

## Understanding Museum Archives

<http://www.gslis.utexas.edu/~vmuseum/roberts.pdf>

Simply put, museum archives serve as the museum's memory. Like other institutional archives, museum archives function to "preserve and administer records of permanent value not in current use."<sup>i</sup> Records of the museum may be in any and all formats. Most museum archives contain at least three kinds of records:

1. Records that are part of their collection including items such as, maps, artifacts, photographs and audio-visual materials.
2. Archival material pertaining to their collection including provenance information
3. Museums also manage their own institutional archives.<sup>ii</sup>

This kind of information and a variety of others, depending on the institution, are readily available to museums staff, trustees and interns. In most cases, the public may access the museum's archives by appointment to conduct scholarly research.

Aside from the basic institutional papers, many museum archives contain items that are collections in and of themselves. Often times personal papers and artifacts of the artists themselves are found in the archives. For example, the Museum of Modern Art archives in New York City contain a one-of-a-kind tie made by Pablo Picasso for former museum director Alfred Barr. It's original mailing envelope hand drawn and addressed in crayon by Picasso is also a part of the museums archives. Museum archives are an invaluable research tool.

This pathfinder has been created for an academic library setting in order to help museum patrons and researchers understand the function, necessity and research value of archival collections within a museum setting. It also serves as a tool for museum staff interested in starting their own archives. The sources I selected provide both background information on museum archives and case examples. I chose to select sources that are publicly available and, except for the staple resources, have been published within the past ten years. All the books included in the bibliography are available at the Perry Castañeda Library (PCL) at the University of Texas-Austin in order to cater to local academic scholars. To provide the most recent information I included several online sources as well as societies and associations that deal specifically with the field of museum archives.

I began my quest for sources with the search engine [Google](#) using the term “museum archives” in parentheses to yield that particular phrase in my results. I was able to locate several relevant associations and organizations. Many of the results were for the archives of specific museums themselves.

Next I proceeded to search the University of Texas’ online library catalog, [UTNetCat](#). This search produced only one book dealing specifically with museum archives but several dealing with general archives and description. Since so few books were available I located various journal articles by using the subject heading "museum archives” in Article First and Readers Guide Abstracts databases available through the UT Library Online. The searches produced several article citations that provided useful background knowledge and issues

pertaining to museum archives. I did try Humanities Index and came up with no results. Finally,

[Grove Dictionary of Art](#) online has an extensive entry on archives.

## **Part II: Annotated Bibliography**

### **Books**

Note: All call numbers correspond to the holdings of the Perry Castañeda Library (PCL) at the University of Texas-Austin.

1. Deiss, William A.. *Museum Archives: An Introduction*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984. (AM158 D45 1984 PCL Stacks)

This book is the basic procedural manual for museum archives and the only one written on the topic specifically. Topics covered include why a museum should have an archives, planning a museum archives, how to start an archives program and basic procedures. It is an essential tool for anyone setting up a museum archives.

2. Gracy, David B. *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977. (Z695.2 G73 PCL Stacks)

Gracy's book is perhaps the essential manual for novices to the archival field. It covers the two basic activities in archival enterprise, arrangement and description. While it does not deal specifically with museum archives, it is a basic manual necessary for starting an archives from the bottom up.

3. Yakel, Elizabeth. *Starting an Archives*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1994. (CD950 Y35 1994 PCL Stacks)

Like Gracy's book, this manual is designed for those professionals and administrators interested in starting their own institutional archives. Yakel discusses the financial and administrative aspects of starting an archives as well as easily understood descriptions of basic archival procedures. This manual also contains sample forms and documents.

## Journal Articles

4. Carlin, John W. "Your Past is Disappearing: What Museums Should Know About the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Archives Crisis." *Museum News* 78, no. 1 (1999): 46-49.

Researchers may find this article interesting because the author, John W. Carlin, is the archivist of the United States. In *Your Past is Disappearing*, he gives his views on the importance of cooperation between curators and archivists. He says their job should be to work together in order to provide superior public service. Carlin also emphasizes the fact that museums not only need to care for their artifacts but also their records.

