

SIMA

2025 Symposium

MCI Theater, MSC

July 17-18, 2025

Session One

Thursday, July 17, 9:45 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

Alba Ferrándiz Gaudens (University of East Anglia)

Entangled Histories: Militarization and the Making of the Collection from the Mariana Islands at the NMNH

This presentation will provide an overview of the NMNH's collections from the Mariana Islands, highlighting their deep interconnection to the history of militarization of the islands by the United States in the period between 1898 and 1945. Through a combination of information gathered through archival-and-collections-based research at the Smithsonian, I will examine the spatial distribution and networks of collectors tied to the US military. I will also consider the varying degrees of engagement these collectors had with the Indigenous Chamorro population of the Marianas. These interactions are reflected in the types of artifacts they collected. Where possible, the analysis will focus on retracing Indigenous agency and mapping the relationships that shaped the processes of collecting. Towards the end of the presentation, I will focus on the techniques of classification and dislocation/dispersal that operated in the Smithsonian upon the accession of these artifacts, thinking about the Smithsonian as an entity whose actions are shaped by shifting institutional logics and interests. All in all, I aim to highlight how the history of the collection of Chamorro artifacts at the Smithsonian cannot be separated from the complex history of US militarization and imperialism in the North Pacific, a process that is still ongoing.

Wade Paul (Concordia University)

Outlawed Culture: The Potlach Ban and Museum Collections

Towards the end of the 19th century, the newly formed Canadian state was dissatisfied with the lack of Indigenous assimilation into the settler-colonial state. The Canadian government believed that the continued practice of Indigenous traditions and ceremony was what was preventing Indigenous peoples from becoming 'civilized'. In an effort to expedite the process of assimilation, the Canadian government amended the Indian Act in 1880 to ban cultural traditions and practices such as Potlach and Sun Dance. In 1885 the Canadian government further codified this destructive practice by enacting the Potlach Ban that would remain in effect until 1951 (66 years). Today the Potlach Ban is recognized as a form of cultural genocide. This presentation will explore NMNH's collection of First Nations and Indigenous drums from Canada. It will provide an investigation into the instances of collection and their interconnection with the Potlach Ban.

Dakota Feirer (New York University)

Ember Ecology: Tracing Museal Fire in the Natural History Archive

Fire is a gathering agent, an ancestor and an archive. I adopt Caromano's provocations of 'fire as a museum object' and recognize the possibilities of musealized fire at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. My research begins with an historical and material analysis of 'Fire-Making Set' (E168116) ostensibly from 'New South Wales' before trickling outward to trace where museal fire inhabits the margins of the ethnographic archive: from the adhesive blanket of tree resin between sinue and bone, to the burnt engravings mapping the insides of a cloak, to the technological methods of fire-making demonstrated in Kerry's ethnological portraits and deep time relations involved in the masonry of igneous stone. By attending to such an incorporeal, understudied museum object, fire reveals several darkneses, silences and absences amongst the archive. Most importantly, underpinning this research are local efforts to retrieve fire as cultural heritage, and restore good fire relations throughout social, cultural and environmental management practices.

DISCUSSANTS

PASCALE BOUCICAUT (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA BERKELEY)
TORREY RICK (SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION)

Session Two
Thursday, July 17, 11:15 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Qiaoyun "Jeolin" Hu (Indiana University)

Interpreting the Fedrick Gilman Scovel Collection: Gift, Materiality, and Cross-cultural Collecting of a Missionary Journey

This research examines the Scovel Collection at the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) to explore the entangled dynamics of materiality, documentation, and meaning making within the museum context. By attending to both the material affordances of the objects and their evolving representations across different catalog systems at the Smithsonian, the study traces how institutional documentation mediate, transform, and sometimes obscure the biographs and trajectories of objects. Situated within the broader context of the Scovel family's missionary activities in mid-twentieth-century China, this study follows the objects' journeys from local sites of collection, such as Huaiyuan embroidery villages, to their transnational journey and institutional framing in the NMNH. Objects' material affordances, such as patterns, embroidery techniques, inscriptions, and signs of wear, are brought into conversation with accession records and catalog metadata to show how object materiality and cataloging systems intersect to generate, reimagine, and reframe knowledge about the collection. In doing so, the study seeks to surface the inclusive, dynamic, and collaborative potential embedded within museum cataloging and meaning-making practices, to activate interpretive possibilities and better of cross-cultural encounters through objects.

Alex Calloway (Bard Graduate Center)Imperial Edicts: Diplomacy, Gifts, and South Korea at the Smithsonian

My research examines the material histories of extraction, exchange, and reconciliation within American and South Korean anthropological collections. Across nearly 150 years of holding Korean objects at the NMNH, the two nations' diplomatic relationship has been profoundly marked by colonial infrastructures impressed upon South Korea during American occupation—namely, national Korean museums modeled after American anthropologists' customs of accumulation and display. Via a close archival reading of two anthropologists employed by NMNH (Eugene Knez and Chang-su Cho Houchins) and one object (a gifted replica of a golden state seal,) I investigate how Smithsonian agents and their Korean counterparts have co-constructed shifting relationships of power and knowledge during and after the Cold War through museum objects. In doing so, I argue for a reading of museums as a type of literary infrastructure, capable of imagining and (re)claiming notions of belonging, expertise, and sovereignty for their networks of actors.

