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This Old Vase: Ancient Art and Primary Source Instruction in the Archives

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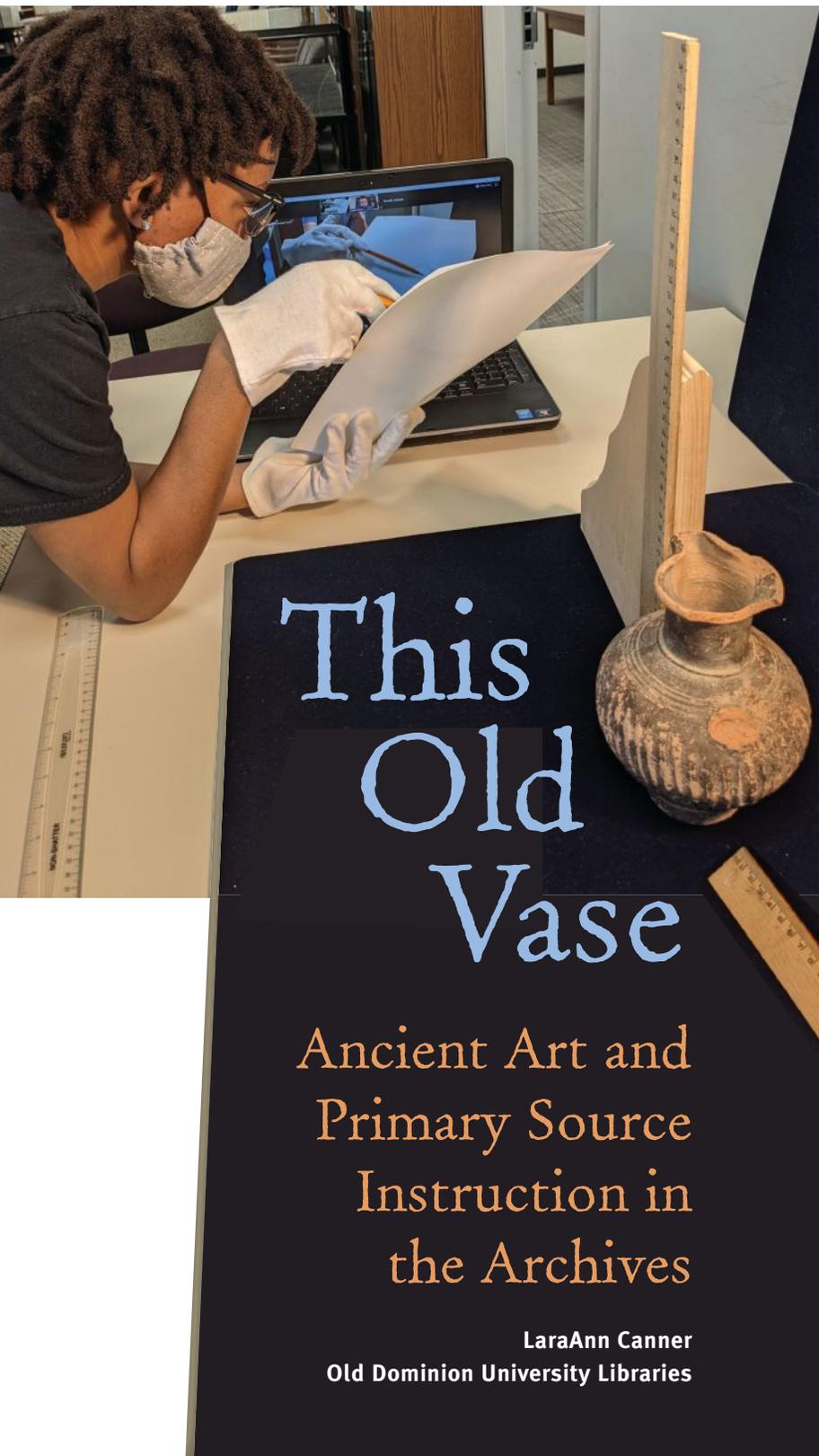


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Above: ODU undergraduate student Sekoyah McGlorn asks Dr. Jared Benton for guidance via Zoom in October 2020. *Photo by LaraAnn Canner.*

I have been told that within libraries an archivist needs to be multidisciplinary *and* a jack-of-all-trades. Never have I felt this more strongly than when I became a de facto archaeology teacher—even though my title is curator of Music Special Collections at Old Dominion University (ODU) Libraries! Still, the opportunity to assist students in research in the archives, while offering safe access amid COVID-19 concerns, was a rewarding experience—for both me and the students.

From Archives Host to Assistant Teacher

The ODU Special Collections and University Archives hosted Dr. Jared Benton’s 200-level art history class, “Ancient Art,” in spring 2020. Their visit focused on Bronze Age pottery from the island of Cyprus donated to the university in the 1960s.¹ The students took photographs and created archaeological sketches of the vases. Later, their work would be turned into digital three-dimensional models and be the focus of in-depth research papers for the class’s final exam. The results of their studies were impressive, so much so that Benton believed that their work should be presented at ODU’s Undergraduate Research Symposium. Benton also asked if I would be interested in assisting students with the symposium by making the collections available, editing papers, and answering research inquiries.

