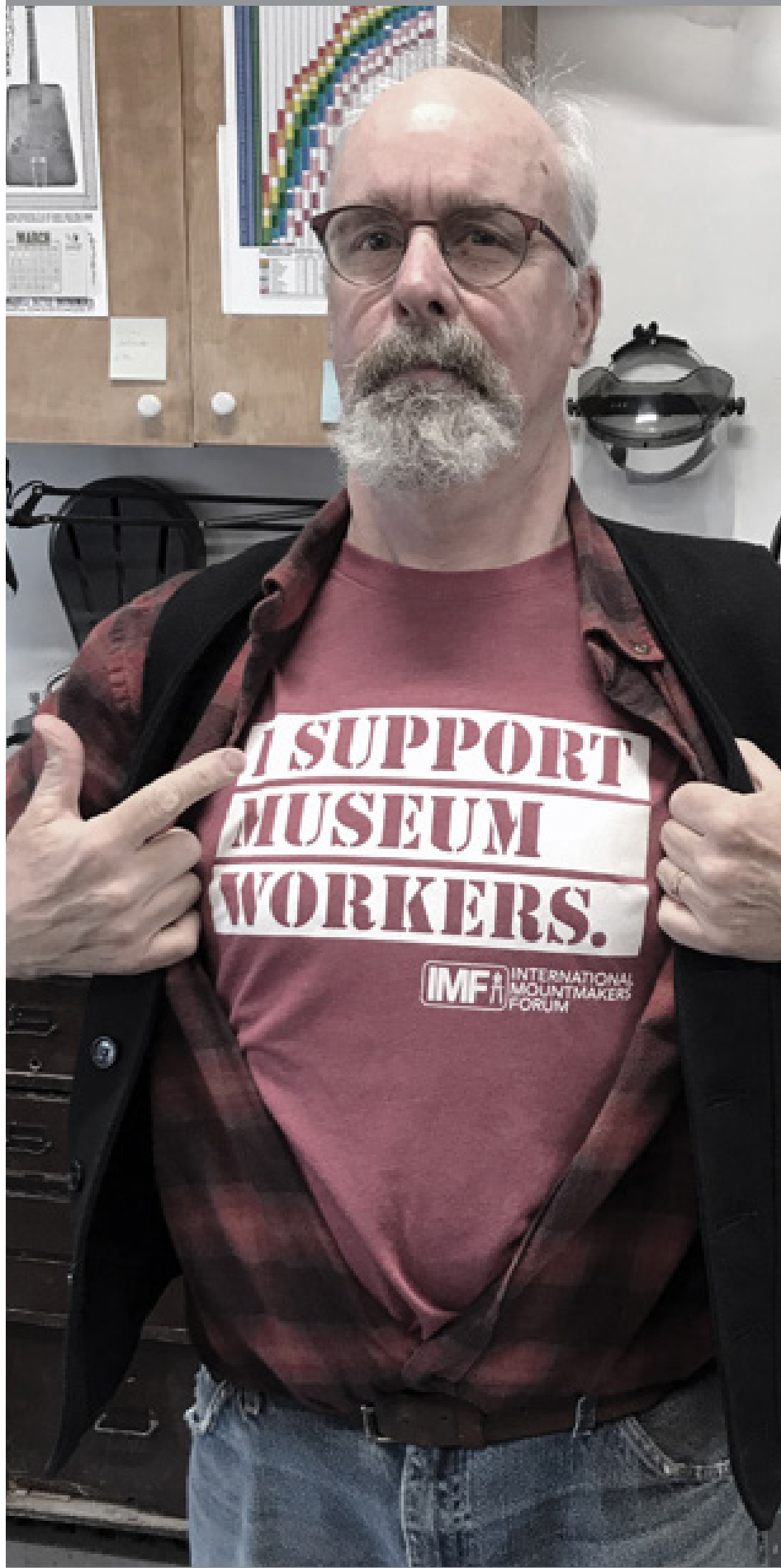


HUMANS OF MOUNTMAKING

JAMIE HASCALL

MOUNTMAKING FOCUS
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON, USA



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Jamie Hascall has been an exhibition mountmaker since the early 1990's where he was part of the team that re-mounted the Seattle Art Museum (SAM). During his conversation with Shelly, he shares his passion for mountmaking, teaching and community as well as his roots in music and science.



