



Throughout the month of February, Dr. Peter Shapinsky's ECCE HIS 486: Exhibiting Asia: Trans-Pacific Material Culture course visited the Illinois State Museum's Research & Collections Center. At the museum, each student adopted two objects that they studied with the goal of developing a digital exhibit.

Students examined an array of artifacts from Japan: swords, armor, kimono, seal holders (inrō) together with their netsuke toggles, a matchlock musket, and portable shrine. These were acquired by the Illinois State Museum from nineteenth and twentieth-century collectors. By learning how to handle and interpret these artifacts, students gained insight into how historians and museum professionals work with material culture.



Students grappled with the complex histories of the objects they adopted, reconciling shifting forms of value of their artifacts' creation, use, and acquisition by individuals in Illinois. After developing the biographies of the objects, students will create digital exhibits.



The public facing nature of exhibits meant that the class would be working with one of the skills most in demand by modern historical institutions, thus preparing them for their future. Students explained how they relished the opportunity to interact with history and were thankful for the Illinois State Museum's support in developing skills for their future careers.



Dr. Shapinsky explains that the purpose of the course was to “trace changing meanings attached to these objects from their creation through their arrival in Springfield as evidence for cultural worldviews. In doing so, we explore how material culture can be appropriated to serve ideological ends and we consider the agency of specific objects in constructing their owners in evolving Trans-Pacific contexts.” Students expressed great excitement whilst dealing with the objects, but also treated each artifact with great care and consideration, thus representing their knowledge of historical practices.

