

CURATOR TAKES VACATION ONLY TO VISIT MORE MUSEUMS: HOW TAKING MY WORK WITH ME CHANGED EVERYTHING

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Mixing business with pleasure is not uncommon practice in the field of archaeology, as most archaeologists will tell you that they love their jobs. Sometimes, however, an opportunity will present itself so serendipitously that it can hardly be called “work” at all. Such was the case for me on a recent family vacation to Europe, where I came face to face with an important archaeological collection at the British Museum in London.

In June 2013, I accepted my first “real” job out of graduate school as Curator of Collections for the [Marco Island Historical Society](#) (MIHS) in Marco Island, Florida. I had finished my M.A. in Museum Studies at the University of Florida (UF) just six months prior, and in the meantime had been teaching an undergraduate anthropology course at UF while working as a Curatorial Assistant in the Anthropology Division at the [Florida Museum of Natural History](#) (FLMNH). My first assignment for the MIHS would be to develop a permanent exhibit on the prehistory of Marco Island for installation in the Marco Island Historical Museum. Needless to say, I had a lot to learn about Marco Island, not to mention life as a museum curator.

For those who are unfamiliar with [Marco Island](#), it's as picturesque as it sounds. The largest of Florida's Ten Thousand Islands, Marco's natural crescent beach and fertile waters make it a hotspot for retirees, vacationers, and fisher folk alike. However, many visitors don't realize that Marco is also home to one of the most famous archaeological sites ever discovered in North America.



Just another day on Marco Island, Florida. Photo by Austin Bell.

In 1895, a retired British military officer named Charles Durnford was tarpon fishing in the area when he was informed of an unusual find in the muck of Key Marco (now Marco Island). Not wanting to miss out on the action, he quickly set sail for Marco to perform his own excavation. It was not long before he too uncovered incredibly well-preserved artifacts made of wood, gourd, and cordage, materials that often do not survive in archaeological sites. Knowing the potential significance of these rare items, Durnford took them all the way to Philadelphia in hopes of conferring with his friend at the University of Pennsylvania, where by chance he encountered [Frank Hamilton Cushing](#). Cushing, a famous anthropologist from the Smithsonian Institution, confirmed the importance of the finds and was duly inspired to make his own visit to Marco. What Cushing found in his subsequent visits (1895 and 1896) is the stuff of legend, an archaeological site so spectacular that it has yet to be replicated in more than 115 years of archaeology in Southwest Florida. Among the finds were painted wooden masks, finely woven nets, fishing floats made of wood and gourd, and beautifully carved wooden figureheads, some of the finest examples of prehistoric Native American art ever discovered. The most famous of these is the “Key Marco cat,” now housed in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C. The cat is so well-known that it’s been featured on a United States postage stamp (see picture)! For archaeologists and archaeology enthusiasts, the Key Marco site serves as one of best known examples of a “wet site,” where biological materials not ordinarily preserved can add greater context to our understanding of prehistoric cultures.



The "Key Marco cat" on a 1989 U.S. postage stamp. Image courtesy of the Marco Island Historical Society.

While Durnford's cavalier removal of artifacts from Key Marco would be frowned upon today (i.e., illegal), he had the foresight to not only write up his findings in *The American Naturalist* (1895), but also to donate the objects to the esteemed [British Museum](#) in his home country. The fifteen objects remain there to this day, one of which (a wooden tray) has been on permanent exhibit since 1999 as a representative piece of "the Americas."



The Southeastern United States section of the British Museum's "North America" exhibit. Note the Seminole patchwork shirt at the top. The wooden artifact on the floor in the back is from Marco Island. Photo by Austin Bell (July 4, 2013). © Trustees of the British Museum.



The “wooden tray” discovered by Durnford at Key Marco in 1895, as seen on public exhibition at the British Museum in London. Photo by Austin Bell (July 4, 2013). © Trustees of the British Museum.

