

Museum Archivist

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Letter from the outgoing MAS Chair, Tara Laver



Tara Laver, outgoing MAS Chair
and Senior Archivist, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

If you attended or tuned into the Museum Archives Symposium co-hosted by the section and the Yale Center for Art on May 10, you will be familiar with Sarah Demb's presentation, "Wicked Fragmentation: Archival Dissociation as a Tool for Reparation and Inclusivity."¹ If you did not attend or tune in, you can watch the [recording](#). At my institution, we do report-outs from conferences we attend, and Demb's was one of the sessions I shared with colleagues in the Learning and Engagement Division, my home division. Like me, they found it thought-provoking, and recognized that it presented a new avenue for thinking about reparative practices in the archives and museum.

So much reparative work in archives focuses on description. Demb's presentation and the work it draws on² calls us to think also about how the way records are managed within the museum can advance or retard reparation efforts. Central to this idea is the concept of dissociation. As Demb shared, dissociation comes from the field of preventative conservation and refers to the circumstance in which relationships connected to objects are made less visible by the separation of records and collections; differing standards and practices of the professions that take care of objects, collections, and related documentation; and separate discovery and access systems. As museum archivists, we certainly are no stranger to this silo-ing of information, structurally, with records about the same objects maintained, for example, in curatorial and registration departments as well as archives (all of which may make materials accessible to differing degrees), and digitally when these museum units employ separate collection management systems (ex. TMS vs. ArchivesSpace).

Continued on next page

1. My thanks to Sarah for sharing a copy of her presentation.

2. Mike Jones, *Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum*, Routledge, Oxon; New York, 2021; Catherine A. Nichols, *Exchanging Objects: Nineteenth-Century Museum Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021).

Demb provided the example of a diorama by early 20th-century artist Tom Ivester Lloyd held at the museum Museum of London, where she previously worked, to illustrate how that distribution can obscure object histories. Part of a series of dioramas called “Britain Through the Ages” (a history of Britain from prehistoric people through to the 20thC), the single surviving example at the Museum of London started life there as a prop, then became a much-loaned, accessioned object. In responding to a query about it, she went down a rabbit hole, as we often do, and found a letter from Henry Ford in which he requested to borrow the diorama for an exposition—as it turns out, an exposition about eugenics. This loan information had been dissociated from the object—she found it by contacting The Henry Ford, and other information on it was in registration records. It’s change from a museum prop to an accessioned object had also obscured its history and use. In Demb’s words, “It’s important to surface this type of connection now more than ever so we can understand the way in which our institutions help to create the social fabrics of inequity and oppression that occur. Although the diorama was not an object that would now fall under repatriation or reparations, its loan history was not neutral.”

How to make this information and connections known, and at scale, is the question. Some possibilities she suggested include a change in description and tools that center relationships in the object record and that support federated searching, employing linked data, and a regular practice of linking out to dissociated, relevant documentation from objects’ records in public platforms.

The presentation brought to mind the Museum Archives Section Working Group’s 2017-2018 [research project](#) and [related symposium](#) “Care and Stewardship of Permanent Records Held Outside of the Archives.” Working Group members conducted nineteen interviews with museum professionals in both archivist and non-archivist roles to investigate the management, preservation, storage, and access rules of these permanent records and begin to identify best practices for museum archivists. The reparative lens Demb focused on is another dimension of that work now. Ever the reference archivist, I wanted to make that connection for anybody either still thinking about Sara’s presentation or navigating this information management situation, and I hope you will take advantage of the related section resources linked aboved.

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Letter from the incoming MAS Chair, Laura Uglean Jackson

Greetings Museum Archives Section members! For my first newsletter article, I want to share plans for the year ahead which are influenced by the data from the section's survey earlier this year, and make a loud and sweeping call for your participation and ideas.

