

HUMANS OF MOUNTMAKING

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INTERNATIONAL
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FORUM



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Shelly Uhlir has been making mounts since the mid-80s, began working at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in 2001, and has been involved in the IMF since its inception. In this interview, we discuss how she began mountmaking, what her day-to-day work looks like, what makes a "good" mountmaker, and her thoughts on the future of the field.

How did you find your way to the mount-making profession?

I came of age during the time of the blockbuster exhibition. Museums were a big deal. I was in high school in the 70s, when the *Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition blew through the US. Although I didn't see it in person, its effect was felt *everywhere*, positive and negative.

The year I finished my undergrad at Northern Illinois University, in 1983, *Treasures from the Shanghai Museum: 6,000 Years of Chinese Art* visited the Field Museum. I suppose that exhibition might have been my first true glimmer of appreciation for exhibition fabrication and design, because although I still remember the beauty of the art displayed in that exhibition, I also remember thinking it was brilliant theater as well – the lighting, the colors, the pace of the show all added to the drama and showcasing of the treasures presented. I didn't know that exhibition mountmaking existed yet, but I had felt its effect.

In 1986, I was just back from a couple of years living in China, in the process of studying for a master's degree in linguistics so I could continue to travel the world teaching English. I had helped with installing student exhibits during my undergrad years, and I had worked with silver in a jewelry-making class in high school, but I had no idea that there was a job that would bring my previous experiences together until I lucked into a job at the Smithsonian Museum of African Art as a Graphics Exhibit Specialist during their inaugural exhibits.

During that "all-hands-on-deck" time, I had the opportunity to learn from a great crew at NMAfA and to help pad and

paint the mounts that were made by the contract mountmakers. Those mountmakers were Bob Fuglestad and David and Mair La Touche at Benchmark. They represented the gold standard in mountmaking at the time. I feel so grateful that these were the people who introduced me to this work. A year or so after that, David and Mair asked if I was interested in joining them on a job where I could learn some basic mountmaking skills. Long story short, we hit it off and I ended up eventually working at Benchmark for over twelve years, contracting at institutions all over the world, moving from apprentice to crew supervisor, helping to develop the Benchmark Catalog as well as numerous seminars and workshops.

Looking back, I think my early years at Benchmark were a perfect mountmaking apprenticeship for me. I started with painting mounts, attaching existing mounts to bases, prepping and installing pins and soldering simple mount constructions. We had a lucky string of jobs where I could focus on repetition – mounting hundreds of spoons or plates or other simple solutions. This gave me the opportunity to really hone my fitting and bending chops, as well as finishing skills and to find efficiencies to increase my overall fabrication speed. With repetition, we can experiment with slight variations in solutions to make better mounts each time. I was also able to observe David and Mair as they solved more challenging mount and mannequin problems and started to understand and apply those ideas more and more. Through the early days of development of the Benchmark catalog, I learned about product R&D, computer programming and marketing. Through the development of the mountmaking seminars, I was able to bring my teaching experience to a new focus, learning a lot along the way. Eventually, I picked up ways to estimate and bill clients fairly, and to run crews. For my brain, I don't think it could have been planned any better.

EARLY DAYS

1988 Baby mountmaker Shelly measuring stem height for bases on one of her first jobs with Benchmark at the Princeton University Art Museum. (COVER IMAGE: 2012 Fitting a fossil hand for NMAI-NY's Circle of Dance exhibition while the Tlingit and Mayo Yoreme mannequins look on)

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Would you like to share any of the other education or professional experience that helped you to start your mountmaking career?

Like many mountmakers, I come from an artschool background. I was a studio arts/photography major with an art history/ languages minor. I took classes in visual communication, drawing, painting, printmaking, photography, cinema, literature, French, Chinese, tons of art history classes, etc. Basic Liberal Arts. I ended up with an emphasis in photography because that's where I had the most credits, but I would have kept shifting and learning new skills forever if I could have. Although at the time, I was honestly just indecisive, and I thought I really might be unemployable, that scattered education really ended up benefiting me later and gave me confidence in my problem-solving and hand skills. I feel super grateful to have had the opportunity to just follow my creative whims for a while.

