Sample Lesson 7: The Critical Interpretation of Provenance and Provenience

Overview:
Researchers using museum collections need to have a critical understanding how to make use of provenance and provenience. These terms generally refer to (a) the authorship and ownership, and (b) locality and cultural attribution. These terms and concepts seem simple and straightforward, but they are typically intertwined in complex ways that can confuse the anthropological researcher because most museums have idiosyncratic ways of documenting objects in their collection.

Anthropological researchers have traditionally paid little attention to the identity of the maker of an object in an ethnographic collection, focusing instead on the locality where it was collected, made, or used. Many museums record locality information but it is often unclear whether the locality given refers to where the object was made, where it was used, or where it was collected. Since many ethnographic objects have been traded or exchanged during their social life, distinguishing these attributions can be quite important for the researcher. Many museums record an object’s cultural affiliation and identify the accession through which an object came into the collection, but rarely focus on who might have owned the object after it was collected and before it entered the museum. In a rather different way, the documentation of ethnographic photo collections may focus on the photographer and the localities in which he or she took photographs, but may all but ignore the objects included in the frames of the photos.

In contrast, art historians have traditionally focused on an object’s provenance, which usually traces the history of ownership of an art object by an identified artist. In the early and mid-20th century, museum anthropologists tended to focus less on provenance, but emphasized provenience. Yet many museum objects have had much more complex histories since leaving the communities where they were made than museum records may suggest.

Two major breakthroughs in museum anthropology came in the 1980s and 1990s when anthropologists began to recognize (1) that museum objects had social lives (Stocking 1985, Appadurai 1986, Ames 1992), and that (2) both local and collector agency (how collector desires were intertwined with and confused by the desires of people in the study community from which objects were collected). Because of their active roles in the process of collecting both the collector and the individuals in study communities had shaped which objects got into a museum collection (see e.g., Cole 1985, O’Hanlon 1993, Schildkraut and Keim 1998, Welsch 1998, Herle and Rouse 1998, O’Hanlon and Welsch 2000).

This lesson shows the difficulties researchers can have untangling the provenience and provenance of objects in museum collections, beginning with museum documentation found in catalog books, catalog cards, and computer databases, and discussing how ambiguities in museum registration and documentation can lead us astray. We will explore some of the ways we can try to sort through these ambiguities by considering the
ethnographic community and its style, the goals and personalities of the collector, and the social life of objects after they are collected.

Goals:
- to understand the complexities of museum record keeping that museum anthropologists often refer to as “museum documentation”
- to gain an appreciation for the varying assumptions embedded in these different documents
- to distinguish between ambiguities that reflect the likely absence of information from ambiguity that probably reflects inaccurate information.
- to learn strategies for examining accession files and other kinds of documentation that may be used to unravel ambiguities in the extant museum records
- to appreciate how complicated the provenience of a museum object may be
- to recognize the importance that provenance can have in clarifying the provenience and significance

Session Outline:

This session will offer a hands-on opportunity for students to connect museum documentation from the computer database with catalog books and accession files, and then to consider objects in particular collections in light of what we can learn from the accession files. There are three parts to this lesson.

(1) The faculty will use examples of problems one can encounter using different kinds of cataloging, illustrating from their work with the A. B. Lewis and Fuller collections in Chicago’s Field Museum how provenance and provenience can play an important role in understanding different objects.

(2) The faculty will use parts of three collections from New Guinea, collected in the 1920s by Brandes, Stirling, and Peck. Although field collectors Brandes and Stirling worked in quite different communities, the Peck collection (which is much more poorly documented) shows similarities to both of the others. Visually students will sort out the similarities and differences, and make sense of the three collections by exploring details that can be found in the accession records.

(3) Students will have selected a set of objects for their individual projects and will have a chance to explore the provenience and provenance of objects related to their projects. In some cases, unraveling the provenience and provenance of a group of objects may be quite challenging. In others, identifying other collections at the Smithsonian or in other museums may be required.

Specific session tasks will include:

- examining different kinds of museum records for information about provenience and provenance
- identifying the assumptions made in each of these records
- exploring gaps and lacunae in museum records
- using Smithsonian museum records to clarify gaps in the documentation and the possibility of incorrect information
- examining collections for stylistic similarities in three assemblages to raise questions about provenience
- summarizing what the likely social life of different objects has been after examining the objects and their associated documentation
- considering how local and collector agency may be embodied in a collection

Summary discussion

- how museum record keeping can place road blocks to our understanding of the history and social life of objects in a collection
- strategies for finding other documentation or comparative collections that can help sort out ambiguities in a study collection