June was a month of reflection, both personal and social. As we reached the halfway mark of our year, we believe it was important to stop, breathe and take a moment to rest from everything we have been exposed to recently. In these times difficult time, one may find themselves experiencing different emotions and states of mind. However, it is not all darkness. At the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens, we thank you for being part of our family, and for allowing us to be a part of the Borderplex community. We hope the month of July will bring wonderful moments for all of you and introduce us to the better part of 2020. We are eager to share with you this month’s newsletter and are hopeful it can keep you entertained and informed, even if it is for a split second.

Stay safe and be well

Welcome
Mayra Gonzalez & Sebastian Carrasco, Student Work Studies

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Stay safe and be well
Collections Move
Samantha Winer, Curator

Often when you think of museums, the first thought that comes to mind are the objects. It is the artifacts that help make the museum, where else would be able to see pottery from pre-historic sites, a dinosaur bone, and a painting by Van Gough? Yet, out all of the objects you see on display there is so much more hiding beneath the surface.

A museum typically only shows anywhere from 10 to 5% of its’ collection, the rest is in storage. Large museums such as the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum have large offsite storage capabilities. Smaller museums like the Centennial, keeps its objects on site, creating a Tetris like game, to find a safe spot for each artifact. The Centennial has approximately over 60,000 artifacts in its collection, ranging from leopard skins, pottery shards, and even a crossbow. The Centennial, established in 1936, was El Paso’s first museum. As a result, our collection is varied vast with different objects requiring different storage needs. The Centennial has four rooms in its basement dedicated to collection storage. Thanks to an endowment, the museum has been in the process of updating it’s collections with new compact storage units. Some of these storage systems have probably have been in place since the 1960s, almost museum objects themselves.

As the Curator of Collections and Exhibits this has been an exciting time for me. I’m very grateful that museums previous curator, Scott Cutler, was able to start the foundational planning of the new storage. I’m fortunate that by working for the university we have access to the department of Planning and Construction, which has made a very confusing and stressful situation a bit
The planning took several years, to ensure we were working with the right company and making sure that the planned storage units would meet our needs.

One of the first steps in placing the new compact storage was to remove all of the old storage and of course artifacts. One of the smaller collection rooms, mainly full of files and random supplies, was cleaned out and brand new shelving was placed in the room, becoming our swing pace. The first room we tackled full of objects was our pottery room, affectionally known as the “pot room”. Most of these artifacts were from Paquimé, an archaeological site from Northern Mexico, that dates from the 12th century C.E., no pressure there. Our collection from Paquimé, as the other ceramic objects in our collection was carefully moved into the swing space. Luckily the rooms were right next to each. Thanks to the help of our student workers and interns we were able to move the objects within several weeks. Each artifact’s location and id number were carefully recorded. The old storage units were taken down and new ones were put up. Then we had to put everything back in safely. One of the best parts of these new storage units is that every object had a safe space for them, and the objects are easy to access without causing potential damage.

Our collections move is still underway, we are over a little half way done. Just as the pandemic began to ramp up, we were in the middle of moving our largest and most complex collections area, the dreaded room 106. I was able to finish...
to moving the objects into our swing spaces and in a few extra rooms. One of the most important skills to have in the museum world to be able to adapt to changes. Be it an unexpected school tour pops up, a painting in an exhibit falls down, or even pandemic you have to be ready to go with the flow. The work crews were still able to come in to the museum and place the new storage. During the past few months we hope for the room to be done by the end of June and eventually the moving process will begin all over again.

Moving collections is stressful, no matter the circumstances. But one of the best things about the move is that I have been able to learn so much more about our objects. I have discovered how beautiful our geological collections are, I’ve handled high heel shoes that are over 100 years old, and been enamored of a map that shows the old city of Tenochtitlan. Yet the most important thing about the move, is that the objects will be continued to be taken care of and preserved for the future.
**Lhakhang Virtual Tour**

Claudia Ley, Education Curator

Through this global pandemic that we are currently facing, it feels like if COVID-19 has taught public institutions like ours, along with other cultural institutions and libraries, anything, it is the importance and value of technology and the digital world. Living in a time when most individuals own a smartphone or some form of digital technology, the importance of digital collections, exhibitions, manuscripts, and archival collections is now more relevant than ever. And because as many of us in the museum world did not anticipate the length that our museums would be closed, it has pushed us out of our comfort zone and it has gotten us to learn how to create more online content such as virtual exhibitions, tours, and online activities for families and individuals of all ages.

