

HUMANS OF MOUNTMAKING

ANN PRAZER

MOUNT SHOP SUPERVISOR
THE FIELD MUSEUM
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, USA



INTERNATIONAL
MOUNTMAKERS
FORUM



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Ann Prazer wears many hats as the Mount Shop Supervisor at Chicago's Field Museum. She and Shelly discuss her role working with and mounting the Field's diverse collections, lessons learned and the path that led her to joining the IMF Steering Committee in 2023.

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?

Ann: If we're going way, way back, I was always extremely focused on art as a kid, and my favorite place to go was the Cleveland Museum of Art. The art, the architecture, it was just majestic to me — I was hooked. Working at a museum or a gallery when I grew up was always in the back of my mind.

I have a BA in Studio Art from Miami University, where I concentrated in both painting and photography. Most of my work was 2D, but I took metalworking and jewelry making classes, which I really loved. I also completed what is called a thematic sequence in Museum Studies, which is a program at Miami that is just short of a minor.

After graduating in 2003, I was a photography assistant and worked for a few fine art galleries in both Cleveland and Chicago, before I found mountmaking in 2006. The Field Museum at that time was really scaling up their mountmaking staff for two large permanent halls, Evolving Planet and Ancient Americas. There were two Mount Shop locations in the museum, and I was one of about 20 mountmakers. Most of the positions were 6-month terms, so I really hustled and worked on building my skill set in that time.

Shelly: What does your day-to-day work look like? What type of objects are you working with? Do you work very independently or is the work more team-based?

Ann: Our Mount Shop is unusual in that we are technically part of the Exhibits Department, and not in the

Conservation Department, like many museums. In my role as Mount Shop Supervisor, I don't make as many mounts as I used to, which can be a bit disappointing at times. Along with Pam Gaible, the Senior Mount Shop Supervisor, I plan the mountmaking and object installation of exhibits, coordinating with the rest of the Exhibits teams — Production, Development, Registration, and 2D and 3D Exhibit Design. We often collaborate with our Anthropology Conservation Department or Collections Managers for specific challenges. Some days I will be measuring and photographing objects for future exhibits, sometimes designing mounts, or coaching mountmakers and helping them with troubleshooting. We each have our individual roles, but it's important for us to all be on the same page and work as a team.

We work with all types of objects, since the Field Museum's collections span Anthropology, Geology, Botany, and Zoology. We also have an impressive Rare Book Room in our library.

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

Ann: My favorite parts of my work are both on the object side and the mount fabrication side. Like most people, I enjoy learning about cultural objects and scientific specimens, but it's their age that sometimes gives me pause. Seeing a 4,000-year-old fingerprint preserved in the clay of a ceramic pot that you are handling can be awe inspiring.

I also love the problem solving that goes into designing and fabricating a mount, and the subsequent satisfaction when you know you've nailed it.

My least favorite thing is juggling a lot of projects at once, but it does keep things interesting!

DEC 2022 : SUE THE T-REX

Temporarily deinstalling the scapula from Sue the T. Rex for the scientific research and examination of Sue's strength and range of motion. Performed by the Field Museum and The University of Chicago. (COVER IMAGE: Ann & The Tara of Agusan (9th-10th century AD). 3D imaging project in the Grainger Hall of Gems.)

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GRAINGER HALL OF GEMS

Finished case in the Grainger Hall of Gems, showing a variety of mount types & sizes. The smallest gems are mounted with flattened insect pins that conform to their facets (top). Gem "quake" mounts for the traveling exhibit, *Wild Color*. Each cradle mount has an added upper bracket that is screwed into the post (bottom left and right).

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

Ann: There's a lot of exhibits I loved working on, but our Hall of Gems stands out as particularly enjoyable. I have always been interested in gems and jewelry, and it was great to work on such small and often intricate mounts.

As far as an individual object, there is an Apsáalooke headdress that I made a mount for back in 2007, which was my first steel mount. It's not the most attractive mount I've ever made, and honestly not my favorite, but it did have some great features to it. The feathers down the trailer of the headdress couldn't be held upright because of the fragility of the leather lace that connected them. To hold them upright, I made individual mounts for each feather, each fitted with a rare earth magnet. These magnets also held the trailer in place, on a curved steel ramp covered in fabric. We featured this headdress again in our *Apsáalooke Women and Warriors* exhibit in 2020, and I wish I had the time to rework some parts. I have a photo of it by my desk that reminds me how far I've come with my mountmaking over the last 17+(1) years.

