



THE ANNUAL PUBLICATION OF THE  
WILLIAM R. & CLARICE V. SPURLOCK  
MUSEUM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

# SPURLOCK

MUSEUM

2024-2025





**SPURLOCK MUSEUM MAGAZINE**

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On the front cover:  
**Madre Migrante**. Washoyot Alvitre.  
John Needles Chester Endowment purchase.  
See more on page 12.

Right: **Door**. Morocco, late 19th  
or early 20th c. 2023.01.0025.  
See more in *New Acquisitions* on page 10.



# DEAR FRIENDS,

As we begin the new academic year, I am thrilled to share with you that the Spurlock Museum has been reaccredited by the American Alliance of Museums. Of the approximately 33,000 museums in the US, only 1,113 are accredited. Accredited museums are leaders in the field and are committed to serving their communities, to being a good steward of resources and belongings in their care, and to continued growth and learning. The reaccreditation process occurs every ten years and is intensive, requiring over a year to complete.

Not only was Spurlock reaccredited, but Marise McDermott, the chair of the AAM Accreditation Commission, praised the Spurlock staff as “passionate, devoted, and innovative.” Our new guest curator model was noted to be “innovative and forward-thinking.” Additionally, we were praised in the reaccreditation report for our mentorship of student staff members, and it was noted that “[n]ever have we seen such important engagement of students at a museum.”

I would like to thank the entire Spurlock team for their hard work during the reaccreditation process. It is truly my honor to work with this amazingly talented team who are leading the field with their bold ideas and desire to make museums more inclusive and ethical spaces.

With appreciation,  
**Elizabeth A. Sutton, PhD**  
*Director*



**Vessel**. Peru, 200–400.  
Gift of Beverly and Janet Falk in loving memory of our parents, Dr. and Mrs. Philip Falk. 2003.15.0001.

Through the caring for and sharing of cultural collections, the Spurlock Museum creates space for people to learn, collaborate, and build connections. By providing opportunities for engaging experiences, we foster compassion and empathy, amplify community voices, and inspire further exploration. We aim to be an active and vibrant university and community center that enriches and enlightens.



# Community in Action

## SPURLOCK EVENTS IN 2023-2024

by Travis Stansel

### Skeena Reece: "Access Granted"

Skeena Reece is a Tsimshian/Gitksan and Cree artist based in British Columbia, and "Access Granted," performed at Spurlock in February, offered more questions than answers, starting with simply "Is it a performance? ...an installation? ...a presentation?" Reece brought with her a mask her father crafted in 1991 called *Txem-Sym* — *A Tribute to Northwest Coast Carvers* and symbolically freed the mask from behind display glass.



Clockwise from left: Skeena Reece, Connie Shirakawa, Tatsu Aoki and The MIYUMI Project.

family and how they coped with discrimination and displacement with grit, wit, and tenacity. She brought "Woman Warrior" to the Spurlock in December and participated in a panel discussion with *Nikkeijin Illinois* curator Jason Finkelman and director Sharon Evans.

### The MIYUMI Project

A July concert welcomed Chicago bassist, composer, and educator Tatsu Aoki and The MIYUMI Project to the Spurlock. Presented as part of a dialogue with the *Nikkeijin Illinois* exhibition, The MIYUMI Project explores a nexus of cultures: Asian and American; Japanese and African; past and present. The MIYUMI Project composed music for "And Then They Came For Us," a 2017 documentary on Japanese-American incarceration during WWII.



### Connie Shirakawa: "Woman Warrior"

Connie Shirakawa was born and raised on Chicago's west side, and her performance "Woman Warrior" reflects on four generations of women in her

### Juxtapositioned III: An Exhibition by Durango Mendoza

Durango Mendoza (1945-2020) was an artist, photographer, and published writer of short stories and poetry. He was a resident of Illinois for about 50 years, concluding in Urbana.

Durango's ideas about Indigenous identity are interwoven — juxtaposed — with his relationship with the world around him, reaching back to his childhood, making meaning of the world.



### The Dance Elixir

An elixir is a mix or potion, an alchemical cure-all, and The Dance Elixir in November provided a respite from the end-of-semester rush. DJ KamauMau offered an evening of chill music for dance and movement to help promote emotional, social, mental, and physical wellbeing.

Right: DJ KamauMau.

Below: Manager of Community Engagement and Programs, Monica Scott (third from left), and university student gallery guides at the Dance Elixir. Throughout the year, Scott trains the university student gallery guides who focus on programming for their peers.



### The Spurlock Gala: Night at the Museum

Spurlock's student gallery guides organized the first Spurlock Gala in April for an evening of music and dancing along with a photo booth, hors d'oeuvres, and mocktails. Music was provided by DJ TAT, the official DJ of the Fighting Illini, and attendees were encouraged to "dress to impress" and explore the galleries with friends, old and new.

Gallery guides and party guests prepare to do a line dance at Night at the Museum with DJ TAT (front right).







- INITIAL FINDINGS**
- Create better accessibility and wayfinding
  - Reallocate gallery space to represent all of Africa, including modern Africa
  - Expand use of interpretive tools beyond written text
  - Determine provenance of items
  - Revisit evaluations to measure success of goals



**Asafo Flag.** Ghana. 2013.05.0499.  
**Scroll: Megillah (Book of Esther).** Morocco, 1492. 1969.11.0004.  
*Right: Focus groups discussing and examining objects.*  
 Mutapa Font and Patterns by designer Tapiwanashe Garikayi. Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe.



## Improving accessibility, developing new narratives, and challenging assumptions

by Monica M. Scott and Beth Watkins

Since we last reported on Reinterpreting Africa — a grant-funded initiative aimed at redeveloping the entire gallery by centering multiple authentic cultural voices and deconstructing traditional museum power structures — many pieces of the project have moved forward, thanks to crucial input from key stakeholders.

Key stakeholders are defined as people who have a special relationship with Africa based on at least one of following characteristics.

- RESEARCH**  
Scholarly or professional work focused on some aspect of the African continent; could be faculty, graduate student, curator, etc.
- IDENTITY**  
Born in an African country; identifies as Nigerian, South African, Congolese, Kenyan, etc.
- HERITAGE**  
Generation(s) removed from Africa by immigration or the Transatlantic Slave Trade; ancestry is African; could identify as Black, African American, Afro- Latino, Afro-Brazilian, Jamaican, etc.

The project will improve visitors' experiences of Spurlock, whether or not they know a lot about African cultures already, providing more complex and better-contextualized interpretation with objects, images, and other media. It also provides needed impetus to do more research on the museum's ever-growing collections of over 11,000 objects from this diverse continent.

The initial activities in Reinterpreting Africa were the facilitation of focus groups and the distribution of in-gallery surveys. Focus groups made up of combinations of our key stakeholders including UIUC students, faculty, and community members, were asked about their impressions of the current African Cultures gallery. This included open-ended questions about first impressions of the space, navigation, likes and dislikes, and preferred types of objects and topics. They also asked more complex and challenging questions about how Africa and African cultures are presented in museums. What kinds of stories are not told but should be? What stereotypes dominate museum narratives? And what can we do to counter these stereotypes? They also saw a selection of African artifacts not currently on display and were asked to share their responses to these pieces.

The focus group participants shared so many valuable insights. They suggested

improvements to accessibility and wayfinding, recommended new narratives to integrate a global African perspective, and wanted displays that challenge myths and assumptions about this part of the world.

One dominant theme from their conversations is the expansion of interpretive tools. They want to see objects activated through audio, video, and other interactive media. How does the regalia move? Other than reading text, how else can people obtain and interact with information about artifacts?

Another frequent comment is how much room our current Ancient Egypt exhibit takes up, especially when so many current African cultures are not represented. Modern Africa is of significant interest to our stakeholders and visitors, partly because it helps challenge the stereotype of Africa as unchanging and historical. The global African diaspora is a key part of this story that is currently missing in our museum. Cultural retention in Africa and globally is another story visitors want to see.

