

Exploding Objects: A Month at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

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Over the course of four weeks between June and July 2019 I participated in the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History's Summer Institute in Museum Anthropology (SIMA) in Washington D.C. SIMA is an intensive residential course designed to train and immerse the next generation of anthropologists and museum studies students in museum anthropology and object handling with the overall aim of revitalizing museum based anthropological research (see <https://naturalhistory.si.edu/research/anthropology/programs/summer-institute-museum-anthropology-sima/sima-prospective-students>).

Funded by the National Science Foundation Cultural Anthropology and Documenting Endangered Languages programs (Grant # 1824641), SIMA is directed by Joshua Bell, Curator of Globalization in the Anthropology Department of the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH). Candace Greene, who retired from NMNH in 2017, began SIMA ten year ago to address the marginalization of museum collections within anthropological research by University based departments in the United States, specifically in terms of providing hands-on training. As Director, Bell notes "Collections in all their diversity are invaluable means by which to understand cultural diversity of the past, a way to address the colonial dynamics of knowledge production, a way to understand the dynamics of cultural change and continuity. They are also a critical means by which to engage with communities of origin to think about the intersecting histories of the Global North and South, and the too often asymmetrical relations of power that informed these histories. Engaging with collections and the different ways these materials constitute heritage is a critical means by which to further decolonizing the discipline" (Personal communication 15 August 2019)

This summer SIMA consisted of twelve graduate students^[1], three faculty fellows who wished to learn how to refine their teaching by learning from SIMA, and visiting lecturers including Candace Greene (NMNH and SIMA Director Emeritus), Alison Brown (University of Aberdeen), Maia Nuku (MET) and Marit Munson (Trent University). In addition we had lessons with Bell, Torben Rick (NMNH), Logan Kistler (NMNH), Ann McMullen and Dr. Kelly McHugh, who are at the National Museum of American Indian. I'm sure all twelve of us applied to SIMA for various reasons and personally I was drawn to the field of museum anthropology in order to unearth object histories in relation to the societal and political climate of the time they were created and the time they were collected or accessioned into museums. Being able to map object biographies and trace linkages between source communities and objects in museums is a fascinating endeavour encompassing culture and traditions, cosmologies, trade and exchange networks, craftsmanship, and ethno-political histories. I arrived with a roughly defined research project, I knew which collection I wanted

to study and why, but I anticipated that my original proposal would change after seeing and handling the objects in person. This is much like how entering the field often alters your original project goals, and it was clear that once in D.C, the NMNH, and the wider Smithsonian, became our field-site. NMNH's anthropology collections encompass 3.5 million cultural and archaeological objects from across the globe, arranged in 4 three-storey pods, each roughly the size of a football field (The Museum Support Center, where the bulk of NMNH's collections are held, has 5 pods and holds materials from other Smithsonian museums). There is also 8 million feet of film, 9,000 shelf feet of manuscripts, 635,000 photographs and 11,400 audio recordings that comprise the National Anthropological Archives and its subsidiary the Human Studies Film Archive (<https://www.si.edu/siasc/naa>).



"Queen Isabella's Crown". Petra Pico. Cat. No. E313084-0/ Acc. No. 064687. Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

Diam.10.5" x 5" h.

Coiled weave, 3-rod juncus reed foundation.

This basket was woven by Chumash weaver Petra Pico, (1834-1902) in Ventura County, CA., the last basket she wove before losing her eyesight. According to collection history notes Petra named this basket and imagery, "Queen Isabella's Crown", clearly indicating Spanish influence, as well as the pedestal which became present in Chumash basketry during the California Mission period. Accessioned on 24/02/1920 by Miss Ella. F. Hubby.

Upon arrival, my aim was to study the imagery and form of the National Museum of Natural History's Chumash basket collection; approximately 40 basketry items woven by Chumash weavers in the California Mission and post-Mission period, accessioned to the museum in 1920 and 1925 by avid Indian basket collector Miss Ella F. Hubby (1849-1925). By the end of SIMA my project had shifted to examine not only the form and imagery on the baskets which was influenced by the Mission system and Spanish colonists, but also to examine collecting histories, looking at baskets as symbols of identity for weavers on the one hand, and baskets as symbols of status for the collectors on the other. Ultimately highlighting the juxtaposition between the status and wealth acquired by the collectors and dealers, yet the lack of acknowledgement and prestige for the incredibly skilled weavers. To do this I spent many hours working with the baskets, as well as archival and accession materials such as letters, wills, accession files, newspaper clippings, photographs and film. In addition, mindful to help further decolonise the discipline and ensure collaboration between museums and the source communities from which their collections derive, I brought my research into contemporary relevance by speaking with members of the source community today - Chumash basket weavers and elders. By doing this I was able to gain their perspectives on basketry traditions contemporaneously then and now, as well as discussing what museums can learn from this in terms of collecting histories, and modern display. From this, I was more able to understand the objects in their own culturally specific frame of reference.

