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Kachinas of the Southwest: Dances, Dolls, and Rain

Elucidating the Kachina Cult

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This past semester (Winter 2008), the Museum of Peoples and Cultures (MPC) researched and curated an exhibition on the Kachina Cult of the Pueblo and Hopi cultures. The Kachina Cult is centered around belief in a set of spiritual beings that bring blessings, gifts, and rain. Kachina literally means “spirit father” or “life father” and can be anything that exists in the natural world. One of the most common representation of kachinas is in the form of dolls. The exhibition features an impressive collection of ancient and modern kachina dolls in an effort to provide insight into the fairly elusive Kachina Cult.

The goal of my creative project was to work in concert with the staff of the Museum to create a catalog for the Kachina exhibition. An exhibition catalog is a valuable resource for the MPC. It not only documents the exhibition, but also includes research papers giving further information about the Kachina Cult and its connections to Mesoamerica. Designing a catalog is a very involved process which required decisions to be made regarding the page layout, fonts and spacing, cover design, title, paper weight, binding type, and the number and type of graphics.

The first step in my project was to do research on previous MPC publications. The Museum of Peoples and Cultures has several types of publications: a Popular Series, an Occasional Papers and the Technical Report Series. The catalog that I designed was a part of the Popular Series, which the MPC defines as publications that are “intended for the lay person”.

With that in mind, I studied the format and style of previous publications. Many of the older publications were quite lengthy and staid. They had little or no color and the language was more appropriate for a professional reader than the general public. I spoke to both the museum director, Paul Stavast, and to the editor of this publication, Glenna Nielsen, in order to ascertain what changes needed to be made to make the publication accessible to the target audience. We decided that this publication would be much shorter than those previous and would include more color. In order to make it shorter, we decided to leave out the comprehensive inventory of the artifacts featured in the exhibition. An inventory of the artifacts generally includes a photograph and description of the artifact that targets professional readers. In previous publications, this accounted for nearly half of the length of the publication. Removing this section cut down the length and allowed more freedom to incorporate color. Printing color costs almost ten times as much as black and white; by reducing page count, the museum’s limited budget could be stretched to allow for color.

With that in mind, I created a layout that was clean and open that could easily incorporate many color figures on the same page. In order to create the document, I taught myself advanced Adobe InDesign techniques. I had started with a basic knowledge of the program, but designing an entire book was completely new to me. I had only ever designed projects that were a page or

two in length. Designing a book is much more complex and involved. It requires using master pages, character and paragraph styles, and generating a table of contents, as well as working with dozens of images and figures.

One difficulty I ran into while designing was finding photographs and figures that I could actually use. The budget for this publication did not include any money to purchase copyright licenses because we planned on using images from the museum archives. However, the authors of many of the papers had originally used images that were under copyright, so it was my task to find suitable pictures to substitute. This required talking to professionals in the anthropology/archaeology fields to ask permission to use their photographs without monetary compensation. It was a great deal of work to sort things out, but in the end the figures looked fantastic and I learned a lot about copyright laws and working with professionals.

Another surprise I ran into was that things hardly ever happen exactly as you plan them. I had drawn out a timeline of when I wanted things to be completed by, but it was incredibly difficult to stick to it. The main deterrent was that I had to rely on other people to finish writing and editing the papers for the catalog. Getting the papers took far longer than expected and meant that the catalog was printed a few weeks later than originally planned. Another change in plan was that in addition to acting as the designer, I was able to step in as an assistant editor. Glenna Nielsen edited the papers for content and flow and I edited for grammar, spelling and consistency in referencing. Although I hadn't intended to take part in any of the editing, it was actually quite enjoyable. It was satisfying to find and fix problems before the publication was printed.

Overall, this project helped me to refine my design skills and learn about the publication process. I was involved in every aspect of the creation of the catalog, far more than I had originally anticipated. I was able to design the catalog, edit the research papers, take and edit photographs of items in the museum's collections, and learn about the actual printing process. The exhibition catalog has now been printed and met museum expectations. The museum plans to submit the design to a national museum contest for exhibition catalogs. The work that I did on this publication led to the opportunity to work on a second exhibition catalog with the MPC. In addition, I have also been able to use the skills that I learned to help employees at the Museum of Peoples and Cultures learn InDesign for use in their own projects. Finally, I have gained more confidence in my graphic and publication design skills that will be instrumental in my search for a job now that I have graduated.

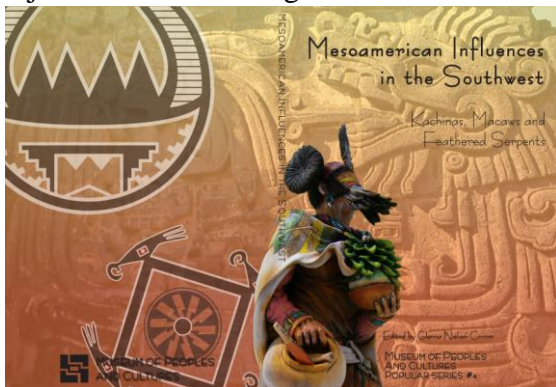


Figure 1 – In addition to creating the layout of the catalog, I also designed the cover.



Figure 2 – Examples of a typical pages from the catalog