5. Cisneros, Guillermo and Ana Luisa Delclaux. "RAMA - Remote Access to Museum Archives." *Information Services and Use* 14 (1994): 171-181.

As of 1994 RAMA was a major initiative in Europe to provide remote access to museum archives through computer networking. This article provides insight into the kinds of projects being implemented to make museum archives more accessible to researchers.

6. Lawrence, Deirdre E. "The Evolution of a Library: The Brooklyn Museum of Art Library and Archives." *Art Documentation* 18, no. 1 (1999): 10-13.

This article was written for the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Brooklyn Museum of Art Libraries and Archives and is purely the historical tracing of the development of a museum library and archives. It is useful for a researcher interested in museum archives to read about an actual case example of an archive that is still functioning and continues to actively collect.

7. Melton, Maureen. "Preserving Love's Labors in the Museums Archives." *Art Documentation* 15, no. 1 (1996): 7-9.

Melton discusses the importance of keeping exhibition records created by curators for current and future researchers. This article serves as an example of how and why internal museum records should be saved. She describes the arduous process curators endure while putting together an exhibition. Melton sheds light on the array of invaluable "behind the scenes" materials available to researchers.

8. *Museum News* 70, November-December 1991.

The entire issue of this journal is dedicated to museum archives. The main topics discussed are the relationship between the archivist and the curator and how they are in many ways performing the same jobs but often do not communicate well. In order to make the most of both professions within the institution, communication is paramount. The articles in this issue

give the researcher some background into the field as well as some common issues faced by museum archivists.

9. Pederson, Ann. "Do Real Archivists Really Need Archives and Museum Informatics?" *American Archivist* 53, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 666-675.

Ann Pederson reviews and analyzes a new, at the time, quarterly newsletter, *Archives and Museum Informatics*, and a technical series to assess if the field of archives needs such a bridge between the two professions. She concludes the newsletter and technical reports are needed to help keep archivists abreast of the new developments in the field.

## **Index, Abstracts and Full Text**

Note: All available through UT Library Online

10. ArticleFirst (Database). Dublin, OH: , OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., 1990 - present. Updated daily.

Indexes articles from the last ten years from over 12,000 journals dealing with the humanities, science, social science, medicine and popular culture. Abstracts occasionally included. Search using the term museum archives.

11. NetFirst (Database). Dublin, OH: , OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., current. Updated daily.

Verified and updated daily, NetFirst contains over 100,000 Internet resources and web pages. Use the search string museum archives.

12. Readers Guide Abstracts (Database). Bronx, NY: H.W. Wilson, January, 1983 - present. Updated Monthly.

The electronic version of the print *Reader's Guide to Periodical Abstracts*. Indexes and abstracts a core list of popular periodicals published in the United States and Canada. It also cites book reviews and contains abstracts for many entries. Again the term "museum archives"<sup>iiii</sup> produces the most results.

## Internet

13. "Archives" *Grove Dictionary of Art Online*. <<http://www.groveart.com/>> [Accessed 8 October 2000].

Available through UT Library Online, *Grove Dictionary of Art Online* is the electronic version of the print, which is a necessity in any academic and art library. *Grove's* is continuously updated and contains "updates to the existing 41,000 articles of the print edition as well as over 15,000 links to the web sites of museums and galleries around the world with more than 100,000 color images."<sup>iv</sup> The entry on Archives is very comprehensive.

14. *Google* (Search Engine). Available at: <<http://www.google.com/>> [Accessed 8 October 2000]

According to *Wired* magazine, Google is the "most intelligent agent on the internet." It is a favorite among researchers because it indexes over one billion web pages and often produces the most relevant web sites for your topic. Use the term "museum archives", in quotes, for the best results.

