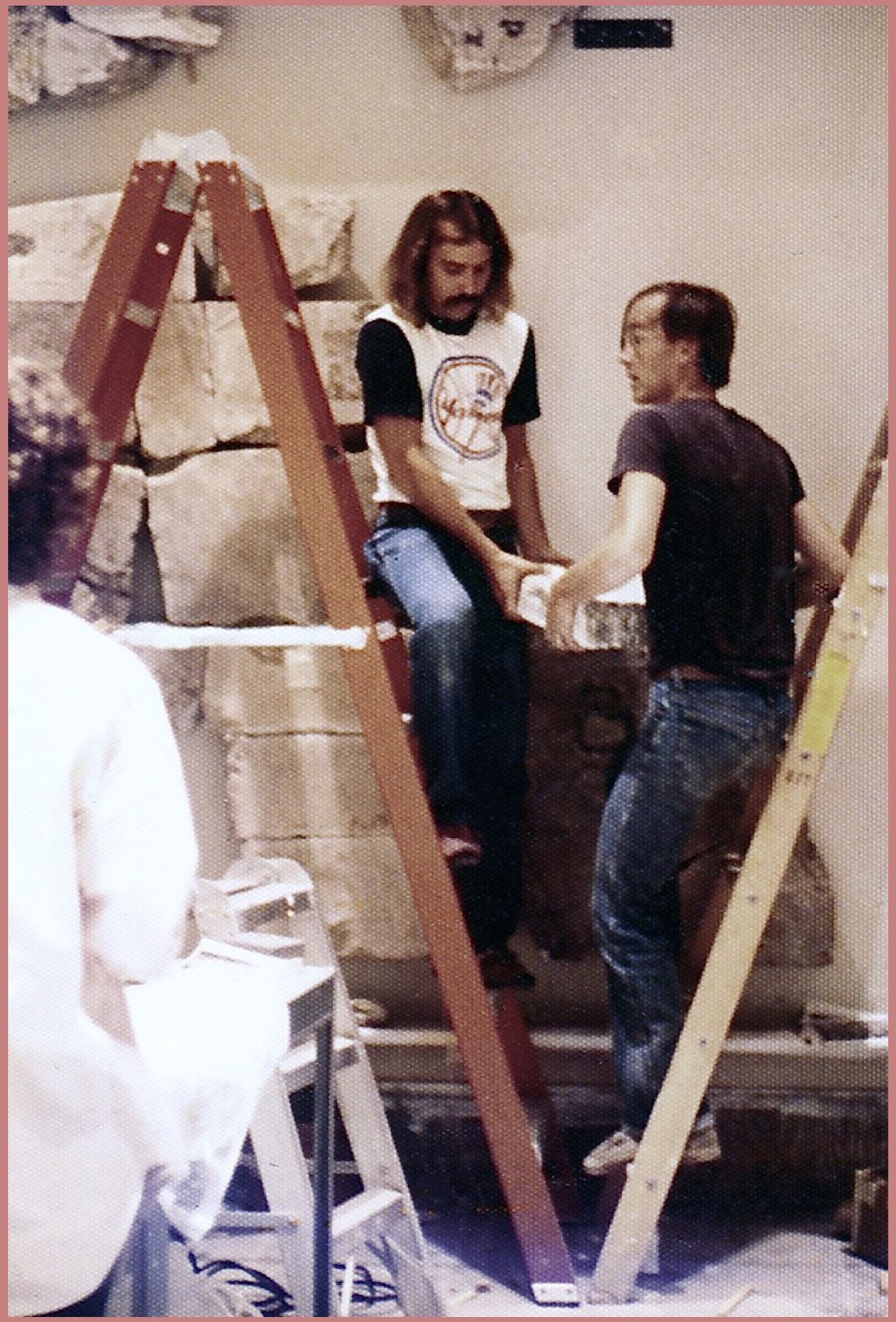
DAVID & MAIR LA TOUCHE

BENCHMARK
ROSEMONT, NEW JERSEY, USA



DAVID LA TOUCHE

David is one of the earliest practitioners of modern mountmaking, starting in 1977 at the Met in New York. Since creating Benchmark with Mair in 1981, David has traveled the world to support thousands of artifacts, supplied the mountmaker's craft through the Benchmark Catalog, and has taught many next generation mountmakers through mountmaking seminars. Here is Shelly's in-depth conversation with him.