Tara Laver gave a great detailed presentation about the 2024 MAS survey data during the Section meeting on July 24. As was reported, only 19 people completed the survey, a very low response rate for a section that has 700 members. Despite this, it gave some insights into activities to prioritize and how the steering committee should focus its efforts, which was the main purpose of the survey. We learned that pop-up presentations are, well, popular- rating highest on activities to prioritize. This was followed by a half-day symposium on museum archives, in-person tour at the annual meeting, and updating the [Standards and Best Practices Resource Guide](#). The lowest-ranking activities were in-person networking opportunities at the SAA annual meeting, updating the MAS website, curated topics on the list-serv, special projects around relevant topics, and collaborating with other sections on projects or events. Respondents also reported on the topics they want more content about. The top five areas were digital preservation, policy/procedure development, specific platforms or tools, acquisitions and collection development, and records management. You can find the full survey results here: <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/museum-archives-section/surveys>.

Based on these results, I plan to schedule pop-up presentations throughout the year with a goal of at least quarterly. Pop-up presentations are meant to be short and sweet, 15-20 minutes of speaking followed by 10 minutes for Q&A. If you are interested in presenting, please contact me or look out for an online submission form soon. The Steering Committee will discuss updating the Standards & Best Practices Resource Guide to ensure links are active, new resources are added, and the categories are comprehensive. The new steering committee will hold its first meeting after the SAA Annual Meeting.



Laura Uglean Jackson, incoming MAS chair and Digital Archivist, Denver Museum of Nature & Science

SAA Sections thrive with active participation from members. We are always open to feedback, discussion items, and finding new presenters for pop-ups and the annual section meeting. Please feel free to contact me directly at laura.jackson@dmns.org if you have ideas for activities, want to present a pop-up, or have other Section business.

I'm looking forward to serving as your section chair over the next year and hope to meet many of you either virtually or in person at SAA.

Until Next Time,
Laura Uglean Jackson

News from the Museum Archives Section

Museum Archives Section Business Meeting, July 24, 2024

The Museum Archive Section hosted its 2024 virtual business meeting on July 24 as part of the ARCHIVES*RECORDS 2024 annual meeting. In addition to the business portion, the meeting included presentations about steps archivists at three museums are taking to implement reparative description practices on institutional records.

Hillary Bober, Archivist, and Zoe Heinsohn, Assistant Archivist at the Dallas Museum of Art, discussed the reparative description activities undertaken in their archive; Jenna Stout, Museum Archivist at the Saint Louis Art Museum discussed the process of reappraising and redescribing legacy administrative files predating a formal records management program; and Allyce Farino, Assistant Archivist for Digital Assets at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, discussed the reparative description actions taken as the Archive migrated their digital collection to a new Digital Asset Management System.

If you were not able to join, you can read the notes from the meeting on the MAS microsite here:

[*View the 2024 annual section meeting round-up*](#)

Catch-up with the [chair's report slides](#), [meeting minutes](#), and [presenters' slides](#) from our program on reparative description of institutional records. Full [Winter 2024 survey results](#) are also online.

Retirement News - Kathleen Williams

Kathleen Williams is thrilled to be added to the ranks of archives retirees, after 42 years in the profession with 30 of these in the federal government. She ended her career after seven years as head of the Archives at the National Gallery of Art. She had long stints at the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (2004-2017, with nine years as its director), the Smithsonian Institution Archives (1994-2004), and was the founding Archivist at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1984-94). Williams served the profession in numerous capacities over the years, and includes among her favorites stints serving as the first editor of the newsletter, *Museum Archivist*, and as chair of the MA section. She was named a Fellow of SAA in 2015.



Section Steering Committee

Museum Archives Section Steering Committee 2024-2025

Laura Uglean Jackson	Chair	Denver Museum of Nature & Science
Celia Emmelhainz	Vice-Chair	National History Museum, Smithsonian Institution
Kim Bradshaw	Secretary	Art Museum of the University of Memphis
Lena Hansen	Web Liaison	University of Pittsburgh
Kelly Schulz	Newsletter Editor	National Gallery of Art

The Steering Committee would like to thank Tara Laver, outgoing Chair; Kelly Burton, outgoing Secretary; and Kelli Yakabu, outgoing Web Liaison for all of your hard work!

