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I am the Fowler/Van Santvoord Keeper of Near Eastern Collections at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology. It's a mouthful to say on an answering machine, and it doesn't quite explain what I do. At the most basic level, you could describe my work as "collections management," but being a keeper is so much more than that. In this brief document, I'll go through a few typical days inside the collections at the Penn Museum so that you can best understand that no two days look alike, and that is why I enjoy my job so much!

The collections at the Penn Museum are vast. I have the honor of overseeing artifacts that range from the Neolithic Period to the Ottoman Empire, from the Levant, ancient Iran, and Mesopotamia. The Near Eastern collection numbers around 300,000, and all but about 200 of these objects came from the Penn Museum's excavations in the Middle East. Penn has supported archaeological projects around the world for more than one hundred years. As a field archaeologist, I have worked at various museum excavations in Italy, Syria, and Israel over the last twenty years.

My undergraduate degree in Classical and Near Eastern Archaeology is from Bryn Mawr College. I earned my graduate degree in Art History from Southern Methodist University. I had the benefit of learning both Classical and Near Eastern sites, sculpture, and ceramics in the classroom as well as in the field; and, more importantly, I learned how to research and discuss these same materials in a broader sense to a diverse audience.

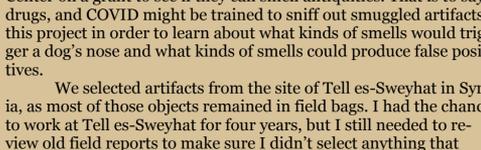
It sounds as if my studies were diverse, but not really. I couldn't discuss Manet to save my life.

Day One

One of my favorite things about my job is working with researchers. I like to say that in the Venn Diagram of the museum's collections and the researcher's interests, my area of expertise is the overlap. Because our excavated collections aren't always fully catalogued, some of the objects in my charge might not appear in the online database. A researcher might not know they exist. To this end, I always try to find not only what the researcher asked for, but also relevant artifacts I know we possess. This means that for each scholar, I get to learn something new about objects in our collection.

The Penn Museum has a researcher room that hosts up to four scholars. The Near Eastern section of the researcher room is booked six to nine months ahead of time. Most of my researchers are finishing degrees from universities across the globe. They obtain grants to come and study our materials for long periods of time. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 had a Hungarian scholar scheduled for a three-month residence, a German for four months, and an Italian for two weeks (returning after a previous five-month stay in 2019!). We request a month's notice so that we have time to locate objects, move the artifacts, and confirm there is space in the researcher room. No one books a ticket until I have inked them into the museum calendar.

On this particular day, I received a research request that posed a different kind of challenge. This individual wanted to see Mycenaean ceramics from two different sites. One site is published with field numbers and museum accession numbers. This part of the request was easy. As for the other site, even he knew it would be difficult. The second locale has a publication from 1933 featuring black-and-white photographs of objects that are, in fact, very colorful. This site's archaeologists didn't use a field number system, so I had no way of tracking those publication images to boxes and boxes full of pottery sherds. We're talking thousands of sherds!



Left: Black-and-white images from publication juxtaposed with corresponding painted sherds in the Penn Museum collection.

That means I have to rely on all those years I studied ceramics, both in the field and in the classroom. I have to be able to look in a box of sherds and determine if they are from the same time period as the imported pottery under scrutiny in the researcher's project. I have to examine hundreds of pieces to determine if the fabric looks right, if the thickness is correct, if the painting technique matches what he is requesting. And, because of all those years of studying tiny pieces of broken objects, I was able to match 95% of the researcher's request

Day Two

The curator in charge of my section has been asked to work with the university's Working Dog Center on a grant to see if they can smell antiquities. That is to say, dogs that can detect cancer, drugs, and COVID might be trained to sniff out smuggled artifacts at airports. I was asked to work on this project in order to learn about what kinds of smells would trigger a dog's nose and what kinds of smells could produce false positives.