Participants are also interested in knowing the provenance of objects in our collections: not only where artifacts come from but also the chain of possession and information about how they ended up in Urbana. Like many

museums and many collections, our knowledge about our collections is extremely varied. More recent donations often come with thorough documentation, and a significant majority of our African collections came into the museum after the year 2000. But the further back into older acquisitions we go, the harder it is to find out the story of each piece.

Reinterpreting Africa received significant funding from the Chancellor's Call to Action to Address Racism & Social Injustice Research grant. Though this grant's funding period ended before new exhibits were proposed, curated, and opened in the gallery, the front-end evaluation process gathered essential information and data toward realizing and sustaining the project's goals. Evaluation will continue to be incorporated into our exhibit practices, and we will revisit these evaluations in the future to measure changes in participants' expectations of the gallery and relationships with the museum. The project team will continue to brainstorm ways to update some of the pragmatic challenges the participants noticed, such as lighting in gallery spaces. In the coming year, we will launch exhibit prototyping, building directly on feedback from stakeholders and other survey responses.

The focus group participants will be invited to come back to the museum to participate in this prototyping process. They will choose objects from the collections and will share an interpretation based on their own individual experiences with the object, creating first-person narratives that connect local people, museum collections, and global stories. These prototypes will inform the eventual design of a long-term reinstatement of the entire African gallery.

The museum thanks OUR Tech, the Center for African Studies, the Chancellor's Call to Action to Address Racism & Social Injustice Research grant, and the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

You can read last year's update in the 2023 magazine at [www.spurlock.illinois.edu/pdf/about/publications/SpurlockMag-2023-2024](http://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/pdf/about/publications/SpurlockMag-2023-2024).

This material is based upon work supported by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Chancellor's Call to Action to Address Racism & Social Injustice Research Program. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, the Chancellor, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, or The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.



1. **Valentine Card.**  
United States, 19th c.  
1972.21.0006.

2. **Ayers Hair Vigor  
Advertising Card.**  
Lowell, Massachusetts,  
late 19th c. 1972.21.0068.

3. **Alden Fruit Vinegar  
Advertising Card.**  
Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1865.  
1972.21.0055.

4. **Dr. Seth Arnold's Cough  
Killer Advertising Card.**  
United States, 1865. 1972.21.0067.

5. **Christmas Card.**  
United States, 19th c.  
1972.21.0300.

All objects pictured are the  
gift of Natalia M. Belting.

# COLLECTION HIGHLIGHT

## Reading History through Advertising and Greeting Cards

by Chris Gimbel, Class of 2024, History

The Spurlock Museum holds a collection of American advertising and greeting cards from the Victorian Era. This overview offers some historical background on these pieces of ephemera.

### Advertising Cards

Art historian Robert Jay says that advertisement cards — referred to as trade cards — were unique in that it was the only messaging medium that “could reach so many households” while also being “saved and cherished by the consumers themselves.” During the 1880s, the trade card became “the most ubiquitous form of advertising in America.”

Advertisers printed trade cards with detailed and appealing designs so that their brands were more likely to be memorable for the average consumer. Children demonstrating aspirational lifestyles were also popular among young audiences. A card for Alden Fruit Vinegar shows a little girl standing on a beach near the shoreline. For girls that lived in more constraining social environments, this imagery may have been a symbol of what opportunities were available in a new industrialized era.

### Greeting Cards

The most common type of greeting card in Spurlock’s collection is the Valentine. The intimate nature of these cards enables researchers to analyze the more genuine thoughts and opinions of contemporary consumers. In sentimental Valentines, the intended messages were of a wholesome form of love, with corresponding scenes of children and animals.



A common theme among American-made Christmas cards in the 19th century was their warm and socially significant designs. For instance, the text on the card pictured here implies that it was created with the intention of being sent to loved ones over long distances.

When analyzing the marketing history of the post-industrial era, it is tempting to dismiss ephemeral items like these for their simplicity and temporary nature. But doing so also overlooks any microeconomic and sociological insights that could be found in their underlying messages. These printed advertisements can help scholars understand the mission and marketing goals of whoever commissioned them and learn what aesthetic and messaging themes appealed to consumer audiences of the time.

Read the full version of the author's research on our blog at [www.spurlock.illinois.edu/blog](http://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/blog)





# NEW ACQUISITIONS

by Dery Martínez-Bonilla

The objects pictured here are examples of gifts from generous donors in the last year. Now that they have become part of the Museum's permanent collections, they can be used in exhibits or research by students and scholars.



**Inkwell.**  
India, early 20th c.  
2023.01.0018.



**Chhaang (Beer) Horn.**  
Bhutan or Tibet, early 20th c.  
2023.01.0011.



**Crucifix.**  
Belgium, early 20th c.  
2023.01.0023.

**Ewer Coffee Pot.**  
Uzbekistan,  
19th or early 20th c.  
2023.01.0027.03.

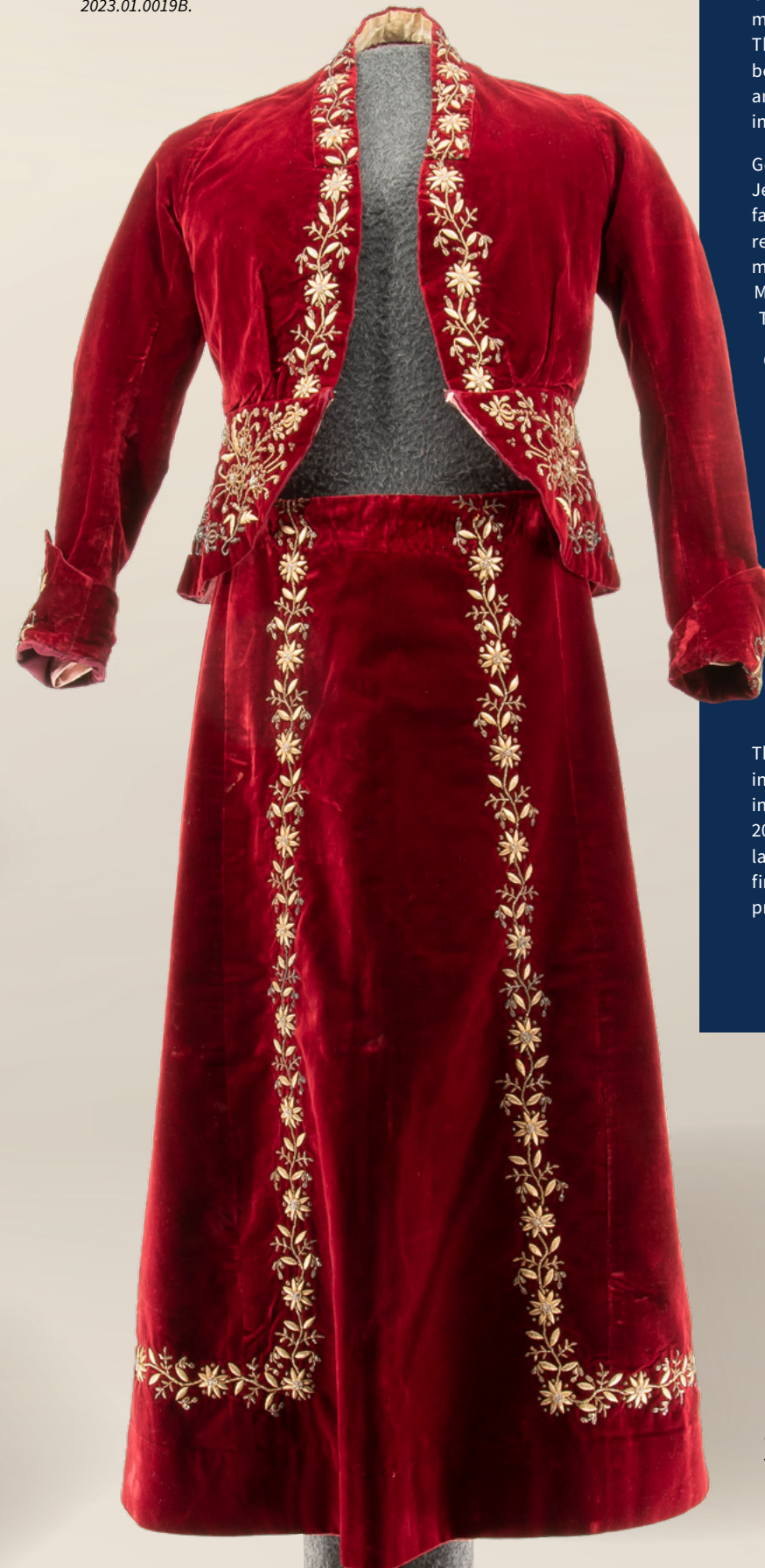
**Door.**  
Morocco, late 19th  
or early 20th c.  
2023.01.0025.



