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## Fieldnotes on vist to the Columbus Museum of Art to view collection Walter O. and Walter L. Mayo

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**FIELDNOTES: MAYO: ART AND COMMUNITY**

Accession number: MAC-PT-F092101.A

Researcher's name: Peg Tazewell

Event: Visit to the Columbus Museum of Art to view collection of  
Walter O. and Walter L. Mayo

Place: Columbus Museum of Art  
480 East Broad Street  
Columbus, Ohio 43215-3823  
(614) 221-6801

Co-workers Present: Jessica Phillips, Professor Melissa Dabakis, Dan Younger, Sarah X, Judy Sacks, Nanette M., curator

We met with Nanette M., curator of the exhibit: *FATHER AND SON: Carvings and Paintings by Walter O. and Walter L. Mayo* on Friday, September 21, 2001 at the Columbus Museum of Art. While the main exhibit is no longer displayed, the Museum has kept several carvings of Walter O., and one painting of Walter L. on display in the Museum's general collection. At the time, more work was in storage and Nanette arranged for us to view the carvings that had been stored as well. It is my understanding that there remain more paintings by Walter L. at the Museum but they were not laid out for us to view in storage.

Nanette took us to view a display on the first floor of the Museum, in a hall-way beyond the children's section. Carvings by Walter O. Mayo included: *The Mayo Special, Black Pig, Greyhound Jumping through Hoop, Jacob and the Angel, The Baker, Rooster, Turtle, and Twenty Mule Team*. The only painting remaining of Walter L. Mayo's was *E.A. Schlairet Tractor-Trailer, 1948*. Walter O's, *The Ark of the Covenant*, promised as a gift to the Columbus Museum, is displayed on the second floor in the hallway with folk art by Elijah Pierce.

Nanette spoke first of Walter L. Mayo. She noted his classical training in commercial art, but feels that as he aged he lost his training and he becomes more of a folk artist. She commented, "he had some interesting talent when he was young."

The Museum was unable to date most of Walter O's carvings, nor did they have any idea how he learned or when he began to carve. Nanette expressed hopes that our investigation may uncover some of this information.

She spoke of Michael Hall, an art-historian and collector who wrote the article that accompanied the exhibit for the Museum. Mr. Hall prompted Mrs. Jeanette Mayo to search for the scroll which should have been inside of *The Ark of the Covenant*, which Mrs. Mayo subsequently found. It is not contained in the drawer of *The Ark*.

Nanette spoke about Mrs. Mayo, who is Walter L.'s second wife. She identified that Duff Lindsey had been contacted by the daughter of Walter L. and his first wife, but also noted that

there was another daughter by his second wife, Jeanette (NOTE: in discussions one week later with Mrs. Mayo, it appears the second daughter was actually the daughter of Mrs. Mayo and her first husband).

In speaking of the carvings of Walter O., Nanette suggested that Walter O. was a wood crafting hobbyist. She felt his work contained “little racial consciousness,” but instead reflected the influence of American mainstream popular culture. She identified the Twenty Mule Team piece and connected it to a popular 1920’s radio show.

She did say that those people who viewed the work and were knowledgeable about harnessing were amazed at the intricacy of the harnessing in the carvings, and they’d indicated that it was accurate.

Nanette spoke about her interactions with the Mayo family, assuring us that they are “just about as middle class Mid-western as you can possible get.”

She talked about the family’s close relationship with Reverend Jesse Wood, a Baptist minister in Columbus, pastor of Bethany Baptist Church where Walter L. attended and produced many of his homecoming banners artwork.

Nanette finally gave us interesting information on the black community and artistic traditions in Columbus, Ohio. She spoke of the information that is available in the curatorial files on William Hawkins, Elijah Pierce, and Ralph Bell. She spoke of Smokey Brown, who continues to live and work near the east side of Columbus, and who’s work may give us some connections to the Mayo’s traditions. She also spoke of Ameena Robinson, an artist who grew up in the neighborhood of Elijah Pierce’s barbershop and who played with clay while Mr. Pierce carved. She believes that Ms. Robinson interweaves the traditions of folk art and fine art in her work.

Nanette relayed the story of Emerson Burkhart, a white painter who protested the segregation of the Columbus Art League by organizing his own opposing openings on the same night as major openings at the Art League, drawing off people from the Art League’s openings to view his “egalitarian” collections. The Museum’s collection displays a portrait by Mr. Burkhart of another African-American artist, Roman Johnson, who represents more of the trained tradition of African-American artists in Columbus. At this point, Nanette identified that the Museum occasionally is criticized by those who believe the collection focuses too much on “untrained” artists -- suggesting perhaps politically that they are the only African-American artists of value. The Museum is seeking more works by trained artists in response.

We were also able to view additional works of Walter O.’s that are in storage. These works included: *The Logging Team*, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream*, *Chief Pontiac* and *Maharaja Riding an Elephant*.

I found the carvings of Walter O. Mayo to be incredibly intricate. As Nanette stated, the harnessing was amazingly detailed leather harnessing. The carvings were very realistic, showing a true appreciation of (and I think affection for) the animals. The work shows both a popular culture influence and the influence of a rural society -- farm animals and carts. Other works

reflect Mr. Mayo's religious influences. While the comment had been made that the work showed no racial consciousness, I found that there were different shadings of the people carved (particularly the difference between *The Baker* and the people in *The Mayo Special* piece). Given the rural, largely white, community that Walter O. was raised in, and the times when these works were produced, it is not surprising that there doesn't appear to be a strong racial consciousness. However, I do believe the men in *The Mayo Special* carving especially represent African-American men.

Walter L.'s Schlairer truck painting is very reflective of popular culture, but I also see the continuing tradition of his father's work -- using bright, bold primary colors in his painting, although his father's painting was on wood.