

Memory Institution Merger:
An Exploration into the Relationship Between Archives and Museums

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This semester I found myself dividing my time between work and school, like so many other graduate students. However, being employed and interning at two different cultural institutions gave me a unique perspective on how various “memory institutions” can complement each other and what role archives play in a museum setting. As a Gallery Host at the Chrysler Museum of Art, my role is often forward facing and focuses primarily on visitor experience. I am afforded the opportunity to witness how collections impact museum patrons. During an internship at The Barry Museum of Art, I worked behind the scenes to create new records for and catalog all of the objects in a recently acquired donation of more than 160 works of glass art. Being able to see how archives and records affect the operations of museums and also how museums can complement and highlight archival collections was beneficial to me as I hope to work in a museum setting upon completion of my M.L.I.S. degree. It was also a relationship that I wished to research further for this paper.

Traditionally, Archives are organizations dedicated to the preservation of records and historical materials that serve as evidence of a particular person, community, culture or organization. Museums display objects of cultural significance and interpret their context in a way to educate and

entertain patrons. At first glance, it seems like these institutions are dissimilar in their primary functions and goals, but if we look closely many similarities arise. Helena Robinson of the University of Sydney's Department of Museum Studies (2012) states, "...libraries, archives and museums share an essential compatibility and purpose around the concept of memory and history" (p.414). I also believe that archives play a crucial role in supporting museums and in some cases, archival collections actually benefit from being showcased by museums. If one of the primary goals of a modern archivist is to make collections accessible, then collaborating with a museum seems like a natural choice.

Museums know the value and necessity of keeping and preserving records concerning the objects in their care. When an object is accessioned into a permanent collection, a record is created that will be consulted and revised over the span of the object's lifetime in the collection. Starting with accurate records that provide provenance, condition and contextual information about the object is crucial. While record keeping best practices may vary by institution or software the importance of keeping accurate records is agreed upon. In a panel session at the National Archives, representative of the Museum Archives Section of the Society of American Archivists Deborah Wythe affirmed "...without a clear understanding of what information is held by a museum, in which departments, and under whose control, research efforts will be seriously hampered" (Wythe, 2016). Many

museums also house structured archives within the institution and feature archival collections in their exhibitions. In their booklet for The Association of Independent Museums, *Successfully Managing Archives in Museums*, authors Emma Chaplin and Janice Tullock (2015) say, "Archives can be an incredibly rich and enlightening part of your museum collection. They can tell a whole range of stories and help bring your whole museum and the rest of the collections to life" (p.3).

There are also benefits for the archives when partnered with a museum. Museums provide an interpretive environment, visibility and access for archival collections. Sometimes an exhibition focuses solely on archival materials or draws its inspiration from them. One example of this was an exhibition entitled "Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art" shown at the International Centre of Photography in 2008. This exhibition featured contemporary works by artists reimagining collections and interpreting new meaning in the historic record using archival documents as their inspiration. I have seen an example of the creative use of archival materials in a work from the Chrysler Museum of Art. We have a piece in our collection by artist Titus Kaphur portraying what looks like a traditional portrait painting of Thomas Jefferson. However, nailed across his face and hanging down beyond the bottom border of the frame are strips of cloth with the names of the people enslaved by him. These names were taken from historic records. The piece invites the viewer to ponder the

conditional nature of the “freedoms” our founding fathers fought for. Emily Lonie, Archivist for the City of Coquitlam, addressed this idea of a harmony between the two disciplines in a recent blog post. She states, “Artists use archival records in ways we may have never considered, bringing new life into the records we preserve” (Lonie, 2017). She goes on to say that artists, in a sense, can be seen as ambassadors for the collections and help to bridge the divide between these institutions' traditional roles. In her post, Lonie provides another example of this partnership from The Corner Brook Museum and Archives in Newfoundland. The museum was planning to implement an “artist in residency” program to foster, “...an enhanced education experience for the public through the unique interpretation of the artist” (Lonie, 2017).