Kelsey Doyle (University of British Columbia)Visual Typologies and the Politics in the Archive of Ulithi

At the request of Paramount Chief Magul John Rulmal Jr., this presentation examines how typologies of photographic images established by William Armand Lessa's 1947 census fieldwork in Ulithi Atoll of Yap State Micronesia, structured a western visual logic and language that carries over into ethnographic film depictions and representations of Ulithians. Drawing on a large body of visual material housed in the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives—from Lessa to Laura Bolton, William Vitarelli, Mattias Maradol, and Scott Williams—I examine how recurring visual tropes reflect systematic imperial and anthropological agendas of the United States across mediums. Furthermore, how photography and film as objects were (and continue to be) archived and thus raises contemporary questions in museum anthropology of authorship, censorship, and data sovereignty. By embodying the still and moving image as both artifact and agent, I aim to understand how Indigenous-led visual practices towards the Ulithian content is one pathway to create and imagine new relationships to their visual record in the Smithsonian.

DISCUSSANTS

AMALIA CÓRDOVA (SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION)

CANDACE GREENE (SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION)

Session Three
Thursday, July 17, 1:30 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Mikaela Razo (University of Texas San Antonio)

Is Everything Really Bigger in Texas?: Exploring the R. King Harris Collection and its (Re)presentation of Texas History

This presentation examines how the Robert King Harris collection at the National Museum of Natural History shapes public understanding of Texan history and identity. Described as “robust” and “representative,” the collection is positioned as a comprehensive source of Texan cultural materials for further research and comparative analysis. However, a closer analysis reveals a foregrounding of particular cultural, geographical, and temporal concentrations that reflects Harris's personal biases and agendas in his archaeological investigations. These selective emphases privilege a particular kind of narrative and image of Texas and its inhabitants. By highlighting the negative space of the collection, this presentation aims to explore Robert King and Inus Marie Harris's collecting history, arguing that such institutional holdings do not just preserve history, but actively participate in shaping knowledge about Texas and its diverse identities.

Faraz Saberi (Northwestern University)

Revisiting Representations of Nomadic Asian Identities in Early Collecting: Nationality, Ethnicity, Tribe & the Gaze of 'Nomadic Art'

From the late 19th century through to the mid-20th century, collectors of various occupational backgrounds - from missionaries to archaeologists - sought to grow the Smithsonian's collection of 'nomadic art'. Conceptually, this entailed examples of the everyday objects reflecting the 'simplistic' lifestyle of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples. It also simultaneously involved a curious look into the extravagant, colorful textiles from these same groups. While deconstructing the ways in which identities of nomadic groups from West Asia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia were recognized and represented in the catalog, I will explore how the museum's categories of identity often proved to be awkward for 'classifying' this region. With the close cultural, linguistic, and political interrelation between nomadic groups in the mentioned regions acknowledged, I also explore the intersection between the gaze of collecting 'nomadic art' and how these collections can now serve in contemporary inter-group relations or weaving revitalization efforts.

Olivia Palepoi (Purdue University)

Sāō Fa'alālelei and Future Directions

The exchange of 'ie tōga (fine pandanus textiles) between Samoan families and nobility is used to recognize significant events and ceremonies. Therefore, as an integral practice of maintaining Samoan relationships, this ongoing collaborative project aims to articulate the stylistic changes of 'ie tōga over time within the frames of size dimension, the average density of weaves, and variations in presentation (feathers, yarn, etc.). To accomplish this, I have applied linear inch measurements of dextral and sinistral strands from thirteen quadrant placements across five mats located in the National Natural History Museum collection. These measurements I have collected will serve as a comparative point for other countries collections, such as collections in New Zealand and Germany, in order to trace the stylistic changes of 'ie tōga and to contribute to research literature on a standardized methodological practice of measurement for Samoan 'ie tōga. Finally, I will offer some reflections on my research experiences alongside the integration of this project into my future dissertation work.

DISCUSSANTS

CANDACE GREENE (SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION)

FLAVIO SILVA (UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA)

Session Four

Friday, July 18, 9:45 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

Faith [Insight] Tenise Herd (University of Houston)

Black Out Survival

The preservation of Gullah Geechee culture of the Sea Islands and Southeast US is not fairly represented within the Smithsonian Anthropological collections. Like the diasporic movements of slave populations traceable in North American literature, the works of this community can be found in four various archives and six Smithsonian museums. From my exploration of all ethnology objects & Sturtevant Archives listed under the NAA, all Gullah Geechee connections can be traced to communities of struggle and assimilation. Delineations like this presents the culture void of their literature, imaging, music, and media; at the same time, this ultimately allows anthropologists, the Smithsonian, and academics the right to capitalize on the labor, language, and lifestyle of the Gullah and Geechee people. As such, this research will tell the story of the how accessible resources juxtapose autonomously cultivated stories, lineages on how their culture continues to thrive using the five-senses, and celebration of their stories from someone with adjacency to the cultures aligned.

