

History 6302

Collections Management in Museums

University of West Georgia/Atlanta History Center

Summer 2009

Instructors:

Dr. Ann McCleary, Department of History, University of West Georgia, 678-839-6041

amcclear@westga.edu, Office hours: Tuesday 2-5 p.m., and by appointment

Ms. Deborah Thomas, Registrar, Atlanta History Center, 404-814-4054,

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Class meetings: Class meets on Wednesdays from 12:30-5:30 at that Atlanta History Center, except for the first class meeting, which will be on **Tuesday, June 9**. *No class meeting on Wednesday June 10*. Please see the AHC website for directions. Classes will meet in the Kennedy Theater.

Course description and objectives:

This course is an examination of the processes by which a museum manages its collection, including collections policies, acquisitions, collections development, registration, cataloging, conservation, and collections care. Students will acquire skills to conduct registration and curatorial work according to professional museum standards.

Each class meeting will consist of discussion of assigned reading, presentations by instructors and occasional guest speakers, and some student presentations. Class meetings will also include specialized training in particular topics such as object handling, packing, or care of objects on exhibit.

Required Readings:

Buck, Rebecca A. and Jean Allman Gilmore, eds. *The New Museum Registration Methods*. American Association of Museums, 1998.

Reibel, Daniel, *Registration Methods for the Small Museum*. Alta Mira Press, 1997, 4th edition, 2008.

Other useful readings:

Buck, Rebecca A. and Jean Allman Gilmore. *Collections Conundrums: Solving Collections Management Mysteries*. American Association of Museums, 2007.

Case, Mary, ed. *Registrars on Records: Essays on Museum Collections Management*. American Association of Museums, 1998.

MacLeish, A. Bruce, *The Care of Antiques and Historical Collections*. Alta Mira Press, 1996.

Malaro, Marie, *A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections*. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998.

Simmons, John E., *Things Great and Small: Collections Management Policies*. American Association of Museums, 2005.

National Park Service, *Conserve-o-grams*, multiple topics and publication dates, available online at <http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/publications/conserveogram/conserv.html>

Building an Emergency Plan: A Guide for Museums and Other Culture Institutions. The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999. Available on-line.

Course Assignments

Collections Management portfolio (45% of final grade)

All students will prepare a portfolio that demonstrates what s/he has learned about collections management during the semester. The portfolio will include:

- A narrative of at least 1,500 words describing the student's learning over the course of the semester, relating the *books and articles*, class activities, speakers and practicum to each other. The format and content of this narrative is flexible and you are welcome to be creative if you choose to do so. The narrative will be evaluated on the content and your demonstration of what you have *learned* in the class. Please be sure that you do not simply describe the lectures and practicums, such as what you did during the class, but that you *reflect* on the content of the course and what you have learned. (20% of final grade)
- A narrative of at least 2,000 words that describes the process of processing a museum collection. Please include items which illustrate your in-class and practicum assignments, such as completed forms, photographs of you at work, etc. Again, you are welcome and encouraged to be creative on this narrative. (20% of final grade)
- Creative and well-organized *presentation* of the portfolio. Remember that we would like you to design this portfolio as if you were to present it to a potential employer to demonstrate your mastery of registration and curatorial skills. (5% of final grade)

In addition to these narratives, the portfolio should include the following assignments (described below under course requirements):

- PastPerfect Practicum Assignment (may be included in association with the narrative about processing a museum collection);
- Your essay on the registration ethics issue;
- Any class handout that your team may have provided for the ethics issue you researched;
- The preservation/conservation brief that you prepared for the class (you need not include other student briefs, just your own);
- Make-up work and discussion of the readings from any class days that were missed.

PastPerfect Practicum Assignment (15% of final grade)

Students will *produce Past Perfect entry forms for three objects* at the Williams farm house in Villa Rica. PastPerfect is one of the most popular museum collections management programs, and we want you to have experience in entering objects into this database. A trial version of this software is available at <http://www.museumsoftware.com/> and may be downloaded to your home computer for this exercise.