**Spice Container.**  
India, early 20th c.  
2023.01.0010.



**Bank Note: 5 Srang.**  
Tibet, early or mid 20th c.  
2023.01.0019B.



## Iraqi Velvet Wedding Garment

This two-piece red velvet hand-tailored and -embroidered garment was donated by Nathir Sara. It was worn by his mother, Layis Sa'id Barsoum, on her "henna night" in Mosul, Iraq, in May 1923, as she was preparing to get married to Georges Yousuf Sara. They were married in the Syriac Orthodox Church of Mar Toma, commonly acknowledged as the oldest church in Iraq.

The Sara and Barsoum families were residents of Mosul. Both families belonged to the Syriac Orthodox faith (an ancient Christian tradition, mostly found in the Middle East and India). The bride's uncle, Aphram Barsoum, eventually became the Patriarch of the Church of Antioch and the Entire East (the Syriac Orthodox Church in Iraq and Syria).

Georges Yousuf Sara attended college in Jerusalem where he learned about the Protestant faith to which he converted. His siblings, however, remained in the family church. At the time of the marriage, there were no Protestant churches in Mosul, and the best available venue was Mar Toma Orthodox Church.

Custom mandated eight days of extravagance to accompany the wedding. Starting on Monday a week before the wedding, close friends and immediate family members arrived at the house of the groom, and many immediately set to work to help the household with food preparation and setting up the venue for the party.

On *laylat-al-henna* (the henna night), the bride's palms (or at least the fingers) are treated with henna, then wrapped in a simple cotton cloth till the next morning. Then the single women and single men also get the henna but often on only one finger — the little finger most of the time.

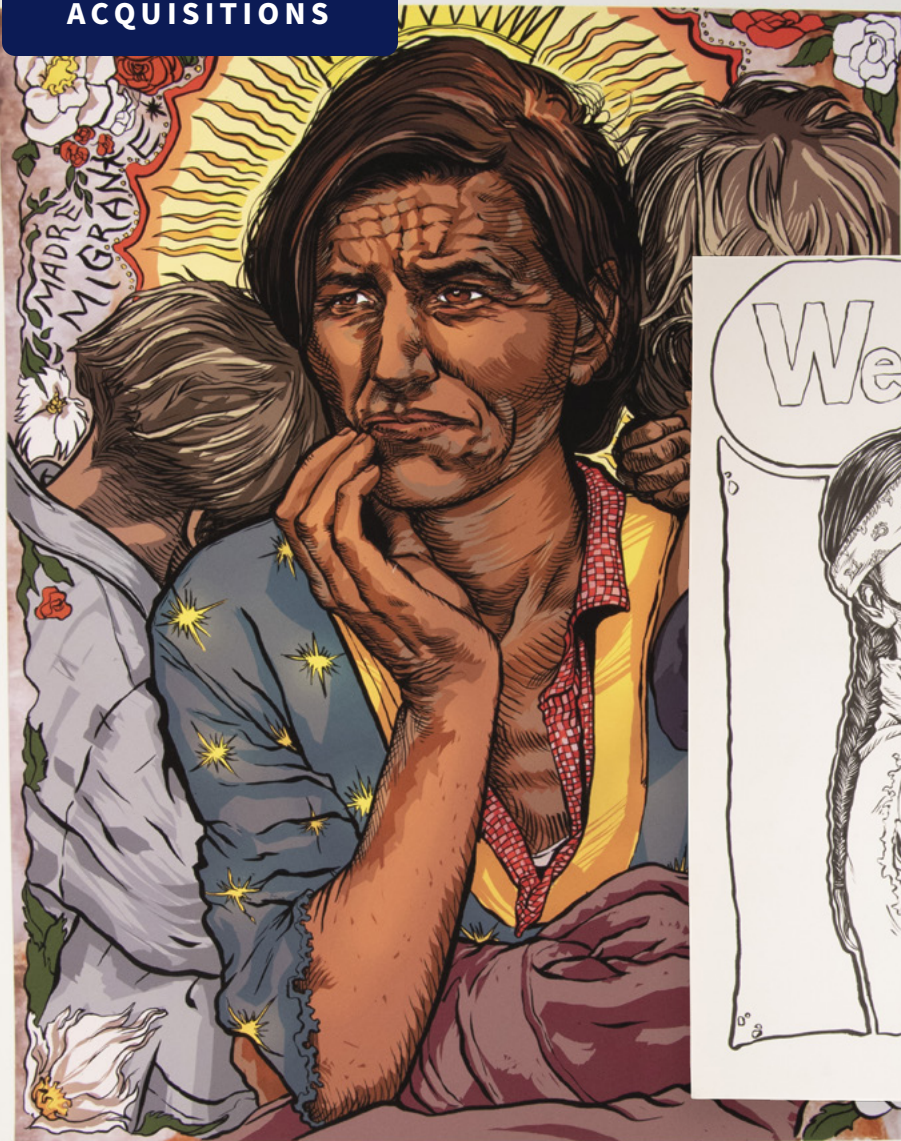
The donor's older sister, Salwa Sara Cochran, inherited the garment upon their mother's death in 1993. She immigrated to the United States in 2000 and brought it with her. Over two decades later, she sent it to the donor with the request of finding a proper place for its display and preservation. We are honored to be that place.



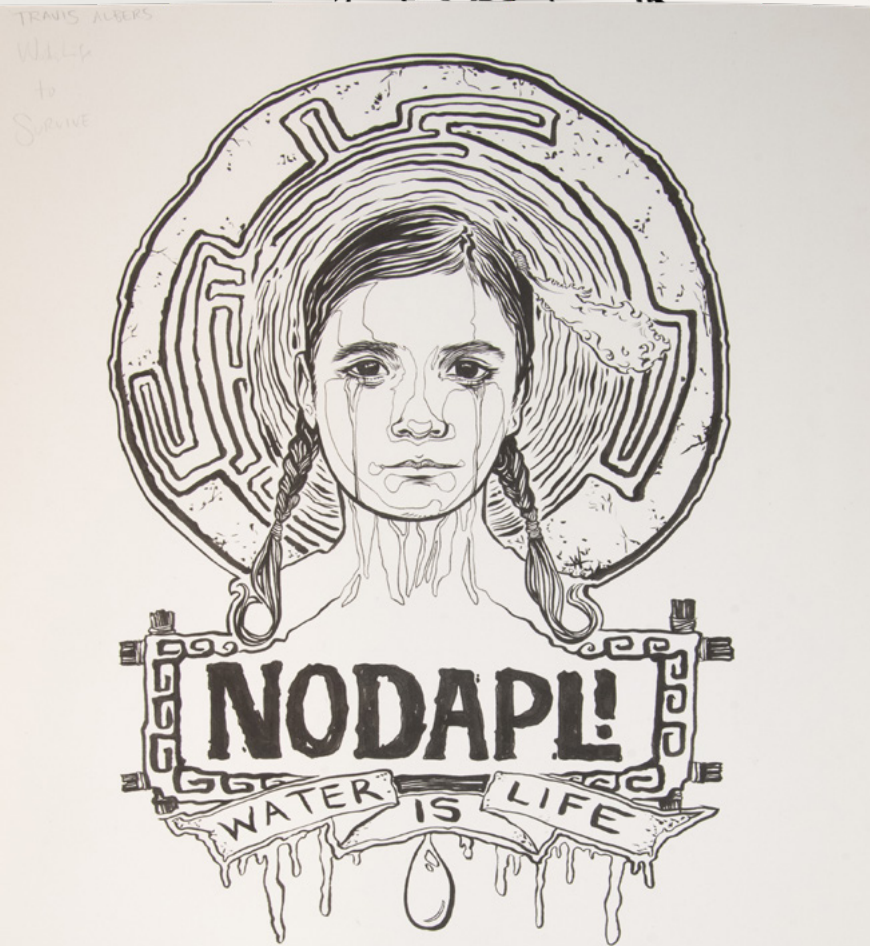
**Wedding Garments.**  
Iraq, 1923.  
2023.02.0001.

