

# Making Memories in a Museum

**BEFORE MY WIFE AND I RELOCATED** to Philadelphia in the summer of 2021, we followed in the footsteps of many of our “boomerang generation” peers: We moved in with my mother-in-law to save money. I had known Thongsoune Luangrath for almost a decade, but during this six-month spell as roommates, I truly got to know her as Mom.

Forty years earlier, Mom had come to the U.S. as a refugee from war-torn Laos. Now she was a retired factory worker, savoring her much-earned freedom. For lunch she cooked food from her country, like papaya salad and eggrolls, and at night she nestled onto her couch to watch Thai movies.

As the last issue of *Expedition* went to print, the phone rang in the worst way: Mom had a heart attack. We flew home and spent five days by her side in the ICU. On the fifth day, we said goodbye. Soon we were sitting on the floor of Mom’s living room, praying alongside four Buddhist monks as they blessed her home. With sacred chants, they sent her belongings to be with her spirit in the next realm. Mom had all sorts of handmade Lao and Thai crafts, from wood carvings to golden prayer bowls, and these treasured objects surrounded us as we prayed.

There’s no easy path back to work after a personal tragedy, but it turns out the Penn Museum had a couple of surprises for me. First, Marie-Claude Boileau wrote a story about Laos for this issue (In the Labs, p. 60), which felt like a lovely nod to Mom’s ancestors. And then one day as I walked through the Museum’s Spotlight Gallery, located next to the Sphinx, I saw something familiar: a Southeast Asian fishing trap (Welcome News, p. 70). As a child, Mom had seen these traps stationed in the Mekong River, the same river she floated down when she escaped Laos in 1980. In her house in the American suburbs, she had small toy versions of these fish traps on keychains.

The bold promise of this Museum is that it can connect you to the past. You can take an impersonal journey through 10,000 years of human history, and at times you may even find a more direct link to the culture of your distant relatives. For me, on that walk through the Spotlight Gallery, the Penn Museum became a place to make a new memory with someone I had lost.

I had been so excited to show Mom the Asia Gallery on her next visit to Philadelphia. She never got to see it, and that stings. But each day I come to work I will carry her with me, and as I walk through these halls, I know they have more to teach me about her. I hope our Museum’s bold promise holds true for you on your next visit: With objects from myriad cultures across three floors of galleries, may you make new memories and special connections of your own.



QUINN RUSSELL BROWN, EDITOR

## PENNMUSEUM

University of Pennsylvania Museum  
of Archaeology and Anthropology

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Quinn Russell Brown

PUBLISHER

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CONTRIBUTORS

Jessica Bicknell  
Marie-Claude Boileau, Ph.D.  
Jennifer Brehm  
Kris Forrest  
Sarah Linn, Ph.D.  
Anne Tiballi, Ph.D.  
Jo Tionsgon-Perez

PHOTOGRAPHY

Jennifer Chiappardi  
Colleen Connolly  
Francine Sarin  
(unless noted otherwise)

INSTITUTIONAL OUTREACH MANAGER

Thomas Delfi

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Editorial inquiries should be addressed to  
expedition@pennmuseum.org. Inquiries  
regarding delivery of *Expedition* should be  
directed to membership@pennmuseum.  
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