

HUMANS OF MOUNTMAKING

RICHARD HARDS

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Richard Hards started out in art handling as a means to support his artwork but has evolved into a master mountmaker who has worked with collections at both the Getty Villa and the Getty Center. We talk here about his history, the joy he finds in the detail-oriented, collaborative work we do, and where he sees the work heading.

Shelly: How did you find your way to the mount-making profession?

Richard: It wasn't a straight line. For years I didn't know mountmaking even existed. In 1993, after graduate school, I moved to Chicago where I was represented by an art gallery. To supplement my income I started working for a very small art handling company called RAF, Inc. There were only two employees, so we were involved in every aspect of the company. Transporting and installing art, rigging sculpture, and building crates. I learned a lot from that experience.

In 2003, I moved back to California to be closer to family and I started working for Cooke's Crating, an art handling company in Los Angeles. I was quickly contracted to the Getty to help reinstall the Villa after its renovation in 2004. This is where I was first exposed to mountmaking and had that light bulb moment, "Wow! People do this for a living!" I was very fortunate that Mac and BJ took me under their wings and saw potential in my abilities. They thought it would be a good idea to train someone locally in case they ever needed to hire someone for contract work. That's how my career in mountmaking got started and I think my first official contract for the Getty was in 2007.

Shelly: So, you trained there first and then contracted for them?

Richard: Yeah, but the initial training session was a very short time. I think I went in for just a few weeks to get an idea of how things worked in the mount shop. They had a lot of terracotta vessels that a volunteer had made. They were replicas of ancient pottery, and I used these to practice making contour mounts, clips and interfaces. Then I shadowed BJ and Mac and soaked in everything they were doing.

Shelly: That's amazing, though. You must have really had some facility before that!

Richard: I guess so, yeah. I took to it really quickly. I'm very detail oriented, and I love working with my hands, so it seemed like a natural fit to me.

Shelly: I have a follow-up question - I'm curious about your art degree and the kind of art you were doing. Was it --three-dimensional?

Richard: Surprisingly no, it wasn't three-dimensional at all. I started drawing when I was a kid and then I got involved in painting and printmaking. My major in graduate school was printmaking and painting. I don't know where my spatial skills come from, but they were there as soon as I started fabricating mounts.

Shelly: Those spatial skills are hard to teach.

Richard: Yes, they are. But I think the most interesting part of it to me is the problem solving. All of the spatial, tactile and hands-on work is really engaging, but the first step of visualizing a solution is quite challenging and fun. "How am I going to solve this problem?" That's something that's difficult to teach, too.

I think something that helped me on this path was my strong foundation in art handling. Rigging sculptures got me started thinking this way. Packing and crating objects is somewhat related to making mounts, just using different materials. The primary concern is for the safety of the object and understanding the particular fragilities in each piece.

MOUNTMAKER IN THE WILD

LEFT: Installing Charles Cordier's *Woman from the French Colonies* with David Glickman, Senior Fabricator, and Michael Chomick, Preparator, Getty Center, 2023.

(COVER IMAGE: Mountmaker exploring the Ancient Bristlecone Pines in the White Mountains of California.)

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Shelly: That brings up the second part of my follow up - you said you got that first job with the small art handling company in Chicago. But how did that happen? I'm asking for the people who are out there wondering how to get started in this kind of work.

Richard: I moved to Chicago not knowing very many people and without much of a plan. There were three or four art handling companies in the city at the time and I just started calling people up, or knocking on doors. Eventually I landed some interviews.

Two companies were hiring at the time and I chose to work at the smaller of the two. The larger company felt more confining in a way, where you were given a specific job, like crating or packing, or working on the trucks. The small company required being involved in every aspect of the job and that appealed more to me.

Art handling interested me because it allowed for a somewhat flexible work schedule which allowed me time to focus on my own work. Most art handlers at that time seemed to be active artists and musicians, so there was a work environment sympathetic to that lifestyle.

There's a trade off for this flexibility, though, which is that most art handling positions don't pay very well, at least in the beginning. You can gain a lot of great experience and you're exposed to a variety of very challenging situations that help you grow, but it's not necessarily lucrative when you're starting out.

Shelly: Is there anything else you'd like to add that you think helped you?

Richard: I think a lot of previous experiences I had gone through kind of paved the way for my career in mountmaking. I had learned to develop an attitude of remaining calm and being level-headed that allowed space for approaching problems in a thoughtful way. Sometimes the best solutions are lying off to the side somewhere, they're not always what comes first to mind. Trying to remain conscious of that helps slow me down and keeps me open to more possibilities.

