Lunch boxes offer a nostalgic look at the past for both adults and children

By Janice Kaplan
Special to Research Reports

Come Labor Day, when summer fades into fall, schoolchildren across the country will be getting haircuts, buying new shoes and engaging in an age-old tradition: choosing new lunch boxes. Will this year’s top seller depict the age-old tradition: choosing new lunch boxes. Will this year’s top seller depict the

A different view

But the focus of Shayt’s investigation was the suitcase-shaped, side-opening variety of his youth with its depiction not only of favorite television programs but also of important themes of postwar American culture, such as the space race, the Cold War and changing gender roles.

“These images have a unique ability to transport us across time, to re-introduce us to our past and to the challenges and dreams of a nation,” Shayt says.

TV cowboy Hopalong Cassidy led the way. In 1959, Nashville-based Aladdin Industries introduced the “Hoppy” box. Aladdin’s major competitor, American Thermos, entered the market a couple years later with a Roy Rogers design.

What followed was a veritable explosion of full-color boxes and matching thermos bottles. Manufacturers introduced new designs each fall, “the way auto manufacturers revealed their new car models each year,” Shayt says. About 450 different designs were produced from 1950 to 1985.

Lunch boxes galore
Shayt was struck by the variety. The boxes honored the entertainment icons of the day—from Lassie to the Six Million Dollar Man. They also tracked the TV shows that baby boomers grew up on—from Lost in Space to Laugh-In. The boxes depicted sports heroes, such as the Harlem Globetrotters and Pele, and superheroes, including Batman and the Bionic Woman.

Super heroes, such as the Bionic Woman, were popular images on metal lunch boxes.

Music sensations were well-represented—the Beatles and the Bee Gees—as were hit movies, such as “Star Wars” and “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.” Consumers also were attracted to images of characters that broke new ground, such as TV’s first African American lead actress, Diahann Carroll, star of the hit TV series “Julia.”

But the most popular box of all time was a container in the shape of a bus that was inhabited by beloved Disney characters. That design returned to store shelves every fall for about 10 years.

Shayt, however, was interested in more than just the decorations. He also saw the development of the metal lunch container as an example of “steel’s penetration into everyday life, especially after World War II, when the American steel industry was looking for new markets to use its capacity.”

But while the steel industry was thinking outside the “box,” another story was in the metal containers in 1989. That was the year fellow Curator Larry Bird organized an exhibition on American television that included two dozen examples of classic metal lunch boxes decorated with images from popular television shows.

Recalling the joy that came from his own childhood lunch box that was emblemized with submarines, Shayt, at 49, began exploring the history of the metal lunch box.

Along with Shayt, Charlie McGovern, a curator at the National Museum of American History, and Margarette Folley-Cooper, a project director at the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, are co-curators of the traveling exhibition.

A separate display of lunch boxes from the Smithsonian collection, organized by Shayt’s lead curator, David Shayt, a museum specialist in the National Museum of American History’s Cultural History Division, first became interested in the metal lunchboxes.

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A different view

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Museum studies  Stephen Weil, a Smithsonian senior scholar emeritus, is sitting in the café in the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building talking about his new book, Making Museums Matter. The book not only documents the revolutionary changes taking place in museums but also traces the current debate about the relevance of museums back to 1917. That's when pioneering American museologist John Cotton Dana argued that the future of museums lay not in amassing more objects but in providing a "full and rich utility" to its community.

If museums are to survive, Weil says, they must provide experiences that result in changes, in positive differences in knowledge, attitude, or values in the quality of individual or communal lives. In Weil’s words: “If our museums are not being operated with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of people’s lives, on what (other) basis might we possibly ask for public support? Certainly not on the grounds that we need museums for individual or communal lives. In Weil’s words: “If our museums are not being operated with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of people’s lives, on what (other) basis might we possibly ask for public support? Certainly not on the grounds that we need museums for individual or communal lives.

