

Children's Museum unwraps hidden treasures

By C. Whitney Ward
Special to The Globe

Museums throughout the world have hidden collections rarely seen by the general public. Your chances of studying these squirreled-away treasures are indeed remote, unless of course, your pursuit is scholarly in nature and your credentials impeccable. Museums are caught on the horns of a dilemma: how to display and interpret objects for the present generation while maintaining them for future generations.

The Children's Museum has found a solution. The Study Storage Collection of Northeast American Indian Artifacts, which opened less than a year ago, is the first step toward making portions of the museum's vast collection of 50,000 objects accessible to the general public for visiting by appointment. A Japanese Study Storage Collection will open April 1, 1983.

The museum had to rethink how to use its collection when its philosophy was changed to allow visitors to touch as much as possible, according to Joan Lester, curator of museum collections and the study storage collection.

"Before we taught with collections, we had used certain objects that the kids could touch and manipulate. But we realized that the collections could not be used in that way. A grant [from the National Endowment of the Arts] allowed us to come up with the study storage model which succeeded in integrating the collection while continuing to protect it," she said.

Study storage is a collection of 1500 objects representing the cultures of the Northeast American Indians. It is, however, not just a repository of the past. In the collection are the works of contemporary native Americans as well.

"When I first came to the museum," says Lester, "I only taught about Indians in the past tense, as if they had vanished from the face of the earth. When I became aware of native American communities here in New England, I realized that the culture had never stopped. I then began to change the way I taught."

Lester developed a stereotype workshop that she took outside the museum to schools and groups. A project, funded

by private donations and called "Indians Who Met the Pilgrims," followed. The funding included the establishment of an American Indian Advisory Board.

"They had power," says Lester. "We wanted them working with us, looking over our shoulder so to speak, having a say in whether or not the project represented them as a community and whether it was relevant for a museum setting."

Further helping them to raise the consciousness of the general public toward native Americans was a grant the museum received from the National Endowment for the Humanities to do an exhibit called, "We're Still Here."

"For a long time native American people weren't visible," says Lester. "It's not that they weren't being Indian, they just weren't talking about it. The pow-wows were still being held, the values were still being taught. All of that was still there, but it wasn't up front. It took the civil rights movement to bring everybody to the surface."

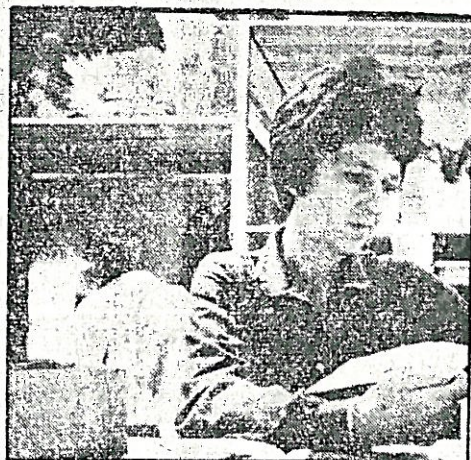
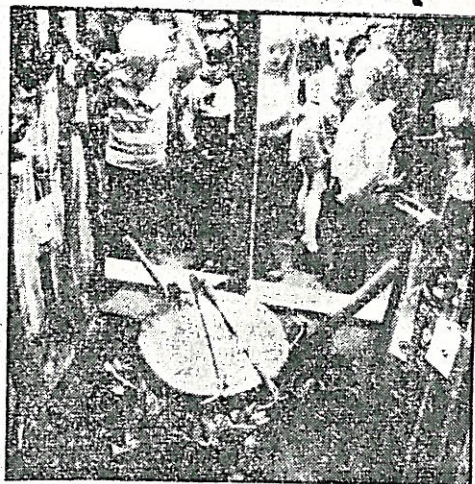
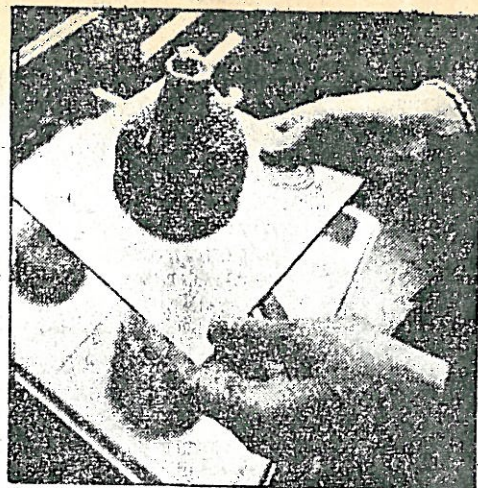
Currently on the third floor of the museum, this exhibit connects the past with the present visually and provides the museumgoer with a feeling of continuity. Study storage has been integrated into this exhibit; most of the collection is visible on open trays seen through the ceiling-to-floor glass wall that separates the collection room from the exhibit.

Often this "window" into the collection prompts someone to call and make an appointment to view and study the collection in more depth, says Lester. "We are a museum for beginning learners, and study storage is set up so that anyone can make sense of it." (Study storage is open to the general public, but by appointment only.)

Each item is packaged so that you handle the package rather than the object. A piece of Indian beadwork, for example, might be enclosed in clear plastic surrounded by a foam-core frame: a see-through "sandwich" permitting scrutiny of the object without the necessity of touching.

But not all items in the collection are so precious. Duplicate items or contemporary items that are replaceable are packaged to permit touching. A color-

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Top: An Indian salt jar mounted to be picked up but not touched directly. Middle: Visitors are separated by glass from Indian artifacts. Bottom: Joan Lester, curator of the study storage collection.

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coded symbol - red/no touching; yellow/touch with care; green/touch - is attached to each object.

The collection is displayed on large pull-out trays accommodating, side-by-side, traditional and contemporary examples of the same object - a turn-of-the-century Iroquois cornhusk salt bottle, next to a contemporary Iroquois salt bottle, for example.

Document envelopes corresponding to items on the tray have been prepared and contain xeroxed reference material. And, through a folk arts grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the museum collected contemporary material on Northeast American Indian artists. Taped interviews of the artists represented in the collection, as well as slides of their work, are available.

Study storage has attracted a diversified group of people over the last year: teachers wanting to implement a native American curriculum; researchers honing in on a specific object for study; an Indian artist wanting to draw accurately; headdresses worn by four different Northeast American tribal chiefs.

"Accessibility is the key to the success of study storage," says Joan Lester. "The most exciting thing about opening up the collection is that someone can walk in here and say, 'Hey, that's my grandmother's work!' - and sure enough, it is. It allows me to learn more about the objects."

What makes study storage really work, however, is the granting of curatorial time. And although Joan Lester is quick to note that the "objects, rather than the curator, are teaching about the culture," it seems clear to anyone who has visited study storage that having the attention of Joan Lester, the curator, enriches the experience.