

HUMANS OF MOUNTMAKING

Laura McClure

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LAURA MCCLURE

Laura McClure is the staff mountmaker at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and has been making mounts since 2010. She is so dedicated to her work with the IMF that she allowed herself to be interviewed while experiencing extreme pain from a broken tooth. The pain narcotics don't seem to have affected her answers at all!

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

Laura: That's a very good question, Shelly:) I started my museum career in the Project Management Office at the National Museum of American History (NMAH) in October of 2001. Around 2010, I began cross training in our Office of Exhibits Production and started loitering around our mountmaking area.

Brian Jensen, who was the mountmaker at the time, had announced his retirement and when he found out I could do hot work, he brought me into his inner sanctum, which was very, very rare. He liked to do his own thing. My craftiness and ability to apply padding was a plus, and so I learned mountmaking on the job from Brian while he was there. We worked together for a few months, and then he retired. After that, I turned to our conservators and collections people, and they encouraged me, and I also called one Shelly Uhlir at NMAI (that's you) and I was like, "What should I do? How do I get better at this?"

You gave me really good advice, "If you want to get better at making mounts, just make mounts." So, that's what I did. I made a lot of bad mounts in those early days. All the objects were safe, but it taught me a lot. It was a trial by fire in some ways, I guess, literally by fire. I had a quick apprenticeship with the great Jon Pressler from On the Verge Design, and I learned so many little tricks from him about mountmaking approaches and philosophy and that really helped. Just getting some feedback like, "Yeah, you're doing great. Just keep doing what you're doing" was what I needed to keep going.

Shelly: You came to mountmaking already knowing how to braze, so did you want to share anything more about your earlier education or other professional or artistic experiences pre-mountmaking? What led you to being interested in this?

Laura: When I'm asked, "You work at the Smithsonian? What is your job?" and I'm like, "Oh, I'm a mountmaker," I wait for the inevitable, "I don't know what that is," then I go into my spiel about what it is that mountmakers do. The next question is, "And what did you study? What did you learn in your matriculation through university?" And I love answering that question, "I was an International Affairs major, with a focus on Buddhism and Asian religion." And then there's another beat, and they're like, "'Cause, what... How does that...?"

Shelly: It's such a natural progression from...

Laura: Exactly! The natural progression of International Affairs/ Buddhism to mountmaking. But I've always been a maker of things. Silversmithing is essentially making tiny mounts. Between that and every other craft I have ever come across: quilting, stained glass, mosaics, painting with every medium, all that stuff helped develop my kind of mountmaking. My personality, my ability to problem-solve, and my experience as a project manager came into play because that's such a big part of what mountmaking is, too. I feel incredibly lucky to have found a job that allows me to be creative, to work with my hands, and to work with such incredible people and artifacts. I feel like my life could have gone in a totally different direction, but the stars aligned and here I am, in what I think is the most amazing job at a museum.

WONDER WOMAN : 2019

Laura poses after installing Lynda Carter's Wonder Woman tiara & earrings in *Superheros*.--
(COVER IMAGE: 2017 Mountmaker disguised as the Statue of Liberty during Democracy Wing opening)



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Shelly: Having all these creative pathways really expands your problem-solving options for mountmaking. It's great that this all came together for you in this way.

Laura: What's interesting is as a mountmaker with ADHD, I have this superpower of hyperfocus and at the same time being like, "Oh! there goes a squirrel." ADHD brains are wired to observe threats and opportunities, which is exactly how you design a mount. The ADHD is also why I have so many crafty hobbies and love to do art things.

Shelly: It's nice to have an outlet to use that creativity, the hand skills, the problem-solving, and the diplomatic skills...

Laura: That's true. That's where the degree comes in, I guess: Diplomacy!

Shelly: We know that diplomacy is an important factor of mountmaking work, but you're probably the first person that I have heard of who actually had official training in diplomacy before becoming a mountmaker.

Laura: I also learned so much from project management, about how groups work. It taught me that sometimes you have to be a leader, even though you would think that you didn't. I think learning that, and how to talk to different kinds of people... Some people you can send an email and with some people you need to go stand in their office and ask for something. I learned a lot from project management that I use in mountmaking.

Shelly: Can you share some aspects of your normal workdays?

