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PROCESSING THE THERESA-INDIA YOUNG PAPERS: A RESEARCH INVENTORY GRANT PROJECT

Presented as part of the session “Enhancing Underrepresented Collections and Reaching New Users” for the New England Archivists and Archivists Round Table of Metropolitan New York Joint Spring Meeting in New Haven, Connecticut, March 24, 2018. The session was the winner of the Inclusion & Diversity Session and Travel Assistance Award.

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INTRODUCTION

The University Archives and Special Collections department in the Joseph P. Healey Library at UMass Boston was awarded a Research Inventory Grant from Mass Humanities in June 2017. This allowed us the opportunity to devote a significant amount of time and resources to acquire, arrange, and describe the papers of noted Boston fiber artist, educator, and artist activist, Theresa-India Young. View the finding aid for the Theresa-India Young papers [here](#). An exhibit showcasing materials from the collection is planned for June 2018 at the Grossmann Gallery in the Joseph P. Healey Library. The following is a presentation that describes who Theresa-India Young was, her work, and the importance of the collection, followed by a description of the process of acquiring the papers, the grant project, lessons learned, and a conclusion.

THERESA-INDIA YOUNG AND HER PAPERS

The Theresa-India Young papers, spanning 44.75 linear feet, document her work as a fiber artist, interdisciplinary arts teacher, and education consultant working in the Boston area from 1975-2008. Young taught studio art and museum education at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, where a scholarship is endowed in her name. She also taught at the Museum of Fine Arts, Roxbury Community College, Boston Public Schools, Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, Harvard University Museum, Cambridge Friends School, Lesley University, and Wheelock College.

The collection documents her involvement with the Piano Craft Guild Tenants' Association and Piano Factory Gallery. The records for the Piano Craft Guild Tenants' Association is housed at the University Archives and Special Collections; access to the collection finding aid can be found here: <http://openarchives.umb.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15774coll8/id/258/rec/84>. Young was a mentor in her community, helping her colleagues and local youth claim their identities as artists, and pursue opportunities related to those roles. She served as an advocate for

her fellow artists at the Piano Factory Studios when rising rent threatened to displace resident artists.

Young mentored Boston youth by developing the Kush Club, a teen docent program, and managed Primal Arts, an educational consulting business that specialized in cultural presentations, art workshops, and museum tours. As a teacher and purveyor of cultural heritage, Young worked to preserve and maintain folk art traditions in her artwork, such as the Gullah heritage of basket weaving. Her work was informed by her research into African aesthetics and traditions, particularly weaving and hair braiding. She was also prolific in ceramics, European Tapestry, and ethnic weaving.

Much of Young's research is preserved in the collection, in the form of clippings, handwritten notes and varied publications. As a longtime resident of the Piano Factory, Young lived and worked within a dynamic local arts scene. The collection documents her relationships with other local artists, like Allan-Rohan Crite, as well as the issues they faced, such as affordable housing.

This collection consists of correspondence, handwritten notes, curriculum research, meeting minutes, scrapbooks, clippings, publications, ephemera, photographs, slides, and original artwork by herself and others, and includes personal papers relating to her early years in New York, her education, and genealogical research of her Gullah heritage in South Carolina and Africa.

The importance of this collection cannot be overstated. The papers will provide researchers access to an under represented areas of art, culture, and race in Boston. This collection will be of particular interest to the diverse student and faculty population at UMass Boston and play an important role in connecting this community with University Archives and Special Collections. It is important for students to see their culture and experiences represented in our collections.

Research areas include but are not limited to; African-American art and artists in Boston, fiber, textile, and weaving arts, multicultural education, museum education, and artist tenancy rights. The University Archives and Special Collections also hold the records of the Piano Craft Guild Tenants' Association, 1972-2010, bulk 1989-1997 which provide researchers with a complete picture of Young's life while living at the Piano Factory Studios in the South End of Boston.

ACQUIRING THE TIY PAPERS BEGINNINGS

It took University Archives and Special Collections (UASC) six years of planning and cultivating a relationship with the donor before we were able to acquire the resources to bring the collection to the archives. The donor, Jacquelyn L. McRath, approached UASC in 2012 after a local institution declined to take the papers and recommended UMass Boston. We were very interested in the collection since it fit our collection policy. A staff member conducted a preliminary inventory of the collection at the two storage locations it was located. The collection at the time spanned 40 linear feet. We were unable take in the collection at the time due to our lack of space and resources to transfer the collection. The University Archivist kept in touch with the donor, cultivating an important relationship.

In 2017, the Healey Library administration and UASC began focusing on grant funding opportunities. Responsibilities of librarian, Mary Moser shifted to Outreach, Marketing, Fundraising, and Grants providing UASC with the committed effort and support to acquiring the resources to fund work on the collection. I worked closely with Mary Moser to apply for the Mass Humanities Research Inventory Grant of \$2,000 to process the Theresa-India Young papers. In June of 2017, we received notification that our application was approved.

GRANT PROJECT

The Research Inventory Grant funded the transportation of the collection to UASC, and the work of professional archivist Rebecca Machado and a graduate student worker as Project Assistants to work with myself on arranging and describing the collection. Work began in December of 2017. As Project Director, I oversaw the work of both Project Assistants, whose roles included gaining full intellectual and physical control over the Young papers.