Bringing museums to homes has become popular in the social media world through hashtags #museumfromhome and #museumathome, with individuals at home recreating masterpieces through reenactment and dress. There is also a need for more virtual talks, tours, and workshops to take place through various platforms as an effort to continue keeping audiences engaged and coming back to our sites.

Prior to COVID-19, the Centennial Museum and Chihuahuan Desert Gardens began the conversation of digitizing one of its most prized artifact exhibition, the Lhakhang Cultural Exhibit. Known as “UTEP’s Cultural Jewel”, it is no surprise that the Lhakhang is one of the most visited sites on the university campus since it was inaugurated in 2015.
Located in the heart of the Centennial Plaza, this cultural artifact was a gift to “The People of the United States of America and entrusted to the University of Texas at El Paso” as a symbol of friendship from the Kingdom of Bhutan. To this date, this truly unique and intriguing structure is the only of its kind to have ever left the Kingdom of Bhutan.

From afar the Lhakhang stands out from one of the many uniquely inspired Bhutanese architectural structures throughout campus. Surrounded by local native foliage, standing tall is a white “temple”-like structure with a red roof, a gold-colored pinnacle, and hand-carved windows and doors, along with four emerald-green dragon heads, all handcrafted in Bhutan by highly skilled artists, craftsmen, and artisans. The interior of the Lhakhang is just as impressive, as it is made up of intricately carved and painted wooden ceilings, pillars, an altar, and clay sculptures. The walls are decorated with hand-painted sacred stories and images of Buddha and other important figures in Buddhism and Bhutan. But because of its value to the university, not many get to go inside the Lhakhang and experience its uniqueness first hand due to preservation purposes.

With very different climates in the humid Himalayan mountaintops of Bhutan and the dry desert climate of El Paso, the preservation of the Lhakhang is something that was very important to the previous UTEP President Dr. Diana Natalicio. Open every Tuesday and the first Saturday of every month from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., if weather permits, the hours and days of operation make it difficult for many to be able to visit. But in my year as the Education
Curator for the Centennial and as the one who oversees the operation of the Lhakhang, making more accessible to others became something I really wanted to work on, even if that means not necessarily having to physically be there to experience this jewel.

Fast forward a year later, and with a global pandemic to keep us from going into our museum jobs, and prevented visitors from visiting our museum, gardens, and the Lhakhang, the personal want and need to speed up the process and begin to digitally document this cultural artifact became more apparent to me. Through a collaborative partnership with lecturer and administrative assistant John De Frank from the Humanities Department and creative genius, David Figueroa from Augment El Paso, we began discussing the possibilities of digitizing the Lhakhang through various platforms in an effort to make it more accessible to the public. John expressed the interest in creating a digital site for the Lhakhang through the Microsoft Office app SWAY, an app he had previously explored and worked with to create Preserving Identities, an interactive, multimedia exhibit which examines issues and public policy concerns related to preserving the world’s cultural heritage. David, whom the museum has also previously collaborated with, offered his knowledge and interest in creating a virtual exhibition using 360° photography, along with video, sound, and augmented reality. I would be in charge of compiling most of the text through previous research, along with working with our graphic designer Amy Briones on additional research and components for our website.

We plan on launching our first virtual exhibition, The Lhakhang: a Cultural Gem in UTEP, this August, right when the students “head back to class” this fall. We hope this is the first of many projects and collaborations in hopes of digitizing more artifacts, exhibitions, and documents as an effort of making them more accessible to all, whether in person or in the palm of your hand through a smartphone, computer, or tablet.
Chihuahuan Desert Gardens
Notes for July 2020 by Kevin Floyd, Botanical Curator

There are few things better than resting under the shade of a tree during our hot July weather. Listening to the rustling leaves and chirping birds, watching the spots of light dance on the ground as the leaves shift, and maybe enjoying a cold drink must be one of the most relaxing things we can do. There are many additional benefits to having trees in an urban environment, and even in our challenging desert climate there are several great options to add to your own yard. You can come visit our gardens (wearing your face covering and social distancing following public health recommendations) to see some of these trees look like for yourself.

Perhaps the most apparent benefit of trees is the shade they provide. The shade, combined with the water they release into the atmosphere, can cool summer temperatures by 2-4°F. If strategically placed close to a building, they can reduce the cooling costs as well, in some cases up to 30%!

Trees act to reduce the urban heat island effect, the warmer temperatures in cities caused largely by expanses of asphalt and concrete, making summers a little more tolerable.

