he put me to work illustrating insect and salamander papers that he was writing.

When Kraig was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, he went on a museum expedition to the Sierra Madre del Sur in southern Mexico. The result of that trip was the description of three new species of hylid frogs. Kraig ask me to do watercolor illustrations for his paper. I had never actually done watercolors of frogs before, but I said I'd give it a try. When the paper was published in 1965, Bill Duellman saw my paintings and hired me to illustrate the project he was working on, *The Hylid Frogs of Middle America*. This was the start of a 32-year professional career as a biological illustrator.

After Duellman's book was completed I had to find new employment elsewhere because my salary depended on a two-year NSF grant that expired six months after I finished that book. I sent out resumes to 40 universities and zoos, resulting in only one response which was not acceptable. I was getting worried about my future as



FIG. 4. Red Salamander (*Pseudotriton ruber*) and Hercules Beetle (*Dynastes tityus*) in a southern Ohio scene, one of a four-poster set issued in 1983.

an illustrator! Then, within a week, I got two unsolicited phone calls, one from the Bronx Zoo and the other from Ohio State University. I took the job at OSU, and as I later found out it was my old friend and mentor, Barry Valentine, who was responsible for me getting the position which I held for 30 years.

My job as biological illustrator involved drawings for lab manuals, fossil plant reconstructions, and multimedia slide shows to promote our introductory biology program, but mostly it was thousands of less than exciting charts and graphs for faculty publications. The multimedia shows were a concept I had devised, and one with an ulterior motive. Little did the university know that all this shiny new equipment would also be used for a new audiovisual show, "Amphibians of the Appalachians," and later used for even more SSAR shows. When I showed "Amphibians of the Appalachians" to the Dean of Biological Sciences, he was impressed enough to support it being shown at the First World Congress of Herpetology in Canterbury, England (1989; Figs. 1, 2). He was a good dean!

During those 30 years at OSU I had many side projects including posters, paintings, and drawings for various SSAR publications. These included watercolors of several new species of lizards and frogs in the *Journal of Herpetology*, giveaway posters for annual meetings (Fig. 3), and even several versions of the Society's logo (a calling frog, *Hyla versicolor*; Fig. 4). Some major projects included watercolors for the *Golden Guide to Reptiles of North America* by Hobart Smith and Butch Brodie, Tim Halliday and Kraig Adler's *Encyclopedia of Reptiles and Amphibians*, and a series of ecological field guides to several Latin American countries published by Academic Press.

None of this would have happened without my parents, who let me hitchhike to the zoo, and collect venomous snakes and keep them in the basement of our home; the elderly neighbor lady, who turned me on to birds; my grandparents, who let me bring herps home; John Mehrstens, who furthered my interest in herpetology; Terry Strawser, who taught me watercolor painting; Barry Valentine, who was ultimately responsible for my job as a biological illustrator at OSU and my interest in salamanders; and most of all Kraig Adler, who was responsible for the very start of my career as a biological illustrator, and who still keeps me busy doing stuff for SSAR.

—David M. Dennis