Project Report

Exhibiting Moments: Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures*

Emily Buhrow Rogers

Abstract: In 1973, Indiana University's Mathers Museum of World Cultures purchased a selection of works from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians' Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, one of the oldest Native American-owned art and craft cooperatives in the United States. In this paper, I discuss, from my perspective as co-curator, the development of the museum's 2015 exhibition of that collection, Cherokee Craft, 1973. Through this project, the curatorial team sought to creatively evoke the Qualla cooperative at the dynamic historical moment these works represented, while also contending with significant resource limitations. What resulted was an exhibit organized around the concept of a moment in time. This alternative presentation strategy gave us an opportunity to explore a variety of important topics and ongoing processes specific to the institution in the early 1970s. In this paper, I discuss how this approach allowed us to present a plurality of voices, while also showcasing many of the cooperative's most renowned makers. I also position Cherokee Craft, 1973 as an exhibit curated by graduate students for a university audience: it was a site of innovation and representational experimentation for its creators, unique to its institutional type and its own particular moment in time.

[Keywords: Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians; Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual; material culture; museum exhibitions; Appalachian studies; higher education. Keywords in italics are derived from the American Folklore Society Ethnographic Thesaurus, a standard nomenclature for the ethnographic disciplines.]

Introduction

Museum exhibit design is an exercise in constraint. These displays exist within particular genre boundaries, and each is influenced by their histories and the expectations of their visitors. Paintings are hung on walls, protected by invisible shields; objects are held down under glass and viewed from afar, too precious for anyone but members of the museum's upper echelons to encounter in any other way. However, collection objects themselves also play a powerful role in shaping museum exhibits. This is particularly the case in museums with ethnographic and archaeological collections, where such artifacts as potsherds,

* This editorially-reviewed project report was accepted for publication in *Museum Anthropology Review* on March 18, 2019. The text in this work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>.

weavings, and carvings are fundamentally influenced by the lives and hands of the people who brought them into existence.

Figure 1. Cherokee basket, c.1970. Made by Carol S. Welch. White oak, walnut root, butternut root. 12 x 8 x 9.5 in. (30.5 x 20.5 x 24 cm). Mathers Museum of World Cultures, 1973-19-0004.

I became most aware of the push and pull of these forces in museum display when I was given the opportunity to design my very first exhibition as a graduate assistant at Indiana University's Mathers Museum of World Cultures. Here, I made my first attempt at synthesizing the ideal with the actual; of blending what I envisioned with what was possible. The collection that we exhibited was a large group of objects from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians' Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, one of the oldest Native American-owned art and craft cooperatives in the United States. Throughout the design process, my Mathers Museum colleagues and I worked to convey the vitality of these works and their excellent documentation while contending with significant resource limitations. In this project report, I will discuss the ways in which the exhibit that resulted—*Cherokee Craft, 1973*—worked *with* these parameters, rather than *against* them. The outcome was a creative presentation of the collection. In embracing what was available, and exploring it to the fullest, we designed the exhibition around the concept of a 'moment in time.' Focusing on one point in history rather than individual objects or object types enabled us to display the collection in a vivid and thought-provoking manner. It also created room for a deeper exploration of the perspectives of the individuals who animated the Qualla Co-op during this period and a space to explore the nature of the organization itself. Perhaps most importantly, this approach allowed us to present a plurality of voices and to more thoroughly contextualize Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual in regional and national contexts. We could then also showcase many of the institution's most renowned craftspeople.

After presenting the collection and the exhibition, I will conclude this project report by arguing that university museums are unique and invaluable in that they can serve as safe spaces for students to take risks and make themselves vulnerable (following in the footsteps of Royce 2018, 1999, and her views of ethnography). They are places both *of* and *for* learning: in these institutions, emerging scholars can learn about the processes of exhibition, but they can also experiment and innovate in ways that are uniquely encouraged in an educational context. University museums can give students the opportunity, for instance, to test their ideas about representational strategies and to try new approaches for communicating anthropological concepts to broader audiences. In this way, places like Indiana University's Mathers Museum of World Cultures embrace and encourage the potential of cultural anthropology and neighboring fields for teaching others about the many ways people make meaning from the world around them.