As fate would have it, my family had organized a trip to Europe months in advance of my hiring at Marco Island. Not wanting to miss out on a rare opportunity to spend “quality time” with my parents and two sisters (not to mention our first ever family vacation overseas), I informed the MIHS of our plans and they generously allowed me to go ahead with them. The British Museum was already on our itinerary, but with my new interest in the Durnford Collection, I put in a last-minute request to see the objects themselves. Given the short notice and my relative inexperience in the field, I was doubtful that such a request could be honored, but I figured “why not ask?” Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised when the good folks at the British Museum quickly replied with an enthusiastic “yes,” as I’ve come to realize that people in the museum field often bend over backwards to help a colleague. So it came to pass that on July 4th, a date on which I normally would be celebrating my home country’s independence from Great Britain, I stood inside the British Museum’s Ethnographic Collection Storage building by the grace of several wonderful and accommodating staff members, thanking my lucky stars (and stripes) to be *in* Great Britain. It was there that I came face to face with the Durnford Collection, an experience I am unlikely to forget.



Excitement builds as we pass through the gate to the British Museum in London, England. Photo by Austin Bell (July 4, 2013).



Formulating a strategy for exploring the world-renowned British Museum in London, England. Photo by Austin Bell (July 4, 2013).

The objects themselves are relatively unremarkable, at least when compared to Cushing's finds of 1896. The collection consists of several shell tools, some potsherds, a few wooden float pegs, some highly deteriorated netting and cordage, and several other fragmented wooden artifacts. What struck me almost immediately, however, was that these were the very artifacts that Cushing looked at in 1895, probably in a setting similar to this one (with these same artifacts strewn across a table in a non-descript room), and inspired him to take his now famous expedition to Marco Island. Not only were these fifteen objects an inspiration to Cushing, they basically set off the more than 100 years of stellar archaeology conducted in Southwest Florida since him. As a student and practitioner of both museology and archaeology, everything finally made sense in a way that sitting in a classroom never could. I had gone from the person who preserved artifacts to the person artifacts were preserved *for*, if only for a few fleeting hours. All those years of wondering "who will ever look at all this stuff?" seemed to wash away and my confidence in my career choice reinvigorated. Given the age of the objects (ca. 500-1500 A.D.), the fact that they had been in collections storage for nearly 117 years, and the understanding that conservation techniques were not what they are now, their condition was remarkably good. For someone who had worked with archaeological materials from Southwest Florida for the better part of five years, the thought that someday, long after I'm gone, someone will be looking at an object or collection of objects that I helped curate and be equally excited and inspired seemed to make it all worth it.



The Durnford Collection as it appears 117 years after its excavation. Photo by Austin Bell (July 4, 2013). © Trustees of the British Museum.

The point of this article, however, is not to boast about my travels or associate myself with a renowned institution like the British Museum; people visit their collections all the time. The point, rather, is to share the inspiration I felt as a professional who can sometimes take for granted the amazing things I get to work with on a daily basis. At this point in my career I am more “museum professional” than “archaeologist,” so I’m obliged to advocate for the role that museums play in preserving artifacts that archaeologists uncover. Without museums, objects like those in the Durnford Collection wouldn’t be around for new generations of hungry eyes to feast upon. What’s more, there will almost certainly be new technologies and methods of analysis for museum collections in the future, much the way that radiocarbon dating didn’t exist in 1895. This makes the role of the museum all the more important in archaeology, allowing professionals and amateurs alike the opportunity to interpret and re-interpret the meaning of material culture for centuries to come. As I now try to incorporate what I’ve learned from the British Museum into the exhibit on Marco Island, I encourage you to think about what artifact or collection of artifacts has inspired you. While it’s all just “stuff,” so often it’s the inspiration for anything from a simple idea or personal revelation to a life’s work. Little did the makers of the artifacts discovered by Durnford know that hundreds of years later, their creations would be written about in books and inspiring people from a new locale halfway around the world. So, if you find yourself lacking that personal connection to an artifact (or archaeology in general), I implore you to visit your local museum. Heck, don’t just visit it, ask for a tour of the collections. After all, museum people get excited when other people get excited about museums, so as I said before, “why not ask?”; the worst they’ll do is say “no,” but the best they’ll do is change your life!