Shelly: That's really good advice.

Richard: This is making me think about our discussions regarding education in the IMF and training future mountmakers. Currently we lack a clear path for training like there is for Conservation, for instance. In some ways, mountmaking is still considered a trade, in the sense that learning happens through an apprenticeship. At least that's been my experience. If you're looking for a clear step by step manual on how to become a mountmaker, it may be frustrating. Finding opportunities to get experience in a working environment and being open to a wide variety of possibilities, rather than having a fixed idea of the path forward, may be a better approach.

Shelly: Like you were saying earlier about problem solving right? It's also about not being wedded to a solution.

Richard: Yeah! I may have been working on something for five hours, but if a better solution presents itself and I have time to do it, I'm going to start over. In the beginning, when I first started mountmaking, this was probably the most difficult thing to realize. Instead of digging in my heels when I knew it wasn't working and continuing to push forward, I found it better to just take a breath and reassess. It's difficult after you've invested a lot of time, particularly if you're working under a deadline, but it's necessary sometimes to admit that something isn't working and start over. Fortunately, this situation becomes less frequent with more experience.

Shelly: Do you feel like your experience with making art helped with that?

Richard: Yes, I think so. The way I approached art was very fluid. I'm not someone who would work up a lot of sketches or make a lot of plans. It was happening as I was doing it, and I definitely think this experience helped me in certain situations with mountmaking. I think that it particularly helped me as a contractor working under tight deadlines, where you don't have a lot of leeway with your time. After a while you just learn to accept things as they are and settle into that workflow and focus. That concentration is where a lot of creativity comes from, because you're not thinking about some idea in your head or some preconception. You're experiencing what's happening at the moment and can make last second adjustments and decisions based on that, rather than what you've thought of in advance. I think that's helped me a lot.

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Shelly: It's also in conversation with the piece of art. I think we can take this into a whole philosophical direction. It's good, but let's go from the philosophical to the practical. Can you share a little bit about what your day to day looks like?

Richard: My day to day has changed recently because I transferred from the Antiquities Conservation Department to Decorative Arts and Sculpture Conservation. Previously, my day to day was all about antiquities, ranging from small gems and rings to very heavy stone sculptures and reliefs. There was a lot of variety. Now that I'm at the Getty Center, working in DecArts, there's not quite the variety in size and weight, but it requires its own unique problem-solving skills since a lot of the objects are extremely delicate. Although our curators are very sympathetic to mountmaking here, they would still prefer mounts to be as invisible as possible, so we try our best to design internal mounts. There seems to be more opportunities to make internal forms in the DecArts collection because a lot of the pieces are hollow or have cavities underneath compared to antiquities. So, it requires a little bit of a different approach.

At the Getty, Tim, Nick, BJ and I are really collaborative. The approaches that we're taking with our work are fairly uniform, even though we can't always apply them in the same way. But we're all aware of what the other is doing and we know we're all on the same page as far as how we're designing things.

Shelly: That's nice that the aesthetics of what the viewer is seeing in the exhibits are similar, too. So, digging into that a little bit. How does that manifest in the day to day?

Richard: It's not always the same. There's a lot of administrative work and a lot of meetings too. I mean a LOT of meetings. The amount of thought and planning that goes into exhibitions is extensive. Most of our work involves changing exhibitions. There is some work with our own collection, but the majority of our time is spent on

changing exhibitions. Most of the mounts for objects in the permanent collection already exist, though some of them might need updating because they were made in the 80's or 90's. That's something that we'll be reevaluating soon because of a construction project that's coming up. Right now we're involved in traveling to visit loans that will be arriving for future exhibitions. We'll be 3D scanning them, then coming back to our lab where we'll print them. We're utilizing 3D prints to begin making mounts well in advance of loan objects arriving. Sometimes we're really involved in 3D printing and processing the data that we've collected for these exhibitions that are coming up.

At some point, when that's settled, then we dig into the actual fabrication time. We're currently experimenting with ways to incorporate 3D prints into our internal supports, rather than using traditional casting techniques. We're just wading into this, but so far it's been really successful.

Shelly: It is so useful to the rest of the mountmaking community, that you all have the room and the practical need, so you can do these experiments, and when you are ready to share your results, that'll be really helpful to many. I am curious though, in terms of the loan program, how much control or how much time you can ask for, to get all those steps done that you need, for going out there and getting the scans and all that.

