

HUMANS OF MOUNTMAKING

# PETER ROSEN

MOUNTMAKER  
THE FIELD MUSEUM  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, USA



INTERNATIONAL  
MOUNTMAKERS  
FORUM



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**Peter Rosen joined the Steering Committee in 2023. He has come to mountmaking via a fascinating road from neuroscience, sleep lab research, and an obsession with all things “thing” to the Field Museum in Chicago. Here, Shelly and he discuss all this and his approach to mountmaking now.**

**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?**

**Peter:** I took a winding and wayward path into mountmaking. The way I have rationalized it in the past, is that I peaked at the age of 7 when I was convinced that my future profession would be fabricating and replicating to meet the needs of museum objects — and ever since then I have been knocking around the professional landscape trying to get back to that vision. Although I moonlighted in sculpture shops in college, my official degrees were in the sciences and after undergrad I headed off to pursue a doctorate in neuroscience while completing research in sleep labs. From there I bounced to anatomy/cadaver lab dissections and biomedical illustration, which eventually became my gateway into (medical) museums. Once in museums, I bounced from “upstairs” to “downstairs” — from curatorial planning to registration and collections work — then finally conservation/preservation management. In retrospect what all of these turns have had in common is an underlying focus on research, experimentation, problem solving, and hand skills — so although they seem disparate in nature, the path makes sense in context. Regardless, I wouldn’t have done it any other way...

**Side Note:** It is probably worth mentioning that at some point in my early 20’s I was fortunate enough to get a random tour of the Field mount shop by the legendary Pam Gaible

— and that singular conversation was meaningful enough to stick a beacon in my brain for the next decade that eventually pulled me right back into that very shop. Serendipity.

**Shelly: Wow, you have had some amazing journeys so far! So happy you landed with us mountmakers! Tell me a little bit more about what was going on at 7 years old that convinced you about the museum work?**

**Peter:** I think I was just obsessed with all things thing. And the Field Museum specifically fed that obsession through its cavernous object-dense halls — consisting of everything from mammalia to material culture. Around that age I would also spend weekends Xeroxing images from reference texts at the public library to gather fodder for making replicated models out of polymer clay that I would later paint. Seeing that someone had done the same thing at an occupational level with the glass and wax models at the Field opened my eyes to the concept of a dream job. And that sort of thing sticks with you; like an imprinting process. For many of us that is what this is to us — a dream job.

**Shelly: Also, regarding your “Side Note”, was the Field mount shop tour with Pam your first introduction to mountmaking? Who was your first mentor in mountmaking?**

**Peter:** Pam was my first introduction to mountmaking as a professional possibility — and ultimately my first true mentor in mount making. Moreover, through describing her shop roster at the time, she first introduced me to the refreshingly open-ended notion of whom a museum fabricator could be...

## 2022 : MOUNT INSTALL

Mount installation of articulated *Thylacosmilus* holotype cast. (COVER IMAGE: Installation in progress of Eugene Von Bruenchenhein’s clay objects. 2017. For *Mythologies* publication)



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**Shelly: You have worked at many different institutions both as a mountmaker and in different capacities. Can you share more about how the job responsibilities varied between workplaces?**

**Peter:** I have held other roles in museums — mostly collections management related. But I have always felt that these positions (albeit extremely meaningful) were just a step in the path towards what I truly wanted to be doing. I live for benchwork and have grown allergic to the computer screen.

