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Review of Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy

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Rachel Chatalbash, Susan Hernandez, and Megan Schwenke, eds. *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2022.

Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy is the first holistic work concerning museum archives since the publication of the second edition of *Museum Archives: An Introduction* in 2004, also by the Society of American Archivists (SAA).¹ The profession has changed in the intervening years, and *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy* is a welcome addition to the body of professional literature on museum archives.

Museum Archives emerged from the work of the SAA's Museum Archives Section's Best Practices Working Group (vii), and the book's introduction provides a timeline noting the establishment of the working group and other major events in the professionalization of museum archives (6). It has 27 contributors, 17 chapters, 3 parts, and totals 192 large-format pages. Its size, though a bit daunting, is fitting for a long-awaited work that profiles a substantial and complex subset of the archival profession.

Its essays explore topics such as managing artist documentation, preserving audiovisual collections, building relationships with stakeholders, the role of the archives in the ethical care of museum collections, and records management. The essays are complemented by suggestions for further reading, footnotes, and sidebars, which provide additional information on topics through diagrams, narrative explication, and small case studies.

Overview

Museum Archives is divided into an introduction and three parts. These sections address the themes introduced by the book's subtitle—practice, issues, and advocacy—while at the same time showing how each theme is informed by the others. Part 1 introduces us to the core competencies of the museum archivist and how individuals can advocate for their archives through providing better service and forming relationships with museum colleagues. Part 2 addresses practices for working with collections commonly encountered in museum archives. The third part takes on ethical issues in museum archives work as well as the trends influencing the direction of the profession.

Book Sections

Part 1 concerns the functions of a museum archives and the skills that an archivist should have to do the job successfully. The skills and services found in museum archives are similar to those encountered in other archival domains, though with important differences that the authors endeavor to point out. Functions of museum archives addressed in part 1 include records management; archival fundamentals such as arrangement, description, and preservation; appraisal and acquisition; and outreach, “inreach,” and digitization (chapters 4–7). These may be called the core functions of a museum archives, especially contrasted with the more collection-specific activities explored in part 2. These functions add value to an archival program regardless of

¹ Deborah Wythe, ed., *Museum Archives: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004).

whether it is situated in an art museum, natural history museum, children's museum, or historic house.

In addition, chapter 2, "The Archival Core and Beyond," discusses the departments located in most museums and how archivists can cooperate with these colleagues and alleviate friction. Building on this introduction to museum organization, chapter 3, "Museum Archives: Management and Institutional Support," discusses the ideal placement of the archives within a museum's organization, the resources it needs from its administration, and in what ways archivists must take leadership roles to demonstrate the archives' value.

The second part turns away from the core functions of museum archives to a consideration of more detailed aspects of managing museum records. Each chapter is centered around a different record type or format: audiovisual materials, oral histories, photographs, architectural records, documentation of artists' works, and field notes (chapters 8–13). While none of these records is truly unique to the world of museum archives, the authors show how these record types are frequently encountered in museums and can define the work of the museum archivist. The sidebars in part 2 highlight some of the interesting work with which museum professionals are engaged, including the use of oral histories to contextualize collections at a veterans museum (86), engaging communities through crowdsourced photo identification (100), and creating Encoded Archival Context for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (EAC-CPF) records for scientific expeditions as well as their individual members and funders (129). These miniature case studies provide context for broader lessons and prompt the reader to think creatively about applications for their own collections.

Part 3 takes a step back to provide advice for fundraising, consider ethical and legal issues, and discuss the current trends and ideas taking root in the profession. Here, the reader can learn about strategies for fundraising in a museum context, how to apply professional values in negotiating ethical issues surrounding access and use of museum archives, the process of reckoning with unjust institutional legacies, hiring and training a diverse and inclusive staff, and the role of archival records in the repatriation and return of objects procured by museums through unethical collecting (chapters 14–16). Kathleen Williams's final chapter, "We Are What We Share, or Making the Case for Museum Archives," acts as an epilogue and recapitulates the theme that providing value to user groups is essential in advocating for museum archives. The most introspective of the book's sections, part 3 is an all-too-brief look at the more contentious issues encountered in museum archives, some of which are unique to the field while others are broadly shared with the archival profession in general.