The Distinguished Service Award from the American Association of Museums hanging in Weil's office attests to his own commitment to museum work, the phase of his career that began in 1967 at the Whitney Museum and continued when he was recruited in 1974 for the number-two spot at the Smithsonian’s about-to-open Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Weil retired in 1995, moving his office next door to the Arts and Industries Building, where he is housed in the Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies with a title worthy of an elder statesman: scholar emeritus. That office is where many of the insightful and frequently witty essays in Making Museums Matter were composed.

“...museums to future generations? To what extent is that obligation explicitly reflected in its museum professionals: “To what extent has your museum articulated a distinct obligation to future generations? To what extent is that obligation explicitly reflected in its..." Weil says. He has watched with great interest the shift in museums from focusing on objects to focusing on processes, of "being inward to being outward, of being fascinated with antiquarian and sometimes precious objects to asking questions about how those objects can be used in service to the community."

In contemplating the future, Weil writes that museums are beginning to "melt at the edges," a reference to the innovative partnerships taking place between museums and schools, and museums and libraries. For instance, a branch of the Rochester, N.Y., public library, located in that city’s Strong Museum, allows visitors to borrow books related to museum exhibits.

He concludes the book with a series of serious questions for forward-thinking museum professionals: “To what extent has your museum articulated a distinct obligation to future generations? To what extent is that obligation explicitly reflected in its day-to-day operations? To what extent is it implicit?" He concludes the book with a series of serious questions for forward-thinking museum professionals: “To what extent has your museum articulated a distinct obligation to future generations? To what extent is that obligation explicitly reflected in its day-to-day operations? To what extent is it implicit?"

Weil says he enjoys writing more than anything else in the world. Making fun of the sometimes laborious task of putting thought to paper, he chirps, “Look, I got a page done. But what a page!”

Weil also is the author of three other collections of essays, including A Cabinet of Curiosities: Inquiries Into Museums and Their Prospects.

Making Museums Matter was published by Smithsonian Institution Press and sells for $40 (hardback) and $18.95 (paperback). It can be ordered by calling 1 (800) 782-4612.

Natural history database offers access to users throughout the world

By Colleen Herschberger
Smithsonian Office of Public Affairs

A young woman in South Africa contacts the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History and requests records of all rock, bug and plant specimens collected in her township, as "well as any archaeologi- cal sites that may be there. She is studying the interaction of geology, climate, humans, plants and animals in the area.

While this is not an unusual request made of a museum with the largest collection in the world, it is one that has been impossible to fulfill. A massive project is now under way to fold the museum’s nearly 30 database systems into a new electronic Multimedia Catalogue database system using a product called Electronic Museum from KE Software. The new system, called EMu, serves as a central repository for all collections and related research data in the museum.

Gathering together
Since the late 1960s, museum staff have been capturing text information and, more recently, images in electronic form. A wide array of databases were devoted over the years—from custom-developed mainframes and off-the-shelf systems to ones scientists developed themselves to meet individual research needs. Many of the systems were difficult to use or inconvenient to access. Some databases were even "dead," or no longer associated with any current software.

This project ingests all these different databases with their various legacies and brings them all into one standard, fully integrated system with an easy-to-use Web interface, at www.mnh.si.edu/mcs.

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Silver services for warships are symbolic reflections of rise of U.S. Navy

By Michael Lipka
Special to Research Reports

This isn’t your grandmother’s old punch bowl, not with those engravings of Birmingham, Ala., steel mills or the stirring scene from Gen. Custler’s Last Stand. And grand- father never kept his cigars in a sterling sil- ver humidor modeled after an adobe building in old Santa Fe, N.M., on which even the miniature chilies strung on an out- side wall are crafted from silver.

These and hundreds of other gloriously extravagant silver pieces represent a little-known strand of U.S. military history— the presentation of one-of-a-kind silver table services to Navy warships.

