

Museum Archivist

Summer 2021

Volume 31, Issue 1

Letter From the Chair, Sharad Shah

Dear MAS Members,

As I write this, we approach this year's annual meeting, and I wanted to take this moment and reflect on my term as chair. It would be difficult to look back (or, indeed, forward) without acknowledging the daily complexities and challenges we all face as a result of living through the pandemic.

For SAA and MAS, this meant meeting virtually. For professionals and students, it meant working and studying remotely. For museums, archives, and libraries, it meant a decrease in visitation, followed by lost revenue and closings—which in turn meant lost jobs and employment opportunities.

Through this, members of the steering committee worked together to continue to contribute to MAS and provide some means of assistance and support to our members. Megan Schwenke and Rachel Chatalbash have led a group of volunteers in revising the MAS Guidelines and updating the MAS Resource Guide. In November, Greg Adams of the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage gave a presentation on navigating complex collections issues in the midst of COVID. In short, we found ways to be productive.

Moving beyond the gloom and doom, I am thinking of one of the fundamentals when it comes to investing: "buy low, sell high." Applying that wisdom to this roller coaster we call life, I am optimistic about the direction MAS, SAA, and professionals in our fields will face as we move forward. If the worst is behind us, then we lick our wounds, heal, and emerge wiser and more resilient. I'm delighted to know that my



successor as chair, Katrina O'Brien, is also my predecessor. Whatever advice I could possibly offer her can be simplified to, "do what you told me to do, but do it better."

To all of you, one of the best bits of advice I can give is to stand up for yourself. It sounds simple enough, but it involves speaking up ("Drawing attention to yourself! Aaah!"), and actively getting involved ("Putting forth effort, time, and energy! Aaah!"). What I've have seen over the past few years is that silence can often amount to enabling through inaction or perceived indifference. For any society or organization to reach its fullest potential, it needs to hear the voices of all its members, so please consider getting involved in MAS, SAA, or other groups and causes that impact you.

In closing I want to convey my thanks and gratitude to the MAS Steering

(Shah, continued from pg. 1)

Committee for its wisdom and feedback and contributions in either improving the state of our section or helping to make this ship run smoothly. Additionally, I want to wish my successor and the incoming committee members the best of luck, and I have the utmost confidence that MAS will prosper in your leadership.

Thank you,
Sharad J. Shah

*Should you wish to donate to the Archival Workers Emergency Fund, please visit [Archival Workers Emergency Fund | Society of American Archivists](#).

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Welcome, Incoming Section Officers!

This Spring, the Museum Archives Section held an election for incoming Newsletter Editor and Vice Chair/ Chair Elect positions. I am pleased to share that Janeen Schiff and Jenna Stout were selected to serve. Please join me in welcoming them to the Steering Committee!

- Jenna Stout, Museum Archivist, St. Louis Museum of Art, Incoming Vice-Chair/ Chair
- Janeen Schiff, Archivist, Dia Art Foundation, Incoming Newsletter Editor

Letter from the Incoming Chair, Katrina O'Brien



I'm back as your MAS Chair for 2021/2022. Feeling a little déjà vu? Blame it on COVID, or at least the craziness we all felt during last year's election cycle. To catch you up, we had no takers for Vice/Chair candidates last year, nor for any of the other open leadership positions, so the steering committee decided they would be willing to extend their service and add their names to the ballot, voting to allow me to extend my tenure as Vice on the ballot after my original tenure of Chair 2019/2020. And so, Tara and Shannon were re-elected to

repeat their roles as Treasurer and Web Liaison, respectively, and I took on the position of elected Vice Chair during Sharad's tenure as Chair and will finish my second tenure year as Chair for the second time for 2021/2022. Déjà vu indeed! A great thanks to Sharad for steering all of us through what has been a year of perspective, new direction, and at times, déjà vu.