We selected artifacts from the site of Tell es-Sweyhat in Syria, as most of those objects remained in field bags. I had the chance to work at Tell es-Sweyhat for four years, but I still needed to review old field reports to make sure I didn't select anything that might come from a trench featuring human remains. We know dogs can find the bodies of missing people. What we needed to prove was whether a dog could detect ancient pottery. In addition to ceramics, I also had to provide "contact" smells that might trigger a false positive: ambient air from Penn collections, the plastic bag containing the pot sherds, and jewelry I bought in Aleppo that smells like me (the person that had handled the artifacts most). It was fascinating!

Before anything, I had to appeal to our Scientific Testing Committee to request permission to physically sample and select the artifacts for the project. Despite the "fun" aspect of the premise, this was a genuine scientific study, and the illicit trade in antiquities remains a serious problem around the world. To be sure, I also wanted to meet the dogs and witness the tests.

Lo and behold, dogs can smell antiquities! For the next phase, I was invited to be an investigator in the expansion of testing parameters. I selected additional sites from various time periods. The artifacts from Tell es-Sweyhat dated to the early Bronze Age. From Iran, I chose a site that featured Islamic glazed ceramics. These are artifacts that are heavily traded by legal and illegal means. From Mesopotamia, I chose similar samples we know are "hot" in the current market.

By all accounts, the dogs passed with flying colors!

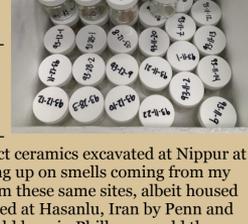
Phase three involved colleagues from other institutions possessing similar artifacts to the Penn Museum. Could the dogs detect ceramics excavated at Nippur at the turn of the twentieth century or were their noses merely picking up on smells coming from my storerooms? Could they discern objects excavated in the 1970s from these same sites, albeit housed at the Oriental Institute in Chicago? What about ceramics unearthed at Hasanlu, Iran by Penn and the MET in the 1960s? Again, were the dogs trained on samples held here in Philly, or could they notice their counterparts in New York?

This final phase is pending. Still, as a project participant, I learned a lot about how dog detection works and how experts in animal behavior pose questions and test theories in their scientific discipline.

Right above: The "Wheel of Smells" testing device. Right below: Moxie the Sniffer-dog.



Above: Pre-sampled sherds from Tell es-Sweyhat. Below: Samples prepared for transport.



Day Three

Collection practices change every year, and I like to think it's always for the better. How we stored an object in the 1970s might not be the standard fifty years later. One of my favorite collection management jobs is called *rehousing*, or what my boss likes to call "putting small things in boxes." For whatever reason, I love doing this!

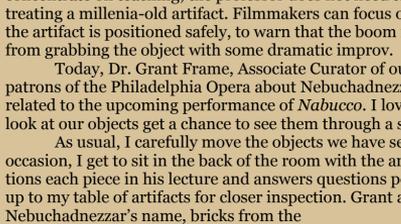
Oftentimes, putting something into a box means it will not only have a microclimate, but you also don't have to worry about it bumping into other objects in the same drawer. If the number on a box is starting to fade, it can be more clearly labeled.

I tell my students that every object has one hundred "touches" in its lifetime before it breaks. Objects can break out of use and inherent vice, not necessarily because someone handled it improperly. A given artifact comes with a bunch of touches stemming from its ancient life. In its modern existence, an excavator has handled it, then a packer, then museum staff. We touch the object to present it to students and researchers. My goal is to have objects clearly boxed and labeled so that you only handle the pieces you need to handle, that you don't waste touches flipping a piece to verify its accession number only to return it to the shelf or drawer.

And, so, my students and I spend a lot of time on rehousing, on bagging, on writing numbers clearly on everything *at all times*. It's the bread and butter of collections work: making sure that the objects are properly labeled for future students, researchers, and exhibitions.

Today, I am taking a drawer of textile tools excavated in Iran in the 1930s and cataloguing, photographing, and rehousing them. I take their field numbers and match them up to the field records in order to figure out what year they were excavated in order to assign them to the right accession lot. These objects have been in the building for ninety years, but they only ever received a field number way back in Iran. So, I am creating records in the museum database describing the artifacts, including a photograph to illustrate my descriptions, and, finally, placing them in small boxes labeled with brand new accession numbers.