Richard: Luckily for us, our administration is very supportive of our travel and research. It hasn't always been the case, but they're beginning to see how much time and stress this saves. I think we're past the point where we have to prove our case each time. It's become part of the process now, and it's understood that we'll need time. From the first planning stages, the project administrator is building travel into the schedule which gives us a big head start in advance of the objects arriving. This allows us to do the work we need to in a timely manner, so we don't have to fabricate everything when objects arrive and go through that stress. We don't have the staff for that anymore. Our exhibition schedule has grown and the number of objects included in these exhibitions has dramatically increased over time as staff has decreased, so we have to find ways to make it work.



2018 : AN AUDIENCE OF CURIOUS STUDENTS

In the process of making contour templates for the ancient bronze Runners, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Italy.



2019 : WOODEN TRIPOD

TOP LEFT: A visible mount that recreates an ancient wooden tripod, Villa dei Papiri, Herculaneum, Italy.

TOP RIGHT: 3D prints are used to properly locate tripod fragments onto the mount.

LEFT: The Wooden Tripod fragments supported by the display mount.

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Shelly: Having object lists that far out, seems amazing to me.

Richard: Some shows are better organized than others. Some object lists change even after we've traveled.

Shelly: What happens then?

Richard: Well, either we have to make the mount when the object arrives or occasionally we can modify existing mounts. Sometimes, the object will just be cut and it's a big sigh of relief!

Before 3D scanning and printing, we could only get to a certain point with mounts. Even if we traveled to measure and make templates ahead of time, there was still a lot of work to do when the objects arrived, and with only two or three mount makers it was extremely difficult to complete each fitting and paint all of those mounts. We never missed a deadline, but it takes a toll.

One of the side benefits of 3D technology is that it minimizes the amount of object handling. Less handling means less risk of damage occurring, so that's a huge thing. I think object safety is something our administration understands even more than stress management.

Shelly: Well, I could talk with you about this all day, but we better move on. You've already touched on my next question a little bit, but would you say you work more independently or team-based? It sounds like you have a good collegial kind of team dynamic in your workplace.

Richard: I'd say it's very seldom independent. When it comes down to fabrication time in the shop, when we're building something, then it's more independent. Though, if there's a large, complicated piece we're involved in then we join in together. Everything else is very team based from the moment the exhibition starts taking shape. We have multiple people from every department in the museum involved in these planning meetings. Curators discuss the story they're trying to tell and the way they'd like to display the objects, and wanting to know how the mounts will be designed and

utilized. Luckily, we have a voice at the table. We used to be more in the background but now we're being brought into the conversation early on. It's been very helpful because mountmaking intersects with just about every department: we work with registrars to develop the installation schedule and communicate with lenders, and the design team to make sure the display furniture accommodates our mount designs. Anyway, the culture here has slowly improved and each department involved in the exhibition is now included in our planning meetings.

We do have independence when it comes to mount designs and materials use, as well as determining whether an object should be base isolated or not. We have a lot of autonomy in how we go about problem-solving, but we always consult the Conservators and communicate our decisions to the team.

Shelly: That's great. Okay. So now we get to the series of questions that are about your favorites. The first one is: What's your favorite thing about mountmaking work or what's something that drew you to it?

Richard: Well, initially, the thing that drew me to it was how similar to making art it is. It's hands on and I'm very detail oriented, so I immediately loved the forming and shaping of metal and working at the bench. Brazing and welding, I love that, too. The work felt very natural to me. Then, as time went on, as I said before, the problem solving kept me interested. When an object comes in and you have to figure out how to safely secure it and build something discreet in the process, I find that very rewarding. Here at the Getty, where we sometimes incorporate base isolation systems into the mount design, this brings in another level of skills that I had to draw on from high school and college, like math and physics. My memory of these subjects is really rusty and doesn't work very well anymore, but the more I get involved the easier it gets. Anyway, this is what excites me about this job and keeps me going.



2017 : JADE HEAD ORNAMENT

LEFT: A seismic brass mount formed using a 3D print of a jade head ornament from Guatemala, Golden Kingdoms, Getty Center.

RIGHT: A 3D print of the head ornament installed on its mount.

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Shelly: That's great! But then the other side of it is: What's your least favorite thing about this work?

