

Museum Archivist

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Letter from MAS Chair, Celia Emmelhainz

Thank you for another year of engagement with the Museum Archives Section. I know it's been a challenging year for many of our members—and interested colleagues who aren't formally members—but it's helped to have a diffuse community to work with.

We had a brown bag coffee in early December, at which museum archivists joined together to discuss issues ranging from item-level vs. collection-level processing, to the challenges of being a solo archivist in a museum, to how museum archives fall within museum structures, to the challenges of caring for federal records in a museum collection or curator dominated environment.

This spring, we anticipate hosting another lunch-and-learn or two, perhaps with brief presentations on your current work or sharing issues that you're thinking about, and asking for input. If you have something you might want to present casually (it can go on your CV!) do reach out and let us know. Next summer, we'll be looking for a new chair and chair-elect, as well as a web liaison, to serve two-year terms.

If this is of interest, **feel free to reach out to your section officers now**. We're happy to put you in contact with people who currently or previously served in this role, so you can consider whether to run for office!

With warm wishes for the new year,

Celia Emmelhainz

Senior Archivist

Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology.



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Dear MAS newsletter reader:

If you would like to include an article, news, or highlight piece to the upcoming Summer 2026 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. Enjoy reading the Winter 2025 MAS newsletter!

Preserving the Early Years: National Gallery of Art's Documentary Films on Twentieth-Century Art

By Kelly Burton, Media Archivist, National Gallery of Art

In August 2025, the National Gallery of Art in Washington was awarded a grant by the National Film Preservation Foundation to preserve and enhance access to three documentary films highlighting early acquisitions of twentieth-century art. The films—*Femme/Woman: A Tapestry* by Joan Miró (1979), *Mobile*, by Alexander Calder (1980), and *David Smith, American Sculptor, 1906–1965* (1983)—emphasize the National Gallery's unique and close relationships with various twentieth-century luminaries and document the early years of the institution's East Building.

Research Significance

The documentaries addressed by this grant represent a trio of forward-thinking efforts by the National Gallery to connect with onsite and remote audiences using audiovisual materials. *Femme*, *Mobile*, and *David Smith* were educational films created for the museum's Extension Services department, an office which circulated no-cost audiovisual aids to schools and groups throughout the country. In 1979, the department recorded approximately 38,000 bookings for film, videotape, and slide materials, reaching an audience of over three million people. The three films chronicle the National Gallery's close relationships with artists and curators, featuring original interviews and documentary footage and providing viewers with an intimate window into the creative process.

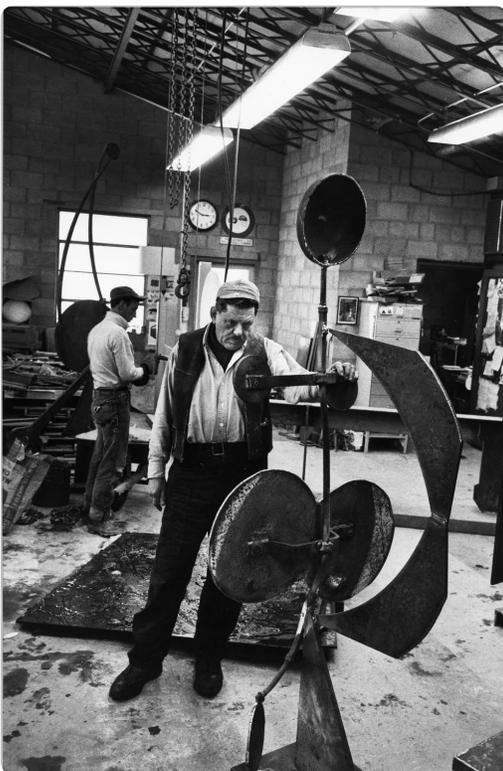
Femme/Woman: A Tapestry by Joan Miró (1979) focuses on the design and execution of a large-scale tapestry commissioned by the National Gallery in 1977 for its East Building. This new facility, completed in 1978, was designed to house the museum's modern paintings, drawings, sculptures, and prints, as well as study and research centers and offices. To cover a large expanse in the East Building's central court, Catalan Spanish painter, sculptor, and ceramist Joan Miró created a massive wool and cotton tapestry which, at the time of its completion, measured 35-feet-by-25-feet and weighed just over a ton. The 15-minute film uses



original footage to document the project's initial design stages, the fabrication by weaver Josep Royo on an oversized loom in Tarragona, Spain, and the installation on the south wall of the East Building. The film also presents a sketch of the life and artistic work of Miró, highlighting his distinctive and influential approaches to the Surrealist, Fauvist, and Expressionist movements of the twentieth century. *Femme* features original footage of Miró, Royo and his weavers, and National Gallery notables such as director J. Carter Brown.

Mobile, by Alexander Calder (1980) chronicles the creation and installation of the first artwork commissioned by the National Gallery for its East Building. The 25-minute film provides an overview of the life and work of Calder—an American sculptor known for both his innovative mobiles, his static “stables,” and his monumental public sculptures—before focusing on the design of his final major work. *Mobile* documents the evolution of Calder's sculpture from concept to completion and spotlights the collaboration of the artist, architect, museum staff, and craftsmen in meeting the challenges posed in the fabrication of this complex work of art. The film offers an intimate look at the creative process, featuring original footage of Calder and his wife, Louisa; Paul Matisse, Calder's design collaborator and grandson of Henri Matisse; East Building architect I.M. Pei; and National Gallery director J. Carter Brown.

David Smith, American Sculptor, 1906–1965 (1983) presents a summary of the life and work of the American abstract expressionist sculptor and painter known for creating large steel geometric sculptures. The 31-minute film was produced in conjunction with an exhibition of the artist's work at the National Gallery, one which brought almost 120,000 visitors to the museum. Smith's working methods are disclosed through original interviews with his daughters, fellow artists Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankenthaler, and photographer Dan Budnik. The film takes the viewer to Bolton Landing in upstate New York where Smith created a studio on the grounds of a former fox farm in the 1940s. The open fields surrounding his house and studio provided an appropriate setting for much of Smith's sculpture, which became larger in scale as his career developed. The film includes footage of the artist himself, both at work and commenting on the origins of his ideas and techniques. David Smith was co-directed by curator E.A. Carmean, who also served as the film's interviewer and narrator.



Increased Access

The Basic Preservation Grant awarded by the National Film Preservation Foundation provides funding for the creation of new 16mm negatives and positive prints for each reel. In addition to providing high-quality digital access copies to researchers at no cost, the Archives plans to incorporate the preserved films into larger outreach programs involving archival audiovisual holdings. To this end, the archives will be exploring various avenues for increasing public awareness of institutional history, such as collaborative projects with museum curators and online access to the films. Digital versions of the preserved films will also be uploaded to the National Gallery's internal digital asset management system to facilitate staff access.

David Smith inspecting Voltri-Bolton V and Voltri-Bolton I with an assistant in Bolton Landing, New York, 1962. Photo: Dan Budnik. © 2021 Dan Budnik. All Rights Reserved.

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Museum Archives Section Steering Committee 2025-2026

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The Steering Committee would like to thank **Laura Uglean Jackson, outgoing Chair**; and **Kelly Schulz, outgoing Newsletter Editor**, for all of your hard work!

Reach out to Us!

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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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