SAA's Museum Archives Section has a special place in my heart. I started my part in MAS leadership as Newsletter Editor for the 2017/2018 and moved into Vice Chair for 2018/2019. At the time, MAS had recently amended its governance to include staggered leadership with Cate being your Newsletter Editor for the two-year tenure 2019/20-2020/21. She has done such a great job and while sad to see her go, we are excited to see where her new endeavors take her. Having spent a longer time than average as Vice and Chair, it has offered me the sincere pleasure to work with and see the progress the MAS Working Group has made in developing the update MAS Guidelines over the years; the co-chairs also have a SAA book coming out with a selection of articles relating to museum archives.

Today, I am happy to include Jenna as our incoming Vice/Chair and Janeen as our incoming Newsletter Editor. As we head into the next session, I and the rest of the MAS leadership look forward to being a resource that represent your needs and interests while providing a sound foundation for the next generation of MAS leaders to follow. And so, while we just had elections, please consider nominating yourself for 2022/23 – it will come around faster than you think. While there have been many positive aspects of having consistent leadership through the arch of the pandemic, MAS will be looking for new voices and perspectives as we move forward. And until then, I will be doing my very best to make MAS it can be as we turn the corner.

Katrina

Report from the Standards and Best Practices Working Group

BY RACHEL CHATALBASH AND MEGAN SCHWENKE
S&BP Working Group Co-Chairs

The Standards and Best Practices Working Group worked on two separate projects this year.

Museum Archives Guidelines Update

[The Museum Archives Guidelines](#) were originally developed in 1998, and approved and endorsed by SAA Council in 2003. The Working Group began evaluation and revision of the Guidelines in 2018 to reflect the many changes and advances in our profession over the past two decades. This year, the Guidelines project culminated with community review of a new draft, and implementation of the resulting feedback. Once the draft Guidelines are approved by the SAA Standards Committee, they will be updated on the Section's website and reviewed by the Museum Archives Section on a periodic basis.

The Working Group greatly appreciates the feedback Section members provided on our drafts, whether through responses to the survey we distributed or through one of the Working Group-facilitated Zoom feedback sessions. This important revision was truly a group effort and represents the thoughts, work, and expertise of the entire Section.

Standards and Best Practices Resource Guide Update

In addition, this year, the Working Group updated the content of our [Standards and Best Practices Resource Guide](#), an online tool first established in 2011 to aid resource sharing across institutions within the museum archives community. Working Group members gathered updated examples of forms, policies, procedures, and project documentation, and issued a special call for resources related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in museum archives. Thank you for your contributions to this initiative and enabling the Resource Guide to continue to support the work of our museum archives community.

Volunteers Welcome

We'd like to increase our Working Group member numbers and are excited to begin accepting new members in **August 2021**. Please consider joining us! It's a great way to meet colleagues and grow your museum archivist network, work on interesting museum-archives focused projects, and to build new skills. Our projects are conducted via email and generally average out to one to two hours of work a month. If you're interested in becoming part of the Working Group, please email the Group's co-chairs: Rachel Chatalbash (rachel.chatalbash@yale.edu) and Megan Schwenke (megan_schwenke@harvard.edu). We will be meeting as a virtual group in September to plan our work for the year ahead.

2020-2021 MAS Standards and Best Practices Working Group

Arabeth Balasko, Kelli Bogan, Sam Bogner, Emily Fendya, Tara Hart, Michelle Interrante, Tara Laver, Hannah Mandel, Sana Masood, Karen Melis, Shannon Morelli, Katrina O'Brien, Cate Peebles, Katherine Meyers Satriano, Joe Schill, Sharad Shah, Peggy Tran-Le, Brian Wilson

Co-Chairs

Rachel Chatalbash
Megan Schwenke

Dissolving a Museum and a Collection

By Katrina O'Brien, MAS Chair

“Mandatory staff meeting today” read the email subject header. Only two other times had staff gotten that email: when a past executive director unexpectedly quit and when a co-founder died. This was not going to be a happy announcement. So after roughly two months of working from home, I along with the rest of the downsized staff were told that the Board had decided to close the museum permanently. The Ferrari exhibit which we had all been planning to open at the beginning of the pandemic had been sitting in wait. The exhibit itself was never opened to the public. In the end, it would just be four staff members, myself included, that were kept on to dissolve the museum and its collection.



