THE PEABODY MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

PROMOTING TEACHING AND RESEARCH THROUGH EXCELLENCE IN COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT

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> - DAVID DEBONO SCHAFER, SENIOR COLLECTIONS MANAGER AT THE PEABODY MUSEUM

The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is among the oldest museums of its type in the world, and is home to one of the finest collections of human cultural history. Since the late nineteenth century, the Museum has played an active part in the history of American anthropology and in the evolving relationship between museums and native peoples. With a focus on teaching and research, staff at the Peabody needed to consolidate their object data and make it easily accessible to the many students and researchers who rely on it for their work, as well as native leaders who need access to their cultural objects.

OVERVIEW
- 1.4 million objects
- 500,000+ photographic images
- 20,000 individual human remains

RETURN ON INVESTMENT
- Increased accessibility to archives for staff, students and researchers
- Better preservation of collection with reduced movement and handling
- Minimized time spent assisting professors and researchers

PRODUCTS
- The Museum System (TMS)
- eMuseum

CHALLENGES

The Peabody houses a total of 1.4 million objects. While the majority of those are archaeological and ethnographic in nature, the collection includes human osteology objects, with 20,000 individual human remains to account for. Peabody staff wanted a collections management system that was flexible enough to allow them to document the artifacts in a way that would make finding and studying them easier. Most objects in the collection were gathered through scientific exploration, so the artifacts relate to paper archives and to photographs in the collection. It was important to consolidate this data by merging the 3D collection with the archives and photos in order to make it more meaningful to students and researchers.

SOLUTION

After researching the available collections management solutions, the Peabody selected TMS and eMuseum from Gallery Systems. "One of the reasons we went with Gallery Systems was their commitment to us in helping develop the tools to support specialized features for an anthropology museum," explains David DeBono Schafer, Senior Collections Manager at the Peabody Museum. "TMS is comprehensive enough to let us capture all necessary data on each object. It gives us the flexibility to adapt the modules and fields so that they make the most sense to us, and makes searching our collection easier for staff, students and researchers."

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TMS AT THE PEABODY

Today, all information at the Peabody is managed in TMS, which supports the museum's mission of achieving high teaching and research standards. Each semester, the museum brings 2,000 artifacts to undergraduate classes. With TMS, Peabody staff are now able to easily track the movement of each artifact, recording when it is needed and which professor has made the request. "Two years from now when the class is offered again and the professor asks for those objects, we can look it up in TMS and know exactly what they need," says David. "We also run statistics in TMS on how many courses we are supporting at Harvard and at other universities, the number of students served, etc., and then we export the data from TMS and submit it as part of our annual report."

TMS has allowed the Peabody to manage all the information related to each object, from paper archives to photographs, in one easily accessible place. The level of configurability the software affords has also been a benefit. "We can adapt the modules and fields to fit our unique needs," says David. "For example, we use the Components fields, which other institutions might use for, say, recording information about a painting or a mount, to track the 320 bones of a human skeletal remain. And, we've morphed all our data in the 'Culture' and 'Period' fields into one wonderfully searchable Thesaurus field."

"The Events module in TMS has really become a priceless tool for us," David continues. "We use it to capture data such as an object's carbon-14 analysis, DNA details, the lab that did the testing and the professor who made the request. If the professor publishes the results, they send a PDF to Museum staff, who then attach it to the Media tab on that Event. We can see the published paper that came out of that DNA study, and having it all together in one place really helps researchers." Peabody staff also use the Events module to document what each researcher examined, and when. Should researchers need access to the objects again, staff can quickly assist them.

EMUSEUM AND NAGPRA

Also helping advance research at the Museum has been the integration of TMS with eMuseum web publishing software. Before the Peabody put their collection online, researchers would come for weeks or months at a time to sift through objects. With eMuseum web access, researchers can see the collection, select the objects they wanted to study, and come to the Museum for a shorter time. Reducing research time helps to reduce the number of collection artifacts being moved and handled, and decreases staff time spent supervising researchers. Within three years of putting their collections online, research increased by 300%, without the need to increase staff.

Finally, TMS has been instrumental in helping the Peabody Museum remain accountable to NAGPRA (the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, a U.S. federal law). "NAGPRA requires us to return human remains, funerary objects, and sacred objects back to native groups," explains David. "This is a huge undertaking for us as we have the largest collection of human remains in the country besides the Smithsonian. TMS supports our NAGPRA work, with in-depth record keeping. For example, the law requires us to prove that an object is from a specific location. All of our records have to match up accurately. As another example, once we report that we have, say, 317 bones to repatriate to the Iroquois, there better be 317 bones in that storage container when they request them. So we're fanatical about storage location tracking."

The Peabody's current focus is to digitize all paper and registration archives and records so that these digitized documents are accessible in TMS. According to David, "It's the combination of having the objects, photographs, and the paper records available to students and researchers that truly brings value to our collection. Gallery Systems is an essential partner in our museum's goals."