Shelly: How did you find your way to the mountmaking profession? What sort of education or professional experience did you have to start your mountmaking career?

David: I had a bit of experience, basic technique, with two crafts: tinsmithing and jewelry making. Then, during a couple of years in art school, I became familiar with photography, sculpture, woodworking, and printing (in various ways like etching, offset printing, silkscreening, etc.). All this was my introduction to both seeing an object clearly and to forming materials, both of which abilities are important to mountmaking. Then, after starting and running a community art center with some friends, installing some museum exhibits, and later working as a cabinetmaker, I applied for, and got, a job as Installer at the MMA in 1977. That is where I first made object mounts.

Shelly: Was there a specific person who taught you to make mounts or did your other craft experiences and aesthetic sense inform your problem solving and everything just developed from there? I think of you as one of the creators of modern mountmaking, but who was there at the Met before you and what was their approach?

David: At the Met, where I first made mounts, there was a picture pinned to the wall. Cut from a magazine, it showed a lovely unbroken Greek vase. But it was there not for the ceramic but for the way it had been installed. It was secured in place by three angled cut nails. We felt sure we could do better. That's where I first learned the basics: spiders, tees, balance, spines, etc.

There was one person who was the source of modern mountmaking, and his name was Harvey Merton. He was the armorer at the Met. When I started at the Met in 1977, I learned how to make mounts from the restorers in the Conservation Dept, who had worked with Harvey for years. At the same time, in 1977, Harvey was installing the Kienbusch Collection of Armor at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A young member of the design team, Bob Fuglestad, was fascinated watching Harvey and ended up working with him on that installation. So, both Bob and I learned from the same source and at about the same time.

After being at the Met, I went on to learn from everyone I could, stealing usable ideas from any source, without compunction. But, as you know, I've always said that it's not rocket science but mostly just simple tricks of physics involved in bending wire and holding things up!

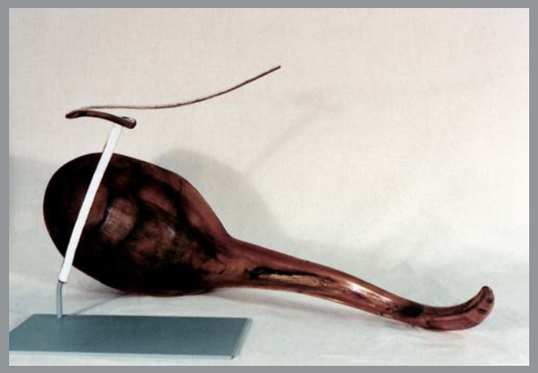
Shelly: Can you share any specific or significant evolutions to your own style of mountmaking over the years?

David: I think for the first 10 years that I worked in the field, at the Met and afterwards, my mounts reflected a constant, slow change and upgrade in technique and design as I added good ideas that I saw others use, from various different fields. And I'm sure I added some tweaks of my own. But at this point It's hard to untangle what idea came from where. The field is rife with cross-pollination.

Shelly: Are you a private contractor/freelance mountmaker or a staff mountmaker?

David: I spent a couple of years making mounts on staff at the Met until my wife, Mair, and I started Benchmark in 1981 to provide installation services to museums. So, for the past 42 years, I have been working as an outside contractor/free-lance mountmaker.

DAVID LA TOUCHE



MOUNTMAKING : BIRD LADLE

A ribbon shaped Benchmark mount
for a bird ladle.

1978 : ANCIENT HISTORY

David impales the Brooklyn
Eagle at the Brooklyn
Historical Society.

