

Confronting the Legacies of Colonialism and Racism in Special Collections

Introduction. In response to growing concerns about the historical and present-day forms of racism and inequity on the Bryn Mawr College campus, the Bryn Mawr Special Collections Department has taken up the charge of reconsidering the histories of colonialism and racism that have shaped the formation and presentation of our collections of historical, cultural, and artistic works. We have been actively working to address these legacies through increased transparency about the acquisition histories and cultural significance of our collections, a recognition of potentially harmful descriptive language in our databases and catalogues and renewed efforts to acquire objects in a just manner that expand the diversity of artistic works, particularly contemporary artworks, represented in our collections. We also increasingly aim to follow best and up-to-date practices in collections management, including understanding our ethical responsibilities to the collections we steward. These strategic goals are in alignment with LITS-wide and College-wide efforts toward Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. We continually look to faculty, staff and students to understand how we can improve upon our work in Special Collections and how we can better contribute to the college.

What are “Special Collections”? & Why are they “Special”?

- For Bryn Mawr College, the “Special Collections” comprise a group of objects—such as manuscripts, letters, photographs, art, and artifacts—that are deemed unusually rare or irreplaceable, and must be stored in a secure location with environmental controls to preserve the items and ensure current and future access.
- The Special Collections are intended to foster teaching, learning, and original research. We also hope the Collections spark dialogue and prompt open engagement. And we, the Special Collections staff, welcome interrogation, critique, and insights into how we can continuously improve upon our work.
- The Special Collections Department recognizes that the inherent barriers to accessing Special Collections, and inherent biases in collecting practices, may lead to a feeling that they are elitist or exclusive. We are working towards creating a more accessible, ethical, and anti-racist framework for the execution of our work. These strategic goals are in alignment with LITS-wide and BMC-wide efforts towards Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

¹ As part of the Bryn Mawr College Community, Special Collections joins the College’s overall commitment to the “critical work of education, dialogue, and institutional change that will form the basis of what the institution wishes to be.”

Organization of the Document

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I. Collections Histories and Politics of Power

The Special Collections range widely by period and region and include natural history objects, works of art, archaeological and ethnographic artifacts, photographs, audio-visual materials, archival documents, books, manuscripts, and scientific instruments. We recognize that there is inherent bias in what was collected, preserved, and made accessible through exhibits and digital access. These objects were primarily given to the College by faculty, alumni, and donors, and thus bear out their individual interests, politics, beliefs, etc. Many of these objects are the gifts of people who benefitted from systems of power and privilege that shaped the world today. Bryn Mawr College’s Special Collections Department recognizes its role as a participant in these same systems—including the ways we acquire, describe, and exhibit materials.

The Department is supportive of provenance research into the history of its objects’ ownership. Information about the provenance of an individual work adds historical, social, and economic context, and provides insight into a history of collecting, including the culture, language, and economics of exchange. Even though an object may be legally acquired by the College from a donor, we recognize that it may be a product of colonial relations and power imbalances. Provenance research is only part of the work we need to do to address this. When the provenance of an art object is known, we work to publish that information in our online database.

The Department is prepared to repatriate objects that we learn were acquired in a manner that would not be considered legitimate or appropriate today. We will engage with claimants and potential claimants in an open and respectful way. Our approach to the return of objects is set out in our [Collections Management Policy](#).

Ongoing Acquisitions

To fulfill our responsibilities as a cultural institution and to remain relevant, we need to diversify and redress imbalances in our collections. Special Collections is working to acquire collections and objects directly from artists, writers, and activists from marginalized groups. When we acquire materials from marginalized groups, it is important that we do so with care and with compensation of full market value. Moreover, we need to address the systems that allowed disproportionate representation to dominate the collections.

We acknowledge that we will continue to receive donations from individuals that benefit from dominant systems of wealth and power. We aim to be selective when we do, mindful of mitigating representation of privileged groups, and transparent about the contexts of acquisition to the extent allowed by our legal responsibilities. [[See, again, our Collections Management Policy here](#)].

At the same time, it is the responsibility of the Special Collections Department and the College's Collections Committee to prevent artists, authors, and other subjects from marginalized cultures and groups from being misrepresented, overlooked, or forgotten in our collections. The Department often uses acquisition funds to purchase objects made by and representing the histories of such individuals, especially when they support contemporaneous teaching at the College.

II. The Collections Themselves, the (Visible) Content & (Invisible) Context

Many items in the collections contain historical language and content that may be considered offensive, for example, language and images that were used historically to refer to racial, ethnic, or other cultural communities. Items in the collections, their content and their descriptions, reflect both the time period in which they were created and the perspective of their creator. In this way, many collection items offer information in both (visible) content and (invisible) context.

