

HUMANS OF MOUNTMAKING

# BJ FARRAR

SR. MOUNTMAKER  
DECORATIVE ARTS AND SCULPTURE CONSERVATION,  
GETTY MUSEUM  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, USA



INTERNATIONAL  
MOUNTMAKERS  
FORUM





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**As one of the co-founders of the International Mountmakers Forum, BJ is a perfect candidate to kick off our IMF Steering Committee “HUMANS OF MOUNTMAKING” Interview Series along with McKenzie Lowry. BJ started making mounts in Seattle in 1993 and has been on staff at the Getty Center since 1997. Here, Shelly Uhler sat down with BJ to discuss the founding of the IMF, his career and his thoughts for the future of mountmaking.**

**Shelly: How did you find your way to the mountmaking profession?**

**BJ:** I’ve been fortunate to be in the right places at the right times. I came across mountmaking early on in my museum career. I had finished art school and had started as an entry-level art handler at the Seattle Art Museum. There was no mountmaking there at the time, but they were preparing to expand their original site into a new building. In 1989, there was a huge earthquake in San Francisco, the Loma Prieta, which caused significant damage to the museums there. The administration of the Seattle Art Museum was very concerned that they were venturing into creating all sorts of new galleries and that there was potential for big earthquakes in Seattle. There was also no conservation department at the Museum at that time. We were working with a contract conservator who was a former Getty conservator, and she put us in contact with the Getty Museum. They were the only museum that was doing any sort of seismic mountmaking at that time and staff from the Getty came up to Seattle and introduced all of us to the fundamentals of mountmaking. This started an ongoing and long-term relationship between the two museums.

I was still a very low, low, low, level prep that time, so I was just observing all of this and was purely, just extremely fascinated by all of it. I could identify with the whole idea

of problem solving, designing, and creating. I just immediately could identify with all the aspects of it and was extremely jealous of the people that were my colleagues that were starting to do this. So, I was just constantly looking over their shoulders. They had no idea what they were doing at that time, they were just going on bits of information that they were getting from the Getty but slowly began putting things together. Clearly, there was a lot of work to do, so they expanded that small team of mountmakers. Jack Mackie was one of the originals up in Seattle, as well as Gordon Lambert. They knew I was really interested, so when they decided they needed a third person a few years later, I was fortunate enough to be that person and started working with them. At some point, they realized that was still not enough people, so they began drawing from local people who were doing museum work too. One of them was Jamie Hascall, who was just finishing up graduate school in museum studies. He started working with us too, and it was an amazing time. We were all just in a big room, making stuff up and learning from each other constantly.

Part of our training at the Seattle Art Museum was for each of us to independently go to the Getty and spend between a few weeks and a month, working alongside the mountmakers, Wayne Hawk and Bob Seeger, then Will Thornton, who had been a contract mountmaker in Seattle, and had worked closely with Jamie, Jack, Gordon and myself. He and Bob were the mountmakers when I came down. Wayne was the first.



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Now, fast forward many years later when I had the opportunity to come to LA for what I thought was a short period of time. The Getty Museum was opening up its new Getty Center, so they were hiring lots of people, and I was able to become part of the Getty staff and over a few years was able to move into a full time, mountmaking position. And that's where I am today, 26 years later. I started mountmaking in Seattle in 1993, came to LA in 1997 and have been part of the Getty since then.

When I started at the Getty, there was a choice between a temporary, limited term mountmaking position and a permanent full-time preparator position. Because the limited term was for only like 6 months, or something very short, and my wife was going to graduate school, and we were definitely on a limited income, I decided to take the full time preparator's position. Eventually, I was able to move into a permanent mountmaking job, after the original Getty mountmakers, Wayne and Bob, left a few years later. McKenzie Lowry came in to fill one position and I filled the other one, and soon we were mountmaking buddies.

**Shelly: What sort of education or professional experience did you have to start your mountmaking career? What was your major in school? What were the skills or interests that you had when you started out that made you want to even do the museum prep work?**

**BJ:** Two things come to mind about this:

When I was in school, my focus was kinetic sculpture. I find this ironic because I started out making things that were meant to move around, but I ended up in a profession that is designed to keep things from moving.

Also, when I was in school, I had a work study job that helped pay for my tuition all four years, and it was in an art gallery. I

was heavily influenced working in the gallery, doing tons of installation and art handling and everything. So, when that opportunity came at the Seattle Art Museum. I think I might have got the job because of my gallery experience. I mean, it was fine that I had been to art school, but I think that getting that job was down to that gallery experience.

