

# Who Penned This?: Unboxing Hybrids

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**Abstract:** What to do when you find a non-manuscript “boxed in” with the personal papers of a donor? In the hierarchy of hybrid archival collections—often a mix of manuscripts and fine arts holdings, the manuscript is, too often, prioritized. A “witness to the past, it provides evidence, explanation, and justification both for past actions and current decisions.” While commensurate in significance, the “companion” fine art collection is often underutilized, undervalued, and under-protected. Art curators within archival institutions must be standard bearers—willing to take a hybrid approach to navigate implicit and systemic biases in their effort to affect the proportionate treatment of fine arts holdings.

Penned or executed in various mediums, art speaks the unspoken; records history and movements; authenticates and corroborates; promotes dissidence and determination; informs and instructs, etc. Unboxing or “unpacking” the discourse around how institutions develop best practices that encapsulate their collections' full breadth and scope requires a “hybrid” or cross-disciplinary approach on every level, including processing acquisitions, cataloging, and arranging collections, stewardship, and collections management.

In *Who Penned This? Unboxing Hybrids* the panelists, an art curator and archivist, will discuss the complexities of working collaboratively to manage hybrid archival collections--manuscripts, fine art, photography, and other ephemera.

## **Introduction:**

The impetus for this research was to establish a cross-disciplinary framework for developing best practices in managing and contributing to the long-term sustainability of hybrid archival collections. This reference specifically encompasses manuscript collections that contain non-conventional materials such as original works of art, photographs, ephemera, and other specialized items because of their intrinsic value or need for evaluation or handling by trained specialists, which requires unique consideration. Author Paula Allen and her longtime friend and former colleague Rebecca Hankins often discuss the commonalities of their work. In their respective positions as Curator in the Fine Art Division in the Amistad Research Center (ARC) in New Orleans, Louisiana, and as archivist and professor at Texas A&M University, Allen and Hankins recognized their mutual concerns about working with hybrid collections seemed of mutual interest to their colleagues in the archival and museum profession. In fact, their



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recognition of this shared interest among their colleagues led Allen and Hankins to develop and submit a proposal to discuss the complexities of managing hybrid manuscript collections at the Society of Southwest Archivists Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Their conference session, “Who Penned This? Unboxing Hybrids”, in March of 2023, was enthusiastically received by approximately 70 attendees.

During their session, Allen and Hankins proposed a rhetorical question: What to do when you find a “‘non-manuscript’ boxed in” with the personal papers of a donor? Citing examples in their work and those of their colleagues who worked with hybrid archival collections, Hankins and Allen discovered that often underlying biases resulted in manuscripts being prioritized during processing. While commensurate in significance, their hybrid companion objects, perhaps photos, original drawings, sketchbooks, prints, etc., were under-recorded, under documented, and under-protected. Art curators and other specialists, Allen and Hankins insist, must be standard bearers—willing to take a hybrid approach to navigate implicit and systemic biases in their effort to affect the proportionate treatment of “hybrids.”

To do so, Allen and Hankins suggest that rather than appeal to their colleagues’ aesthetic sensibilities, and they must appeal to the intellectual sensibilities and their shared sense of historical impetus to emphasize that hybrid objects, though penned or executed in various mediums, just as manuscripts, record history, and movements, authenticate and corroborate, promote dissidence and determination, inform, instruct, etc. As such, unboxing, or “unpacking” the discourse around how institutions develop best practices that encapsulate their collections’ full breadth and scope requires a “hybrid” or cross-disciplinary approach on every level, including processing acquisitions, cataloging, and arranging collections, stewardship, and collections management. The research paper will provide an overview of the concerns mentioned above and issues and offer advice for archival institutions as we advance.

### **Methodology/Literature Review**

The authors reviewed the literature and found several essays and articles that tackled the issue of bridging the divide between archives and artistic materials. A notes and bibliography section lists guides and resources that primarily deal with standards and guidelines for archives and museums. Our research project’s methodology entailed reviewing articles that represent an awareness within recent years of the need to work cross-professionally to ensure our historical materials are preserved and made accessible in the original format. Some essays tackling these problems and concerns include an Italian essay by Francesca Zanella’s *Between Artwork and Document. Paths from the museum to the archive and from the archive to the museum* focus on the differences in practices and how to develop a collaborative exhibition. Hankins’s 2010 article was co-authored with Dr. Miguel Juarez argues the need for diverse personnel in archives to handle artistic collections that are often marginalized in archival institutions. *Art in the Making: Artists and their Materials from the Studio to Crowdsourcing*, edited by Glenn Adamson, is a collection of essays that delves into artists’ practices and how their materials and processes influence both the artistic creation and the curation of their works. *A Companion to Curation*, edited by Brad Buckley and John Conomos, is a comprehensive collection that includes chapters on various aspects of curatorial practices while exploring the relationship between art curation and archival practices. *Museum, Archive, and Library Security* by Lawrence J. Fennell focuses