Five students decided to participate in the Undergraduate Research Symposium, scheduled for March 2021. This gave them plenty of time to develop a poster presentation or expand upon the research papers they had written for the art history class. Each student focused on different aspects of the ancient vases, culminating in the most complete study of the pottery ever conducted for the archives.

Then March 16, 2020, happened. ODU’s president made the difficult decision to close campus initially for a week as the number of COVID-19 cases in Norfolk, Virginia, began to rapidly rise. Little did we know that a week would turn into months.

With campus remaining closed over the course of summer 2020, Zoom became the main means of communication with Benton and the students. Together, we formulated the design of a virtual poster, which showed how the class created their digital representations of the Cypriot vases. I also met with the students who were presenting papers and shared my advice on best research practices, suggested edits to their papers, and helped them identify themes to explore further. Overall, it was a

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productive summer, but, to create the best possible poster and research presentations, the scholars would need to study the vases again—not virtually but in person.

Facilitating Active Learning

We found ways to provide access to our collections while adapting to the need for social distancing. Weeks of staff meetings, guidance from the university, and back-and-forth emails led to updated COVID-19 policies, including granting appointments for ODU students and staff, wearing a face mask at all times, completing symptom checklists, and disinfecting the archives space prior to and after each appointment. These were just a few ways to create a safe and healthy environment for our researchers and staff.

Fortunately, the students had retained a basic understanding of how to document the pottery, but were understandably rusty after the long (and stressful!) summer. Even though I had minored in anthropology and had been present for these art history classes—acting as the archival representative and vase guard—I was a bit rustier than our undergraduate scholars. However, I found my old archeology textbooks, brushed up on terminology, and by October I was ready for my first in-person appointment with students to study the vases.

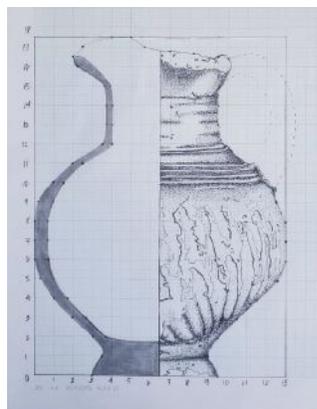
Only one patron and one staff member were allowed in Special Collections for appointments, meaning that Benton would have to use Zoom to help guide students. Two weeks prior to the first appointment, Benton dropped off specialized equipment, including lights, standing rulers, graph paper, digital caliper, and even his personal camera. During the session, if a problem arose or we needed to ensure we were on track, students would hold their papers up to a laptop screen. This was complicated, to say the least.

As a bystander, watching an archaeological rendering is fascinating, but I also had to become an interpreter of the professor's instructions and, at times, a fellow teacher of Bronze Age pottery—not exactly my field of expertise. This first session was a lesson in primary source instruction and active learning. The students and I talked through the best ways to capture the vase's decorations, worked through mismeasurements, and inspected the vase from every possible angle. This involved a chorus of: "Oh, Okay," "Wait, no," and "I got it!" as we placed targets, converted measurements onto graph paper, and worked out the best ways to photograph the pottery from above (without giving me a heart attack!). The results were incredible. Take a look below.



Top: A 3D photometric rendering of a Cypriot vase by ODU student Jordan Staten.

Right: A sketch of a Cypriot vase drawn by ODU student Sekoyah McGlorn. *Photos courtesy of Dr. Jared Benton.*



Expanding Your Reach

Our five students presented their findings at the 13th annual Undergraduate Research Symposium in March 2021 and did an awesome job. I won't go into detail regarding the conclusions that were—quite literally—drawn by the student scholars. You can view the archived recordings of their presentations [online](#) (found in Zoom Room G and Room GG).

After volunteering to help with a primary source instruction session using Special Collections' Bronze Age vases, I was surprised to find myself becoming a teacher of archaeology. It puts a whole new spin on "other duties as assigned" in an archivist's job description, but that is one of my favorite parts about librarianship. We turn choruses of confusion into a harmony of understanding, adapt our policies to provide accessibility to our collections—even during trying times—and offer students a chance to hold a piece of history in their (properly gloved) hands.

As I browse the archival storage shelves and the box holding the Cypriot vases, I see so many opportunities for primary source instruction and active learning. I am extremely grateful that Benton asked me to be a part of his student's work for the Undergraduate Research Symposium, and I hope for future collaborations between special collections and faculty instruction that can give students great education and a glimpse of the ancient art found in archives. ■

Note

¹ In 1968, local Norfolk businessman Dudley Cooper gifted Old Dominion University his collection of five Bronze Age vases, purchased five years earlier from the Cyprian government.