The Alaska Collections Project merged the knowledge of Alaskan tribal representatives with the curatorial and collection resources of the Smithsonian Institution and the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, and the philanthropic resources of the Museum Loan Network, the Rasmuson Foundation, and the Phillips Foundation. The collaboration has enabled the partners to explore the interpretation, presentation, and care of Alaskan objects of cultural heritage. As part of this project, Anna Etageak—an 80-year-old Inupiaq Eskimo elder from the village of Unalakleet in Norton Sound, Alaska—came to Washington with three other elders to examine and discuss 19th-century Unalakleet artifacts from the collections of the National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian.

Building Blocks

In each of the Museum Loan Network's three "think tanks," those who attended returned to twin realizations: "It takes many languages to describe reality," as one phrased it; and multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary collaboration offers an opportunity to tap a variety of such "languages"—i.e., varying perspectives and the fields of special knowledge and ways of knowing they give rise to.

They were quick to point out that audience members are the ultimate collaborators: they bring their own beliefs, experiences, and understandings to an encounter, and *make their own meaning*. The goal of collaborations should be to echo, challenge, expand, elaborate on, or facilitate new dimensions in audience members' personal, social, and historical "constructs" or "mindsets" so that they come to new insights. And those insights should be useful.

Combining approaches from a range of disciplines provides many more "points of entry" for audience members, participants explained. And once people are involved, their sense of possibility expands as their ways of knowing multiply. Interdisciplinary experiences, it was pointed out, are crucial to growth in learning capacity: early learning instills a desire to classify, to create order, and to stay safely within boundaries, so it takes trans-disciplinary learning to create comfort—and interest—in making connections and "holistic meaning."

The "silo mentality" that often accompanies specialization can be a formidable obstacle for collaborators, participants conceded. Still, as leaders in the fields of art history, dance, theater, art, philanthropy, science, history, technology, education, libraries, museums, and public tele-

vision, they agreed that kindred goals and values are building blocks for collaboration, even when organizations appear to have little else in common.

Despite representing a wide variety of disciplines, they discovered they also employ strategies to assist audience members in the "making of meaning" which are striking in their similarity. They all said they engage people by:

Thomas E. Warren, *Centripetal Spring Chair*, New York, 1849, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

- **Creating an environment or setting the stage for something to happen.** Perhaps, most obviously, the performing arts do this, they acknowledged, but others do so as well: museums often create physical layouts to create an "ambience" like that associated with ritual or ceremony. As one participant noted, certain contexts create outcomes: "if you put people in a circle, something *will* happen." Where the environment is multi-sensory, the experience will be richer because a variety of stimuli offers more entry points.

- **Using juxtaposition.** Throwing similarities or differences into relief is a much-used device because it moves people from the familiar to the unfamiliar, quickly amplifying understanding, and generating surprise, delight—even inspiration. Providing an example of the illuminating power of juxtaposition, one attendee described his wonder at mistaking a New England church, its steeple well-lit but enshrouded in mist and rain, for a rocket launcher as he drove through a small village one evening.

How and where to begin a collaboration? **David Park Curry**, Curator of American Arts, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, says one might look to objects for inspiration. "Even though they're non-verbal things, they have a presence that's eloquent as well as mute," he says, "and reflecting on that presence catalyzes response—ideas, feelings, and stories. They can start something."

How are they "eloquent?" One might ask. "Let ideas come *from* the object instead of applying them *to* the object," Curry explains, "and they will 'talk' to anybody who takes a moment to look at them." Formal elements give objects a "language" that is to some degree universal, so that when you juxtapose shapes, for example, they begin to "speak" to each other. By way of an example he describes a mini conversation he created in his galleries using two American chairs and a silver pitcher designed in the mid-19th century. Backward-looking ornament inspired by the 18th-century French rococo masks advanced American technology—steam-bent plywood and leaf springs—used to manufacture the chairs. All three curvaceous objects echo the alluring, wasp-waisted silhouette that dominated women's fashion. And each piece uses ornament from the natural world to soften the potentially unsettling impact of industrial progress.

"Even if you're not versed in understanding how objects were crafted, you can still enjoy links in the vocabulary of form," he says. "I used to hate researching 18th-century chairs—not having acquired a taste for them. I thought them brown, like bottles of Scotch all in a row. But when you taste Scotch you discover infinite variety. And as I began to read the subtleties of old chairs, I found them highly individual. Objects can liberate you from what you know—from your time, economic stratum, and the advantages and disadvantages of your education or cultural milieu—if you're respectful of them."