Laura: My day to day is never the same! I'm typically working on two to three different exhibits at one time. Usually there's one that's coming up in a month, and then a couple that will install in a few months, and then, maybe a small storage thing in the works. And there are usually what I call "pop-up issues." Whether it's an older mount or something needing attention or a 'conservation special' (a mount that is needed to hold an object together).

Shelly: Do you make storage mounts as well as exhibit mounts?

Laura: I do, but not very often, because I'm just so busy with exhibit mounts. I'm working on a couple of storage mount projects right now, and I find that really satisfying, because I know they're going to help make the objects safe long term. I wish I had more time for it.

Shelly: It's easier to work with foam than with metal sometimes...

Laura: Yes, at NMAH, we have such a humongous variety of objects. I really value that because it's never dull moment at our museum, and whether it's the Muppets or coins, or military history objects or medical science stuff, it is just so varied. All of the objects are really exciting to me.

I try to block off time for being only in the mount shop, but fabrication is only a small part of what I have to do to get a project done.



2023 : FEMINIST PROPAGANDA

Laura speaks to a local Girl Scout Troop about her job and that girls can do anything boys can do while wearing Crocs.

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I spend quite a bit of time talking to different conservators, collections people, and curators. Sometimes, I'll be working on a mount, and I think, wait a second, there's a part of this object that maybe should be in the front. So, I'll go to the designer and the curator and ask, "Do you wanna show this, because it's kinda cool." Sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes, in these moments, I'll hear amazing stories about the artifacts. The curator says, "Did you know this," and I'm like, "Holy Shizz!" It helps me understand the object and its story and therefore how best to display it.

Shelly: When you face any given week or any given day, how much of your schedule and workload can you control?

Laura: I have some control issues: I'm a Virgo. I try to map out as much as I can. I ask people, if I'm doing a little pop-up thing for them, to put it on my calendar, so I can keep track of it, because I'm juggling so many projects. I can't rely on my memory to keep it all straight. It also helps because I can go back at the end of the year and be like, "Oh, yeah, I forgot about that!" But I do block off mount shop time on my calendar throughout the week when I can. Especially when I'm in TURBO Production/fabrication mode.

Shelly: It's nice that you have that flexibility both to schedule in the blocked-out time, and to decide when the free time is.

Laura: The Mount Department: that's me. I'm under our Office of Exhibit Production. They're doing all the things to get the exhibits ready. I work independently in the mount shop, but am part of a larger team. I am constantly going down to our cabinet shop and asking, "Why does this screw exist? Or is there a thing that can do X? Is there a fastener that does this?" And they're like, "Yes, there is."

The other thing that I wanted to touch on is although I work independently, at the same time, everything is also team-based. I think it's really important to not be working in a silo, right? A big part of what I have to do day to day is getting information and getting objects and working with everybody and I really value that. I don't know everything, so going to my colleagues and asking for their opinions is something that I value. I think being the only mountmaker in the building has been challenging because I have to come up with all the solutions. And sometimes I will make

a mount and it doesn't work, and I'm like, "Dang it!" If I had somebody to push some ideas back and forth with, it would be great.

My colleague, Justin Chambers, in our cabinet shop does metalwork (along with wood and basically any material ever invented!), and over the past couple of years he's started making gorgeous steel mounts for the museum. Now, I have somebody that I can maybe bounce ideas off of. And it's wonderful.

Justin has a background in Industrial Design, and has been doing that work for 30 years! He is about precision. Like sixty-fourths of an inch precision! It matters to him, and I am well known in my museum for not being great at measuring things. I do a lot of visual templating. My math brain is broken and so I have found ways to work around it. I can see a mount in my head, and I can see how it's going to work. I just have to fabricate it, but I can't explain it. There are many ways to get to a final product and it's great to see people solve problems in different ways.

Shelly: Now we're going to jump from talking about the general of your day-to-day to the specifics of your favorites and least favorites. First of all, what's your favorite thing about mountmaking?

Laura: My favorite thing about mountmaking are the artifacts. I'm going to say the word, "lucky," again. I feel lucky and I feel honored every time I get to help to tell an artifact's story. I made mounts for the ruby slippers, which was also terrifying. We had 1.8 million visitors last year, and many of them came in to see those ruby slippers. I like that as mountmakers we get to help tell these stories. I love being a part of the storytelling.

Shelly: That's beautiful. On the other side, what is the least favorite thing about the work for you?