Richard: Hmm...I would say coping with the toxic atmosphere that's embedded in hierarchical institutions. That's what I find most problematic and troubling on a personal level. I'm not experiencing that as much as I have in the past, so it's getting better, but yeah, that's my least favorite part about this job.

Shelly: Well put. Do you have a favorite object or exhibition that you've worked on over the years, and if so, what makes it stand out for you?

Richard: I don't have a specific object in mind, but I really enjoy working with objects that come to me in pieces, where the mount does the job of articulating them and making them unified again. I like that challenge. I've had to do that with a T-Rex skull, as well as an ancient Egyptian boat model that was small and very delicate. I've also worked this way with an ancient wooden tripod that was recently found under volcanic ash in Herculaneum. These have been my favorite types of objects to work with.

As far as my favorite show, it has to be Golden Kingdoms that opened here at the Getty in 2017. That was one of the more complicated exhibits here at the Getty, and the number of objects was the most we'd ever shown up to that point. It really taxed our resources, but we came together as a team and made some nice mounts. We had also just started using our current scanning equipment. In fact, when I first started traveling for that show, I didn't have a scanner, and by the second trip we had purchased an Artec Eva and Spider scanner. So I was just getting familiar with that technology, which really changed our lives.

Shelly: That was a beautiful show. The next question is about whether you have any lessons learned in mountmaking that stands out to you?

Richard: I mean, there's so many lessons I've learned. A lot of it has to do with the handling of objects.

Shelly: You can also share lessons learned in a positive direction.

Richard: Oh, I'm happy to share things that have not gone well for me in my career. We tend to not talk about this very much, unless it's bartalk with colleagues, but these situations were emotionally difficult to manage at the time. So early on, when I was starting out, I was working with very fragile artifacts from an institution similar to yours, where there are a lot of Native American and Old West artifacts. I was working with a 19th Century guitar, and I was convinced that I needed to make the mounts very snug fitting. I really wanted them to fit perfectly. I knew that I needed to make room for felt, which I did, but in the process of fitting the mount off and on, I put a mark in the varnish of the guitar and, obviously, it did not go down well with the conservator at the time. This was an early lesson learned that the mount doesn't have to be so perfect that you possibly risk damage to the object.



2014 : LUGGAGE FROM A JAPANESE INTERNMENT CAMP

TOP: A stainless-steel mount for luggage from a WWII Japanese Internment Camp in Canada, Canadian Museum for Human Rights, Winnipeg.
BOTTOM: The luggage safely stacked in the display mount.

Shelly: That's a very good lesson learned. I totally know what you're saying in terms of the times when you're so focused on solving the mount that you can forget everything else. I have to be very aware of my workspace. You start out clean, but then the tools begin to encroach on the object. That's when I know I have to take a breath. Move everything out again and make room. Thank you for sharing that good lesson. I think one of the most important skills as a mountmaker is to slow down.

Richard: And that's really difficult when we're working under deadlines. But you're right, it's really important to breathe and remember to slow down. SLOW DOWN and stay focused in the midst of chaos.

Shelly: So true. We know that you're a staff mountmaker at the Getty Center now. You have also worked as a freelance mountmaker. Would you like to talk about the differences between those roles from your experience?

Richard: Sure. I think mountmakers who have had the opportunity to work as independent contractors, especially those who are brought in to work on large projects with deadlines and who may not be very familiar with the collection they're working on, develop a certain mindset that's required for doing this kind of work. It's like you're thrown into the trenches, and it teaches you a work ethic and problem-solving ability that requires you to be very efficient with your time. Going into a project where there's never been a mount shop and setting one up from scratch can be exhausting. You come in, set up, get the work done, then you're out, literally. And the working conditions aren't always ideal. We've had to set up in closets or little back rooms, with no ventilation, or a C Container in the hot sun. It's not fun, but I think it made me a better mountmaker. I think it helped me develop better skills of problem solving, and I feel I have more mental tools at my disposal.

For people who are starting out now, some might think the ultimate goal is to get a job at an institution, which is not a bad approach. There are definitely benefits to working in a large institution, especially later in your career, but I wouldn't want anyone to get discouraged if they aren't part of an institution right away. Developing your skills as a contract mountmaker can help lay a great foundation for your career. You'll be exposed to a wide variety of objects and working situations, as well as meet a lot of great people.

Shelly: You have worked at different institutions and companies as a mount maker and in different capacities within the museum setting. Would you like to elaborate on how your job responsibilities varied in these different roles?