The Project Assistant, Rebecca Machado, surveyed the collection contents, created a processing plan, arranged, and described the contents to make the collection available for researchers. The additional assistance of an existing paid, graduate student worker, to work on more rote tasks such as boxing, foldering, labeling, and creating an inventory helped move the project along.

My work as Project Director involved advising on collection arrangement, deaccessioning materials, communicating questions about the collection to the donor, and interpreting materials in relation to the creator's purpose. I also provided administrative duties for scheduling, planning, and writing the final grant report.

The project will conclude at the beginning of May of this year (2018) with an academic report written by myself outlining Young's work, the research value of the collection, and the availability of the collection for research. The report will be posted on the Joseph P. Healey Library's *Open Archives News* newsletter online (see: <http://blogs.umb.edu/archives/2018/05/07/theresa-india-young-papers-processed-and-available-for-research/>). Announcements will be made through Mass Humanities, and UASC's usual media channels (such as, Facebook, Twitter, and UMass Boston's Communications Office). In June 2018, we plan to highlight the materials in an exhibit at the Joseph P. Healey Library Grossmann Gallery.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

I. Start Early

When working on grant projects, it is best to start as early as possible to combat any delays that pop up. We experienced several delays at the beginning of the project. The delivery date for the collection was delayed three weeks due to challenges of preparing the collection for the move. The start date of the Project Assistant was delayed another three weeks due to administrative challenges. The total linear feet grew from 40 to 50 linear feet, after the initial delivery and

additional accessions. To speed up the project, a staff member checked the preliminary inventory list against the content of the boxes for accuracy, prior to the start date of Project Assistant. During the course of the project, we lost four days due to weather and construction related campus closures.

II. Be flexible

An additional challenge that we encountered was the amount of effort needed to process the collection. This project was expected to be guided by the archival best practice of MPLP: “More Product, Less Process,” a practice that streamlines the processing of a collection as much as possible with the goal to make the collection available as quickly as possible. Upon completion of the preliminary inventory work and sorting into series, it became clear that MPLP would be a challenge due to the lack of original order to approximately 50% of the collection. Extra effort was needed to sort and place the materials into categories in order to make the collection more useful to researchers.

At the end of Project Assistant, Rebecca Machado’s allotted hours, it was clear more work would be needed to finish the project. Fortunately, she volunteered to work once a week on the collection. We would have preferred to pay her for the additional time but did not have the budget. I also, scheduled a two hour Processing Party with four of my colleagues to finish up work on the collection. Despite the delays, the project is expected to be finished on time.

III. Follow best practices, and provide transparency

It is important to follow archival principles and be transparent in the process when working with collections of underrepresented communities. At the beginning of the project, I was apprehensive about imposing my voice on folder titles and the interpretation of the materials in the collection. Following archival principles and best practice, I used the categories Theresa created for her clippings in folder titles. Where categories were lacking, brackets were used around folder titles to indicate when they were created by the Project Assistants or myself. An explanation on the use of the brackets was added to the scope and content note to outline the actions taken when order and description was imposed on the contents.

IV. Lack of original order and creator versus co-creator

Prior to the receipt of the collection, the donor, acting as co-creator, had gone through the collection, sorted, and labelled the contents, making it difficult to determine who was responsible for the arrangement of the materials. Over half of the collection contained binders and envelopes of materials with handwritten descriptions on the outside. The labeling of these materials was difficult to attribute since the donor and Theresa-India Young had similar handwriting.

Again, we followed our bracketing rules when folder titles were created by the Project Assistants or myself. The lack of brackets in a folder title, indicates that either the donor, or Theresa-India

Young created the title. A photocopy was made of the original handwriting on the envelope or folder, and placed in the archival folder to allow future researchers to determine the difference. An explanation of this process was included in the scope and content note.

V. Develop and maintain relationships

When working with collections of underrepresented communities it is important to develop and maintain relationships with the donor or others who have a close understanding of, or are part of these communities. If this is not possible, it is helpful to connect and consult with someone, such as people who have close connections to the community, such as community advocates or a faculty member with knowledge of the community.

The relationship with the donor was extremely important to the progress of the project. As Project Director, I consulted with the donor as questions arose. The donor, who was a close friend and dedicated representative of Theresa-India Young, provided valuable information on Young's intentions, goals, and clarified questions about her history, background, and events, helping with the arrangement and description of the collection.

Our efforts to engage new audiences were assisted by donor, Jacqueline McRath's dedicated and ongoing work to share Young's artistic vision and work as a mentor, teacher, and purveyor of cultural heritage. McRath's work with the scholarship committee in Young's name provided us with the collection's first researcher. The scholarship awardee, a Massachusetts College of Art and Design student, will conduct research for his thesis on the artwork of Theresa-India Young and will be our first researcher to utilize the collection. Ms. McRath hung an exhibit at Boston City Hall, Mayor's Gallery for the month of March 2018, and we expect to make more connections as a result. UASC's newsletter *Open Archives* will be used for future announcements with links to the finding aid and information about the upcoming exhibit.

CONCLUSION

The strength of the archive is in the relationships you develop, maintain, and support. UASC serves as a platform and place of support for the people and communities represented in our collections. Building and maintaining relationships with the donor and these communities is an important part to broadcasting and supporting their voices. This collection would not have been possible without the relationship and dedicated efforts of the donor to preserve Theresa's message and her work.