I overheard one of my curators talking to a student about maybe working with these textile tools for her dissertation. Being proactive, I decided to get ahead of the project and make sure the material was trackable and visible in our online database. When the student eventually seeks the items, she will be able to see *all* the textile tools in the database and subsequently request *only* the pieces useful to her study, greatly reducing needless "touches."



Left: Shell beads prior to rehousing (left) and after rehousing (right).

Day Four

Any time an object moves from storage, it's my responsibility. For example, if an artifact comes out of storage for a BBC documentary, I remain with the object at all times. If a professor requests an object for a lecture, I am present to handle it during the class. This way, the instructor can concentrate on teaching; the professor does not need to be distracted by the proper procedures for treating a millenia-old artifact. Filmmakers can focus on their craft while I am present to make sure the artifact is positioned safely, to warn that the boom mic is too close, to dissuade some paid actor from grabbing the object with some dramatic improv.

Today, Dr. Grant Frame, Associate Curator of our Babylonian Section, is giving a lecture to patrons of the Philadelphia Opera about Nebuchadnezzar and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon as related to the upcoming performance of *Nabucco*. I love it when people who might not ordinarily look at our objects get a chance to see them through a secondary avenue of interest!

As usual, I carefully move the objects we have selected to the museum's lecture hall. On this occasion, I get to sit in the back of the room with the artifacts and enjoy Dr. Frame's talk. Grant mentions each piece in his lecture and answers questions posed by guests. After the talk, patrons come up to my table of artifacts for closer inspection. Grant and I discuss a clay cylinder inscribed with the Nebuchadnezzar's name, bricks from the walls of ancient Babylon, and a brick stamp made 4,000 years ago.

When it's all said and done, I return the objects to storage. Although the event was less than three hours, many more hours of preparation are involved in such presentations, and I didn't even have to deliver the lecture!



Right: Keepers of the Asian, African, and Near Eastern Sections oversee objects from their collections on display during a museum press event.



Above: A research scientist talks on one of the oldest wine jars in the world and its contents with the BBC. I was present to handle the object and facilitate Dr. McGovern's interview. Right: A curator lectures to patrons from the Philadelphia Opera. Dr. Frame requested museum objects to illustrate his lecture.

Day Five

I ran into the head of development in the cafeteria and she asked if I could give a tour to a board member this afternoon. After looking at the calendar, I realized that I had volunteers to train after lunch. My job requires me to be flexible, to juggle a lot of responsibilities, and to think on your feet. I quickly decide to include the volunteers on the tour and say yes.

I eat my sandwich and return to storage where I move some thing around for the student volunteers, and then I have a look at "Katy's Tour Objects" shelf. I give a lot of tours. I love giving tours! The chance to show someone something they might not otherwise see and have the experience help them feel connected to the museum and history in a new way is an honor. I'm often asked to give tours of museum storage to university students, tours of museum galleries for various events, and, for a while, tours for soldiers being deployed to the Middle East that might encounter looted artifacts. Each tour is different and each tour has to highlight different aspects of the collection.

And, so, while today's tour won't be long, I figure to start with *my* tour objects. It never ends with the tour objects shelf, but my goal for every person that enters storage is to have them find a piece that resonates on a personal level. The shelf contains a variety of artifacts: bracks, sealings and seals, shells, and debitage. To many people, a museum collection collects dust in a basement while only a few choice pieces are put on public display. But a museum collection is full of as many surprising discoveries as there are in the field. The collection constantly teaches me new things, and any time I get to introduce any member of non-museum staff to these amazing pieces, I get questions that make me light up with enthusiasm. We discuss ways that the collection resonates with folks who, as one man once told me, "I expected to be really bored. But I wasn't."

And that's because a museum collection isn't a dusty, stagnant thing in a basement; it is a dynamic resource for new and exciting discoveries.



Top left: Gallery tour for the event "Queens in the Ancient World." Bottom left: Storage tour for U.S. Army soldiers prior to deployment to Iraq. Above: Storage tour for a university class.

