

A Colossal Conservation Project

THE MERGER BETWEEN THE AUTRY AND THE SOUTHWEST MUSEUMS HAS RESULTED IN WHAT COULD BE THE COUNTRY'S BIGGEST CONSERVATION AND REHOUSING EFFORT.

BY PAT H. BROESKE

IN A CITY RENOWNED FOR REINVENTION, where non-indigenous palm trees dot the landscape and cosmetic surgeons are as ubiquitous as freeways, the priceless collection of a landmark museum is getting a makeover. Packed away for decades, the artifacts at the Southwest Museum of the American Indian—Los Angeles' oldest museum—are seeing the light (as much as is museum-safe), in an ambitious conservation and rehousing project.

The massive undertaking is being overseen by the Autry National Center of the American West, a nationally-respected intercultural history museum located within Los Angeles' sprawling Griffith Park. In 2003 the Autry, which started as a Western history-themed museum, merged with the then-struggling American Indian-oriented Southwest Museum. Seven years later it was announced that the Southwest's extraordinary Native American collection, including tens of thousands of archaeological items, was going to be moved to



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The Autry National Center of the American West

the Autry Resource Center (ARC), an off-site storage locale, and that portions of it would later be exhibited in the Autry galleries. That triggered a local political and cultural shootout that continues to ricochet. (see "Resistance to the Merger," page 16.)

It also resulted in the current conservation project, which began in September 2010 and is expected to end in early 2013. "We think this is the largest conservation effort in the nation right now," said Joan Cumming, Autry's senior director for marketing and communications. The Southwest Museum has the country's second largest collection of Native American objects, and while it focuses on the American Southwest, some of the items come from the northern- and southern-most regions of the Americas.

The entire collection, which also includes ethnographic and paleontological items, numbers approximately 250,000, and the archaeological holdings are more extensive than was originally thought. "Our projected number was 138,000 archaeological items," said LaLeña Lewark, director of collections and conservation for the Autry. "But we're already getting close to that, and we have almost a year to go. We're going to surpass it, we just don't know to what extent."

To date, staff archaeologist Karimah Kennedy Richardson

LARRY REYNOLDS/BRAUN RESEARCH LIBRARY COLLECTION, AUTRY NATIONAL CENTER, CT 20



The Southwest Museum of the American Indian



These objects, which were moved from the Southwest Museum's Caracol tower, are now housed in one of the museum's former exhibit halls. The items on the top two shelves have been repackaged in archival boxes.

ROBERT WANCE



The 115-foot Caracol tower has no elevators and only enough space to walk in a single file line. In order to remove the boxes from the damaged tower, the staff, carrying one box at a time, had to ascend and descend the 160-step spiral case shown here.

and other team members have conserved, reinventoried, and rehoused some 120,000 items, most of which had been in 2,200 shoebox-size cartons. Another 600 cartons have yet to be examined. “It’s hard to gauge what’s going to be inside,” said Richardson. “One box might hold 200 points. Another might contain one really large item.”

The Southwest sponsored excavations from the 1920s to the ‘60s, according to Richardson, and as archaeologists and other staff came and went, certain objects were documented and exhibited while others were placed on shelves and largely forgotten. “It’s not that pieces were lost. They’re all here,” she said. “They just hadn’t been organized in a systematic way.” Moreover, many of the items are so small that it’s easy to understand how they were overlooked in the shuffle of people and time.

To address this problem, Richardson is organizing them according to the sites they were recovered from. “Boxes A through D might now contain materials from one particular site,” whereas before those same materials were sometimes scattered in 20 different boxes that also contained items from other sites. So, once the project is completed, if someone is researching the Pueblo Grande de Nevada (also known as the “Lost City” in Overton, Nevada, which was submerged beneath the waters of Lake Mead following the construction of Hoover Dam), they will have a database that lists all such artifacts and related materials in the collection.

The conservation effort has resulted in some remarkable, but forgotten, items being rediscovered. A box from a Florida site excavated by noted archaeologist Clarence Moore around 1918 and long since paved over, contained a stunning conch shell that would have been attached to a stick and used as a digging implement. Another carton, from former Southwest curator-archaeologist Mark Raymond Harrington’s 1950s’ excavation at Tule Springs in Southern Nevada, turned up jaws of extinct camels, sloth bones, and a mammoth’s tooth. “I was expecting to find the paleo artifacts involving man,” admitted Richardson, “not the kind of things you see at a natural history museum.” Nor did she imagine

she would see the Southwest Museum expedition flag—the fragile piece had been carefully folded—that Harrington and his crew carried with them.

She also found a nearly eight-inch, bowl-shaped vessel with a human face and red, black, and cream geometric decorations that came from Casas Grandes in northwestern Mexico, as well as ceramic sherds embellished with glyphs that were recovered at Teotihuacán near Mexico City. A small brownware jar that had been mislabeled as Spanish-Colonial was, in fact, Middle-Eastern, and dated to about 3000 BC. “It was probably used to hold oil,” said Richardson, who tracked down a 1960s-era magazine article about the piece, which came to the museum by way of a collector.

