



## **Bulletin 64**

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## **Giving Diligence Its Due: Authenticating New Acquisitions**

*By Steve Henrikson, Curator of Collections, Alaska State Museum*

Every curator is haunted by the specter of acquisitions past...the ones that got away, and the ones that didn't – but that couldn't fully be authenticated. No matter how much time is available, you often have to “fish or cut bait” before you've checked all the sources or heard back from various experts.

The trouble is, when dealing with truly unique objects, there may not be any experts to consult. Shortly into your inquiry, you become the “world's greatest expert” on \_\_\_\_\_. There may not be any innocent third parties to “take the fall” if your authentication falls through. You're left holding the bag – in which to carry your belongings after being summarily fired for incompetence and escorted from the museum. At least that is my recurring nightmare.

Seriously, rather than shifting blame, professionals do due diligence – as much as is practical and necessary prior to acquiring objects or art for the museum. There are legal

and ethical reasons for researching provenance and researching authenticity: Is it legal to own? Did its collection violate treaties or laws? Does the donation (or the taking of a tax deduction) constitute illegal “trafficking” in certain protected animal parts or cultural patrimony?

As the market value of many of the things we collect increase, so does the incentive for fakery. Museum acquisitions funds are scarce and we can't afford to squander them on mistakes...so you collect all the facts you can, apply your professional judgment, and make the call – and pray. In some professions, they call it “making a gut decision,” “intuition,” or, possibly, “witchcraft.” In the museum context, it is referred to as connoisseurship: expertise in the work, developed over long exposure to a body of similar material, of the same period, or by the same artist.

Unfortunately, many forgers are also connoisseurs, and may even use old materials and techniques. That's why it's important to work with sellers who will stand behind the work they sell by offering your money back if the work isn't as advertised. Beware of sellers who carefully word their descriptions to imply something that isn't actually stated.

Provenance is important, but it too can be fabricated. Sometimes the object, through its style or materials, conveys its own history. Considering the totality of the evidence at hand, you should expect some correlation between the provenance and the object. But authentication and attribution are more art than science, so it's important to take a step back and check your objectivity.

It's natural to get excited when you make what seems to be a “big find,” so it's useful to have an acquisitions committee made up of seasoned skeptics who are not afraid to poke holes in the wispy filaments of your acquisitions package. Running their gauntlet is good preparation for when you may be called upon to answer similar questions later, in public.

In 2012, I was challenged to authenticate what was presented as a 19<sup>th</sup> century watercolor of Sitka – one of those rare things that you consider yourself lucky to ever come across once in a career. As soon as I saw it, I realized I had seen it once before. Digging into my “unrealized acquisitions” files, back to the mid-1990s, I found the info we had on it, which proved very useful in authenticating the piece.



ASM Postels attributed

The widow of an art collector in California had initially offered it for sale for approximately five thousand dollars. The art collector was Carl Dentzel, former director of the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles and a serious collector of California and Western paintings. Mrs. Dentzel told me that her husband traveled the world and probably picked up the painting on one of his trips, but beyond that, she couldn't say anything definitive about its source. She added that finding any notes or receipts for the piece in his papers at that time would be virtually impossible. Mrs. Dentzel didn't respond to our further inquiries, and the deal never materialized, but I hoped we would someday get another shot.

That shot came in August 2012, when Adrienne Kaeppler of the Smithsonian Institution contacted ASM Chief Curator Bob Banghart. She said that a friend, Mark Blackburn, had recently purchased the painting from Gary Spratt, a Mill Valley California art dealer, who had exhibited the piece at a recent art show. Blackburn knew it was important and offered it to the Alaska State Museum at his cost, \$21,500. My mood was buoyed when Banghart informed me that he found a combination of state and Friends funds, and he was prepared to "pull the trigger" if the piece proved out. After being assured that he meant "buy the piece" and not, literally, pulling the trigger on his latest personal firearm acquisition, I set out as best I could to authenticate the piece.

The painting depicts Sitka during the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, signed by artist Alexander Postels. The painting had been published in books by several noted scholars of Russian America: Katherine Arndt and Richard Pierce (2003:24), and Lydia Black (2004:241). It was heartening that scholars of such prominence considered the piece authentic enough. Both Pierce and Black had seen plenty of period pieces in their time, and that meant something – but was that enough assurance? We wanted more (we always want more) and turned our attention to the painting itself, which the owner kindly loaned us for examination. Written in the margin of the painting at lower right is the inscription "Drawn from Nature by A. Postels," written in pre-revolutionary Cyrillic:

Ситка. А. Постель. 1806.

