

# From Dust to Dignity: *Collection News from Anthropology*

by Phyllis Rabineau and Donald Collier

**T**he Department of Anthropology has recently completed the first stage of a major project upgrading the care of its storage collection, and has begun work on the next phase. The completed portion is housed in the former southeast lightwell, in a new facility called Central Anthropology Storage (CAS). During the recent modernizing of Field Museum's building, this space was filled in to provide four storeys of steel shelving set aside for anthropology collections. The facility includes adequate fire protection, sensitive security devices, and a climate-controlled atmosphere.

In August 1977 we began our reorganization project. Some 250,000 artifacts were moved from older, antiquated storerooms, arranged in CAS, and inventoried by means of computer printouts. The new storage location of each artifact was recorded as that of the nearest 18 x

36-inch shelf, numerically identified, a procedure which now greatly simplifies access to the collection by researchers. The inventory was designed to remove the many discrepancies, errors, and lacunae which had accumulated in the original catalog since it was initiated in 1894. Because of the dramatic improvements in the care of the collection, our moving staff began to call the project "From Dust to Dignity," a humorous yet apt description of what has been accomplished.

Approximately three-fifths of our anthropology collection is now housed in CAS, and we have begun work on modernizing the care of artifacts in the remaining older storerooms. Once again, we will clean, reorganize, and inventory with computer printouts the remaining 175,000 objects. The first year of this project, called "New Dimensions in Old Spaces," is funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation, and will focus upon North and South American artifacts of organic composition—feathers, fur, woolen textiles, leathers, wood, foodstuffs. These objects are among the most perishable items in our collection; they are sensitive to insect attack, fluctuations in climate, and most likely to suffer from physical crowding. The inventory project will enable us to carefully inspect every item in the storeroom, isolate and treat those with insect damage, reorganize the storage arrangement, and alleviate the overcrowding that makes it hard to locate and inspect objects needed for research and exhibition.

We believe the achievements of the storage reorganization project to be unique among major museums in terms of magnitude, complexity, and efficiency. Field Museum moved other large collections into new facilities in the 1950s and 1960s, and in the past three years, but none of these other moves has involved this kind of inventory. The Museum of the American Indian has recently made an inventory of its large collection but without rehousing the specimens.