And then there was the rediscovery of materials from excavations by Charles Fletcher Lummis, without whom



During the rehousing process, intact vessels, such as this one from Casas Grandes, were rediscovered.

the Southwest Museum would not exist. Lummis was a photographer, writer, editor, librarian, collector, historian, and archaeologist. Born in Massachusetts, he coined the term, “Southwest,” and came up with the iconic slogan, “See America First.” Lummis knew all about that, having famously walked from Cincinnati to Los Angeles in 1884-1885. Along the way, he wrote articles and developed what would be a lifelong passion for Native American and Spanish cultures.

Lummis went on to establish the Southwest Society in 1903. The Society was the Western branch of the Archaeological Institute of America, and the precursor to the Southwest Museum, which he founded in 1907. Originally a general interest museum, it wasn’t until the 1926 arrival of director James A. B. Scherer—previously a college administrator at what became Caltech—that the museum shifted its focus to Native American cultures and anthropology. That was a fitting legacy for Lummis, who passed away in 1928.

THE REDISCOVERY OF LUMMIS’ MATERIALS and other items might not have happened but for a seismic shake-up. Centered in Los Angeles’ San Fernando Valley, the Northridge earthquake of January 17, 1994, left some 60 people dead, and another 8,700 injured. (The quake’s epicenter was actually in Reseda, but early accounts—and resulting media headlines—put it in neighboring Northridge.) Damages for all of Los Angeles were estimated at \$20 billion. At the Southwest, the signature tower, called the Caracol—Spanish for snail, or spiraling seashell—suffered serious cracking which, combined with a deteriorating roof, led to water seepage and insect infestations. This posed a major problem, as the collections, of which only perhaps five percent (a number not atypical

for medium to larger-size museums) had been shown, were stored in the tower and consequently endangered.

Built in 1914, the Mission Revival-style museum is situated on a 12-acre site in the Mount Washington-Highland Park communities, northeast of downtown L.A. Its white tower rises above the scenic Arroyo Seco, a rugged canyon serving as a regional watershed and recreational area, and as a gateway to Pasadena. The seven-story, 115-foot tower has no elevator, so staffers, in order to remove the cartons of collections, had to ascend and descend a 160-step spiral staircase. Several objects had to be rigged and brought in through exterior windows, because they were too large to be carried down the stairs. Gradually, the cartons took over what was once exhibit space. In 2009 the building was closed to the public, while its Braun Research Library remained open.

The staff then began work on conserving and rehousing the collections, an effort presently requiring the work of 15, including Richardson. The ethnographic collection was attended to first for various reasons, one being it had a greater propensity for insect infestation than the ceramics or the archaeology collections. To contain active infestations and to arrest the growth of mold and mildew, organic objects—made of fur, grasses, feathers, wood, twigs, leather/hides, and roots—were placed inside a large freezer and kept for 10 days to two weeks. (In an earlier era, this process was



Archaeologist Karimah Richardson (left) reviews the rehousing of conch shells that were once used as digging tools.



Archaeological collections assistant Monica Corpuz rehouses and inventories lithic tools.

carried out with toxic chemicals, such as arsenic, mercuric chloride, or even DDT.) The pieces were stabilized, photographed, and packaged in special custom-made acid and fume-free boxes with labels that included the date that the freezing occurred.

For archaeological items, the process begins with an assessment by collections managers, who determine whether the packaged artifacts require new storage bags or a particular kind of housing mount. Where exhibition mounts are often unobtrusive—some seemingly “invisible” so as not to detract from what is being displayed—housing mounts are functional and as conspicuous as need be. They cradle and support the artifact, keeping it safe during storage, transport, and handling. Products used to create the mounts and the rest of the packaging are acid-free, to prevent oxidation.

Some items require cleaning, which is sometimes done with a small specialty vacuum. Conservators carry out any needed repairs. The Autry also works with tribal communities who are interested in viewing their cultural material that is in the collection. “For the archaeology collections our [tribal] concerns usually involve objects that have burial and ceremonial contexts. Our goal is to repatriate what we can,” said Richardson, who noted the museum has a Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) coordinator who is responsible for consulting with the tribes.

ROBERT WANCE

Resistance to the Merger

Since 2006, when the Autry announced it was going to relocate the Native American collection of Los Angeles’ historic Southwest Museum and renovate its own gallery space to display some of these items, there has been a war of words, and legal action.

Because the Autry is named for co-founder Gene Autry, the famous singing cowboy of TV, movie, and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” fame, the controversy has generated lots of cowboys vs. Indians rhetoric. More than one vocal local has referred to the Autry as “the black hat,” accusing it of merging with a financially-strapped Southwest with the intention of riding off with its prestigious collection, rather than refurbishing and revitalizing the aging but beloved building that was the collection’s home for nearly 100 years.

The Friends of the Southwest Coalition, a diverse group of more than 65 community organizations, has rallied. “If you separate the collection from the building and its original historic context, it no longer is the Southwest Museum,” said Nicole Possert, a founder of the Coalition and a board

member of the Highland Park Heritage Trust. The neighborhood of Highland Park is adjacent to Mount Washington, home to the museum.

