Alaska State Museums Bulletin 80

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Contents:

Renewing Alaskan Taxidermy

By Fran Ritchie, Natural History Conservator

Fran Ritchie is a graduate of the Buffalo State College Graduate Program in Art Conservation. She is currently the Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Objects Conservation at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. A love of taxidermy and natural science conservation was cultivated during previous experiences working for the American Museum of Natural History, Draper Museum of Natural History, and the Biltmore Estate.

For historic taxidermy specimens in three museums in Alaska, this was a good summer. As a Natural History Conservator, I was able to travel to the state on a cooperative grant-funded project sponsored by the Museums Alaska Collections Management Fund to conserve specimens

at participating museums—the Alaska State Museum in Juneau, the Cordova Historical Museum in Cordova, and the Alaska Museum of Science and Nature in Anchorage. Each museum provided a different challenge and experience, allowing for diverse methods of treatment and problem-solving.

Alaska State Museum:

The Alaska State Museum is now closed to the public while a completely new facility is being built. Fortunately I visited the museum while it was still open and enjoyed the multi-level "eagle tree" exhibit--a replica of a single tree holding seven bald eagles of each life phase, a different eagle coming into view as you walk up or down a ramp. The new museum building will have a brighter and more visible eagle tree, meaning the bald eagles needed conservation in preparation for their new perch. Beginning the project the week of July 4th, a grouping of bald eagles seemed a fitting way to celebrate America's independence.

The group of bald eagles awaiting conservation treatment.

-Each eagle was structurally sound, but layers of dirt and dust had accumulated from years of open display. The eagles required careful vacuuming, cleaning of glass eyeballs, and preening of feather tips.

Wing tips before treatment (left) and after repair (right)

-Since the birds will be reinstalled on a tree that is closer to the visitor, we needed to consider carefully their aesthetics to ensure they look as close to living specimens as possible. We consulted a local bald eagle expert to help with this phase. Phil Schempf is a biologist/ornithologist who has been studying the bald eagles in Juneau for many years. Besides

regaling us with interesting eagle facts and stories, Phil also pointed out that the paint job on the beaks and feet of most of the birds was incorrect biologically.

Left to Right: Alaska State Museum volunteer Lisa Imamura, eagle consultant Phil Schempf, Alaska State Museum Conservator Ellen Carrlee, Natural History Conservator Fran Ritchie

-Painting feet, beaks, and other areas that lose color after the animal has died is a very common practice in taxidermy. However, these birds looked more like they had gotten into a bag of Cheetos than like their living counterparts. The taxidermist paint was removed and a new, more accurate coating of paint was applied.

Flaking paint on the beak of one bird. The paint is also too orange towards the eyes, and too green at the tip.

Discolored and flaking paint before treatment (left) and after treatment (right).

-Another dynamic upcoming display in the new museum will be a "Wonder Wall" full of Alaskan natural science specimens. I especially appreciate the new display because several previously unseen specimens will soon be on display for visitors. To prepare them for a public debut, many needed to be removed from old mounts and checked for accuracy with the help of the exhibits department.

Aaron Elmore during the removal of a taxidermy polar bear specimen from its original base to pre-pare it for display on the Wonder Wall. The long hairs around the feet were embedded in a plaster matrix that had to be chiseled and crushed to release the hairs.

-Over the course of just three weeks in Juneau, we were able to complete treatment of 3 of the 7 bald eagles (with all others in progress), remove a polar bear, and set up protocols for the treatment of several other specimens. Thank you to all staff at the Alaska State Museum, especially Conservator Ellen Carrlee, Exhibits Specialist Jackie Manning, Exhibits Specialist Aaron Elmore, museum volunteer Lisa Imamura, and visiting museum professional Bethany Buckingham.

Cordova Historical Museum:

In 1963 an unexpected visitor to the frigid waters of Prince William Sound became entangled in a local fisherman's net-- a 600 pound leatherback sea turtle. The turtle was so unusual that it was preserved by a local taxidermist and given to the Cordova Historical Museum where it has been continually on display, garnering the love of local school children and town folk and who officially named him "Prince Willy." The museum is gearing up to move into its new location in the soon-to-be completed Cordova Center, and the aging Prince Willy required four weeks' worth of attention to prepare it for the move.