2007 : ANN'S FIRST STEEL MOUNT

Ann's first steel mount was made for this Apsáalooke Headdress and used rare earth magnets attached to individual feather mounts.

Shelly: Are there any objects or mounts that come to mind that have offered particular "lessons learned" for your mountmaking?

Ann: There is a mount I made for a Qingming scroll, which is a 27-foot-long painting on paper and silk. I was tasked with making a mount for it, and it became apparent that this mount had to be fully adjustable in both width and height. Only a small area of the scroll is displayed at a time, presumably to extend the number of years the scroll can remain on display. Because of some delicate repaired areas, I could not predict how the scroll would want to lay with each yearly rotation, which affects the width. The case is also quite small, so the mount panel is easily removable from the case to make adjustments on a table. The adjustable legs permit the opening of the scroll to range between 14-3/4" to 22" wide. The adjustable height is necessary, since the thickness of the rolled areas of the scroll vary with each rotation. To move the legs higher or lower, there is a set screw on each leg base that can be loosened, then re-tightened when the leg is at the desired height. There is a Tyvek-covered mat board under the scroll, which prevents the fabric on the panel from grabbing the surface of the paper too much. There are adjustable, fabric-covered panels that slide in and out on the mat board, which conceal the bright white Tyvek surface if the mount is adjusted. There are also small Mylar "clips" that gently press the scroll to the mat board behind it in areas where the scroll wants to ripple slightly.

That is a very long explanation of how the mount works, but the process of making this mount taught me a lot. I improved my skill set in making custom hardware, and combining a large variety of materials that functioned well together. More importantly, it was the first time I had to make a mount that was completely adaptable to the whims of others for future rotations, and any possible changes in the condition of the object down the line. I had to work within very tight parameters, with a lot of unknowns. I am not a fan of unknowns, so I felt I had to plan for maximum flexibility to get over that.



QINGMING SCROLL : CYRUS TANG HALL OF CHINA

The finished adjustable mount & scroll in its case (top). The adjustable scroll mount in progress, testing the functionality of each component (middle). One of the custom mount components that allows for vertical & horizontal adjustment. The brass flat stock provides a way to cover the large slits needed in the mount panel for a finished look (bottom).

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Shelly: At this point, you have a lot of experience as a staff mountmaker at the Field, but have you ever worked as a freelance mountmaker?

Ann: I've done only a few freelance jobs over the years. It's hard for me to take on freelance jobs on top of a full-time job, especially since I don't have a home workshop space. I really admire freelance mountmakers though since there is so much self-discipline and the added pressure of running a business.

Shelly: Have you worked at different institutions as a mountmaker or in different capacities?

Ann: Most of my experience with this is when I've traveled to other institutions to install traveling Field Museum exhibits and seen how other museums structure their mountmaking and production roles. Although each institution is working to achieve the same goal of building an exhibit, museum teams have such varied structures. I've known mountmakers that can focus solely on producing mounts, while some museum workers are required to produce the whole exhibit and wear all of the hats.

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

Ann: I joined the IMF team this past year and will be working with the rest of the Steering Committee to support the 2024 Forum in Boston. I had a minor role in helping Pam Gaible and Earl Lock plan the 3rd International Mountmaker's Forum in Chicago in 2012, which was really enjoyable. I'll also be helping to edit the Tools and Equipment section on the IMF website soon.



SPRING 2022 : GUN LAKE CANOE

Ann hanging a canoe from the ceiling of the *Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories*. This canoe, from the Gun Lake Band of Potawatomi, is supported on its interior by a lightweight aluminum frame and in-painted nylon straps.



RAINBOW ABALONE SHELL

Inpainting on contoured "quake" mount brackets for the traveling exhibit *Wild Color*.



ANN & LUCY

In a small vault space, Ann often needs to live with unusual exhibit components behind her desk, like this model of Lucy, the famous australopithecine hominin species from *Evolving Planet*.

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

Ann: Observe what other people in the mountmaking community are working on and ask a lot of questions. Try not to worry that you might be asking a "dumb" question — chances are that mountmaker will be more than happy to talk shop. Read up on different skills and processes involved in mountmaking and play around with different materials and how they work together. If you make a mistake when you're fabricating, try not to beat yourself up too much, and learn from it. Once you solve a mountmaking puzzle, take that information and build upon it. Make sure to balance your fabrication skills with plenty of object conservation and preservation knowledge.

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

Ann: I think mountmaking is heading in the direction of more collaboration and communication between mountmakers, which is beneficial for everyone involved.

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

Ann: If you need tips on how to make a mount for dried mammoth dung, let me know.