There are times when the lines between museum and archive are blurred. An institution may function successfully as both. One example we are given in Laura Millar’s text, *Archives: Principles and Practices* (2017) is the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. The museum highlights archives, artifacts and realia pertaining to the history of lighthouses in Scotland. By making the archives part of the museum experience, visitors are able to connect with this unique subject in a tangible way. In my research, I discovered another Scottish museum where the archives are appreciated for the value they bring to the collection. At The Burrell Collection, archivist Fiona Cairns has been working behind the scenes

caring for a records archive of the nearly 6,000 letters, 27 purchase books and a personal library of 1,400 volumes of Sir William Burrell. She feels the provenance and context provided by these materials complement the museum's holdings. Cairns believes, "The records the Burrells left behind are as important as the objects in the collection- they tell us so much about what the objects are, where they came from and how the Burrells acquired them" (Fotheringham, 2022).

The idea that archives, libraries and museums all fall under the umbrella of "memory institutions" and in some cases can physically coexist in the same space has been gaining momentum. Many governments are beginning to see the benefits of merging archives with other cultural institutions. An example of this merger in action is Library and Archives Canada (LAC) founded in 2004. Canada's National Archives merged with the National Library with a goal to become a one stop knowledge institution that serves the dual purpose of community learning and information management. These two institutions often shared buildings and resources pre-merger, so becoming a single integrated institution was a smooth transition. One that may soon include a national museum. According to a case study in *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage* concerning the LAC merger, author Michelle Doucet (2007) points out that the institution "holds significant potential for serving museum functions and even creating a museum-like building" (p. 63).

One of the results of these types of collaborations is that the archivist finds themselves wearing many different hats. Archivists will often perform the roles of historian, special collections curator and records manager simultaneously in a museum setting. Some argue that a museum by its very nature is essentially one large archive. A place to preserve and promote access to items we as a society feel have cultural significance. In another case study, student Tony Mitchell reported on his findings while working on a project for The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney, Australia. He discovered records in the museum dating back to the 1880s that were unprocessed and nearly untouched. The findings consisted of "minute books, correspondence, administrative, financial and library records, stock book registers, and branch museum records...most of them covering the early period of the Museum's existence" (Mitchell, 1981). Mitchell was able to organize and store the majority of these forgotten records during his time at the museum. In an instance such as this, it is easy to see the value of having an archivist onsite.

While we have been investigating the mutually beneficial relationship that can exist between archives and museums, it is important to note the challenges that could arise from these sorts of collaborations. Libraries, museums and archives have distinctly different methods, practices, policies and parameters in place with regard to the items they collect and how they provide care for them. Archival materials of different shapes, sizes and

physical compositions often can not be stored together. Archives often don't have the capacity to provide the space or supplies needed to house three dimensional objects and artifacts in their collections. Museums and archives also rely on different indicators for which materials they wish to accession into their collections. Keeping that in mind, it may be unclear at times which institution is a better fit for the materials. This can result in objects and records being transferred back and forth between a museum and an archive until it is decided where they should permanently reside. "Museums often become the custodians of objects separated from archives collections," says special collections archivist Katie Rudolph (2011). She was faced with this issue while working with the *Krzyzanowski Family Papers, 1886-2003* at the Wisconsin Historical Society. The collection consisted of both written documents and physical artifacts. The artifacts were transferred to a museum who ultimately decided to accession only two of them. The rest were returned to the archive where they remain in storage. Finding the proper "home" for an object is one obstacle that could be overcome by a merger between the two institutions.

My own experiences this semester have shown me how complementary archives and museums can be and how collaboration between these departments and institutions are often beneficial for both. My project at the Barry Art Museum was mostly performed behind the scenes consisting of data entry and research. However, I could easily see

the impact this had on the museum's collections. My creation of records would make it possible for the objects to be ready for an upcoming exhibition. My experience this semester in this seminar course gave me an opportunity to apply some of the principles I was learning through our course materials at my internship site, an art museum. I began to see how easily these archival skills transferred to a museum setting. When I could complete my assignment for an exhibition critique at my workplace I could see clearly how archives affect exhibition planning and design. At the end of his experience, Tony Mitchell (1981) reflected that museums are mirrors of the societies in which they exist. Archives are often referred to as society's evidence of itself. Archives and museums often share such similar goals and interests that mergers between them are steadily increasing and through my research for this paper and my experiences this semester, I believe this is a promising prospect for both institutions.

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