In his office at the Renwick Gallery, Kenneth Trapp carefully reviews pages of slides of silver services from U.S. Navy warships. (Photo by Jo Ann Webb)

Usually paid for by public subscription, the custom silver services have been com- missioned for scores of battleships, cruisers, submarines and other Navy vessels since 1889. The punch bowls, coffee and tea services, goblets, water pitchers, wine coolers, fruit baskets, bread baskets, meat platters, candelabras and other objects were used for formal occasions aboard ship, such as visits by foreign dignitaries.

The fact that the services were meant to be used ceremonially, however, puts them in a class apart from usual examples of presentation silver, according to Kenneth Trapp, curator-in-charge at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Something else distinguishes the Navy sil- ver from, say, a trophy given to the owner of a winning racehorse or the key to the city presented to a military hero. “These were objects given to an intimate object by thousands or millions of citizens,” says Trapp, who is chief investigator for “Silver on the High Seas,” an ongoing Renwick study of U.S. Navy presentation silver, as well as a new exhibition slated for fall 2005.

Historical beginnings

The American practice of presenting silver services to warships parallels the rise of the modern Navy, Trapp says. In decline in the years after the Civil War, the U.S. fleet entered an era of revitalization in the 1880s. Congress authorized a succession of new steel ships—cruisers, such as the Chicago and the Boston, and battleships, including the Indiana, the Massachusetts and the Oregon.

Naming those ships after states and cities or after famous battles, as with the Alamo, was a shrewd military maneuver to whip up civic pride in the fleet. Presenting the new ships with silver services paid for by public subscription also gave Americans a sense of ownership. “It was a way for cit- izens to buy into the U.S. Navy,” Trapp says.

Researching a tradition

Trapp recalls seeing the massive, elaborate punch bowl created for the USS Cincin- nati on display in a public library when he was an industrial design major at the Uni- versity of Cincinnati. He came across more pieces of Navy silver years later when, as a curator of decorative arts at the Oakland Museum of California, he was preparing an exhibit on California’s arts and crafts movement.

But only recently has Trapp begun pulling together the full story behind all those stately silver services.

He is the first formal study of U.S. Navy presenta- tion silver services.

In the Renwick’s basement library, a large wall map of the United States dotted with pins designating the ori- gins of services helps Trapp visualize the scope of the tradition. Red pins designate services given to ships named after a state; yellow pins are for services that went to ships named for cities. Blue and pink pins stuck in the map represent complete ser- vices or single pieces presented to ships by an individual or an organization.

However, most of the silver services were gifts from the wide public, paid for with fund-raising drives. A piece for the Indiana is inscribed: “Presented by the Schoolchildren of the State of Indiana.”

“We don’t know how this tradition came about,” Trapp says. “We don’t have the document that states how it all began.”

He believes that the first silver service commissioned for a modern Navy ship was designed for the cruiser Chicago in 1889. And he knows that the silver on the Maine went down with the ship at the start of the Spanish-American War, but that the service was quickly recovered.

A silver service com- missioned for the Idaho was stolen while on pub- lic view. West Virginia never got to present a silver service to its name- sake ship. “Someone there embellished the money,” he says.

State representations

Surviving services are rich advertisements for the wealth of states. The Arizona’s ser- vice is made of silver and copper from the Arizona mines. The Nevada’s silver came from the Comstock Lode. The California’s punch bowl is adorned with gold bears.

Silver service for the nuclear submarine Long Beach is adorned with representa- tions of an atom. The punch bowl for the Montana is engraved with scenes from the state’s history, including Custer’s Last Stand. Wyoming, the first state to grant women the right to vote, put portraits of a pioneer woman and of Sacagawea, the Indian woman who guided Lewis and Clark, on the punch bowl for the USS Wyoming.

Silver ‘mining’

“I’m getting ready to make a trip to see the services in Nebraska and the Dakotas,” Trapp says. He will examine and pho- tograph the pieces and gather what historical information he can.

This 1945 water kettle made by the Gorham Manufacturing Co. was on the USS Dayton. Seeing other examples of Navy silver won’t be easy. While some services are still on ships, others are at the Pentagon or in Navy supply depots, mayor’s offices, libraries and other places. Some silver has migrated to other ships. For example, the Louisiana silver service is now on the air- craft carrier Theodore Roosevelt.