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

Jamie: My very first job in a museum was when I was studying Botany at Beloit College. I got an internship at the Field Museum mounting pressed plant specimens. I got to know this crazy group of people that worked in museums, who would party at the drop of a hat and just were interesting, weird people. I went from botany into horticulture, left that after a couple of years and went into woodworking and instrument building.

My brother Mike was leading Artech, an art handling company in Seattle, and so I had knowledge that there was this backside of the art world. They introduced me to conservation, and at first I wanted to be a conservator. However, I didn't have the chemistry background, so I found the Museology program at the University of Washington and happened to see that the Burke Museum needed a part-time preparator. I walked in and said, "Well, do you want a trained cabinet maker for student wages?," and they took me on.

Gary Wingert taught me mountmaking and it came very naturally. It worked well enough that he mentioned the Seattle Art Museum was building their new downtown museum and that I should go talk to Jack Mackey. Soon I was on the crew at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM), building the downtown museum with Jack as Mountmaking Coordinator and five other mountmakers: Gordon Lambert did all the plex mounts. Will Thornton who ended up at the Getty.

Chris Cunningham who's currently editor of Small Boats Monthly. Kirby Lewis ran a gallery that specialized in oceanic art. And then there was Fitzgerald DeFreitas, originally from Trinidad and a costume designer and builder for Carnival. Eventually, BJ and Gary came on as well.

I was able to learn on the job from with this amazing array of stuff to mount. Everything from tiny Egyptian figures to German carvings. I did that for a year and a half until the opening of the museum, took a slight break, and then we went back and installed the Seattle Asian Art Museum. I was on staff at SAM for almost 3 years. At the end of that they said, "Thanks, bye." which launched me off into being an independent and a whole series of museum projects.

Jack's role was important as the Mountmaking Coordinator. He ran flak for all of us, went to all the meetings, and made sure the stuff was there for us. He organized everything, so that when you finished one mount, you would have the next object, its display angle, distance from the wall, etc. He kept us moving. It isn't often emphasized how major a role that a mountmaking coordinator plays in large projects, but in the end, the role has to be filled by somebody, no matter what. Usually, it's just taking time away from somebody that should be building mounts.

CARVING THE FORM

Jamie carves a male mannequin from ethafoam for the Naval Undersea Museum in Keyport, Washington.

(COVER IMAGE: Jaime shows off his IMF "I support museum workers" tee.)

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Shelly: What a great apprenticeship period, working with an amazing group of craftspeople coming with their own sets of skills and having the time to work with great collections and develop a set of guidelines for mountmaking in a seismic area. Were you all making it up as you went, or did you have guidance?

Jamie: They had worked very closely with the Getty in all their planning. BJ talks about this in his interview. SAM worked very closely with Wayne Haak and Jerry Podany, and conservation was part of it from the get-go. We had real clear rules about padding and all of that and although material selection was not as rigorous as now, overall, it was still there.

The nicest part of working with the group was that if you'd get stuck, you could call the others over, and put more eyes on the problem. Suggestions would go around a circle, and though you might end up right next to where you started, you had to go around that logic circle to get there. The communal aspect of working in the group was something that I valued so much, and as my career progressed to working alone, I really missed it.

Shelly: Can you expand on your educational and professional experience a bit?

Jamie: It really goes all the way back to learning from a father who is a tinkerer. He'd look at a problem and find some weird piece of hardware to solve it. My mother called them Hascall-isms, which meant using something for a purpose that it was not designed for. That's the essence of mount making. It really gave me this basis of asking "How can I look into the industrial realm or other places for mountmaking materials?" I learned about materials and their rules, and how much you can stretch the rules. 3D thinking is so important as it's so much the basis of all this along with basic engineering of leverage and all of that. When I was really small, I also worked on my own bicycles. Bicycles are one of those mechanical things that gives you

all this other knowledge that is totally useful in mountmaking. I had a strong grounding in sciences, from botany to basic physics to some chemistry and all those things were super important. Just to know how to look at things from a chemistry and physics point of view for something as simple as understanding temperature and expansion and contraction. I think, for me it was super important to my career in mountmaking to have both a knowledge of physical sciences such as physics and chemistry and geology, but also natural sciences and cultural awareness. It's one of those great arguments for a true, liberal sort of education, where you try to get a grounding in a lot of different areas.

Knowing the scientific method, being able to hypothesize, test that hypothesis and come to a conclusion, that led to my ability to test materials and understand why some things work and some things.

Shelly: It's very logical. As an independent mountmaker, you have to be a mountmaker and a project coordinator too, like Jack Mackey.

