

Alaska State Museums BULLETIN

An Information Source for Alaska's Museum Community

Bruce Kato Retires

Chief Curator Bruce Kato retired at the end of June after 30 years of service to the State Museums and to the museum community statewide. Following is an interview with Bruce:

ASM: What accomplishment are you most proud of after 30 years of working at the Alaska State Museums?

BK: Creating a flatter more nimble organizational structure with the agility to easily and quickly respond to situations as well as take advantage of changing opportunities was extremely important for success. In addition, establishing state government procurement exemptions for curation and conservation professional services further allowed for greater efficiency and flexibility to easily and quickly respond to a myriad of situations.

Focusing on small cultural heritage facilities in the state, and being able to provide them with both financial and technical support has resulted in seeing a significant impact on organizations with limited financial and human resources that are making great strides in improving their operations.

In particular, I am especially proud of the success we have had in elevating the awareness of best practices for preventive conservation in



Head Curator Bruce Kato at his post at the Alaska State Museum.

the state, the effects of which can be seen at many institutions across Alaska. The establishment of graduate student museum internships has also had a significant impact to museums in Alaska by providing actual hands on support to Alaska's cultural heritage facilities.

A fond memory but delicate issue was facilitating the recovery and installation of Robert Murray's controversial 16 foot-high abstract sculpture Nimbus onto the museum grounds, during

a time when there was still little support for modernist publicly funded art installations.

Undoubtedly, the most rigorous undertaking was facilitating the reaccreditation review by the American Association of Museums in 1987, and again in 2001. However, during my tenure, I am most proud of bringing together a great team of skilled museum professionals to carry out the important work of the State Museums.

ASM: What will be your happiest memories of working at ASM?

BK: Working with the great staff will be a lasting memory. Another is seeing many of our youth grow up that have been captivated by their early-age museum outings and themselves become parents that see the museum as an important part of their family educational experience. Two other great moments were seeing our Legislature having the foresight to appropriate funds to purchase the Sheldon Jackson Museum in 1985 and, in 1990, being able to bring a collection of early ethnographic items for display from the National Museum of Finland collected by Adolf Etholen of the Russian-American Company.

ASM: Would you do it all over again?

BK: Yes, but a little differently. I would have enjoyed being able to travel to see many more of our Alaska communities. However, I am more comfortable with my feet on the ground and would have had to overcome my fear of flying.

ASM: How has the Alaska State museums specifically and the museum profession in general changed during your career?

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Grant-in-Aid Funding



Twenty-seven museums and historical societies across Alaska are receiving funding for important projects this year. The projects range from treating water damaged artifacts from last spring's floods in Eagle to upgrading the storage for photo archives at the Juneau-Douglas City Museum.

Five of the grants will bring museum studies interns from various universities to work in small museums in Alaska. The grants range from \$780 to \$8,000 for a total \$105,600. Most requests were to fund collection storage improvements, conservation projects, exhibit upgrades, and new equipment.

Overall, 33 applicants had requested more than \$160,000 for museum projects around the state. The museums and organizations receiving funds are as follows:

Ahtna Heritage Foundation	Glennallen	conservation supplies	\$1,981
Alaska Museum of Natural History	Anchorage	exhibit upgrades	\$7,315
Alpine Historical Park	Sutton	conservation assessment of exhibits	\$2,000
Alutiiq Museum	Kodiak	exhibit upgrade project	\$7,541
Alaska Moving Image Preservation Assoc.	Anchorage	audio preservation project	\$7,111
Anchorage Museum	Anchorage	internship funding	\$5,120
Bald Eagle Foundation	Haines	internship funding	\$2,000
Baranov Museum	Kodiak	kamleika conservation project	\$7,440
Duncan Cottage Museum	Metlakatla	internship funding	\$5,000
Eagle Historical Society	Eagle	treatment of flood-damaged objects	\$2,000
Hammer Museum	Haines	exhibit upgrades	\$1899
Hope and Sunrise Historical Museum	Hope	interpretive sound recordings	\$2,000
Iñupiat Heritage Center	Barrow	internship funding	\$5000
Juneau-Douglas City Museum	Juneau	storage system for photos/ archives	\$5,654
Kenai Visitors and Cultural Center	Kenai	datalogger equipment	\$1,870
Kodiak Maritime Museum	Kodiak	cover for fishing vessel display	\$1,090
Museums Alaska	Statewide	support for annual meeting	\$5,280
Museum of Transportation & Industry	Palmer	computer equipment	\$2,000
Palmer Museum	Palmer	storage re-organization project	\$7,865
Pioneer Memorial Park	Fairbanks	enlarge photos for display	\$2,000
Port Alexander Historical Society	Port Alex.	internship project	\$3,500
Resurrection Bay Historical Society	Seward	camcorder for oral history	\$780
Sheldon Museum	Haines	exhibit lighting upgrade	\$5,452
Talkeetna Museum	Talkeetna	monitor heaters	\$2,000
Tanana Valley Railroad Museum	Fairbanks	develop finding aid	\$2,000
Valdez Museum	Valdez	exhibit upgrade project	\$8,000
Whittier Museum	Whittier	security and monitoring equipment	\$1,702

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BK: The greatest change has been in the use of technology to provide access to museum resources through the development of virtual exhibits and electronic access to museum collection records through the online databases. It seems like only yesterday, we were using typewriters and correction tape and now the use of Internet and mobile technology including social networking platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, and Bebo, have become common place in the museum community. However, tweets, blogs and text messaging will not be a substitute for the impact the “real object” can have in providing a moving experience for individuals. The rush to digitization and technology will not displace the contemplative environment and almost spiritual effects that our museums can provide for our visitors and where can be found a world of discovery, imagination and excitement.