I prefer the autonomy of being a contractor.
At first, we did more than just make mounts, such as fabrication, wrapping, and installation of case furniture and other preparation tasks, but very soon we concentrated just on mountmaking once it was clear how much need there was for that unique skill. And since there were probably less than half a dozen freelance mountmakers in the country then, we soon found we were assembling (and occasionally training) teams of mountmakers to satisfy our clients' needs. Our work was appreciated, and our client list grew. Our ability to provide a team large enough to cope with an exhibition that encompassed hundreds of objects to be mounted within a few-week-long time frame caused us to be in high demand.
In 1991, we sent out the first Benchmark Catalog to offer needed supplies to the exhibition installation world. Then, Mair, Shelly, and I developed the curriculum for our mountmaking seminars and held the first one that same year.

Shelly: Have job responsibilities or expectations varied between workplaces?
David: In my case as an outside contractor, the job responsibilities were usually the same. What was different among institutions were the materials we were allowed to use. This was under the purview of various conservators with differing opinions on material choices. That caused us to gradually refine our material list down to the items that were accepted by most of them. For a while we would still occasionally run into that sort of unexpected roadblock as we worked at different venues, but I think the field of acceptable material choices seems much clearer today.

Shelly: From your experience, are there any places or exhibits that stand out as "best practice" examples from the mountmakers' point of view — always a joy to work at?
David: The National Gallery of Art was the best of many fine places I've worked, as Mair has said as well. We received clear, well-thought-out designs from a designer who understood the

"I LOVE BEING INTHEPROCESS OF MAKING A MOUNT; SEEING THE OBJECT, CONCEIVING THE MOUNT, AND THEN MAKING IT."

DAVID LA TOUCHE

field and didn't believe he had to reinvent the wheel in terms of mounts. He just had to give us the info we needed about the desired object presentation.

Bill Bowser, the exhibition manager, was a paragon of forethought and careful instruction about how to work with the museum's quirks and frequent attention to our needs. There was a quiet professionalism and understanding of each other's role that allowed us all to just do our best work.

One example of how well mountmakers could be taken care of: Our crew of four had been working for several weeks on an exhibit and could not get our promised payment from the treasurer's office. We groused a bit about it to Bill, who straightaway told the head of the design department of our problem, something we would never have done. The head of design immediately called the treasurer's office, and we had that payment within the hour. That kind of concern for the workers on the floor from the head demonstrates the mutual respect that pervaded that department. There are plenty of other well-run places to work, but the NGA stands out in my memory.

My "best practice" tips are very familiar to you, Shelly, and to all contract mountmakers. A suitable work area (not the loading dock), with objects to be worked on delivered and removed by staff. Design decisions more-or-less finalized before we arrive to make the mounts. The necessary passes provided to the mountmakers by the museum. And so on.

Shelly: What does your day-to-day work look like these days? What type of objects are you working with?

David: At this point my mountmaking is done only for my friends and a few local art dealers, who specialize in Folk Art, and I make all these mounts on my own. Over the decades we have worked on all sorts of objects and sizes of crews.

Shelly: What is your favorite and least favorite thing about this work?

David: I love being in the process of making a mount: seeing the object, conceiving the mount, and then making it.

I don't like being in poorly thought-out work situations organized from so far above that the organizers didn't clearly see or understand how the task could be efficiently done.

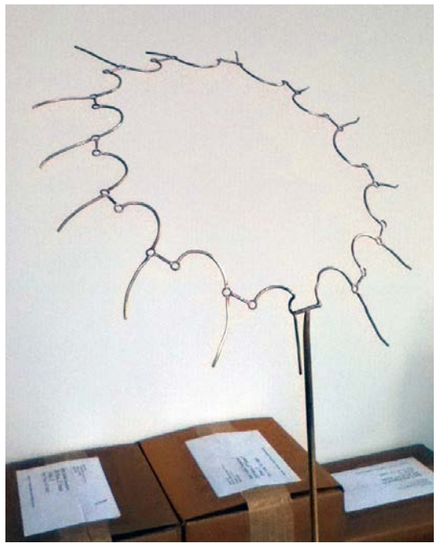
Shelly: Do you have a favorite object or exhibition that you've worked on? What makes them stand out to you?

David: My favorite objects are favored because of their mounts. The large NW Coast horn spoon has a mount that looks like a ribbon unfurling, a simple solution and beautiful in its own right.