The Collection

In 1973, the Mathers Museum of World Cultures purchased a selection of artworks from Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual. This organization is located in the city of Cherokee, North Carolina, which sits just south of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Near one of the main entrances to the park, Cherokee attracts thousands of tourists each year. While many retail shops in the area sell mass-produced souvenirs alongside high-quality works made by local Native makers, Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual has become renowned amongst private collectors and museums as an important place for Cherokee craft in the region (see discussions of the region and Co-op in Fariello 2009; Duggan 1997).

The Mathers Museum's interest in collecting works from the Co-op lie in the institution's own focus on acquiring American ethnographic materials during the 1960s and 70s. A growing national interest in American craft—and Appalachian craft in particular—coupled with the fast-approaching United States Bicentennial in 1976 motivated many of the museum's purchases during this period. The Mathers' documentation records for the Qualla Co-op collection indicates that the museum's ethnology curator in 1972 contacted the Co-op directly to acquire artworks for the museum's permanent collection. The Qualla Arts store manager at the time, Betty Craig DuPree, selected the works that would be sent to the museum, and mailed them to Indiana.

The list of artworks that she sent includes:

- 13 baskets
- 5 wood carvings
- 4 dolls
- 2 finger weavings
- 5 pieces beadwork, including jewelry, medallions, and belts
- 2 blowguns
- 3 rattles
- 10 ceramic pieces, including bowls, vases, and pipes

This collection demonstrates the broad array of traditional arts and crafts that Cherokee people were making and selling in the 1970s, and still are to this day. It is also comprised of works made by many of the most renowned and prolific artists in the Co-op's history.

Cherokee Craft, 1973: Possibilities and Constraints

This wonderful collection remained largely hidden behind the walls of the Mathers Museum's permanent storage room for just over 40 years. In 2014, however, the director of the Museum proposed that I co-curate an exhibit of the Qualla Co-op works under his guidance. The original concept for *Cherokee Craft, 1973*, was to present the works of Eastern Cherokee artists in the context of a then-ongoing Appalachian craft revival. It was also intended to showcase the cultural and economic life of the Cherokee people in western North Carolina. A third goal for the exhibition was to highlight the works of the craftspeople who had earned reputations as masters of the forms in which they worked, and who were highly influential in shaping the practices of the current generation of Cherokee makers. The initial plan was to create a vitrine-centered presentation with images and graphics affixed to the museum walls. Objects would be divided by form and material type. The original exhibition proposal also described using so-called tombstone labels identifying individual works with the names of makers and accompanying explanations of the objects themselves.

Figure 2. Bear mask, c.1970. Made by Adam Welch. Holly wood. 11.5 x 9 x 4 in. (29 x 23 x 10 cm). Mathers Museum of World Cultures, 1973-19-0030.

As I worked on designing *Cherokee Craft, 1973*, however, it quickly became clear that the Mathers Museum's collection of Eastern Cherokee objects was contextualizable with an exceptional wealth of available information about makers and about Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual. It also became clear that it would be exceedingly difficult to capture the richness and complexity of these pieces within the constraints of the exhibit the museum staff had initially planned. For example, as I listed earlier, the collection included objects from many different types of expressive practices and illustrated variation within those forms, and the goal of the exhibition's planning team was to display all of them. A detailed and comprehensive discussion of artwork types would not be possible using a more traditional exhibition strategy. Most importantly, virtually all of the pieces in the collection came with tags that named their makers. Such influential figures as Amanda Crowe, Cora Wahneta, and Rowena Bradley had carefully carved, sculpted, and woven the items that we were about to put on our exhibit shelves. While they had since passed away, many publications exist that record some of their perspectives on their practices. Thanks to Qualla Arts' promotional and documentary work, and through the digitization efforts of Western Carolina University's Hunter Library, photographs of these women working, their planning sketches, and even transcribed interviews were all available for the curatorial team to utilize to teach visitors about these women and their art forms. *Cherokee Craft, 1973*, presented us with an opportunity to draw on all of these pieces to highlight the lives and beliefs of those individuals who brought Qualla Arts to life.

