Welcome to HMSC Connects! where we go behind the scenes of four Harvard museums to explore the connections between us, our big, beautiful world, and even what lies beyond. My name is Jennifer Berglund, part of the exhibits team here at the Harvard Museums of Science and Culture. And I'll be your host. For the last few weeks, I've been talking to some of the people behind the scenes that care for the treasured collections in each of our four public museums. Today, I'm speaking with Diana Zlatanovski, a collection steward at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. She works with a collection of 1.2 million objects from cultures around the world, specializing in materials collected from contemporary peoples outside North America. Diana has a breadth of interests, a lifelong love for museums, and a deep appreciation for the aesthetic sensibilities of people from both yesterday and today. I wanted to learn more about how she landed where she is now. Diana Zlatanovski. Welcome.

Diana Zlatanovski 01:34
Thanks for having me.

Jennifer Berglund 01:37
When did you fall in love with museums?

Diana Zlatanovski 01:41
As a kid, there was two big museums that we would go on field trips to one being the Museum of Science and Industry, and the other the Field Museum, which is natural history and anthropology collections. And I was just fascinated by the anthropology exhibits as a kid there. Especially, there was one and I believe it's actually still there called the Pawnee Earth Lodge, and it was a replica of a traditional round, earthen lodge that would have been inhabited by Pawnee tribes on the Great Plains in the 1800s. And so it was a full size reproduction that we would walk into and sit inside of, and learn about the artifacts and there was a replica of artifacts that we could handle. I remember, there being constellations sort of above our heads, I don't remember if they were painted, or if it was projections. And the whole experience was just magical. I remember looking up a lot and there was a hole cut in the top of the lodge above where the fire pit was, and making that connection of sitting and living in this space, and being so connected to the outdoors, and having this, you know, this opening above that you could just look out into the sky. I just pictured myself as how different that was than the life that I was living every day of boring old bedroom with no constellations, nothing. As a kid, you know what you know, and you know what you experience. And you know, some kids are lucky to get to travel a lot when they're young, and be able to live different lives and experience different things. So a lot of my experiencing other types of environments was through museums and through books, and that was something else that I immersed myself in. But it all came sort of full-circle many years later when I
graduated from college with that anthropology degree, and I was trying to decide what career path I wanted to go down. So I ended up volunteering at the Anthropology Department at the Field Museum. And just as soon as I walked into the the non-public spaces of the museum on the upper floors, these hallways were just lined with old wooden doors with the old timey black lettering on them. And there was just that magic again of like being in another time. And I was totally hooked. And the next stop was graduate school in museum studies. And after that, I came back to the Field Museum to work there for a few months. So, the Field Museum is sort of like my old boyfriend that I'm always going back to. All roads lead back to the Field Museum for me.

Jennifer Berglund 04:54
You have a background in art, as well as anthropology. Can you explain how you became interested in both of those subjects, and then how you figured out how to combine both of them into a career?

Diana Zlatanovski 05:07
So my parents immigrated to the US from Macedonia, and holding on to their traditions was really important to them. So yeah, so I grew up in a fairly multicultural household. And I imagine that probably predisposed me a little bit to being interested and being aware of other cultures. And I'm not sure I can actually pinpoint exactly when I became interested in art, but I did go into college as a studio art major, so it was some time before that. The one thing that I loved about college was all of the different options that were available, and I tend to be somebody that is interested in a lot of things around me, and what, and learning different new things. So, I came across an Egyptology class that sounded great, and pretty much, as soon as I ended up in that class, I headed off to the registrar's office and changed my major to anthropology.

Jennifer Berglund 06:07
What was it about Egyptology that really sparked your interest?

Diana Zlatanovski 06:12
There's something, I think, about Egyptology that is especially exciting. Like it's one of the more romanticized sides of archaeology and a little bit of that Indiana Jones tone to things and how it's just imagining these, these worlds that existed, and being able to work with artifacts from them was just so exciting to me. So it wasn't until after college that I was exposed to anthropology within museums, and that that would even be a career option.

