Inspire! Grants for Small Museums

Sample Application IGSM-249234-OMS-21
Project Category: Collections Stewardship

Northern Illinois University (Center for Burma Studies)

Amount awarded by IMLS: $49,419
Amount of cost share: $0

The project description can be viewed in the IMLS Awarded Grants Search:

https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/igsm-249234-oms-21

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 most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category (if applicable) to which you are applying.

Project Narrative

The Center for Burma Studies (CBS) at Northern Illinois University (NIU) cares for a permanent collection of over 3,000 exceptional and rare artifacts which constitute the Burma Art Collection (BAC) and holds over 13,000 bibliographic items. The BAC was born entirely out of donations from American families, diplomats, advisors, missionaries, and scholars who lived and worked in Burma (now Myanmar) as early as the 1930s.[1] Our collection continues to grow, with approximately 300 substantial objects being added yearly, and is the only comprehensive Burmese Art collection in the United States. The BAC reflects a lesser-known part of United States history and our involvement with Southeast Asia since the mid-twentieth century. Textiles were common acquisitions, either through purchase or gifting, of Americans living and traveling to the various ethnic regions of Burma. As a result of several personal collection donations in the last 35 years, the ethnographic textile holdings of the BAC represent more than 10% of the permanent collection and are one of our most comprehensive object categories. Many of the textiles represent cultures that have disappeared or are in the unfortunate process of disappearing due to globalization.

Project Justification

What need, problem, or challenge will your project address, and how was it identified?

In 2019, the BAC received IMLS funding for compact storage to retrofit a larger and climate-controlled storage space to rehouse our collection through the Museums for America (Collections Stewardship and Public Access) program. The rehousing of our collection, and a dedicated space for photography, now allows us to begin new projects as outlined in our Strategic Plan to strengthen our online presence during a time when this type of online accessibility is more important than ever. While we have the skills, time, and digital platform to digitize and give access to our collection, we are lacking the supporting staff and photographic equipment to do it. We are uniquely positioned to complete this project because our institution has relevant departments that can support our goals and help us enhance our skills, such as Media Services and a Photography program to provide digitization best practices, as well as our Museum Studies program to provide a qualified graduate assistant.

Some of our objects were initially photographed three decades ago, and under the current curator, more have been photographed in the last 15 years. Due to changing digitization practices, new file formats, and overall data degradation during digital storage migrations in the early 2000s, we urgently need new images. As a best practice, we also aim to update those outdated photographs to assess object changes over time. We have identified and chosen to focus on our textile holdings after making a formal assessment of our collection to determine the most feasible plan for the lengthy digitization process. As we develop a larger strategy to digitize the entire collection, our textiles will serve as an excellent starting point due to their two-dimensional nature. We will then develop best practices to continue digitizing other categories within our collection such as fragile sculptures, paintings on glass, and extremely old and rare Buddhist clay tablets.

Who or what will benefit from your project and how have they been involved in the planning?

The focus of this digitization project will directly benefit the objects within our collection and at the same time our researchers, students, and general audience that will gain a new level of accessibility to them. Our textile objects (over 300 in number) include large religious tapestries, complete ethnic garb from various minority groups, complex needlework and embroidery, pictorial textiles, religious banners, and a sizeable number of accessories including headdresses, shoulder bags, hats, and silk parasols. We also hold rare tools such as a complete and functional backstrap loom and bronze loom pulleys. Most of the textiles date to the 19th and 20th centuries. Our bibliographic holdings include rare, illustrated albums that feature ethnic garb which provide primary sources for textile research. The current condition of the objects ranges from excellent to in need of extensive repair. Some of the objects have been worn or used in ceremony and were never intended for long term storage, while others have never left their original box other than for exhibitions.

---

[1] Burma changed its name to Myanmar in 1989. In the United States, both names are still used.

Our digitization efforts will give us an opportunity to compare old photographs and condition reports to assess conservation needs. In an effort to improve our care practices, we have contracted Cara Varnell, an art conservator specializing in textiles, to provide an assessment of our textiles. Her report emphasizes the importance of digitization due to the fragility and vulnerability of these textiles (see supporting document 1).