I also wonder if some of it was genetic. My grandfather was a tool & die maker in Cleveland, and when he retired, he puttered in his garage shop making *whirligigs*. Seeing him create these moving creatures out of scraps of wood and metal seemed magical to me. Knowing that it was possible to make things like this, even if I didn't know how yet, took away any barriers as a maker. He didn't live long enough to see me in this profession, but I did inherit his tools, many of which I still use now. I like to imagine that he might be chewing on his cigar, in his Lazy-boy chair, a little surprised that his granddaughter is doing this work, but pleased.

There's some brain chemistry that I think helps me to mountmaking also. I have always had the strong ability to focus on whatever I was interested in and block out the surrounding noise, sometimes to a fault (ask me about lipstick painting my parents' bathroom, drawing fish scales on my 3rd grade desk, or melting graham crackers in the kindergarten water fountain). A telling picture from my childhood shows my brothers happily wrestling on my grandparent's sofa while I am next to them obliviously engrossed in my Nancy Drew book. That same focus allows me to solve tricky mountmaking challenges or to stay concentrated on the art being installed as the courier reminds me of the value of the piece along with all the other people and noises of an active installation.

Another useful inherited skill that has served me well in mountmaking is the ability to easily flip between two and three dimensions in my mind. I can't play chess like the character in *The Queen's Gambit*, but the scenes where she visualized the games on her ceiling demonstrate well how my mind sees a mount solution begin to form or an exhibit drawing take shape from the paper. It is also helpful at the soldering bench, where unwinding an end goal 3D mount idea to a set of flat shapes can make brazing easier.



ON THE ROAD

TOP: 1995, Happily fitting seismic mounts for the opening exhibitions at the Skirball Cultural Center Museum in Los Angeles, CA.

BOTTOM: 1996, Acid-speckled apron model caught mid-bend during fabrication for the *Alexander the Great* exhibition at the Florida International Museum in St. Petersburg, FL.

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I do want to be clear that I was unaware of these inherent traits as anything special when I first started mountmaking. All I knew was that when I started working with brass with the goal of making safe, respectful seats for the artwork on display, it felt like home.

As a female mountmaker, do you feel there were any extra hurdles to overcome?

Honestly, I never felt any restrictions or barriers from fellow mountmakers. We are a community that is based on problem-solving and results, so the metric is your ability to do the job, not your gender. I did go through a time of frustration with clients as I was transitioning to crew leader in the 90s though – since most of our crew were tall men, some of the museum staff where we worked would automatically assume that one of them was the boss. I am naturally a pretty shy person, so I suppose that ultimately helped me to make myself more assertive and confident in the workplace. Life's not fair for anyone though, so I'm uncomfortable spending too much time on that. Make improvements where you can, and let the rest go.

What does a day at work look like for you? What type of objects are you typically working with? Do you work very independently or is the work more team-based?

One of the things that I love about this work is that every day is different. I talked about brain characteristics that help with

mountmaking, but one of my brain's weaknesses is that I am almost incapable of doing the same thing the same way twice. It's a kind of ridiculous inner rebellion. This is the reason that I could never be a jeweler, or at least not one who had to make matching earrings. Mountmaking is rarely the same, even if solutions are similar, because the artwork always has you exploring different paths. I love that.

It is hard to put a percentage to how much of a typical week is administrative or teaching or bench work. For example, last week we were immersed in a large deinstall of about 650 objects, so early in the week, I was in the gallery handling objects and sorting mounts, deciding which ones we would save, and then packing the saved mounts. Then we have mount note sheets that describe how to deinstall the art. Those documents are kept with the on-site collections managers during the show, but after that, it is generally my job to scan them all, add metadata and attach them to the treatment records for that exhibition in the database. So, today I am sitting a lot doing that, whereas last week I was running around getting over 20,000 steps every day. In a few weeks, I will be teaching a daylong workshop off site, so soon, my focus will shift to presentations and hand-on exercises.

When we are working on an installation, the work is very team based, which I love when everything is running smoothly and find satisfying to pull through when it doesn't. But I also have

a lot of independent time, which recharges me. It is a perfect balance. The way my work is set up here at NMAI, I work within the conservation department. This is great because that means my main reason to create is conservation driven. During the times when I am not fabricating, the expectations of working in a conservation department are that I will work on dissemination of information, teaching, and continuing to learn. I am not considered only a bench worker producing a certain quantity of mounts per day. Bench working was an important part of my mountmaking education, but for my time of career, it is nice to have that variety. I can click into fast production head when I need to, but I also get to be involved with the Steering Committee of the IMF and everything we are doing there. Being allowed and expected to be a part of that voice in the mountmaking world is wonderful and balancing.

