

John Muir in the study commons

A case study in the aesthetic and educational impact of art in the library

At the University of the Pacific Library, a work of art is being used to raise the visibility of one of its unique special collections. A photographic mural in the library's study commons offers an artistic tribute to the naturalist John Muir, whose papers are housed in the library's Holt-Atherton Special Collections department. The series of events that led to its installation provided unique opportunities to forge partnerships between the library and a variety of people and units within the campus community. As a result, the study commons features artwork that provides this learning space with aesthetic beauty as well as a thematic connection to the John Muir Papers.¹ This educational impact reflects the perspective of former ALA President Jim Rettig, who observed, "art has an educational purpose that resonates with the library's academic mission."²

John Muir and University of the Pacific

One of the truly distinctive aspects of University of the Pacific is the university library's unique role as home to the John Muir Papers. In addition to being a renowned nature writer, Muir (1838-1914) founded the Sierra Club, was instrumental in the development of the National Parks concept, and is widely viewed as the forefather of the modern environmental movement. His papers, which include correspondence, manuscript writings, journals, drawings, and photographs, attract researchers from around the world. This collection is also used by Pacific students in a variety of courses. The Special Collections department proactively facilitates the use of archival material within the undergraduate curriculum, and the Muir Papers are a key component of student engagement with Special Collections at Pacific.

The University of the Pacific promotes John Muir as not only an important historical figure, but also an icon for current issues, such as sustainability. The library works in collaboration with Pacific's John Muir Center in using Muir as a touchstone for developing environmental awareness in students as well as the general public. Muir quotes and images can be found in the University Center, reinforcing the environmental ethic it represents as the campus's first LEED-certified "green" building.

Muir's commitment to environmental stewardship provides the foundation on which Pacific's M.O.V.E. (Mountains, Ocean, Valley Experience) program is built. This award-winning initiative takes first-year students on an overnight trip to wilderness areas with activities to deepen their understanding of environmental issues, and includes a reflective exercise on Muir's philosophy. Through these programs as well as curricular opportunities, Pacific students become aware of the significance of the John Muir Papers as well as the importance of Muir's ideas in stimulating their own perspectives on environmental responsibility.

The university library and Muir Center also cosponsor a conference on John Muir every four years. This event involves professional scholars as well as Pacific students who share their Muir-related research. In 2010, the "John Muir: Naturalist and Scientist" conference coincided with the inaugural year of Pacific's new president, Pamela A. Eibeck. Throughout the year a series of campus programs were designated as

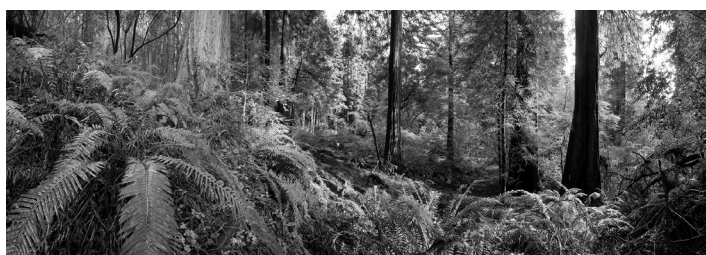
Shan C. Sutton is associate dean and head of special collections, e-mail: ssutton@pacific.edu, and Robin Imhof is associate professor/humanities librarian, at the University of Pacific Library, e-mail: rimhof@pacific.edu

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inaugural events in honor of Eibeck. The Muir conference enjoyed this designation, as did a separate Muir-based initiative developed by a group of Pacific students. A common sense of purpose sparked extensive collaboration between the organizers of these two events that resulted in the Muir-related art being installed in the library's newly created study commons.

Collaboration between the University Library, John Muir Center, and Powell Scholars

The Powell Scholarship is University of the Pacific's most prestigious merit scholarship for undergraduates. It is designed to cultivate future leaders by providing opportunities for experiential learning, study abroad, and volunteering in the local community. In



Detail of Stephen Joseph's Muir Woods photograph. The photograph is accompanied by the caption "Muir Woods Centennial, 1908-2008" and the Muir quote "Kings of the Forest, The Noblest of a Noble Race."