Trapp hopes to answer some of his ques- tions about the origin of the tradition of presenting silver to ships by mining Navy archives and old records of the National Archives’ Bureau of Navigatio.

He also plans to search paper troves belonging to silver manufacturers, such as Tiffany and Gorham, as well as periodicals and other sources.

How the services have been used, how much they represented a public relations effort to build sup- port for fleet modernization and how American citi- zens felt about the silver services at the time they were com- missioned are topics to be addressed in a book on the presenta- tion of silver that Trapp expects to see published and in an upcoming Renwick Gallery exhibition.

“We’re hopeful that people will come in and be happy at seeing their state or city represented,” Trapp says. The curator expects gallery visitors to be moved not only by the beauty of preci- ous objects but also by the stories the silver will tell about national pride and Navy history.

“This will be the very first study of this tradition,” he says. “It’s really a phenome- nal find in the history of American decora- tive arts.”

This silver punch bowl and plateau were presented to the USS Nevada in 1916. (Photo by Scott Kellett, courtesy of the Nevada State Museum, Carson City, Nev.)
A curator's research credits work and life of an under-recognized artist

By Kristin Hilterman
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

Olga Viso’s investigation into the life and art of Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) has taken the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden curator of contemporary art from the open stretches of Iowa’s farmlands to the lush vegetation of Oaxaca, Mexico. Her interest in the artist goes back to the early 1990s when, as a curator at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Fla., she met several Cuban-born artists of Mendieta’s generation who were attracting international attention, as well as the collectors who were supporting their efforts. Now, for the Hirshhorn Museum, Viso is organizing the most comprehensive exhibition to date to honor this Cuban-born artist. It is scheduled for a Washington, D.C., premiere in 2004.

Emerging as artists in the early 1970s—first in Iowa and then in New York City—Mendieta “had a brief yet significant career,” Viso says. “She subsequently influenced several generations of artists who also have worked with their bodies and explored themes associated with gender and identity.”

“Her performance-based works in the natural landscape,” Viso adds, “which the artist described as ‘earth/bODY sculptures,’ were based on the silhouette of her body.”

“Constructing her ‘illusIa/s’ out of branches, leaves, flowers and other earthen materials,” Viso continues, “Mendieta conceived ephemeral actions that remain for us in the form of slides, photographs and film. There are also numerous drawings and more ‘permanent sculptures’ made toward the end of her career.”

At the center of Viso’s investigation is Ana Mendieta, the artist herself. Viso seeks to look beyond these events and examine the work in the context of its time, as well as its relevance today.

Retracing the artist’s ‘steps’
Supported by a Smithsonian Center for Latino Initiatives planning grant, Viso has physically retraced key phases of the artist’s evolution, including her student years in the Intermedia Program at the University of Iowa, which was an innovative cross-disciplinary approach to art-making to which Mendieta was introduced as a student in the 1970s. Viso also looked at Mendieta’s annual explorations of pre-Hispanic ruins around Oaxaca through the 1970s, her arrival in New York City in 1978 and her final year in Rome at the American Academy.

In addition, Viso traveled frequently to Miami and New York to conduct interviews and view examples of Mendieta’s art, which has been collected broadly in these cities, as well as in other places in North America and in South America.

“My research process has been comparable to piecing together a jigsaw puzzle,” Viso says. Her work from “rather limited” contexts, either concentrating on her feminist orientation or emphasizing her identity as an exiled Cuban, has been granted unprecedented access to 10,000 documentary slides and photographs, years of correspondence, personal records and libraries, and other documents related to Mendieta’s evolution as an artist.

Nevertheless, Viso says, “the artist’s exhibition history and bibliography have never been fully researched, and no complete life and career chronology has ever been published.”