15. *Museum Archivist*. Available at:  
<[http://daryl.chin.gc.ca:8000/BASIS/forum/user/e\\_letters/SDW?W%3DTYPE%20%3D%20%27Letter%27%20ORDER%20BY%20EVERY%20TI/Ascend%26M%3D21%26R%3DY](http://daryl.chin.gc.ca:8000/BASIS/forum/user/e_letters/SDW?W%3DTYPE%20%3D%20%27Letter%27%20ORDER%20BY%20EVERY%20TI/Ascend%26M%3D21%26R%3DY)> [Accessed 12 October 2000].

This is a newsletter produced by the Museum Archives section of the Society of American Archivists. It is published twice a year and contains section reports, current issues, book reviews, and announcements in the field of Museum Archives. It is also useful because it provides contacts and serves as a network of professionals in a fairly specialized field.

16. *Virtual Libraries Museum Page*. Available at: <<http://www.icom.org/vlmp/>> [Accessed 27 October 2000].

This site is a listing of web pages for museums all over the world. It contains thousands of entries and also has a listing by type such as children's, art, science and natural history. This web site is useful for museum archives because a list has yet to be compiled of solely museum archives web pages so, from here researchers can go to individual museum pages and search to see if they do have their own archival collection.

## Associations/Organizations

### 17. AAM (American Association of Museums).

1575 Eye Street, NW Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20005  
Phone: (202) 289-1818  
Fax: (202) 289-6578  
Web page: <http://www.aam-us.org/> [Accessed 10 October 2000]

Founded in 1906, AAM represents all types of museums and the professionals and staff who work within the museums. Their mission is to provide support and advocacy for museums throughout the United States. Currently AAM has more than 16,000 members including 11,500 museum professionals and volunteers, 3,100 institutions, and 1,700 corporate members. Their web site serves as a way for museums professionals to keep abreast of current issues and contains many professional resources such as *Aviso*, their employment bulletin.

### 18. IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services).

1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20506  
Phone: (202) 606-8536  
Fax: (202) 606-8591  
Web page: <http://www.imls.gov/> [Accessed 9 October 2000].

IMLS is the only government agency of its kind and was started as a result of the Museum and Library Services Act of 1996. They work expressly to provide grants and support to museums and libraries of all kinds throughout the United States. They work to enhance the educational benefits of the two institutions by fostering relationships between them. The IMLS web site contains grant information, recent grant recipients, and electronic access to their publications and resources.

### 19. SAA (Society of American Archivists).

527 South Wells Street, 5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Chicago, IL 60607  
Phone: (312) 922-0140  
Fax: (312) 347-1453  
Web page: <http://www.archivists.org/> [Accessed 10 October 2000].

The Society of American Archivists was founded in 1936 to serve the information and educational needs of its members in the field of Archival Enterprise. They are the oldest and largest national archival association in North America. SAA has several sections designed as a tool for members with similar fields and backgrounds to communicate. They have museum archives section composed of “persons responsible for the organization and care of records relating to archives located in museums.”<sup>v</sup> From here there is a link to their newsletter *Museum Archivist*, discussed earlier in the bibliography.

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**Style Manual used:** Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996.

## **Understanding Museum Archives: A Pathfinder by Rebecca Roberts**

<http://www.gslis.utexas.edu/~vmuseum/roberts.pdf>

Museum archives serve as the museum's memory. They "preserve and administer records of permanent value not in current use."<sup>vi</sup> Records of the museum may be in any and all formats. This pathfinder has been created to help museum patrons and researchers understand the function, necessity and research value of archival collections within a museum setting. It also serves as a tool for those museums interested in starting their own archives.

### **Where can I learn more about the field of archives in general?**

To gain a firm grasp on the general field of archival enterprise including types, history and examples, start with the entry "archives" in the online version of *The Grove Dictionary of Art*. The Grove Dictionary of Art can be accessed online through the Indexes, Abstracts and Full Text databases at the University of Texas Library Online at: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/> or directly at <http://www.groveart.com/>. Once at the Dictionary's web-site, the researcher should search using the term "archives". The article on archives is very comprehensive.