Have you worked in different capacities within the museum setting?

Yes! When I worked at NMAfA, even though I was technically a graphics assistant when I first started and my duties were mostly around processing and silkscreening labels and text panels, we were a small exhibits crew, so we all really had to do a little bit of everything. We were wiring security devices, fabric wrapping case furniture, art handling and cleaning a lot of acrylic. It was a great early training and helped me learn to gage where help was needed. I learned a lot there.

You have worked as both a contract mountmaker and a staff mountmaker. Can you elaborate more on your experiences within both of those roles?

During my time at Benchmark, we worked with hundreds of different institutions, galleries and individuals, so I experienced many different ways of organizing and executing an exhibition and learned to be very efficient and customer service oriented in the process. David and Mair talked about being good butlers in their interviews and I learned that from them. How can we be of service?

I have been an employee at NMAI for almost 25 years now. The biggest difference that I've found between being a contractor and an employee boils down to expectations and teamwork. As a contract mountmaker, we were hired to be experts and were treated that way. It was to everyone's benefit to make the work as efficient as possible for budget and schedule. Even though we were the "butlers", and often we had to help find the efficiencies, there was no doubt that we were appreciated as experts. Relationships were generally short-term (although we had many repeat clients!) and intense because we were usually there at the exciting times. As an employee, we are primarily expected to be a useful part of the team. We are there for all of it – the planning, the budgeting, the meetings and the cleanup, maintenance and storage at the end, all on top of the fabrication and installation work. The relationships are long-term and compromise for the sake of the team dynamic is there in a very different way.



2012 : STOP MOTION

Initial sketch for the Quechua Scissor Dancer mannequin for the Circle of Dance exhibition at NMAI-NY.



The mannequin hanging out before dressing.



ABOVE: Testing the steel support and measuring to make sure it would fit in the case. RIGHT: Scissor Dancer jumping for joy that he is finally installed.



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2004 : OPENING OF A NATIVE PLACE

Shelly installing Tenochtitlan stone maskettes in the Lelawi Theater, some of the first pieces that went into the Smithsonian NMAI's inaugural exhibitions. Note the ever-present folding rule in the back pocket.

What is your favorite part about mountmaking?

The independence, the creativity, the problem solving, the privilege to spend intimate time with spectacular cultural heritage and working with artists or family of the people who made these pieces and having a role in supporting them in a way that does them justice, as safely and respectfully as possible. When that works, it is the best. Even though I've been doing this for almost 40 years, it has rarely been boring. And I am easily bored.

How often do you work with living artists and what is that experience like?

It isn't every day that I get to work directly with living artists, but I do stay aware that every day that I am making mounts, I am responsible for a living community's belongings. Sometimes that brings with it the privilege of working together directly with artists. One recent example was when artist *Ursula Hudson* came to DC in connection with the opening of the *Sharing Honors and Burdens: Renwick Invitational 2023* exhibition. NMAI had just purchased one of Ursula's ensembles that is on display there, *We Are the Ocean*, and *Ursula* had scheduled time with conservators Susan Heald, Emma Smith, and me to discuss details of how she would like the ensemble displayed for future exhibitions. Listening to and exchanging possibilities with Ursula directly was enlightening and clarifying (and fun!). Having those conversations recorded and available for the future, and honoring the artist's wishes for the care and display of her creations is important.

It doesn't always make sense for me to be involved directly with the artist because often mountmaking is a very small detail on a long list of other things to resolve first. Sometimes, artists haven't seen how mountmaking can help enhance the experience of their artwork before. But after all these years, some contemporary artists who have worked with me before will reach out directly for brainstorming and display conversations. That always makes me very happy. I don't do contract mountmaking these days, but I am always happy to consult and point in the direction of colleagues who do!

More often, because artists and communities can be inundated with requests and questions during the planning of an exhibition or loan, we try to be respectful of their time by organizing

collaborations through curatorial or conservation channels, so we aren't bothering folks too much. If I know that a conservation or curatorial collaboration is being planned, I can see if any questions can fit into that conversation and at the same time, I can be ready if any questions come up that I can help answer.

