

## **C-R-E-A-T-E: Building an Institutional Cultural Resources Platform**

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### **Background**

In late 2015, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation invited the University of Miami (UM) to pilot an Academic Art Museum and Library Summit; an invitation that UM—through the offices of its Libraries (UML) and Lowe Art Museum (LAM)—gratefully accepted. Several months later, 14 pairs of museum and library directors from colleges and universities spanning the nation gathered in Coral Gables, Florida, for three days of shared learning. In advance thereof, the organizers asked participating teams to submit brief narratives highlighting obstacles to their collaborative efforts as well as visions for a shared future. This pre-work shaped the summit's agenda, which featured keynote addresses by Daniel Weiss, president, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Winston Tabb, dean of University Libraries and Museums, Johns Hopkins University; Clifford Lynch, executive director, Coalition for Networked Information; and Jeremy Upton, director of Library and University Collections, University of Edinburgh. These distinguished guests further framed the meeting's overarching theme: identifying and addressing opportunities for deep

library-museum collaboration within institutions of higher learning. The proceedings, which included presentations by all participating institutions, were captured in a detailed white paper that is freely available online.<sup>1</sup>

Following this impactful summit, the Mellon Foundation invited several participating institutions to submit funding proposals addressing museum-library collaborative opportunities. UM responded with a three-pronged plan to create two new, integrated, matrix-reporting fellowships (one devoted to paper conservation, the other to academic outreach, engagement, and support) as well as an incentivizing grants program for faculty wishing to incorporate University of Miami Libraries and Lowe Art Museum (UMLLAM) holdings into their curricula. Mellon generously committed \$500,000 to these intertwined initiatives, which were specifically designed to further the respective missions of UML and LAM, to advance UM's fundamental commitment to pedagogical support across all disciplines, to foster ongoing research and scholarship, and to leverage the expertise of UM's world-class faculty and staff. The outcomes and outputs to date have been encouraging, but challenges—as well as new opportunities—remain. In addition to highlighting some of the most impactful areas of UMLLAM's partnership, this paper will touch upon shared successes, surface obstacles, and paint a vision for tomorrow.

### **Cultural Resources | Engagement | Academics | Technology | Enrichment (CREATE)**

Binding the three central threads of UMLLAM's Mellon initiatives together is CREATE,<sup>2</sup> an interdisciplinary initiative designed to catalyze and support innovative pedagogies, exhibitions, research, and public programs that hold UMLLAM's collections at their core. Launched in June 2017, CREATE is more than just an administrative home for the aforementioned faculty-incentivizing grants, however: It is an interdisciplinary committee comprising faculty drawn from UM's Coral Gables, Virginia Key, and downtown Miami campuses as well as staff from both UML and LAM. Participating constituents

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have three principal responsibilities during their one-year (renewable) terms of service: to function as UMLLAM ambassadors; to raise awareness about CREATE grant-funding opportunities; and to evaluate funding applications thrice

annually. The program is managed by the Andrew W. Mellon Fellow for Academic Engagement, Christina Larson, and supported by UMLLAM staff, including those who may not serve on the committee but are, nevertheless, essential to the success of CREATE projects.

By heightening awareness of UMLLAM’s cultural resources and offering critical support, CREATE has succeeded in both strengthening extant relationships with faculty while encouraging new partnerships. Students have also significantly benefited, above all by participating in curricula infused with object-based learning experiences.<sup>3</sup> Animating Antiquity, a CREATE-funded project developed by Karen Mathews, associate professor of art and art history, is instructive in this regard.<sup>4</sup> Rooted in a cross-listed upper-level course (ARH 333/CLA 226) that was co-taught by Mathews and senior lecturer in classics Han Tran, this project focused on select works in LAM’s Greco-Roman antiquities collection. Participating students conducted object-specific research and drafted contextualizing dossiers, the results of which were used to launch a unique website.<sup>5</sup> They also used photogrammetry to create 3D prints of the sculptures they studied and, ultimately, to develop analog as well as digital interactives, available both online and in the Lowe Art Museum’s Marchman Gallery.<sup>6</sup>

CREATE has also served as a powerful catalyst for the production and dissemination of new knowledge by supporting and advancing scholarship rooted in UMLLAM collection objects. The CREATE-funded project, Attic Treasure: Flagler’s Dream Train, for instance,

focused on the UM Libraries' newly discovered, recently acquired, archival blueprints for the Oversea Extension of Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway connecting Miami to the Florida Keys. This initiative prompted a series of online articles<sup>7</sup> and a new publication.<sup>8</sup> Senior lecturer in English Judy Hood worked closely with a range of Special Collections and Conservation professionals at the libraries to preserve these invaluable plans, whose significance extends far beyond our region. She also conducted extensive scholarly research, which culminated in her publication of *Attic Treasure: Flagler's Dream Train*.