Beyond the limitations of a more traditional exhibition strategy, the curatorial team also encountered significant spatial and budgetary limitations when it came to planning and

executing the project. First, the available gallery was quite small. It was the smallest of all the exhibit spaces in the museum at the time, and we had approximately 300 square feet to display around sixty objects of varying dimensions, ranging from a beaded key chain to a six-foot long blowgun. The space also had no built-in vitrines or display cases, and those needed to be added, taking up walking space within the exhibit. A second obstacle was the museum's budget. While we had the museum staff's time and expertise—including but not limited to the museum educator, photographer, and preparator—we had no additional funds to purchase any materials that were not already owned by the museum. These factors considerably shaped the scope of what we could achieve with the exhibition and how we could go about doing it.

Keeping these restrictions in mind, during the design phase of the exhibition's development, I decided—with input from another graduate student curator, Kelley Totten—to make the most of the wealth of historical information that we had about the Co-op. We shifted plans, making our goal instead to fully invest in the concept of a *moment in time*. Our examination of digitally available archival photos of the Qualla Arts shop from the 1950s and 60s revealed that the cooperative itself at that time was probably a small store with very functional furnishings. Its shelving was filled with baskets, beadwork, and other crafts created by its members, and the space and the layout of items was designed for customer browsing, much like the ways objects are arranged in many museum exhibits. Although we did not have the information or the funds needed to recreate the space precisely, we thought that building a smaller, intimate shop setting would be the best way to take advantage of the available ethnographic data while displaying the full array of crafts that comprised the collection. This would provide visitors with a more vivid, experiential space for learning about the museum's Cherokee works. Moreover, it allowed us to limit the text somewhat, since wall space (and therefore negative space) was in short supply. We could create an exhibition that was immersive and relied on the presence and juxtaposition of non-textual visuals to create a sense of entering a markedly distinct space and time outside the museum and outside of 2015. Focusing on evoking a moment in time would also allow us to justify somewhat densely populating the display shelves with artworks in order to evoke the original retail store space. In our final exhibition text, we encouraged museumgoers to enter the store and to browse the wares on display, much like visitors to the Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual would have done in the 1960s and 70s.

The Exhibition

The final layout of *Cherokee Craft, 1973* included reused and repurposed non-collection objects found both within and outside the museum. We revived an old metal shelving unit with a coat of white paint, cleaned and partially refinished an old circular dining table, and re-stained a glass-paned wooden cabinet, which was once part of the museum's permanent storage and was destined for the dumpster. By using a blend of shelving types, we hoped to parallel the variety of display strategies used in the Qualla Co-op itself in the era represented. We also used the museum's existing vitrines in order to safeguard items that would be better hung on the wall—like the booger masks—or that were too large to fit in the other shelving units, like the blowguns.

Figure 3: Basketry display constructed from a reused wooden cabinet. Photo by author.

The curatorial team segmented the exhibit space into a few different areas, but for this project report, I will focus on the “Featured Craftworkers” wall and the text panels we placed

throughout the exhibition that raised other topics about the cooperative that we wanted to cover. The “Featured Craftworkers” area was laid out in a way that nodded to the photographic information that we had about the Co-op space in the 1970s. We selected one item from four different artists, for whom we had photographs and archival, as well as published, quotes about their practice. We mounted their photos on the exhibition wall and displayed their selected work below in a plexiglass vitrine. The curatorial team also selected these particular artists because of their relationships with one another, and their differing perspectives about their own work. In so doing, our aim was to demonstrate the plurality of voices represented in the collection and the variety of meanings that the makers gave to their crafts. Our goal was to also highlight for visitors that, although these items were once for sale in a store, their significance was not only economic. These makers’ carvings, ceramics, and weavings were expressions of their community, their personal creativity, and their individual engagement with tradition and with life in the 1970s.

Figure 4. Carved weasel, c.1970. Made by B. Nations. Cherry wood. 12 x 2 x 5 in. (30.5 x 5 x 12.5 cm). Mathers Museum of World Cultures, 1973-19-0029.