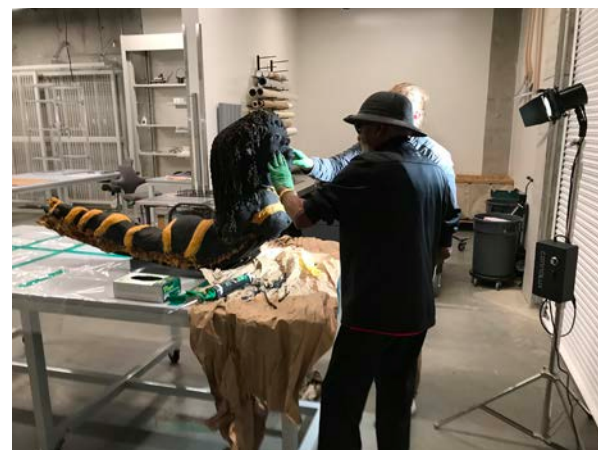
I deeply appreciate the other mountmakers I know who have knocked around a variety of other positions or trades before they land at the bench — it is one of the common shared traits that makes professionals in our field so fascinating to collaborate with.

**Shelly: It seems that your experience before working at the Field was mostly at art institutions. Can you share any differences you find working at a natural history museum?**

**Peter:** The easy answer would be that the art institutions involved far more interactions/collaborations with living makers — specifically with those who directly produced the objects I am working on. But if I shift my thinking slightly from makers to stakeholders/stewards of an object, I am finding an equally healthy amount of collaboration still present in the natural history setting.

I have however found from a conservation perspective that the guardrails for the methods and materials used to interact with tangible heritage objects are refreshingly more firmly established at my current institution — thanks to the Field's stellar collections and conservation teams. Having these guardrails in place gives us a stable scaffolding to work off of when making fabrication decisions. It is a fallacy to consider such things as inhibitors for novel creativity or experience building (which is sometimes common in art spaces), instead I believe it provides a structure for creative individuals to utilize while simultaneously respecting the long-term preservation of the object.

With that being said, I think the natural history setting could take note for how ephemeral objects (and intangible heritage) are handled in the contemporary art setting. I feel fortunate to have been able to have a taste of each.



**2021 : ARTIST  
DR. CHARLES SMITH**

Discussing preferred conservation methods and materials to repair bowsprit figure experiencing internal material decay.

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## 2021 : BONE TOWERS

Selection of bone tower works by Artist Eugene Von Bruenchenhein. Inspection post handling and move to new Art Preserve storage/display location.



## 2023 : WHALE FALL VERTEBRAE

Temporary support structure to expose underside for mount fabrication without disturbing friable worm-eaten surface.



## DETAIL : WHALE FALL VERTEBRAE

Mount in-painting detail



## MASS MORTALITY SLAB : [LEPTOMERYX]

2022. Handling conversation with Pam Gaible and other Field Museum Colleagues.

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

**Peter:** At the Field, the day-to-day is completely project dependent. Between exhibitions, the shop is mostly working on the simmering needs of the institution such as object rotations or mount alteration. During exhibition build-up and fabrication periods, the shop is constantly collaborating with Conservation, Collections, Registration, Design, Woodshop, Developers, Project Managers, and others to produce structural supports for artifacts that appropriately hold them in a manner that will also convey the concepts written into the exhibition design. With the way things are organized at the Field, we often represent the conduit between Collections/Conservation and Design/Exhibitions Production. During rotations it is an all hands on deck whirlwind of artifact handling to deinstall/reinstall.

Occasionally there are “other duties as assigned” at the museum that the mount shop gets transitioned into because our skillsets are multifaceted — plus we rarely are capable (for me pathologically so) of passing up an opportunity to problem solve. Beyond exhibitions, the museum is a research institution with folks constantly traveling out into the field and bringing back all manner of objects with an array of needs. If the schedule allows — we may be assigned to figuring out how to meet those needs with our colleagues. This is one of the other pleasant differences I have found now that I am working at a natural history/ anthropological museum rather than a straight contemporary art museum. It is in these moments where we get to integrate more deeply with the museum ecosystem and immerse ourselves in the many ongoing projects (and in some instance life’s work) of our talented colleagues.

**Shelly: What is your favorite thing about your work?**

**Peter:** By far my favorite part of being a mountmaker is the constant problem solving involved (shocker based on my previous answers, I know... ha). Particularly the problem solving involved with material selection and choosing the best method to alter that material to meet the needs of the object at hand under the current constraints of the project/ environment. This is in part because methods and materials are always churning. New items are always surfacing while others are ceasing production. But by understanding how to read the needs of an object, as well as some underlying creative principles to working with material, there is always a solution.