Introducing the National Postal Museum Archives

By Mitch Toda, Head Archivist, National Postal Museum

In September 2023, I began my tenure as the Head Archivist for the [National Postal Museum Archives](#). As a new archive I have the wonderful fortune and opportunity to build a museum archive from the ground up.

My first foray into the museum field began with an internship in collections management at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This internship led to contract work digitizing everything from drawings and shoes to cuneiform tablets and bronze sculptures. From there I found myself in the Manuscripts Department at The Huntington Library in San Marino, California processing manuscript collections for a retrospective cataloging project.

It was through the encouragement and counsel of staff at the Huntington that I made the decision to pursue my library science degree with a concentration in archival studies at UCLA.

Two years later, degree secured, I'm on a road trip from California to Washington, DC to be the Lemelson Center Archival Intern at the National Museum of American History. After having a great experience living in DC and working at the museum, I began the work of applying for jobs after my internship ended. Jumping forward several months later I am on my way back to DC to start as an assistant archivist at the Smithsonian Institution Archives helping to appraise, accession, process, preserve and make available the records that document the history and activities of the Smithsonian.

A brief eighteen years later, I am now on the journey to start the archives at the National Postal Museum.

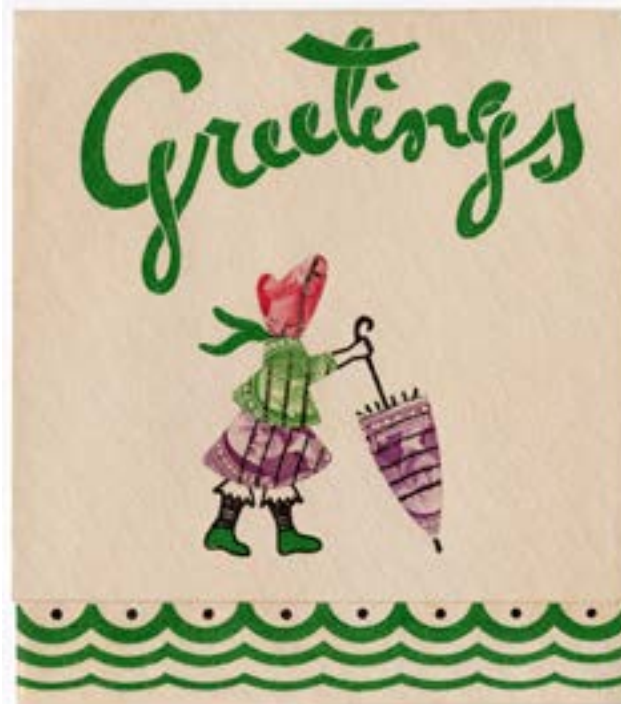
While the museum has held archival materials in its collections since its beginnings as the National Philatelic Collection at the National Museum of American History, the first proposal for an archive at the museum did not happen until 2008.

From there a decade would pass until a 2018 grant application by Susan Smith, Winton M. Blount Research Chair, secured funding from the Smithsonian Institution Women's Committee for a survey and analysis of archival materials. The work for this was carried out by Allison Marsh, PhD, from 2020 to 2021 and Marsh's findings identified pockets of archival materials in the collections and laid out a suggested framework for the creation of the archive at the museum.