The definitive monograph on Mendieta, to be published for the exhibition and distributed internationally, will address this oversight. Compiled with the aid of part-time research assistant Laura Roder, the catalog will include an expanded timeline of Mendieta’s life and work, which juxtaposes breakthroughs with the larger art world and global events. It also will include essays by Viso; Júlia Lobo-Herzberg, an independent art historian; Christi L. Brown, a British art critic and scholar.

In addition, Viso plans to donate her own files and transcripts of interviews to the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art and is working to facilitate the donation of the artist’s papers as well.

Searching for answers
As an explanation for Mendieta’s under-representation in the art historical lexicon, Viso points to the fact that, until recently, many scholars have interpreted Mendieta’s work from “rather limited” contexts, either concentrating on her feminist orientation or emphasizing her identity as an exiled Cuban. On the latter point, Viso says, “While Mendieta desired to recuperate her lost homeland and often referenced Cuban, as well as Mexican, sources in her art, her influence and, indeed, her significance were vastly broader.”

Mendieta’s mysterious and tragic demise is another factor. Accounts of her life and death have tended to focus more on the sensational aspects. The artist’s fatal fall at age 36 from the window of her sculptor husband Carl Andre’s New York apartment created a public scandal, as did Andre’s ensuing murder trial, which ended in his acquittal.

Vio seeks to conIuR up the artist's presence in order to conjure up the artist’s presence in their working environment. She suggests that “this ritual act is a touching tes- tament to Mendieta’s relevance for artists working in Cuba today.”

For most visitors, Viso says, “the exhibition will provide the context for Mendieta’s work, as well as an important introduction to a highly ephemeral and time-based art form.”

Viso also met members of an artists’ collective that have created earthen silhouette forms reminiscent of Mendieta sculptures in order to conjure up the artist’s presence in their working environment. She suggests that “this ritual act is a touching tes- tament to Mendieta’s relevance for artists working in Cuba today.”

By the end of the summer, Viso intends to conclude her information gathering and writing and focus on the exhibition. It will travel to New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art and two other venues in the United States, which have not been confirmed. Financial support from the Judith Rothschild Foundation and Fabián Roberts and Felicín Roberts will make the traveling exhibition possible.

Facing challenges
Because many of Mendieta’s artworks were nonpermanent or site-specific, Viso is faced with the task of re-creating their full impact within the museum. “We will use video, film and slide projections to convey the importance of sequentiality in many of Mendieta’s performances and time-based actions,” she says.

However, the use of photographic mate- rials raises the challenge of deciphering whether or not the documentation of Mendieta’s activities constitute indepen- dent artworks. The artist’s own slide labels and notations provide key clues, as do interviews with her contemporaries.

Exhibition plans
To further illuminate the importance of process to Mendieta, Viso is planning an exhibition gallery devoted to documentary materials—brochures, photographs, books and miscellaneous items by Mendieta and her peers related to the artist’s experience in the Intermedia Program.

“Some 100 interviews will have been con- ducted by the end of the project, adding a human dimension to the text-based record. During a trip to Cuba, in the spring, Viso, whose Cuban heritage allowed her to navigate language and cultural barriers, had the thrill of discovering residues of Mendieta’s rock carvings along overgrown embankments near Varadero Beach and Jaruco Park. Recalling ancient goddess imagery, Mendieta made these works—some of which were presumed lost or destroyed—in 1981.

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‘Mendieta,’ continued on Page 5

Ana Mendieta is shown here in a Zapotec tomb in Oaxaca, Mexico, creating a performance-based artwork. Olga Viso sits in a Zapotec tomb in Oaxaca, Mexico, where Ana Mendieta made several earth/body works, such as the one below.
Anthropologist studies Smithsonian's work with FBI forensic investigations

By Michael Lipka
Special to Research Reports

Tourists snap them up by the dozens from souvenir trucks parked just outside of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. But if anyone has a right to wear one of those baseball caps emblazoned with the letters FBI, it is Anthropology Curator Douglas Ubelaker.