Searching for new suitable materials also forces collaboration with external groups. In order to resolve a problem that requires a unique solution, this often means reaching across fields, industries, and/or creative groups. Since this profession is in its relative infancy — that means it is open for exploration. And I genuinely appreciate that I can find myself in an artist’s studio, or a mechanic’s shop, or a researcher’s lab (etc! the list goes on indefinitely) and still be able to draw on connections to the work I do and pull strategies from their solutions.

**Shelly: And your least favorite?**

**Peter:** My least favorite part about my work is the feeling that most things I produce are only a fraction of what I am capable of. I think most of us can commiserate on this point. Time, space, and money constrain every element of what we do, and although I am often happy with my work, there is always something I wish I could have done better. Potentially a more positive person than I could make lemonade from this sentiment (because consistent room for future improvement keeps a job from dulling), but I have a hard time cutting creative darlings — especially when it comes to finishing details.

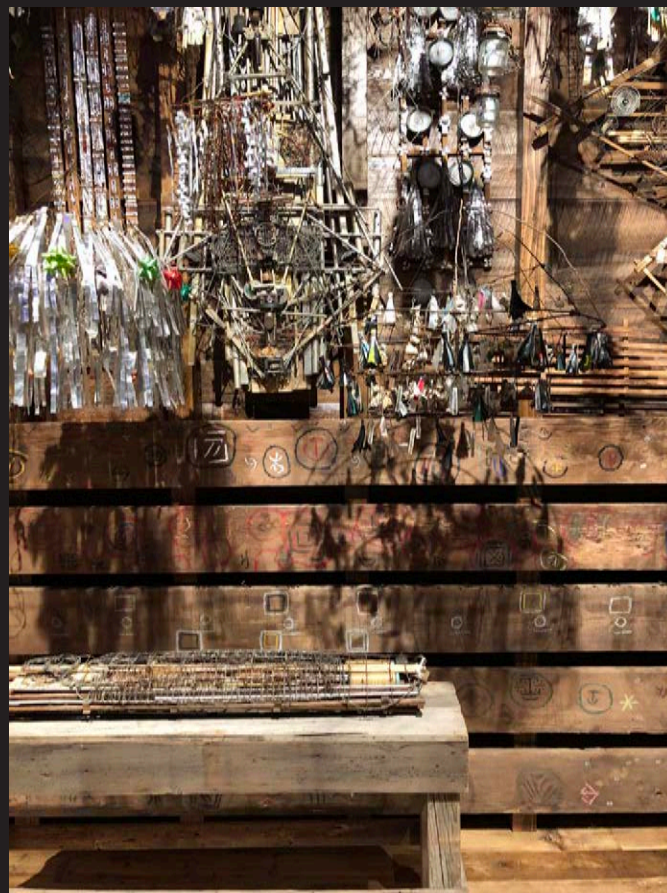


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**Shelly:** Do you have a favorite object or exhibition that you've worked on? What made it stand out to you?

**Peter:** There is no ONE object that is my favorite — but I definitely do have a “type”. The projects I gravitate to are the weird ones — the fraught ones — the ones people don't usually like to get their fingerprints on for fear that they might fall apart. This isn't because I am particularly calm or brave in my disposition, in fact quite the opposite. But I think challenges like these offer opportunities to brainstorm, sketch out, plan out, and devise. As a prolific insomniac, I take the moments my body won't allow me to sleep as an occasion to float around in twilight and process problems at hand. Seeing a sufficiently thought-out project come to fruition, in spite of the anxiety involved along the way, is an irreplaceable experience for me personally. And by collecting these experiences it also strengthens my resolve to continue to throw myself onto these projects in the future. It is this gravitational pull (a force past colleagues have termed “running towards the fire”) that has left me fortunate to be able to work with objects in the forms of chicken bone towers, glitter houses, fantasy coffins, and healing machines (among others).