We will establish a date for the class to visit the Williams House within the first week or two of class, and at that time each student will choose three objects to document (with approval of the instructor), which will include photography and measurements. Students will then complete the forms for these three objects using the downloaded software. In most cases, students will need to conduct some research on the objects to be able to document them as part of this process. Please

print out two copies of these completed forms, one to include in the portfolios and one to provide to the Williams House.

Class Presentation and Essay on Registration Ethics Issue (15% of final grade)

All students will be assigned to work in a team of two students to research, present, and lead discussion about a current issue in museum registration. Please plan for a discussion of about twenty-five to thirty minutes.

In addition, each student will write a three- to four-page essay that presents the current issue and takes a position on the issue (the essay's thesis statement), using evidence from your research. Please include footnotes, as appropriate, and use at least five sources, which must be included in your bibliography. A maximum of three on-line sources may be used. Your essays are due on the date for which the issue is to be discussed (as stated on the syllabus). Comments will be provided in sufficient time to revise the essay, if desired, for the final portfolio

These five issues are:

1. What is ethical and what is unethical about selling objects from a museum's collection to pay the bills? Please explore the recent issues surrounding museums which are selling some of their collections, why they are selling them, and what is controversial about these actions.
2. What are the issues that surround NAGRPA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) and how are museums handling these collections? Has NAGRPA been successful, and why or why not? How would you measure success?
3. What should museums do regarding Nazi-era art and collectibles? One place to begin is *Museum Policy and Procedures for Nazi-Era Issues*, by the American Association of Museums (2001).
4. What are the problems that museums have faced in collecting ancient antiquities? How should museums resolve these issues? You might begin with *Who Owns Antiquity: Museums and Battles over our Ancient Heritage* (2008), but please consult other sources as well.
5. How should museums deal with contaminated cultural materials in museum collections? You can begin with the book *Old Poisons, New Problems: A Museum Resource for Managing Contaminated Cultural Materials* (2007), but please check out other sites and sources as well.

Conservation/Preservation brief (10% of final grade)

Each student will prepare a *one-page* brief on preservation and conservation of a particular type of material or object that might be found in a museum collection. These briefs are due on July 8. The briefs must be one full page, but may not exceed one page. Please list at least two or three of the best sources that you used you used for reference at the bottom of the page.

Make enough copies of your brief to distribution to everyone in the class, so that you will all be able to take advantage of each other's research. With this assignment, you will finish the class with a set of conservation briefs, and relevant sources, to use in your own work.

Class attendance and participation (15% of final grade)

Attendance is a central part of the course. Students will arrive having done the reading and being prepared to discuss it.

Students who miss a class meeting will be expected to (1) make up any assignments, without requiring extra time from the AHC staff and (2) prepare a written discussion of the topics of the day to add to the student's portfolio.

Because there are only seven class days (one of which is a mandatory practicum), students who are absent for more than one class day will have their final letter grade lowered one letter grade for missed two classes or two grades for three missed classes. More than three absences will result in a failing grade.

Revision policy

Students are welcome and encouraged to turn in any written work in advance to Dr. McCleary for comments. Except for the Preservation/conservation brief and the essay on a current registration topic, there is no specific due date for the assignments. However, please feel free to turn in an early draft for review. Allow sufficient time for me to read your assignment and offer suggestions.

Any and all assignments may be revised for the portfolio. The final grade for that assignment will be based on the assignment that is in the portfolio, but only if you submit the first draft (with comments) in the portfolio so that I can assess your revisions.

Class Schedule

Please note the following:

- Readings for each class meeting are listed on the day for which they are assigned. Please complete the readings by each class day. The reading is heavier at the beginning of the semester, allowing you to focus more time on the portfolio over the last two weeks.
 - Additional readings may be provided in class or added to the electronic course reserve.
 - This schedule is subject to change.
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June 9: **Class Orientation and Introduction to Collections Management**
(Tuesday)

- 12:30 Course introduction
1:30 What is a Museum Collection? Why does it need to be “managed”?
What is a Museum Registration system?
2:30 Exercise: Object Handling
3:30 Exercise: Unpacking

Read: Reibel, Introduction and chapter 1; Buck and Gilmore xiii-xvii and 211-12; “Handling,” 45-48, 349-354.