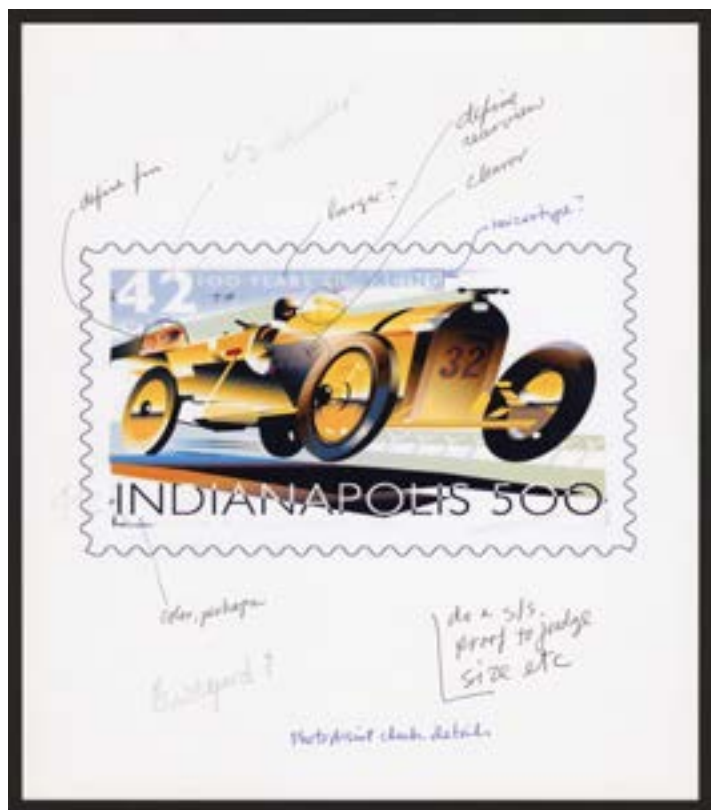


Mitch Toda
Head Archivist, National Postal Museum

One of my first activities to start the NPM Archives was to determine how its collections and what it collects complements the museum's existing collections. Marsh's survey and report provided great background information about the archival material at the museum and was extremely helpful in beginning the work of creating a Collections Stewardship Plan for the Archives. The Plan provides a structure for what the Archives is, what it collects, and how it functions within the museum. Elements of the Archives' Plan include identifying the types of programs supported by the collections, determining its audience, confirming the museum collection strengths and weaknesses, distinguishing the subject areas collected, developing the collecting scope of the Archives, formulating the acquisitions process, explaining how collections may be accessed by public, outlining the deaccessioning process of collection materials, and laying out the archival implementation strategy.



Cover - Holiday Card from Josephine McDevitt to Catherine L. Manning, undated ([NPMA.2023.1 – Catherine L. Manning Collection, 1897-1957, 1968, 1973, and 2007](#))



Design drawing by John Mattos of Forever (44c) Indianapolis 500 stamp, includes design notations by Phil Jordan, Stamp Art Director, 2011 ([NPMA.2023.2 – Phil Jordan Collection, 1992-2015](#))

The work to write the Collections Stewardship Plan was very much a collaborative effort between myself and the staff of the Curatorial and Collections Departments. It was also informed through meetings with various archival colleagues within the Smithsonian at the Anacostia Community Museum, the Archives of American Gardens, the National Museum of African Art, the National Museum of American History, the National Museum of Asian Art, and the National Museum of the American Indian. What I learned from my colleagues' experiences, their workflows, and their best practices influenced my formulation of the Archives Collections Stewardship Plan. After several months of edits, comments, and feedback the Archives Collections Stewardship Plan was approved in February 2024. With the plan in place, I was now able time to start implementing it.

When opening the storage cabinets in my space for the first time, lo and behold there were already archival collections waiting for me to work on! The