The CBS team and our graduate students will benefit from the project by expanding our digitization process knowledge, and our interested stakeholders such as international Burma Studies scholars will gain greater understanding of the rich diversity of our textile holdings, creating new opportunities for research. The project was conceived by the CBS team in consultation with our interested stakeholders, who are often unable to visit in person and who wish to see in greater detail the objects we hold. Digital images are often beneficial for research even after an in-person visit to our collection or exhibitions. This project will be important for the newest generation of Burma Studies scholars who are now accustomed to open-access in academic research. As larger museum and library institutions have paved the way for this type of global research practice, we seek to follow their lead and will make our project freely available for the benefit of knowledge and education.

How will your project advance your institution's strategic plan?

We seek to advance our strategic plan goal to "develop and expand the Burma Art Collection's presence on the Web" to bring us closer to our mission of being a "comprehensive archive of artistic and cultural materials essential to the academic study of Burma, while providing free access thereto for classroom instruction and research at NIU and for wider use in scholarship throughout the world." (see Strategic Plan) To this end, we have created an actionable and measurable outcome-based project to digitize our textile holdings and increase the skills of our staff and graduate assistants while providing a tangible digital product that researchers can freely access (see logic model in supporting document 1).

How will your project address the goals of Inspire! Grants for Small Museums (as described above in Section A1) and align with the project category you have chosen?

Our outcome-based project focuses on "expanding access and associated resources" through the digital delivery of our collection. Over the years, our collection stewardship practices have improved as we sought expert advice through consultations and assessments (2016), addressed overcrowding issues by gaining a new temperature-controlled storage facility (2019), and began addressing long-term goals such as security and disaster preparedness (2020). We now have a dedicated space in our storage for a photographic studio and the institutional support to maintain an online searchable database. In 2017 we made a financial commitment towards digitization and online presence and began importing some of our objects to a website created by the project's co-director with PPO (https://niuburma.pastperfectonline.com). Because this website has already been built, we can now focus on the objects that we want to photograph, research, and make accessible to researchers. The textile holdings offer the greatest opportunity for our project as they are the least photographed category in the BAC. The completion of our project will allow the BAC to become the standard for collection access within our institution by becoming the first to provide extensive open-access to our collection.

Project Work Plan

What specific activities, including evaluation, will you carry out?

Our project has been designed using the Shaping Outcomes curriculum methodology to produce a straight-forward and measurable project with a clear positive impact on our collection. We will begin by familiarizing and training the CBS staff team (four to five staff depending on the year) and interested museum studies student volunteers with the photographic process for flat and two-dimensional objects. To amplify our knowledge, we will have bi-yearly consultations with Bob Banke, a professional photographer who knows our collection (see Resumes), to review our actionable plan for standardizing our photographic process and to establish best practices to save time and to consider avoidable mistakes. At the same time, we will take the opportunity to update condition reports on the objects as we photograph them. Concurrently, we will assess the object's records and either create, update, or make any corrections to the existing record in our PastPerfect Collections Management System (PP). Our goal is to go through the photographing process to then have the still

images ready for the digitization process, including image enhancing and editing, and creation of descriptive metadata using one of the standardized methods such as Dublin Core as it used in our field. While these activities are taking place, we will update each record as it is completed to our PPO searchable database.

As we make progress with the photographing and digitization process, we will create promotional materials to bring attention to our project and our database. Evaluation to measure our success will begin once the database is ready for public use and will be conducted to measure short term outcomes such as change in knowledge related to Burmese textiles. User friendly surveys will be distributed to our online users to measure these outcomes, and to gather information to improve our database.

What are the risks to the project and how will you mitigate them?

Any digitization project is lengthy, time consuming, and requires special attention to detail. Photographing objects is equally challenging and can be slowed down by technical issues, especially as there is a learning curve when using new technology and equipment. We are aware of these challenges and have allotted ample time within our schedule of completion in the event of delays. We have also built in additional time as we expect that COVID-19 will continue to cause delays and slow projects due to social distancing measures. Regarding digital data preservation, we understand that there is a real risk of data loss for projects such as this. We have a robust global back-up system in our institution and the supporting technical staff in our Information Technology division to provide any support necessary during the process (refer to Digital Product Form).

Who will plan, implement, and manage your project?

The project will be managed by Dr. Catherine Raymond, CBS director, professor of Art History, curator, and Burmese specialist, who will supervise the completion of the project and provide the expert knowledge and research related to each object. The project's co-director, Carmin Berchiolly, will provide the expertise in photographic and digitization practices. Together they will train and manage the project's team.

Will partners be engaged and, if so, for what purpose?