The mounts for the Calder necklaces involve a more complex fabrication process than ordinary mounts and are wonderful solutions that end up looking a lot like the objects they were to hold. A story: at one museum holding the Calder Exhibition we

2010 : 2ND INTERNATIONAL MOUNTMAKERS FORUM

Poster Session at the Smithsoninan, Washington, DC.



2015 : MOUNT AS ART, FOR ART

Calder necklace mount.

THEN : 1991

The first Benchmark seminar on mountmaking.

NOW

David teaching the power of the flame during a Benchmark seminar.

had installed the mounts into the cases, and left the vitrines off as we departed. Shortly after that a fellow from the executive suite burst into the next room, where the hands-on museum staff were, complaining that the Calder cases were ***full of art and didn't have their bonnets on!*** How could this happen?! The staff delightedly explained to him that, "Those were just the object mounts. Everything was okay." For our mounts to have been confused with Alexander Calder's work was high praise.

Shelly: What is your role in the IMF? Why do you spend your precious time volunteering to be part of it?

David: I offer suggestions and help out where I can. I stay involved because I well remember the years when mountmakers/preparators all around the country operated in vocational solitude. Now, with the IMF, there's a forum for us/them to ask/give help, share info, learn, etc. It has made us into a community. A long desired one.

Shelly: Do you have any advice for people just starting out in mountmaking?

David: Enjoy doing the best work you can with all those wonderful objects, stay in touch with others so that you can get or give help, learn as much about as many crafts as you can, and always advocate for object safety when you can or must. But mostly enjoy it all.

Shelly: Where do you see the future of mountmaking heading?

David: I can't predict the future, but I doubt that 3D printing will make mountmakers obsolete.

Shelly: Would you like to share anything else about this work or the field in general?

David: For someone like me who is fascinated by things, by objects, this career has been a gift. Enjoying a lifelong meditative work process, with beautiful things that each convey some essence of mankind. It's been great, but I still think we should all be offered ice cream more often.

DAVID & MAIR LA TOUCHE

By David W. Major

WHEN they saw the farmhouse in upstate New York, David and Maire Digges La Touche loved it; they had to have it. So they did the next logical thing for them. They took it apart, piece by piece, packed it up on the back of a truck and hauled it home to New Jersey. Once they had found some land in Rosemont, David and Maire rebuilt the structure — again, piece by piece. Today, they call it home.

"I had wanted to learn something about old houses and how they were put together," says David Digges La Touche, who, with Maire and a handful of friends, disassembled the structure. "The house was built in 1840, the last stage of houses being built with timber frames. And timber houses you can take apart with your hands and move because the joints are keyed together."

Says Maire Digges La Touche, who documented and tagged every bit of the house and who drew endless sketches for the structure's reassembly in Rosemont: "The ability to somehow hold history in your hands is something that is very compelling."

"I've always liked old things," says David. "But it was never really as clarified or directed as it seems to be now."

So it appears. Whether the aging wood frame of a 19th-century farmhouse or pre-Columbian archaeological objects, David and Maire like to have history in the palms of their hands. After all, they do it for a living. As authorities in providing museum and installation services, a vocation that involves the mounting of art objects and artifacts in museums and galleries, they come into contact with some pretty nifty objects, most of them as old as the hills and often as fragile as an egg.

Since leaving the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 1977, where they were first learned the discipline of museum installation, David and Maire have made a career of it, developing skills in presenting art objects safely, pleasingly — and unassumingly.

If they do their job well, you don't even know they've made a trip to the museum. Because their task is to present that African mask — and not to distract your admiration because of cumbersome, obtrusive mounts supporting it.

Although we are not consciously aware of their work, museums and their staffs certainly are. David and Maire Digges La Touche and their business, Benchmark, are in high demand. Among their clients are The Carnegie Museum of Art, The Smithsonian, The Museum of Modern Art, The Met, The New York Public Library, The New-York Historical Society and The Art Museum at Princeton University. Just recently they helped install the exhibition *African Reflections* at the American Museum of Natural History.