It's still that way. I mean, I'm constantly learning and drawing from prior experience. Knowledge is always evolving, always. I do feel like I have come full circle. I mean, just to round off that first question, you know, just in terms of my being at the Getty, I don't think I would have ended up doing what I do if it hadn't been for my predecessors and influences at the Getty. I feel like I started from their influences, and I'm now in a position that I'm hopefully sharing information for others.

**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?**

**BJ:** That's a good question. Any three-dimensional object that goes on display at the Getty Museum at the Getty Center comes under our realm, so I can be working on anything from a small gem to a monumental sculpture. We don't divide the work depending on the size of the object like some institutions do, so it really can be anything and everything as long as it's three dimensional.

Daily, it really can be a mixed bag. Typically, there are multiple things going on at the same time. Mostly it's kind of medium-sized sculptures, some bronzes, some marbles. For the mountmakers in the Antiquities department at the Villa, their workload is definitely on the heavier side.



## IMF2022

BJ with fellow Getty Center Senior Mountmaker, Richard Hards

“ I’M THE LUCKIEST PERSON IN THE WORLD. I HONESTLY DO FEEL THAT THIS PROFESSION JUST TICKS ALL THE BOXES FOR ME, AND IT BRINGS A BIG SMILE TO MY FACE WHENEVER I’M AROUND FELLOW INDIVIDUALS THAT YOU KNOW FEEL THE SAME WAY. IT’S GREAT. ”

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## 2022 : INTERNAL MOUNT

BJ installing an internal mount on a Cy Twombly sculpture on loan to the Getty from Menial Collection

**Shelly: How far in advance are you able to plan your work? I know some people find out what they are doing each day when they come into work, and some people know weeks or months in advance.**

**BJ:** I'm a huge proponent of planning and the museum is very supportive of that. There is a lot of complexity to the mounts that we have to do because of being in a seismic zone. Also, our temporary loan exhibitions can have hundreds of objects that all arrive within a very short period of time. So, when it's possible, we try to travel in advance and see these objects, and prepare as best we can. This has really led us down the road into working with 3D scanning and all of that technology. That's continuing to push us in amazing directions. We're now in a position where we can, using our scanning equipment, get super accurate information that allows us to be really well prepared when the artworks arrive for installation. We can have very complex mounts ready to go, based on those digital scans. So yeah, I'm not a big fan of winging it. If we can prepare and make good decisions in advance, then I'm all for that.

**Shelly: Do you want to say anything about how mountmaking at both the Getty Center and the Villa are under the conservation departments?**

**BJ:** The conservation departments at the Villa and the one here at the Getty Center are independent departments, but we work very, very closely with each other and very much in line with all of our designs and aesthetics. There's no real difference now between the two sites in terms of mountmaking approaches. So, even though you might be working independently on a mount, you're still part of a team. It wasn't always that way in the past, but we've worked very hard to unify that approach between the two sites. There really isn't any difference between a mount that's made here versus at the Villa, which is great. We're constantly sharing information and materials and techniques. We want the aesthetics to be really in line with each other, even though the collections are so different. The approach is good. It's really helped us define how we want to do things, and it's good.

**Shelly: I know it's hard to come up with favorites, but I have to ask - what is your favorite and least favorite thing about your work?**

**BJ:** I think this is good. My favorite is that each artwork presents unique challenges, so it's always new and interesting, even though it might be an approach that we did with a similar object. It's still unique. I really love that because it never gets boring. There's always something that makes it interesting.

My least favorite is second guessing myself. Did I make the right decision? I try to own my decisions early on, but sometimes, there's a complicated object that you ask yourself if you've done it right. Did I make the right decisions? I hope I made the right decision. All of this takes place in the middle of the night, when you shouldn't be thinking about anything other than sleep. I try to limit that, but that's my least favorite.

**Shelly: It can be stressful.**

**BJ:** It can be very stressful. You know, we're dealing with priceless cultural heritage. Each piece is unique. And you know you want to do it right. Sometimes it's tough.

**Shelly: I don't like that it keeps you up at night, but I know that the fact that you do care probably makes you a better mountmaker.**

**BJ:** Yeah, yeah, I know it's good. I don't feel like I drift through it. Actually, I really enjoy collaboration. I feel like the best work always comes from multiple views. I certainly don't necessarily see the complete picture sometimes, and having that different perspective or different approach, by melding those together, we can really come up with a great final plan that might not have been there if it was just a singular thought. I'm a big fan of collaboration and problem solving with colleagues.