Research shows that living near urban forests can improve both mental and physical wellbeing. This was one of the goals in the design of the Campus Transformation Project at UTEP, with the Centennial Plaza as the centerpiece. Native trees, along with shrubs, cacti, and perennials, were planted in areas...
designed to improve mental relaxation and allow students to take a calming break from their studies. Trees also can filter out urban pollutants and fine particulates. Particulate matter is one of the most damaging forms of air pollution, and one study found that urban trees can reduce health problems by amounts estimated at $1-60 million! El Paso often exceeds the air quality standards for particulate matter, and increasing our urban forest canopy would be an important step towards improved public health.

Trees can increase urban biodiversity by providing food and shelter to many animals. Flowering trees like honey mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) and desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*) support pollinators, including bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. Oaks and pine trees produce nuts that many birds and mammals eat. The insects that feed on trees in turn become food for birds. This spring our cottonwood, pecan, and Texas walnut trees were hotspots for migrating warblers and vireos searching for insects to fuel their journey north.

There are several non-native trees that are commonly planted in El Paso, like the Afghan pine (*Pinus eldarica*), that do provide some ecosystem services...
like providing shade. However, to maximize all the benefits that trees can provide it is worth looking for those native to our region. There is a surprising diversity of options when it comes to size, evergreen or deciduous, water use, and wildlife benefits. The West Texas Urban Forestry Council and the El Paso Master Gardeners both have excellent resources, including recommended trees and planting instructions. Careful selection and planting will ensure that the tree will thrive for many years to come. At the regional level, learn more about supporting the Million Trees El Paso program led by Eco El Paso. Their goal is to plant one million new native trees across the greater El Paso region in the next ten years. Reaching that will provide many benefits to all of us!
Friends have asked me what a typical workday is like for me. The answer has always been “it depends.” The paper description of my job as Curatorial Assistant is “assisting with the creation and maintenance of exhibits, both temporary and permanent.” A lot of different tasks fit into this description. I work as the Graphic Designer, Preparator, and in some cases the IT person. Larger museums have more specific job roles, but we are a small museum, so our staff wear many hats.

During the installation of the exhibit, Tiny Tunnels, Big Connections: Ant Relationships Shape the World, I recorded everything I did for a day. Here’s a little insight into my job:

- Started the day with coffee and emails. During exhibit prep, there are many emails I need to keep track of from scheduled meetings, quotes for exhibit material, and anything that needs to be addressed. The coffee helps with this step trust me.

- Prepared marketing design files for print. For this exhibit we had a UTEP graphic design student develop a graphic style for this exhibit. I then received the design files for editing. Files need to be prepared with crop marks for cutting and edited for grammar errors. They are then sent off to a printer for a quote where I let them know the quantity and paper type. This day I finished the postcard for the exhibit, but other marketing collateral include posters, flyers, and sometimes brochures. I also do digital marketing such as Facebook and Instagram graphics.

- Exhibit wall got prepped. The earlier exhibit was deinstalled,
so the walls needed touching up.
I sanded down some holes that
were uneven and asked two of our work-studies to
patch up some nail holes with drywall compound.

• Exhibit design files got edited. I set up text and image
panels for print. This day I redrew some line work on
exhibit graphics, set up layouts for different
panels, and printed out test panels. Printing tests are
always important for the final product.

• Had a meeting with Augment El Paso. This exhibit had
augmented reality (AR) elements to it, so I was in a
meeting with staff and exhibit partners to discuss
these interactives.

• Troubleshoot printer errors. The printer does not want
to print. Usually UTEP IT can help, but we own our
large format printer and we do not have IT support
for it. I fiddle with the settings and wait for it to print
before moving on to the next task.

• Checked sizing for vinyl graphics and sent for a quote.
We use vinyl for some of our wall graphics. I use a
program called Sketchup to determine the size each
graphic needs to be. It’s a 3D software that helps me
visualize the objects in a space and uses exact
measurements. The graphics are then sent out to a
printer for a quote.

• Sketched up plans for exhibit mounts. This exhibit
needed special mounts for specimens. I looked up
references and sketched out a solution. I then made a
simple model in Sketchup to test if it would work.

• Went back to the printer to see if it printed. The
printer usually takes around 30 minutes to an hour to
print the first time. Luckily, it printed that day and I
was able to look at the test print. At this point I also
gather other staff members and work-studies to look at
the test print with me. This helps to get a good
sense of what people see other than myself.

• Had lunch at some point.

• Had a meeting with the curator of this exhibit, Vicky Zhuang. We needed to go over how specimens would look in the cases based on the template she provided.

• Another test print was made so Vicky and I could look over the sizing and font size for the exhibit cases.

• Got an email back from our vinyl printer and installer, Big Media. There was an issue with one of the graphics, so I fixed it and sent it back.

• The day is over, time to go home!