



## **Council for Museum Anthropology 2014 President's Report**

12/04/2014

This has been both an exciting and in some respects a difficult year for CMA. Margaret has covered the details of the year very fully in her report so there is no need for me to go over them. Instead I will provide an overview of where I think we are at present and of the main issues we need to contend with over the next few years.

On the positive side, I see the Council for Museum Anthropology playing an increasingly central role in the AAA. As museum anthropologists we always need to balance our role as curators of a major and almost infinitely reusable resource with the theoretical entanglement of museums and collections in the present. We were, in the past, the people who saw value in the material world that many of our disciplinary colleagues were blind to. That past of museums and their collections is now increasingly seen as ever present — as important to source communities today and as vital evidence for reinterpretation of past histories both of our discipline and of the histories of the times the collections were made. Objects are often used as evidence to challenge received opinions. The great archive of knowledge and information held in museums can provide material for significant interventions across the four fields of anthropology. Museum anthropology is leading the engagement with digital technology in building dialogical resources that can better engage with source communities as well as providing an integrated archive for anthropological research. The AAA has previously recognised the importance of collections by putting forward to the NSF the survey of cultural collections as one of the *Great Challenges* that needed to be addressed. Such a survey is essential to facilitate the curation of an invaluable scientific and societal resource and to recognise the value of cultural collections in research education and community engagement

In my own area of special interest, using the search tool provided by the AAA's electronic scheduler, I find that art has become a significant term in anthropology. There were 25 pages of results for me to search through. And so many of those contributions would clearly benefit from a perspective provided by museum anthropology! Many write as if the discovery of synergies between art and anthropology developed out of critiques of ethnographic museums and positivist methodologies, but as a museum anthropologist I know of the long-term engagement between artists and museum anthropologists in research, interpretation and value

creation processes — often sceptical but frequently productive engagements. Denver, next year's host city for the AAA, has had a long history of engagement between art, museums, material culture and anthropology.

I think that as interest in collections develops, universities are showing more interest in the curation of collections, perhaps in part because they see them as a public face of the university and a source of good images for brochures — but any increase in professional opportunities for graduate students is welcome. And we are beginning to produce them in increasing numbers. The Smithsonian Institution's Summer Institute in Museum Anthropology (SIMA) has begun to make a significant contribution, and it is great that it has been awarded four more years of funding. But the workload of museum anthropologists is increasingly heavy because of the multitasking required — the more we succeed, the more people want our time. And museums everywhere are under severe funding pressure — support for the resource we value so highly is being threatened just as its value is being recognised. This problem is beginning to dominate our lives. We need to build partnerships, we need to work hard with foundations, we need to make sure that the universities that use us to seduce their alumni direct some of money raised to secure the resource, and we need to take advantage of the fact that we cross over disciplinary boundaries, bringing science, social science, and the humanities together, by developing major international cross-disciplinary research projects. And we need to build on those vital collaborations with source communities that are so beneficial to the future trajectories of museums. Museums and their collections are not bounded entities, and we need to extend our engagement with issues of cultural heritage more broadly.

As far as CMA's finances are concerned, the biggest decisions we are going to have to make will be in the domain of publishing.

I would like to thank Margaret for doing a fantastic job as secretary, and Karl (I should say unflappable Karl) for his work as treasurer, which included a mass of work on the publication plan and setting up the endowment. Thanks to Trish for organising the program so efficiently and battling the new constraints of the system where needed. Thanks to Jennifer Shannon and Cynthia Lamar, the retiring editors of Museum Anthropology, for maintaining the high standard of the journal. There are many terrific contributions from the board, with a special thanks to Cory Kratz and Cara Krmpotich for facilitating and increasing our presence on social media.

**- Howard Morphy, CMA President**

*Annual Meeting, American Anthropological Association, Washington, DC*