

HIST 395/595: Museum Collections
Fall 2021, Section 1
T/Th 2:00pm-3:15pm
CCC 305

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Office Hours: Weds 2-4pm and by appointment

Course Summary

Museum Collections is a course about stuff: the historical significance, preservation, and general “thinginess” of museum objects. It is designed to introduce students to the history, theory, and practice of maintaining museum collections. Throughout the semester we will examine a range of artifacts, challenging you to develop a critical eye for analyzing history through the study of objects. Students will put these skills into practice by drafting reports of “mystery objects” for the UWSP Museum of Natural History, inputting objects into the PastPerfect database for Portage County Historical Society, developing an exhibit display of curated objects, and creating a conservation plan for objects that will be moved out of Albertson Hall.

Learning Outcomes

Students taking “Museum Collections” will develop skills for analyzing and interpreting history through artifacts. Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Evaluate how interpretations of the past are developed, enhanced, or challenged through the study of artifacts
- Analyze the similarities and differences in studying artifacts compared to traditional written texts
- Visit different museums and repositories to identify key similarities and differences in curators’ approaches to handling collections
- Conduct an in-depth analysis of an artifact through writing the history of a “mystery object” for the Museum of Natural History
- Properly identify, catalog, and curate museum collections through cataloging objects for Portage County Historical Society
- Reflect on the class activities and discussions by recognizing both the theoretical and practical challenges of working with artifacts

Required Texts

Nicola Pickering, *The Museum Curator’s Guide: Understanding, Managing, and Presenting Objects* (available for purchase at the UWSP bookstore)

Other assigned readings will be posted on Canvas.

Assignments

Participation: Class participation consists of more than just regular attendance. It also involves coming to class prepared and engaged, bringing assigned readings, listening to fellow classmates and guest speakers, and actively contributing to class discussions.

Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class. Students may miss three classes before their final grade begins to drop. It is not wise to use all of your absences early in the term in case you have legitimate reasons for missing class later. Arriving late or leaving early from class will be counted as one-half an absence. Students facing extenuating circumstances affecting their attendance (such as UWSP athletics, the birth of a child, military service, etc.) are encouraged to talk to me.

In-Class Responses: There will be a series of in-class writing responses to questions about the readings. I will grade responses on a plus-check-minus system. A check-plus indicates exceptional work (10/10), a check represents basic competency (8.5/10), and a check-minus signals incomplete, inaccurate, or substandard work (7.5/10). Students who are absent will receive a zero for their participation grade that day and will not have an opportunity to make up the missing work. Students can drop their lowest response score.

Mystery Objects: Curators frequently stumble across objects that they have no idea what it is, how it was, used, or why it is significant. You will research one such mystery object and write a comprehensive report detailing the artifact's provenance and significance.

Cataloging Objects: In partnership with Portage County Historical Society, students will enter artifacts into the PastPerfect Database by cataloging identifying features, metadata, photographs, and other pertinent information.

Exhibit Display: Using the objects from Portage County Historical Society, Students will create an exhibit display at the Museum of Natural History and/or the CCC (depending on the size and number of objects selected). Students will be responsible for selecting objects, writing exhibit labels, and developing an installation plan.

Object Care and Storage Plan: Students will select objects from the Museum of Natural History gallery and develop a care and storage plan for the upcoming move out of Albertson Hall. Students will take into account environmental conditions, proper handling, packing, and potential hazards.

Final Exam: The final exam consists of three essay questions that address the broader theoretical and practical issues surrounding museum collections. Students will submit their exam responses via Canvas during Finals Week.

Assessment Breakdown*

Participation and In-Class Activities: 15%

In-Class Responses: 20% (divided evenly among responses)

Mystery Objects: 10%

Cataloging Objects: 15%

Exhibit Display: 15% (divided into incremental assignments)

Object Care and Storage Plan: 10%

Final Exam: 15%

*For students taking this course as a 500-level seminar, additional readings and projects may be assigned. Please see me for more details.

Grading Scale

A: 93-100
A-: 90-92
B+: 87-89
B: 83-86
B-: 80-82
C+: 77-79
C: 73-76
C-: 70-72
D+: 67-69
D: 60-66
F: 59 and below

Classroom Policies

According to UWSP policy, “All students, employees and visitors to any UW-Stevens Point campus or facility will be required to wear face coverings when inside campus buildings and enclosed spaces with others outside of your household (e.g., in a UWSP vehicle). This policy is in effect until further notice.” Please visit the Disability and Assistive Technology Center if you require accommodation.

Students are expected to arrive on time and to be attentive and engaged during class. This means you are not sleeping, reading/working on other materials, using electronic devices, talking to your neighbor, or disrupting class in any way. Students will raise their hands for questions and be respectful of fellow students and the professor. You may disagree with another person’s comment or position, but do so with courtesy and respect. For more information on classroom expectations, see: <http://www.uwsp.edu/dos/Pages/Academic-Misconduct.aspx>

All forms of academic dishonesty including, but not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fraud, and unauthorized access to tests and assignments are strictly prohibited. Any words or ideas borrowed from another person or source, whether through a direct quotation or through paraphrasing, must be cited properly to avoid plagiarism. Please familiarize yourself with what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it. Violations of the university’s code of conduct are subject to sanctions ranging from a failing grade for an assignment to disciplinary hearings or potential failure of the course. For more information on academic dishonesty, see: <http://www.uwsp.edu/dos/Documents/CommunityRights.pdf>

If you have a learning or physical challenge that requires accommodation, please contact the Disability and Assistive Technology Center as early as possible. They will then notify me privately of the accommodations that will facilitate your success in the course. Their office is located on the 6th floor of ALB (library), Voice: 715-346-3365, TTY: 715-346-3362.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal law requiring educational institutions to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. For more information about UWSP's policies, see: <http://www.uwsp.edu/dos/Pages/ADA.aspx>

Computers and other electronic devices are generally not allowed in class discussions without getting permission from me in advance. Studies have shown that students learn more and perform better by writing down the main ideas of lecture versus typing them. For more information, see the article in *Scientific American* entitled "A Learning Secret: Don't Take Notes with a Laptop" (<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-learning-secret-don-t-take-notes-with-a-laptop/>).