**Te-Aburi (hand warmer).**  
Japan, probably 19th c.  
2023.01.0015.





WESHOTYOT ALVITRE 2018 AP



# STORY/LINES

## Sparking Conversation with Works by Weshoyot Alvitre

by Elizabeth Sutton

We are excited to share the news that last year we applied for and were awarded money by University Chancellor Jones from the John N. Chester Fund. This award enabled us to purchase and commission several works from Native artists. One of the artists from whom we purchased important works is Weshoyot Alvitre, a comic book artist, writer, and illustrator. Her work has been featured in *Marvel Voices: Indigenous Voices* and *Deerwoman: An Anthology*. She is the illustrator for Marvel's ECHO (aka Maya Lopez) who is a member of the Cheyenne Nation and also one of very few deaf comic book characters. Alvitre's children's book illustrations in *At the Mountains Base* and *Living Ghosts and Mischievous Monsters* have received numerous awards.

Alvitre was born at the Satwiwa Native American Cultural Center in the Santa Monica Mountains of Southern California and is of Tongva (Native American Nation upon whose lands the city of Los Angeles was built) and Scottish ancestry.

Traditional knowledge inspires much of her work, and her pieces use pop-culture, sci-fi, and archival materials to explore and reframe colonial history from an Indigenous perspective. Through art, Alvitre sparks important conversations about contemporary Indigenous issues and representation.

### **We Can Sioux It! and No DAPL!**

We purchased nine of Alvitre's works that the Spurlock staff found to be significant to contemporary conversations in which our community and university students are engaged.

The first two pieces, *We Can Sioux It!* and *No DAPL* are part of Alvitre's series protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline, the No DAPL movement. The Dakota Access Pipeline Project is an underground pipeline spanning over 1000 miles to transport crude oil from North Dakota to an oil terminal near Patoka, Illinois, which is about 120 miles south of the UIUC campus. The Standing Rock Sioux and Cheyenne River Sioux Native nations opposed the project, although the path did not cross tribal lands, because the pipeline would damage several sacred sites and threatened water sources. In the United States there are approximately

2.5 million miles of pipelines that are subject to hundreds of leaks each year. As the pipelines age, the risk of ruptures increases.

In Spring of 2016, Native groups and other water protectors began protesting the pipeline in North Dakota at sites where the pipeline was being constructed. In September 2016, pipeline workers bulldozed a documented sacred site and used attack dogs to round up protesters. In October 2016, police and soldiers forcibly cleared the encampment of protesters. Construction of the pipeline was completed in 2017.

*We Can Sioux It!* is obviously reminiscent of the World War II *We Can Do It!* poster, originally produced by Westinghouse Electric in 1943, featuring the strong Rosie the Riveter figure. Created to inspire and increase morale among the female workers during the war, the image was coopted in the 1980s to promote various feminist causes. The National Archives and Records Administration reports that the poster is one of their most requested images.

Alvitre's *We Can Sioux It!* speaks to the strength of Native women in the No DAPL movement and beyond. During the No DAPL protests, this image was reproduced on posters, t-shirts, and banners.

Also reproduced on posters, t-shirts, and banners was Alvitre's *No DAPL!*, which depicts a Native American woman with a circular element behind her head. This image of a Native woman with a circular sun/moon/earth shape behind her has been seen in other art connected to work of water protectors.

### **Madre Migrante**

Alvitre's *Madre Migrante* is based on the famous *Mother Migrant* photo by Dorothea Lange. Lange captured the image of the migrant woman and her children in Nipomo, California, in 1936. During the Great Depression, people flocked to California to find work in the agricultural fields, often living in temporary encampments and moving to different fields frequently as crops ripened for harvest. Although the economy started to recover in the early 1930s, unemployment remained high until the 1940s. Alvitre's work was created in 2018 and features a woman of color and her children as the central figures. The work is intended to resonate with conversations

Clockwise from top left: **Madre Migrante**, 2018. **We Can Sioux It!**, 2016. **No DAPL!**, 2016. **Take A Knee**.

Works by Weshoyot Alvitre, purchased with funds from the John N. Chester Estate Endowment.



related to the separation of migrant mothers and children at the southern border of the United States and also the forced removal and separation of Native American children from their families over the last 500 years of American history.

**Deer Dancer Page 1**

The graphic novel *Sovereign Traces, Volume 1: Not (Just) (An) Other Anthology* was published in 2018 and paired works by contemporary Native and First Nations authors with illustrated works by artists from the US and Canada. Alvitre was selected to illustrate the poem “Deer Dancer” by Joy Harjo, the current United States Poet Laureate and member of the Mvskoke Nation. This is the first page of the illustrated poem.

**We’hey We’hey Too’koo’ro’t**

P22, called *Tukuurot* by the Tongva Tribe, was an urban mountain lion who made his home in and around Griffith Park in Los Angeles, California. From birth he was tagged and monitored by local wildlife managers because the local cougar population in the Santa Monica Mountains faces constant threats from encroachment of the city into the mountains, freeways that cut off access to their territory, and the effects of rat poison in the wildlife food chain.

