

EXPLORING THE NATION'S ATTIC



LAURIE PENLAND

Trials & treasures at the Smithsonian Institution

It's true that a farmer who has just finished plowing a field in Nebraska cannot look in at the Smithsonian Institution at the end of the day to see his favorite Whistler, Leland Bryant (MFAIA '06), photographer for the Freer and Sackler Galleries, reminds me.

Most U.S. citizens, the institution's true owners, can't, although they may catch an exhibition sponsored by the Washington, D.C.-based Smithsonian at a local county fair or some other local site. The Smithsonian is the nation's attic nonetheless—or "mirror"—as Reuben Jackson (RUP '78), archivist for the American History Museum, would have it, and it enacts, as well as records, our ideal of extending a generous, open hand to the world.

An irreplaceable resource for artists and educators and the world's premier research institution, the Smithsonian is the top prize in any job lottery one might imagine. Leland, Reuben, John Hiller (GV '95, '97) and Joan Wetmore (GV '94) work where the nation records itself and then reflects on the record, and their sense of responsibility for the 142 million items in the Smithsonian collections is apparent.

"When working with museum objects, the word *forever* gains new significance," John wrote in an email prior to an

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interview. "Forever becomes, somehow—and I can't tell you how—somehow real."

John retired after 30 years working as a documentary filmmaker for the Smithsonian. Now, in retirement, he works in Maryland at the climate-controlled warehouses that hold the photographic history apparatus collection, where he shelf-audits some of the museum's photographic holdings and handles some of the nation's oldest photos.

"The collection that I work with came into existence in 1887-88," he says. "Remember that photography had been invented in 1830. I try to do nothing that has even a faint chance of eventually damaging any of the things I'm working with."

Above: the first Smithsonian building, a red sandstone, Gothic Revival structure designed by architect James Renwick, was erected on the National Mall between 1847 and 1855. It is known to Smithsonian staff and visitors alike as "the Castle."

No one can say with accuracy why the British chemist John Smithson left his unusual bequest to the U.S. government to establish an institution for “the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.” Actually, he gave the gift indirectly, through a nephew who was charged with the obligation to make the donation of what amounted to \$500,000 to the United States should the nephew die without heirs, as he did in 1835.

Smithson had never visited the United States, and England certainly tried to block the gift with litigation. It has been suggested that Smithson, born illegitimate, resented the British monarchy system, for it kept him from the family title, or that he simply fell under the thrall of a spirit of revolution and independence he associated with the United States. Whatever the case, once the 11 boxes of gold sovereigns reached Washington, D.C. in 1838, a national discussion began that led to an Act of Congress in 1846 to establish the Smithsonian Institution. The entire collection comprises 16 museums and research facilities, archives, libraries and the national zoo.

For both Joan and Leland, working at the Smithsonian was a kind of homecoming. Leland was born and raised nearby, in Falls Church, Va. He recalls many happy visits “as a little guy” to the medical museum, where he always “had a look at the elephantiasis leg” before running screaming down the stairs.

“I grew up with the Smithsonian being here,” he says, “and as I became a photographer, I’d say, ‘I’d really like to be a photographer there.’” It took a life’s journey of other adventures in photography before Leland realized his dream. He was hired in 1984, after taking a job in a professional photo lab in Washington as a way to meet the “photo

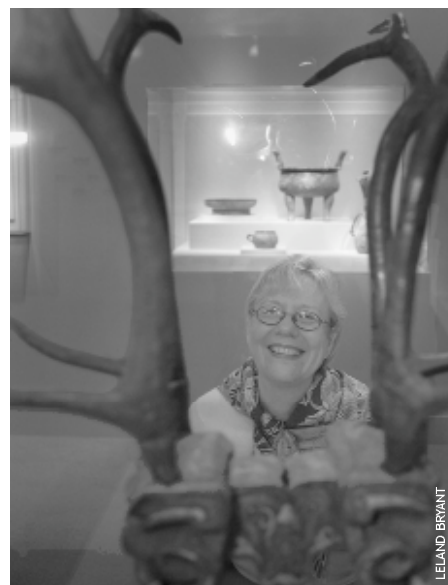
community.” Every Tuesday, he’d call the list of heads of photo departments at each museum and chat them up.

“And one day one of them called and said, ‘Oh, can you start next week?’ And that’s how I started.” Leland maintains a visual record of the objects the Freer and Sackler Galleries have in their collection. “I think the Sackler has the smallest collection,” he says. “Currently, we’re up to about 35,000 to 39,000 objects.” He reminds me that the Smithsonian museums display only 3 or 4 percent of their holdings.