© Stephen Joseph.

addition to receiving this scholarship, the Powell Scholars work together on various academic and outreach projects.

In 2010, the Powell Scholars committed to hosting an inaugural event involving the acquisition and installation of artwork on campus that was inspired by Muir. This concept was based on the Powell Scholars' recognition of both Muir's importance as a symbol of environmentalism and his connection to Pacific through the John Muir Papers.

Ultimately, the Powell Scholars chose a 9-by-3-foot photograph of Muir Woods by Stephen Joseph, a fine art photographer based in the San Francisco Bay area. The photograph offers a striking view of Muir Woods National Monument, with sunlight filtered through coastal redwoods and ferns. (Muir Woods National Monument, located just north of San Francisco, was dedicated in 1908 in honor of John Muir.) Unbeknownst to the students, Joseph had a

connection with the Muir Papers from photographing the collection for illustrations in the book *Nature's Beloved Son: Rediscovering John Muir's Botanical Legacy*.³ In addition to being an impressive piece of art, Joseph's photograph of Muir Woods offers visual testament to the magnificence of this wilderness area. In doing so, the photograph connects two issues that are central to Pacific's identity: cultivating environmental responsibility and promoting the legacy of the John Muir. Knowing the University Library is the global epicenter for Muir research, the Powell Scholars approached the library as a location for the photograph. Not only was the library thrilled to accept this offer, there was a perfect space already waiting for it.

The study commons

In 2009, a 2,000-square-foot "Study Commons" was created by renovating a portion of the library

previously dedicated to book shelving that had become empty as a result of earlier phases in the building's renovation. The spacious study commons accommodates both individuals and groups through a variety of moveable tables, chairs, couches, and white boards. With comfortable, colorful furniture, the space has an inviting look and feel that attracts students and facilitates collaboration. This area has emerged as a hub of student activity in the library, especially at night as they work on course assignments and group projects.

When the study commons was originally conceived, the library intended to place artwork on a large wall that previously had served as a bulletin board. Before any formal identification of art was made for this purpose, the Powell Scholars' concept emerged to provide an ideal piece to decorate the space and also promote an essential aspect of the library's identity as home of the Muir Papers.

“The photograph was a wonderful milestone for the Powell Scholars,” student Anas-tasya Uskov affirmed, “and its location in the library couldn’t have been better. It represents not only Muir’s legacy and the university’s determination to preserve that legacy, but its place in the study area further surrounds students with that intangible, magnificent nature that makes university of the Pacific so beautiful and special.” The location of the photograph in the study commons helps to ensure that its aesthetic beauty and underlying message are appreciated by large numbers of students. The image also has the impact of bringing the natural world into the building. It offers a vivid example of how art featuring nature scenes or themes can convey a warm organic aesthetic in a library.

As one student remarked, “The photo of Muir Woods helps make the space feel more open and natural. It’s very calming to look at nature when you’re busy with homework.”

In order to make explicit the connections between the photograph and the John Muir Papers, the library mounted a 5-by-3-foot poster in an adjacent area of the Study Commons that highlights the Muir Papers and their significance. The poster explains how the papers embody Muir’s legacy and are used in research by scholars from around the world as well as Pacific students. It features images of items from the collection, such as letters, journals, drawings, and photographs, including a photo taken of Muir in Muir Woods. Together, the photographic mural and the poster give context to each other as decorations with both artistic and educational impacts.



The Muir Woods image offers an artistic focal point for the Study Commons area of the University Library.