The structure of the four-weeks was morning lectures and afternoon data collection where we worked with objects of our choice and ended with a symposium where we each presented our research projects to our cohort and lecturers, and other faculty and interested parties from across the Smithsonian. This format bridged the gap between application and theory by encompassing a blend of research method and theory training offered by faculty with a range of experience and perspectives having worked with diverse cultural groups and in different professional settings, and our own individual 'practical' research projects. Each week tackled a different theme or concept to apply when working in museum anthropology with the overarching goal of highlighting the significance of collections-based research. A great learning tool was a session informally called 'Stump the Chump' where we watched various Smithsonian faculty approach the identification of objects they have not seen before. Being able to watch the mental and physical processes they did

was a great foundation on which to build my own methods of approaching my basketry items. Objects embody much more than just being a tangible visible 'thing' and in museum and research settings it is important to let the objects speak for themselves, and for the researcher to approach materiality from the perspective of the source community. For example, certain imageries on the baskets I studied and shapes such as the inclusion of pedestals or lids are obviously the result of European and Chinese influence, yet some markings and lines on the baskets convey kinship genealogies or clan systems and so to understand this a more nuanced cultural understanding was necessary.

Coined by Joshua Bell, when looking at objects we were trained to 'explode' them in our minds. This entailed mentally picking apart the object into its collective parts, and thinking beyond automatic categorisations or identifiers as 'jar', 'rattle' or 'mask', and instead, identifying the materials used, where they would have come from, how it was made, and what was the use. Many of the lectures encompassed very analytical close looking at objects stressing the importance of using all sensory methods, not just sight. For example, textures, smells, and sounds, although not many of us chose to taste. The visual aesthetic of my baskets were key to understanding imageries and materials used, as was touch - being able to feel the material and joins of reeds which helps to identify their locality, but smell played a role too in terms of ascertaining materials used, such as juncus reed and sumac, and usage of the basket, for example did it smell of food or smoke? These sensory elements are also very evocative for source communities where they can invoke many more layers of meaning and nostalgia than for a museum researcher culturally or emotionally disconnected from where the object is originally from. Close looking also included much detective work, which became quite addictive. For example, what made that colour, is it a chemical in the dye that changes when interacting with a certain material, or changes over time or use? Was that section added later, why? Why are cowrie shells found on objects deriving from landlocked regions? In sum, we were taught to look beyond just the materiality of the 'thing', and recognise that objects are layered with meaning through each of their 'life' stages before entering a museum, as well as to think about the materials as part of the materiality; the sensory as well as the intangible, and to learn how to appreciate the otherwise muted or obscured histories and ontologies that are objects. Exploring the social biography of an object is fascinating and can take you down many avenues and rabbit holes as well as into different academic disciplines, exploring their inception, creation, use or purpose, to the chain of ownership after leaving the source community and the uses they may have had then. Ultimately how they came into museum collections and their uses there, as either in displays telling different narratives and imposing a different meaning depending on the exhibition, or as research objects in storage.

Objects examined during SIMA also included photographs, films and close looking at such documents along with the support of archival materials such as expedition logs, diaries or letters further contributes to the researchers contextual understanding, using an analytical and critical eye, exploring the reliability of data. For example, in images of explorers with Indigenous groups what items are seen in photographs being collected and what can placement of people and body language suggest? What is the positionality of the collector and the historical climate or reasons for

such endeavours at the time of collection? There is also the issue of a potential lack in cultural knowledge and linguistic hurdles such as mistranslations or the lack of correct language to be able to define or describe an object properly. This can lead to misidentification or 'unknownness' of an object in relation to locality or cultural group which poses an issue not only for museum employees and external researchers, but also for source communities who may be using museum collections to revitalise traditional knowledge systems. Though object centred, the importance of decolonising museum spaces, collaborative research projects, and an awareness of contemporary challenges and changes to museums in relation to collecting and exhibiting permeated throughout SIMA, stressing the significance of objects to source communities and the importance of accessibility to the objects.

SIMA offered an amazing and rare opportunity to work extensively and intensively with objects and collections of our choice, as well as learn from direct handling and observation of objects selected by the faculty during the lectures. It was a fascinating, vigorous, rewarding four weeks and I highly recommend it to those interested in object handling, museum-based anthropology and ethnohistory.

[1]The funding of SIMA is such that applicants are limited to US Citizens studying abroad, those studying at US institutions or members of Canadian First Nations.