Day Six

Today is a strange day. I've been asked to accompany some tablets to the Iraqi Embassy in Washington, D.C.

You see, Penn started excavating at a site called Ur when Iraq was just a new country. Ur is *permit one*; the first permit to excavate the newly formed country of Iraq was Ur. We have always participated in a system of partage where half of the material remains with the host country, and the host country gets the better half. In the case of Ur, Penn excavated the site alongside the British Museum. Half the material stayed in Baghdad, the other quarter went to the BM, and one quarter came to us.

There were a lot of tablets excavated in the early days and the University of Pennsylvania had one of the preeminent groups of tablet readers at the time, experts who could read cuneiform in both Sumerian as well as Akkadian. It was always agreed that once the tablets were published, they would return to Iraq. Over the last 100 years, most were returned. Only small fragments remained in the Penn Museum collection.

The tablets consist of unbaked clay, and these pieces were so fragmentary, baking wouldn't preserve them. And, for years, we have been concerned about sending them back and having them fall apart in transport. But, now, the time has finally come. Two archaeologists from my section selected 400 tablets that they thought could make the journey and our conservation experts approved their choices. I had the responsibility of giving each artifact a tracking number and photographed them for record-keeping purposes. I worked with the our registrar's office to individual pack each tablet and then deposit them into two large boxes. I was to accompany the tablets in the same fashion I accompany any museum object that goes out on loan.

This time, the occasion was a public relations event. I traveled with multiple curators, a translator, a member of our management team, and a staff photographer. I have couriered objects on at least fifty loans, from Beijing to Bozeman. I have been escorted by police. I have ridden shotgun in semi-trucks across the country. But I have never traveled with a photographer before.

We arrived at the Iraqi Embassy and gathered to talk about the scheduled press event. I worked with the ambassador on the Iraqi's plans and on my own concerns for the artifacts. Until the paperwork is signed, I am responsible for the objects. Once we were all in agreement, I accompanied the tablets in their embassy vehicle on a trip to the next location. There is a lovely press event, documents are signed, an they ask me to repack the pieces so that they are done in the same way as the rest of the materials, preparing everything for transport.

Soon, the pieces will fly with diplomatic immunity into Baghdad, as soon as their museum is ready to receive them. I fall asleep in the van on the way back to Philadelphia. It's been a good day, but I'm not used to so many people watching me do my job!

Top right: Discussion at the Iraqi Embassy about how to best display tablets at the press event. Bottom right: Setting out tablets for the press event in Washington, D.C.

Day Seven

Data entry. I began my work at the museum before my senior year in college. I volunteered at the registrar's office doing data entry on the Mediterranean Section's numismatic collection, or coins. I didn't have access to the objects. I was merely going through old handwritten object cards and typing in the descriptions. As a Classical Archaeology major, I could see Pluto or Hera in the scribbles in a way that, say, someone studying Native American cultures couldn't (and vice versa!). So, the experience was a good introduction to the collection.

To this day, I do a lot of data entry. A lot. Hours. Every day. Even as the "boss" who oversees volunteers, interns, work study students, and assistants, I still do data entry.

Today, I'm working on a group of lithics from Bisitun, Iran. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the graduate student intern I hired can't have access to the collections. This means I must take photos of all 2,199 lithics. I took a class in 1996 that taught me the difference between a biface and a burin, and that means I basically know which way is up. My intern is finishing her Ph.D. on a Paleolithic topic, so she is excited to work with this material in any way she can.

Our database administrator has exported the fields I want to work on today. I use Excel to clean the data and then import it all at once into the database. I check to make sure that the location fields are correct, that the legacy of information is recorded the same way, and that abbreviations are spelled out corrections. This morning, I cleaned from 50-2-500 to 50-2-999, and I hope to get it all organized and uploaded by the end of the day.

Data entry is so important. It's how the public, my researchers, and my curators can find the pieces they need. It's how the objects get into dissertations, publications, and exhibitions around the globe. And, yes, it can feel tedious, but, somehow, I don't mind this aspect of my job as keeper of collections. I know how useful it will be to the rest of the world.

