



Inspire! Grants for Small Museums

Sample Application IGSM-253026-OMS-23
Project Category: Collections Stewardship and Access

Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$48,000
Amount of cost share:	\$17,745

The Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center will catalog approximately 2,000 objects from its collection related to the historic Black Mountain College. For the project, the institution will hire a part-time collections assistant to work with paid interns on data entry and collections staff will train interns on object handling and cataloguing. After data entry and photo documentation of objects is complete, staff will make records accessible to the public online. As a result of the project, the museum will have increased intellectual control over the collection.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

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Project Justification

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center seeks a grant of \$48,000 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services for a two-year project to improve stewardship of its collections of artwork and ephemera. Following the museum's previous Collections Assessment for Preservation (CAP) recommendations, this will include cataloging an estimated 2,000 objects. BMCM+AC recently launched a digital collections portal for the first time in the museum's 30-year history; this project builds on these efforts to provide unprecedented access to the collection to museum staff, researchers, students, and the public. Funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services will support the hiring of a part-time, temporary Collections Specialist and a paid internship program for four academic semesters. Our goal is for the Collections Specialist role to become a regular, permanent staff position at BMCM+AC at the conclusion of the project period.

The project will address the following challenges faced by BMCM+AC:

1. **Accessibility.** The collection is estimated to contain about 4,000 objects, as well as at least 15 linear feet of archival collections. However, the museum began as a grassroots, volunteer-led organization, and did not document collections according to professional standards until 2019. Access to information about material in the collection, including anything more than basic location information, is incomplete, often necessitating that staff physically search the collections storage vault to see what objects are held by the museum, and to physically locate a specific object in order to answer questions about it or determine its suitability for an exhibition or loan.
2. **Institutional knowledge.** Knowledge of how and where materials are housed within the collections storage vault is not currently documented in tangible staff resources, but held in employee memory, posing a risk to organizational continuity and overburdening a sole staff member with responding to collections-related research inquiries. Documenting locations and codifying practices of proper collection housing through approved policies and documents to which all employees can refer, is essential for ensuring long-term staff effectiveness.
3. **Collaborative potential.** Since 2017, BMCM+AC has worked with artists, curators, and scholars to create new work that draws from the BMCM+AC Permanent Collection through our Active Archive Residency Program. By increasing the quantity and quality of cataloged information, we will streamline residents' ability to access, understand, and respond to the collection.

BMCM+AC receives requests for collections-related information regularly, responding to an average of thirty telephone and email inquiries per month from scholars, students, writers, and public historians interested in specific aspects of the history of Black Mountain College. At this point, BMCM+AC's Director of Preservation responds to inquiries regarding materials from our Permanent Collection on a case-by-case basis. We offer our library and exhibitions for on-site research use, with staff available to facilitate research and provide guidance with special collections.

BMCM+AC has been a collecting institution since its inception in 1993, and has acquired a widely ranging collection largely from donations by alumni, their family members, and friends. A few highlights are works by M.C. Richards from her earliest encounters with pottery; letters written to her family by Alma Stone (Williams), the first African American student to attend Black Mountain College in 1944, ten years before the Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*; a loom from the Weaving Workshop at BMC that provides a direct connection to Anni Albers's teaching and artistic practice; and textiles, furniture, paintings, photographs, and broadsides made at the college, all of which help us understand the materials, ideas, and collaborations that were in flux, and gives tangible presence to these conditions. Objects from our collections have been loaned to other institutions including Hamburger Bahnhof, ICA Boston, MoMA,

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Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Portland Museum of Art, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, Tate Modern, and others. BMCM+AC also holds physical custody over and manages the Hazel Larsen Archer Estate, which includes about 65 photographic prints/contact sheets as well as several recently digitized films—the only known existing film footage from BMC.

As a grassroots organization that was nomadic for years, stewardship of the collection has long posed a challenge. A previous CAP assessment identified improved collections storage as a key priority, citing important needs in security, HVAC improvements, light exposure, and fire protection/detection. BMCM+AC's move to its first permanent location in 2018 made it possible to follow through on these recommendations, to have collections storage in the same building as exhibitions, and to continue the process of inventorying and collecting photographic documentation of the collection. Today, collections are housed in a dedicated 600 sq ft "vault" (with three very large sculptures stored off-site).

In 2017-18, support from the Luce Foundation (\$12,500) and Windgate Foundation (\$4,800) allowed BMCM+AC to photograph and create a spreadsheet inventory of approximately 1,000 materials from the Permanent Collection over a one-year period, in conjunction with an artist residency, exhibition, and publication. This funding supported the purchase of photography equipment and a part-time intern to perform this work. Over the next several years, BMCM+AC worked to standardize and add to this data as new items came into the collection.

