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Awards for Faculty/Student Mentored Research

c/o: Dr. Mikylah Myers, Assistant Dean of Student Artistic Achievement
College of Creative Arts
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February 27, 2022

Dear Dr. Myers and Mentored Research Committee,

I am submitting this faculty mentor statement along with our full application for the Collaborative Research Award in the College of Creative Arts for the 2021-2022 academic cycle, sponsored by the WVU Research Office and the CCA Deans Office. The WVU Art History department traveled to Rock Hill, South Carolina to join faculty and students in the Department of Anthropology at Winthrop University on a collaborative exhibition of Pre-Columbian artifacts from the Salazar Latin American Artifacts Collection in honor of the beginning of National Hispanic Heritage Month in the United States (September 15- October 15, 2021). On display through October 1, 2021 at the Louise Pettus Archive in Rock Hill, South Carolina, the exhibition *Preserved in Clay and Stone: Celebrating the History of Ancient Latin America* featured 20 objects from the Salazar Latin American Artifacts Collection. The works represented several periods of Latin American culture and history and were selected for their emphasis on gender roles and animal imagery.

The exhibition objects were extensively researched by WVU Art History Teaching Assistant Professor Megan Leight and undergraduate students in WVU's Art History and Research Apprenticeship (RAP) programs: Samuel Hensley and Riley (Red) Klug. The students combed through old ceramic volumes, dissertations on stone sculpture, and decades-old exhibition catalogs to uncover information about the unique objects in the Salazar Collection. Some of these materials were research materials were published in Spanish, and thus, had to be translated as well. Students made excellent use of ILLiad, and I also purchased books to aid in our research project on these difficult objects.

The project began with my colleague Brent Woodfill, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Winthrop University, and his undergraduate researcher Brandon Messmann, who

photographed all the works of art, took measurement data, and shared the images through a Shared Google Drive everyone could access. The collaborative exhibition was a months-long process, spanning the summer of 2021 to ensure it was a success at the beginning of the fall term.

Klug noted their participation in the exhibition research as part of the WVU Research Apprenticeship Program had, “given me a great foundation to become a better researcher.” Before this program and this exhibit, Klug wrote they “really had no experience with anything research related. This project helped me dive deeper into a focus area that I hadn’t really explored before now, and I genuinely love it... I cannot wait to continue working with the Pre-Columbian ocarinas (flutes) in the collection, which are now the focus of my research with RAP.” Klug is presenting the continuation of their research at the invited undergraduate symposium in Material Cultural Studies with Drexel University this March 2022. They will also be presenting at the Spring 2022 WVU Undergraduate Research Symposium as part of their RAP expectations for the academic year. Finally, our goal is to submit this research work for publication in the WVU MURR journal in the Fall 2022 term.

Professor Woodfill and I presented the overview of the research on Thursday, September 16th, 2021 at 3pm at the Pettus Archive in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Both Klug and Hensley presented on their 2-3 selected artifacts as part of my larger panel discussion. We discussed the collection in general as well as the purpose and significance of select artifacts. Following the lecture, faculty and students answered questions from the audience and examined the artworks up-close in the Louise Pettus Archive.

Hensley noted, “I’ve noticed major growth in my research skills since I’ve started working on more in-depth projects like this one. Professor Leight has helped me develop strong academic strategies that I’m really happy with, and working on projects that go beyond the constraints of a typical class is building my confidence in my ability to succeed at graduate-level research.” Hensley was also part of a collaborative presentation with Professor Leight and undergraduate Blaire Phillips for the 2021 Undergraduate Research Symposium on another Pre-Columbian research paper on owl iconography.

On Friday, September 17th, 2021, the WVU students were also able to view pre-Columbian works of art at the Mint Museum Randolph in Charlotte, North Carolina before returning to West Virginia. Hensley shared, “it was wonderful to finally have the opportunity to see these kinds of artifacts in-person.” Both of these research students are currently enrolled in the upper-level Art History course on Andean Art, which focuses on works of art from indigenous South America.

The WVU Art History student researchers received small travel grants from the Margaret Tavenner Rajam Art History Endowment to offset the cost of travel and the overnight stay in Charlotte, North Carolina (\$300). Professor Leight received a College of Creative Arts (CCA) Professional Grant for the Winthrop event (\$300). Leight was also the recipient of the 2021

Distinction in Mentoring Undergraduates in Research award from the Office of Undergraduate Research at WVU (\$1000), which went directly toward taking students on this trip.

In closing, this type of academic opportunity is only possible through the continued support of research endeavors for WVU undergraduate students. Academically rigorous and time-intensive projects are ultimately once-in-a-lifetime learning opportunities for students to better understand the processes associated with all aspects of research. From the inception of this exhibition project, my WVU undergraduates have been involved in selecting the objects for inclusion in the show, compiling the measurement data, performing the hands-on research on every object to finalize the exhibit text despite a lack of provenience on many of these objects, and finally, the travel and presentation of our results to the public last fall. Perhaps most importantly, the Louise Pettus Archive staff immediately asked us to consider designing another exhibit around some of the additional materials from the Salazar Collection, and the students were absolutely thrilled with this prospect!

It is my sincere hope your committee has everything from our collaborative project uploaded to the WuFoo form, but please let me know if you need any additional information or materials for your full consideration of our application for this award. We thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Megan Elizabeth Leight', written in a cursive style.

Megan Elizabeth Leight
Teaching Assistant Professor of Art History
West Virginia University