Jennifer Berglund 06:50
Did you have any collections when you were a kid?

Diana Zlatanovski 06:53
Oddly enough, I don't think I did. It didn't have a sticker collection, actually, now that I think about it. I think I still have the sticker collection. It hasn't been deaccessioned. Probably mostly free stickers, and any stickers that I was gifted.

Jennifer Berglund 07:14
What kinds of objects at the Peabody get you most excited?
Diana Zlatanovski 07:19
Honestly, it's difficult to find an object of the people that I don't get excited about. My interest is really in material culture and these artifacts overall, not a specific sort of region or a specific type of object. And I think, probably because of my art background a little bit, I see all of the collections, as utilitarian as some of them might be, as art objects. And you can pull just about any object from a shelf, and I will be amazed at the creativity and the craftsmanship that went into designing and creating it. We've got boots made of salmon skin, and necklaces of jaguar teeth. These beautifully intricate weavings that were just done on a backstrap loom, like a portable piece of equipment. There's bark cloth, which is like an almost translucent, sometimes an almost translucent cloth that was made from tree bark.

Jennifer Berglund 08:29
What does it feel like to hold an object like that, like what goes through your mind?

Diana Zlatanovski 08:35
It definitely connects you to the person that made that object that you're holding, and the time and the care and the meaning that it might have held for them. To have put this level of attention. Some of the objects would be everyday things that you could easily get by having a very simple version of whatever, you know, bowl that you're using. But it tells you a little bit about the person who created it, that they wanted it to also be beautiful, and, you know, took the time to carve it, or paint it, or do something to personalize it, and to make it a beautiful object.

Jennifer Berglund 09:18
Does that tell you anything about humans in general?

Diana Zlatanovski 09:23
I think it helps us relate to humans. It's the same motivation that I have for creating or for observing beautiful things and wanting to be surrounded by things that I love.

Jennifer Berglund 09:42
You're coming out with a new book. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Diana Zlatanovski 09:47
The book is called Typology: Collections at the Harvard Museums of Science Culture. And I suppose it's an example of combining my background in art and anthropology. Like I mentioned, I'm really fascinated by the design of objects, and whether it's natural or manmade, and they have a strong visual impact on me. So, several years ago, I started this photography project featuring collections of similar objects all laid out together in a single image. They're photographed separately, and then I compile them into a single image. Seeing the objects side by side also brings you to really see them as a collection and to understand how they relate to each other. And when you're looking at them all laid out together, you can't help but look for the similarities and the differences between them. And in doing that, what you're really doing is now, like you're studying them in detail, and you're noticing things that you likely wouldn't have noticed. Maybe you would imagine all of these abalone shells looking roughly the same. And it's not until you see 10 of them in a row that you're like, oh well, so they can be slightly
different size, they can be a slightly different color. You know, one of them might have an accretion on it somewhere, you know, there was some barnacles on one. I'm looking at that, and now it's registering to me that looking at those barnacles, like, that was an event that actually happened in that organisms life like those barnacles attached to that one specific shell. Each of these objects have their own sort of life story. And by looking at them closely, you can see evidence of that story a lot. That is what gets me excited about having people look at collections, and looking closely at collections. You know, the more you look at it, the more interested you might get. And so the book, you know, will tell you a little bit about what the objects are, but it's primarily a photography book to sort of introduce you to the different collections at all six of the HMSC museums. It was such an incredible experience to have a reason to go into all of these different collections and explore and learn about all these different materials from natural history, and to Cuneiform tablets, to the 18th century ivory microscope slides. I had no idea that was a thing. You know, there were so many collections that I've not gotten to experience and wouldn't really have a reason to. It's interesting sometimes to uncover sort of how they're related, or, at least, have, you know, connections to each other. Being at Harvard, where some of the museums tended to be more grouped early in the early days. So, collections would come in from one expedition, and they would sometimes be distributed to the different museums of like, a plant material would end up at the Herbarium, and the cultural artifacts would end up at the Peabody. And in connecting with the different people at different departments, and seeing different collections, I start seeing the same names come up in the same expeditions come up and be like, Oh, my gosh, we have collections from the same expedition. And, you know, to me, it's interesting to see this more holistic sort of view of what was being collected that sometimes all of the different types of materials within one expedition.

