

Upcoming Exhibition Offers Training Opportunities

When three people position a fragile 20-foot-long canoe at an acute angle so they can maneuver it down a not-so-wide hall and into a classroom, one thing becomes clear: hands-on experience with works of art is exciting. Over January Term, Museum Services came to campus to move 70 Asmat art pieces from St. Thomas storage facilities to a classroom in Brady Educational Center. Room 101 in Brady provided art photographer Bob Fogt and objects handler Susan Wood with the space necessary to position and light the works properly.

The photo shoot took over three weeks to set up and complete. Images from the shoot will be used in a catalog produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts for the exhibition "Time and Tide: Asmat Art from New Guinea." The exhibition opens Feb. 14, 2009 and runs through the middle of June.

During the shoot, art history graduate students Barbara Manthey and Jenny Maki learned about organic material present on many of the carved pieces from the objects conservator, Kristin Cheronis. With magnifying optivisors it became clear that what appears to be ordinary dust actually consists of a wide variety of unusual debris, such as insect webbing, egg sacks, frass (insect excrement), dermestid beetle larvae and dermestid beetle casings. This organic matter will need to be removed before the MIA will let objects in the door.

At the end of March, Cheronis was on campus to train interested art history graduate students and majors on organic debris removal. Care is vital as the objects are wooden, and many are quite fragile. Complicating the situation is the fact that Asmat artists do not traditionally use a binder when applying pigments; instead, they rub the pigment onto the object's surface. This means pigment can flake off easily. Volunteers will start cleaning the objects this spring.

In addition to working on the MIA exhibition, students and staff have been busy with more routine activities. These include cataloging and inventorying all of the objects, creating a tracking system and designing exhibitions for display cases in Brady Education Center, O'Shaughnessy Educational Center and John R. Roach Center for the Liberal Arts. We also are



Barbara Manthey and Kristin Cheronis examine the base of an Asmat carving from the village of Per.

working with Information Resources and Technology specialist John Kinsella to compile the data needed to put images of the collection on our Web site and to make the collection more easily accessible to the public (www.stthomas.edu/asmat).

Our efforts to enhance the short-term and long-term preservation needs of the collection received a boost in February. The AMAA@UST was accepted for the Midwest Art Conservation Center's 2008 Subsidized Survey Program. Elisa Redman, who trained in the areas of disaster response and detection and safe handling of pesticides in museum collections, will be on campus for two days during the first week of June. She will evaluate storage areas, display areas and office spaces. The resulting report will help the AMAA@UST pursue future grants successfully.

As we move forward with programming and exhibitions on campus, we will be working closely with Crosier Fathers and Brothers who served in Asmat. Still in its beginning stages, the Crosier Interview Project is taking form. Once the AMAA@UST receives approval from the Internal Review Board, we will be able to conduct and record interviews with members of the Crosier order who lived and worked with the Asmat for many years. Eight Crosiers who served in Agats are now living in Onamia at the Crosier Priory. The oldest, Father Joe, turns 94 this year. We want to document as many memories as possible during 2008 and 2009. ■

Dr. Julia Risser, curator of the American Museum of Asmat Art at the University of St. Thomas