I hold regular office hours on Wednesdays from 2pm-4pm and by appointment. During this time, my priority is to talk to students about any questions or concerns they may have. I truly enjoy meeting with you to hear about how things are going. If you are struggling, stop by and let's chat. If you are unable to meet during office hours, email me and we will set up an alternative time.

Please note that the syllabus is subject to change and assignments may be added. Given that we are working on actual community projects, our schedule may adapt based on the schedules and needs of our partners.

Part 1: Identifying Collections

Week 1: Course Introduction

September 2: Course introduction and syllabus review

Week 2: Defining Museum Collections

September 7: The Meaning of Objects

DUE: Bring to class one object that represents yourself. Come prepared to discuss why you selected it.

Readings Due: Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten* (Canvas)

September 9: Defining Museum Collections

Readings Due: Pickering, *The Museum Curator's Guide* (hereafter Pickering) pp. 9-25

Week 3: Origins of Collecting

September 14: Origins of Collecting

Readings Due: Impey and MacGregor, *The Origins of Museums* (Canvas); Other readings TBD

September 16: Historical Collections

Portage County Historical Society Site Visit (NOTE: Date subject to change)

Week 4: Ethnographic Objects

September 21: Ethnographic Objects

Readings Due: Mary Jo Arnoldi, “Herbert War’s ‘Ethnographic Sculptures’ of Africans” (Canvas); Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Objects of Ethnography” (Canvas)

September 23: Mystery Objects

Unit 2: Processing Collections

Week 5: Managing Collections

September 28: Museum Collection Policies

Pickering, pp. 26-64

September 30: PastPerfect Database Overview

Meet at CCC 307 Computer Lab

***NOTE:** For weeks 6, 7, 9, and 10, students will be divided into two groups: Group 1 will meet with me on Tuesdays for class discussion while Group 2 will work in the Archives Lab processing collections. Group 2 will meet with me on Thursdays for class discussion while Group 1 will work in the Archives Lab processing collections.*

Week 6: Authenticity

October 5: Authenticity (Group 1)

Archives Lab (Group 2)

Readings Due: Jane Maclaren Walsh, “Crystal Skulls and Other Problems: Or, ‘Don’t Look It in the Eye’” (Canvas)

October 7: Authenticity (Group 2)

Archives Lab (Group 1)

Readings Due: Jane Maclaren Walsh, “Crystal Skulls and Other Problems: Or, ‘Don’t Look It in the Eye’” (Canvas)

DUE: Mystery Objects Assignment (on Canvas)

Week 7: Ethics

October 12: Ethics (Group 1)

Archives Lab (Group 2)

Readings Due: TBD (selection will be posted on Canvas)

October 14: Ethics (Group 2)

Archives Lab (Group 1)

Readings Due: TBD (selection will be posted on Canvas)

Unit 3: Interpreting Collections

Week 8: UWSP Collections

October 19: Archival Collections

Meet at UWSP Archives, 5th Floor ALB

October 21: Art Collections

Meet at Carlsten Gallery, 2nd Floor NFAC

NOTE: Date subject to change

Week 9: Displaying Objects

October 26: Displaying Objects (Group 1)

Archives Lab (Group 2)

Readings Due: Pickering, pp. 81-97 (additional readings may be added to Canvas)

October 28: Displaying Objects (Group 2)

Archives Lab (Group 1)

Readings Due: Pickering, pp. 81-97 (additional readings may be added to Canvas)

Week 10: Interpreting Objects

November 2: Interpreting Objects (Group 1)

Archives Lab (Group 2)

Readings Due: Pickering, pp. 98-114; Serrell, *Exhibit Labels* (Canvas)

November 4: Interpreting Objects (Group 2)

Archives Lab (Group 1)

Readings Due: Pickering, pp. 98-114; Serrell, *Exhibit Labels* (Canvas)

Unit 4: Preserving Collections

Week 11: Collections Care

November 9: Collections Care, Handling, and Storage

Readings Due: Pickering, pp. 65-80

Other readings Posted on Canvas

DUE: Cataloging Objects (Canvas)

November 11: Natural History Collections

Meet at Museum of Natural History, 1st Floor ALB

DUE: Object Selection for Exhibit Display (Canvas)

Week 12: Objects of Conflict

November 16: Objects of Warfare

Readings Due: Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Canvas)

November 18: Screening of *Monuments Men* (link via Canvas)

DUE: Object Labels for Exhibit Display (Canvas)

Week 13: Film Discussion

November 23: Film Discussion

November 25: Thanksgiving Break

Week 14: Contemporary Objects

November 30: Collecting Present-Day Objects

Readings Due: Graham Bowley, “In an Era of Strife, Museums Collect History as It Happens” (Canvas); Other Readings TBD

DUE: Installation Plan for Exhibit Display (Canvas)

December 2: Objects of the Digital Age

Readings Due: Roy Rosenzweig, “Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era” (Canvas)

Week 15: Roundtable

December 7: Museum Relocation: A Roundtable Discussion

DUE: Object Care and Storage Plan (Canvas)

December 9: No Class (Exhibit reception on Friday)

December 10: Exhibit Reception at Museum of Natural History

Finals Week:

Final Exam: Wednesday, December 15, 2:45pm-4:45pm, CCC 305

DUE: Final Exam Essays (Canvas)