Postels came to Alaska with the Litke Expedition in 1826, where he served as a naturalist and sketch artist. Postels and another artist, Kittlitz, made illustrations of plant, fish, and other natural history specimens collected by the expedition's scientists. Postels alone is said to have made over a thousand drawings on the four-year around the world voyage. In addition, as Litke's mineralogist, he collected over three hundred rock specimens. (Henry 1984:58, Pierce 1990:410)

If a body of the artist's work was available for study, we might be able attribute it based on style. Several of Postels' drawings of Russian America were made into engravings for the Litke expedition's published atlas, but this particular view is not among them. Unfortunately, the current location of Postels' original paintings from the expedition is not known to us; they might be in the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, in one of the universities in St. Petersburg that employed Postels later in his career, or another institution. Another possibility is that they were destroyed during WWII. We could find only one original work by Postels: a portrait of three Alaska Natives, now in a private collection. As it is a portrait, it unfortunately provides nothing definitive in comparison to the view of Sitka.

Does the scene as painted accurately depict Sitka as it appeared during around 1827? The work is in the tradition of the 18<sup>th</sup> century topographical drawing and painting as practiced by many seafarers and explorers in the years prior to photography, and accuracy was of vital importance. Faint pencil gridlines appear in the background of the painting in places, suggesting an effort on the part of the artist to accurately lay out a panoramic view.



Circa 1827 painting



2012 View from the Poulson Residence. Mt. Edgecumbe is obscured by the bridge at left, but it is in the same position as in the 1827 view. Courtesy Rebecca Poulson

Looking at period maps, we found that the vantage point of the artist is a small island to the east of Castle Hill. The Russians built a causeway connecting the island, and put in a building (the stone foundation of which survives). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a large home was built on that site, currently owned by Thad Poulson. Thad's daughter, Rebecca Poulson, confirmed that from that position, Mt. Edgecumbe appears to the left of Castle hill. Comparing the painting to her photos, some imagination is required as the shoreline around the hill and the adjacent beach has completely changed since that time due to the fill on the tidelands and construction of the bridge and connecting roadway. But still the resemblance is clear.

Litke's description of Sitka in 1827 is well reflected by the painting:

“The settlement is at present made up of two parts – the fortress and the outlying areas. The first encloses the governor's two storied house, situated on the highest point of the rock, at around eighty feet above sea level, surrounded by towers and by batteries armed with thirty-two cannon, which makes it like a citadel... All of the structures in the fortress are company property; they are well maintained, although not without difficulty for the magnificent wood of conifers and saplings used here, because of its poor quality and the effect of the climate, does not last very long. One of the towers along the fortress walls houses the arsenal, with enough firearms and hand arms for over a thousand men, kept in good order.” (Litke 1987:46)

Individual structures appearing in the painting correspond to other period artwork and maps of the city. To the right of Castle Hill extends a log wall or palisades, and several substantial buildings. The wall itself closely aligns to the position as shown in a 1827 map of Sitka published with the Litke Expedition journals, entitled *Plan du port de Novo-Arkhangelsk* (illustrated in Arndt and Pierce 2003:44). The view also shows several structures – workshops, bunkhouse, and bathhouse – on the lower side of Castle Hill, the foundations of which were excavated in the mid-1990s by the State of Alaska Office of History and Archaeology. The watercolor is one of only a few images showing the hexagonal Church of St. Michael the Archangel, which was built in 1813 around an older chapel dating to 1808. It was replaced in 1834, thus providing a possible late date for the painting's creation.

The fine details of the painting closely match maps and illustrations of Sitka from the 1820s. The accuracy convinced noted scholars such as Lydia Black and Richard Pierce

that the piece was authentic. The style of the piece, as a topographical illustration, as well as the hand-drawn border suggests early/middle 19<sup>th</sup> century. The materials appear to be old and consistent with what was available in the period. The chances that the piece has been forged are very minute, given that it would have taken extensive research in Russian archives to have rendered such an accurate view of Sitka as it appeared in the 1820s. Based on this totality of the information, and the support of the owner, Mark Blackburn, I recommended to the Museum Collections Advisory Committee that we purchase the painting, but at the same time indicated more research was needed to more thoroughly authenticate it, including:

- removing the board glued to the back of the painting may reveal inscriptions or watermarks.
- check the painting for pollen or spores: if the painting was done outdoors, in the summer, pollen or spores from plants native to Sitka may be adhered to the paint.
- locate other original sketches by Postels to solidify the attribution to him as artist.
- conduct XRF analysis of the paint to confirm its components were available in 1827.

When considering acquiring a piece for the collection, you often have limited time to make your decision, and might have to decide before all possible research is completed. However sure you might be, new information or new analytical techniques may someday prove you wrong. Falling prey to forgers is indeed an occupational hazard in our line of work, but by being as thorough as possible, and by working with dealers and owners willing to stand behind their material, we can mitigate the risks.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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*Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press.

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Henry, John Frazier 1984  
*Early Maritime Artists of the Pacific Northwest Coast, 1741-1841*. Seattle, University of Washington Press.