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

**BJ:** Wow, that one's a little tougher. I've worked on a lot of work over the years. There have been many artworks that I've really enjoyed working with. But I think there's an overall satisfaction that I get, just in general, as a mount maker. We get to handle and delve into a particular object in a way that no one else gets to. It's really wonderful. I feel a little bit guilty about it sometimes, because I get to hold this amazing thing. I get to get my head into it in a way that you know that not many people do.



We've had some pretty spectacular pieces come through the museum where I've had that opportunity to just be really part of that object. That's a bonus for sure. So yeah, I can't say that there's one piece that stands out. I mean, there are definitely pieces that I've really appreciated more than others, but in general, I think it's being able to just focus and be a part of that object and feel where the balances are and you can maybe appreciate it at another level. You can really appreciate some of the craftsmanship that was involved in creating that object. When you can add your own craftsmanship to an amazing piece of art without interfering with its craftsmanship, that's an opportunity that is unique to our profession.

**Shelly:** I know you've been a staff mountmaker at the Getty Center and at SAM. But have you ever been a contract mountmaker?

**BJ:** I have freelanced quite a bit over the years, but once I had a kid, I stopped doing it because I didn't have the time or the headspace for it between my regular job and my home job. I have had some great opportunities to work with some very interesting pieces, but I have to say that I really identify with being part of the museum end of that versus the contracting end. For me it's purely because of the fact that it's all about the artwork. When I'm at the museum, I don't have to worry about anything else. I feel that as an independent, it's more stressful for me. I contracted more before I was a mountmaker, when I was a preparator. I did more private work then. But now, I get enough of it at work. I don't need extra.



## 2021 : MOUNT DETAIL

French pendant,  
Getty Museum (85.SE.237)

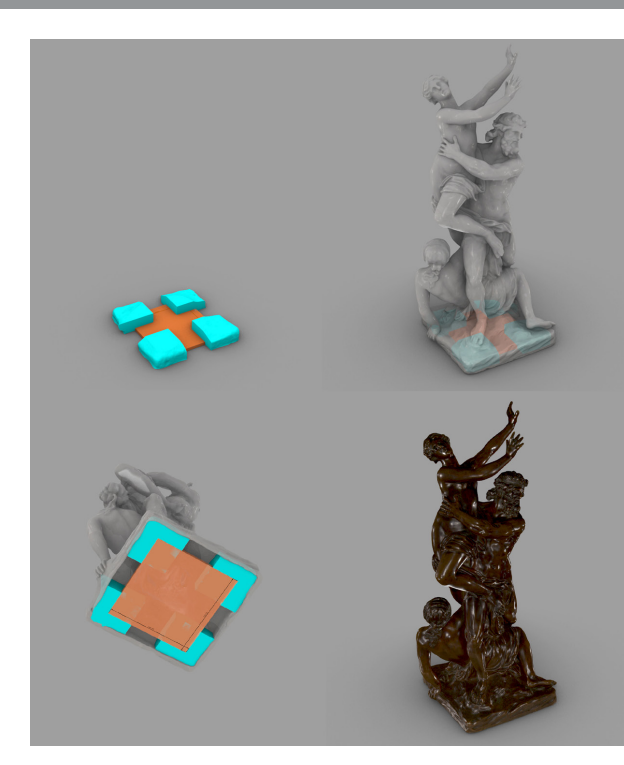
**Shelly:** You've already kind of answered this question, but do you want to elaborate on your experiences working at different institutions or companies as a mountmaker or in different capacities?

**BJ:** The biggest job I had other than the Getty was at the Seattle Art Museum. I was there for eight years, four of those years as a mountmaker. Every institution is organized a little differently. At the time when I was there, there was no conservation department, so mountmaking was part of the exhibitions and preparations department, so my boss was the head exhibit designer. So, it was a little different approach.

