CONSERVATION AND MOUNTING OF A BASKET FROM THE SEYCHELLES

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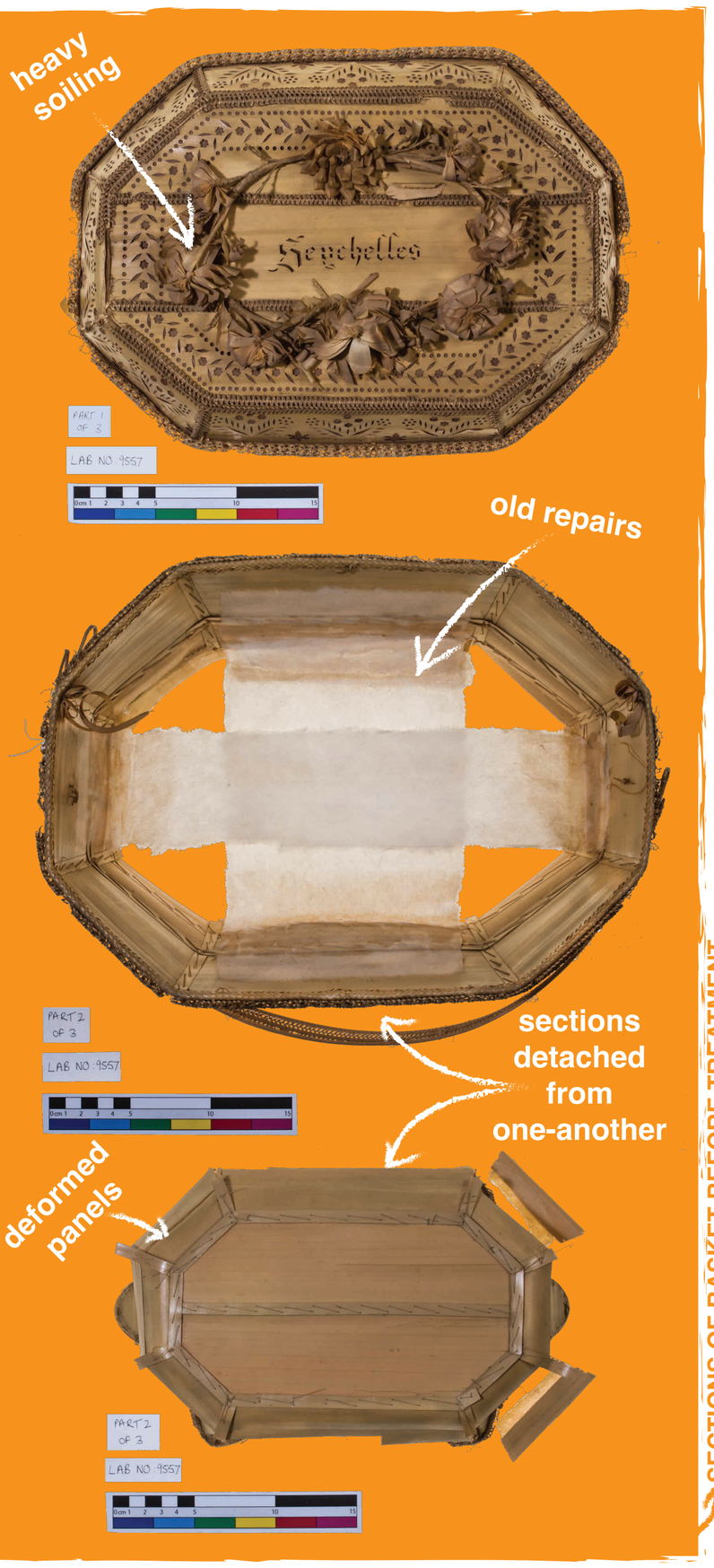
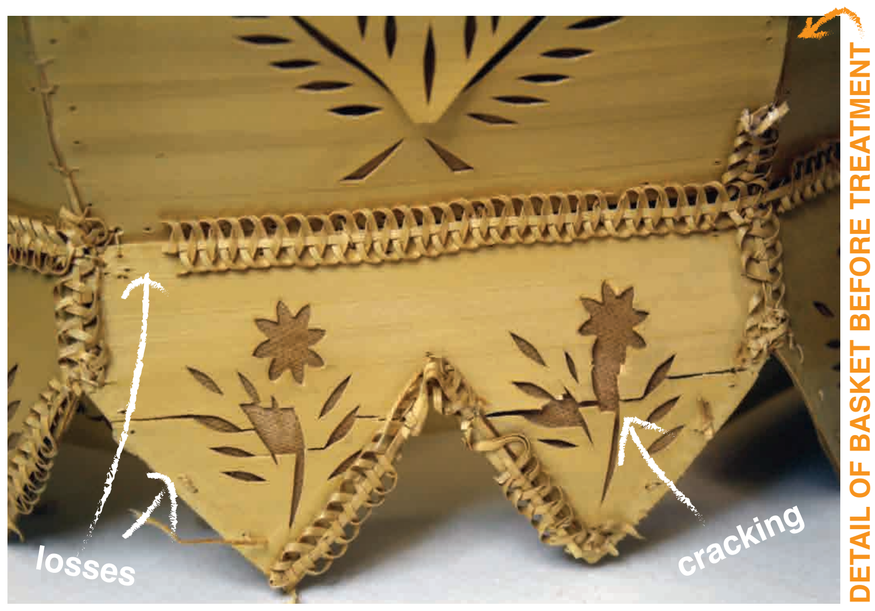
SUMMARY