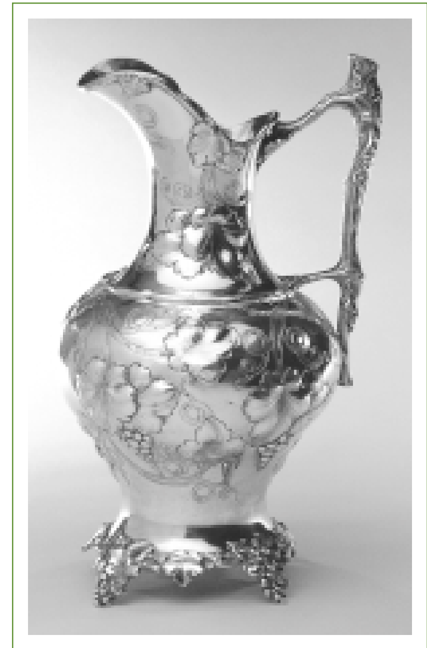
The way in which an artist plays with the formal elements of shape, line, texture, and color also creates

- **Providing context.** Participants said they often connect what they are presenting to other objects or information because it can reveal a bigger or more complete meaning. (Those in the performing arts were said to be especially insightful about how contextual meaning can aggregate.) They were quick to note, however, that creating too accessible a context—too much comfort—can impede the making of connections for audience members. The "startle factor"—and all it sets in motion—can get lost.

- **Making the context accessible.** Those attending the meetings said they frequently work as guides, too, translating arcane concepts to jargon-free language, moving between the experts and audiences. They try to provide references that resonate with audience members' own experience in doing so.

- **Using scholarship as a platform.** Scholarship offers a particular kind of context, attendees pointed out, that can help amplify meaning. One described an exhibit that presented information about Italy being the first country to practice human dissection. Understandably, this had a profound effect on the way artists represented the body, to which audience members became privy.

- **Making the process of creation transparent.** Some artists are reluctant to "pull the curtain back on how a work is made, believing that what you see is what you get," as one put it. But participants



Mitchell & Tyler, *Pitcher*, Richmond, Va., 1850, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

compelling narratives of choices made, of ideas considered and discarded. Curry points to landscapes by painters of the Hudson River School, which are pretty formulaic: most feature a "screening of trees at their edges, a watery middle ground, and a distant point." It's the deviations from pattern that "tell stories." "You look at a painting, compare it to the actual site or an old photograph, and wonder 'why was this or that element left out?'" says Curry. "Why is there a tiny sawmill in this vast landscape? What will happen to these seemingly endless resources? What's the artist's take in 1868—how is that different now?"

"Even the most abstract painting is about something," he says. "Since the paintings, sculptures, and decorative arts in the Virginia Museum's American collection were generally created for domestic use, they always prompt stories about their cultural context and interrelated use too. Associations overlay that use; but meaning varies from culture to culture." White flowers are associated with brides and weddings—joyful occasions in the United States, Curry notes, whereas in Japan they signify death. "So you see, objects can accommodate any number of interpretations," he says. "And as physical things they can move from context to context without baggage—unlike us," he laughs. Watching people "seek cohesion among objects' individual tales," he realizes they are making meaning. "You can see how objects are tools for exploring something on your own," he concludes.

Ultimately, however, it is the muteness of objects' presence—not their visual eloquence—that Curry considers to be their greatest "gift." Because objects survive all the shifting meanings assigned to them by viewers, their simple presence is reassuring, especially in times of flux, he believes. And the reflection they catalyze is comforting. "Objects remain the same. It's the meaning that flows in and out."

To Conserve a Legacy is the result of a broad collaborative effort between museums, a conservation center, and six universities. Organized by the Addison Gallery and The Studio Museum in Harlem, in association with the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, the exhibition features 200 African-American works from the collections of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). As part of this comprehensive partnership, a two-year internship program was developed to enable students from HBCUs to learn about the practice and profession of conservation.

agreed that when an artist shares his or her process, it helps people understand the motives and craft that go into creating a work of art. It makes the art and the artist more accessible and human; such appreciation is even a form of meaning. (It's especially helpful with contemporary art, it was noted, because materials are often removed from their familiar uses and nothing is recognizable.)