CREATE's metrics to date speak to its significance and impact. Between its June 2017 launch and today, the program has funded 22 separate projects spearheaded by 23 faculty members drawn from 6 distinct University of Miami colleges or schools and 13 separate departments.<sup>9</sup> In addition, nearly 300 UM students have been directly involved in CREATE-funded projects, while countless others have been indirect beneficiaries. A further 500 individuals, drawn from our campus and community, have also enjoyed CREATE-sponsored public programs and performances. Overall, CREATE has been an effective vehicle for elevating UMLLAM's collections, for stimulating faculty development and innovation, and for promoting deep intra-institutional collaboration, the focus of the 2016 inaugural summit.

Regarded in its entirety, CREATE has proven to be a relatively low-cost, extremely high-impact initiative. It has not been without its challenges, however. Perhaps the most significant trial was determining how best to manage workflows and, relatedly, how to equitably distribute labor amongst UMLLAM's already busy team members. Effectively promoting the program to the university community was another obstacle, as were the sheer mechanics of grant submissions and reviews. Overly ambitious faculty proposals that did not reflect programmatic or budgetary realities posed another set of difficulties, as did the management of cost-sharing across two units with separate financial management offices. None of these issues proved prohibitive, however, and all were eventually resolved.

## **Conservation of Works on Paper**

Like CREATE and UM's Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship for Academic Engagement, UM's Mellon Fellowship for Paper Conservation has proved an invaluable asset to the university's campus and surrounding community. Beyond expanding institutional capacity to address critical collections needs, this position has equally provided important training for the two individuals who have filled this two-year, fixed-term, postgraduate post since its launch: Laura Fedynyszyn (2017–2019) and Clara Huisman (2019–present). Highlights from Fedynyszyn's term of service include her treatment of a 1718 edition of the Roman poet Publius Vergilius Maro's *Maronis Opera*; a volume printed in iron gall ink, the acidic tannins of which were effectively eating away at its paper support. Fedynyszyn, working under the supervision of the UM Libraries' lead conservator Duvy Argandona, was able to successfully stabilize this important work while also repairing losses and tears throughout.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Fedynyszyn assisted Argandona with preparing materials from the libraries' distinctive collections for display at UML and LAM, including the latter's 2018 *Antillean Visions: Maps and the Making of the Caribbean* exhibition (see "Collaborative Exhibitions" section below). As UM's second Mellon Fellow in Paper Conservation, Huisman has similarly performed a range of conservation treatments, designed and constructed custom mounts and housings for artists' books, treated photographs and other fine art works on paper, and stabilized materials containing iron gall ink. She has also developed a sampling methodology for collections assessments and carried out UMLLAM collection condition surveys.

## **UMLLAM Shared Discovery Initiative**

Collection objects are, of course, only useful if they are discoverable. Thus, in 2016, UML and LAM began exploring single, open-access portals that could surface all of UM's research resources as well as UMLLAM's collections materials. UML, which has a fuller complement of technology staff than the Lowe, took the lead on developing the related request for proposals. LAM staff, however,

were closely consulted at key points to ensure that metadata generated by the museum’s collections management system, The Museum System (TMS), would be discoverable whichever new platform might ultimately be selected. In May 2016, UML went live with the Alma library services platform and Primo discovery service by Ex Libris North America, with which they piloted the combined holdings of all UM Libraries. Internally branded “uSearch,” The Primo discovery service accommodates multiple metadata formats and allows for a variety of ingestion paths, including Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH) and application programming interface (API) web services. An upgrade of LAM’s TMS and eMuseum software in late fall 2016 enabled a new API web service to interoperate with TMS. The following year a UMLLAM Shared Metadata Initiative Team worked on identifying and testing optimal solutions for harvesting metadata from TMS for use by uSearch. A UMLLAM team then explored options for sharing records including the new API, direct XML export, OAI-PMH, and crosswalk opportunities. Ultimately, OAI-PMH was selected as the best method for sharing records between TMS and uSearch. The work concluded in 2019. LAM’s collections are now discoverable in uSearch and in results for searches done using the “Everything” scope. New options have since been added to the “Availability” and “Library” facets to limit search results to LAM materials should a user so desire.