A decorative basket made from petioles of the Lodoicea – 'coco de mer' – plant was brought to the Institute of Archaeology conservation laboratory for treatment. The object was collected from the Seychelles, and had been donated to the Kew Economic Botany Collection in 1855. When it arrived for treatment, the plant material had become extremely brittle, causing it to deform and collapse under its own weight. The object was re-shaped, reconstructed and stabilized as far as possible but still remained extremely fragile, structurally weak and at risk of future re-deformation. A support mount was created that held the weight of the basket and a reverse-sling was adhered to the underside of a decorative element to spread the pressure across the stronger panels of the basket. Finally, packaging was created to allow the basket to be viewed without physical contact, further reducing risk to the object.

CONDITION BEFORE TREATMENT

When it arrived at the Institute of Archaeology for treatment, the plant material had become extremely brittle, causing it to **deform and collapse under its own weight**. The basket also featured extensive applied decorative elements which were very fragile and had suffered many **fractures and losses**. **Large and obtrusive old repairs** detracted visually from this decorative object and the **packaging was also inappropriate**, causing abrasion and damage.





DETAIL OF BASKET BEFORE TREATMENT

THE KEW ECONOMIC BOTANY COLLECTION

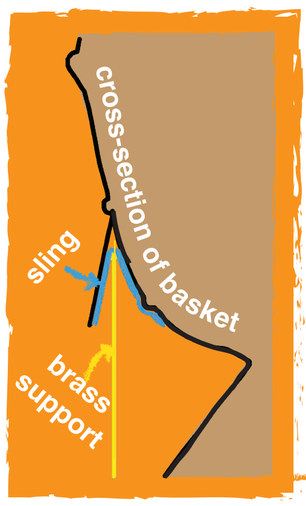
The Kew Economic Botany Collection contains around 100,000 objects which demonstrate the use of plants by humans – such as for food, medicine, clothing and ornaments. The collection holds extensive scientific, anthropological and historical research potential, and any conservation treatment had to **have no effect on the future research potential of the basket**. Although the collection does not curate displays of its objects, artefacts are regularly accessed by researchers, and visitors can take tours of the storage area where objects are presented in their packaging. This meant that the basket must **be easily accessible, and able to be viewed with as little risk to the object as possible**.

TREATMENT

- Dry cleaning and removal of old repairs.
- Humidification and re-shaping of base to restore its original form.
- Stabilisation and repair of panelling.
- Re-joining of the body of the basket.
- Re-creation of missing panelling.

INTERIOR AFTER TREATMENT

CLEANING



MOUNTING SYSTEM

CREATING A SUPPORT MOUNT

After treatment, it was decided that the basket was still **too weak to support its own weight** so a mount was created to lower the risk of the basket distorting or fracturing again.

