**VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

**MINUTES OF THE RESEARCH AND COLLECTIONS COMMITTEE MEETING**

**Nov. 21. 2020**

Present at the online meeting were Dr. Art Evans, Dr. Tom Benzing, Dr. Carole Nash, Lisa Moerner, Melany Stowe, Dr. Joe Keiper, Dr. Hayden Bassett, Dr. Adam Pritchard, Dr. Kal Ivanov, Dr. Nancy Moncrief, Zach Ryder, and Ben Williams.

* Committee Chairman Dr. Art Evans called the meeting to order.
* The minutes were unanimously approved by the committee.
* Due to the meeting taking place online, the new acquisitions sign-off sheet was distributed to committee members electronically. Ben Williams will submit the sheet to VMNH Registrar Jill Harris once all signatures have been collected.
* The committee moved to recommend to the Board of Trustees that retired Curator of Geology Dr. Jim Beard be made Curator Emeritus.
* The committee moved to recommend to the Board of Trustees that Dr. Jackson Means be made a Research Associate.
* Dr. Tom Benzing said that he has prepared some guidelines for committee meetings held via Zoom. He added that he is open to suggestions for Research and Collections Committee members, and the next appointments will open in May 2021. The role of the Research and Collections Committee, he said, is to make recommendations to the board based on the activities of the museum’s Research and Collections division. Dr. Carole Nash asked Dr. Benzing if there were guidelines for appointing individuals to the committee, and Dr. Benzing said that the positions are open to any board members who wish to serve on the committee.
* Dr. Adam Pritchard offered a brief overview of how the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has affected Research and Collections. Dr. Pritchard said that in mid-March, many museum employees began working off-site, although by early June, safety guidelines had been put in place to allow employees to return to the building if needed. During the spring and summer, Dr. Pritchard said, Research and Collections received many inquiries from both professionals and the general public. These inquiries tapered off by the fall, he said, but that is normal in his experience. He added that a small number of researchers have visited the museum, though not as many as would during normal circumstances. He also said that field work has largely been limited to areas within driving distance. Dr. Kal Ivanov added that specimen ID requests from the public have greatly increased, especially during the summer, partly due to the open invitation on “#BenInNature” social media posts and partly due to people having more time in the summer and wanting to get out of the house. Dr. Art Evans echoed the increase in specimen ID requests, adding that he hopes the level of interest in the natural world shown by the public is sustained once the pandemic comes to an end.
* Dr. Joe Keiper discussed the museum’s acquisition of a Guatemalan street art collection. Roughly three years ago, he said, he was approached by the executor of an estate who wanted to pass along a collection of Guatemalan street art their late client obtained while living in Guatemala in the 1950s. The materials were accepted as a deed of gift and constitute six banker’s boxes worth of material. Several of the pieces, Keiper said, appear to be actual Mayan antiquities rather than street art. He consulted with a firm in Richmond called Cultural Heritage Partners that serves to identify such pieces and repatriate them to their country of origin. However, he said, the process is expensive and he wanted the board’s guidance. Dr. Hayden Bassett said that several of the pieces appear to be legitimate Mayan antiquities dating from 200-900 A.D. These stone figurines were likely based around a Mayan culture of mushroom worship, also known as mycolatry, and were likely used in ritual ceremonies involving hallucinogenic mushrooms. The remaining pieces are largely ceramic, Dr. Bassett said, and are of a type with others sold in Guatemalan street markets in the 1950s and 1960s.
* Dr. Bassett outlined three potential courses of action for dealing with the items: A., repatriate the items to Guatemala’s national museum using the aid of a specialist firm like Cultural Heritage Partners; B., attempt to return the items to the Guatemala national museum by handing them off to museum representatives at the country's border (although this runs the risk of having some items claimed by customs), and C. transferring the items to a U.S. museum with an existing Mayan collection, such as Norfolk, Va.’s Chrysler Museum of Art. Dr. Carole Nash proposed a fourth option of reaching out to colleagues at the Smithsonian to see if they could assist in repatriating the artifacts, and Dr. Kal Ivanov suggested reaching out to Guatemala’s national museum directly. The committee ultimately decided to reach out to both the Smithsonian and Guatemala’s National Museum and choose a path forward at a later date based on the content of the responses.
* Dr. Art Evans mentioned that he had included in the committee packet an article discussing the importance of natural history collections. The article, he said, would help committee members formulate important talking points when speaking with the public and legislators.
* Dr. Kal Ivanov mentioned to the committee that items are currently being purchased to construct a functional molecular lab at VMNH, which will not only assist the curators in their research but also attract students and researchers from outside of the museum.
* Dr. Tom Benzing moves to adjourn the meeting and the vote was seconded by Lisa Moerner. All present members approved the motion to adjourn.