Out of these projects it is hard to single out one or two to spotlight in full, but perhaps an alternative way to discuss this is in terms of lessons learned in the process. One of the most notable being, when making a support structure — consider allowing for more gentle movement than your initial impulse dictates. For instance, when creating a support structure for the Eugene Von Bruenchenhein bone towers (3-5ft lightweight towers constructed in the early 70s from poultry bones, unfired clay, model airplane glue, and spray paint), we found in early inspection that the materials had formed very hard, brittle regions where the adhesive had become shatterable. Applying any firm resistance to these regions caused immediate breakage. Conversely, in other regions (such as the longer straight aways) we found some acceptable flex. When combining these two factors together, it was decided to treat the towers as miniature architecture and create a packing/handling solution for them that allowed for some gentle sway naturally (like a building in an earthquake) — which ultimately accommodated both the brittle/immovable regions and the pliable.



## 2020 : 'HEALING MACHINE'

Selection of Emery Blagdon 'Healing Machine' components. Installation view at Art Preserve facility (JMKAC).



## 2019 : INSTALLTION

Installation in progress of Artist Lenore Tawney's Cloud Labyrinth. Unfurling fiber strands once the weight of the piece is fully distributed and supported from above. Gallery of John Michael Kohler Art Center (JMKAC) for Mirror of the Universe series.

Continuing with this line of thought, if you find a mechanism that works, don't be afraid to use it in other applications, even if they seem completely disparate. For instance when creating a suspended mount for a 20ft x 20ft fiber piece by Lenore Tawney, a mechanism needed to be devised that allowed it to be distributed/hung by hundreds of small monofilament loops. Although on a relative grid, each point had small variation in position, and if weight was not distributed all at once the loops would break under the weight of the entire textile. To accommodate this, a large frame was constructed with the ability to receive dozens of runs of tubing which were then threaded through all of the loops. When the frame was raised, it allowed the textile to fall into the preferred position without creating harmful tension. A similar mechanism (at least in initial theory) was used to install the many disarticulated/floppy sections of siding on the exterior and front porch section of Loy Bowlin's Beautiful Holy Jewel Home. The home had never been square, even in its original site in McComb, MS, which called for another solution with built-in 'slop'. In short, the glitter and rhinestone embellished siding fragments were stitched together using a series of reversible muslin hinges, essentially turning the sides of the wall and porch ceiling into large textiles. Then, like the Tawney piece, the large sections were suspended in place using many mechanical connections to distribute the effecting forces.

We all encounter these moments of lessons learned— which is why I put so much stock in groups like IMF who provide an outlet for talking about them openly.



## ON THE MOVE : HOLY JEWEL

Move of Artist Loy Bowlin's Beautiful Holy Jewel Home plaster, lathe, and glitter wall. 2019. Collections storage of JMKAC.



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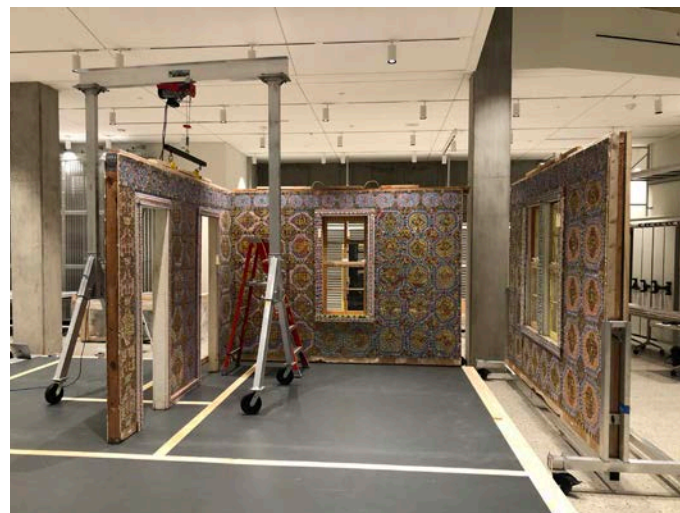
## 2022 : COURTS OF HELL

Mounted fabric and paper soft sculpture of figure depicting a particular fate within the Courts of Hell. Installation view at Field Museum for Death exhibition.