With support from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2021-22, the museum worked with developers at Whirl-i-Gig to create a customized instance of Collective Access that will integrate documentation and discovery of artwork, archives, and library materials. NEH support also enabled us to investigate details relating to metadata standards, accessibility, user needs, and long-term strategic planning/sustainability, as well as to move forward with the pilot implementation of a digital collections management system and online collections portal that will be populated with roughly 1,000 digital collection items. Starting with data conforming to a basic Dublin Core metadata element set, we customized and extended elements as needed for multidisciplinary work, objects, artworks, and archival items; as determined by a collections survey. As of this writing, the new collections management system and front-facing digital collections portal are scheduled to be complete by the end of 2022.

Recent work supporting collections management has also involved drafting documents including BMCM+AC's first collections management policy, which will be reviewed and approved by the Board of Directors by the end of 2022 (See Supportingdoc1) and workflow documentation for processing incoming items as well as backlog (See Supportingdoc2 for a draft CollectiveAccess object cataloging guide, one of several documents in progress as of this writing and scheduled to be finalized by the end of 2022). As of this writing, BMCM+AC is also working with a digital collections consultant to draft a long-term digital strategy plan, also scheduled for completion in the coming months.

Physical conservation and condition reporting has also been a focus of the museum's recent efforts. In 2020-2021, BMCM+AC completed several projects with conservators Maho Yoshikawa and Craig Crawford, including an assessment of the conservation needs of paintings in the collection. Cataloging objects will make it possible to add condition notes, conservation history, and treatment recommendations to specific object records, improving the museum's capacity for addressing conservation needs, mounting exhibitions, and loaning works.

This project supports the goals described in the Collections, Stewardship and Public Access category of the IMLS Inspire! Grant by improving intellectual control and public access to BMCM+AC's Permanent Collection. It also supports BMCM+AC's institutional 2019-2024 Strategic Plan (Strategicplan.pdf) to

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leverage the collection to support the development of contemporary scholarly and creative research, increase national and international visibility, and strengthen/expand collections. A key goal for BMCM+AC in the next four years is to make its entire collection available to the public online via an aesthetically pleasing, interactive platform with resources for audiences across a wide range of ages, interests, and previous knowledge. Dedicated digital collections work—including staffing—is the logical next step. Support over the next two years will not only help address a backlog of uncataloged objects, but also place the museum in a strong position to be able to make the Collections Specialist role a permanent staff position.

Project Work Plan

Beginning on September 1, 2023, the two-year project period will support the hiring of a temporary, part-time Collections Specialist and stipends for 1 paid intern per semester (fall and spring). This plan was developed by BMCM+AC's Development Manager in consultation with the Director of Preservation and Executive Director, based on CAP Assessment recommendations and recent strategic efforts emphasizing improved access to collections; with input from experts (see Supportingdoc3.pdf for letters of support from collections professionals at organizations with which BMCM+AC frequently collaborates).

The overall goal is to add approximately 2,000 more object records to the digital catalog. Each record will include, at a minimum, an object ID, title, creator, date (or estimated date), dimensions, location of the object in the BMCM+AC collections storage vault, and image. Additional information such as condition notes and descriptions of the object's significance to the BMC legacy may also be added, as time allows and depending on whether such information is relevant and readily available (such as if past exhibition labels are stored with the object).

The prioritized sequence is 1) framed paintings, works on paper, and photographs; 2) unframed photographs, including Hazel Larsen Archer Estate prints; 3) unframed works on paper (watercolors, drawings, prints) in flat files, and oversized items in flat files or rolled; 4) textiles; and 5) sculptures/furniture. This is an updated version of the priorities identified during the CAP Assessment, based on research/exhibition use and logistical considerations. Evaluation of the collection, its strengths and weaknesses, and its short and long term needs have recently informed updates to the collections management policy, digital collections strategy, and permanent staff job descriptions.

The Collections Specialist will work closely with BMCM+AC Director of Preservation Alice Sebrell to locate objects, and Sebrell will review each object record to ensure accuracy and quality. As BMCM+AC's longtime staff member and the primary source of institutional knowledge regarding the collection and its use over the past three decades, Sebrell is well-situated to offer a discerning eye, fill in missing information, and provide important context. The project team will also include one intern per semester, to be recruited from area universities and managed by Sebrell. BMCM+AC has a long-standing relationship and memorandum of understanding with UNC Asheville: when the museum has been able to offer paid internships in the past, interns have been successfully recruited from UNCA's art, art history, and history departments. The intern will support tasks such as file renaming, image editing, uploading, and data entry. (For details of the projected timeline see Scheduleofcompletion.pdf)

Workspaces will include two dedicated areas within BMCM+AC's collections storage vault—a worktable for staging, measuring, and photographing objects; and a computer for entering data into the web-based collections management system—as well as a second computer, located in the upper level of the museum, dedicated to image editing using Adobe programs.