We will engage many internal departments at NIU to seek their expertise and advice as we advance through the project. Media Services and the School of Art and Design's photography program will help us navigate the nuances of the photographic and digitization process. The Family and Consumer Science's Fashion Merchandising program has expertise on textiles and production techniques which will prove useful as we work with each object. We have worked with all of the departments mentioned here in multiple projects, exhibitions, course work, and conferences throughout the years and feel confident that their aid will make our project more successful. We have also partnered with the National Museum of Myanmar on various occasions and plan to continue to engage with them for this project; we share commonality in our textile holdings and their curator and director have interest in our digitization project as the data we produce can help advance their own research.

As professor of Art History and coordinator of the Museum Studies Program at NIU, the project director will engage with professors and students who are active during the grant years to seek their expertise in best museological practices, project brainstorming, and providing visits to our space as we work on the project. Graduate students will be invited to volunteer their time when available to help with the more challenging portions of the process. We also plan to open the project for internship hours to last-year graduating students. Our goal is to involve our students when our project can provide beneficial experience for their careers. To that end, we will regularly engage with photography, fashion, museum studies, and Burma Studies students.

When and in what sequence will your activities occur?

The project will be divided into two years: the first to focus on photographing and digitizing, and the second on developing our web presence and promoting our results. The first 2 months of the grant period will be used by the co-director to train graduate assistants, staff, and volunteers who will aid in the photographic and digitization efforts. Twelve months have been allotted to photograph our textile holdings while simultaneously updating or creating condition forms and descriptive metadata within PastPerfect (PP). Each object will go through the following sequence in the digitization process: 1) Locate the object and any existing documentation

2) review documentation and either create or update its condition report 3) bring the object to the photo studio area and take multiple views and angles for different purposes, including advertising and research purposes, as well as detailed macro images of areas of interest or concern 4) return the item to its storage location 5) update or create PP record with new condition details 6) upload still images and run them through the editing process using either Photoshop CS or Adobe Lightroom 7) upload the final images to the PP record 8) conduct relevant research necessary to create basic descriptive data 9) upload findings using Dublin Core 10) store the new data separately from the file within PP and 11) embed the data within the photographic file for online use.

Throughout both years, we will work on making our objects ready for PPO. The project's director will review each object record against Nomenclature 4.0 for standardization and determine the best categorization, lexicon, and special word use based on her expertise on Burmese art and culture. Towards the end of the project, we will create promotional materials such as newsletters that can be disseminated online and via our social media platforms in order to bring attention to our resulting online database.

What time, financial, personnel, and other resources will you need to carry out the activities?

To make this project possible, we require the assistance of a full time (20 hrs/wk) graduate assistant to work closely with the CBS staff and focus 100% of each year's effort towards the project. To strengthen the outcomes of our project, we will consult with a professional photographer to review our plans and provide regular guidance. As a consultant and advisor, the photographer can help us prevent mistakes that may slow down the project. We also require the photographic equipment to outfit our photo studio area. We have already committed other financial resources to make this project possible, including ongoing maintenance costs for digital products such as our online database and websites, digital storage and backup solutions, hardware (computers), software (Adobe Creative Cloud), and the physical space dedicated for object photography.

How will you track your progress toward achieving your intended results?

The project has clear, attainable milestones established by the director and co-director, who will conduct weekly progress meetings. The milestones are as follows: Over 300 artifacts digitally photographed and searchable on PPO by November 2022, and an average of 15 objects per week photographed and images processed and update to PPO. If our goal is not achieved, an action plan will be developed. The team will meet weekly to discuss progress; delays in meeting goals will be quickly identified and action plans will be initiated to respond to staffing needs and completion of milestones. We recognize there may be delays caused by COVID-19 and are prepared for shelter-in-place restrictions.

How and with whom will you share your project's results?

Our existing websites: niu.edu/burma and centerforburmastudies.com, and our partners at the various research and academic centers at NIU will link externally to our PPO database which will house the results of our project. Using our social media accounts such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, we will regularly post photographs of our textiles to showcase our collection and engage in academic and informative conversations with a larger audience. While we already receive good online traffic from our interested local and international audiences, we plan to release newsletters before and after the grant period to bring attention to our database. The newsletters will showcase specific aspects of the project, tips for using the database, spotlights on specific objects of interest, and contact information for anyone interested in learning more. We also plan to work with campus press to release a news article bringing attention to the project's results and to those who helped make it possible. Lastly, we plan to engage with our Center's associates including professors that teach relevant course work from Southeast Asian Studies, The School of Art and Design, Museum Studies, and the Liberal Arts and Sciences, to invite them to tour our storage area, see our photography studio, and learn about our project.