Two artists we paired and featured were Amanda Crowe and Virgil Ledford. Amanda Crowe was a renowned Eastern Cherokee woodcarver, known for her fluid and expressive animal sculptures. She was also an educator, and worked as a studio art teacher for several years at Cherokee High School. In a statement on her work, she wrote:

I carve because I love to do it. Each piece leads into other ideas, during and after the carving is finished. So, too, in teaching there is stimulation in helping others know the joy of creating their own things and in seeing them grow in their enthusiasm. (Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Inc. 1987, 10)

Virgil Ledford was one of her students. He reflected on her instruction in a statement of his own:

My wood-carving and sculpture instructor in high school was Miss Amanda Crowe, and it was under her instruction that my greatest growth was achieved as a designer/carver. It was Miss Crowe who taught me to think for myself in creating designs of a contemporary nature as they related to the history of my native land and people. (Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Inc. 1987, 46)

By placing their images, words, and carvings together, the curatorial team aimed to draw the visitor's attention to the relationships between these artists and to the ways in which they experienced and created their work in conversation with one another. By putting their voices at the forefront, we hoped to use the model of the Qualla Co-op space to draw visitors' attention to makers' ideas and social networks in a way that might not have been possible in another museum exhibition format.

Another Qualla figure on whom we chose to focus was Betty DuPree, who was the manager of the Co-op in 1973. This was her first year at this job, and she went on to hold this post for decades afterwards (see Duggan 1997). Betty DuPree was an enrolled member of the Eastern Band, and worked for arts organizations in the American Southwest before taking up her position at the Co-op (Southern Highland Handicraft Guild 1972). In our exhibition text, we displayed an archival photo of Betty DuPree that was dated to 1972 and explained her role in the organization. Our goal in featuring Betty DuPree was twofold. First, as the creator of the Mathers Museum's collection, she played a vital role in the itinerary of the pieces featured in the exhibition. We aimed to draw attention to the part that individuals played in shaping the institution and its policies. Second, discussing some of her decisions as manager situated Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual within the larger market for Native American arts during the 1970s, and further placed the organization and the collection within a broader national context.

The curatorial team used the remaining wall space to give visitors more background information on the Co-op as an institution. In one panel, we discussed briefly the Co-op's juried membership, and explained that an executive board composed of Cherokee community members runs the Co-op. The board determines artists' memberships and regulates the quality and standards of what can be sold. Our goal in doing so was to softly encourage visitors to think about *who* could sell their works in the store and *who* makes these decisions. We intended to highlight that this was and is a Native, community-run organization.

Figure 5: *Cherokee Craft*, 1973's "Featured Craftworkers" section. Photo by author.

Figure 6. Exhibition shelving unit displaying a variety of object types, including dolls, beadwork, pottery, and a turtle shell rattle. Photo by author.

In a similar vein, in another panel—and throughout our exhibition’s recreated retail space—we took inspiration from the accessioned artwork’s original sale tags, which are identical to the ones still used by Qualla Arts today. These slips are marked with the cooperative’s official seal, and have been certified “genuine” by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board (IACB). We explained to visitors that the United States Department of the Interior created this Board to encourage and promote Native American art and to protect Native American cultural property, as originally established by the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1935 (Public-No. 355, 74th Congress, S. 2203). The Board created this trademark to recognize items made by certified artists and organizations that belonged to federally recognized tribes. While the history and effects of the IACB were too expansive for us to discuss within the scope of this exhibition, we wanted to introduce to visitors the idea of federal recognition and the influence of federal government regulation on Native American life.

The ultimate structure of *Cherokee Craft, 1973* emphasized networks and relationships. It portrayed the works on display as nodes of these connections, foregrounding their dynamism and vitality. They were not portrayed as static objects, but rather as vibrant manifestations of their makers’ beliefs and social realities during the 1970s. These representational results were a direct consequence of taking a chance on an alternative exhibition path.

The Promise of the University Museum

The development of *Cherokee Craft, 1973* shows how constraint can generate creativity and invention. In working *with* what is available while keeping an eye on what is possible, new forms of representation and interpretation can emerge. The Mathers curatorial team’s organizing principle of ‘a moment in time’ was a direct consequence of the museum’s spatial and budgetary limitations: it forced us to slow down and reconsider our exhibition design strategy. This ultimately resulted in a museum space that was tailored to and determined by the collection itself.