Do you have a least favorite part of the job?

Unnecessary bureaucracy or hierarchy, too much paperwork and inefficient communication can suck the energy out of a project. There are times when egos can get in the way of what's important. Feeling my time is being wasted for no good reason is irritating. That stuff can make me crazy, but usually it's just a flash. I choose to assume that everyone is trying to do their job the best way they can, and that usually allows me to do whatever I can, then get past that stuff quickly. Who wants to spend their lives in all that?

I have that famous Ralph Waldo Emerson quote displayed at my desk: "Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day. You shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense." I can't say I'm always successful with it, but I try!

Do you have a favorite object or exhibition that you've worked on? If so, what makes it stand out for you?

It's very hard to pick favorites, but from the way back machine, one exhibition that pops into my head from a purely "I can't believe how lucky I am to get to do this work" point of view, was the *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration* exhibition that opened in 1991 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Over 600 objects represented cultures from all over the world in that time period. When a cart entered the workroom, it could be carrying any number of treasures: Islamic swords, Chimú textiles, Muisca cast gold ornaments, Mixtec mosaic masks, Indian bronzes, Korean, Japanese and Chinese ceramics and lacquerware, Italian woodwork, German silverwork, Benin bronzes, carved amber from northern Europe... everything was spectacular and it was energizing to see the differing levels of craftsmanship and technologies used around the world at one time. Having the privilege of actually handling and mounting some of these pieces was the treat of a lifetime! (*Exhibition Catalog*)

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There was a while in the 90s where we were mounting a lot of Alexander Calder's jewelry at various museums. Those were some of my favorite pieces to mount because, although he worked in silver, much of the jewelry and kitchenware he made used very similar techniques to what we use in mountmaking. Also, shadows are so important to his work that it was a fun challenge to try to invisibly support those pieces.

Since I've been at NMAI, there have been so many favorites, but the one that comes to mind is the *Circle of Dance* exhibition we mounted in NY a few years ago. That one started as just a "small show," only ten cases that would each have one mannequin displayed. But thanks to the collaboration and confidence of our curators, designers, and conservators, I was allowed to play while attempting to balance static display with active dance. It was fun and I think everyone was pretty happy with how the display forms turned out.

Are there any "lessons learned" stories you'd like to tell?

We learn lessons every day, don't we? I don't have any catastrophic mount failure stories, but there was a focusing experience that happened on a job in the early 90s where I was carefully holding a figurine in gloved hands, over its storage box, and the heat of my hands activated what turned out to be an old faulty repair and its head popped off. Even though everyone told me it was fine, that it needed to be re-adhered anyway, the adrenaline had me shaking for an hour after that and the memory keeps me focused to this day.

The other thing that comes to mind is more about leading crews. I am very organized at work and very independent, and I have always been good at scheduling and such, but encouraging and leading people is harder for me. I always expect that people will, of course, always do their best, and unfortunately, I am pretty impatient and confused when they don't or can't. If I could, there are a few lessons learned in that regard that I'd like to go back and repair.

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

Right now, I find myself in a kind of head cheerleader role at the IMF. Brett Angell calls me the den mother and that works for me too. I have my fingers in the social media, website, conference planning, and virtual programming pies, and I'm really good at bringing people together (and scheduling meetings:)). I just feel lucky that I find myself in this time and place, with the knowledge and connections earned over all these years, along with the opportunities and expectations of disseminating knowledge that working within the Smithsonian in NMAI's conservation department offers. For

right now, I feel like I have things to offer the IMF. I have been part of the IMF since BJ, Mac, David, and Jerry first brought us all together, so I can see how far our profession has come through the group and how useful the exchanges we facilitate are in furthering all of our knowledge and how exciting things look for future growth. What mountmaker wouldn't want to be part of helping the profession grow?

