

LIVING OUR CULTURES CONSERVATION PROJECT

By Landis Smith

[Note: This article serves as an introduction to the project. Future articles will address aspects in depth.]

Conservation for one of the most challenging and exciting ASC exhibits, *Living Our Cultures*, is well under way. Scheduled to open at the Anchorage Museum in April 2010, Smithsonian conservators are working to ensure the long-term preservation of some of the oldest and most extraordinary Arctic collections extant. At the same time, and in keeping with the overall philosophy of the exhibit, project conservators are committed to facilitating an unprecedented level of access to the objects for Alaska Native peoples. Most notably, ASC Alaska Director **Aron Crowell** is implementing an exhibit program in which requested objects can be removed from exhibit and taken to a specially designated room for close study, consultation, or other purposes. For conservators working on this project, the value of this access is constantly weighed against the physical risk to the objects in determining suitability for long-term loan. It is also recognized that it is often only through access that intangible aspects of objects - their meanings - are preserved. A special emphasis has been placed on finding creative solutions to exhibiting these objects so that they are both accessible and protected.

The objects themselves present a great diversity of materials, technologies, histories, and aesthetics. The exhibit includes over 400 objects from the National Museum of Natural History and almost 200 from the National Museum of the American Indian, and represents nine major Alaska Native culture groups. The organization of the conservation project mirrors that of the exhibit; the work progresses by culture group, thus allowing the conservators to become familiar with the particulars of each. Also in keeping with the exhibit project is the centrality of Alaska Native advisors and consultants in the conservation treatment decision-making process. Much of the curatorial work with Native Advisory groups can be found on the ASC *Sharing Knowledge* website (<http://alaska.si.edu/>), a major resource for project conservators. Further consultations specific to the conservation of objects are an extension of this kind of collaborative effort and, to date, has been one of the most rewarding aspects of the project. Working with exhibit curators, advisors are located who can best consult on technology, use, care, handling protocols, and other cultural aspects of the objects that may affect conservation decisions and/or accurate documentation and presentation of the objects.

Thus far our advisors include **Chuna McIntyre**, a Central Yup'ik artist, and **Vernon Chimegalrea**, a Central Yup'ik linguist, who traveled to the Washington, DC area in October 2007 to

examine and consult on Yup'ik objects at both the NMNH Anthropology Conservation Laboratory and the Conservation Department at NMAI. Mr. McIntyre and Mr. Chimegalrea's knowledge of Yup'ik material culture has proved invaluable to our project and understanding of the objects. In particular, the identification of materials in English and Yup'ik was illuminating, as was the contextualization of many of the objects in use. The demonstration of dance fans by a dancer as accomplished as Chuna McIntyre was a highlight, bringing into focus the how these important dance items cannot be fully understood with feathers and plumes missing.

In November 2007, **Elaine Kingeekuk**, doll-maker from St. Lawrence Island, shared her expert knowledge of gutskin sewing in the execution of the repair of a NMAI gutskin parka, bringing with her repair materials as well as insights into the cultural landscape. Other gutskin parkas were viewed and discussed with Ms. Kingeekuk at NMNH, shedding light on the various conditions observed by the conservators. As a dollmaker, she was most excited to see a very old, and rare, dressed doll from her village on St. Lawrence Island, now in the NMNH collections. At her request, the doll is now included in *Living Our Cultures*.

As the *Living Our Cultures* project continues over the next two years, conservators look forward to similar kinds of mutually beneficial interactions with Native advisors as we continue to learn more in our efforts to preserve the unique cultural heritage of Alaska Native communities. A special thanks to the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** for their generous grant to the NMAI, making the consultations possible, and to the NMNH Anthropology Department for additional support.



From left to right: **Vernon Chimegalrea**, **Chuna McIntyre**, **Landis Smith** with Yup'ik collections at the MSC.



Elaine Kingeekuk with **Kelly McHugh** inspecting dance fans.