- **Supplying resources that assist in the making of meaning.** Like libraries, museums often point to resources from which audience members can extract their own meaning. When the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Addison Gallery of Phillips Academy organized *To Conserve a Legacy*, an exhibition of works drawn from the collections of Historic Black Colleges, they also collaborated with the Williamstown Arts Conservation Center. This collaboration offered students at Howard, Hampton, and Fisk Universities a chance to participate as conservation interns, enriching their understanding of the exhibit.

- **Inviting people to adapt a concept or make something themselves.** When people are invited to do something themselves, all agreed, they take on levels of understanding that could not possibly be conveyed in any other way. Moreover, learning by way of hands-on experience imbeds knowledge of process from which later intuitive leaps and connections can be made—expanding an individual's ways of apprehending and thinking.

Even though museums serve as repositories for material culture, they rarely have the benefit of knowing about their objects' making or use, **Judy Mitoma**, Director, UCLA Center for Intercultural Performance in Los Angeles, points out. To her mind, building such knowledge is one very good reason to collaborate with others—and in current parlance, be *inclusive* about it.

"Our office is below the Fowler Museum of Cultural History," she says, citing an example. "Upstairs there are objects sitting in drawers because cataloguing is such a chore. At most, knowledge from the academic and scholarly world will be compiled." She finds this irksome. "Adequate attention just isn't given to what I call 'user knowledge,' or 'painter knowledge,'" she explains, "and that is *such a loss*. It's exciting to have parallel sets of knowledge! And useful to know if there's a difference of opinion between the academic and the 'local'—the applied insight that carriers of tradition would have."

"We say of 'high art' that everyone sees something different in it," she elaborates. "Well, we should acknowledge that it's true for other objects too, and that some people—like the 'local person'—have impressions that reach deeply into a cultural frame of reference, a sense of history. It's important to get what you might call the 'outsider view,' but the 'insider view' is also crucial." Objects are "a reflection of both a person (the artist) and a culture. I'd love it if the value attached to objects came to mean more than beauty or monetary value—if it came to incorporate memory, story, and history as well," she says, "because that's where the power of objects really lies."

To get at that power, Mitoma imagines museums taking a cue from the popular TV program "Antiques Road Show." "They could invite

As they catalogued this repertoire of strategies that are common to all cultural institutions in some form or other, participants noted that using them in combination multiplies or magnifies their effects, and that particularly rich combinations of strategies might be had if individuals from widely varying backgrounds were to collaborate. The tools technology offers for creating and disseminating work are evolving and increasing rapidly, too.

But ultimately, they said, the unique assets that museums bring to the table—their collections—should be viewed as the starting point. Though they hailed from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds, those attending the "think tanks" pointed out that visual images are the first "language" of infants, and remain the dominant language of human life. Museums thus have unparalleled expertise at the core of human experience. They should keep that in mind.

people to bring in objects, then take photos of them, and record information about why they are valued—annotating knowledge of the craft involved, the history of their possession, and so on." The exercise would reveal "local knowledge"—and engage people. "Getting into the hearts and minds and history of others to learn how they construct their realities," she points out, especially neighbors from dissimilar cultural backgrounds, is "stimulating, energizing—downright inspiring."

Several installations the artist Hirokazu Kosaka has done with the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles offer another illustration of the possibility and power of inclusiveness, suggests Mitoma. At New Year's he invited visitors to do collage, ink drawings, and paintings for an exhibit. "He created a way for us to care about each other," she reports, and the result was "a manifestation of love, thought, and taste." Now he has installed sheaves of rice (the equivalent in Japanese culture of wheat, she notes) in the Museum's courtyard, making it into a work of art, offering people a new perspective.

"Museums can do a lot to serve the public," Mitoma believes. "Bringing in people—especially working class people for whom 'aesthetic experiences' are not a high priority, who value a direct encounter with an outcome of which they themselves are the instrument—is one way. Museums then become windows that reflect who we are to ourselves and to each other." Coming from the performing arts, she sees this kind of thing beginning to happen—the museum world "blossoming, breaking out of its skin." And it's exciting "to listen to logic unlike your own being applied to the world around you. I feel like this is the right direction," she says. "Not one river but waters mixing—that's thrilling."