On more than 700 occasions since 1977, Ubelaker has, figuratively, doffed his research scientist's cap and donned an FBI hat. He is the latest in a line of Smithsonian physical anthropologists who, as experts at analyzing human skeletal remains, have been asked by the FBI to help solve forensic puzzles.

Not too long ago, Ubelaker undertook to investigate the investigations themselves, by studying the types of cases that the FBI had brought to the museum over a span of more than 30 years. An Analysis of Forensic Anthropology Cases Submitted to the Smithsonian Institution by the Federal Bureau of Investigation From 1962 to 1994 (No. 45 in the Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology series) was co-written by Ubelaker and Gretchen Grisbaum, a former intern in the museum's Anthropology Department.

"The study showed how our work with the FBI has continued, yet the nature of the cases has changed," Ubelaker says. "It is simply because there are so many good people in the field now." For years, the tiny band of experts who once could apply lessons learned from studying ancient human remains to modern cases of murder or mysterious death has evolved into a national network of forensic scientists. That growth has led to a more focused forensic role for Smithsonian physical anthropologists.

Changing trends

"In the early days, we used to see whole skeletons," Ubelaker says. Now, packages from the FBI are apt to be smaller, and the museum increasingly is asked to perform specialized analyses that complement work by other forensic scientists. A skull will come in accompanied by a request for a specialized analysis that complements "work grows on you," he adds. "The cases become complex, and they often open up research doors.

Douglas Ubelaker, shown here in his office in the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, works with the FBI to solve crimes. (Photo by James DiLoreto)

"Mendieta," continued from Page 4

tions from dried mud, both of which are in the Hirshhorn collection. The extreme fragility of many of the works made from burned tree trunks, bark, leaves and other organic matter has necessitated that close consultation be held with the museum's conservation lab and that extra attention be paid in securing loans.

Smithsonian scientists have helped Viso identify the form of limestone employed in for a summer of reflection, consolidation and writing. (Viso)

Douglas Ubelaker, shown here in his office in the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, works with the FBI to solve crimes. (Photo by James DiLoreto)

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"These standardized foods only strengthened the market for the lunch box," Shayt says.

Building a collection
At the same time the curator was exploring the many stories behind the metal lunch box, Shayt also was building the Smithsonian's collection. He turned to some of the country's best-known "boxes" or "packaging models," terms used to describe men and women infatuated with the classic lunch boxes. Two of the collectors he spoke with were Allen Woolall and Sean Brickell, co-authors of *The Illustrated Encyclopedie of Metal Lunch Boxes*. Both men made generous donations and loans to the National Museum of American History.

"At first, it was simply unfeasible to catch a specimen, take photos, draw a digital image and videos of live specimens collected in volcanic areas and recent biological collections from areas being recolonized after an eruption also could be associated. Researchers' field notes, which often refer to specimens scientists didn't collect, also could be cross-referenced.

Accessing data
Researchers at the National Museum of Natural History will have special access to the system to upload and revise their data, making it instantly available. In the past, only collections staff had access to many of the databases.

Staff at the museum expect that the integrated database, she explains, allows the museum to gather up all the literature and collections information it has and present it to the world. "We'll be able to say, 'Here, this is what we've been doing all this time,'" she adds.

Seeing relationships
Having these databases in one system will leverage powerful cross-referencing capabilities, allowing researchers to see relationships in ways that were not possible before. For instance, one could look up information on volcanoes and retrieve all the related Mineral Sciences collections of rocks, as well as the research of the museum's Global Volcanism Program.

The impact of volcanoes on people could be found in Anthropology's records. Fossilized biological specimens collected in volcanic areas and recent biological specimens from areas being recolonized after an eruption also could be associated. Researchers' field notes, which often refer to specimens scientists didn't collect, also could be cross-referenced.

A planet at risk
Considering the current worldwide ecological crises, Weitzman says, the ability of the database to "provide the basic backbone of biodiversity information to help the citizens make good choices for sustainable development is in many ways the most relevant benefit of EMu," right now.

"Collections also are key to understanding global change," she adds. "From examining collections, both fossil and recent, we get the clearest picture of ecological and organismic responses to short- and long-term changes in the environment."