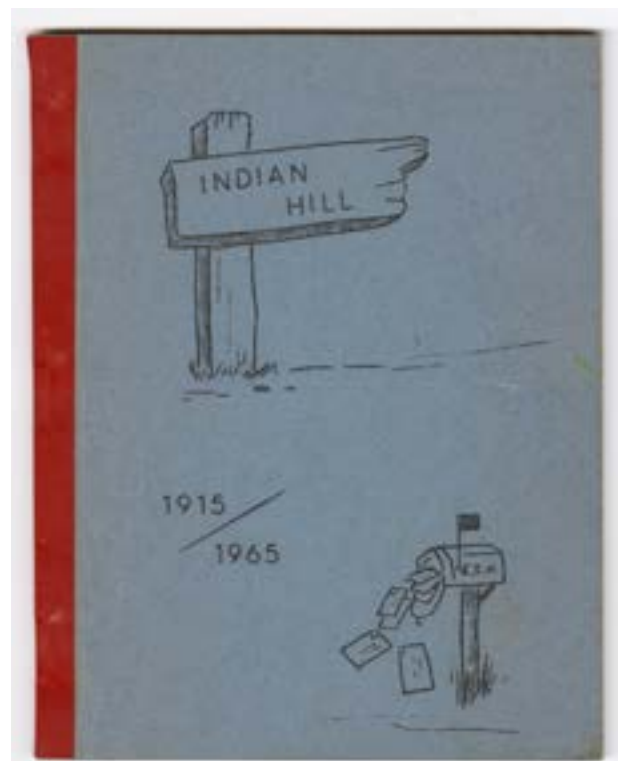
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materials are a legacy of past transfers of records from the United States Post Office Department to the Smithsonian. In learning more about the collections at the museum and how the museum functions, it was clear to me that the primary avenues of growth of collections in the Archives will come through a thorough survey and appraisal of existing “archival” items identified in the museum’s collections management system as well as through the ongoing offers of donations of items from folks.

As with many of the archives at the Smithsonian I chose to manage and process the Archives’ collections in ArchivesSpace. With the application I can manage provenance and administrative collection information, collection locations, create finding aids, and can link to digital objects.

To date, the archives have nine finding aids to collections with digitized materials available online on the [Smithsonian Online Virtual Archives](#). Future endeavors entail the working on collection donations from the public, surveying and processing existing museum archival materials, and the refinement of workflows and guidelines for accessioning and processing.

It is an exciting time at the NPM Archives and I look forward to the time when I can welcome my first onsite researcher. I continue to learn a great deal about postal operations history and the museum’s collections. In many ways the work of the post office and its employees touch our lives every day, it is my mission to share materials about their work and reveal the stories about their efforts and their lives to the museum’s visitors, researchers, and the public.



Left: Group portrait - Cleveland Letter Carriers’ Band, photo by Ransdell Inc., 1954 ([NPMA.2023.4 – Cleveland Letter Carrier’s Band Scrapbooks and Photographs Collection, 1890-2020](#))

Right: Booklet entitled, Indian Hill, 1915-1965, by letter carrier Edward S. Hirsch is a memoir marking his retirement from the United States Post Office Department and describes his twenty-five years of service in the Indian Hill section of Madeira, Cincinnati, Hamilton County, Ohio. ([NPMA.2023.3 – Indian Hill, 1915-1965 booklet](#))

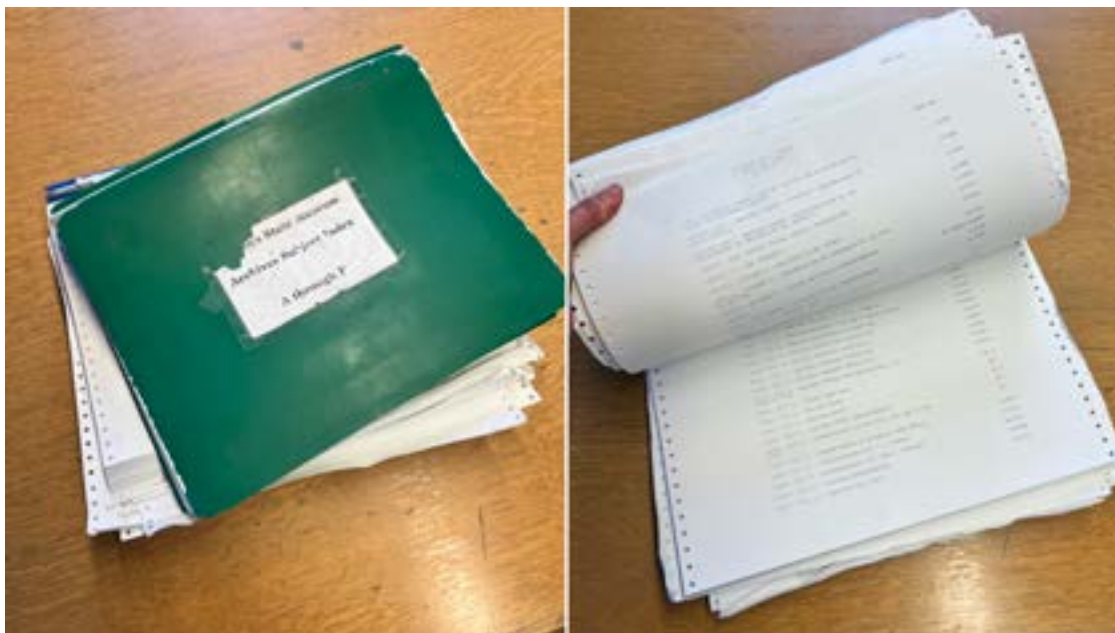
From bad OCR to transcription to AI: Good communication with IT was the final solution