Laura: That's easy for me. I feel like I never have enough time. I often feel like my mounts have to be quantity over quality. There's just never enough time for me to really futz around and make things super perfect. Plus, sometimes, I just don't get access to the objects with a ton of time for fabrication.



2023 : ERUPTION

TOP & RIGHT: Faux finish on the mount for Eddie Van Halen's Frank 2 guitar.
BOTTOM: Suspended from Arakawa NMAH's *Entertainment Nation* exhibit.

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INSTALL CART

"Mobile Chaos and Tool Station: I've got solutions for your problems on this cart."

Shelly: Are you part of decisions around deciding on what work is contracted vs what's done in-house?

Laura: Yes, absolutely. We have humongous exhibit projects. I typically don't do the mounts for those. We'll hire a contract mountmaking team that will come in and they'll handle the really big shows. Typically, there will be a couple of snowflake artifacts that need a little extra something-something or there might be a conservation mount for an unstable artifact that just needs a little extra time, and so I will often take those on, because I have more access to the objects. Of course, there are always last-minute additions or surprise objects! "Oh, by the way, we just found out this costume has a helmet that goes with it!"

Shelly: From your experience is there anything you want to say about staff vs contract mountmaking?

Laura: This is what Jen Simons and I talked about for our talk at *IMF2022*! I think that there are a lot of differences and a lot of similarities. I personally feel like a shepherd for our collection at NMAH. I get emotionally attached to our collections quite easily and feel responsible for them. I will say "our collections" and really feel that connection, and I would assume that a contract mountmaker would say "their collections." This attachment isn't necessarily great all the time: my personal feelings and emotions are tied up with the job and the objects. But I love my job and it's so important to me, and such a big part of my identity.

Shelly: On top of the fabrication, installation, and project management roles, do you also save your mounts? Do you write up and keep track of the mount note sheets?

Laura: I don't keep a lot of my mounts because I don't have a lot of storage area to save them. And yeah, it's a ton of work to track all that. Also, I have found that I have made mounts for some objects multiple times, but the objects are displayed differently each time, so I'd have to start over anyway. I save a couple of mounts here and there because I think maybe I can cannibalize part of this if it goes back on display this way. I would like to start saving more mounts and cataloging them. But again, it's that time factor.



2013 : "AS IF HE'S SNOWBOARDING"

TOP: A mountain climber's harness was used in Shaun White's snowboarding costume to make it float from an Arakawa wire track.

BOTTOM: Finished *Snowboarding* case with floating snowboards! Laura made the *Shaun White snowboard* mount and Jonathan Zastrow (Smithsonian NMNH) made the array of mounts showing the progression of snowboards.

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Shelly: Is there a favorite object or a favorite exhibit to share?

Laura: *Cookie Monster.* My first time working with Cookie Monster, the gentleman who loves cookies, was several years ago, and at that time, we made a permanent base and spike for his support. So, I don't have to make a mount for him anymore because he lives on that, but I recently had to reinstall him in our *Entertainment Nation* exhibit, and every time I get to spend time with him, I am transported back to 1980, when I went to the Ice Follies in Pittsburgh and Cookie Monster skated up to me, picked me up and swung me around on the ice. There's a picture of us! I even wrote a [blog about it for NMAH](#). When we installed him I just kind of smelled him a lot. He just smells like the seventies. He was born in 1969, our Cookie. When I look at him, I'm just filled with joy.

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

Laura: I had my first intern this past year, Lauryn, who just got her master's in public history and had a background in silversmithing. For six months, we did installs and deinstalls, exhibit meetings, and fabrication. I tried to let her learn by "just making mounts." We'd look at a production package and I'd ask her what her approach is gonna be and she would sketch some stuff out. I would look at her and be like, "Huh! Maybe you should put something here???" And she would be like "Well, why?" And I would say to her, "I can't be specific. My brain is a Rolodex of mistakes that I have made and there is something in my Rolodex that springs up when I see your mount. I want you to learn by experience, but also want you to avoid some of the mistakes that I made early on."

I guess the lesson learned is: you have to learn lessons. My Rolodex is my mount experience.



Laura gets a big hug from Cookie Monster - Ice Follies - March '80



LAURA'S FAVORITE OBJECT

TOP: "Laura gets a big hug from Cookie Monster- Ice Follies - March '80"
BOTTOM: 2014, Laura is reunited with an old friend, for *Puppetry in America* at NMAH



2016 : SCIENCE UNDER GLASS

Laura chats with colleagues Janet Rockenbaugh & Mallory Warner during install of *Science Under Glass*.