Photograph of Prince Willy after it was caught and brought aboard the Pam L. The fisherman's son, Dean Kramer, sits atop the turtle. Kramer gave this photograph to the museum after hearing about the conservation project.

-The turtle has a flipper span of nearly eight feet, and is over five feet long. Leatherbacks are the largest species of turtle and the only ones without a bony shell. Instead their shell, or carapace, is an oil-saturated matrix of skin, muscle, and small bones. Given the high amount of oil present in the animal, it is no surprise that they notoriously leak oil in perpetuity. (I asked other natural history museums who confirmed that their leatherbacks were oozing oil).

Left: The turtle on display in the museum before the conservation treatment. Note the large yellow-brown area of leaking oil around the bottom back flipper. Right : Museum Curator Denis Keogh (back to camera) helps direct community volunteers during the process to remove the turtle from the wall.

-The oil was removed by carefully scraping it with a paint scraper, and then by using cotton pads dampened with ethanol.


Left: Detail of the underside of the turtle before treatment. Note the dark, shiny oil dripping from the center seam in the skin. Right: Conservator Fran Ritchie scraping oil from the underside of the turtle.

Detail of the underside of the turtle after treatment.

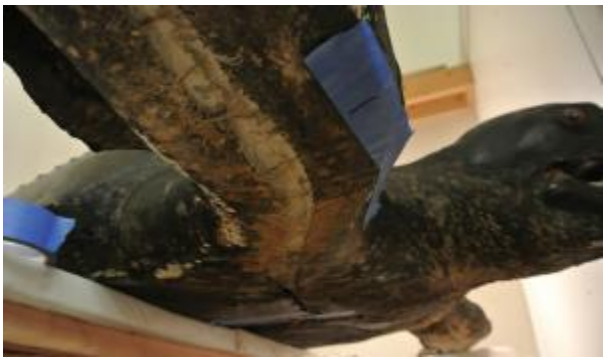
-Prince Willy had other condition concerns in addition to the build-up of oil. A pie slice shape of flesh was missing from the turtle's front left flipper (perhaps where it was caught in the net...or where flesh was taken for turtle soup). The taxidermist filled the gap with over a dozen nails, and then covered it with plaster and paint. The plaster was completely loose and falling off, which also revealed two large seams above the gap that were splitting into the skin. Because of the loss of flesh, the flipper was slightly loose and had been torqueing while on a slanted, vertical display, which may have caused the loosening plaster and tearing skin.

Left: Top view of the front left flipper where the painted plaster is cracking and falling off (before treatment). Right: The same flipper after the plaster was removed. The red arrows point out the tearing seams in the skin, while the circle shows the nail-ridden gap in the flipper.

-The plaster was removed, nails trimmed, and a piece of Japanese tissue paper used to cover the nails. Lightweight spackle was then applied over the tissue to build-up the surface and fill the gap. The white spackle was covered with more tissue to give the appearance of wrinkled skin, and then painted black. The splitting seams and tearing skin were repaired in the same manner.

Left: The Japanese tissue paper covering the nails before adding a lightweight spackle fill. Right: The flipper after spackle fill and final painting.

-Painted wooden boards were added to the front flippers to provide support and prevent further torqueing, especially when the turtle moves to its new location at the Cordova Center. By drilling into the plaster that was exposed in the seam openings on the underside of the turtle, no new holes were added to the aging turtle skin.



Underside of the front flippers before support boards were added. Note the gap in the seam of the skin exposing the internal plaster.

After treatment

-The taxidermist applied a layer of black paint over the body, as well as white dots. Living leatherbacks do have white dots, but the painted dots looked unnatural and very much like the work of a human, so the paint was removed from a majority of the specimen. After discussions with museum staff and community members, it was decided that paint would not be re-applied. -The turtle does not look exactly like a living specimen without the white dots, but given its age and history, all of those consulted believed that the original skin looks best.

Left: Side of the turtle before treatment. Note the black paint with white dots. The tan area in the middle is where paint has flaked off from the oil leaking between the original skin and paint layer. Right: The same area after treatment (after paint and oil removal).

Prince Willy after conservation treatment, ready to move into the new museum facility.