With some collections, the cultural politics and power dynamics are conspicuous. For example, there are collections created by people in power that discuss or describe marginalized populations from an outsider perspective (such as 19th century European/American travel writing in Africa, Asia, or the Americas). They are likely to include offensive material in language and imagery. These types of collections (objects, documents, images, publications, and other materials) have been retained in their original format for the purposes of teaching and education about a historical moment.

In other cases, the cultural politics and power dynamics behind a collection are more inconspicuous. For example, there are many non-Western cultural art and artifacts in the collection that don't visibly reveal the uneven power dynamics in

which they were created, sold, and acquired. Many of these cultural objects were collected and exchanged by white collectors and art dealers who benefited from "owning" these objects, often with little to no benefit to the individuals or communities from which these cultural objects originated or to their descendant communities. These objects, then, powerfully represent a colonialist and imperial worldview, but one that is not obviously inscribed on the objects themselves. This creates a valuable teaching opportunity about the subtle but pernicious forms of racial power embedded in cultural objects.

More information about what Special Collections staff is currently doing to contextualize collections can be found at the end of this document.

III. Teaching. Learning and Telling Stories with Special Collections

Bryn Mawr College's Special Collections Department takes seriously its role of custodianship for its collections and its obligation to the peoples who created the objects and stories, as well as to their descendants. The Department aims to describe materials accurately, respectfully, and in a way that is not harmful or offensive.

Bryn Mawr's Special Collections are designed for teaching and learning. As part of a learning environment, the understanding and meanings of objects are always in flux. We encourage and rely upon community members to research, interpret, and teach us about collection objects, and we are dedicated to expanding our own learning. We embrace this as a collaborative and inclusive effort, especially as part of coursework or paid internships in the Department. [[Current opportunities](#)].

Objects are sometimes on display on campus without context as part of coursework and research assignments, so that students can learn how to research decontextualized objects. The Department aims to be transparent when this occurs through accompanying signage or in-person instruction.

More typically, objects are displayed as part of exhibitions organized by staff, faculty, and students. All such exhibition efforts aim to reinterpret the collections' historical holdings for contemporary audiences, intervening into the problematic contexts in which some objects entered the collection. The Department aims to better document these exhibitions online, so that these temporary reinterpretations remain attached to the object records.

IV. Describing our Collections -- Cataloguing

Current practices in cataloguing and description employ internationally-recognized controlled vocabularies that may be problematic. Here, we articulate our approaches to cataloguing different types of Bryn Mawr College collections materials. The most commonly used vocabularies and thesauri are: Library of

Congress Subject Headings (LCSH); LC Thesaurus for Graphic Materials (LCTGM); LC Genre Headings (LCGFT); Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT); and Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names (TGN).

Archives

Archival finding aids may contain racist, sexist, or homophobic terminology as well as phrasing that reinforces existing power structures by adopting a “neutral” or “objective” tone in relation to problematic creators of records held in the College Archive. Where material was written by archival staff, we are working on updating our descriptions to be more accurate and to remove any offensive language or outdated terminology.

Some of the language in our archival finding aids reflects language used by the original creators of the material, which may include offensive, harmful, or otherwise problematic terminology. Folder titles created by the people or organizations whose records we hold, for example, are kept in their original form as they convey contextual information about their creators. This is in line with standard archival practice.

Our finding aids use Library of Congress subject and name authorities in accordance with national and international guidelines, and controlled vocabularies and thesauri, such as Getty AAT. When the only options in LSCH are harmful, alternative and local vocabularies are consulted.

Art & Artifacts

We use Embark Collections Manager by Gallery Systems to catalog and manage the metadata for our Collections, and Web Kiosk by Gallery Systems to make our Collections available online. Embark Collections Manager incorporates several Getty Vocabularies, Chenall’s Lexicon for Object Types, and the Beazley Archive Subject Headings. These systems are imperfect but were identified by staff as the best available for cataloging the varied types of Collections that we maintain and collect.

Rare Books & Manuscripts

The cataloging of Special Collections books and manuscripts is done in accordance with national and international guidelines, using controlled vocabularies and thesauri, such as LCSH and Getty AAT. While controversial or outdated subject and genre terms are periodically reviewed and updated, we recognize that there are many terms used that continue to be problematic. When the only options in LSCH are harmful, alternative and local vocabularies are consulted.