By Molly Stothert-Maurer, Associate Librarian (Archivist), Head of Library and Archives at the Arizona State Museum

For five years I have been wrestling with a data set at the Arizona State Museum called the “Master Index” that has been trapped in formats that were, um, less than ideal. The Arizona State Museum, part of the University of Arizona, is an anthropology museum that celebrates the regions 13,000-year human history and preserves, creates, and shares knowledge about the peoples and cultures of Arizona and surrounding regions. We also serve as the official archaeological repository and as the permitting authority for archaeological activity on state land in Arizona.

The Master Index or Archives Index is a comprehensive and detailed list of topics, names, archaeological site numbers, and other subjects pointing to the collection identification number for the series, subseries, box or folder where the information can be found. This is a helpful document to find archival material because large sets of materials in our collection do not have EAD finding aids or detailed catalog records. Of that set are the A-files, the earliest set of archival material collected by the Arizona State Museum. These files, numbered in the thousands, were originally described in a document written on a typewriter in the 1950s-1980s.

When I was hired the Master Index existed in two known formats. A paper set printed in 1993 and a large PDF created from the paper set in the early 2000s.



Two views of a physical copy of the Master Index, one of the cover and the other of a sample page.

Image courtesy, Arizona State Museum.

When I need something from the Master Index, I usually end up using the crudely bound version printed on a dot matrix printer from 1993 instead of waiting for the large PDF file to load, even though I compressed it and separated it alphabetically into three sections, it is still painfully slow to work with. In the past I have gone looking for the original computer file, which I thought was an Access database, but always with no luck. I scoured network drives, talked to colleagues, looked through floppy disks in various places around the office.

Over the years I have tried numerous approaches to try to scrape the OCR from the pdf and field the data in a spreadsheet. The main problem is that there are numerous lines with helpful “see also” notes that don’t have a corresponding collection identification number, and so Adobe Acrobat OCR produced a wonky reading order and when I tried to export it to Microsoft Excel the columns never aligned properly.

I reached out to colleagues across campus and had at least 4 different people look at the problem with me and come to the same conclusion: I would have to just find someone to either type it up or clean it up. At one point I had a work-study student typing it up and after multiple weeks had hardly made a dent and was still in the A’s. I also worried endlessly that the project was punishing.

With the advent of ChatGPT I thought surely artificial intelligence can solve this problem! Here is an example of the prompt I tried:

I need help exporting data from a pdf into an excel spreadsheet with two columns. The data is in a series of rows separated by visual spaces. Each row has a lot of text in column 1 followed by one or two words in column two. The tricky part is that the values in column 1 sometimes occupy two rows which are identifiable by the lack of a full line break. It is important to line up the rows from column 1 and column 2 appropriately. This will involve looking for blank space and adding a cell with blank space in column 2 when no value appears.

Promising response from ChatGPT:

To help you export the data from the PDF into an Excel spreadsheet, I’ll first extract the text from the PDF, then process it to separate the values into the appropriate columns, and finally save it as an Excel file.

Let’s start by extracting the text from the PDF and then processing it to match your specified format.

I’ll begin by extracting the text content of the PDF. This will take a moment.

The extracted text appears fragmented, which indicates the presence of visual spaces and line breaks that need to be processed for proper alignment into columns.

