

On Campus

Anthropology Students Curate Museum Exhibits

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Artifacts of Pacific Islander culture at a student-organized exhibit. Photo: Aubrey Miller / AMNH.

Anthropology graduate students have a new platform for showcasing their research and curatorial talents: an exhibit case in New York City's American Museum of Natural History.

"It is a win for both institutions," said David Harvey, the museum's senior vice president for exhibition. "The museum gets a great exhibit case, while the students are exposed to the roles of curators, exhibition designers, collection managers, and conservation professionals through a real-life project."

Columbia and the American Museum of Natural History jointly offer a one-year master's degree in museum anthropology, with Columbia faculty teaching the first semester and museum staff the second. In the past, students in the program have shown their work in the Low Library Rotunda. Moving forward, the plan is for each cohort of students to create a new exhibit case in a permanent hall of the museum.

The first case is in a hall named for the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead '28GSAS, who taught at Columbia for several decades. The hall is devoted to Pacific Islanders' history and culture. In designing the exhibit, Columbia students consulted with New York—based Pacific Islanders, who donated several artifacts. The items on display include a feathered belt, a carved spirit figure, and a navigation chart made of wood, shells, string, and paper.

“The exhibition project is important because it’s something you cannot easily teach in a classroom,” says Columbia anthropologist Nan A. Rothschild '62GSAS, who started the museum anthropology master's program in 2003.



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