### **Do most museums have archival collections and where in the internet can I find a listing of museums with archival collections?**

Whether or not a museum has an archival collection is really dependent upon the institution itself. Many factors come into play such as the museum's mission statement, funding and staffing. A comprehensive listing of museum archives has yet to be compiled, but a simple search using the terms "museum archives" in <http://www.google.com> produces links to several museum archives web pages.

Another place to start is the *Virtual Libraries Museum Page* <http://www.icom.org/vlmp/>. This site provides researchers with an extensive list of web addresses for museums all over the world.

### **I am a librarian in a small local museum. How can I start our own museum archives?**

William A. Deiss covers all aspects necessary when setting up a museum archives specifically.

William A. Deiss. *Museum Archives: An Introduction*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984. (AM158 D45 1984 PCL Stacks)

A few other good books available at the PCL that deal with starting an archival collection and archival principles in general are:

David B. Gracy. *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977. (Z695.2 G73 PCL Stacks)

Elizabeth Yakel. *Starting an Archives*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1994. (CD950 Y35 1994 PCL Stacks)

### **Where on the Internet can I find more information on, and support for museum archives?**

Again by using the search engine [Google](#) to perform a search using “museum archives” as the subject, you will get numerous “hits” concerning the many aspects of museum archives. But, the best place to find support for and information about museum archives is the museum archives section of the SAA (Society of American Archivists). They publish the newsletter, *Museum Archivist* that provides information on current events and is the central network for museum archives professionals.

SAA Museum Archives Section. Available at:

<<http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section9.htm> - description> [Accessed 12 October 2000].

*Museum Archivist*. Available at:

<[http://daryl.chin.gc.ca:8000/BASIS/forum/user/e\\_letters/SDW?W%3DTYPE%20%3D%20%27Letter%27%20ORDER%20BY%20EVERY%20TI/Ascend%26M%3D21%26R%3DY](http://daryl.chin.gc.ca:8000/BASIS/forum/user/e_letters/SDW?W%3DTYPE%20%3D%20%27Letter%27%20ORDER%20BY%20EVERY%20TI/Ascend%26M%3D21%26R%3DY)> [Accessed 12 October 2000].

**I hope this information has been useful. Remember never hesitate to ask a librarian for additional help!**

## Endnotes

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<sup>i i</sup> Museum Archives Guidelines, Society of American Archivists, Museum Archives Section:  
[http://daryl.chin.gc.ca:8000/BASIS/forum/user/e\\_letters/DDW?W%3DTYPE%20%3D%20%27Letter%27%20ORDER%20BY%20EVERY%20TI/Ascend%26M%3D29%26K%3D2628%26R%3DY%26U%3D46%26PCU%3D25](http://daryl.chin.gc.ca:8000/BASIS/forum/user/e_letters/DDW?W%3DTYPE%20%3D%20%27Letter%27%20ORDER%20BY%20EVERY%20TI/Ascend%26M%3D29%26K%3D2628%26R%3DY%26U%3D46%26PCU%3D25)

<sup>ii</sup> John W. Carlin, "Your Past is Disappearing: What Museums Should Know about the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Archives Crisis," *Museum News* 78, no. 1 (1999): 46.

<sup>iii</sup> UT Library Online. *Indexes, Abstracts and Full Text. Alphabetical List - R*. Available at:  
<<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/Indexes/R.html>> [Accessed 27 October 2000].

<sup>iv</sup> UT Library Online. *Indexes, Abstracts and Full Text. Alphabetical List - G*. Available at:  
<<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/Indexes/G.html>> [Accessed 27 October 2000].

<sup>v</sup> Society of American Archivists. *Description of SAA Sections*. Available at:  
<[http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section9.htm - description](http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section9.htm-description)> [Accessed 29 October 2000].

<sup>vi</sup> John W. Carlin, "Your Past is Disappearing: What Museums Should Know about the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Archives Crisis," *Museum News* 78, no. 1 (1999): 46.