

FOR THE LOVE OF THINGS

Priscilla Rachun Linn holds a B.A. from Cornell University and a B.Litt and D. Phil in anthropology from Oxford University in England. In 1970-1971 she undertook field-work in Chamula, Chiapas, Mexico, and in the winter of 1972 she returned to Chamula with a grant from the Harvard Chiapas Project through Professor Evon Z. Vogt, and again in the summer of 1972 as field leader for that project. Since 1979 she has pursued a career in museum anthropology, and is currently employed at Hillwood Museum in Washington, D.C. Married twelve years with two children aged 5 and 9, she finds her children like to visit museums in Washington almost as much as she likes to work in them.

[Anthro·Notes editors asked Dr. Priscilla R. Linn to write a profile of her work as a museum anthropologist in order to better acquaint students and teachers with the varied career options open to an anthropologist. She responded to three questions.]

Q. Most anthropologists teach and do research within a university setting. How did you become interested in museums?

In 1963 the promise of unlimited potential drew undergraduates to anthropology at Cornell. I distinctly remember the last class of Anthropology 101: "By 1973," the professor predicted enthusiastically, "all Ph.D's graduating in the United States could be absorbed in the state of California alone." In reality, however, by 1973 the anthropological market could absorb no more. For frustrated, job-searching graduates of the 70's, the lush days of the 60's had already reached the proportions of a mythical Golden Age.

Fortunately for me, academia had never been an ultimate career goal as an anthropologist. I knew as early as the 60's that if I hoped to open minds and erase prejudice, to teach the wisdom of cultural relativity and objectivity, I had to do it apart from the formal classroom. I chose an alternative career as

the world "alternative" and I came into our maturity.

Perhaps my love of culturally produced things generated my interest in museums. Material Culture, today called Material Anthropology, has long been the step-child of the intellectual pace-setters. Yet to me -- whether complex or simple, beautiful or ugly, mended or discarded -- things reveal a mini-theory about the people who produce or use them. Things tell us how people allocate resources, including time; how they exchange with each other; how they set up social groups; and how priorities symbolize values. A thing is a deed in itself, a completed fact. For better or worse it is what someone actually did, not what they said they did, or thought they might do. How to interpret the stories that things harbor -- that is the challenge for museum anthropologists.

Q. How did you first actually enter the museum job market?

In 1977, when I received my Ph.D., I took a part-time job teaching at George Mason, while pursuing my interest in the museum world through a course in museum anthro-

pology at George Washington University. I also read Bowles' What Color is Your Parachute? and came away with the concept of the Information Interview.

I began to make appointments with museum professionals-- at the Smithsonian and Corcoran, the Association of Science and Technology-- to ask for information about their work and their career experience. I always came away with another lead for an interview, left my resume' behind, and afterwards wrote a thank you note. Eventually after 6 months of a staunch job quest, I took a contract position as a researcher for the Smithsonian's "Celebration Exhibit" at the Renwick Gallery. Through Victor Turner, guest head curator for the show and my former professor at Cornell, I was hired to research Latin American objects and co-ordinate research efforts, but the job took me far beyond research into various aspects of exhibit production. Although the managers of the exhibit worked at the Renwick, my base of operations was in the Museum of Natural History where I soon found many members of the department extending friendship and help when the need arose.

Q. After "Celebrations", how did you manage to stay at the Smithsonian?

As my phase of "Celebration" work came to a close, I applied for and was awarded a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the Smithsonian. Research on artifacts collected by Dr. William H. Crocker, Curator of South American Ethnology, from Gê speaking Canela Indians of Central Brazil absorbed me from 1981-1982. Material on Canela masks based on this research awaits revision for publication, and a continued investigation of Canela objects remains one of my most lively current interests.

However, as early as December 1980, the Department of Anthropology had approached me about curating a loan of select North American Indian artifacts from the Marjorie Merriweather Post collection in the Smithsonian to Hillwood Museums, Mrs. Post's former estate. Once again I would be in the delicate position

of working for an employer apart from my place of employment. For an anthropologist interested in exhibits and public education here was an unparalleled job opportunity. Working with Hillwood staff and eventually O'Neil and Manion Architects and Root and Chester Design, I would curate, coordinate, help plan and design an exhibit for a beautiful rustic lodge constructed to evoke the woodland of Mrs. Post's Adirondack Camp Topridge. The reality of the job, begun in 1982, has far exceeded even my most optimistic anticipation. As the approximately 200 pieces of North American Indian art find a place in the grand exhibit design, excitement for the project mounts. Educational information on cultural context will complement the purely visual and aesthetic appeal of the building and works of art. Hillwood, located at 4155 Linnean Ave., N.W., anticipates a July opening for the Indian building, which will be available to the public by reservation only due to zoning restrictions. Those interested should call Hillwood at 686-5807.

At present I can devote time only to Hillwood but know that once this project is complete, I will again take up a free-lance quest, with considerably more management and organizational skills under my belt than before. Meanwhile I have manuscripts to publish and research to update.

Some careers appear to materialize as blocks, each one laid consecutively upon the next to form an edifice. Mine appears more as a sturdy scaffold, composed both of frame and spaces as I work around-- but not always within-- the structure of museum organization.

Priscilla Rachun Linn