Richard: I've been on projects where the client is a private collector and I've had to be the furniture designer, the

furniture builder, the mountmaker, the rigger, everything. There have also been instances where I've been part of a contracted team of mountmakers for a permanent exhibition, where mountmaking is the entire scope of the job, or others that involve installing everything after we've made the mounts. My current role as a mountmaker at the Getty is just focused on mountmaking. We are present in the galleries when objects are installed and I really like that, because we're very familiar with the way the mounts work, so we're on hand to answer questions or oversee. If someone's not familiar with the mount, it can potentially go wrong, and that's not safe. I feel strongly that the mountmaker should be installing their own mount, but it isn't always possible. Overall, my responsibilities have run the gamut, and it's just been dependent on my situation and the project I'm involved in.

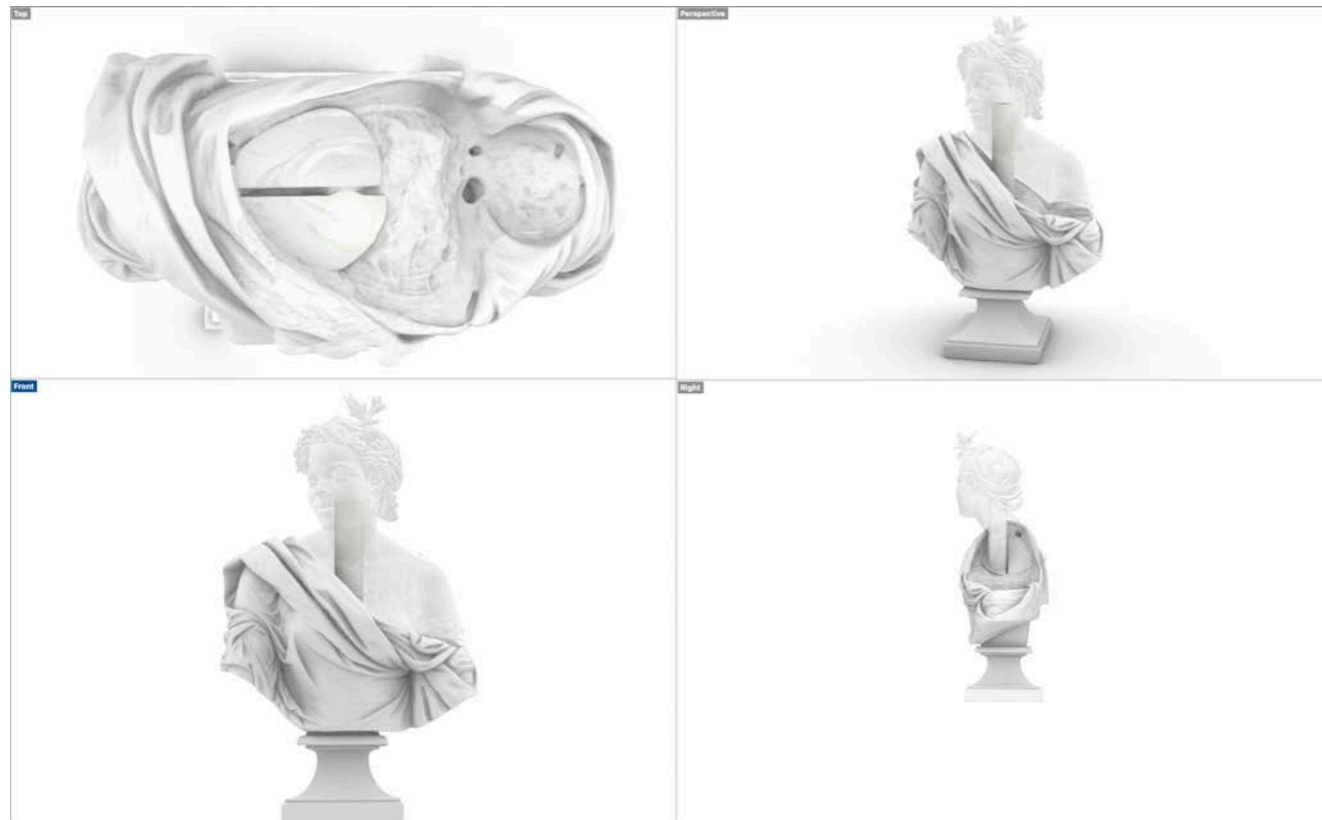
Shelly: What draws you to wanting to volunteer to help with the IMF?

