

May Weber Ethnographic Study Collection: Museum Studies/Collections Management Intern

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B.S. Environmental Science, Interdisciplinary Honors

Abstract

The responsibilities of Museum Studies/Collections Management interns in the May Weber Ethnographic Research and Teaching Collection serve the development of the collection through the physical care and management of cultural objects and documents, handling techniques, cataloguing procedures, and records digitization. Interns engage with a variety of topics related to anthropology and the care and use of cultural materials including the development of collections, their purpose, and their ethical management.

Introduction

The May Weber Collection

The May Weber Ethnographic Research and Teaching Collection is comprised of approximately 3000 pieces of art from around the world collected in the mid to late twentieth century by Chicago-based psychiatrist May Weber. Collection objects range from unique, masterful works to tourist art. The collection is housed on the fourth floor of Mundelein Center and is curated and managed by the Department of Anthropology under the direction of Dr. Catherine Nichols.

Internship Purpose and Motivation

I chose to take this internship with the May Weber Collection because I am seeking post-grad work in the cultural sector. I hope to work in experiential, informal museum education and as many museums' education departments maintain their own teaching collections, I am incredibly grateful to have found this internship with the May Weber Collection under the direction of Dr. Catherine Nichols. I am confident that the collections management skills I have gained in the course and through practical internship experience have afforded me the necessary skills to provide the successful programming in my future career. I hope to provide museum education that is based in ethically sourced and managed collections that pay dutiful tribute to object history. I feel that this is best achieved by seeking restorative justice through research and engagement that acknowledges and provides support to the work of contemporary and historical collections object creators.

Internship Methods and Design

Over the course of the semester, interns meet once a week for instruction and discussion and are otherwise free to complete their 100 hours when it works in their schedule. The instructional material builds on itself each week.

- Week 1: Introduction
- Week 2: Paper cataloguing
- Week 3: Digital cataloguing
- Week 4: Inventory
- Week 5: Archives
- Week 6: Open Hours – cataloguing
- Week 7: Open Hours – archives
- Week 8: Spring Break
- Week 9: Storage Mounts
- Week 10: Open Hours – archives
- Week 11: Open Hours – archives
- Week 12: Open Hours – cataloguing and storage mounting
- Week 13: Open Hours – cataloguing and storage mounting
- Week 14: Open Hours – cataloguing and storage mounting
- Week 15: Open Hours – cataloguing and storage mounting

Results



Image 1. (left) Image of *Silver Bedouin Necklace with Red Stone*. May Weber Ethnographic Study Collection, Chicago, Illinois.
Image 2. (right) Detail image of *Silver Bedouin Necklace with Red Stone*. May Weber Ethnographic Study Collection, Chicago, Illinois.



Image 3. (left) Image of *Bedouin Necklace with Bells and inscribed with "Allah" in Arabic*. May Weber Ethnographic Study Collection, Chicago, Illinois.
Image 4. (right) Detail image of *Bedouin Necklace with Bells and inscribed with "Allah" in Arabic*. May Weber Ethnographic Study Collection, Chicago, Illinois.



Image 5. Image of *Silver Multichain Necklace*. May Weber Ethnographic Study Collection, Chicago, Illinois.

Discussion

As noted, the instructional material builds on itself each week to afford interns the practical skills to have more agency over their projects during open hours. Over the course of the semester, I did paper and digital cataloguing, inventory of one cabinet, archival organization of the 3.75 linear feet of "Series 1: Correspondence and Invoices," and storage mounting.

One of the components of this internship that I have found the most rewarding is in cataloguing when I am able to find connections and accurate histories for objects. *Silver Bedouin Necklace with Red Stone* (see image 1) was originally described by the May Weber Past Perfect Catalogue as being from India. Based on research into comparable objects, the necklace was likely created by the Yemeni Bedouin people of the Middle East. The beads hanging from the pendant are known as *khair* in Arabic. Noticing these beads and similar metal work on *Bedouin Necklace with Beads inscribed with "Allah" in Arabic* (see image 3), I decided to conduct further research on the work to confirm that it is of similar origin. The May Weber Past Perfect Catalogue described the objects' origin as being from India. The object was likely created by the Bedouin people of Saudi Arabia and Yemen who practice Islam. The central pendant is inscribed with *Allah* (see image 4) in Arabic. This led me to connect the *Silver Multichain Necklace* (see image 5) to the Bedouin people as well because of its similar beads and metal work to the objects discussed above (see images 2 and 4).

I was also very interested in archival work. The goal of archival organizing is to make the materials accessible and to build connections between the materials and objects in the collection. I organized most of the 3.75 linear feet of archives Series 1 in alphabetical order and then chronological order. The archives offer incredible insight into May Weber's relationships to art dealers and collectors and her process for collection. Connecting these archival materials to objects in the collection enrich the catalog of objects.

Inventory and storage mounting are essential to the general maintenance of the collection. Inventory aids in organization and building an accurate record of the extent of the collection. The purpose of storage mounting is to preserve the integrity of the objects while also making them accessible for study. I created storage mounts for free standing objects and textiles.

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