Next, I’ll process the extracted text to separate it into two columns as you described. The key steps will include:

1. Identifying where column breaks occur based on patterns in the text.
2. Handling cases where the text in column one spans multiple lines.
3. Aligning entries in column one with the appropriate entries in column two.

Let's proceed with processing the text and formatting it for the Excel spreadsheet.

I had such high hopes that the project was finally going to be done. But after trying various prompts, revisions I couldn't get any usable output.

The next approach was to update the reading order in Adobe Acrobat so that I could copy and past column 1 and column 2 into a spreadsheet. This involved opening the accessibility tools and drawing a box around each column and declaring it a "table". Unfortunately there is no feature I could find to apply a structure from a template to all pages at once and there was still the problem of bad OCR and the word level and other hand corrections for the missing spaces in column 2.

And then one day a miracle happened. I needed to install some software and put in an IT ticket. When two members of IT personnel arrived I was deep in the business of copying and pasting information out of the PDF and hand correcting it in the spreadsheet. We got to talking and I mentioned how much I would love to find the original file. IT suggested we look through the workstation backups of previous employees who might have worked on it. I created a list of employees who may have been involved, and low and behold... they found it an hour later! The file was created using a [Prime Computer](#) and IT was able to quickly exported the contents to a spreadsheet for me. I was then able to turn it into a [finding aid on Arizona Archives Online](#), where I added an alphabetical sort so that you can quickly jump through all 14,290 rows to find what you need. All keywords are now indexed through the main search box in the website and readily available to researchers.



Image of Arizona State Museum staff printing a document similar to the Master Index on a large dot matrix printer with a Prime Computer terminal at the left (unknown date). Image courtesy, Arizona State Museum.

Expediting Discovery and Access in Archives at the National Gallery of Art

By Nina Aguiar Shemplier, Summer Intern, National Gallery of Art Archives

As my nine-week summer archive internship at the National Gallery of Art comes to an end, I am grateful to have worked alongside experienced archivists at our nation's capital. This opportunity allowed me to gain valuable professional archival experience in a museum setting and deepened my passion for archives, history, and cultural heritage.

The National Gallery of Art, "funded as a gift to the nation" is committed to the preservation, exhibition, and education of artistic and cultural artifacts. Its archives play a crucial role in documenting the history of the Gallery's collections, exhibitions, acquisitions, educational programs, and development over time, making it an ideal environment for hands-on archival work.

My internship objectives are centered around gaining practical experience in archival processing, specifically focusing on analog, time-based media, and digital records. Processing included organizing and arranging archival materials, ensuring they were cataloged and described according to archival standards. Additionally, I preserved historical records and assisted in writing the front matter for various collections. I also facilitated future discovery and enhanced access to heavily used collections by importing metadata into ArchiveSpace. Working on diverse projects organized by each of the Gallery archivists gave me the opportunity to work alongside experienced archivists, providing me with a greater understanding of their roles and functions.



Nina Aguiar Shemplier at work processing analog collections at the National Gallery of Art Archives.

My internship also included weekly team meetings and weekly one-on-one check-ins with the Deputy Chief and Senior Archivist. It also included weekly meetings with my mentor, who provided invaluable guidance and support throughout the program.

My first two processing projects included working with the Corcoran Gallery Art Object Records, and the Donald M. Blinken Papers. The Corcoran collection which included 42 cubic feet of archival material, includes accessioned art object files that had been maintained by the Corcoran Gallery of Art from 1869 to 2013 until they were transferred over to the National Gallery of Art. This collection was divided into three series which included photographs, modern prints and drawings and old master prints and drawings. To expedite discovery and access