## 2023 : PRESERVATION

Treatment preparation of Judith Scott bundle. Project currently underway in Object Preservation studio.



## 2020 : INSTALLATION

Installation in progress of Loy Bowlin's Beautiful Holy Jewel Home. Move and installation of Art Preserve facility.

**Shelly: You are a staff mountmaker at the Field, but do you do any private contractor/ freelance work?**

**Peter:** Yes. I work at the Field Museum full-time and on my weekends/off hours I am fortunate to work independently on other external museum contracts (under Object Preservation, LLC). When I moved from semi-rural Wisconsin to Chicago my studio shrank from 1350 sqft with 25 ft ceilings to 600 sqft with 10 ft ceilings, which requires a whole re-think in how I organize my workspace. However, the size of objects that have been circulating through my shop has also decreased (sometimes; usually; not always actually). Lately, the majority of the projects have been more object conservation/part replication focused - but I also work mounts into the mix when the need arises. Because mounts are such an 'invisible' practice/product, I don't think it is fully realized how beneficial and efficacious a well-made storage or display mount can be for the long-term preservation of an object. This is a concept I try to impart on those I complete work for. Why spend the energy and resources treating/repairing an object when you could have this damage reoccur because you are not properly removing the stress that caused it in the first place? Mounts are not just for seeing something positioned in a more aesthetically pleasing way — arguably they are one of the least invasive, most "reversible," conservation actions we have available to us.

Keeping with my "type" (and considering my time and space is finite) I am fairly selective on what independent projects I agree to. If it's not a treatment I can puzzle around with, or working with an artist or material that captivates me, I typically do not take it on. This is a luxury afforded to me by working for both an institution and independently — but it also makes for a packed working schedule.



## 2019 : NEK CHAND

Installation in progress of Artist Nek Chand's concrete and ceramic works from Chandigarh, India. Move and installation of Art Preserve Facility.

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

**Peter:** In the months/years ahead I will be working with the other phenomenal members of the IMF steering committee as an editor for the Materials Page on the IMF website. More than emerging digital technologies, 3D scanning, or printing, I feel materials are the future for mountmaking. I think the nature of the work we do will always require the skilled hand and eye of the fabricator — thus the variable that I see changing most significantly in the years ahead is the portfolio of ODDY approved materials we have available to us. Furthermore, with professional communities/collaborations turning to virtual platforms to commune in recent years, the ability for knowledge sharing has burgeoned. I hope to capitalize on this and use the steering committee's involvement in other conservation focused professional organizations/working groups to strengthen material related sharing channels with the IMF community. Keep an eye out for more soon....

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

**Peter:** Listen to the cranky museum lifers in your department. It is far too easy to fall into the trap of thinking you know everything (we've all been there — but it is simply not true). The reality is that the folks who have been working in museums for 30 or 40 years have seen some s\*#t and are a bastion of knowledge regarding pitfalls, techniques, and nuances specifically related to the environment you are working in. They will be the ones who will have your back when you need help, and the ones who will teach you that one tool/trick/philosophy that will stick with you for the rest of your career.

Although in full disclosure, I am certainly biased with this statement because I am destined to be one... and I plan to be particularly cranky by the time I get there....

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

**Peter:** It is in the materials.

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

**Peter:** A colleague of mine (whose identity I sadly no longer recall) said something to me in passing that I have latched onto for over a decade now, and it is a philosophy that I am constantly repeating as I work. They said "...objects are doing an immense amount of work even at rest, the aim in all we do is to try to make the object do the least amount of work as possible." I make mounts with this in mind.

*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.*