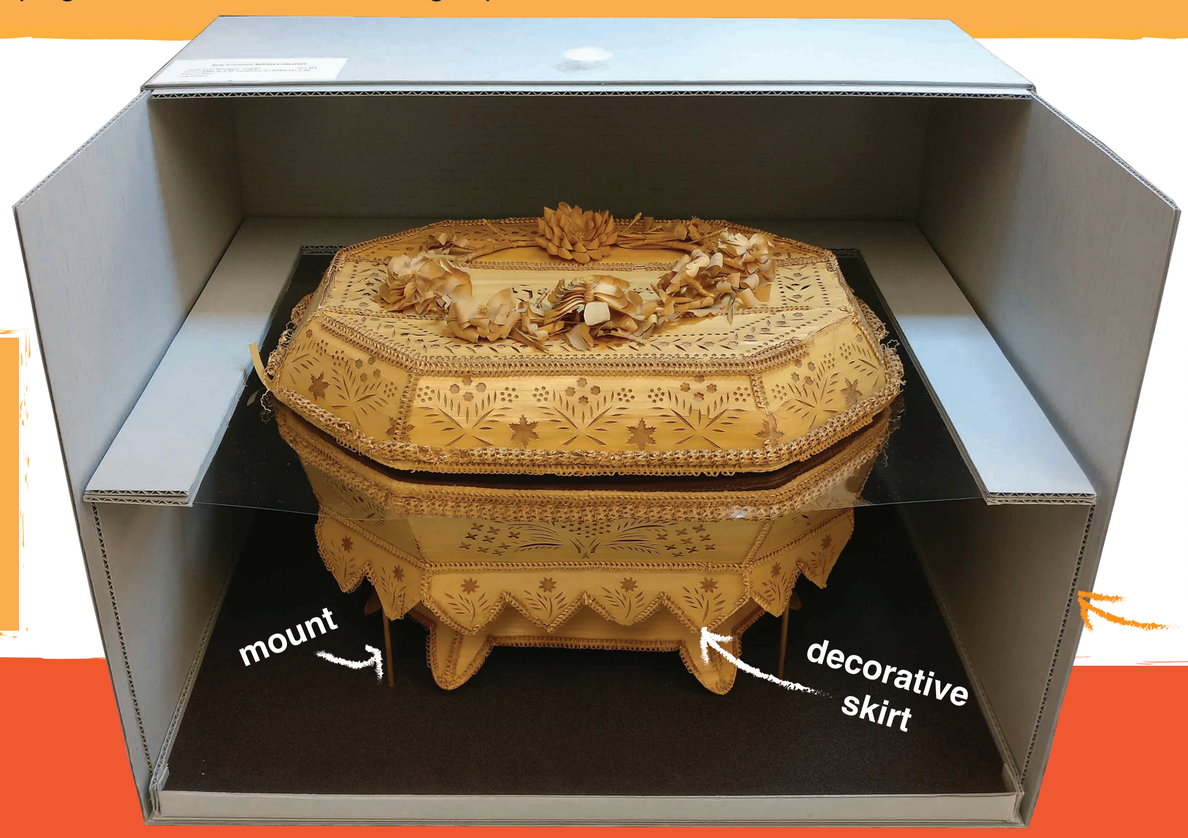
- A **mount** was made to support the object using brass rod. This followed the irregular octagonal shape of the basket with four legs and was made to fit below the decorative skirt on the body of the basket.
- A **reverse sling** of Japanese paper was adhered to the underside of the decorative skirt. The mount would make contact with this sling, **distributing the weight** of the basket away from stitching at the join, and spreading it across the stronger panels.

SECTIONS OF BASKET BEFORE TREATMENT

ACCESSING DIFFERENT SECTIONS OF THE BASKET

CONSTRUCTING PACKAGING FOR STORAGE AND DISPLAY

The new mount was fitted into a Plastazote-lined tray so that the object could be viewed without contact with the material. A box was then constructed with a **removable clear Melinex shelf for the lid**, allowing the object to be viewed as a whole without abrasion between the fragile and intricate decorative elements on both the lid and basket body. **Either lid or supported body can now be removed from the box separately**, allowing all areas of the basket to be viewed without contact. The box was created from archival board with a drop down front and cotton twill tape tie to allow for easy access to the object. Use of absorbant materials will also **buffer fluctuations in the environment**, helping to lower the risk to the fragile plant material.



THE SEYCHELLES BASKET AFTER TREATMENT

OUTCOMES

The treatment, mounting and packaging enhanced the value of the basket for the collection immeasurably. The basket was **restored to its intended form**, it was made **more stable, risk to the object was lowered** considerably, and it was made **more accessible** for research and presentation to visitors.

Libby Ireland is a student on the MSc in Conservation for Archaeology and Museums at UCL. She has undertaken internships with Plowden and Smith Ltd and Tate.

All images courtesy of the Kew Economic Botany Collection