International collaborations
International biodiversity initiatives specify that countries determine what resources they have. "Within the vast majority of that information in the United States and Europe," Weitzman says, "we have an obligation to make the data available, as well as to assist those countries in learning how to access it."

Making these data available isn't just a challenge for the National Museum of Natural History; it's a challenge for museums across the globe, especially those with large numbers of specimens.

The museum is working with international initiatives to make sure its Multi-media Catalogue will operate with other systems. Weitzman says that there is a worldwide effort for standardization so that the biodiversity collections of the world may one day be jointly accessible. Still, no one museum will offer more specimen data than the National Museum of Natural History.
Jeremy Sabloff said that the commission year to advise on the “most timely and relevant themes and methods of presentation for the museum in the 21st century.” At their meeting on May 6, the commission expressed support for and endorsed the specific recommendations of the commission, as well as the vision and direction embodied in their report. The complete report is available on the Web at americanhistory.si.edu.

Science Commission meeting. With two of the top leadership positions in the Smithsonian science about to be vacant following the May 31 departure of Under Secretary for Science Dennis O'Connor, who also served as acting director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian Science Commission recommended to Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence Small and the Board of Regents in an April 17 meeting that work begin immediately to fill these two positions permanently and, in the interim, on an acting basis. Science Commission head Jeremy Sabloff said that the commission will be recommending no major changes to the present organizational structure of science at the Smithsonian; it is also still examining the Smithsonian’s natural history, paleobiologist Douglas Erwin was appointed to the museum’s Board of Regents and as symbols of national independence. The focus of a research project in the National Numismatic Collection at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History will include the symbols of sovereignty and use of money as they change over the centuries. The project will chart the influence of synesthesia, a process in which one type of stimulus produces a secondary, subjective sensation, such as when a particular color evokes a specific sound. The researchers are exploring the inter-changeability of sensory perceptions and musical analogies on the development of abstract and multimedia visual art from the early to mid-20th century. Extending upon the work of earlier scholars, “Color Music” takes a cross-disciplinary approach in revealing overlooked connections among artists, artistic movements and developments in music, psychology and popular culture.

Research Highlights

Commission report. Developing and installing an engaging introductory exhibition that captures the “full sweep of American history” and serves as a physical guide to the rest of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, Behring Center was one of the main recommendations in a report of the museum’s Blue Ribbon Commission. The report was released during a May 7 press conference. The 23-member commission was charged by the Smithsonian Board of Regents last year to advise on the “most timely and relevant themes and methods of presentation for the museum in the 21st century.” The commission expressed support for and endorsed the specific recommendations of the commission, as well as the vision and direction embodied in their report. The complete report is available on the Web at americanhistory.si.edu.

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Series Publications

The following publications on research in various fields were issued during the period March 1 through May 31, 2002, by the Smithsonian Institution Press in the regular Smithsonian Series. Diane Tyler is managing editor. Requests for series publications should be addressed to Smithsonian Institution Press, Series Division, Victor Building, Suite 4300, MRC 953, P.O. Box 37012, Washington, D.C. 20013-7012.

Smithsonian Contributions to Zoology • 617: A Phylogenetic Study of the Tribe Dasyurini (Dasyuridae) (Dipterus phyladeo), by Wayne N. Mathis and Tadzio Zawarczuk. 110 pages, 154 figures, 2 tables.

Fossils: The Key to the Past, by Richard Forey (Smithsonian Institution Press and the Natural History Museum, London, 2002, $55 cloth; $27.50 paper). This thorough introduction to the world of paleontology has been completely revised and updated, reflecting changes in the ways that fossils are viewed and interpreted.


Remaking the World: Myth, Mining and Ritual Change Among the Duna of Papua New Guinea, by Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002, $45). How the Duna have remade their rituals and associated myths in response to the outside influences of government, Christianity and large-scale economic development.