Their careers came to them as a revelation. While helping The Met on a freelance basis, after having left it, with the installation of its American Wing, David and Maire were asked about another job in town, over at the Jewish Museum.

"We did the installation, and we realized, 'Hey, this is great work. Not bad,' " says David, sipping on a cup of tea. "What we had disliked about working at The Met was not the work but working at an institution, nine to five. The work itself was wonderful, and, on a project basis, it really suited our personalities."

"What we do," says Maire, "is a real combination of the intellectual design of a mount that works and the details of actually fabricating it: fabricating it well, immediately, smoothly, clean joints, well filed."

They're proud of their mounts and the skills and technical know-how necessary to make them. "Time to time," says Maire, who was trained at Skidmore College, Carnegie-Mellon University and the Tyler School of Art in Rome, Italy, "people come through and say, 'You know, you should really have a show of your mounts.' "

"When we're working on a major show, we'll have 300 of these mounts lined up stuck in wood boards on the desk; all of the pieces are like little fleets of artifacts," says David, who was educated at The Cooper Union and Instituto Nacional des Bellas Artes in Mexico. "It can be difficult keeping track of what goes where."

"We knew one curator who could identify which objects went with which mount by merely looking at the mount," says Maire. "He would look at the mount and say, 'Oh, I know which piece that is!' "

The fraternity of installation experts is not large. Although major museums have at least somebody who tends to the mounting of artifacts and art objects for display, only a dozen practitioners scattered around the country are doing it for a living.

"We do it full-time," says David. "We're just really into it in a much greater way."

That may be an understatement. Clearly, David and Maire Digges La Touche are intensely interested in their vocation, and they are equally curious about the world that they, together, have assembled

(Continued on Next Page)

TIME OFF/RICHARD H. WILLIAMS

The Support Group

David and Maire Digges La Touche, with Shelly Uhlir, design the mounts that support the archaeological works in the top museums

Top, Maire and David Digges La Touche discussing their craft in the design studio of their Rosemont, N.J., home. Above, the handiwork of the couple's work before going into the cases for public display.

"THE SUPPORT GROUP"

1990 Princeton "*Time Off*" magazine article about early days at Benchmark.

SHARING A SET OF GLOVES

David and Mair reading at Posner Center, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennslyvania

1994 : COUNTDOWN

Treasures of the Czars, Florida International Museum (FIM), St Petersburg, Florida.

MAIR LA TOUCHE

Since creating Benchmark with David in 1981, Mair has helped expand the resources and materials available to mountmakers through the Benchmark Catalog as well as setting standards for creative solutions and aesthetics in modern mount and mannequin-making, both through her own mountmaking work and the week-long mountmaking seminars hosted by Benchmark in bucolic Rosemont, New Jersey.

Shelly: How did you find your way to the mountmaking profession? What sort of education or professional experience did you have to start your mountmaking career?

Mair: I had various museum jobs—mostly volunteer—as a kid in high school and in early post-college days in NYC. I knew them as interesting places to work with interesting people doing interesting things. My whole life since I was a kid has been influenced by craft-jewelry, ceramics, sewing, sculpture, origami (!), plumbing, model-making—just generally making things, using my hands.

While living in NYC, David and I both—serendipitously—got jobs at the Met. Mine made "intellectual" use of my craft background: I was the product manager for all the metal repros sold in the museum shop and catalog. I got to dive deep into the Met's collections, looking for items to reproduce. That was amazing. But when it came to sourcing vendors or craftsmen to do the repos and shepherding the projects through, the work really devolved into phone work and that made me nuts. David's job was 100% hands-on in Objects Conservation, making mounts—so I had that to look at with envy.

After a couple of years, we left our full-time jobs but returned to the Met on a freelance project that was part of the re-installation of the Englehardt Court. Ah, hands-on...and the sneaking thought that perhaps we could make a living doing this mountmaking thing freelance. After all, very few museums had the wherewithal or, truthfully, the focus, to field an in-house team of mountmakers. We're talking 1980.

Shelly: Was there a specific person who taught you to make mounts or did your other craft experiences and aesthetic sense inform your problem solving and develop from there?