ASM: What words of wisdom would you give to someone new coming into the field?

BK: Step back and gain some distance for a wider perspective and greater insight on your work and relationship to a

larger political, social, economic and cultural context. Develop keener instincts and perception to become more intuitive.

ASM: What are your plans for the future? How will you be spending your new free time?

BK: For many years my wife and I have been interested in becoming foster parents. After raising two daughters we began foster parenting. This was an eye opening experience as we became more aware of the unseen hardships for many children and families within our community.

September 16th was one of the happiest days of the year for Patty and I, and not because of retirement, but because of our adoption of a 3-year old child that has been in our care since she was 6 months old, Kylie Star Hoshiko Kato. So you ask what I will be doing, well it looks like I have become a stay-at-home dad! What about fishing and golf? I will have to fit that in between Kylie and grandson Asher's soccer games, ballet and piano lessons.

Museum Success Stories

Sitka Historical Museum

Ashley Kircher, who interned in Alaska as part of the ASM Summer Internship Program in 2008, was recently hired as the new Curator of Exhibits and Collections at the Sitka Historical Museum. Prior to her arrival, gifts had been steadily donated to the museum, but the lack of a curator or a collections manager resulted in a pile-up of items and archival materials in the collections room.

loggers and a dehumidifier were put in place to control temperature and humidity fluctuations. Once a formal inventory of the existing collection has been completed, Ashley will be able to go through and assess which of these donations are appropriate for accession. All non-collections items—cleaning and painting materials, old exhibit panels, and gift shop items—were also moved out of the room.



SHM collection room before and after reorganization. Photo by Amy Thompson

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Ashley worked with Amy Thompson, an ASM summer 2009 intern, to begin clearing out a collections room so tightly packed with treasures that you could barely open the door! They began by bagging, labeling, and packaging - in large plastic tubs - all items not already accessioned into the collection, including any items lacking paperwork, and moving them to their secure off-site storage house. They also moved the entire photography collection and photo index to this location, creating an inviting workspace for photo researchers.

The storage space basement was cleaned and prepared to house objects as needed. Data

Amy also updated exhibits: scanning, re-printing, and mounting old photos that had yellowed and curled; updating wall text; and painting outdated wood paneling with clean white paint. These subtle changes have already improved the feel of the exhibit space. Additional exhibit redesign and updates are planned for the quiet winter ahead.

Amy's internship was a success and will help her develop as a museum professional. Her enthusiasm, hard work, and creativity have jump-started the process of collections management at the Sitka Historical Museum.



Ask ASM: Why should I write condition reports for incoming loans or for new accessions?

Condition reporting varies depending on the purpose. In the collections database, it is usually only a few sentences. For loans, it is more in-depth. And the most detailed reports are done before a conservation treatment takes place.

Keeping good condition information has three purposes:

1. Knowing the condition of an object when it comes into the collection provides a baseline for determining if an item is actively degrading, naturally aging, or experiencing new damage. Some types of foam or plastic might degrade within your career. Seeing new corrosion on a metal item might suggest a problem with your environmental conditions.

2. It can help determine the objects liability, especially for loans. For an incoming loan, keeping a record of condition when it arrives can help prove you did not damage something while it was in your facility. Also, for an outgoing loan, if you have paperwork indicating its condition when it leaves your

facility, you will have a stronger case in asking for compensation if something is damaged while out on loan.

3. It helps distinguish between similar items, both for inventory purposes and also if something is misplaced or stolen. A rule of thumb is to think of a condition report as a message to another museum professional in the future. Reporting missing or broken parts is very useful but it is also helpful to write what is NOT wrong. It is important to say “no obvious damage,” or “no loose or missing beadwork,” or “colors vivid.” For things that are fragile or might develop problems, it is good to indicate information like “seven feathers present,” or mention small pieces that might be lost, such as “miner’s scale comes with five small weights and two coins.” It is best to avoid the terms “good,” “poor,” “fair,” etc. because they don’t give much information. Sometimes writing “no change” and including the date is all that is needed if you are re-examining something when it comes back from a loan.

Hands-on Loan Program Now Available Online!

Go to museums.state.ak.us/sheldon_jackson/sjhandson.html, select “create an account,” and begin searching for educational materials. Login using your password during future visits. For information call 907.747.8981

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