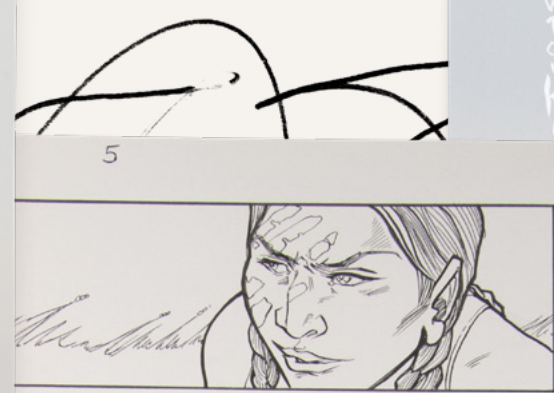
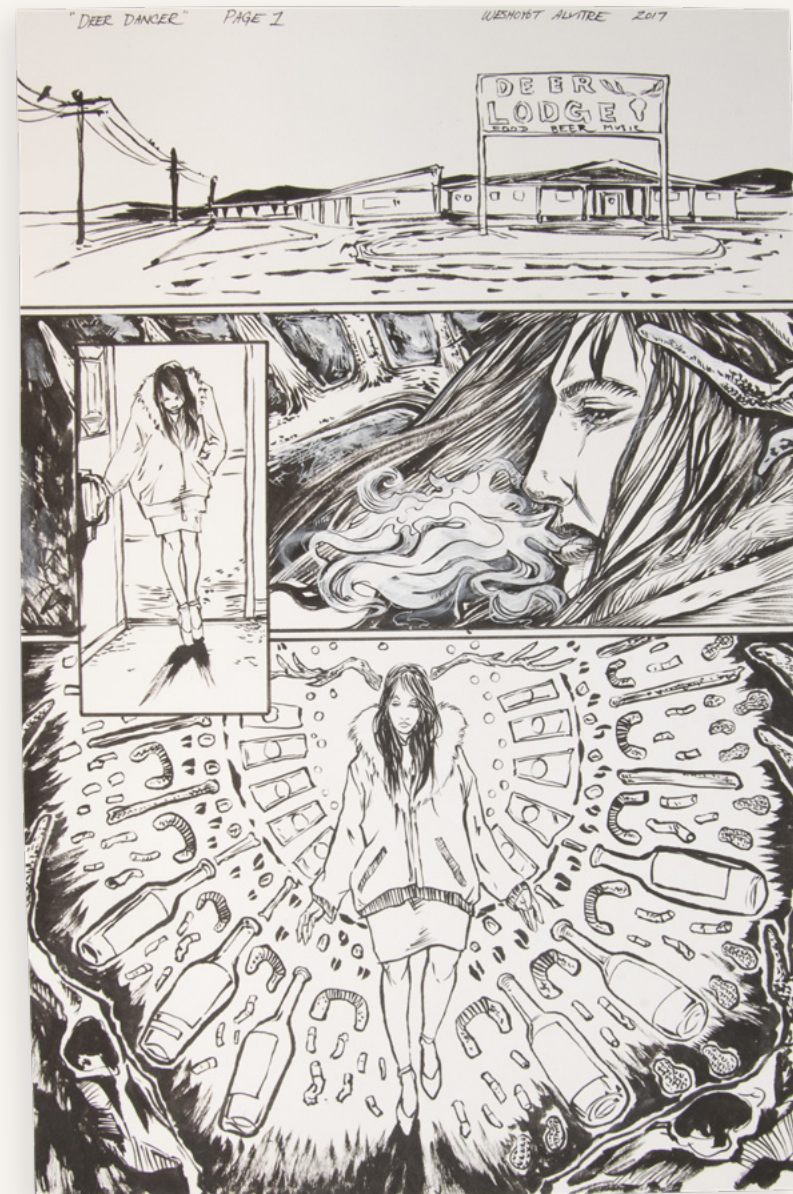
P22 was beloved in Los Angeles and was the subject of numerous books, television segments, and art. People connected to this wild animal who had adapted to the urban environment, and the city held P-22 Day on October 22 every year in his honor. In December 2022, wildlife officials decided

to euthanize P22 after he was hit by a car and was subsequently found to be suffering from a host of health issues. After his death, his body and samples taken during the necropsy were held by the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, and there had been discussions to taxidermy his body and possibly put his body on display at that Museum.

The Tongva, Chumash, and Tataviam tribes led efforts to bury him in his ancestral lands, as mountain lions are seen by these tribes as relatives and teachers. In March of 2023, he was laid to rest in the Santa Monica Mountains in a ceremony led by his Native relatives. Some of the samples taken from his body remain under the control of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

Alvitre created this work to honor Tukuurot’s memory.

*Spurlock has already been able to share many of Alvitre’s works with several university classes. We are certain that we will be able to share these important stories and images with many more members of our community during the coming year.*

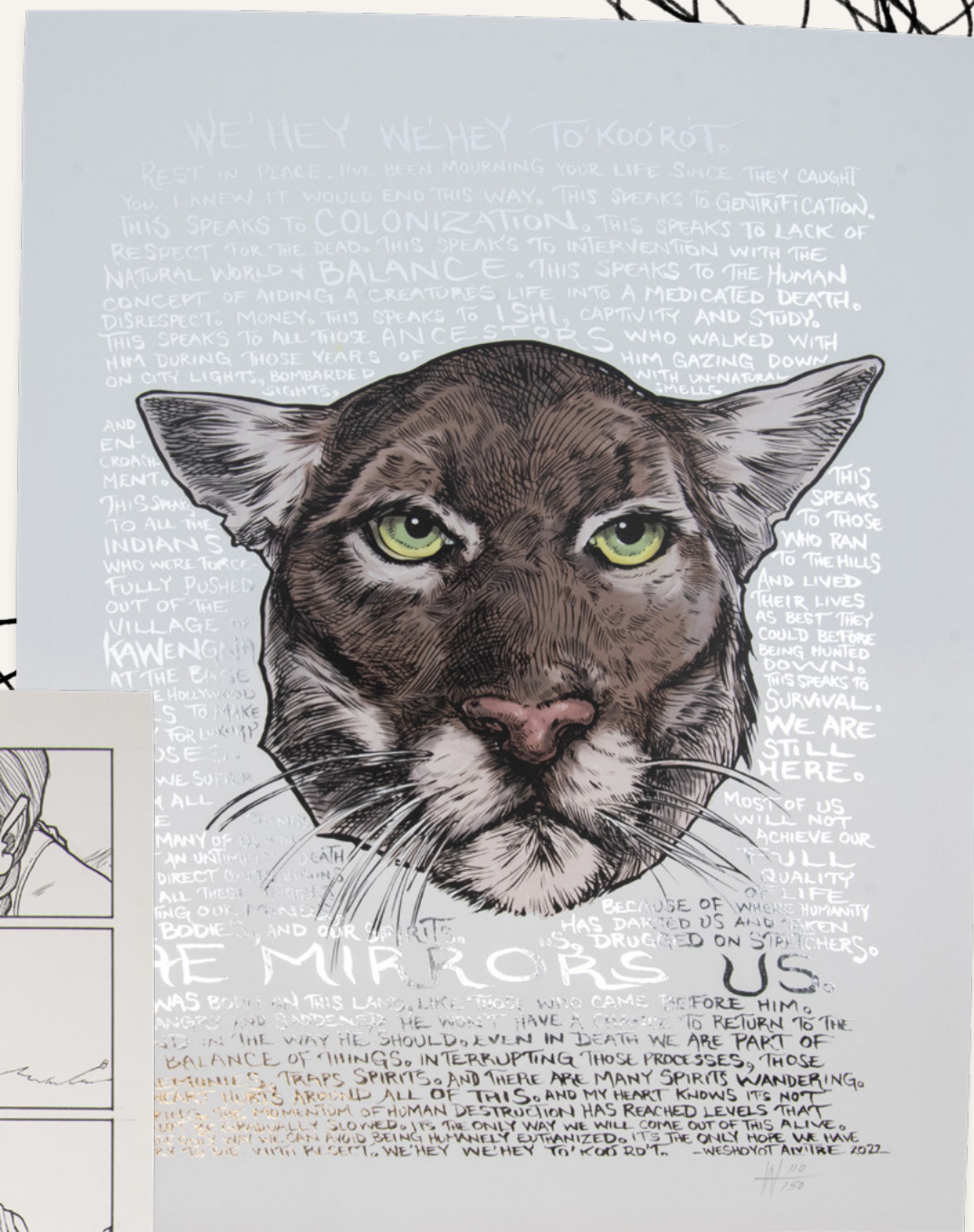


Left to right: **Deer Dancer.** From the graphic novel *Sovereign Traces, Volume 1: Not (Just) (An) Other Anthology*, 2017.

**Tovaangar: (A Seal)** is a response to the history of Los Angeles and the city seal. “Tovaangar” refers to the homelands of the Indigenous Tongva people in the area now occupied by LA.

**Marvel ECHO.** Illustrations of the Cheyenne Nation character from the Marvel comic book series.

**We-hey We-hey To’koo’ro’t.** Created to honor the urban mountain lion P22.







# STUDENT CURATORS

## CRAFTING EXHIBITS, SHAPING PERSPECTIVES

by Dery Martínez-Bonilla



**Hat.** Niger, 1980s.  
Kieffer-Lopez Collection.  
2008.22.0142.

**Architectural Fragment: Dragon.** India.  
Estate of Robert E. Brown.  
2012.07.0031.

**Pendant: Cross of Agadez.**  
Niger. Kieffer-Lopez  
Collection. 2008.22.194.

**Wallet or Bag.** Niger, 1980s.  
Kieffer-Lopez Collection.  
2008.22.0154.

**B**ecause we value our role as a teaching institution, our students undergo extensive training in various aspects of museum work. They contribute significantly to all aspects of our projects. However, much of the indispensable labor that sustains any museum remains hidden from the public eye. As one former student aptly put it, their efforts are often “invisible” to visitors.