Shelly: What's your role with the IMF and why do you choose to share your time and skills with us?

Laura: I do graphic design. And the website scheming and social media collaboration. The Smithsonian's mission is to diffuse knowledge. And I feel that's what the IMF is doing. They're trying to get out as much good information about our very niche field as possible. It's really important to get mountmaking information out there because the risks are high.

When mountmakers have reached out to me with questions, it's so nice to be able to direct them to the website. When I have reached out to other mountmakers, they have always been so gracious and willing to share information. We're not a closed religion. We all want to help guide each other, do best practices, and make sure the objects are safe.

Most people don't know about our job! I've met plenty of interns or museum staff that didn't know about mountmaking or what our job entails until they saw me installing something. How do we get people interested in mountmaking? How do we get the word out: The IMF!

My awesome supervisor gets what I'm doing, and I am so fortunate that I have a Federal position at an Institution that values education. I joined the IMF Steering Committee during the pandemic, and I could do a lot of work for the IMF because I couldn't go into the museum regularly. That was perfect timing! The graphic design and website work

doesn't really feel like work, so I do quite a bit before work, after work, and on the weekends. I love it.

Shelly: Looking to the future, do you have advice for people who are just starting out in mountmaking? You mentioned your intern, so I know this has been front of mind for a little while as you were developing her curriculum.

Laura: Curriculum! I was very clear to Lauryn that I would show her "what I know" but there are many ways to get to the end result. If you gave ten mountmakers ten of the same object, you'd get ten very different mounts. If you have the opportunity to work with another mountmaker, that's such a great way of learning. They have their own rolodex! You can get info from their rolodex and add it to yours!

Shelly: We might have to explain what a Rolodex is.
Laura: No problem: I work at the Smithsonian, check out this [link!](#)

But I think the advice that you gave me is the best: make mounts. You're gonna make some real ugly mounts but, you learn from them.

My other piece of advice, which was hard for me to learn in my early years, is to take the help offered to you. It took me a while to accept people's help. You cannot know everything and if you don't know how to do something: don't pretend. Bullshitting in our line of work is very, very,

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TIGHT SPACES
 TOP LEFT: 2022. Laura holds on to *Roberto Clemente's* jersey during *Entertainment Nation* install.
 TOP RIGHT: 2016. Installing brass mounts on a ceramic vase, in *Art Pottery and Glass in America, 1880s-1920s*.
 BOTTOM: Installing musical instrument mounts made by Jen Simons (Brigid Mountmaking).



MASKED MOUNTMAKER

2021. Laura in the Mount Shop, with mounts for *¡Pleibol! In the Barrios and the Big Leagues/En los barrios y las grandes ligas*.

very dangerous. I feel totally comfortable saying, "I don't know how to do that." I can't make a mount for an 800 lb. cannon. I'm not saying we can't display a cannon, just that I can't make a mount for it. There are plenty of other mountmakers that can.

Shelly: Where do you see the future of mount-making heading?

Laura: I think mountmaking is going to get better and better with information and new technologies that we can't even conceive of right now. I know other museums use 3d scanning and printing to make mounts for delicate objects or loan objects. I'm going to be working on a storage mount for *Spock's ears* (from the 1982 movie, *The Wrath of Khan*) and they are quite unstable, but now we now have a 3d printed version, so I can experiment and come up with a long-term solution for storage and future display without further damaging these fragile objects.

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

Laura: Every Collections Specialist that I've ever worked with knows I get "stressed out" during install. You've got 15 people standing around watching you in a really critical time when the objects are most at risk and you've got a lot of stuff going on behind you in a gallery. It can be tough.

One morning, before an install, I ran into my colleague Shawnie. I told her it stressed me out to ask on-lookers to be quiet during a particularly complex mount install. She gave me some really good advice. She told me that in World War II, when a plane would be flying out to do a bombing run, the pilot would obviously be flying the plane. But when they would get to the area that was intended to be bombed the pilot would relinquish control of the plane to the bombardier. They did their thing and then passed control of the plane back to the pilot. "You're the bombardier, you're in charge during the time when you're installing those objects. You're in charge of that space, and you're in charge of what's going on right in front of you."

That really helped me. Now I feel better creating a less stressful environment while I'm on my mount mission.

I'm the bombardier. 

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.