on security aspects that highlight the practices of safeguarding materials in museums and archives and the potential differences.

### **Defining the Roles:**

. *Museum Curator-Overview-Introduction-what the discussion will be the*  
The American Alliance of Museums' *Museum Registration Methods* offers collections management guidelines that can be cross-referenced with some of the same best practices offered by the Museum Archives Section of the American Archivists (SAA). Both professions, archivists, and museums "systematically collect, organize, preserve, and provide access to organizational records of enduring value as well as the papers of individuals, groups, and topics." Also, manuscript libraries, including those with hybrid manuscript collections, "maintain records in all formats, as well as to undertake the acquisition and stewardship ensure that resources are readily available to support the work of its staff as well as to meet the research needs of scholars and the general public."

"Museum Curators are subject-matter specialists in a field related to their museum's mission, researchers, supervisors of museum collections, exhibition developers, and public advocates for the collection. As scholars, curators provide museums with credibility within academic circles and as trusted sources of information amongst communities by serving as information brokers and conduits for conversation."

Museum curators also research and develop interpretive materials; design and install exhibitions; are knowledgeable about object and exhibition histories, provenance, and valuation histories; promote collections and services; foster collaborative relationships; share and build knowledge, strengthen acquisitions, build stewardship, focus on long term sustainability; and advocate for financial support and resources.

Depending on their educational backgrounds or training, museum curators may also have added specializations or training in areas such as studio arts, art history, graphics, or design.

### *B. Archivists/Manuscript Curators*

An archivist, as defined by the Society of American Archivists' SAA Dictionary of Archives Terminology, "are professionals with expertise in the management of records of enduring value." Lisa Lewis noted in her winning elevator speech, "We bring the past to the present. We are records collectors, protectors, and keepers of memory. We organize unique, historical materials, making them available for current and future research." Additionally, the collections support and encourage researchers to develop new understandings through research and creativity. Archivists employ archival literacies to teach students to recognize when information is needed and provide them with the skills to locate, evaluate, and effectively use primary and secondary resources within collections.

Most archivists work in institutions and organizations that may house books, manuscripts, writings, photographs, journals, diaries, newspapers, reports, patents, and archival records. Increasingly, archives are also charged with working with born-digital collections. These

collections present many challenges for archivists who need to be trained or have minimal training in the skillsets needed to work with these collections, similar to other hybrid materials. Some of our Presidential libraries are perfect examples of the dilemma archivists face.

President Obama's Presidential Library is primarily electronic and digital documentation with over 35,000 objects that include artwork, compared to former President Jimmy Carter's Presidential Library, which is mostly paper-based with objects and artwork. President Obama's library, when it opens, will be the first to use a Digital Research Room to access his records. Presidential libraries run by the United States National Archives and Records Administration have always maintained a trained staff to handle the holdings of these special hybrid collections. There are separate procedures when borrowing for museum exhibitions or other usage that require specialized handling for works of fine art, cultural artifacts, books, clothing, domestic furnishings, sporting equipment, and other hybrid materials.

### **Overlapping Responsibilities**

There is a recognition that archivists and art curators share some overlapping responsibilities, but the execution and context for these duties often need to be revised. In the archival and art curator context, collection development policies should guide the acquisition of documents, resources, and collections. They also inform donors of the parameters and strategies for donations or purchases for the archive. Donor relations are often ongoing long-term relationships that require continual engagement and communication. Donors to the archive and museum components can and often have certain demands and wishes guided by the Deed of Gift signed and kept in the archival collection folder. In both instances, archives and museums can decline gifts if they impose unreasonable restrictions or cause difficulties for the institutions.

Other responsibilities, such as appraisal in the archival and art curatorial context, mean determining if something is worth collecting. Does it have an enduring value to the institution that it is important to acquire? This is also where the collection development policies are helpful.