This observation resonated deeply with me, prompting conversations with current students about their experiences at Spurlock. While they expressed satisfaction with their roles, many also wanted to engage more directly with exhibit development beyond their daily responsibilities. In recent years, some unexpected staffing shortages have led to closer collaboration between departments, particularly between Collections and Registration, with some Registration students even assisting in exhibit installations.

That’s when an idea started brewing: inspired by our Community Curator program, Spurlock could implement a similar smaller-scale program that would enable our student workers to curate a display.

Recognizing Spurlock’s evolving mission towards a more people-centric approach to all of our work, I thought it was crucial to provide new opportunities for our students to expand beyond their routine tasks. I firmly believe that we can learn just as much from our students as they can from us. I also thought it was a good way to engage our students’ interests in the museum field while also trying new ideas for displaying our collections. By allowing students to showcase their work and creativity, we not only recognize their contributions but also foster innovation within our institution.

As I began to create a plan, I discussed a potential project with some students, and their enthusiasm was palpable. They were excited at the prospect of creating a small display, which would not only showcase their learning but also challenge them to acquire new skills and deepen their appreciation for exhibit development.

The project, called Crafting Exhibits, Shaping Perspectives, provides upper-level student workers at Spurlock with the

chance to create a display or mini exhibit using museum artifacts. The student curators are expected to apply the knowledge they have acquired about artifacts during their tenure at Spurlock while also broadening their understanding of various facets of exhibit development, with guidance and support from our senior staff. Their responsibilities encompass extensive research, writing informative and engaging labels, the development of promotional and marketing materials, as well as the design and execution of an interactive component or activity that showcases their creativity and enhances the visitor experience.

Initially, each student is required to submit a proposal containing three potential exhibit topics. These topics must meet the following criteria:

**CULTURAL RESPECT**

Demonstrate respect for the cultural beliefs and sensitivities of the artifacts’ originating cultures.

**RESEARCH REQUIREMENT**

Topics must involve artifacts that need further research.

**RELEVANCE**

Does the topic fit with Spurlock’s mission and goals? Does it fill a gap in our current exhibits? Does it connect to the populations we serve?

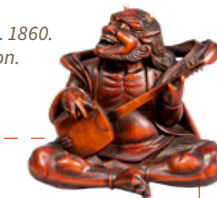
**PHYSICAL SPACE**

Chosen item(s) must fit within the designated exhibit cases.

These proposals are evaluated by members of the Exhibits Committee. Students receive constructive feedback and potential approval to proceed with one chosen topic.

Upon receiving approval, each student formalizes their commitment by signing an official Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This document outlines specific deadlines and responsibilities for both student and the museum, ensuring a clear and organized collaboration throughout the project.

**Carving: Oni.** Japan, c. 1860.  
Fred A. Freund Collection.  
2020.06.0094.



Meet our two students, Haley and Jacob, who have been working on curatorial projects.

**Haley** started working in Registration in the fall of 2021. Her current exhibit project focuses on Tuareg jewelry from North Africa and explores the importance of craft and the notions of beauty imbued within the jewelry.

**Jacob** started working in Collections in the spring of 2022. His project focuses on examining the diversity of mythical interpretation across cultures by comparing representations of dragons and demons.



**Ring: Cross of Zinder.** Niger.  
Kieffer-Lopez Collection.  
2008.22.0199.





## BUSINESS/ADMINISTRATIVE ASSOCIATE

# Karen Flesher Retires

by Beth Watkins



Not long after this magazine is printed, the museum will say a very fond farewell to our retiring Business/Administrative Associate Karen Flesher. Karen started at the museum in 2004, working part time in the business office with former Business Manager Dee Robbins and part time in the Registration section helping catalog artifacts and images. The following year, she moved into the business office full-time. Her position has duties in finance, purchasing, payroll, human resources, grant management, facilities and equipment, and many other administrative tasks.

Because the museum is a different kind of university unit — we have extensive collections, we serve the general public in addition to students, and we do not have faculty or courses of study — Karen has to figure out ways to navigate university systems that are not designed for our unique work. She works closely with our director and other staff to ensure smooth operations for our always-changing projects, and she has been an extremely organized liaison for our communications with other offices across campus and throughout the university system.

Karen graciously spent some time with me to tell us all a little more about how her work fits into the bigger picture of the museum — and what's in store for her next.

### What's one of the hardest parts of your job?

One challenge is the wide variety of tasks I encounter in a single day, frequently bouncing back and forth between business and personnel-related tasks. I may begin the day making purchases or reviewing financial reports and be forced to switch to human resources to deal with an emergent issue or the opposite. I start each day with a general plan or task list; however, it will usually be altered to address new tasks with more immediate deadlines. I rarely have the luxury of spending an entire day on a specific task or topic.

Serving as the department liaison to campus Facilities and Services can be challenging as well because I rarely know the specifics of the work needed. Incomplete or inaccurate

information makes projects more complicated and take longer to complete. Over the years, I have encouraged direct communication between our staff who can best describe the need and the facilities staff performing the work. And now we finally have a Senior Assistant Director of Operations who can take all of that on. *[Read more about our new colleague Jimmy Gonzalez in this issue.]*

### You do a lot of purchasing, and I suspect the range of supplies that we need is broader than the average academic department on campus?

Definitely! Some departments just need office supplies and computers, but we need specialized lighting, construction materials, paint, tools, cloth and thread, camera equipment, both a large freezer and a heat tent [for treating infested artifacts], matching t-shirts for front-of-house staff...plus things like art materials and catering that the public directly uses.

### You also have to send a lot of emails to keep us compliant with various regulations. Whenever there's a campus training, you remind us to do it and try to get our student staff on board too.

It seems there's always something new coming on, always a change in the process. It can be very hard to keep on top of all of that, especially with the wide range of duty areas I have. Even when the changes are beneficial, keeping proficient in procedures is tiring. I can now appreciate why the previous business manager was so exhausted when the university adopted its current software system. Whoever takes this role next will certainly need to have energy for dealing with constant change.

### Let's talk some about what projects have been memorable to you. This can be favorites — or maybe things that were really hard and when you look back you realize how impressive it was that you did them.

My work is not really focused around my own projects. The workload is fairly constant without the rushes and lulls of a more academic department. There is always something to buy, employees to add to payroll, or financial reports to review.

One thing that comes to mind is the changes necessitated by the COVID pandemic and working remotely. We were forced to consider what we were doing and move a lot of processes online, both as a unit and as a campus. These changes really have helped to make us operate more efficiently. Previously, we used a paper time sheet system for hourly employees. But with no one working in the building, we had to switch to a digital method. This switch made our subsequent transition to a digital system created by the College of Engineering and adopted by the Urbana campus much easier.

### Are there areas in which you felt that your background in anthropology and archaeology gave you a better understanding or context to your tasks?

It gives me a greater understanding of what we're doing. I appreciate the purpose of exhibits and programs, probably more than someone who only works in accounting, for example. And being interested in those areas offers a bit of a respite from the business side of my job: if there are intriguing artifacts out on the table in our cataloging area, I can go in and learn about them. My days are not always just staring at my computer.

### What are some things that you've had to learn or do that surprised you? When you look back, you think "I can't believe I did that!"