Jamie: Yes, there are many stories I could tell about that, but I'd like to move on to your question about whether I work very independently or more team based. I think it's a really important thing. It's been one of my roles that I've often been hired on to train people and kept on as a mountmaker. This is what I did at the Alaska State Museum and at the Burke Museum and in other places. I had to work with whoever they had and try to understand the abilities that were there and the politics and then assemble the most efficient working group I could out of that. That's been one of my roles that has been really interesting, but challenging because, coming in from the outside, you don't actually have authority. So, you use logic and knowledge and cajoling to make things happen. You also have to be open to the ideas there that are new to you. I worked with a dyslexic guy who was so difficult to understand but I learned so much from his very unorthodox ideas.



MOUNTMAKING TRAINING

Students at a *Mountmaking for Exhibits* workshop in Seattle.

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It requires paying attention. You have to be very aware, and sometimes you're massaging egos, and trying to keep everybody happy. At the Alaska State Museum, I was hired as a trainer, so there I had an explicit training role. When I worked at the Burke, I was just an additional experienced person. That's where Jack was so important as the Mount Coordinator. He just helped the whole thing become a fun cohesive group.

A whole lot of my work has been done truly alone, especially in my private collector and non-institutional work, which was a lot of what I did. It's hard because you don't have somebody else to bounce ideas off of, and you have to do everything yourself. That work started with a collection of Pre-Columbian stone and ceramics and gold. I ended up working for 2 years on this project with one of the best collectors that I've ever met. They were scrupulous and cared about provenance. I got to work on everything, from little, tiny things up to huge stone pieces. It was custom work and helped design the case work. We survived the 2001 6.8 magnitude earthquake really well. Once everything had stopped shaking, I called them to check on the damage. Everything I had worked on stayed exactly where it was supposed to stay which was good to hear.

Shelly: What is your least favorite part of this work?

Jamie: It's definitely dealing with the business because it's not what I want to do, but I can't afford to have somebody else do it. Bidding is my least favorite. Trying to estimate what something will cost, and then having to stay to the bid is just mind bogglingly difficult.

A lot of working through this is with communication. If things were very unclear or unstructured, I would have to work for time and materials. Sometimes, it's just an unstructured job, and they keep finding more pieces to mount, so it had to be

handled that way. In those types of situations, I was akin to the gardener and the other people serving this extremely wealthy family. I was just hanging their stuff up.

Shelly: What's your favorite thing about mountmaking?

Jamie: It's all the problem solving. Every single one is different. It's like, "Damn, how am I gonna deal with this?" It's damaged and fragile. It's observation and interpretation and the cultural appropriateness of what's being asked for. All of those are parts of the puzzle.

For cultural awareness, the classic one for me is displaying a native pipe and stem. They're only put together to be used in ceremony, so mounting them needs to show position but it needs to be clear that the two parts are not together. Or mounting any sort of animate figure. You don't put anything around the neck, even though it might be the easiest place to hold on to it. You don't put a tab in the crotch. So, it's the challenge of understanding and then turning that into a structural solution that looks ok. I've just loved doing that.

Every time I install a mount and take my hands away, I still ask, "Okay, is this one gonna work?" I don't necessarily assume it will because sometimes there's an unforeseen issue. Having it do what I intended just makes me smile every time.

Shelly: Do you have a favorite object or exhibition that you've worked on? You started to mention it briefly earlier.

Jamie: The Pre-Columbian stuff really was fabulous, but the best project was working on the Alaska State Museum. It was a great group of people, an incredible collection, truly everything from Native art to paper objects to industrial cannery machinery. They got it right. The thing that was



2016 : SLAM

Aaron Elmore rocking the SLAM Project logo at the opening of the Alaska State Museum in Juneau.



IS THERE A PERSON IN THERE?

A Tlingit Tin'aa showing how a proper mount can bring a display to life at the Alaska State Museum.



MOUNTED : FISH

Student mounted Angel Fish at mountmaking workshop, West Dean College, Chichester UK

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so cool about that was that they were able to bring a lot to the table with the architects and with the builder. It became not a hierarchy, but a triangle, which is very unusual. They all worked together, and at the end, both the architect and the builder said that they'd never had a client like that. Ultimately, they got the museum that they wanted.

It was one of those rare confluences where you had somebody like Bob Banghart. He had worked in state government and was a deal maker. He was able to go and lobby in ways that got them money. Aaron Elmore led the crew, and it was amazing. They brought me up to teach and then they called me and had me come up 4 or 5 more times to build mounts. Best opening ever!

