

BURKE WORK: What We Do Behind the Glass

An Educational Museum Activity Book

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FRAMING

This project treats the Burke Museum of Natural History as representative of many other natural history museums, identifying and seeking to rectify several issues within the general field. Primarily, this project seeks to bridge the gap between museum collections and collection workers and museum visitors. Museum collections are often inaccessible and misunderstood by the public, while museums themselves are also unappreciated as the vital scientific resource that they are.

Even at the Burke Museum, designed with visible labs intended to show researchers and technicians working, there are failures of communication. While volunteers, students, and staff can be seen at work, there is minimal interpretation, and the COVID-19 pandemic has ended the open-door days which allowed visitors into the workspaces. A more in-depth explanation of what they're doing, as well as how and why, would increase visitors' understanding of and empathy for the research done in museums using collections.



A staff member works in the archaeology visible workroom, visible from the Our Material World archaeology gallery.

PURPOSE AND IMPACT

The purpose of this project is to informally educate a young (ages 9-11) museum audience about the work done in the archaeology and paleontology departments of the Burke Museum through an activity book. The book will teach about the processes of collection, preparation, cataloging, and storage of artifacts and fossils, as well as the research done using the collection. Children who complete the book will have a greater understanding of the work that happens in the museum's visible labs and collections workers within those departments will have a new resource for interpretation.

PROCESS

This project began with research into the common questions asked by visitors to the archaeology and paleontology galleries by speaking with gallery guides and with collections workers. A survey of museum, educational, and commercial activity guides also was conducted, tallying common activities and themes within the books.

Next, I interviewed archaeology collection workers Siri Linz and Jori Hurst about the practices of the department, as well as paleontology prep lab volunteer Jean Primozych about fossil preparation tools and methods. Finally, I spoke to archaeology researcher Meghan Caves about the work she had done as a visiting researcher and paleontology researcher Brody Hovatter about the research he conducts as graduate student in the department.

After creating initial thumbnails for the activity book pages, the thumbnails were shared with project stakeholders: my supervisory committee, the collection managers of the relevant departments, and the education department, as well as the DEAI coordinator.

Once I had received feedback on the thumbnails, edits were made and the production of the activity book began. Pages were digitally sketched, inked traditionally, and then digitally lettered. Once all pages were completed, booklets were compiled and the pages were returned to stakeholders for a final round of feedback.

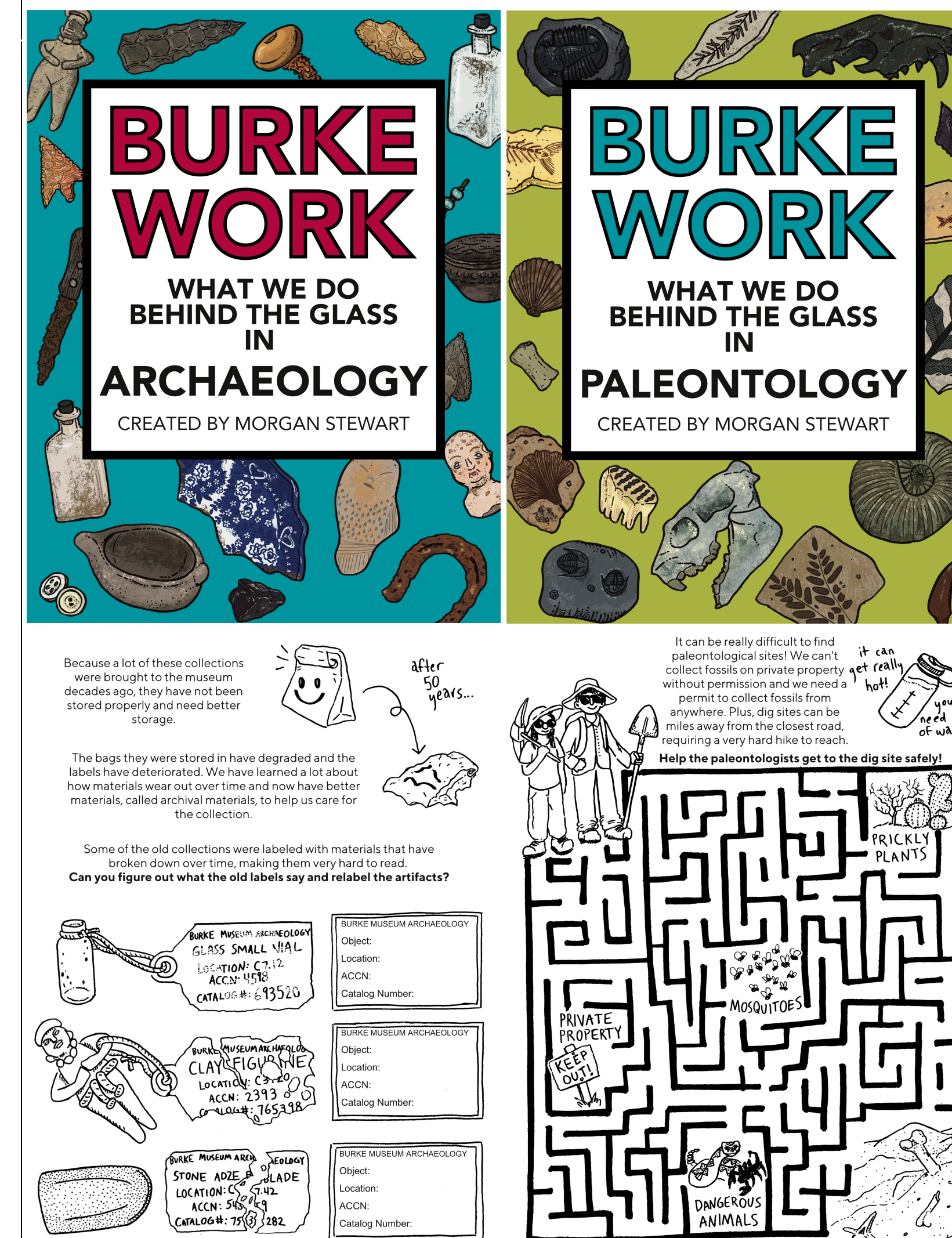
Final revisions were completed, and the activity books were presented to the host site: the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture to be shared with the public through the education department's programming.

DELIVERABLE

Two black and white activity books about the work done at the Burke Museum in the archaeology and paleontology departments.

The archaeology book (15 pages) covers the discovery, care, cataloging, and storage of artifacts, as well as real research done using artifacts from the collection. The paleontology activity book (16 pages) covers the collection, preparation, and organization of fossils at the Burke, as well as real research done using fossils in the department.

Activities are designed to place the user in the shoes of a collections worker or researcher as they move through the puzzles presented by museum work.



Activity book covers and sample pages.

REFLECTION AND NEXT STEPS

Two activity books were completed, which introduce readers to the terminology and methods of collection work in two of the Burke's departments. Visitor feedback was not completed, due to time constraints and pandemic-related low attendance rates, but the Burke will be testing the book with its target audience in the coming months.

A logical next step is to produce similar resources for the other departments, which have similar issues with outreach and interpretation. Each department has unique priorities and procedures, but the format of educational activity book allows for a wide variety of subjects to be explored. Multiple collections managers have expressed interest in a non-disruptive method of interpretation such as this project.

Other museums, which do not have visible labs, may benefit from similar projects to increase the public's understanding of collections and the work done in museums.

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