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

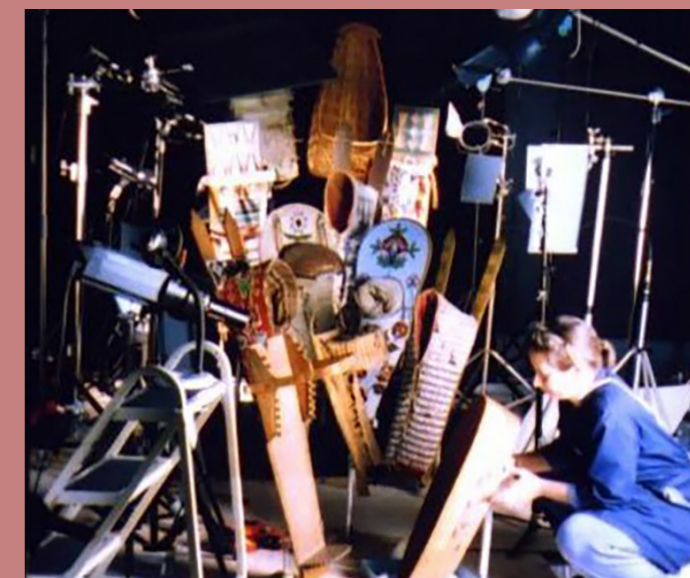
Honestly, I'm not sure that I have any useful advice to offer. I can share what my path was, I can share techniques, I can share tool and material info, tell stories, and put people together with other people, but who ever really listens to other people's advice anyway?

But when people ask my opinion about how to get started in mountmaking, I usually offer some variation of: "look, make, assess, repeat."

Look: First of all, if we are talking about learning or improving mountmaking skills, you have to look at other people's mounts, the ones you admire and the ones you wonder about. It used to be that the only way to do that was to go visit museums, but now, with all the sharing that is going on in our IMF social media, we can see so much more work than before. What appeals to you stylistically? If you wonder about decisions made, you can directly ask about how and why. I love that we have this tool at our fingertips now. It still is wonderful to visit museums, but we are less likely to annoy security through social media.)

Make: Secondly, of course, you have to know the techniques and hone your hand skills. There are so many ways to do that, even if it isn't a specific mountmaking course: jewelry classes, welding certifications, computer classes... it depends on what you are drawn to or where you feel your weaknesses are. Once you have access to a setup for whatever material you want to work in, start making some mounts, for things at home or for friends. Just start playing with finding support points and connecting the dots.

Assess: The third step is crucial to getting really good at any craft – You have to make mistakes and be willing to do-over. Try not to get stuck in a solution or just try to get to the finish line by any means necessary. The problem-solving and careful execution of the well-fitted mount requires lots of repetition. Try not to get too wedded to initial solutions and allow yourself to back up and start over as needed. Remember that the work is for the sake of the art, not the ego.



VALUE OF REPETITION

TOP: 1998, One of the cases of jewelry mounted in the *Alexander Calder: 1898-1976* exhibition at the National Gallery in Washington, DC
LEFT: 1993, Endless plate mount fabrication for the permanent ceramics collection at the Wadsworth Athenaeum. (Photo by David La Touche.)
RIGHT CENTER: 2003, Surrounded by cradleboards while working on a bit of a tight photo shoot for NMAI's *Native Universes* publication. (Photo by Ellen Simmons.)
RIGHT BOTTOM: 1996, Shelly installing the jade and serpentine figures and celts of the *La Venta Offering 4* for the *Olmec Art of Ancient Mexico* exhibition at the NGA.

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I understand that schedules don't feel like they allow for that sometimes, but the earlier you can honestly assess the mount you are working on, the less chance you have of digging yourself into a time consuming and potentially unsafe hole. Even if you just realize that this mount might have technically worked, but next time you would do it differently, that's a step toward expertise. You should be the harshest critic of your own mount solutions because at a certain point, when your mounts are "safe and pretty enough," you can easily get stuck in a rut and the work can become drudgery. Keep it fun and keep making it better.

And finally, the **repeat**. This is obvious. Keep looking, keep improving your skills, keep honing your solutions. When it stops being fun, move over for someone else to step in! I guess that was a lot of advice after all.

Over the years, have you noticed any types of training or student backgrounds that seem most conducive to good mountmaking?

I've trained folks who come from the arts, the trades, bartending and everywhere in between and from what I've seen, I don't think a person's initial starting point really makes a difference.