Living our Cultures project conservators:

NMNH Anthropology Conservation Laboratory:

Greta Hansen, Head of Conservation

Michele Austin-Dennehy, ASC/AM Project Conservator

Landis Smith, ASC/AM Project Conservator

Kim Cullen Cobb, ASC/AM Project Assistant Conservator

Molly Gleeson, Intern, UCLA/Getty Program in Archaeological and Ethnographic Conservation

NMAI Conservation Department:

Marian Kaminitz, Head of Conservation

Kelly McHugh, ASC/AM Project Conservator

Kari Kipper Undergraduate Intern, ASC/AM Project

PATRICIA WOLF RECEIVES SMITHSONIAN AWARD

By William Fitzhugh

After many productive years as director of the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, **Patricia Wolf** stepped down this past fall and passed the baton to a new generation (see photo). Pat has been the ASC's dear friend since the *Inua* exhibit was displayed at her museum in 1983 when she was Curator of Education. Pat's invitation to host the ASC's nascent Alaska office gave us a home and led to increasingly more robust commitments that now include the rolling loan of major collections from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian, and the building of a new wing to display these collections and house the Center's office (to be completed in 2010). In October, Director **Paul Risser**, on behalf of **Cristián Samper**, Acting Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, awarded Pat the *Smithsonian Bicentennial Medal*, carrying the following citation:

Through her steadfast vision, devotion and skillful planning, Patricia B. Wolf created a permanent home for the Smithsonian in Alaska at the Anchorage Museum. Her tireless efforts revitalized the Institution's one hundred and fifty year commitment to the study of Alaska Native peoples, cultures, languages, and art and provided new opportunities for Smithsonian collections, scholars, and public programs to inform and be informed by the Smithsonian-Alaska connection. Through these achievements, she has profoundly contributed to the fulfillment of James Smithson's mandate for the increase and diffusion of knowledge.

Pat will be remembered for energetic, feisty leadership which catalyzed museum expansion and delivered a string of fabulous exhibitions, some of which traveled and came to the Smithsonian. Her vision changed the face of Anchorage, advanced its cultural life, and moved Native American heritage and art from the periphery of public awareness to the central place it enjoys today.



Pat Wolf (center) received the *Smithsonian Bicentennial Medal* from **Paul Risser** (right). Also pictured left to right: **Aron Crowell** and **Bill Fitzhugh**.

2007 INTERNS AT ASC ALASKA

By Dawn Biddison

In the summer of 2007, ASC Anchorage welcomed four interns: **Abby Chabitnoy**, **Nadia Jackinsky-Horrell**, **Alexandra Sprano** and **Hannah Voorhees**.

Abby Chabitnoy is currently pursuing a B.A. in anthropology and English at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, PA. Her great grandfather, originally from Kodiak Island, settled in Pennsylvania after attending the Carlisle Indian School. Working with research conducted with Sugpiaq Elders for the *Looking Both Ways* project, Abby prepared edited object-based discussions for the *Sharing Knowledge* web site and computer kiosks that will be part of the new Anchorage gallery.

Nadia Jackinsky-Horrell (pictured in *Interns*), originally from Homer, is a doctoral student at the University of Washington, where her research examines cultural revitalization and how Alaska Native identities and memories are communicated through material culture. In addition to a season of archaeology fieldwork in Kenai Fjords, Nadia completed two prior internships with ASC Anchorage. For her third internship, she researched and wrote historical summaries for Yup'ik and Sugpiaq objects that will be in the Anchorage exhibition.

Alexandra Sprano, born and raised in Anchorage, has volunteered at the Anchorage

Museum since high school. She is currently a senior at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, pursuing a degree in Classics with a concentration in Middle East Studies. At ASC, Alexandra researched historical illustrations to contextualize objects for the *Sharing Knowledge* web site and computer kiosks in the new gallery. She will return for a summer 2008 internship to continue this work.

Hannah Voorhees, a graduate student in cultural anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, spent her time at ASC working with oral history records from Sugpiaq communities of the Kenai Peninsula, collecting memories and knowledge about resource use and migration from Prince William Sound along the outer Kenai coast. This information will be combined with archaeological data to create an in-depth record of the human history of this understudied area.



Abby Chabitnoy



Alexandra Sprano



Hannah Voorhees