Read also the class electronic reserves: Mary Case, “What Registrars Do All Day;” Daniel B. Reibel, “The Registrar as Human Resource Manager,” and Stephen Weil, “The Great and Renowned Kelly Sock Collection.” These articles are on reserve on the library e-reserves, the password is “registrar”

June 17 **Collections Policies, Acquisitions, and Records I**

- 12:30 Creating a Collections Policy
1:30 Acquiring Collections, Appraisals
2:30 Collections Records overview
3:30 Collections records at the Atlanta History Center (Thomas)
4:00 Exercise: Cleaning objects on exhibit in Turning Point

Read: Buck/Gilmore, 1-16, 43-4, 116-166, 221-4, 303-306 ; Reibel, chapters 2-5, Appendixes B and C.

“Dusting wooden objects” available at

<http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/publications/conservoogram/07-05.pdf>

June 24 **Collections Records II**

- 12:30 Collections management databases and software
1:30 Loans
2:30 Deaccessioning, Disposal, and Abandoned Property
3:30 Ethics—class presentations #1 and #2
4:30 Exercise: Inventory

Read: Buck/Gilmore 17-43, 117-119; 167-188, 281-288; Reibel, chapters 6-8, and Appendix A.

July 1

Care of Collections I

- 12:30 Preventative care of collections
- 1:30 Pest management
- 2:30 Storage and environmental conditions
- 3:30 Exercise: Rolling large textiles (rugs) (Neill)

Read: Buck/Gilmore, 103-116; 255-266, and
“Identifying Museum Insect Pest Damage” available at
<http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/publications/conservation/03-11.pdf>

July 8

Practicum: 9-12, required hours

Each student will work on one exercise for half the class and then the other exercise:

1. Textiles: packing, numbering textiles, choosing object(s) to catalog
2. Military: Numbering a variety of objects

Read: Buck/Gilmore, 65-94.

Class: Care of Collections II

- 12:30 Handling, shipping, insurance, by Amy Simon, High Museum of Art
- 1:30 Conservation, by Patricia Grewe-Mullins, conservator
- 2:30 Disaster planning
- 3:00 Student presentation #3
- 3:30 Exercise: Condition Reporting
- 4:15 Exercise: Objects on Exhibit (care and monitoring)

Due: Conservation/preservation brief. Please make enough copies to distribute to all your classmates.

Read: Buck/Gilmore, 49-64, 120-126, 131-156, 237-254.
“Preservation of Museum Collections” available at
<http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/publications/conservation/01-01.pdf>
“Preventative Conservation Recommendations for Organic Objects” at
<http://www.nps.gov/history/museum/publications/conservation/01-01.pdf>

For today’s class, we encourage you to visit and review the following websites:

American Institute for Conservation at <http://aic.stanford.edu/>
Getty Conservation Institute at <http://www.getty.edu/conservation/>
Western Association for Art Conservation at
<http://cool-palimpsest.stanford.edu/waac/>
Journal of American Institute of Conservation, available on-line at
<http://aic.stanford.edu/jaic/>

July 15

Exhibits and Museum Ethics

12:30 Creating an exhibit from the Registrar's point of view

1:30 Registrar's Roundtable: What are the current issues?

Cindy Bowden, Director and Registrar, International Papermaking
Museum at Georgia Tech

William Grewe-Mullins, Registrar, Fernbank Museum

Glen Kyle, Director, Northeast Georgia History Center

2:30 Student presentations #4 and #5

4:00 Exercise: Cataloging the DuBose Collection

Read: Buck/Gilmore, 189-208.

July 22

Practicum day 12:30-5:30

Two exercises. Half the class will work on one, and then the groups will switch.

1. Textiles: process, catalog, and document

2. Military: process, catalog, and document

5:30-7 p.m. Reflections over dinner, including *all* students and any AHC staff

July 27

Portfolios due by 12:30 p.m.