-A split in the skin on the front right flipper was repaired, as well as a chunk missing from the top of the head and several tears and old nail holes on the edges of the back flippers. Thanks to the museum staff, especially Curator Denis Keogh for his immense hands-on help, and to the Prince William Sound Science Center for solvents.

Alaska Museum of Science and Nature

The Alaska Museum of Science and Nature is the newest of all the museums visited during this project, having only been established in 1994, and opening its current building in 2005. Despite this short history, the Museum continues to make great strides in developing exhibitions and collections protocols, and renovating the building facility. To help continue this work, I performed a condition assessment of the collection storage and exhibit spaces, focusing on the collection as a whole with all materials in mind-- from fossils, bones and taxidermy, to minerals and models. The condition assessment ranked condition concerns that the museum should prioritize for short- and long-term planning and stressed the practices that the museum is doing well and should continue. The museum can use this ranking when applying for funding as evidence of need.

Left: A rockfish on display before conservation treatment. Note the dust accumulation that was discovered during the condition assessment. Right: The fish after treatment.

-Conservation treatment was carried out on seven specimens from the ornithology collection, most requiring tail and wing reattachment or stabilization, common ailments for birds because of their fragile, thin skin.

Left: A boreal owl before treatment. Note detached tail. Right: The bird specimen after treatment. The tail was reached and broken claws on both feet stabilized.

-Several taxidermy specimens and casts on display also received minimal conservation treatment to repair splits/tears, fill losses, and provide general surface cleaning maintenance.

Top: The ear of a mountain goat split at the base, revealing the internal support and a hole. Bottom: The same ear after
treatment.

-To continue preservation protocols after the project ended, I was also able to teach permanent staff how to care for specimens. Together we cleaned an Alaskan rookery display after a tutorial on proper handling, vacuuming, and surface cleaning.

After demonstrating how to clean birds, I instructed staff on the maintenance of larger animals, like this lion on display. A week after the project ended, the Museum Manager, Judy Bachicha, sent photographs of other specimens they cleaned
on their own.

-The two weeks went by quickly, but thanks to the friendly and willing staff, we were able to accomplish a lot throughout the museum. Thank you especially to Collections Manager Samantha Winer and Museum Manager Judy Bachicha for the rookery cleaning.

Acknowledgments:

Natural history specimens are often ignored in institutions because of the uncertainty of how to care for them. It was with great pleasure and enthusiasm that I could work towards preserving these specimens, each of which has its own story and represents an invaluable place in our environment. What a treat that such work could be completed in a sublime landscape full of opportunities for eating wild salmon, hiking, sailing, and berry picking. This project could not have been done without the support of museum staff and community members, and a special thanks is due to **Scott Carrlee**, Curator of Museum Services for the Alaska State Museum; **Cathy Sherman**, Director of the Cordova Historical Museum; and **Katch Bacheller**, former Director of the Alaska Museum of Science and Nature; I extend my deep gratitude to each you for making this work possible.

Ask ASM

Question: I was asked by my supervisor, to find out the best way to remove super glue from a collection. All the research I have done points me towards using small amounts of acetone applied with a q-tip to remove the super glue. I know the super glue is on a collection that was donated and had been glued down to a fabric (there is also purple fibers on some-from whatever the artifact had been glued to), I believe the artifacts include wood, stone, and maybe some ivory and/or other bone. Any thoughts on this?

ASM: As you may already know, super glue is a cyanoacrylate adhesive and once dry can be hard to remove. Here are two things to consider. First is that the bulk of the damage is done and there isn't a big urgency to get it off from a deterioration standpoint, it is mainly an appearance thing...getting in the way of visual interpretation and study. Removing it incorrectly is a bigger risk than leaving it for a while. So you really need to answer the question "Why do you need to remove it?" If these objects are going on display or researchers can't see what they need to, then there might a good reason to remove it.