The Trust and the Mount Washington Homeowners Alliance have filed a lawsuit against the City of Los Angeles, pertaining to the Autry’s plans to expand their main facility, which is on city property, in order to accommodate some of the Southwest’s collections. The groups contend that the City Council ignored zoning and environmental laws in order to assist the Autry, and that the City’s action harms the Southwest Museum. The Autry, however, said it is simply renovating existing gallery space rather than expanding its facility.

The Autry originally said it would operate both museums separately. But after spending \$2.4 million to repair the Southwest’s building, Autry officials announced it was not economically feasible to bring the structure up to modern museum standards, and that the collection would be better off elsewhere. “For us to be responsible stewards, we have to keep it safe—for future generations, and for research-



A sculpture of Gene Autry, who co-founded the Autry National Center.

ers and tribal members,” said Autry spokesperson Joan Cumming. “[The Southwest building] is not an ideal place to be housing a priceless, one-of-a-kind, second largest-in-the-country collection of Native American artifacts.”

The Autry has recently approached the City of Los Angeles about partnering with the museum to turn the Southwest’s building into a “vibrant historical and cultural facility,” said Luke Swetland, the Autry’s vice president for exhibitions and special projects. In the meantime, the Autry has reopened the Southwest on weekends for small exhibits, lectures, and other gatherings. —Pat H. Broeske

CORY WILKINS

The items are also re-inventoried, but the laborious process of cataloguing them will not occur until after the move to the ARC, which is about two and a half miles from the Autry and 11 miles from the Southwest. Cataloguing is “just too vast a job for us right now,” said Kim Walters, interim director of the Southwest Museum. Typically, the catalog listings include the object name and identification number, photographs of it, the material it is composed of, its dimensions, the name of the archaeologist who recovered it, the date and the site it was recovered from, and any special remarks about the piece. “If we did this to every one of the items we’re now going through, we’d never get done, with this phase,” Walters said.

Over the years, most of the items have been documented to some extent, and many have catalog cards housed in the Braun Research Library. The descriptions of the items, some of which are handwritten, range from extensive to brief. “Some were done in detail by the actual archaeologists,” Richardson explained, “and others were done on a very rudimentary level by museum personnel.”

The archaeologists’ notes are sometimes in corresponding boxes. When they aren’t, Richardson searches the library’s holdings. Resulting information is entered into a MIMSY collection management software program that merges the databases of the Southwest and the Autry. (The Southwest previously utilized ARGUS, which was actually designed and developed at the museum.) Boxes are subsequently bar-coded, which identifies the exact location—hall, shelf, and row—of the box.

RICHARDSON HAS YET TO OPEN CARTONS from excavations in New Mexico and Arizona, but she was impressed by some of the artifacts from sites in California, Nevada, and beyond, such as the large steatite (soapstone) bowl from the indigenous Southern California people called the Tongva (also called the Gabrieleño, or the San Gabriel Band) who lived in the San Fernando Valley. She didn’t know the piece’s **american archaeology**



These dilapidated boxes were removed from the Caracol tower. Many of them are the original boxes that the objects were placed in when they first entered the museum.

specific provenance due to its meager documentation. “But maybe, as the re-inventorying continues, I’ll find those [corresponding] materials,” Richardson said.

She was also surprised by the magnitude of sites excavated by Harrington in the Borax Lake region, several hours north of San Francisco. “Look,” said Richardson, “his excavation there has been well documented. But what isn’t well known is how many sites he excavated around the Borax area. I’ve found references to 50 sites.” This information will be valuable to other archaeologists researching that area. In fact, Richardson has so far documented that the Southwest’s collections were recovered from more than 860 sites, and she believes that number could triple by the time this phase of the project is completed. Why? Because a single box’s contents might come from numerous sites. “I’m finding that certain expeditions were really umbrellas—a lot of sites



ROBERT MANCE

In order to identify the two boxed sherds in the middle of the photo, the staff consulted the book below, which was published by the Southwest Museum's former Mesoamerican consultant Hasso Von Winning. According to the book, the sherds were found at Teotihuacán.

were excavated under one expedition.”

For years, the Southwest Museum Collection has been known for such things as its unparalleled array of Navajo textiles, its Hopi and Zuni kachina dolls, and its 14,000 baskets. But as the conservation and rehousing project has shown, it also has remarkable artifacts that have long been unseen.

And more remains to be revealed. Clustered in a subterranean room of the museum are 5,000 to 10,000 stone objects. (When they came into the museum they were too heavy to be carted up and down the staircase.) They will also be reinventoried and rehoused, and, with the rest of the collection, taken to the ARC, which is now being refurbished and is anticipated to open in 2015. The ARC will house the

Southwest collection and the Autry collection, as well as both of their libraries.

“By then, we’ll have a feel for everything,” Richardson said confidently. “And it will all be in the proper archival materials. So we’ll be more equipped to move ahead.

The idea is for researchers to be able to see, on the [eventual] online database what we have, so they can come to ARC to do the rest of their work. We know the end goal. We just aren’t there yet.”

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