Broader Themes

Practice

The book's authors faced a challenge in establishing the roles, responsibilities, and day-to-day practices that define the work of a museum archivist. The Institute of Museum and Library Services

estimated in 2014 that there were 35,144 museums in the United States.² Museum archives are housed in a vast number of institutions, which have unique missions, organizational structures, and collections. The book's contributors alone hail from art museums, natural history museums, historical societies, city and county museums, and even a wildlife conservation society (183–87).³ With this variety come widely varying responsibilities for museum archivists.

In chapter 3, Maygene Daniels defines the practices that are common and essential to museum archives work. Although the chapter might have benefited from data providing a better understanding of the composition of the field (number of museum archivists, educational background, and job titles and responsibilities, for instance), Daniels establishes that museum archivists must know or do the following: “Understand the programs, sensitivities, and perspectives of other museum departments”; “be conversant with digital media technologies”; have a “sound grasp of numbers”; be “alert to new laws, standards, and requirements for digital records retention”; have a “structural knowledge of databases and other information systems”; possess a “knowledge of the terminology, scope, current trends, and history of the museum’s academic area”; and be “skilled in meeting user needs” (14–16). In other chapters, we find that archivists must also be proficient in strategic planning, disaster planning, information governance and risk management, appraisal and acquisition, and records management. It is worth noting that the competencies germane to museum archives may be gleaned from various chapters but are never listed together. In this case, the book’s ability to offer a cohesive definition of practice may be hindered by its multitude of authors and, again, by its lack of a statistical survey of the field, which would have put it on better footing to describe what makes work in museum archives its own unique profession.

The competencies listed by various authors supplement the SAA’s core concepts for archival graduate education to establish the essential skills and knowledge a museum archivist must possess (17). It is a long list indeed, and mastering it may be a daunting task. This is especially true for the many museum professionals who lack formal archival training. Chapter 5, “Applying Archival Fundamentals to the Museum Context” by Susan Hernandez, acknowledges that many of those working in museum archives, especially at smaller museums, are not trained archivists (37). Hernandez writes for this audience by providing thoughtful, clear explanations of archival work with an eye to the differences between museum and archival practices. Although a valuable addition to the book, much of the chapter focuses on appraisal at the cost of explaining core concepts like the principle of provenance, original order, and hierarchical arrangement. Museum

² “Government Doubles Official Estimate: There Are 35,000 Active Museums in the U.S.,” Institute of Museum and Library Services, May 19, 2014, <https://www.ims.gov/news/government-doubles-official-estimate-there-are-35000-active-museums-us>.

³ Twenty-five of the book’s twenty-seven contributors have worked in or consulted with museums. Their range of experience is impressive. It is worth noting, however, that few have worked in smaller museums. Reviewing the biographical information provided, a majority currently work or have worked at such well-known museums as the Museum of Modern Art, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, the Guggenheim Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the United States Holocaust Museum, the National Gallery of Art, and various museums of the Smithsonian Institution. Twenty-one contributors currently work in California or states on the eastern seaboard. While many of the profession’s emerging trends have originated in these institutions, the vast majority of museums and museum archives may not resemble them in mission, size, or funding.

professionals seeking a ground-up explanation of these and other archival mainstays will have to find them elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the various chapters of *Museum Archives* are an excellent compass with which those outside of the profession and its newer members may orient themselves. Those with more experience will still find value in the chapters exploring topics with which they are less familiar, especially the collection-specific essays comprising part 2 and part 1's excellent essay on records management by Sarah Demb.

Advocacy

A common refrain across chapters is that other professionals in museums are potential allies but not archivists. They need instruction regarding the value that archives provide (67), how to research archival collections (63), and how to comply with records management schedules (22). Herein lies the “advocacy” referenced by the book’s subtitle: it is advocacy not for museum archives nationally or within the archival profession (a topic nevertheless covered by the introduction) but primarily advocacy by each museum archivist for each archives within their home institution. “Working with museum colleagues,” writes Hernandez, “makes it necessary for museum archivists to be able to clearly articulate what an archives is and what it does and why” (37). Opportunities to prove archives’ worth are often impromptu, and accordingly archivists might find opportunities for advocacy at unexpected times and in unexpected places (67). *Museum Archives* makes the case that practitioners should always be prepared to explain the purpose of the archives and raise their profiles. Indeed, in the book’s concluding chapter, Kathleen Williams characterizes advocacy as a kind of “campaign waged every day” (180).