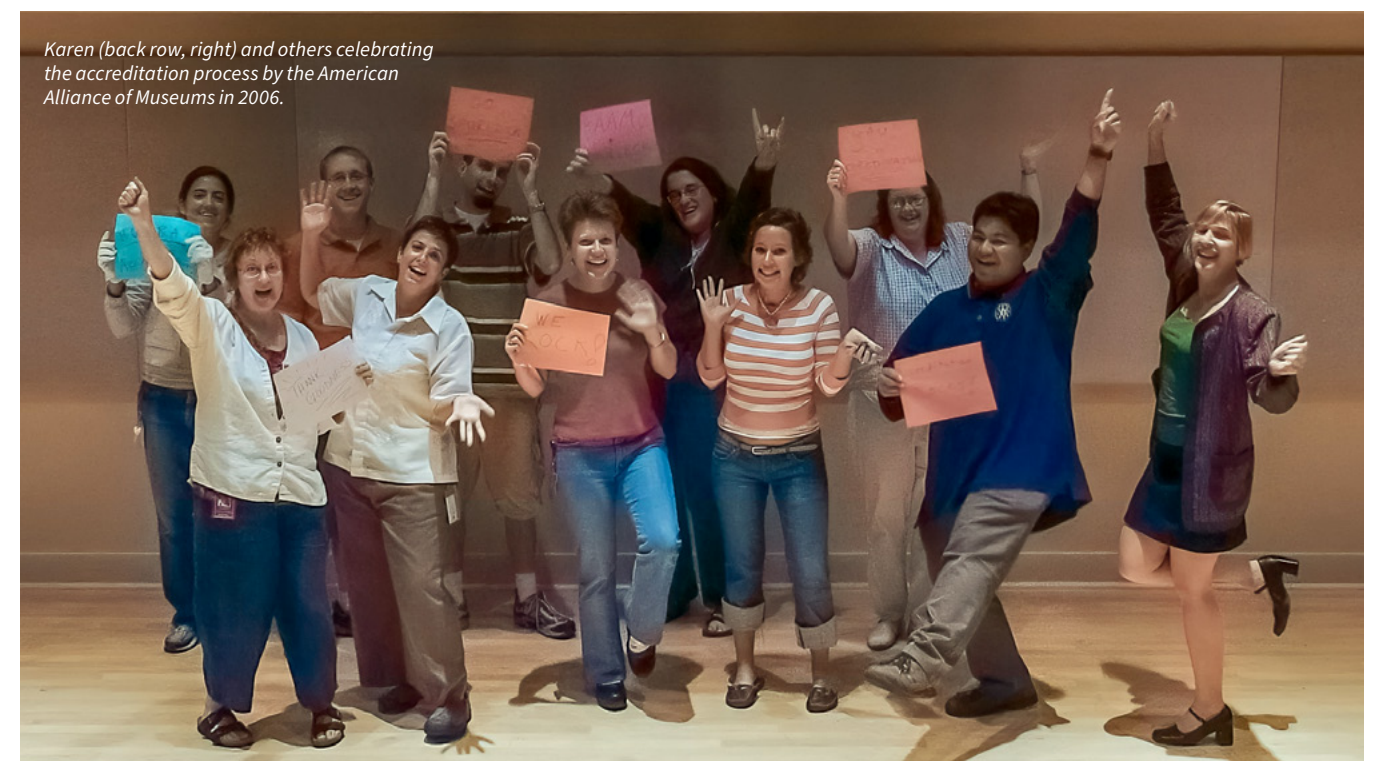
I was in one of the first groups to participate in a campus-wide certification program for research administration, which is the university term for grants. The museum doesn't write grants on the scale of some other campus units, but we still have a few at a time and they often feel complicated. It was great to have an opportunity to train in something that will really help you in your job, even if it's not a huge piece of what you do.

**Your job is a little bit like “don't ask the magician to explain their tricks”: we can't see inside the black box where processes happen. The university's systems seem so mysterious to many of us, but we know they are the means to the ends that we want. You are the person who actually makes things happen! And very kindly, you are not saying how frustrating we are because we don't realize how long it can take to work that magic, so we don't get you involved as early as we should, or we don't have all of the necessary information assembled to process a request. You have so much patience!**

“We have such a varied array of projects and needs because the museum is always trying new things, so there are often new components for me too. No one really knows to ask a question ahead of time because we don't know what we don't know yet.”

I can spend a significant portion of the day researching what we are allowed to do and how to do it. We are changing rapidly, at least for a museum. It is frustrating that I don't have much time to utilize what I've learned from one project before there's another project with slightly different requirements or processes. However, I know our stretching is for good reasons.

Our community exhibit program has been especially challenging because people from outside of campus, understandably, have an even steeper learning curve than the rest of us. They haven't experienced the university/state purchasing and contract systems before. They have great ideas, but we can't always make them happen. This is why one of our colleagues



Karen (back row, right) and others celebrating the accreditation process by the American Alliance of Museums in 2006.



calls me “the dream squasher.” However, keeping us compliant with state and university policies and procedures is an important part of my job.

Ideally, my successor will be excited about being a problem-solver. I’ve met people like that around campus — people who love having a new set of challenges every day and have genuine enthusiasm for that aspect of this work.

**We joke that our Manager of Events, Brian Cudiamat, is the air traffic controller for how our public spaces are used. He keeps the calendars and he knows what equipment is available in which spaces, how visitors use spaces during events, etc. You have those same powers about purchases, which is so much more than ordering a box of paper.**

Paying for goods and services makes our work possible, especially the more we’re trying to compensate people for sharing their knowledge, helping with programming, and lending objects for exhibits. It’s the same magic of moving resources around and finding ways to make ideas possible. And there’s so much minutiae!

**Moving to more personal topics...we’re really going to miss you as a human being! A lot of us eat lunch together and chat in the office hallway. I wonder what it’s like to leave a place where you have a good time together at work. And you’re one of the nine of us who have gotten Liberal Arts and Sciences staff awards — we’re literally an award-winning team! What are some of the fun moments that have happened for you?**

I enjoy our lunch outings. They are an opportunity to get a better sense of your co-workers as people. We also get to meet so many amazing people through our work, the different community members and scholars we meet through exhibits and events. Our board members have fascinating lives.

I also have fond memories of the field trips we’ve taken. We’ve been to the Hellenic Museum in Chicago, the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures at the University of Chicago [formerly the Oriental Institute], the Field Museum to see the Tut exhibit. Seeing what other museums are doing is definitely one of the fun perks of working here!

*Karen receiving the LAS Staff Award from Dean Venetria Patton in 2022.*



*Karen (right) with Registration colleagues.*

**What are your thoughts so far about how you’ll spend your days once retired?**

My elderly parents in North Carolina need more help. I hope to convince them to return to Illinois where I can offer more support. Travel is another goal. My husband and I have friends from coast to coast, some we have never visited in their current locations. We both want to explore more of Illinois, too. At home, I’m looking forward to getting back to knitting, sewing, and painting. I did a lot of watercolor when I was younger but haven’t touched it since college. And I want to learn how to make a decent pie crust. I was going to say “perfect” but I’m not that ambitious.

**The internet’s advice on pie crust is so vast. “Ice!” “No ice!” “Vodka!” “No vodka!”**

“Vinegar!” “No vinegar!”

**You are a person who’s always game to go try a new restaurant. Are you at all inspired to try to cook some different things once you have more time?**

Definitely. We do have several cookbooks from cuisines around the world that I want to dig into, particularly Thai and Indian. I want to explore every international grocery store in Champaign-Urbana.

**We’ll all come meet you there and then go get lunch! Is there anything else you’d like to add?**

I’ve always been proud of what we do. The role we play in the community is very important. There are times when bringing a project to fruition is very challenging.

“The staff’s devotion to the museum’s mission is admirable. Being a contributor to what the museum has accomplished is very satisfying.”

**It’s important to me that people who are significantly behind the scenes, like you and some of our students, also get to see their names on what we do, because ultimately it’s all for public audiences, whether on campus or in town or further afield.**

This conversation brings to mind something I don’t think I’ve experienced anywhere else: I have never ever felt unappreciated here at the museum. Sometimes people aren’t happy with my responses to their requests, but I’ve never felt that what I do is taken for granted or that I am unappreciated. And that’s an amazing thing to realize.