At the Getty, I'm part of one of the object conservation labs. To me it makes the most sense to be part of conservation because mountmaking really is a kind of preventive conservation. What we're doing is preventative, we're trying to prevent damage to the works when they're on display. But it is still nice to be able to work closely with colleagues that have different knowledge than what I have, and vice versa. It's a great set up having access to diversified skill sets

## TECHNOLOGY

Internal mount design from a  
3D scan



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**Shelly: Can you tell us about your role in the formation of the International Mountmakers Forum?**

BJ: Back in 2006, both Mac and I were involved in a Seismic Mitigation Symposium. It was a multi venue conference that started in Los Angeles, and really took us all over, presenting the work that we were doing with seismic mountmaking along with seismic engineers and conservators. We were in Palermo. We were in Tokyo. We were in Athens. It was a very interesting project to be involved with, and both McKenzie and I were grateful to have had the opportunity to do that. There were a few mountmakers at the conference and we had the realization that throughout all of these conferences there were only a few mountmakers involved, and we didn't think that that was right. That led us to thinking about the idea of having our own mountmaking focused conference.

It was no more ambitious than that at first. I mean, the idea was just to create the opportunity to focus directly on mountmaking and have mountmakers there. So, we floated the idea past our department head, and he was very supportive of it. With that, we started organizing our first mountmaking forum conference which was at the Getty Villa in 2008. Back then, we knew some people, some mountmakers, some colleagues, but certainly not by any stretch the number that we know now. We reached out to the few people we knew, and then just literally cold called every other museum that we didn't know people at, and had our first conference, which was amazing. It was a full day.

I think we had 11 presenters, and everybody walked away from it just feeling like we just scratched the surface, that this was an amazing thing. We needed to do it again, but we had no idea of how to do that. Fortunately, Shelly, you were there and had an idea that yeah, maybe we could do this again. You organized the second one, and that sealed the deal that this was something that we could do. The second one, at the NMAI and the Smithsonian, was the one that sort of defined all of the conferences so far, I mean, we had such a great turnout, and the enthusiasm was just exponential from the first one. That just set the ball rolling, and it just has never stopped, which is amazing.



## 2018 : MOUNT SNAPSHOT

BJ working on an internal mount on a Getty Museum bronze.

**Shelly: And what is your current role on the IMF? Why do you continue to spend your precious time volunteering to be part of it?**

BJ: Currently, I'm part of the IMF Steering Committee. I see my volunteering as an investment. I feel like with any energy that I put into it, I get not only my own personal satisfaction in return, but I can immediately see the benefits to the profession. It's a no brainer to me. It's only getting better. I feel like especially now, with the work that has happened in this short period of time that the IMF has existed, that we've made a significant impact on our profession, and have really given it credibility and visibility.

The sharing of information that we do has really helped solidify some important best practices. Also, it's fantastic to see a concept that was presented a few years back being part of somebody's work now. It's just it's great just to see that. How that flow of ideas is really solidifying things! I feel like we're moving into a kind of a mountmaking golden age. I don't know, maybe I'm overselling it. But I feel like just from my own path, that I really didn't have any exposure other than these little limited pockets, and that doesn't exist anymore. It is out there. It's totally available to anyone anywhere in the world. And it's great.

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

BJ: Yes, good luck. No, that's not the right answer. I always direct people to the IMF because it's a great resource, and there's so much information there that's constantly being added to it for anyone who's interested in the profession. I direct them immediately to the IMF website because if you want to try to get an overview, you can see what people are doing professionally. Between the archived presentations on the YouTube Channel and with all the foundational information that's on the website, it's a great place for

someone to really kind of delve into it and get a little better sense of the profession and what's going on, and how they might fit into that.

**Shelly: Where do you see the future of mount making heading? You also touched on this a little bit before, but if you want to elaborate on anything...**

BJ: This one is where I have many grand aspirations. I think creating the opportunities is paramount, and that's very much a carryover of the premise of the original intention of the IMF, to create opportunities for people to learn and share information. Internships and apprenticeships would be great, but I would also love to see more professional exchanges happen, where someone from one institution visits another, very much like a guest scholar situation. We could have an opportunity to work at another institution for a month or two. There's a lot of potential. It's just navigating and figuring out how to make that happen. It's very much a hands-on kind of profession, so any opportunity where people can get hands-on practice is really important.

**Shelly: Finally, would you like to share anything else about your job or the field in general that we haven't mentioned so far?**

BJ: I'm the luckiest person in the world. I honestly do feel that this profession just ticks all the boxes for me, and it brings a big smile to my face whenever I'm around fellow individuals that you know feel the same way. It's great.

**Shelly Uhler: That's a good wrap up. Is there anything else you'd like to say on the record?**

BJ: Don't do it for the money.