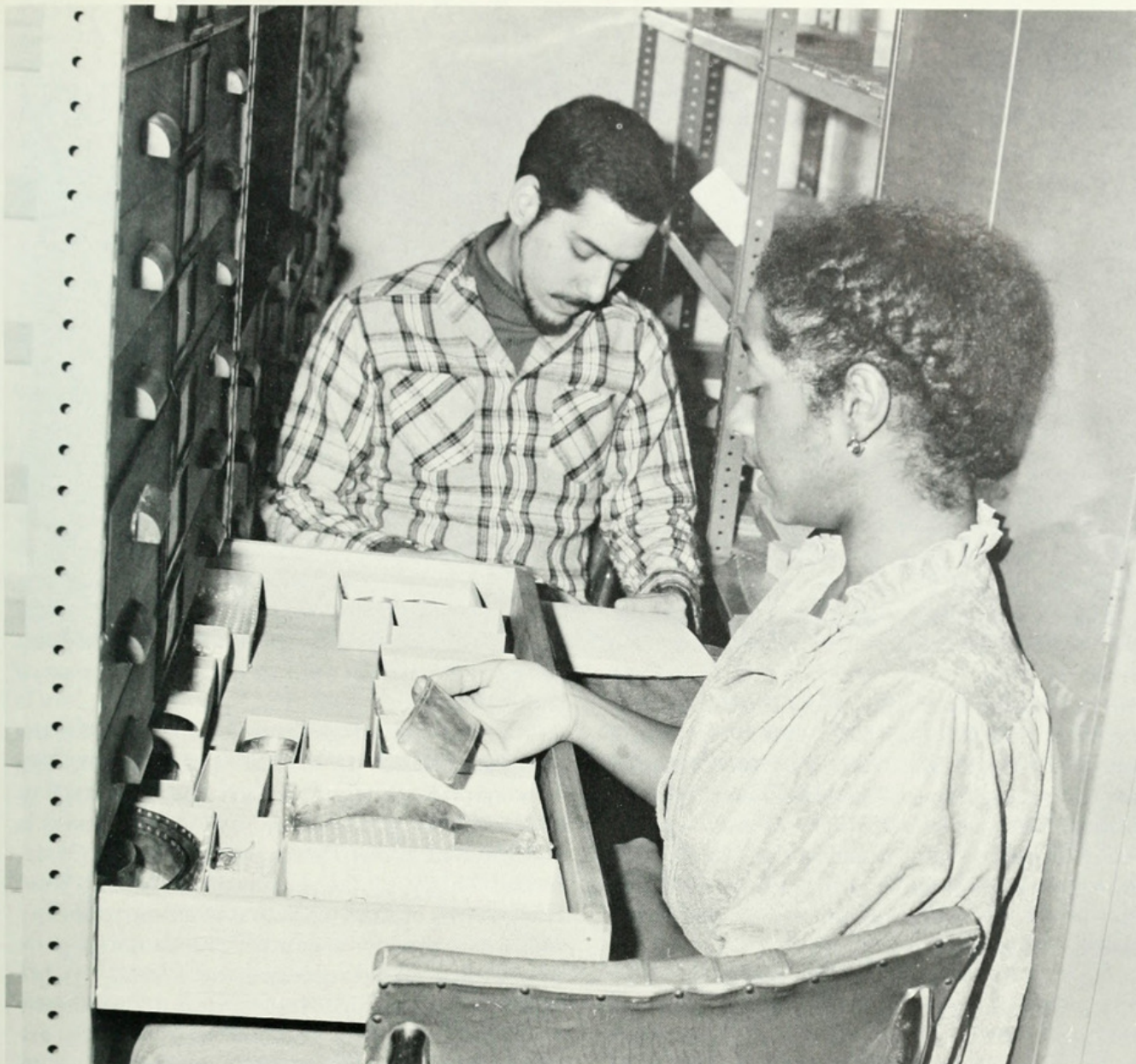


*Collections on the move! Joyce Hammond transports African artifacts from an old storeroom to the newly modernized area.*

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*Phyllis Rabineau is custodian of the anthropology collections; Donald Collier is curator emeritus of Middle and South American archeology and ethnology.*





*Tens of thousands of potsherds have been cleaned, packaged, organized, and inventoried. Here, Paul Fini and Ethel Turnipseed prepare ceramics from the southwestern United States.*

The U.S. National Museum's project to rehouse and inventory its anthropology collection, and the projects at the University Museum in Philadelphia and the Peabody Museum at Harvard University will not be finished for several years. Field Museum is recognized nationally for having taken an energetic, innovative lead in the new wave of collection management development.

It is accurate to say that the CAS project took twelve years. It began in 1968 with serious departmental and Museum-wide planning for modernization, which led to policy decisions, fund raising, architectural and engineering planning, and construction. Our new storage space was completed and cleaned in July 1977; detailed planning for the move and creating the computer catalog file had begun early in 1977, and was completed in six months. The actual moving and inventory was carried out by two teams of three persons each, plus a project assistant and an engineering-logistics specialist. These teams performed with extraordinary skill, stamina, and devotion. We would like to recognize their contribution to the success of this pro-

ject by listing their names:

Edward Applebaum	Roberto Maisonave
Robert Bailey	Alan Majak
Donald Bockenfeld	Roberta Martin
Kathleen Christon	Anita Raba
Diane Cluts	M.E. Rada
George Davis	John J. Rider
Patricia Figel	Marianne Schoch
Paul Fini	Maija Sedziarz
Theresa Gross-Diaz	Ernest Sheldon
Joyce Hammond	Sue Ann Stott
Elizabeth Koenen	Christine Taterka
Barbara Larson	Ethel Turnipseed
John Liston	Adam Wasserman
Timothy Liston	Charles Williams, Jr.

Over the three-year span of the CAS project, some eighty people in all, within and outside the Museum, contributed to its success. The work has been made possible by four generous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and by substantial support from Field Museum's Capital Fund for modernization. The project was directed in its first year by Donald Collier and thereafter by Phyllis Rabineau. □



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