Next would be to determine the behavior of the adhesive, and if it really is super glue. I would suggest starting with a not-so special stone item...one that is robust and the adhesive is in an inconspicuous spot...something without a lot of interpretive value...and see what the adhesive is like. Sometimes adhesive can be picked from the surface with a scalpel or X-acto blade without leaving traces of itself behind. A tiny cotton swab with a bit of acetone could also be tested there

to see what it does. One of the risks to removing adhesives is that many of them don't fully solubilize (dissolve) in a solvent, they simply swell and get softer. That may make it possible to remove, but if it has penetrated into the pores of the artifacts, it swells in those pores and causes damage. Even worse it could strip off the surface when the gob of adhesive is pulled off. Staining from the adhesive or from the solvent you use is also a very real possibility. A conservator would consider this a conservation treatment and would be photographing a "before" shot of all those areas of adhesive on each item, and an "after" shot of the results. All the while, a conservator would be keeping a record of what solvents were used and what happened.

Shaking the Money Tree

Museums Alaska

Collections Management Fund

Deadline: Tuesday, March 31, 2015

In 2015, $100,000 in grants is available to museums and cultural centers in Alaska for collections management supplies and activities. The goal is to build capacity for managing collections through professional expertise, training, and conservation materials and supplies.

Applicants must be 501(c)(3) nonprofit, government, tribal entities or equivalent organizations that hold collections in the public trust, such as a museum or cultural center. Small, rural-based organizations are encouraged to apply. Preference will be given to projects that are collaborative or cooperative in nature. Emergency conservation projects will be given priority. Membership in Museums Alaska is encouraged but not required.

NEH

Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions

Deadline: May 5, 2015

Preservation Assistance Grants help small and mid-sized institutions—such as libraries, museums, historical societies, archival repositories, cultural organizations, town and county records offices, and colleges and universities—improve their ability to preserve and care for their significant humanities collections. These may include special collections of books and journals, archives and manuscripts, prints and photographs, moving images, sound recordings, architectural and cartographic records, decorative and fine art objects, textiles, archaeological and ethnographic artifacts, furniture, historical objects, and digital materials.

Website: http://www.neh.gov/grants/preservation/preservation-assistance-grants-smaller-institutions

State of Alaska

Grant in Aid

Deadline: June 1, 2015

The Alaska State Museum awards grants to Alaska museums and museum-related organizations, such as historical societies or support groups, for projects that improve the quality of museum services and operations within the state. The grants are awarded on a competitive basis once a year. For more information visit the website http://museums.alaska.gov/grants.html

Spotlight on Grant in Aid

Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center

Intern Kelly Hutson rehousing some African objects

In October 2013, Collections Intern, Kelly Hutson, began her work with Collections Registrar Julie Farnham and Collections Manager Darian LaTocha. As outlined in their grant proposal, the initial project focused on a small natural history and mineral collection group of approximately 450 objects.

Objects from the mineral collection

These objects consisted of archaeological and historical bone and wood fragments, minerals, fossils, etc. Originally it was predicted this collection would be completed within two or three weeks and that time spent on this project would be a great introduction for Kelly to handle and process museum objects before moving into the more delicate African collection. Instead this collection turned into a steep learning curve with a wide range of registration and conservation issues. The natural history and mineral collection which was anticipated as a very trivial detail in the overall time line of the grant became a project lasting more than two months.

The work flow consisted of:

- Pulling objects from storage by shelf location
- Cleaning objects when necessary
- Digital imaging
- Mount making for long term storage
- Location tracking
- Recording measurements
- Recording material types
- Processing and uploading images to TMS

Obstacles encountered with the natural history and mineral collection were a result of limited documentation, inaccessibility, and no photographic documentation. Researching the accession records in attempt to reconcile undocumented and unnumbered objects was a frequent practice. Clearly from the state of the accession files, database records and the objects themselves, the collection was highly neglected for quite some time. Judging from the exhibit history and history of researchers at the Anchorage Museum, it is unlikely that the objects have been reexamined once they were accessioned into the museum's collection.

Objects from African and Oceania Collections on compactor shelving

A similar work flow was applied to the next stage of the internship, processing and rehousing the African/Oceanic Collection. As a part of the supply budget for the Grant-In-Aid, four sizes of banker boxes for storing masks, jewelry and figurines were purchased which expedited the rehousing and stacking of the collection groups. These collections occupied storage space of approximately 520 cubic feet of the compact storage unit prior to the re-housing. Now the same collections occupy less than 290 cubic feet of storage space. This has been a very beneficial project because storage space at the Anchorage Museum is a scarce commodity.