This case study also demonstrates the possibilities of what can happen when a museum relinquishes partial control over its exhibits and the content of its collections. From the very nascence of the Qualla Arts assemblage, the Mathers staff had loosened its grip. The curator at the time entrusted the Co-op manager and also the Co-op’s Board of Directors and artists to curate what would go into the museum, and therefore what would be exhibited. This collection was community-driven from the start. It was not tailored according to academic experts’ ideas of what should or should not be in a museum, but rather, it reflected the values and ethno-aesthetics of Cherokee community members at that time. The challenges presented in creating *Cherokee Craft, 1973*—and the similar loosening of curatorial control by the museum’s permanent staff members when it came to its student-led design—made the curatorial team stop and realize the uniqueness of this collection. It encouraged us to take a non-traditional approach and focus on the makers themselves and the trajectories of the objects as central parts of the story. By working with rather than against the existing exhibition constraints, we were better able to listen to and convey the circumstances of the collection’s creation.

Figure 7. Wedding pitcher, c.1970. Made by Louise Bigmeat. Ceramic. 4 x 5.5 x 5.5 in. (10 x 14 x 14 cm). Mathers Museum of World Cultures, 1973-19-0017.

Cherokee Craft, 1973—in design and development—also told its own metacommunicative story about museum anthropology in the 2010s, the Mathers Museum, its staff and students, and their intellectual goals and pathways. Creative exhibitions like this arise from a university museum's willingness to serve as a site for experimental and experiential learning, to exist in part as incubators for the next generation of curators and museum scholars. Student-curated exhibits can function as public stages for deconstruction and experimentation, for drawing on classroom knowledge and translating and communicating it through different expressive mediums. I hope *Cherokee Craft, 1973* also represents a moment in time when we, as anthropologists and museum practitioners, are learning and

growing to listen better; a time when we realize the importance of telling the stories that matter most to those with and about whom we work and write.

Acknowledgement

An earlier version of this paper was given at the American Anthropological Association's 2018 Annual Meeting as a part of the panel, "Pragmatic Imagination, University Collections, and the New Museum Anthropology." I wish to extend my special thanks to Jason Baird Jackson, Kelley D. Totten, Ellen Sieber, Sarah Hatcher, Matt Sieber, Carolyn A. Smith, and the Hunter Library Digital Collections of Western Carolina University for their assistance on this exhibit and on this project report.

References Cited

- Duggan, Betty J. 1997. "Tourism, Cultural Authenticity, and the Native Crafts Cooperative: The Eastern Cherokee Experience." In *Tourism and Culture, An Applied Perspective*, 31–57. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fariello, M. Anna. 2009. *Cherokee Basketry from the Hands of Our Elders*. Charleston, SC: History Press.
- Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Inc. 1987. *Contemporary Artists and Craftsmen of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians: Promotional Exhibitions, 1969-1985*. Cherokee, N.C.: Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Inc.
- Royce, Anya Peterson. "To Be Transformed: Reflections on Learning, Community, and Being Present." Keynote address at the FACET Tenth Anniversary Retreat, Faculty Colloquium on Excellence in Teaching, Indiana University, Bloomington, May 21, 1999.
- Royce, Anya Peterson. "Taking the Long Way Around." Tracy M. Sonneborn Lecture, Indiana University, Bloomington, November 30, 2018.
- Southern Highland Handicraft Guild. 1972. "Qualla Has New Manager." *Highland Highlights*, February 1972.
- Emily Buhrow Rogers is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University as well as a Research Associate of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures. She was the curator for Cherokee Craft, 1973, which ran from June 19, 2015 to July 1, 2016. Prior to curating this exhibition she had studied Eastern Cherokee collections at the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of Natural History and undertook a research visit to Cherokee, North Carolina. She is presently writing a dissertation focused on craft knowledge and ecological change among the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. Her research*

in North Carolina was supported by the American Philosophical Society's Phillips Fund for Native American Research. Her more recent work has been support by the Center for Contemporary Craft and the Whatcom Museum.

<https://doi.org/10.14434/mar.v13i1.26472>