Khlebnikov, Kiril 1994  
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## Ask ASM

**Question:** I need some advice on labeling rocks. Following AAM advice, I have been marking with ink over clear base coat. I have also noticed that previous labelers marked with ink over white acrylic paint. Either way, the surface of the rock is often very irregular, and my labels are sometimes unreadable. Also, what is the best practice for very small rocks? Is it considered sufficient to place rocks – all rocks – in a plastic bag and label the bag? Thanks for any advice you or anyone else can give me.

**ASM:** Bumpy stone surfaces tend to do better with water-based adhesives and then a printed thin paper label that will conform to the bumps when wet in a way that the clear solvent-based labels don't do so easily. The drawback is that the adhesive is pulled deep into the pores of the stone, and if you need to get the label off, the adhesive does not fully dissolve, it only swells into a gel that can stay plugged into those pores and when you pull the label off you can possibly skin the surface of more friable (powdery) rocks. You will face a similar problem trying to remove the acrylic paint. Sometimes, depending on the surface of the rock, it can be possible to use the solvent-based adhesive and a dry stiff brush to tamp down the thin paper label for better contact before it sets and before a top coat is applied.



Very small rocks? You can label very small things using a 6 or 8 point font on a thin tissue paper. If you find it is not practical to label each one you can put them in bags and label the bag. However, you must document it carefully to avoid confusion in the future. Writing the number of rocks in the bag and other info on a little piece of paper to place inside the bag, as well as in the database and hard copy files, along with measurements, and a labeled photograph will help keep the record straight.

Conservator Ellen Carrlee posted about labeling on her blog

<http://ellencarrlee.wordpress.com/?s=labeling>. She covers stone but maybe not the small ones that you are dealing with.



## Shaking the Money Tree

The Museum Assessment Program (MAP) is an IMLS-funded program available to small and mid-sized museums of all types. During MAP, your museum conducts a self-study, consults with a museum professional who will provide a customized site visit and report, and gains the tools to become a stronger institution.

- The MAP process is customized to your museum.
- The application is easy to complete and 98% of museums that apply get accepted.
- Choose one of three assessment types: Organizational, Collections Stewardship or Community Engagement.

IMLS-funded MAP grants provide \$4,000 of consultative resources and services to participating museums. Become the next museum to take advantage of MAP. The upcoming application deadline is July 1.

[Apply today](#) for the **July 1** application deadline.

Visit [www.aam-us.org/map](http://www.aam-us.org/map) for more information about MAP or contact us at [map@aam-us.org](mailto:map@aam-us.org) or 202.289.9118.

MAP is administered by the American Alliance of Museums and supported through a cooperative agreement with the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

## Spotlight on Grant in Aid

Grant in Aid applications are due June 3. Below are some helpful hints to aid you in your quest for funding through this program. To find the online applications go to our Grant in Aid webpage: <http://museums.alaska.gov/grants.html>

Mini-Grant Application Tips:

The purpose of the Alaska State Museum Grant-in-Aid Program is to help Alaskan museums reach their full potential as stewards of culture, resources, and community.

What to do:

- Know and follow the instructions and rules. \*Specifically: Have you called Scott yet?

- When in doubt – ASK! \*Not knowing or understanding something could put your application, and thus funding, at risk.
- Review, Review, Review!
- Be prepared to write more than one draft, and have multiple people edit it.
- Know the submission deadline and submit early.
- Be concise – explanation and detail should add support NOT emotion or fillers
- Observe the basic questions:
- Who? – will benefit? will be involved? will be responsible?
- What? – is the specific project? are the goals? materials involved? are the concerns?
- Where? – specific room in the museum? out of town workshop?
- When? – will the project start? end? will you see results? How long will it last?
- Why? – is this important? Should it be funded?
- How? – will the project be undertaken? be evaluated? be successful?

Writing the narrative:

- Need, purpose, identifiable goals, and a persuasive reason why this project should be funded are the fundamentals for the narrative.
- Only include extra background and detail if they support the above objectives.
- Remember the “hook” – present your project as fulfilling the specific interests or goals of the funder, in this case: concise and simple reasoning why this grant will help your institution reach its full potential. This is critical, and success with this will make your application more persuasive and compelling.

Mini-Grant Questions De-coded:

- “What do you wish to do with this grant?”

Be simple and concise. State exactly what you want to accomplish, and the tools which will help you achieve the goals. List your anticipated budget, and account for every dollar. Be specific (such as: \$600 collections database software; \$10 Shipping and handling);

- “Explain why you need this grant. Why is it a priority for your museum?”

Discuss how this will your institution, how it will benefit the community, etc.

- “Are you using any other sources of funds or in-kind resources?”