Among the lessons offered up by the authors, Daniels writes that “persuasion built on sympathetic knowledge of the missions of other departments is the museum archivist’s most effective tool” (13). Demb echoes this statement, writing that archivists must thoroughly understand the records generated by museum departments to implement a records management program (27). Williams chooses to center advocacy around the practice of sharing knowledge and expertise, while chapters 3 and 14 stress the importance of having a well-developed set of policies (22, 141). Together, the authors suggest that the most effective forms of advocacy are understanding a museum’s structure, forming relationships with colleagues, and providing value for the museum’s mission and administration. For instance, Nancy Enneking and Jessica Gambling argue that the museum administration has the right to expect value from its archival program even when under-resourced and -staffed by lone arrangers. Without meeting goals and providing value there can be no growth for the program (21). Throughout, the focus remains on forms of advocacy within the power of individual archivists; the dominant form of advocacy is for each archivist to do their job well.

This focus on the individual archivist omits a discussion about advocacy writ large. Each archivist can only do so much to elevate the perceived value of the field among their peers. The introduction demonstrates this by showing the gains that museum archivists have made by working together within SAA (4–6). The chapter does not address future directions for advancement, however, and other authors do not pick up the thread. Readers would have benefited from authors’ insights into what else they can do collectively to advance the interests they champion. An overview of how archivists figure into the activities of museum professional associations such as the American

Alliance of Museums or the International Council of Museums, and the ways in which museum archivists might raise their profile within these organizations, would have provided a backdrop for discussions of advocacy at the individual level. What lines of argument can archivists pursue with the leadership of professional organizations and publicly to persuade museums that “museum archives should be staffed by professional archivists” (7)? Another collective avenue for advocacy worth addressing is education. What are the educational needs specific to working in a museum archives, and what skills and tools will be essential in the future? By contrasting these needs with current master’s curricula, the authors could have indicated where improvements might be made and where the field differs from the archival profession in general.

“The charge of the museum archives is to document not only where the museum has been, but to imagine and help others imagine where it will go,” write Chatalbash and colleagues (7). A similar charge might be assigned to this book but with reference to the field of museum archives and its future. The future it imagines, however, is somewhat disparate: the quantity of authors and their varying expertise, while at times an asset to the work, prevent *Museum Archives* from offering a cohesive vision. Admittedly, imagining a future for the broad array of museums and museum archivists would be a difficult task for any author, especially without a better understanding of the field’s statistical composition.

Issues

The pages devoted to ethical and legal issues in museum archives are the shortest and least robust of those dedicated to the book’s three themes. The first chapter of part 3 provides valuable guidance on the topic of fundraising but does not cover ethical and legal issues. Likewise, the final chapter concludes the book by once again highlighting the importance of advocacy. This leaves just two chapters to discuss such complex issues as access, privacy, diversity, institutional legacies, unpaid internships, volunteering, and the impact of archival provenance research on the return or repatriation of collections.

Taking just one of these issues as an example, namely the repatriation and return of Native American ancestors, funerary objects, and cultural patrimony, Emily Connell and Michael Pahn provide an admirable overview of the history of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in chapter 16. *Museum Archives: An Introduction* covered this topic in 2004, and a statement about how implementation of the law has transformed in the intervening years would have been an excellent addition to their chapter. Another important supplement would have been a discussion of how many of the nation’s leading museums and countless smaller institutions are not complying with the law. The authors draw attention to the fact that “archival records . . . provide the necessary context to trace objects’ provenance and to determine other characteristics required for successful repatriation claims” (171). But what practices in museum archives have contributed to some museums’ failure to comply, and what role can archivists play to address it proactively? Limitations of space may have prevented the authors from going further. Still, a recent ProPublica article on this very topic may quickly outdate the authors’ assertion that “the subject of repatriation rarely enters the public discourse, except for extraordinary circumstances” and drive home the fact that this and other issues could have used a fuller treatment (170).⁴

⁴ Logan Jaffe et al., “America’s Biggest Museums Fail to Return Native American Human Remains,” ProPublica, January 11, 2023, <https://www.propublica.org/article/repatriation-nagpra-museums-human-remains>.

Conclusion

Museum Archives is part manual for archivists and museum professionals and part profile of the profession and its emerging trends. Although it misses opportunities to depict a more complete state of the profession, its readers will certainly benefit from the book by selecting the chapters that best suit their needs or in reading the entire work to see how the themes of practice, issues, and advocacy complement one another. The many authors of this work maintain an infectious optimism and a belief that archives are valuable and necessary components of a museum's day-to-day operations, or at least that, given the right direction, they can and should be. The book will no doubt find much of its audience receptive to this message, and readers will come away with strategies to make themselves and their archival programs more successful.