

Anthropologists Turn to Museums

"The degree of integrity of old museum collections is often underestimated."

If it is true, as Anne-Marie Cantwell of Rutgers University in Newark once read, that the major difference between anthropologists and sociologists is that anthropologists have museums, then, she says, anthropologists should pay more attention to what they have collected. Anthropologists have tended to ignore museums as a source of research data, preferring instead to do traditional fieldwork.

Cantwell, who, along with James B. Griffin of the University of Michigan and Nan Rothschild of Hunter College, organized a recent conference* on the potential use of museum collections in anthropological research, is convinced that anthropologists' attitudes toward these collections will have to change. Funds for fieldwork are becoming scarce. There are fewer and fewer primitive people to observe. And, increasingly, many countries no longer allow American archeologists to dig on their lands. Says Donald Thomas of the American Museum of Natural History, "There may still be a stigma attached to armchair anthropology, but it's no longer a righteous stigma."

As an example of what can be done with a dispersed and largely undocumented collection, James Brown of Northwestern University tells of a 14-year project directed by Philip Phillips, who is a retired curator at Harvard's Peabody Museum. The project involves studying artifacts from Spiro Mound in Oklahoma—an Indian burial site and principal ceremonial center that dates back to between 1200 and 1300 A.D.

Spiro Mound was discovered in 1933 by several unemployed men looking for artifacts to sell. They bought a 2-year lease to dig there and found that the mound was indeed a treasure trove, containing textiles, pottery, engraved shell cups, burial baskets and other valuable artifacts. The men sold the artifacts both at the site and through the mail. At one time, says Brown, they found a skeleton which was held together by dried remnants of tendons and flesh. They kept the skeleton in a wheelbarrow and charged curiosity-seekers to view it. Eventually, the skeleton fell apart and they discarded it. Fifteen months after the men began

digging at Spiro Mound, Oklahoma passed a law to force them to stop.

Phillips, Brown, and others studying the Spiro Mound collection have located a large portion of these artifacts in museums and private collections across the country. They were aided in their search because the more than 500 engraved shell cups at the site, which seem to have been intentionally broken by the Indians and buried with the dead, have distinctive scorch marks on them. The researchers make rubbings of the cups whenever they find them. Then, like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle, they piece together the engravings. Other Spiro artifacts can be identified because they have shell dust, green clay, or textile fibers clinging to them.

"We have learned more than we would ever have hoped," says Brown. The engravings on the shell cups depict scenes from the Indians' ceremonial life, and the clothing and tools seen in the engraving often are identical to those dug up at the site.

restored. He later discovered, to his dismay, a drawing of what the bowl had looked like before it was put on exhibit. Where there is now a swastika was once just the four outer lines of the symbol. Someone at the museum had painted in connecting lines to "improve the merchandise," Freed says.

Then there is the touchy problem of valuable artifacts that are simply gotten rid of for lack of space. Griffin tells several horror stories. One such destruction, he says, took place at a southern university that decided to dispose of animal skeletons found in the United States and dating back to about 3000 B.C. The bones were ground up into meal and spread over the lawn of the chairman of the anthropology department.

Yet, says Griffin, the problem of caring for collections is a serious one. "There is no museum or anthropology department in the country that has adequate space or manpower to care for its collections." Should anthropologists

But research with museum collections has its problems. Valuable artifacts may be altered, destroyed, or allowed to deteriorate.

But Spiro Mound may be an exception. In other cases, it is usually far more difficult to extract information from dispersed and poorly documented artifacts.

Museum collections vary enormously in quality. According to Bert Salwen of New York University some collections at even the best institutions are in terrible shape. Valuable artifacts have been placed in cardboard boxes, for example, and then stored in wet areas. Beetles have eaten seeds and cloth fibers, says Donald Fowler of the University of Nevada. And, says Stanley Freed of the American Museum of Natural History, artifacts often are "restored" or "improved" with no notation given that such alterations have taken place. For example, says Freed, in the course of his own research on the origins of the swastika symbol, he came across an ancient Sumerian bowl in a European museum. At the center of an elaborate pattern on the bowl was a perfect swastika. There was no indication that the bowl had been

then, like pack rats, continue to insist that all artifacts be saved? Salwen thinks not, saying that formal policies should be set on disposing of material. Although it is a touchy subject, institutions regularly destroy, give away, or sell artifacts in a fairly haphazard way. He suggests adopting a policy of sampling, similar to what anthropologists do in the field. It usually is infeasible to bring back every sample and artifact that can be found at a site, so anthropologists judiciously select representative ones. Museum curators should do the same and cull their collections, he says.

As funds for museums get tighter, predicts Thomas, there will be increasing pressure on museums to put their efforts into moneymaking traveling exhibits rather than into caring for collections. It is not clear what will happen to these collections, but, as a source of research data, museum collections are becoming nearly all many anthropologists have.

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*The Conference on the Research Potential of Museum Collections was sponsored by the New York Academy of Sciences and was held on 25 to 27 February in New York.