This question is asked to give a clearer and more complete picture of the proposed activity. This also indicates careful consideration and planning from the applicant.

## **Alaska Museums in the News**

UA Museum of the North looks at ways to reverse decline in attendance

[http://www.newsminer.com/news/local\\_news/ua-museum-of-the-north-looks-at-ways-to-reverse/article\\_3abecde-afd1-11e2-b646-001a4bcf6878.html](http://www.newsminer.com/news/local_news/ua-museum-of-the-north-looks-at-ways-to-reverse/article_3abecde-afd1-11e2-b646-001a4bcf6878.html)

## **Professional Development/Training Opportunities**

The George Washington University's Distance Education Graduate Certificate Program in "Museum Collections Management and Care" is accepting applications for the fall. The application deadline is August 1, 2013.

The graduate certificate is earned completely online and is designed for those working or volunteering in museums with collections management responsibilities. The courses are ideal for those either lacking prior formal museum studies training or desiring a refresher in the topics of legal and ethical issues, collections management and preventive conservation.

For more information, please contact Mary Coughlin at [musede@gwu.edu](mailto:musede@gwu.edu) or visit the website: <http://ccas.gwu.edu/museum>

## **Image Permanence Institute**

Free webinars on the optimal preservation environment

The Image Permanence Institute is presenting a series of free webinars for collections care and facilities staff in cultural institutions is designed to enable collections care and facilities staff in cultural institutions to work together to achieve an optimal preservation environment—one that combines the best possible preservation of collections with the least possible consumption of energy, and is sustainable over time. This series is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities Education & Training grant program.

Webinar presentations will focus on broad environmental challenges and provide useful and effective suggestions for dealing with them. Webinars will be presented by IPI staff unless noted otherwise. Each webinar will be presented on a Wednesday from 2:00 to 3:30 Eastern Standard Time. You can get additional details and register for webinars at <http://ipisustainability.org/>.

June 5, 2013  
Dealing with Summer Heat & Humidity

July 10, 2013  
Investigate your HVAC System & Identify Potential Energy Savings – Guest Speaker  
Peter Herzog, Herzog/Wheeler & Associates, Energy Management Consultant

August 7, 2013  
Practical Approaches to Environmental Control for Small Institutions – Guest speaker,  
Richard Kerschner, Director of Preservation and Conservation, Shelburne Museum,  
Shelburne, Vermont

September 4, 2013  
Sustainable Preservation Practices—Key Team Activities

## Connecting to Collections May Webinars

Webinar 4: Preventive Care of Photographs

Tuesday, May 21, 2013

9:00-10:30 a.m. AKST

Instructor: Debra Hess Norris

This session will look to give a basic understanding of and appreciation for issues relating to preventive care of photographic collections, including risk management; appropriate environmental conditions; handling and maintenance procedures for storage; exhibition and display parameters and monitoring techniques; and emergency preparedness, mitigation, and response.

Webinar 5: Advocating for the Care of Photographs

Thursday, May 23, 2013

9:00-10:30 a.m. AKST

Instructor: Debra Hess Norris

This session will provide a basic knowledge of best practices in photograph preservation and building a case statement for effective fund raising. Advocacy for collections will be stressed as a first step in raising awareness of the richness and importance of photographic heritage.

To register <http://www.connectingtocollections.org/courses/registration/>

## Professional Time Wasting on the Web

Fire destroys Danish Museum

<http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/fire-destroys-danish-museum-artifacts-saved-19059991#.UYGIcbWsh8F>

Article about paper conservation in Alaska in the latest issue of e-Conservation Magazine

<http://www.e-conservationline.com/content/view/1098>

Interesting blog postings about registration of multimedia and other installations

<http://world.museumsprojekte.de/?p=1303>

<http://world.museumsprojekte.de/?p=1402>

Video about the Royal Castle from destruction to reconstruction

<http://engagingplaces.net/2013/05/03/video-the-royal-castle/>

IMLS awards 5 museums the National Medal

[http://www.imls.gov/national\\_medal\\_to\\_be\\_awarded\\_today\\_at\\_white\\_house.aspx](http://www.imls.gov/national_medal_to_be_awarded_today_at_white_house.aspx)

British Museum creates new interactive map

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/the\\_museums\\_story/new\\_centre/explore\\_the\\_centre.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/the_museums_story/new_centre/explore_the_centre.aspx)

Did you know there is a cardboard museum?

<http://www.provenceguide.co.uk/cardboard-and-printing-museum/valreas/tabid/8727/offreid/625fdbed-fdeo-42a3-aa6e-096490c6c076/yesterday-and-today-info.aspx>

World's smallest movie

<http://www.reuters.com/video/2013/05/01/reuters-tv-a-boy-and-his-atom-the-worlds-smallest-m?videoId=242557454&videoChannel=118065&refresh=true>