Jennifer Berglund 13:31
That's so interesting.

Diana Zlatanovski 13:36
Typology can be defined as an assemblage based on at least one shared attribute. So when you look at a group of objects, there's something about them that connects them. Depending on the field that you're in, it can have different connotations. So in archaeology typology, artifacts tend to be classified into their types based on their form, and or their function. That's a context that I was very familiar with the term typology in, so I think that sort of played into me using that idea for the project. So, in photography, typologies tend to feature similar subjects that are sort of photographed consistently with, you know, the same angle, or the same lighting. So it's again, the same idea of if you bring things together that have something in common, then it allows you to see more of what is different about them.

Jennifer Berglund 14:39
Do you have a favorite thing that you photographed?

Diana Zlatanovski 14:42
I fell in love with cicadas in a way that I never expected. I can sort of remember two experiences with cicadas in my life and the first being, as you know, maybe a teenager. I think I had a cicada land on my leg. It was one of the years where the are they 17 year cicadas, they were coming out of the ground. And I think cicadas in general just tend to be sort of clumsy. Like when they're flying, and yeah, this
thing just all of a sudden was flying somewhere and landed on my leg instead. And totally freaked me out. Then a few years ago, I was, was the one time I have visited the south of France, which I feel like sounds like last time I was in Provence. Not a phrase I get to throw around very often, but we were there in August. And what I didn't realize is that is when the cicadas are out and active and it was just like a dull roar of cicada. So I sort of was starting to think cicadas were a little bit interesting after that, seeing them sort of on the trees and how well they blended in, and watching them fly around. I started looking around the entomology collections. One of the drawers, or you know, a few sets of drawers had cicadas in them, and I was able to really see them closely, and they are just absolutely gorgeous. There's patterning on their heads and bodies that you would never get to, or rarely get to, experience in the natural world, like seeing them just fly by, and then their wings are gorgeous and like semi-translucent.

Jennifer Berglund 16:41
Why do you think museum collections are important? And why do you think the Peabody's collection in particular is important?

Diana Zlatanovski 16:51
Museum collections give us a chance to experience a life outside of our own. One of the collections I included in the book is actually a group of stone tools that were collected at Olduvai Gorge, which is a region in Africa that was known to have been inhabited by human ancestors as far back as 2 million years ago. So, when photographing them, you know, I picked up one of the hand axes. They're sort of roughly hand sized, and sort of teardrop shaped. And picking it up. I was absolutely floored by the fact that it fit my hand perfectly. My fingers fell into the grooves that were chipped into the stone, and it was comfortable in my hand and I could picture myself using this tool. It holds in your hand comfortably, and it does that for a reason. Those grooves were carved to fit somebody else's hand, possibly hundreds of thousands of years ago. Having your fingers fall into those spaces, and I've worked with museum collections for decades, and, you know, that moment still sort of took my breath away. These are the sorts of experiences that these museum collections can offer. And being an anthropology museum, the Peabody's collections also serve to connect us to people today. So to people living around the world, in different environments, surrounded by different things having different experiences than we are. The collections can help us learn what traditions these other cultures have, what their daily life looks like. The better we can relate to and understand others, the more tolerant and accepting we are.

Jennifer Berglund 18:47
I like that. That's a great answer. Diana, thank you so much for doing this. Today's HMSC Connects! Podcast was produced by me, Jennifer Berglund and the Harvard Museums of Science and Culture. Special things to Diana Zlatanovsky and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology for their time and expertise. And thank you so much for listening. If you liked today's podcast, please subscribe on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Podbean, or wherever you get your podcasts. See you next week!