

The Art & Science of Natural History Collections at Small Liberal Arts Colleges

Faculty Workshop Program, Alliance to Advance Liberal Arts Colleges (AALAC)
Proposed for 2024, Middlebury College



Workshop Co-Organizers:

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- Alexis Mychajliw, Assistant Professor of Biology & Environmental Studies, Curator of Vertebrate Natural History Collection, Middlebury College (liaison - amychajliw@middlebury.edu) - CV attached
- Supported by: Hayley Singleton, Head of Collections & Operations, Beneski Museum of Natural History, Amherst College

Workshop Description:

The goal of this proposal is to lay the foundation for an interdisciplinary community dedicated to the study, documentation, preservation, and research of natural history collections at small liberal arts colleges. Herbarium sheets, geology specimens, preserved skins, papier-mache or glass models, “relics”— these often formed the core of small college’s collections. The inclusion of many “ethnographic” and anthropological objects among these animal, mineral, and vegetable collections further raises important ethical issues that demand research and redress. While some of our institutions still have natural history and/or art museums, the original “cabinets” or museum objects from many colleges have been dispersed. Once many science and natural history

departments shifted priorities in teaching and learning away from classification and specimen study to field or lab work, many of these departmental collections have languished.

Yet these preserved specimens and their hand-written labels have much to teach us, both about the natural world and about human nature. Their forms help us to understand past methods of teaching and research, while their DNA and collections data yield striking insights into pressing scientific questions about climate change, habitat development, historical migration patterns and population variations, and more. With careful archival research, we can also unearth important human stories behind their collection, preservation, and study— and provide a platform for discussing global environmental issues through the lens of our local communities. We aspire to develop a shared vision in which museums are not simply places to store the dead but theaters in which to imagine a future.

We envision this workshop as one in which participants could share not only current research into their collections, but also work collaboratively to develop plans for future projects following best practices of inventorying, digitization, interpretation, and display— and the fundraising initiatives that might make carrying out these plans feasible. As small liberal arts colleges, how might we band together to tackle shared challenges, from safe handling and abatement of the hazardous materials in these collections (often preserved with arsenic, formalin, or mercury), to the selection of software for collections management and the transcription of ledgers and archival manuscripts (e.g. From the Page), to coping with the potential discovery of human remains amongst these collections? What might our ethical stewardship – or repatriation– of these objects look like? How can we engage undergraduates and our local communities in these issues and practices?

We also hope to spark the imaginations of participants, drawing inspiration from curator-scholar Steve Lubar’s projects “The [Jenks Society](#)” and the “Lost Museum,” which combed the archives of Brown University to reconstruct the once-thriving Jenks Museum and invited artists to construct “Ghost Specimens” of objects that no longer survived. Lubar has agreed to speak with our group, drawing not only on this project but also his many years as a curator at the Smithsonian and director of Brown’s Center for Digital Scholarship and John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage.

Participants:

We reached out to a selection of faculty and staff at AALAC member institutions with Herbaria, Natural History Collections, and other relevant collections to gauge interest in developing a collections consortium using a [Google Form](#), resulting in many enthusiastic responses (see below). We also identified additional faculty at other institutions who may be interested if this workshop is successfully funded, such as Mount Holyoke’s Skinner Museum. We also anticipate a number of Middlebury College faculty members participating from a range of departments including Biology, Earth & Climate Sciences, American Studies, Anthropology, History of Art and Architecture, Special Collections, and the Museum of Art.

A detailed list of prospective participants who have expressed interest is available upon request; these include faculty, librarians, and museum staff from Amherst College, Barnard College, Furman University, Middlebury College, Mount Holyoke College, Oberlin College, Pomona

College, Smith College, Swarthmore College, Vassar College, Wellesley College, and Williams College.

Proposed Two-Day Workshop Programming:

- Group introductions, including flash talks with featured objects from collections from AALAC institutions
- Case study from Vassar: the Vassar College Artifact Project
 - Implementation: drafting an “[Artifact Processing Protocol](#)” for your campus
- Case study: Teaching with Ledgers, a workshop on digitizing, transcribing, and learning from past collections inventories
 - Implementation: syllabus-building workshop
- Demo of [From the Page](#) crowdsourced transcription tool (Middlebury Librarians)
- Demo for natural history specimen digitization in partnership with iDigBio (Integrated Digitized Biocollections <https://www.idigbio.org/>) to discuss best practices in photography and database management
- Case study: Public Engagement, an example of Middlebury’s Pokemon pop-up museum
- Discussion of funding sources and collaborative grant writing (e.g. Institute of Museum and Library Services, National Science Foundation)
- Ethics discussion: NAGPRA (<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/getting-started.htm>) and other ethical considerations regarding nonconsenting human remains
- Keynote speaker/visitor: Steven Lubar, author of *Inside the Lost Museum: Curating, Past and Present*
- Guest presentation: Melissa S. Mead, John M. and Barbara Keil University Archivist and Rochester Collections Librarian, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester; co-director of the [Ward Project](#), an interdisciplinary project that seeks to catalogue and document the wide dispersal of objects distributed by Ward’s Natural Science Establishment to colleges, universities, and museums, 1862-1906

Plans for Assessment

The key mechanisms of assessment for our workshop include:

- The development of proposed grant proposals for NSF, IMLS, and other funding sources
- The creation of a consortium to digitize and ultimately create a database for AALAC specimens
- A best practices guidance document of pedagogical and community engagement approaches as they relate to natural history collections (broadly defined)
- A best practices guidance document regarding the ethics of specimen curation and display

Supplemental Information: Topics of Interest

Our participants identified the following topics of interest related to research, curation, preservation, use of specimens in teaching, and ethics and aesthetics of display:

“How to engage the administration in seeing the value of these collections; best practices for engaging students; fundraising”

“Curation care, ethics of retention and return”

“Ethics of display; preservation; interpretation”

“Sustainable funding, or a session about how we might work together for perhaps an electronic ‘super-collection’ that our students might access”

“Herbarium curation and digitization; uses of collections in research; developing extended specimen networks”

“Development of student interests through time (especially Darwinian thinking)”

“Collection storage, organization, and display techniques”

“Discussion of Colonialism + Natural Histories, Creative ways of teaching with Collections”

“Indigenous Studies approaches to/ rethinking of ‘Natural History’ especially as related to land”

“What ‘counts’ as a natural history collection?”

“Politics of display”