to the record, the archives utilized More Product, Less Process (MPLP). Applying the MPLP techniques provided valuable experience in efficient archival processing. After updating and describing the material in Excel, metadata was imported into ArchiveSpace. Files were then relocated to acid-free record cartons and box labels were created. The Donald M. Blinken Papers consisted of four binders that were maintained and donated to the Gallery by diplomat and art collector Donald M. Blinken. The collection documents Blinken's interest in artist Mark Rothko and his role in the Mark Rothko Foundation. For this collection, I completed folder-level processing and description. I developed a processing plan that included a proposed arrangement that was reviewed and accepted by the archivist leading the project. The records included clippings, correspondence, loans and other related material. After removing and evaluating the contents from the binders, materials with preservation issues were photocopied on acid-free legal-size paper. The original materials were placed inside a Mylar sleeve. Folders were arranged and labeled into logical categories and the files were transferred into acid-free document boxes. Additionally, the materials were described in ArchiveSpace. One of the highlights for me while working with both collections was contributing to the front matter which describes the contents and the context of the whole collection. The front matter underwent several edits, which provided me with valuable learning opportunities to understand the writing style used for this purpose. I particularly enjoyed reading and learning further on the creators of these collections.

Working with the Digital Archivist I assisted in processing over 700 digital images in the John Rewald Papers collection. The objective of this project was to increase access to and discovery of this heavily used collection. The collection features research materials on Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists that John Rewald had collected throughout his lifetime. It includes two of his working files for his two most important Cezanne publications. This experience provided me with an overview and understanding of the digital processing workflow. I initially renamed the images using Bulk Rename Utility, which allows users to easily rename multiple files without giving them the same name. Next, images and metadata were uploaded into NetX, a Digital Asset Management platform. Finally, the images were integrated into ArchiveSpace for future access.

Working alongside the Media Archivist, I processed a diverse range of time-based media formats including audio cassettes, videocassettes, compact audio cassettes, UmaticS, Betacam and other formats. My responsibilities involved inspecting these formats for any damage and ensuring proper storage to maintain their integrity. Additionally, I collected and prepared metadata for this material, which will be imported into ArchiveSpace. This project has significantly reduced backlog of unprocessed audiovisual materials and maximized storage space within the Archives.

As I wrap-up my internship, I am completing my final archival project, focusing on the lecture materials within the Publications and Printed Materials record group. Historically, the Gallery has hosted free lectures and symposiums in the West and East Building auditoriums, referred to as Sunday or Auditorium Lectures. These events are open to the public on a first come basis and include some notable lecture series such as the Diamonstein-Spielvogel Lecture Series, The Sydney J. Freedberg Lectures on Italian Art and Elson Lectures. For this project, I meticulously identified and organized all printed materials related to these lectures. I have carefully arranged and rehoused both processed and unprocessed materials into acid-free folders and document boxes. This process has led to the creation of a new series called "Lectures" within the Public Programs subgroup. To ensure access

and discovery, I grouped the materials by scope, then organized them alphabetically and then chronologically. Additionally, I created a detailed spreadsheet that will be used to import the metadata into ArchiveSpace. Overall, this project has improved the organization of lecture-related materials and will facilitate better management and retrieval within the Gallery's archival system.

I'm excited to have made meaningful contributions to preserving and managing the archival collections at the National Gallery of Art. I want to express my gratitude to the Gallery Archives team Shannon, Marge, Kelly S. and Kelly B. and to the Deputy Chief and Senior Archivist, Michele Willens. I also want to thank my mentor Holly Garner for her guidance and support throughout my internship and to George Luna-Pena, manager of Pre-Professional Programs for organizing and running this wonderful program.

Reach out to Us!

saamasnewsletter@gmail.com

Visit our page to stay informed on all MAS news and programming:

<https://www2.archivists.org/groups/museum-archives-section>

Official SAA Museum Archives Email List

To connect via the official MAS email listserv, login or create a login for SAA Connect: <https://connect.archivists.org/home>. Once logged in, you can select to join the email list.



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Dear MAS newsletter reader:

If you would like to include an article, news, or highlight piece to the upcoming Winter 2024 newsletter, please email saamasnewsletter@gmail.com for more information or pitch us an idea. We rely on this community to keep the newsletter engaging and informative. We look forward to learning more about our museum archives community. Thank you for reading this issue of the Summer 2024 MAS newsletter.