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Skinner Museum layers old objects, new ideas.



Panoramic view of the main floor of the Skinner Museum.

https://web.archive.org/web/20180725113218/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/sites/default/files/skinner_pano_HL.jpg

By [Keely Savoie](#)

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180725113218/mailto:ksavoie@mtholyoke.edu>

To walk into the [Joseph Allen Skinner Museum](#)

[https://web.archive.org/web/20180725113218/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/collection/joseph-allen-skinner-museum?](https://web.archive.org/web/20180725113218/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/collection/joseph-allen-skinner-museum?bc=node/1)

[bc=node/1](#)) in South Hadley is to walk into a different era where curiosities and collectibles were an end unto themselves. Joseph Skinner, a local businessman and philanthropist, was an avid collector from his youth, and spent a lifetime accumulating the nearly 7,000 objects that now fill the museum, a former church.

Shelves lean against the walls, laden with bric-a-brac from fossils and minerals to arrowheads and bones, inviting visitors to take a closer look. Cases full of scrimshaw, medical tools, and gas lamps are arranged in the middle of the floor where pews once sat. Two full suits of armor guard a pewter collection. The walls hold framed letters from the Founding Fathers, a penny farthing bike, and musical instruments.

Restoring Skinner's vision ...

[Aaron Miller](https://web.archive.org/web/20180725113218/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/page/staff) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180725113218/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/page/staff>), who researches and curates the collection, recently undertook a project with student intern Sabrina Smith '17 to reorganize the interpretive material in the foyer, the visitor's introduction to the museum.

"We want to restore it to the original vision of Skinner after decades of well-meaning individuals had moved and changed the groupings of objects in service of different ideas," said Miller.

Skinner, the son of a wealthy businessman, acquired the church that houses his collection in 1929. The building and its contents were given to Mount Holyoke College in 1946.

“What was here in the past was very similar to today, but we felt it was too leading to the visitor,” said Miller, the assistant curator of visual and material culture and NAGPRA coordinator at the Mount Holyoke College [Art Museum](https://web.archive.org/web/20180725113218/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20180725113218/https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/>). “Rather than inviting them to make their own interpretation of the material, a meaning was imposed on them.”

Using just half a dozen early photos as a reference, Miller has tried to arrange the objects according to the groupings that Skinner used. Sometimes, he takes his cues from the palimpsests left by hanging objects on the wooden walls: a faint curved line indicates where something of a particular shape and size once hung.

“Part of what makes this museum so interesting is that now much of it is left to the viewer to figure out what Skinner’s intentions were,” Miller said.

... and adding a layer of modern knowledge

Miller is also developing a new labeling system that adds more information and context to the collection of objects as Skinner believed them to be.

“Skinner had a couple of curators over the years who catalogued half the objects, even if they don’t have labels,” said Miller.

But sometimes the things that Skinner believed he was collecting and displaying are not what they appeared to be. That’s a delicate line to walk as a curator, said Miller, pointing out a collection of bowls.

Skinner probably acquired those with the belief that they were true pre-Columbian artifacts, but they’re not,” he said. “They’re fakes.”

Using language that would be familiar to Skinner, Miller has begun to develop labels that give contemporary context about the objects in the museum. The new labels will be clearly identifiable as such.

“This can give the visitor more information about the objects without breaking the period feel,” he said.

The final layer of meaning and interpretation that Miller is hoping to introduce involves more critical analysis.

“There are a lot of conversations we can have about this kind of thing,” he said. “We can talk about what Skinner believed these objects to be and what they really were. Or the whole colonial idea of collecting objects from different cultures. Or the beliefs and representation of those cultures embodied within the arrangements he chose. But we don't want to impose those on a visitor right from the beginning.”

A number of classes and individual students use the museum to further their own research, and new student curators will help Miller continue to refine and reimagine the museum as it once was—and as it will be again.

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(https://web.archive.org/web/20180725113218/https://www.mtholyoke.edu/about/why_womens_college)

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