Mair: So—David has mentioned Harvey Merton at the Met. He was the sour-dough starter for all that followed. David and Fugelstad were the first in line, as far as I can tell. I never crossed paths with Harvey but his name was legendary as the Met's armorer. The basics of that job are working with metal, so....

Most of the craft skills needed for mountmaking I brought with me to the job. That's the life in craft that I have spoken of. But the particular focus of turning those crafts to the art of making a mount for an artifact (rather than a craft item in and of and for itself) came from David, practice, observation, analysis, practice, observation, practice...

Shelly: Can you share any specific or significant changes to your own style of mountmaking or mannequin-making over the years?

Mair: Hmmm... that's a tough one. I can say on the mannequin-making end of things, I evolved to be more reductive in finding the form. That is, I'd tend to load on more Ethafoam and carve down to the shape I needed. You and I have had discussions about this preference because, last I knew, you had evolved the opposite way—that is, additive—you'd start with less and add on as needed. I don't think either way has an advantage over the other (except perhaps in the quantity of Ethafoam scraps that piles up!). It seems rather just a personal preference. What are your thoughts?

MAIR
LA TOUCHE

PRECIOUS AND TINY

A tiny mount for a tiny object

Thinking about mounts is a bit harder. Perhaps just a recognition as time went on that enough focus was given to a proper finish for my mounts—filled smooth, well-rounded tabs, beveled sides, padding that's carefully cut to match the brass, thorough paint job... all those details. I guess you could say a focus on minimizing...

Shelly: Are you a private contractor/ freelance mountmaker or a staff mountmaker?
Mair: Free Lance. Love that word.

Shelly: Have the job responsibilities or expectations varied greatly between the institutions you've worked at?
Mair: When we first started doing freelance work, we'd do anything and everything our client needed us to do—including sweeping the gallery if there was no-one else lined up to do that. But over time, we advertised—and spoke only of—the mountmaking as our specialty. We'd still sweep the galleries if needed but it seemed a poor use of our time and expertise. Sometimes we'd get asked to step in for the designer and I always found that a difficult mental transition—it being such a different skill. Our team would always bring an aspect of exhibition co-ordination to the project—if only for our own smooth running.

Shelly: You have worked at so many different institutions and experienced so many different styles of managing an exhibition. From your experience, are there any places or exhibits that stand out as "best practice" examples from the mountmakers' point of view—always a joy to work at? Do you have any suggestions for ways an institution can help things go smoothly?
Mair: Well, top of the charts has always been the National Gallery of Art under the very able hands of Bill Bowser (exhibit coordinator) and Mark Leithauser (designer). Why? For starters, Mark always provided us with very accurate design drawings that were explicit in their information about what artifact went where and how it was to be presented. That made making the mounts a clear, straight-ahead task.
To follow up on that good information, Bill was studious in making sure we had all that we needed, and he was always one to close the loop—for example, when a job was done, we'd need permission to move our tools out of the museum. He'd not only make sure that the guys at the loading dock had that permission slip, but he'd be sure to call us to let us know that he'd provided that and double-check that we indeed had no trouble at the dock. Closed the loop. He took none of those details for granted. The best follow-up ever.

MANNEQUIN MAKER

Mair prepares a mannequin for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC.

Shelly: What does your day-to-day work look like now? What type of objects are you working with?
Mair: Well, now, of course, having reached our advanced ages, we've pretty much hung up our torches and our pliers. But for the over 40 years of Benchmark, we'd pack the car with 610 lbs. of tools and materials, ready to set up shop wherever we were called, initially just me and David; for many happy years, me and David and you, Shelly; if more help was needed, we were lucky enough to know other talented folks we regularly worked with come join us. I've always enjoyed the fact that we were both "independent", but also a team. I really enjoy that project-based synergy and the "back-stage" aspect of what we do. We've worked on jobs as small as six artifacts and as large as... not quite sure. One stops counting.

