Assignment
Lisa Aronson, Skidmore College, Spring 2009
Fenimore Art Museum
Eugene and Clare Thaw Collection of American Indian Art
Cooperstown, NY

VENUE: On Saturday, April 18, the class will be going to Cooperstown, NY to visit the Eugene and Clare Thaw Collection of American Indian Art in the Fenimore Art Museum (see back for times and the museum’s address). The Thaws donated their collection to the museum in 1995, and have been adding to it ever since. Today, the collection numbers almost 850 objects representing a good cross-section of Native American Indian cultures and art, much of which we have studied. For insight into the scope and richness of this amazing collection, click on the “See the collection” link in their website:

<<http://www.fenimoreartmuseum.org/fenimore/collections/american_indian_art>>

ASSIGNMENTS: The visit to the museum will involve three assignments, each done in groups that are determined during the previous Thursday’s class. There are two rules of thumb that we must follow: (1) Photography is not allowed under any circumstances; (2) You may only use pencils, so plan to bring several with erasers:

#1: Strategies of Display - The first assignment involves doing a critical assessment of how the museum represents their Native American art collection in terms of organization, display, and access to information. We will talk about our findings as a group in the museum, but each group will provide a more detailed report on their findings in a Word document containing text and any supplementary materials deemed appropriate (diagrams, sketches, etc.) It must be uploaded into Blackboard (there will be a space designated) no later than 5:00 PM on Thursday, April 23. Your group will be seeking answers to the following questions:

• How many rooms does the collection take up, and how are they mapped out? For this, you will want to do a fairly detailed diagram so bring a large notebook and pencils with good erasers (pens and photography are not allowed).
• Through what means (display cases, free-standing objects, collection drawers) are the objects displayed?
• What is the organizing strategy of the overall exhibition? Are the objects arranged historically, thematically, geographically, or some/all of the above? Be specific with examples wherever possible.
• Does the overall display have a designated path that you are meant to follow, and what, if anything, leads you from one point to another?
• What type of labeling and wall text does the museum provide for the NA collection?
• Overall, what do you think the museum intends the viewer to derive from their exhibition of NA art, and how successful are they in their efforts?
• What do you find problematic or confusing about the exhibition, and how might it work better?
• In your assessment of the Fenimore Museum NA exhibition, do you agree with any of the points Sonya Atalay made in her article “No Sense of the Struggle: Creating a Context for Survivance at the National Museum of the American Indian” discussed in class, and if so why? Be specific with references to particular sentences or paragraphs.
LUNCH BREAK: There’s a small café in the museum where we can get sandwiches and drinks, and where your group can continue conversations about the morning assignment.

#2: Curating an Exhibition – For this second assignment, you will be presenting to the class in the museum, and with everyone filling out an evaluation form. This assignment asks you to curate a small thematic exhibition of Native American art using objects from the Native American collection. If you so choose, you can also include American art objects displayed elsewhere in the museum. The idea here is to come up with a well-conceived and creative exhibition. For this assignment, you’ll need to do the following:

• Define the theme and scope of your exhibition, and the reasoning behind it.
• Come up with a title for your exhibition.
• List the artworks, and other materials, you would include in the show, with a brief rationale explaining why you would include them.
• Determine how you would display the objects, and how you would contextualize them through labels, wall texts, or whatever. A good way to address this would be to write one sample label and possibly one sample wall text (or at least summarize them).
• Explain what you hope your audience will take away from your proposed exhibition.
• Present your exhibition proposal to the class for our assessment. I’ve attached the evaluation form for those of us listening to your presentation to fill out.
• Because this is a group presentation, each member of the group is expected to talk. You should decide amongst yourselves what it is you will comment on.

#3: Tang Project – Finally, you and your Tang partner will decide on one object in the Shaw collection that comes close to, or in some way enhances, the objects you are researching for the Tang project. Photography is not allowed; however, the museum staff will gladly send me jpegs of the images you select. Once you have it, you will need to upload it into your blog with an explanation as to why you chose this object, and how you feel it helps you to better understand your Tang pieces.

TIMES AND DIRECTIONS: The Saturday, April 18 travel time to the Fenimore Art Museum is an hour and 52 minutes from Skidmore College. The museum’s address is 5798 State Highway 80, Cooperstown, NY 13326 for those of you needing to google directions. The museum opens at 10:00 AM. To ensure that we get an early start on our assignments, the bus will leave promptly at 8:30 AM from the parking lot of Case Center. Plan on being there by 8:15!!! We are scheduled to leave the Fenimore Art Museum by 4:00, returning to Skidmore by 5:45. However, we can always leave sooner if we complete our assignments in a timely fashion.
Evaluation Form for Assignment #2
Proposal for Curating an Exhibition of Native American Art

What is the title of the group’s proposed exhibition? ________________________________

List the first names of the group members? _________________________________________

Rank the group’s exhibition proposal on a scale of 1-5 (5 being the best):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>The clarity of the group’s theme and rationale for their exhibition.</td>
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<td>#2</td>
<td>The appropriateness and rationale for their selections.</td>
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<td>#3</td>
<td>How well the label/text conforms to and/or enriches the theme.</td>
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<td>#4</td>
<td>How well the group articulates the exhibition’s aim (i.e. what they hope for their audience to learn from the exhibition).</td>
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<td>#5</td>
<td>Is the presentation truly a group effort, meaning have all the group members participated equally?</td>
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<td>#6</td>
<td>The quality of the presentation overall.</td>
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<td>#7</td>
<td>The creativity of the group’s exhibition proposal, title included.</td>
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Use the space below for any written comments you would like to share with me and the group about the proposed exhibition.