

# Museum Conservation in the May Weber Ethnographic Collection

Anth 396 - Museum Studies and Museum Collection Management Internship

By Leah Swan

## Introduction

The May Weber Ethnographic Study Collection at Loyola University consists of around 3000 objects donated from May Weber's personal collection. These include masks, textiles, furniture, objects for religious/ritual purposes, utilitarian objects, and art sourced from Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australia, and the Asian-Pacific. Thus, one of the main goals of the collection is to preserve both the artifacts and the information associated with them to assist in the future uses for research and teaching. My contribution towards this goal includes responsibilities such as cataloguing objects, conducting inventories, organizing the archival records, and creating storage mounts for object rehousing. Participating in this internship I've gained experience working behind the scenes in a museum's collection storage area learning skills for museum conservation, resource management and care, and the decision-making process when faced with an ethical issue or considering trade-offs.

## Working with the Archives

### Questions I Ask When Organizing an Archival Folder

- What types of media and information make up this folder?
- How is this folder organized?
- Are there any similarities between the format or content of the documents within the folder?
- What should be grouped together?
- Are there any similarities or corresponding documents in other folders?
- Are there any duplicated or records that can be discarded?

### My Work on Series 6 Within the Archives

A project I have been working on within the archives is reorganizing the folders in Series 6: Interpretive Labels and Notes. I started by organizing some of the folders from Box 26 where I found a set of labels that were spread out across three separate folders. And when I organized folders from Boxes 25 and 27 I found additional labels belonging to this set. This resulted in me adding more documents to the original folder and Box 26 becoming very full. I then decided the folders needed to be moved around to create more space. To start this process I went through the contents of the other boxes in Series 6 to see what could be grouped together. In doing so I found documents from Box 24 that detailed various exhibits curated by May Weber. I then realized some of the labels from Boxes 25-27 corresponded to these exhibits. My goal was then to try reconstructing the exhibits. I did this by trying to figure out which labels were used in each exhibit by reading descriptions of the exhibits from proposals, newspaper reviews, correspondents, or lists of objects and matching them to a set of labels. I then reorganized and relabeled the folders and boxes.

## Cataloguing

### Why Catalogue?

During my experience creating catalogues for objects, I've considered the reasons catalogue records are important. The first is to preserve the connection between an object and its information by reconciling past records and by having an illustration so the information doesn't get disassociated from the object in the case the identifying manila tag gets lost. The second is to correct misidentifications made about an object in past records. The third is to provide preliminary information that can serve as a basis for future research deeper about the object. As for the associated digital cataloguing database, the first benefit is having two records in case the physical one gets lost or damaged. A second reason is to have a record with controlled vocabulary. This assists when searching for objects with specific classifications. A third is because it's these digital catalogues the public might view to be informed about an object.

### Steps for Creating a Catalogue Record

Condition Report - May Weber Collection

Accession: 2014.001

Examiner: Leah Swan

Date: 2/3/13

ANTH Number: 2014.001.2180

Weber Number: WH2667

Old Numbers: W399

Object Name: personal artifacts > adornment & jewelry > necklace

Artist: \_\_\_\_\_

Culture/Tribe: Naga

Country: India

Geo-Cultural Region: Southern Asia

Continent: Asia

Primary Material: Shell

Secondary Materials: carneelian, glass, bone

Marks/Labels: \_\_\_\_\_

Height: 36 cm

Depth: \_\_\_\_\_

Width: \_\_\_\_\_

Diameter: \_\_\_\_\_

Conservation Priority: \_\_\_\_\_

Curatorial Notes:

- large beads identified as shells by comparing to 2014.001.2181,
- curved beads similar & have the feel & shape of a shell
- cylindrical beads are heavy, spots where they're cracked / broken show it to be thin, sound when gently knocked together is a high pitched clink all supporting them being shell rather than bone
- small rectangular beads thought to be bone by comparing to 2014.001.2181 that has a similar structure

### Description

Exterior - Surface

- large red beads on top
- small green, blue & orange beads
- 4 large cylindrical shell beads
- 2 curved shell beads
- 2 circular, flat shell beads
- 2 rectangular bone beads w/ target designs & diagonal lines

Exterior - Attachment

Interior

### Condition

Exterior - Surface

- red beads have chips
- tarnishing / dirt on shells
- marrow on bone
- orange beads dirty

Exterior - Attachment

Interior



## Storage

### Why Archival Rehousing is Important

Rehousing means making improvements or changes to an existing storage mount or creating a new one. Because space is limited within the collection only objects in a need of a mount get one. This means if they are fragile, have material with a lot of fallout that a tray can catch, or could optimize space if stored within a box or stacked. Thus, space and access are given priority over conservation in the May Weber collection.

### My Process for Creating a Storage Mount

1. I chose a vase because of how precariously it was resting on only a small circle of polyethylene foam (the closed cell foam tubing)
2. I then decided on a storage mount design. Originally I thought of a box inside which the vase would rest. I then decided a box was not necessary since my idea was to have four stands of polyethylene foam (white blocks of foam) to prop up the sides and provide stability. Thus, I only needed a tray and not a full box.
3. I measured the dimensions of the vase then added additional length to account for the space the stands would take to figure out how big the base would need to be
4. I then added length to the base to account for the sides of the tray
5. I constructed a model of the tray with paper to make sure it would fit the vase
6. I then cut out the dimensions from blue board
7. I cut out the stands
8. I carved the stands so they would fit against the sides of the vase
9. I cut out pieces of unbuffered paper and glued it to the stands where they would come into contact with the vase
10. I wanted to use the original foam circle base but it was too big so the vase touched the surface underneath when placed on it. So, I cut the foam circle base and reglued it slightly smaller.
11. I then glued the foam circle to the base of the tray
12. I marked where the stands would be and glued them down
13. I folded up and glued the sides of the tray
14. I wrote the ANTH number and storage location on the outside sides of the tray

## Conducting an Inventory

By making sure the storage location listed on the Excel document is accurate it makes it easier to find objects. Where cataloguing aids in searching for objects under a specific criteria, conducting an inventory aids in quickly finding those objects within the collections.

