

# Rare Maine bottle of bird guano on display at Smithsonian

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS  
OF THE BDN STAFF

Mainers are justly proud of the state's attributes such as succulent seafood, clean lakes, majestic mountains and the rock-bound coastline.

Now, residents can add something surprising to that list -- a 19th century bottle filled with colored seabird guano that is on display until 2017 at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. The bottle, with its intricate design, is a very rare artifact, according to Cipperly Good, the collections manager at the Penobscot Marine Museum in Searsport. It also helps to illustrate a little-known chapter of Maine's shipbuilding and seafaring heritage.

"It's part of our Age of Exploration," she said. "We're just proud that our collection has these hidden treasures that are of national significance. And it's great that the nation can see it."

During the 19th century, nitrogen-rich guano from bats and seabirds was a highly sought-after natural resource that came to be known as "white gold," according to the National

Geographic, because of its potency as a fertilizer. By 1850, guano cost as much as \$76 per pound, or about a quarter of the price of actual gold, and its popularity meant that ships from as far away as Maine plied the waters of the Pacific Ocean in search of the dried bird droppings.

The world's best quality guano was found in the Chincha Islands off the coast of Peru, where the dry climate allowed the piles of poop to grow to nearly 200 feet high. During the 1860s, the booming trade there led to a turf battle between Peru and Spain that is called the Chincha Islands War. America, which had a commercial interest in the region, installed a naval squadron to keep an eye on the region, according to the Military History Now website. The U.S. also ratified the Guano Islands Act in 1856 in order to claim guano islands in the Pacific Ocean and elsewhere.

"It was America's first [expression] of imperialism, where we struck out and claimed foreign land," said Paul Johnston, the curator of maritime history at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.



COURTESY PENOBSCOT MARINE MUSEUM  
**A bottle filled with colored seabird guano, or droppings, that is part of the Penobscot Marine Museum collection is currently on display in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. The bottle is part of the exhibit The Norie Marine Atlas & Guano Trade which runs now through January 2017.**

The small mountains of guano on the Chincha Islands were excavated by Chinese laborers who likely were forced to be there, Good said. The conditions were hard, with the dust from all that nitrate causing workers' eyes to bleed.

Some of the Chinese workers reportedly jumped off the guano cliffs into the ocean to die in order to escape the forced labor, she said.

The museum's guano bottle appears to commemorate a voyage by the Sears-

port-built ship Henrietta to Peru in 1880, toward the end of the guano boom. The resource was effectively depleted by the end of the 19th century.

"This is a very rare object," Good said of the bottle. "We only know of three of them. It's just so Victorian, to put sand in a bottle and make it into a design. But to make it out of guano is rare."

The bottle might have been made by an American sailor who was waiting for his boat to be loaded with guano, or it might have been made by Chinese guano miners. According to Johnston, the Maine artifact is extra special because its ownership can be traced back to the captain of the Henrietta, right after the ship returned from a guano trip to the Chincha Islands.

"It has a totally clean, clear provenance," the Smithsonian curator said.

The bottle was given to the Penobscot Marine Museum by the Carver family of Searsport and has long been a part of the museum's collection of maritime artifacts. It stayed in Maine until earlier this year, when it made its voyage to the nation's capital.

Curators at the Smithso-

nian had received a bound book of charts which included guano trade routes, and decided to mount a guano-themed exhibit. When Good learned the museum sought more guano objects for the Norie Marine Atlas & Guano Trade exhibit, which runs through January 2017, she thought immediately of the Searsport bottle.

"I said have I got the thing for you," she recalled.

In Washington, D.C., the bottle joins other unusual treasures, such as a bottle of vintage homeopathic guano medicine that was advertised as a cure for both terrible headaches and itchy genitals.

"The fertilizer properties were so miraculous to farmers that unscrupulous snake oil salesmen made it into medicine," Johnston said.

So far, the exhibit seems to be popular, especially among schoolchildren.

"The feedback is that they're fascinated by this [bird] poop," Good said. "Poop can be art."

Johnston agreed. "Everybody loves the subject of poop," he said, jokingly. "But since we're the Smithsonian, we call it aquatic avian excrement."

## UMaine Museum of Art announces Summer Exhibitions

May 13 - Sept. 10, 2016

BANGOR – The University of Maine Museum of Art, located at 40 Harlow Street in downtown Bangor, opens two new featured exhibitions in May. UMMA is open Monday-Saturday from 10 am - 5 pm and brings modern and contemporary art exhibitions to the region, presenting approximately 12 original exhibitions each year. UMMA's summer exhibitions open to the public on May 13 and run through September 10, 2016. Admission to the Museum of Art is free in 2016 & 2017 thanks to the generosity of Deighan Wealth Advisors.

## THOMAS BERDING: Remnant States

May 13 - Sept. 10, 2016

The University of Maine Museum of Art is pleased to present Remnant States, a solo exhibition of paintings by Michigan-based artist Thomas Berding. The exhibition is composed of over 40 paintings ranging from large 76" x 70" canvases to an array of 12" x 9" compositions. Berding's shard-like forms and marks of rich and varied colors come together in abstract paintings that possess a jubilant, free-form rhythm. The artist pictures "a world in a simultaneous state of construction and disassembly. If a kind of wholeness or singularity appears what emerges is a tenuous peace within a field of remnants

and surplus."

Thomas Berding received his B.A. from Xavier University and a M.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design. His paintings have been widely exhibited and recognized with awards from the National Endowment of the Arts, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and the NEA/Mid America Arts Alliance. Berding is Associate Professor of Art at Michigan State University.

## ALISA HENRIQUEZ: The Constructed Body

May 13 - Sept. 10, 2016

The University of Maine Museum of Art is pleased to present a solo exhibition of new works

by Michigan-based Alisa Henriquez. In Henriquez's recent constructed assemblages, the artist has combined "material gathered from popular and glamour culture with digitized and magnified images from contemporary media and art history." The artist's ovoid and pill-shaped elements are stacked and arranged into totemic-like structures that also evoke figurative associations. Henriquez states, "I aim to explore the multiple histories, various beliefs, and at times contradictory notions of self that emerge." The UMMA exhibition, The Constructed Body, features works from Henriquez's large-scale Floaters series, in which the title "references not only bits of optical debris

but also the culturally conditioned conceptual spots that linger, informing our vision of ourselves as human, gendered, and embodied entities".

Alisa Henriquez was born in Kingston, Jamaica and first studied art at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver, Canada. She went on to receive a B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design and a M.F.A. from Indiana University. Henriquez has exhibited widely including recent exhibitions at Elon University, A.I.R. Gallery, Dittmar Memorial Gallery and Urban Institute of Contemporary Art. Her 2016 exhibition Makeover Culture Disfigured is currently on view at the Painting Center in New

York City through May 21, 2016. Henriquez is Associate Professor of Art at Michigan State University.

## Distorted Perceptions: UMMA's Young Curators

UMMA's Young Curators will offer commentary on works they selected for Distorted Perceptions at the May 12th Members' Preview Reception. The Museum is pleased to present this unique program that offers youth an in-depth experience of curatorial practice.

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