V. Efforts Towards “Decolonization” and Anti-Racism

The materials we choose to collect, preserve, and highlight via teaching, exhibitions, digitization send a message about what our community should value. We acknowledge that our collections were founded on and exist within unequal power structures. These collections are steeped in the systems of wealth and power that fostered the racial, patriarchal, and cultural hierarchies still prevalent today.

The work of “decolonization” and “anti-racism” are often used interchangeably in regards to museums, collections, and archives, but they are not the same thing. Can we “decolonize” Special Collections? No. Bryn Mawr College is situated within a settler-colonial country and built on the traditional, ancestral land of the Lenape Nation. In a settler-colonial nation like the United States, decolonization is rooted in the repatriation of Indigenous land and the recognition and critique of settler-colonial power structures. It is separate from other anti-racist methodologies.

We recognize that decolonization in this sense is unlikely for Bryn Mawr College. However, we aim to do the types of anti-racist work that has increasingly come to fall under the recent linguistic umbrella of “decolonizing” museums. In this way, “decolonization” has come to encompass activism and scholarship that works to undo the hierarchies of race and power embedded in museums and public monuments. As artist and curator Shaheen Kasmani clarifies, decolonization is “the upfront challenge of white supremacy, de-centers the Eurocentric view, values narrative of that [which] has been made Other. It dismantles systems of thoughts [that place] the straight white man as standard.”

Being anti-racist as a Special Collections Department involves recognizing and eliminating racism in our work and organizational structures. To be anti-racist, we must consistently assess the structures we work within, our policies, practices and programs. We also call upon the anti-racist work being done at Bryn Mawr College by [CARLA, the Coalition for Anti-Racist Literacy](#), whose mission is to create and sustain a shared, accountable, conceptual framework and toolkit for anti-racist literacy in classrooms and the community of the College. Bryn Mawr College, like all other educational institutions, has a key role to play in both dimensions of building an antiracist, inclusive community. In order to realize this vision, the inherent bias built into the character of a predominately white institution (PWI) must be continuously challenged and changed.

VI What Anti-Racist Work Are We Actively Doing Now?

We firmly believe that interrogating and exposing our difficult histories is critical to becoming the more open and inclusive Department and College we wish to be. Without

this work we would continue to participate in and perpetuate white supremacy.

- As part of an academic community, we are continually collaborating with internal and external scholars and researchers, and we seek to develop more insight from non-Western scholars and descendant communities.
- We intend to work with the Anthropology and Archaeology Departments to inventory all cultural objects and any human remains stored in campus collections and will continue to adhere to best practices by implementing the legal guidelines put forth by NAGPRA and by adhering to the most recent code of ethics put forth by professional organizations such as the American Anthropological Association, the American Association of Physical Anthropology, and the Society for American Archaeology.
- We attempt to research collection objects in a holistic way to address gaps in the representations of various cultural groups and the object types within cultural groupings; and we attempt to correct or add missing attributions previously recorded by collector-donors.
- In cataloguing, we aim to identify books with problematic themes, language, and/or art through use of subject headings and genre terms such as Racism in literature, Ethnic stereotypes, etc.
- We strive to continually update our terminology to reflect current usage (such as in the names of cultural groups and in the names of geographic regions).
- We are updating archival finding aids to follow anti-oppressive best practices as suggested by Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia.
- We support and participate in College History projects and aim to contribute valuably to the College's attempts to understand and complicate its history.
- We support and aim to uphold the College's commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

RESOURCES

[Association of Academic Museums and Galleries: Best Practices](#)

[American Anthropological Association: Ethics and Methods](#)

[Association of Black Anthropologists: Collective Statement Concerning the Possession and Unethical Use of Remains](#)

[Society for American Archaeology: Ethics in Professional Archeology](#)

[American Alliance of Museums: Resources on Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion](#)

[Cataloging Lab: List of Statements on Bias in Library and Archives Description](#)

[Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia: Anti-Racist Description Resources](#)

[Protocols for Native American Archival Materials](#)

*Draft Statement;
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[University of Cambridge Museums & Botanic Gardens: A Commitment to Change, Part 1](#)
and [Part 2](#)

[Decolonize Brooklyn Museum: Open Letter to the Brooklyn Museum](#)

[Guardian Article: “Decolonising Museums Isn’t Part of a Cultural War”](#)

PLEASE CONTACT US

Please feel free to contact the Department of Special Collections with any comments or inquiries about harmful language and problematic content in the Collections. We also welcome inquiries about the methodologies and procedures of our Special Collections Department. SpecColl@BrynMawr.edu