

A Report from the Mountmaking Forum

Friday, March 28, 2008

Auditorium, The Getty Villa

This is a report to members of PACIN who were unable to attend this event. Below is a list of the papers presented at the event followed by my typically windy account of what transpired (impatient folk please just skip to the end for the brass tacks).

The Papers:

Working with People Real and Fabricated: Complexities and Solutions for Mannequins with Mounted Accessories at the National Museum of the American Indian

Shelly Uhlir, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington D.C.

Metal Smithing Techniques for Mountmaking

Peter Schilling, Harvard University Art Museums, Boston

Mount Receiving Mechanisms for Safe and Graceful Object Installation

Jamie Hascall, New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, Santa Fe

Study and Display Mount for Ur Lyre

Howard Clemenko, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

(Presented by Richard Hard of Cookes Crating)

Cast Bronze Mounts for Temporary Exhibitions

Mark Mitton and Adrienne Pamp, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

A Mountmaker's Guide to the Seattle Art Museum Expansion

Jack Mackey and Gordon Lambert, Seattle Art Museum, Washington

Organizing and Preparing Mounts for A Museum-wide Renovation and Reinstallation

James Storm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan

A Mountmaker's Solutions for the New Denver Art Museum Addition

Steve Osborne, Denver Art Museum, Colorado

Mounts at Winterthur

Kathan Lynch, Winterthur Museum, Delaware

The Application of Dense Foam in the Reconstruction of an Etruscan Chariot

Frederick Sager, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Isolation Systems at the J. Paul Getty Museum

BJ Farrar and David Armendariz, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

If in reading the topics above, you found your interest peaked I am very happy to report to that the quality that the titles hint at was exceeded by the actual content presented throughout this day-long event. There was information presented that could be of real value to mountmakers at any career level as well as to professionals participating in a wide range of related disciplines within the collections care field.

Just in terms of folks I had occasion to speak with, I encountered mount makers from other institutions, preps, conservators, registrars and commercial art services providers.

About some of the papers :

Of the topics presented, two focused on methods using foam substrates. The first illustrated systems designed for custom mannequin construction developed by Shelly Uhlir of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. Designs utilized the mannequins form itself to create support for heavy and fragile garments and other utilitarian objects thereby acting in lieu of separate, more complex mounts.

A second was offered in a case study presented by Frederick Sager of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Frederick's mount embodied an exquisite degree of reversibility in the mounting of thin bronze panels held in place in some cases with original nails. The effect resulted from the use of 9 lb Ethafoam as a substrate for the most complete Etruscan chariot ever assembled (currently on display in NYC) and it allowed for the removal of the nails (if required at some future date) with only fingernails as tools.

This seemed to be a popular presentation but at this point I would like to point out that as inspiring as the subtleties of the perfectly matched tones of foam and wood components seen in this mount were to so many in the crowd, the scratching sound of pens and pencils was almost tangible at the mention of the gesso product he uncovered that is especially suited to adhere to polyethylene foam. The inner geek is nourished in such an environment.

You want to know what it was don't you? You can't help yourself. Just admit it.

James Storm from the Detroit Museum presented an inspiring accomplishment in the completion of an astounding number of quality mounts in a spare timeframe with surprisingly meager resources. A tip of the hat here from someone who appreciates the genius of efficiency. He exemplifies a most underrated quality – and one that demonstrates real professionalism in my book – the ability to do the most with the least. In this case I don't even think he knew how impressive many in the audience found the account of his project.

Even 2D work becomes a mount making challenge when none of your walls even approach plumb. Steve Osborne's account of installing artwork in the Hamilton building of the Denver Art Museum makes the Guggenheim's gentle spiral look like a cake walk.

The facility which opened in 2006 manages to be at once, every installation tech's nightmare scenario and at the same time becomes strangely intriguing – along the line of “Just what would I do?” For me the result was an odd mixture of envy and admiration for both the opportunity/challenge and the resulting solutions illustrated.

Of course the Getty's forte – mounts designed by their antiquities department to mitigate the transmission of seismic force to vulnerable objects – was as impressive as we have come to expect. We were updated on developments of this ongoing investigation to perfect systems to help protect some of the world's most vulnerable art objects. Mountmakers from the Getty Center focused on what would at first seem to be a contradiction – making cast bronze mounts on the fly.

One of the more engaging presentations for me personally, Jamie Hascall's presentation offered a mixture of the mundane and the profound. I must clarify that by saying that I use the word mundane in the best sense of the word. This is a talk that literally spoke on the level of nuts and bolts (yes, specific hardware) and at the same time addressed one of the most significant and challenging issues we face as practitioners of the most dynamic aspects of preventive conservation. His presentation focused on the need to facilitate the safe handling of objects as they are being installed by anticipating potential risks and minimizing them through the mount design itself. In doing so I would say that he suggests an elegance of design that transcends the more superficial or cosmetic design considerations of mountmaking.

Of course, as a packer who basically installs things for a living, mine is a natural response. There is a particular kind of beauty in the design of multi-function mounting systems. In other words mounts that, with necessary augmentation, integrate an object's needs by acting as its display, handling, packing, and storage mount all within one design.

Getting back to the more tangible, the presentations themselves were augmented by discussion periods with a relaxed tone that reflected the comfortable atmosphere created by the forum's hosts.

One particular discussion that stands out for me involved the disappearance from the market of a material that has been finding an increasing popularity for use in the precision forming of mount interfaces and even in some cases for super accurate crating braces. This Epoxy-type product originally known as "Pliacre" and more recently sold as "Phillyseal" will apparently no longer be manufactured.

Numerous materials either in use or being investigated by different mountmakers in attendance were discussed. The Getty's mountmakers already hot on the trail, promised to investigate the materials and report back to the attendees (Oddy testing as a methodology is widely available to many institutions, but less so are the types of inquiries that relate to a materials tensile or compressive strength – issues of particular significance to mountmakers in a seismically active area).

OK, if you have stuck with me this long here is the reward.

By far and away the most significant aspect of this event and what makes it more than just another great thing that most of us missed is that it is meant to be the genesis of something greater. The organizers ended the event with an announcement and an invitation. The aim is for the Mountmaking Forum to become an ongoing series of events as well as a sort of evolving entity comprised of interested professionals within the field. I, myself, cannot speak for the group and do not know where the details stand exactly at this point – indeed I suspect that they are developing day by day. What I can do is to pass on to you, from them, an invitation. If you wish to be a part of this new endeavor as a mountmaker or as a practitioner in a related field, the first step of the opportunity can be found below in the form of email addresses for three of the players involved.

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Now is a good point to mention that in addition to the three above who acted as presenters, moderators, provided introductions, as well as Mark Mitton and Addriane Pamp, there are a group of other mount makers in different departments of the Getty Museum, like Lynne Kaneshiro in paper conservation, who have contributed to this effort behind the scenes. The permissions and encouragement to do so must also be credited to the heads of conservation for these departments including Brian Considine, head of Decorative Arts and Sculpture conservation at the Getty Center and especially to Jerry Podany, head of Antiquities conservation at the Getty Villa.

Finally some serious acknowledgement needs to go to David Bomford – Associate Director, J. Paul Getty Museum who I have been told is really one of us.

Ultimately the life of any event comes from the folks who show up. It was an outstanding group and I look forward to seeing many of you when the next opportunity arises. I hope as well to see PACIN members who couldn't make it this time but will hopefully be able to attend in the future.

In the mean time we will keep you posted.

T. Ashley McGrew
Lead Preparator
J. Paul Getty Museum