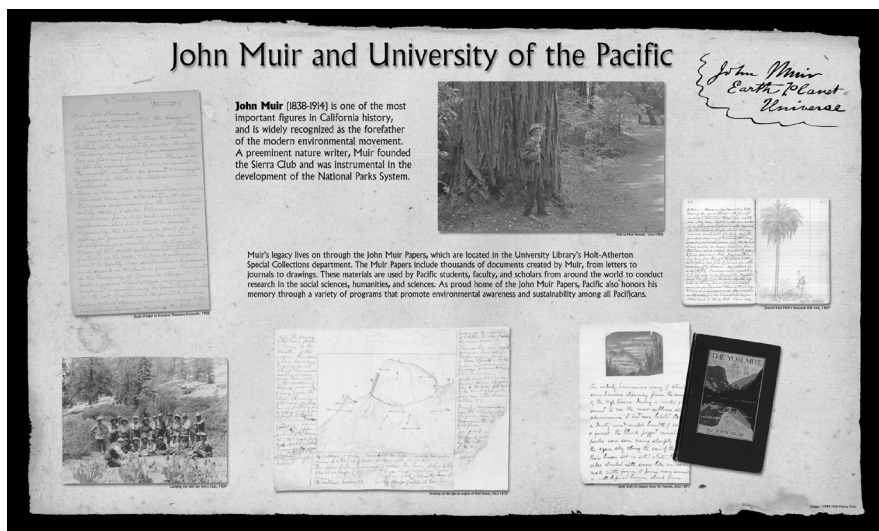
The library, Muir Center, and Powell Scholars worked together to determine how the unveiling of the artwork could simultaneously be integrated into the Muir conference as well as the series of presidential inaugural events. It was decided that the unveiling would be the final session of the two-day conference. Thus the ceremony included conference attendees as well as the campus community and individuals connected to the Powell Scholars

program. The ceremony began with a talk by Stephen Joseph on his photography, then proceeded with the unveiling of the photograph by President Eibeck and the Powell Scholars, and ended with a reception in the study commons area surrounding the

photograph. Bringing yet another partner into the mix, the library’s “friends” group, the Associates of the University Library, cosponsored the reception. The mural was unveiled on April 24, 2010, to an audience of nearly 200 people.

Conclusion

This experience illustrates how artwork can enliven academic library spaces while also conveying an educational message that promotes a library’s unique collection strengths. A key component to success was an openness to collaboration with a variety of campus partners who not only contributed to different aspects of the project, but also ensured that awareness of the artwork would be widespread from the moment of its dedication. Muir once wrote “the power of imagination makes us infinite.”⁴ The process of bringing the Muir Woods photographic mural into the university library was



John Muir Papers poster. The poster on John Muir and University of the Pacific makes clear the links between the Muir Woods photograph and the University Library's John Muir Papers. View this article online for detailed image.

certainly an exercise in collective imagination that extended well beyond the library's walls to raise the visibility of the John Muir Papers, while enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the study commons.

Notes

1. Information on the John Muir Papers can be found at <http://library.pacific.edu/ha/muir/>.

2. James Rettig, "Art for Everyone's Sake," *Virginia Libraries* 50, no. 3 (2004): 5.

3. Bonnie Johanna Gisel and Stephen J. Joseph, *Nature's Beloved Son: Rediscovering John Muir's Botanical Legacy* (Berkeley, Calif.: Heyday Books, 2008).

4. John Muir, "The National Parks and Forest Reservations," *Sierra Club Bulletin* 1, no. 7 (1896): 283. *zz*

(*MetaWHAT?* cont. from page 77)

- Easier metadata entry: Access Services staff will be transitioning from using Excel spreadsheets for metadata entry to CONTENTdm Project Clients. Although this will take some additional training, it will ultimately save time and effort by centralizing all digital object storage and cataloging.

- Expanding this pilot project to include staff from other units within the library, if interest is shown among faculty, staff, and supervisors.

- Continued training and skill development in subject analysis, authority control, and digitization. As staff members express interest in learning more about digital project, the digital archivist continues to hold individual and group training sessions focusing on specific activities and areas of research and practice.

- Document and share the process with others through publicity and publishing.²

We are continuing to refine and improve this cross-departmental collaborative process. We hope to use this as a model for other innovative, exciting cooperative projects within the library and possibly beyond the library walls.

Notes

1. "About UNC Charlotte," University of North Carolina, accessed July 18, 2011, www.uncc.edu/landing/about.

2. The J. Murrey Atkins Library maintains a wiki in order to share training materials with staff and to document and share procedures with other libraries at <http://atkinsspecialcollections.pbworks.com/>. *zz*