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Because a portion of the collection has undergone digital imaging and basic cataloging through these earlier endeavors, we have an excellent initial selection for testing what standards, systems, and workflows will be necessary as we move forward. The equipment purchased through the support of the Luce Foundation also enables us to continue digitizing the rest of the still images and objects in our collection. Digitization will follow established procedures, using BMCM+AC's DSLR camera and Epson scanner to image objects in either TIFF, JPEG 2000, or PDF/A formats, 16bpp RGB color. Sebrell, who has managed image processing since 2017, will train the Collections Specialist on her current workflow. Documentation of cataloging procedures and standards making use of the new Collective Access collections management system are in progress, scheduled to be finalized by the end of 2022, when the public digital collections portal will also be launched.

Sebrell, who has worked for BMCM+AC since 1999 and holds extensive knowledge of the collection, will manage the project; meet with the Collections Specialist on a weekly basis to discuss progress, problems, and needs; provide information about objects; adhere to the schedule of completion; and adjust the project plan as needed (6 hours per week, 19% of 32-hr work week). Executive Director Jeff Arnal will manage the project budget, report progress to the Board of Directors, and assist as needed (1 hour per week, 3% of 40-hr work week).

Risks

One risk to the project plan is the possibility that it could take more time than anticipated to complete. However, our goals are based on a generous estimate of one hour per collection object, and in our previous experience with a similar workflow in 2017-2018, we achieved roughly the same number of objects inventoried+photographed with the same amount of staff over a one-year period. A key difference, guided by this past experience, is that this time we have a digital collections management system rather than simply spreadsheets; and we have built in data standards and quality control, including a process by which the Director of Preservation can review each object record created. Regular meetings with the Director of Preservation about the project schedule will also enable staff to adjust the project plan and priorities accordingly.

Another potential risk is that BMCM+AC may be unable to find and retain a part-time, project-term Collections Specialist with the preferred expertise and experience. Recruiting from regional information studies programs will mitigate this risk. UNC Chapel Hill, Appalachian State, UNC Greensboro, NC Central University, East Carolina University, and Western Carolina University all offer nearby graduate programs in library and information studies and/or public history with a museum studies emphasis; in particular, WCU's museum studies emphasis and UNC Chapel Hill's dual art history/library science master's programs both emphasize hands-on experience and attract students especially interested in museum work. BMCM+AC has spoken with recent graduates of UNC's program, and some have expressed interest in the project being proposed. We are confident that a candidate can be found. BMCM+AC will work closely with IMLS staff on any changes to the project goals, staffing structure, and budget breakdown.

Interns unfamiliar with best practices in object handling could pose a risk to collections. To mitigate this risk, the Director of Preservation and Collections Specialist will train interns on proper handling and share detailed documentation, with examples.

Finally, finding funding for the next steps in the project—namely, continuing to catalog a backlog of objects in the Permanent Collection (estimated at 4,000 objects total) that also includes a wider range of object

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types, such as oral histories and archival collections, while also keeping up with new acquisitions—will be a challenge. BMCM+AC is committed to sustaining public access to its collections in the long term and is currently working with a consultant to develop a long-term digital strategy document to build our capacity to do so. A critical part of this strategy is for the museum to fund the role of Collections Specialist as a regular, part-time position at the conclusion of the IMLS-funded project period.

Project Results

This project is an important step for BMCM+AC as it works towards strategic goals of caring for its collections according to professional standards, and sharing collections with its wide-ranging audiences for purposes ranging from artistic inspiration to rigorous scholarly research. The project will mitigate the risks to collections security posed by lack of documentation; increase our capacity for existing initiatives such as our Active Archive artist and curator residency program; and improve practices in nearly every other facet of our work, as museum staff will more easily be able to digitally discover and physically locate objects.

Key outcomes include the following:

- The overall percentage of the Permanent Collection that is represented in the collections database will increase from 25% (1,000 out of an estimated 4,000 objects) to 75% (3,000 objects cataloged in total). Key measures of success for this outcome will be the actual quantity of documentation, with the goal that 2,000 new collection records have at least the minimum set of data described earlier.
- Museum staff will be confident in using the digital collections management system to find images and information about objects for purposes both internal (exhibition development, interpretation, public programming, conservation, and collection development) and external (responding to research inquiries, social media and communications). Staff will also qualitatively assess intellectual control by self-reporting improvements in their knowledge of the collection.
- Museum staff will decrease time spent on specific work processes that relate to collections as a result of better internal collections management. For instance, we will continue our practice of tracking requests and staff time spent responding to requests for images from the collection, loans from other institutions, and questions. Currently, our staff spends at least one hour per week responding to an average of seven questions or requests a week. We hope that having collections information readily available online will increase interest in BMC, but that as questions or requests increase, staff time per request will decrease, allowing us to serve the public more efficiently and effectively.