A rarity in museums: empty Shelves and newly organized collection taking up less room!

Alaska Museums in the News

Aurora Science Inspires Discovery at Museum of the North.

http://www.newsminer.com/features/youth/aurora-science-inspires-discovery-at-museum-of-the-north/article_a14cc938-98a0-11e4-820f-3f012fade533.html

Alaska writer historian Roppel dies at 76

http://www.capitalcityweekly.com/stories/011415/new_1235189077.shtml

Fairbanks Museum Director Dreamed of Children's Facility

http://www.newsminer.com/news/local_news/fairbanks-museum-director-dreamed-of-children-s-facility/article_a5ef3f66-9a30-11e4-b065-4ffb6647516c.html

Professional Development/Training Opportunities

ANTALM

2015 International Conference of Indigenous Archives, Libraries, and Museums - Washington, DC

Dates: Key Dates and Deadlines.

- Thursday, September 10 - Pre-conference tours to area attractions and/or full-day workshops
- Friday-Saturday, September 11-12 - Conference Sessions
- Sunday-Monday, September 13-15 - Sustaining Heritage Network Post Conference

Action Items:

- Propose a session, workshop, keynote, or other presentation here. Submissions are due by Friday, January 30, 2015.
- Book rooms at the Downtown Washington, DC Renaissance Hotel here. Room rates are $172 plus applicable taxes. Reserve rooms early -- the host hotel always fills up quickly.
- Sign up for the Priority Registration Notification List here. Registration for ATALM conferences fills up quickly. Priority Subscribers receive notice two weeks before registration officially opens. Please note that if you attended ATALM 2014, you are on the Priority List already.
- Learn more about Washington, DC here.
- Volunteer for the Conference Planning Council here.
- Provide guidance for Conference Planners here.
- Apply for a Scholarship here. Applications are due before May 1, 2015.
- Submit a Guardian of Culture and Lifeways Award nomination here. Applications are due before July 1, 2015.
- Contribute to the 2014 Scholarship and Programming Fund here.

- Exhibit, Advertise or Sponsor an event here .

Preventive Care Webinars

The Balboa Art Conservation Center is pleased to offer a new series of WEBINARS: The Preventive Care Primer Series

These webinars offer practical ideas for improving collections care at your institution and provide an opportunity for Q&A after the presentation.

Alexis Miller, Chief Conservator of Paintings at BACC will be teaching a two-part webinar:

AN INTRODUCTION TO HANDLING AND HOUSEKEEPING FOR MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

- January 27th, 11 am – Part One: Handling of Museum Collections
- January 28th 11am – Part Two: Housekeeping for Museum Collections

Future webinars in the Preventive Primer series will provide an introduction to the following subjects:

- Emergency Preparedness and Risk Management for Disaster Preparedness
- Pest Management
- The Environment and its Effect on Collections

For 2015 we have a special introductory rate for our webinars. Check out our webinar site for more information and registration details:

http://bacc-webinars.weebly.com

The Balboa Art Conservation Center welcomes all museum professionals, volunteers, students, and interested people to learn about basic preservation theory and best practices from professional conservators and other experts in the field. The Preventive Care Primer series presents five webinars offered at a reduced introductory price. Our previous webinars have been very well received by a range of attendees, including museum registrars, collection managers, curators, volunteers, and students.

Professional Time Wasting on the Web

Where Boards fall short

https://hbr.org/2015/01/where-boards-fall-short

Slowing Earth Rotation Rate necessitates June “Leap Second”

http://spacewatchtower.blogspot.com/2015/01/slowing-of-rotation-rate-necessitates.html

Beard of Egypt's King Tut hastily glued back on with epoxy

http://news.yahoo.com/beard-egypts-king-tut-hastily-glued-back-epoxy-055013973.html

Holy *Kreuzer Konigsberg*!

Conserving a Lilliputian Battleship Model

http://www.theconservationcenter.com/article/2503364-holy-kreuzer-konigsberg-conserving-a-lilliputian?utm_source=January+2015+Newsletter&utm_campaign=Jan+2015+Newsletter&utm_medium=email

1795 time capsule opened, centuries after Revere and Adams buried it

http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/06/us/feat-paul-revere-sam-adams-boston-time-capsule/