## NEW STAFF

# Introducing Jimmy Gonzalez

## SENIOR ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS

by Beth Watkins

In March, the museum welcomed Jimmy Gonzalez into a brand-new position on our staff. This position is responsible for the strategic development and implementation of business operations, financial policies and reporting, and facilities management. It also involves the complicated task of being the primary contact for all issues relating to the physical care of our building, which is now 25 years old and beginning to show its age. Jimmy also serves as deputy to the Director and actively promotes and implements the Director’s initiatives, leads and coordinates the day-to-day museum operations, and advances our mission and core values. He joined Spurlock after a career in industry and most recently at the University Oak Street Library.

**What is it like getting used to working in a museum? You’ve really jumped right into the deep end of some of the work we do.**

Exciting! As a kid, I was always out digging stuff and trying to find artifacts. My grandmother was part Pueblo, and I have always had an interest in cultural history. I didn’t turn out to be an archaeologist, but here I am working in a museum!

**Have you gotten to do much directly with artifacts yet?**

I’ve got to observe the Collections team, and I’ve been sitting in on the museum preservation class that Christa Deacy-Quin and John Holton teach. It’s introduced me to so much of the behind-the-scenes big picture at Spurlock. For example, going to the class helped me understand why integrated pest management is so crucial, even in an emergency situation, but most importantly how we take care of the objects in our stewardship.

**You joined us right before we found out we have been reaccredited by the**

**American Alliance of Museums after their site visit to us in December [see Director Elizabeth Sutton’s letter in this issue]. Was there anything in the report or from that review process that has been a surprise to you?**

I was so impressed with all the thought that went in. Not just from one individual, obviously, but from the entire team. Everybody came together and provided input to make this process successful.

**One of the things I think about a lot is safety — that’s part of my job here and has been a big part of my work in industry. Here everything works like a well-oiled machine. But clearly a lot of work has already been done here to get us where we are now.**

**Have you discovered anything in your job so far that feels like it really ought to be a higher priority than we thought it would be?**

I see room for me to do a lot as a specialist advocate for some of these tasks, particularly the infrastructure of the building. Doing a walk-through with the campus capital planning committee

was an eye-opening experience: the roof, for example, has reached its lifespan and needs help, not because anyone neglected it, but just because it’s a roof that is outside in Midwestern weather. There are other pieces like that — the water heater, our backup generators — that have reached their lifespan.

**What’s one of the hard things about being new?**

The lingo. I’m always asking people “What do you mean by that?” I really value our staff meetings where people share what they’re working on. It gives us all a chance to think about how each piece of our work impacts everyone else — and to think about those questions together. Each meeting means that more potential issues can be anticipated and managed more smoothly. There are so many pieces of the puzzle. We have front-of-house work, behind-the-scenes work, long- and short-term exhibits, public spaces, secure spaces...it’s a little of everything.

**My master’s degree is in HR education, and I’ll be using a lot of that here. It’s important to focus on values of being respectful, collaborative, and empathetic. There was such a strong focus on that, especially here at the university.**

**I know you’re not new to campus. What are some of the features of working on campus that you like?**

I think the mix of people here — not just staff but also the students — helps tremendously because we get new perspectives. But we also have really tenured staff who can share the back story of many aspects of the building and procedures and how we fit into bigger campus projects and organization. People are really invested in making sure that we build our team carefully and that we work well together. I’m excited to see what the future holds. I’m excited at the potential that I’m going to be a part of. There’s so much interesting work to come. It’s a good time to be here!



*Jimmy and his favorite gallery space — the Ancient Mediterranean. “There is something so powerful about this gallery for me. It really adds that wow factor.”*



Left-Right kneeling: Brian Cudiamat, Robbie Plank. Front row: Yesenia Adrianzen, Natalie Reed, "Jack Granat", "Eve Mehl", "Noelle Johnson", "Zethiana Vargas", Alexandria Stratton, Isabel Iocca, Molly Cooper Willis, Sam Mean, Ioanna Lee. Back row: Emmett Zumerchik, Sam Williams, Jane Marsey, Christian Larson, Norah Harson, "Fen Nyberg", "Jadzia Taborski", Devin Manley, Rudy LaFave, Michael Zimmerman, Julie Matuszewski, Finn Maher, Kari Adams.



## Behind the Scenes In Front of House

by Devin Manley, Class of 2024, History

Sometimes museum publications highlight the people who work behind the scenes where visitors never go. In this issue, we chose to highlight one of our student staff who is almost entirely in the public eye — but as with many jobs, if he and his colleagues are successful at their tasks, you barely notice them. **Graduating senior Devin Manley** shares his experience at our information desk and in running events.

I have only worked as a Visitor Services Assistant at Spurlock for over a year, yet I feel like I have been here forever. As part of Spurlock's front-of-house student staff, I help work the information desk by greeting visitors when they arrive and answering any questions they may have. I also work at various events at the museum by maintaining the sound booth, bringing microphones to audience members for Q&A sessions, helping with staging and lighting, and aiding event hosts in any task they ask.

This job at Spurlock was my first job ever and was not at all what I expected it to be. I had never worked with technology in my life, and, quite frankly, I was extremely technologically illiterate when I first started working here. However, some of the outgoing seniors with longer experience quickly took me in, and I slowly began to get the hang of things. You will never find a job more fun than this one. (Unless you happen to work at a circus or take over Manager of Events Brian Cudiamat's job — in that case, disregard this statement.) In the short amount of time that I have worked here, I have supervised a drag show, seen a falconry demonstration, worked the tech for a PhD recital, and screened films for a semester-long Media and Cinema Studies class, among many, many other events. The sheer variety of these events means that there is always something fun to do, no matter what week it is.

Being part of the "First Flood Squad" means more than just being coworkers with our great staff: it means forming life-long friendships too. Everyone here has such different backgrounds, interests, and skills to bring to the table. What other job can

you become friends with amazing people and learn valuable skills while also having fun? That's what makes working at Spurlock so special. It is because of my time here that I have the confidence in myself to try new things, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes. I learned how to supervise large events, keep a disciplined and punctual schedule, communicate as a liaison between event hosts and museum staff, and recognize when someone else may need help. Oh, and it is safe to say I am not as tech illiterate as I used to be anymore (although I still cannot work Zoom)!

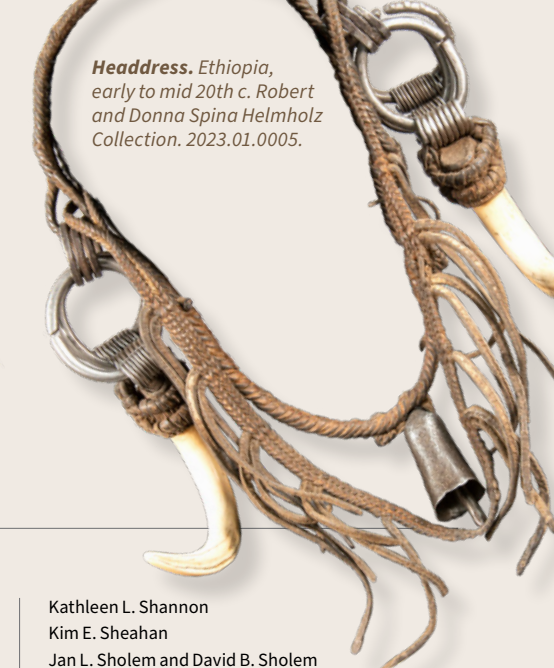
Some of my favorite memories from my time as an undergraduate student have been here at the museum. I will never forget the fun I had at our student gala. To be able to see all your coworkers and friends taking time to wind down, dress up, dance, enjoy some food, and get some group photos is such a fun memory to hold onto. Our staff truly cares about each other. I will never forget my time at Spurlock and will be forever grateful to the people I have met and the skills I have gained here.



L-R: Norah Harson, Julie Matuszewski, Devin Manley, Michael Zimmerman, Brian Cudiamat (front).

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