Archival processing involves organizing and describing the materials within the archive. This organization is often at the folder or box level rather than individual descriptions, although that is also an option for smaller holdings. For the art curator, processing is, more often than not, on the individual level with objects. The items are given a number similar to the cataloging of a book, with the medium, date, and other types of metadata. There is often a generative finding aid that contains more detail on the holdings for archives. Cataloging of individual items removed from larger archival collections necessitates a separation list in the collection folder. With the advent of Machine-Readable Records Cataloging (MARC), there are now several Collection Management Systems (CMS) available for cataloging, finding aids, and other information available online.

Archivists and art curators must also employ preservation and conservation practices involving isolation or documentation remediation. They focus on preservation and documentation of materials for historical, legal, or administrative purposes. In larger institutions, there are conservation and preservation labs where experts have the tools and resources to handle any

concerning resources properly and promptly. Many institutions have quarantine rooms where archival collections are initially reviewed, and other experts are brought in as needed. This is the ideal situation when dealing with hybrid collections, which the authors suggest. Art curators consider exhibition conditions, lighting, and environmental factors to showcase artworks effectively. They involve conservation efforts, but the primary goal is to enhance the visual and experiential impact.

Archivists and art curators create and curate exhibitions. Art curators emphasize the presentation of artworks for aesthetic, educational, or cultural purposes. They also seek to engage audiences and convey artistic narratives. Art curators consider exhibition conditions, lighting, and environmental factors to showcase artworks effectively. Curators may involve conservation efforts, but the primary goal is to enhance the visual and experiential impact.

## **Recommendations**

Archivists who manage hybrid manuscript collections should adopt existing museum standards and collections management policies when possible, refining them to suit archival practice. When such is inappropriate, archivists should create standalone policies for their repositories that draw upon professional museum standards and practices.

Archivists should strive to research, record, and make accessible as much information as possible regarding the provenance of the collections in their care and the care of the archives. Establishing institutional guidelines to ensure consistent practices around releasing information is recommended. The archives should have a professionally trained museum curator. If institutional resources do not permit hiring a professionally trained curator, expert advice should be sought, and training provided to the staff member(s) made responsible for them. Training should be supplemented with memberships, attendance, and subscriptions to professional-accrediting organizations: The American Alliance of Museums annual conference, a subscription to its monthly journal, access to discussion forums, and online articles.

The responsibilities of manuscript archivists are to appraise, acquire, arrange, describe, preserve, and facilitate access to records. They should collaborate with the museum curator to facilitate the appraisal, description, records creation, access, condition reporting, appraisal, and (if necessary) insurance of art objects. Again, we recommend that institutions invest in the expertise needed to ensure collections are provided with the necessary knowledge to take the best care of our collections and records.

The curator should be empowered to participate in strategic planning for the archives, assess its resource needs, and create policies and procedures that follow professional best practices and ethics. While administrative placement, structure, and governance will reflect institutional differences and cultures, the museum collection should be placed within the archives' organizational structure at the same level as all other collections departments, with the museum curator maintaining the equivalent custodial and related authority delegated by the director of the archives, governing board, or parent institution. The fine art department should also be independent within the archive's organizational structure. However, the museum archives may

also be an administrative affiliate of a parent institution's archives, such as when a museum is part of a larger university.

Ultimately, there are too many archival institutions with inadequate budgets to afford all the necessary personnel to ensure that non-archival resources are properly cared for. Ideally, the goal is to have personnel that can hand off hybrid collections to experts. Cross-training should be available for archivists and art curators if that is impractical. Similar to SAA's course Rare Books for Archivists, there can be a course on the care of hybrid collections for archivists or art curators, whichever professional requires the training.

## **Conclusion**

This essay highlighted the contrasting nature of archival and art curatorial practices, each serving distinct but complementary roles. The authors wanted to convey that collaboration, cross-training, and ensuring that archives have the expertise of art curators to work with these hybrid collections is essential. Most archives house art, photographic, and ephemera collections found in federal and state governments, public schools and higher education, religious institutions, hospitals, museums, and historical societies. It is important to push for a synergetic environment to ensure our shared cultural heritage is available and accessible for future generations. The authors sought to engage these problems with hybrid collections and offer recommendations to continue the dialogue and find collaborative solutions.

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