### **Collaborative Exhibitions: Transcending Object Sharing**

The enhanced discoverability of UMLLAM’s collections has encouraged and facilitated more thoroughly integrated, thoughtful collaborations, including shared exhibitions. UML had, for years, lent select materials from their distinctive collections to LAM’s temporary exhibition and permanent collection displays. With the inauguration of the Kislak Center at the University of Miami last year, LAM was able to reciprocate in kind by releasing works from its collection for display in this new library-based, multi-function space, which features state-of-the-art exhibit cases and museum-grade lighting, environmental,

and security controls. This type of bilateral sharing is entirely logical given that both units are, by nature, repositories with contiguous or concentric educational missions. What was lacking, before the Mellon-catalyzed reconceptualization of UMLLAM and shared metadata efforts were rendered more seamless, were comprehensive initiatives that transcended the merely transactional.

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*Antillean Visions: Maps and the Making of the Caribbean* is a powerful example of this richer collaborative model. Co-curated by UM professors William Pestle (anthropology) and Ashli White (history) with support from LAM’s exhibitions team and UM Libraries’ creative team, this groundbreaking show was exhibited at the museum between February 1 and May 27, 2018. A truly interdisciplinary project, *Antillean Visions* featured nearly 200 historic and contemporary maps of the Caribbean, nearly all of which were drawn from UML collections. This multifaceted project also featured several audience-centric engagement opportunities (including a juried mapmaking/data visualization competition, a bespoke in-gallery board game, and a digital mapmaking app) as well as a multi-author, award-winning catalog.<sup>11</sup> What really set this initiative apart, however, was the early involvement of cross-departmental working groups and the integral role played by UMLLAM’s Mellon Fellows. Specifically, teams drawn from a multidisciplinary set of schools, departments, and research institutes participated in the development of this project from the start, rather than at the end as consultative add-ons. Both Mellon Fellows as well as UML’s lead conservator were also brought into the process as early as possible to ensure that effective, efficient engagement strategies as well as conservation assessment and treatment plans could be developed and implemented. This deeply collaborative approach resulted in a project that enabled UML and LAM to advance their interwoven missions in impactful ways while also contributing to

the creation and transference of new knowledge in the service of the University of Miami and a plurality of audiences, objectives that are severely hampered if collaborations do not move beyond simple object sharing.

### **Digital Collaborations**

The enhanced reliance upon and inclusion of digital technologies into both LAM and UML's work have also helped to facilitate a shared commitment to stronger, fuller collaborations. Illustrative in this regard is UMLLAM's combined response to a fall 2018 call for proposals for developing mixed-reality applications. Sponsored jointly by UM and Magic Leap,<sup>12</sup> this internal competition sought innovative digital projects intentionally designed to foster, promote, and support research, teaching, and public outreach. The museum and libraries' successful proposal took as its organizing principle *Radical Conventions: Cuban American Art from the 1980s*, a groundbreaking exhibition curated by Elizabeth Cerejido, Esperanza Bravo de Varona Chair and Director of UML's Cuban Heritage Collection, and slated for exhibition at LAM in summer 2021. Specifically, UMLLAM will create a new app that, using Magic Leap devices, will allow constituents to interact with works featured in *Radical Conventions* through unique visual and auditory experiences. These works include voice recordings of individuals who were a part of the Mariel Boatlift (an overarching theme of the show, which commemorates the 40th anniversary of this historic event) as well as opportunities for guests to contribute their own oral histories through prompts keyed to specific exhibition objects. These personal narratives will be added to other crowdsourced content stored on an augmented reality (AR) cloud, ensuring persistent availability and ease of access and use.

### **The Digital Turn: Before, during, and after COVID-19**

On Monday, March 16, 2020, the University of Miami swiftly and decisively suspended virtually all in-person operations on its three campuses in response to the mounting global health emergency. UM,

which had taken great care to pilot remote teaching, learning, and working capabilities for the vast majority of its nearly 35,000 students, faculty, and staff the preceding Friday, devoted the first few weeks of “alternate” work arrangements to improving the off-site capacities and capabilities of everyone impacted by this transition. Despite these preemptive measures, the sheer volume and all-encompassing nature of these changes posed a range of practical difficulties, particularly for those with limited digital facility and/or a lack of essential hard- and software. Just as challenging were the theoretical and philosophic struggles faced by those who theretofore had relied heavily on in-person, on-site interactions to advance their missions, including not only faculty but also LAM and UML.