In general, the "hard" skills like brazing or welding are relatively easy to teach if people aren't intimidated by fire or tools, but the "soft" skills are more difficult. For example, I've noticed that people either come with a basic understanding of the mountmaker's role in preventive conservation or they don't. I always watch people I am training to see if they naturally have "careful hands" and if they watch before they talk, move, or do. To me, these are more crucial skills to start with because if a student doesn't have that natural understanding of the responsibility of the mountmaker to the art first, they will have more of a challenge being in this field. They might get jobs at first, but few repeat customers. I prefer that a person is overly careful at first than overconfident.

Effective communication skills also are important because you will often find yourself in the middle of tense situations and need to solve those problems diplomatically and safely. Also,

because our work is meant to support but not be super visible, it can take a personality with a bit more humility.

One skill that wasn't needed when I started but is definitely helpful now are computer skills such as working with 3D files, photogrammetry, 3D printing, etc. They're not used for everything, but they are great for some things. Another tool in the toolbox.

As far as training goes, I think there's no question that one-on-one apprenticeships are the best training ground. Two years would be ideal, but one year could work, depending on the student. If we look back, most of us working in the field now were trained or created trainings for ourselves that essentially built an apprenticeship. Unfortunately, we don't have a set of overall standards for our profession, so it is hard to have any kind of official training program either. It is hard to set standards because different museums and collections have different aesthetics, collection needs, or established institutional practices. Maybe places with large shops, like the Met and the Field, can create that apprenticeship setting, but those spots are limited. The closest we have for interested folks are wonderful week-long trainings offered by various colleagues and 10-week internships generously hosted at some of our institutions like we offer at NMAI and NMAH at the Smithsonian and the Getty. I feel like the week-longs are great for people to build existing skills and the internships are great for beginners, but neither guarantees the skills necessary to really be able to get out there and work as a mountmaker afterwards. *The Diversity Apprenticeship Program at The Broad* was so fabulous as a jumping off point for the LA preparator community. In their year-long program, their students develop relationships and skills so that after the training is over, they are hireable and can immediately work in the field. I hope eventually we can figure out a way to offer something like that for mountmakers.

If I'm being honest, not every institution needs a full-time mountmaker. This is where the content that the IMF is offering through the website Library and the YouTube channel and the exchange of information offered on our social media and in the Online Forum makes me so happy. This is the beating heart of our profession!



I GET BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

Removing a mount from a Yup'ik mask representing Negakfok (negeqvaruaq), the cold weather spirit (NMAI 09/3430), during the deinstallation of NMAI's *Our Universes* exhibition. (Photo by Kelly Ford.)

Where do you see the future of mountmaking heading?

Who knows. We could all end up with chips in our heads that allow us to envision the museum experience without really being there, making the whole profession obsolete (forgive me, I have been reading a lot of Ted Chiang recently). Seriously, I do feel like the mountmaking profession, along with the rest of the museum field, is in a state of flux. However, I find that exciting and not existentially worrying. Although we are no longer in the time of the commercial blockbuster, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Budgets and sizes of object-heavy exhibitions may be shrinking in many places, but that just means that mountmaking needs to adapt its skills and methods too. Change is inevitable, so let's embrace it.

The virtual aspects of sharing exhibits are exciting and are important to expanding access. While the virtual tools are exciting and useful, I don't think they will be a replacement for exhibitions with real art. I think as long as people want to experience wonderful things in real life, to come as close as they can to other humans' creations, and there is perceived value in continuing to respectfully care for the belongings and collections that we steward, mountmaking in some form will flourish. Training to an independent level continues to be a hurdle for many, so I hope that as these virtual and social platforms continue to offer opportunities, people can find ways to keep advancing the work.

The physical tools we use may also continue to evolve, but I believe that tenacious, clear-headed problem solving, respectful curiosity and careful hands will always be most the important base tools for a mountmaker. There will always be another shiny new toy to play with, and I am grateful for those who enjoy following those new trails. I am excited to see what the next generation brings. It feels like a time of blooming, a bud before it bursts into something else, whatever that may turn out to be. Ultimately, we are a practical bunch though, so only the best, most useful ideas will survive.

Would you like to share anything else about your job or the field in general?

This is a field that I love because it appeals to creativity and curiosity at the same time that it teaches and inspires. It is a privilege to have a role in bringing belongings back to life or simply offering them a safe, comfortable, temporary seat during their time on display. It is really an honor that I continue to appreciate and I still can't believe that it is a real job!