Richard: Well under normal circumstances, I'm very introverted. But, for some reason, being involved with this community brings me out of my shell. It's personally challenging. It makes me exercise my communication skills in a way that I wouldn't normally. It also exposes me to other people's experiences, which is always helpful. And I get to feel like I'm connected to something larger than myself. So, it's really nice to be involved. At one point in my career, I was teaching printmaking in India and in Iowa, so I really enjoy being engaged on that level. I would love to be involved somehow in teaching mountmaking. Anyway, there's something about mountmakers that make for a very enjoyable company. There's not a lot of drama, or tremendous egos to navigate. There's just something down to earth and relatable about our group. I'm talking about the larger community of the IMF as well, not just our steering committee. It's a pleasure to work with the steering committee, too, because we're all pushing ourselves to become better citizens. Nobody else is asking us to do it. We're asking ourselves to do things that may be outside our comfort zone.

Shelly: I was so impressed when you were willing to take on the Instagram work in the early days. You were willing to give it a try, even though it was new territory for all of us.

Richard: I thought of it as another problem to solve. I had the feeling we could really make an impact, and Pierre-Luc has really allowed that to blossom. I made the right move passing on that baton!

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2023 : CORDIER BUSTS

TOP: Rhino software is used to locate a vertical post inside the female Cordier bust, Getty Center.
RIGHT: The lower portion of the female Cordier mount utilizes cast interfaces and magnets to secure to the object.



2021 : RIGGING MOUNTS

A compression mount with cast interfaces is used to safely rig an ancient marble bust.

Shelly: Do you have any advice for people just starting out in mountmaking? We talked a little bit about that in the beginning. Any memories from when you first started, or things you wish had happened differently in your own training or experience?

Richard: For the second part of that question, I don't really wish that anything was different. I feel very fortunate to have landed where I did, and meeting the people that I did. I couldn't have asked for a better place to learn. So, I don't have any regrets in that sense.

As far as advice to people just starting out, you know, this past year we had a mountmaking intern for the first time at the Getty and she really has the skills and temperament to continue pursuing this as a career. But we saw firsthand how difficult getting started in this profession can be, due to job requirements. It's unfortunate that a lot of museums, the Getty included, require 3-5 years of mountmaking experience for an entry level position. It's a Catch 22. Even if you're a successful independent mountmaker, and have clients who are private collectors, that does not necessarily count towards museum work. It can be hard to get around that. Some art service companies have mountmakers on staff, and that may be the easiest way to get started, but those don't exist everywhere, and the quality of training varies. I wish I had an answer. There seem to be a lot of us older mountmakers who will be retiring at some point in the not too distant future, so I'm hoping there'll be more opportunities for the younger generation. But again, getting past that experience hurdle needs to be addressed somehow.

If this is really your passion, I would say, stick to it, maybe try to get hired by an art service company because you'll be getting experience in a variety of institutions and locations. Immerse yourself in the work and see what happens. There are a lot of museums that don't have mountmakers on staff but they need mounts. Once you gain experience and build up your portfolio, you could start applying for mountmaking

positions, and see how it goes. You may decide that working independently is the best path, who knows. It's best, though, to keep open to different possibilities and stay flexible when it comes to travel and living situations. The jobs aren't necessarily going to be convenient, especially in the beginning.

The IMF is a really great resource for connecting with other people and being exposed to jobs opportunities, and it's getting better all the time.

Shelly: Where do you see the future of mount making heading?

Richard: I can see the benefits to continuing to push towards 3D technology. At this point it's still cost prohibitive for a lot of museums and independent contractors, but it's opening up possibilities that just didn't exist before. And there are new companies emerging with much more affordable scanners and software.

But if you can make a mount from a 3D print rather than the actual object, this lessens handling, reducing risk to the object, and can give you access to an object that you don't have on site. There's something to be said for learning mountmaking with an actual object, but it's probably safer in the beginning to work with a replica. 3D technology isn't necessarily changing our mount designs that much, we're utilizing it in a way that's tremendously time saving and reducing the risk of possible damage to objects.

I am also excited by the possibilities of mounting objects with magnets. I was really resistant to this idea at first, but I'm coming around to the concept. They've always been wonderful for textiles and 2D work, but for 3D work I was a little skeptical. In specific contexts, though, they're working well for us and they're opening up new possibilities for making internal mounts that we didn't have before.

This series was inspired by the AIC-ECPN's @humans_of_conservation Instagram series. We are grateful to them and expand on their idea with their permission.