Joan had grown up in Washington and had toured the Smithsonian as a child. “I can remember just these fascinating objects,” she says. “They were just really interesting stuff.” When she was 18, she asked her father how one goes about getting a job at the Smithsonian. “He had no idea.” Joan went on to jobs in Philadelphia, in education and fundraising, and she worked for the Red Cross. She returned to Washington to care for her aging mother and was hired as a fundraiser at the Freer and Sackler Galleries two-and-a-half years ago.

Fundraising is relatively new to the Smithsonian. Joan believes it was about the mid-’90s when the open hand in Congress began to close. For the first time since 1846, the Smithsonian’s governing board appointed a secretary from outside the academic world: Lawrence Small comes from a career in banking. With less funding allotted, Congressional pressure to expand the institution, and serious structural problems in some of the older buildings holding rare, irreplaceable artifacts, the Smithsonian feels to Reuben, John, Leland and Joan to be stressed. Though Joan, a fundraiser rather than a keeper of the collections, believes that the institution’s mission mantra, “Collect, Conserve, Elucidate,” will always provide correction in the end.

John, Reuben and Leland sound more cautionary notes. Reuben began his Smithsonian career in the gift shop of the Air and Space Museum. Goddard had nurtured and informed his love for jazz, and when the Smithsonian was



LELAND BRYANT



JOAN WETMORE

Left: Leland Bryant (MFAIA '06) in the Smithsonian's "ImagineAsia" classroom. Top: Joan Wetmore (GV '94) in one of the Chinese galleries.



Reuben Jackson (RUP '78), an archivist for the American History Museum, has been with the Smithsonian for nearly two decades.

looking for someone who could catalog the newly acquired Duke Ellington materials, he was ready. By then, he had a master's in library science from the University of the District of Columbia.

"Most archivists my age started with library work because it's kind of a first cousin in a sense." Reuben has worked at the Museum of American History for 17 years. Recent changes worry him. Partly, he believes, the museum is reflecting a change in the country. "For me, the country is going backwards to a more overtly contentious environment." He relates that movement in the nation to the more "dollar-oriented" approach within the Smithsonian.

"People who come to the museum see us as the icons filling the cases, and that's true, but it's a lot tougher behind the scenes than people know," he says. "The objects they love have to be taken care of; it's the less romantic side to this work, and we all care about the material a great deal. It seems now that things that aren't necessarily sexy but which might have a guaranteed financial success take precedence over the less glamorous things."

John has 43 years of filmmaking to his credit. He has worked as a producer, director, cinematographer and editor, winning 135 awards including Emmys and an Oscar for films produced completely in-house for the Smithsonian. He is blunt when he describes what is endangered there today. It was not just that John retired at the end of 30 years of making films all over the world for the museums, worthy films it would be hard to convince an independent contractor to make, but his entire office was closed. Everyone was let go. There is no longer an Office of Telecommunications. Radio Smithsonian is also gone, the producers laid off.

"The museum put the rights to make films for them up for bid, and the History Channel bought the rights of refusal for all projects." The savings are debatable, John believes, and the cuts arbitrary. Initially, the Wildlife Center

run by the Smithsonian was targeted, "but biologists around the world were up in arms. So the secretary looked around again. Did anyone care?" John asks. "I don't think so."

It's a choice the American people have to make about what is important to them, Leland says, speaking about the future of the Smithsonian. The funding is cut, he says, because the nation chooses other priorities, like a war in Iraq, or tax cuts for those who don't need them. But a national museum tells a nation's stories.

"It's the history, the reach of an entire people, their connection with their own identity," he says. "That's what is lost when a museum is nicked and dimed away." The story may not always be told correctly. "I worry sometimes that we shy away from the bad," Reuben admits, "but that's part and parcel of our national mentality now."

"The human condition is such that we all need hope," Leland says, "and in the stories and connections to our history, there's hope, not just for us, but for the world. The world's hope is held in its museums, in its libraries. They can't be run like businesses; they're not businesses."

Goddard's four ambassadors to the Smithsonian exhibit a devotion to the institution that has been characteristic of a long line of scholarly, impassioned employees, whether they worked as specialists in a particular field or as cura-



John Hiller (GV '95, '97), who retired after 30 years as a documentary filmmaker at the Smithsonian, takes a self-portrait.

tors. It is in that tradition that Joan places her faith and expresses confidence that the purpose of the museum is unchanged.

"The good news about collecting, conserving and elucidating is that the vision may go awry momentarily, but it always comes back," she says. "The objects still exist, and they'll be put on view." ■