Shelly: What is your favorite and least favorite thing about your work?
Mair: A mentor of mine at the Met spoke about this job as "butlering". I do like that. The job is to butler—the client, their needs, the show's needs, and not least the artifact's needs. To do that successfully and professionally is very satisfying. At the same time, someone once told us that given the invisible quality of our work, we must have very little ego. Hahaha. Of course, the favorite thing is to make a mount that works but still disappears. I think there is a lot of pride—if not ego—in doing that well. And of course, there're always the objects themselves. Eternally nourishing.
Least favorite is when an institution hampers us from doing our job as best and as economically as we can—sometimes plain old lack of organization (oh—you need tables, chairs and lights??), sometimes inefficiencies seemingly driven by insurance requirements (you have to work here, you have to solder there beyond that eternally locked door, the artifacts have to be somewhere else three miles away and water is nowhere to be found).

DETAILS

Mair adding finishing touches to her mounts.

SOME OF MAIR'S FAVORITES

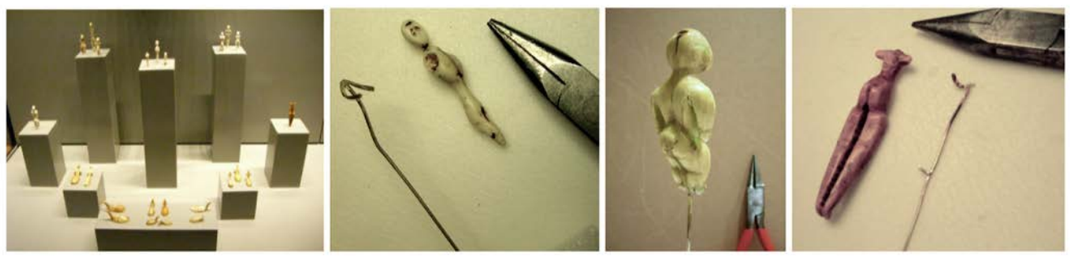
Shelly: Do you have a favorite object or exhibition that you've worked on? What makes them stand out to you?
Mair: The Cap of Monomakh: the most dysfunctional installation ever worked on yielded my all-time favorite object. What made it stand out: Luxury, elegance, simplicity, history. Not my favorite mount though—no magic, just straight forward.
My favorite mounts are a collection of full-on mounts for tiny, tiny ivory figurines. I loved making these miniatures—as carefully in soldering, shaping, filing, fitting as one would do in making a mount for a "regular" sized figurine. It reminded me of my jewelry making days.

THE CAP OF MONOMAKH

"...the most dysfunctional installation ever worked on yielded my all-time favorite object."

PAINTING THE DETAILS

Mair in-paints a mount for a ceramic bowl.



SMALL IVORY ARTIFACTS

All mounts, no wax.

1988 : FAMILY

Benchmark on the road in Rochester.

Shelly: What is your role in the IMF? Why do you spend your precious time volunteering to be part of it?
Mair: I can't answer this question. I'm too keenly aware that after an initial input on ideas and organization of the initial iteration of the website, I have no technical skills that can be of any help. I feel very badly about that. The best I can do is always highly recommend our catalog customers to the IMF webpage and Instagram page and link to them in emails.

Shelly: Do you have any advice for people just starting out in mountmaking?
Mair: Hmmmm. Practice, practice, practice?

Shelly: When will that Mountmaking Book be available?
Mair: Hahaha—picture us retired, on a Greek isle spending the mornings at the taverna by the quai, listening to the squawk of seagulls and the clang of lines against masts, writing our memories of our life in museums—oh yeah, and a comprehensive how-to handbook on mountmaking...

Shelly: Where do you see the future of mountmaking heading?
Mair: Not being much of a tech-head, I used to happily pronounce that mountmaking was safe from the intrusion or even the take-over by the world of tech. But there is so much happening now with 3D printing that I'm not sure I can continue to make that claim. Is that where it's heading? Or is that merely a new tool in the arsenal?

Shelly: Would you like to share anything else about your job or the field in general?
Mair: Only my full-throated enthusiasm that one can do something for a living that's so much fun in a community that is so talented and generous. Who'd have ever guessed?

This series was inspired by the AIC-ECPN's @humans_of_conservation Instagram series. We are grateful to them and expand on their idea with their permission.