Project Results

What are your project's intended results and how will they address the need you have identified?

Our most crucial outcomes focus on our objects and the benefit, impact, and change in knowledge and behavior that they can have on our audiences which include researchers, academics, students, and the local communities that find representation in our collection. By creating a searchable online database that showcases

our entire textile holdings, we are directly addressing the second priority listed within our Strategic Plan. This project brings us closer to our mission to provide free access to our materials as the use of digital mediums in the museum world has become strongly relevant in the wake of COVID-19. Additionally, the following outcomes will be possible because of this project: 1) CBS staff will gain experience and increase skills in all aspects of the digitization process 2) graduate students from our museum studies program will gain knowledge specific to Burmese material culture, allowing them to have strong object and cultural considerations for Burma 3) graduate students will be able to demonstrate a greater understanding of Burma and its artistic legacy as it relates to American collectors 4) Burma Studies researchers and students will gain awareness and knowledge of our textile holdings, creating new opportunities for academic research and 5) curators specializing in textiles will use our database as a tool for identifying objects from their own collections.

How will the access to the museum collections that define the focus of your project improve?

While we have made strong improvements in our online presence over the last five years, we are now at a stage that requires additional staffing and equipment to begin new digitization projects. We have made significant progress with our limited resources, but the ability to replace our outdated camera and the addition of proper photographic equipment will allow us to produce high definition images that researchers can use. Additionally, the extra staffing will allow us to update our object records and condition reports. These improvements will open new opportunities for research and exciting online and virtual exhibitions. To continue with the momentum of the project and to continue improving the BAC in the digital era, we plan to seek continued funding to produce interactive online exhibitions.

What data will you collect and report to measure your project's success?

Once our database is live, we will run statistical reports to monitor user engagement through insights, page views, and unique visits. We will seek insight via data sources such as surveys tailored to our users to measure desired outcomes, and to gather information to improve our database (see sample survey in supporting documents). These surveys will help us determine if there was a desired change in our audience such as knowledge and attitude towards the objects they learned about. In our graduate assistants, we plan to measure change in skillsets via observation and testing as they develop new digitization and object handling skills. Indicators of success will include their ability to describe and identify Burmese textiles, as well as their ability to list and give examples of digitization strategies for different types of two-dimensional objects. To ensure that we achieved worthwhile outcomes, we will begin the evaluation phase early in the project to adjust where necessary before we officially launch.

What tangible products will result from your project?

The digital products that result from our project will live in our PPO database. This fully searchable database will give access to all of the images we produce during the project in a resolution that can be useful for productive research, and to all of the pertinent object records and data that we will create, revise, or update during the digitization process. Our newsletters will serve as an additional tangible product that can help bridge the gap from creating a new website to incentivizing its actual use. We seek to go beyond a mere increase in online traffic or link hits to have our audiences actually engage with our collection in meaningful ways that can spark new research topics, or even bring new interest into Asian and museum studies.

How will you sustain the benefit(s) of your project?

In an era where accessing digital collections and content has gained a new level of relevance, we are committed to continuing to give access to our digital products after the end of the grant. Internal funding will continue to provide website and database hosting fees. University collections are the ideal training ground for future museums and collections professionals and advocates. As a university-based, professionally managed collection, we strive to exemplify best practices in collections stewardship and in building community relationships as we enter into an unknown era where museums will have to rethink, adapt, and collaborate in order to remain relevant and accessible in new ways.

Digitizing the textile holdings from the Burma Art Collection

	2021	2022											2023												Ongoing after grant period
	Grant Year 1 (months)												Grant Year 2 (months)												
	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	
Activities																									
Train CBS staff and GAs to photograph and digitize flat objects	X											X	X												
Update object condition forms			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X												
Photograph objects from the textile holdings			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X												
Verify and update descriptive metadata in PastPerfect Online			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Create or update object records in PastPerfect			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Create promotional materials to promote use of our database													X	X	X	X	X								
Distribute promotional materials (newsletters, social media)																		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Ongoing after grant period
Conduct database user evaluation surveys																		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Ongoing after grant period
Services — Provide access to PastPerfect Online Searchable Database																		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	Ongoing after grant period