Fortunately, each unit, to varying degrees, had embraced the “digital turn” well before the global health emergency hastened their fuller moves into cyberspace. For instance, 88% of UML acquisitions were already electronic. In addition, UML has long been digitizing out-of-copyright collections, providing select virtual channels for research assistance, and servicing faculty and students through e-reserve support. LAM’s pre-pandemic efforts were far more modest (as is often the case at academic art museums, compared to their library counterparts), and comprised mainly digital enhancements to extant programs, rather than virtual surrogates or stand-alone enterprises.

During the pandemic, UML worked diligently with teams of faculty and academic technologists to seamlessly incorporate online and digital content as well as research guides into the learning management system course sites. They also migrated research advising and peer counseling services to virtual environments by adding videoconferencing technology to their extant array of channels. Furthermore, they “flipped” instruction sessions and workshop programs in order to continue providing in-depth, online training for faculty and students and focused on acquiring e-books. LAM, too, leaned into digital engagement, through new initiatives such as #LoweOnTheGo; virtual mindfulness sessions; online course

facilitation (co-taught by faculty and LAM staff); remote visual literacy workshops; virtual lectures; and a born-digital, student-curated exhibition.<sup>13</sup>

Conceived in crisis and delivered in calamity, LAM's and UML's pandemic-related initiatives were developed under conditions that rendered normal, iterative workflows impossible. Additionally, because these all-digital pivots were reactive rather than proactive, prototyping and proofs of concept had to, in the main, be cast aside in the name of expediency and responsiveness. This raised concerns for both units about strategic alignments, intentionality, calibration, sustainability, and mission drift. The possibility of inadvertently eroding institutional commitments to diversity, equity, access, and inclusion due to compressed timelines and limited capacities for consultative work also caused significant apprehension.

To manage these issues as well as possible under the circumstances, LAM took a two-tiered approach. First, it convened a new cross-departmental Remote Engagement Task Force, helmed by Mark Osterman, LAM's John S. and James L. Knight Digital Experience Manager, and charged with prioritizing, developing, and, ultimately, launching the museum's menu of new digital initiatives. In addition, it convened four new working groups—Collections; Teaching and Learning; Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI); and Audiences—to parse the four pillars of LAM's 2019–2021 strategic plan with a view to ranking priorities in a vastly changed world. UML, too, hewed closely to the five pillars articulated in its 2017–2025 strategic plan—Learning; Global Collections; Research and Scholarship; Community Engagement; and Workforce Development—as it navigated this unprecedented crisis. The fact that UML and LAM did not actively pursue such strategies together surfaced, *ex post facto*, a blind spot in our organizational cultures; something that UML and LAM will be addressing together as we all adjust to the “next normal” in COVID-19's catastrophic wake.

## Looking to the Future

As we look to a future that sees us safely back on our campus, UML and LAM are committed to maintaining expanded footprints in the digital sphere. The more exciting question for both units is how we can continue to develop, expand, and refine collaborative efforts while maximizing the benefits that the network turn affords, including enhancing object-based teaching and learning opportunities while leveraging technology's power to increase our reach, maximize our impact, and promote DEAI. Early thoughts include born-digital,

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crowdsourced exhibitions that unite objects from LAM and UML collections in heretofore unimagined ways; a dynamic range of livestream programs as well as archived talks, lectures, and symposia; projects intentionally designed to give voice to the voiceless; and MOOCs that harness the distinctive expertise of both units' staff members. Practical considerations include the continued expansion of object-based learning concepts to include both physical objects and their digital surrogates as well as ensuring that UMLLAM has a scalable, shared, digital storage space.

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community will also be explored, with a view to supporting our constituents' self-directed learning, enrichment, and self-care needs in our spaces. Learning from the lessons of our matrix-reporting Mellon Fellows, UMLLAM will also be looking more closely at integrated workflows with a view to not only identifying (and shifting) overlaps but also, and perhaps more interestingly, discovering new opportunities for ever more innovative programming and sharing more professional positions. Shared storage is another promising vein that UMLLAM will be mining in the future. Binding all of these efforts together is a shared commitment to the mission and vision of our parent organization; to excellence in the service of higher education; to supporting personal growth and development on our campus and throughout our community; and advancing DEAI while also helping to build out a sustainable pipeline of future museum and library staff from underrepresented, underserved communities.

## Endnotes

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