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

Jamie: The lesson I want to share is to beware of going outside your area of expertise. Especially as a private contractor. Because you're hungry, you need work, and a big project comes your way. You say, "Yeah, I can do that, sure. That'd be really cool." Once, I got a request to install a set of plywood murals by Michael Spafford. I bid it, and I bid it too low. In the end, for 3 weeks of solid work, all this planning, two guys helping, I netted about \$300. Everyone else got paid.

I have gotten better at this through my career. The trick is knowing when to enlist other people's knowledge. I have trusted welders because I don't weld. Same for rigging. If it's bigger than I can pick up, and if it could hurt somebody, then I need more help or more knowledge.

This segues back to the fact that I was a production woodworker, and I can still count to 10. I've got all my fingers. I worked in a lot of situations where safety was absolutely my first job and sadly, this also came out of a really awful experience where somebody actually died. The entire exhibit had gotten delayed, and we were being squeezed between the opening and getting all this stuff done. We were working 12-hour days and maybe even 6 days a week by that point, I don't know. We were just running absolutely flat out. One of the guys was diabetic, and he was working so hard he wasn't paying attention to his blood sugar. He left to pick up anchors on the way home, and he went into diabetic shock while driving. He crashed his car and was killed. Nothing is worth that, you know. It's just no project worth that.

The first slide in my teaching PowerPoint is talking about safety. There are three rules. Number one: people come first. The safety of the people working on this and the safety of the people who are going to come see it. We have to keep people safe, period. The second rule is: the objects have



BLADES OUT

Ethafoam doesn't stand a chance against Jamie and his handy blade.



PACCIN

Elizabeth Mauro, Mike Hascall, Sean Harrison, and Jamie at PACCIN event at Mountmaking Focus Studio in Seattle.

to remain safe. This is why we do the work. The third rule is that we get things done on time and make them look good, but that is not ever going to trump the other two. That came out of the loss of this friend.

Shelly: Would you like to elaborate at all about different roles you've had in the museum world?

Jamie: We haven't really talked at all about my time as Chief Preparator in Santa Fe. I decided to take that job after I had been doing the private thing for a while and finally needed somebody to tell me what to do and give me a paycheck at the end of the week. I was done with having to do everything myself I went in thinking that I was going to be just a prep., and then the guy who was supposed to be my lead left for another job less than 6 months after I had started. I got kind of thrown into being the chief preparator and it was good, but it was an insane amount of work. A very small shop spread very thin. I was there for 7 years, and it was quite an experience.

Shelly: Okay, now I want to ask you about your role in the IMF and why, when we all have choices on how we spend our time, you spend time helping with this.

Jamie: I help a bit over the years and presented numerous times, but lately felt that I'm just kind of barely here. One of the fun things I am looking forward to as I retire from being actively in the field is that I should hopefully be able to make more content. We've been talking more about the education end of things so I'm hoping I can help out there. I've developed a whole way of working and I really enjoy passing that along.

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

Jamie: Talk to as many people as possible. See as many mounts as you can. Observe. Really try to think about what this stuff is, and then go put yourself out there and buy the basic equipment. Start buying practice art at Goodwill

and build mounts for it. Because the only way you actually learn to bend metal is to bend metal and get the soldering going. Ask questions. Accept suggestions and try them out.

Look at it is as learning to play a musical instrument. You start by going, pick, pick, pick, and it takes a long time. There's a cartoon out there of a kid saying, "No, no, I wanna skip over all the practice and just get to the part where I'm awesome". But it doesn't work that way, and we all know it doesn't work that way.

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

Jamie: I like that the professionalism and the knowledge of mountmaking as being important is advancing. It is becoming something that even a director will know that a mountmaker is someone who can help with the vision. I think that the IMF has been really important in this, and the connection with AIC that got closer with the Mountmaking Issue that was done in 2010. Working together with conservators on materials testing directly connects to mountmaking. And the AIC wiki pages. We're just getting a lot more blending. We're not two separate things anymore.

Shelly: Finally, would you like to share anything else about your job as a mountmaker or the field in general?

Jamie: Well, I'll just say it is by far the best job I could ever imagine having. I have gotten to see the coolest stuff, and from a worldview point of view, I have seen the sheer genius of humankind again and again. There's no way that with the objects I've handled and seeing the way that different people have come to a problem and solved it that I can ever feel racism or sexism. It's like everybody is stunning in all they've been able to do, and I feel so blessed to have been able to witness that and do this work.