Airlines and the Mail: The Post Office and the Birth of Commercial Aviation, by F. Robert van der Linden (University Press of Kentucky, 2002, $35). The author persuasively argues that the progressive Republican policies of President Herbert Hoover actually fostered the growth of American commercial aviation. To order, write to the University Press of Kentucky, Attention: Order Department, P.O. Box 1573, Bowling Green, KY 40013-0573, or call (800) 839-6855.

Beyond Earth: Mapping the Universe, edited by David DeVorkin (Smithsonian Institution Press and National Geographic Books, 2002, $40). A volume of essays by renowned authors and scholars provides personal insights and professional observations on the art and science of cosmological thinking.


Raccoons have long held our fascination, admiration and even our disdain, the author writes, in Raccoons: A Natural History. "Perhaps no other animal has been associated with the history of the United States as has this one."

These animals, says Samuel Zeveloff, the author and a professor of zoology at Weber State University to Ogden, Utah, captured his attention from early childhood. Thus, the book is an extension of that keen interest. "I was fascinated by this animal initially as a small child having a coonskin cap at the cost of the Walt Disney TV series about Davy Crockett, the 19th-century frontiersman."

Intrigued by these nocturnal creatures for years, Zeveloff turned his scholarly attention to raccoons while in graduate school. He did field and laboratory studies of raccoon population ecology for his master's thesis at North Carolina State University. His doctoral work focused on patterns of variation in different ecological attributes of mammalian communities throughout North America.

And more recently, he organized a symposium at an International Theriological Congress on the evolution of the raccoon family. In the future, he plans to focus his research efforts in the area of raccoon population ecology for his master's thesis at North Carolina State University in Ogden, Utah, captured his attention from early childhood. Thus, the book is an extension of that keen interest. "I was fascinated by this animal initially as a small child having a coonskin cap at the cost of the Walt Disney TV series about Davy Crockett, the 19th-century frontiersman."

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The early fossil record of the rather small raccoon family, the Procyonidae, is not especially "well understood, Zeveloff says. "Thus, one of the misunderstandings about raccoons is that they regularly wash their food before eating it. Indeed, the second half of their scientific name, procyon, means 'washer.'"

Raccoons may occasionally wash their food if it is gritty or muddy. But they may just be dipping their extremely dexterous hands into water to soften their skin. This should enhance their sensitivity to the food objects they might be handling at the time. Some have even suggested that raccoons wiggle their fingers in water simply because it feels good! Thus, I would like to lay the food-washing misconception to rest."

The book, Zeveloff says, strives to reveal just how unusual raccoons are and the vital association humans have with them. "I hope that by broadening the reader's understanding of raccoons, it also will increase his or her appreciation for all organisms," he adds.

--- Jo Ann Webb

Raccoons: A Natural History
By Samuel I. Zeveloff (Published by Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002, $35 cloth; $17.95 paper)

Zeveloff spent approximately five years working on Raccoons: A Natural History. The book begins with the history of the raccoon's name and then addresses its origins, describing how it evolved into its present form. Other chapters examine its physical characteristics, social behavior, habitats, food habits, reproduction, management and conservation, among other topics. There also is an in-depth discussion of the role that the raccoon has with humans.

"I am fascinated by many aspects of the raccoon's natural history," Zeveloff says, "but one aspect of their lives that is intriguing is the plasticity of their mating systems. Though essentially polygynous—a male mates with at least two females—the specific number of males and females in a mating 'unit' in a particular area appears to be rather variable. This arrangement depends on such factors as the local ecology and their population density."

According to the book, raccoons normally mate from January through March, and pregnancies last for approximately 65 days. Prior to giving birth, the female remains in the den, becoming more aggressive toward other raccoons. As her cubs are born, the mother frees them from their embryonic membranes and licks them dry. She then eats the membranes and the placenta.

Zeveloff also incorporates some of the misconceptions about the raccoon. For example, he says, "One of the most misunderstood conceptions about raccoons is that they regularly wash their food before eating it. Indeed, the second half of their scientific name, procyon, means 'washer.'"

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