The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology has in its collection a pair of Cherokee black-dyed buckskin moccasins, with glass bead decoration and silk lining (Acc# NA5862), which is being prepared for display in the museum’s new exhibition, “Native American Voices – The People, Here and Now.” These moccasins are very valuable objects, due both to their age and method of manufacture. They were collected in 1841, which immediately postdates the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the forced relocation of the Cherokee nation in 1838 from the southeastern US to a reservation in Oklahoma.

These moccasins are also important due to their construction using black-dyed buckskin. Often, black-dyed leather shows significant deterioration, powdering, and fragility, due to metal ion-catalyzed oxidation. These moccasins are no exception; the leather is extremely deteriorated, with significant powdering of the surface, and many tears in the leather and along the seams. The deterioration is similar to that of iron gall inks on paper and parchment. However, a broad condition survey of black-dyed leather objects in museum collections has not been done, and so the extent of this inherent vice, and potential loss to collections, is not yet fully understood.

This paper will examine the condition of the moccasins in the Penn Museum’s collection, as well as other black-dyed hide objects in the museum’s collection, and in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. An explanation of the chemistry behind metal ion-catalyzed oxidation, and a review of published literature on the deterioration and conservation of other black-dyed leather objects will follow. The paper will conclude with a description of the conservation treatment of the moccasins. This research and treatment are on-going and what is presented here is only a preliminary review of a larger, more extensive project.
References:


Biography:
Alexis North is a third-year student at the UCLA/Getty Conservation Program, interning at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Her other research interests include new inorganic biomimetic consolidation methods, and the use of digital analytical imaging utilizing ultraviolet, visible, and infrared reflectance and luminescence for non-invasive materials identification. She currently lives in Philadelphia with her two sewing machines.