Helen Martin (George Washington University)

K)not for Sale: Exploring Tungkulus in the Philippine Commission and Metcalf Sisters Collections

Behind the intricate design and meticulous craftsmanship of a tungkulu lies a wealth of information and complex relationships. The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition (LPX) in St. Louis featured a Philippine Reservation, where Philippine people and cultural items were displayed, including members of the Bagobo, an indigenous group from southern Mindanao. Elizabeth and Sarah Metcalf visited the Philippine Reservation and were inspired to move to Mindanao shortly thereafter. The Metcalf sisters employed local women to create products for sale, including tungkulus, a special headcloth traditionally produced for and worn by Bagobo maganis (warriors). The collections curated by the Philippine Commission of the LPX (Accession #044455) and the Metcalf sisters (Accession #057787) feature tungkulus, which prompts reflections on a) the production practices and characteristics of tungkulus and the cultural beliefs associated with them, and b) the relationships the Metcalf sisters had with the local Bagobo community, the women they employed, and their desire to document, collect, reproduce, and sell local crafts. This presentation aims to explore these points within the broader scope of what it means to create a representative collection.

Sydney Nguyen (New York University)

From Santa Ysabel to the Smithsonian: Reexamining the 1901 Dubois Accession through Indigenous Epistemologies

In 1901, Constance Gooddard Dubois, a writer and amateur ethnographer working under Alfred Kroeber, donated a small set of objects to the Smithsonian, including a sacred hoof rattle. Positioning myself as a Kumeyaay woman and a citizen of the Iipay Nation of Santa Ysabel working in collaboration with tribal mentors, I center Indigenous epistemologies to critically examine the conditions under which these objects were acquired, Dubois' relationship with the Kumeyaay at Santa Ysabel, and the ethical implications of museum collecting practices in the early twentieth century. Merging non-Native ethnographic accounts with Kumeyaay oral histories, this project traces the role of music in Kumeyaay spiritual and everyday life, exploring how musical practices have served as acts of resistance, survivance, and cultural continuity. In doing so, it advocates for the continued vitality of these objects and honors the individuals who were coerced into their relinquishment.

DISCUSSANTS

ATTIYA AHMAD (GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY)

GWYN ISAAC (SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION)

Session Five

Friday, July 18, 11:10 a.m. – 11:50 a.m.

Attiya Ahmad (Associate Professor of Anthropology and International Affairs, George Washington University)

Marked Silences and 'Explod-ings': Silk and Brocade Wedding Belts from Fez

Against a backdrop of a longer-term research project examining how late medieval and early modern silk textiles from the Iberian Peninsula can serve as sites and means to trace the production, contestation and iterative practices reproducing ethno-religious differences and interregional relations, this presentation focuses on several SI Ethnology collection items labelled as 'Silk and Gold Brocade Wedding Belt,' that are attributed to Fez, Morocco. I consider major themes participants of SIMA have been encouraged to grapple with: the silences/absences that mark these textiles particularly with respect to anthropological study; the types of questions we can elicit by 'exploding' these objects; and how the question of provenance, and museum/curatorial practices connected to these objects underscore importance features of these objects. I conclude with a brief rumination on why these issues may be of concern to us given our contemporary circumstances.

Flavio Silva (Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama)

Makers, Crafters, and Shakers: The Study of Maya and Mesoamerican Communities of Practice Through Lithic Technology

The research project is aimed at investigating the crafting, use, and circulation of obsidian artifacts in the ancient Maya and broader Mesoamerican world. Building on the previous research, the project explores how lithic production and exchange were embedded within communities of practice and shaped by

regional networks of interaction. Through lithic analysis, archaeometric techniques (especially portable X-ray fluorescence or pXRF), illustration, and high-resolution photography, the study traces the social lives of obsidian tools across time and space. Focusing on legacy and previously excavated collections housed in museums, universities, and institutions in the United States and Mexico, this research engages with long-standing questions of sourcing and technological style while introducing new perspectives grounded in practice theory. Following my research emphasis on the entanglement of people, places, and materials, the project highlights how obsidian objects were not only tools but also vehicles of social connection and identity formation. By reconstructing patterns of craft production and movement, the project contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how domestic economies, mobility, and interregional ties materialized through lithics. The presentation invites audiences to see obsidian not just as a raw material, but as a medium through which relationships (social, spatial, and historical) were forged and maintained in Mesoamerica.