Unlocking the Stories of Serendipitous Cultural Object Collections with Digital Libraries

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cultural objects, i.e., “boxes of stuff”

serendipitous, i.e., “donated”

needs research, i.e., “no notes”
Objects are important documents

- Not central to most library collections
- Adds a layer of complexity
Objects from Antiquity

- Fragile
- Irreplaceable
- Easily damaged through handling
Syria collection

- selected as aligned with outreach and inreach goals
- unusual collection of materials objects
- delicate and irreplaceable
Goals

- identify the items and their context
- provide for preservation
- enable intellectual access
Parameters

- limited budget
- limited staff
- limited time
- off the shelf components
What can we do?
• create an optimized work-flow

• divide the work but share input on the product

• work in parallel
Two graduate students
Two components

- research and discovery
- preservation and storage
- digitization

- digital library construction
- controlled description
- structural metadata
Goal: enable intellectual access

- educational focus
- protect materials from unnecessary handling
- provide access to components of interest
- provide background information
The digital surrogate record
Artifact

- initial description
- digital photograph
- controlled description
- Greenstone object
- stored and labeled

Surrogate for
controlled description
• content standard is a custom version of CCO
• structure is based on CCO categories
• terms are a mixture of LoC authorities, Getty’s ULAN, and Getty’s AAT
Item -- Perfume Bottle

Title
Unguentarium (see related Ancient Glass in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1968 by Axel von Saldern, plate 47.)

Creator
Unknown Creator -- Roman Empire -- Glass blower

Measurements
16 x 4.5 x 4.6 cm, 15.82 g

Materials and Technique
Bluish green glass with iridescence -- Glass -- Blown glass -- bluish green

Date of Creation
2 - 3rd century AD, based on item in Boston

Physical Description
Bell-shaped base supports a long, slender neck, finished with a flaired, unfinished lip. Gentle iridescence.

Condition and Examination History
Excellent

Culture
Roman Empire -- Eastern Mediterranean

Current Location
University of South Florida, Tampa Campus Special Collections, Syria Collection

Creation Location
Roman Empire -- probably Syria

Discovery Location
Mediterranean

Former Location
Private Collection

Subject
Daily life of upper middle class Romans

Class
Glass

View Description
Lateral view

Image Type -- Subject
Lateral View -- Perfume bottle

Image Date
June 30, 2006
Why Greenstone?

- free software under the GNU GPL
- easy to use
- wide variety of platforms
- functions with OAI resource finding
- flexible data formats
- creates access points easily from quality cataloging
Success!

- technology: digital photos with text
- collaboration with faculty and other subject experts
- proposal to Library
What could be better?

• numbering scheme for photos
• subject heading research
• align the project with the next iteration in mind
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Questions?