All photos, courtesy Katrina O'Brien



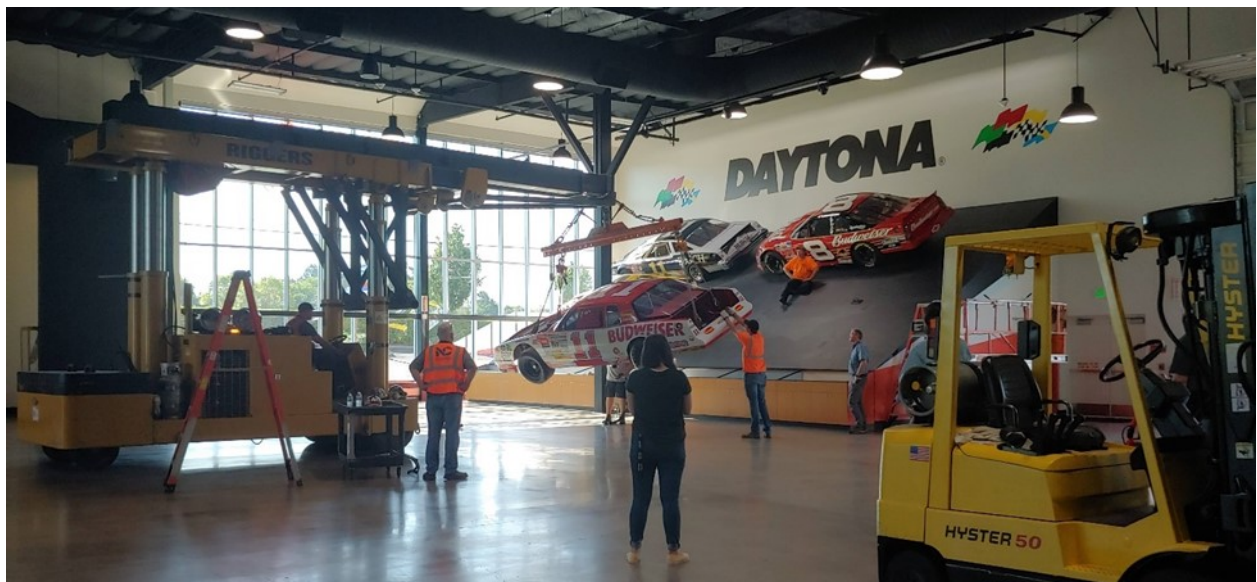
In our first week back in mid-May, the beginning of a plan for dissolution and next steps began to take shape. First off was returning all loans, including pulling items to return to over 45 active archives and collection lenders. Thankfully, the loan agreements were easily retrieved and a personalized Dissolution Loan Return Receipt was made for each. Due to COVID-19, with many lenders being seniors, open air limited access appointments were scheduled over the course of a week for lenders to pick up their items – these were some of the hardest conversations as many were shocked, saddened, and wondered what to do now. On the flip side, it was the only time my work space had an open window with fresh air.





To move forward, I had to drop focusing on the “possibilities”, projects and plans that could have been, and instead focus on rehousing the collection using the same skills and care I had utilizing in starting and building that same collection. It was time to collect, organize and prepare items for rehousing.

Items that had not yet been cataloged had to be hastily be added. Those low priority projects that had been pushed farther down the list had to get done. Materials stored in the warehouse had to be brought over. To do all of this, we had to keep track of what space was being used for what and when.



While my focus was on the collection and exhibits, other museum staff, including the store manager, office administrator, and interim executive director/head of education, focused on plugging through museum store items, office and public furnishings, staff and office files, educational materials, loaned and owned cars, and unrestricting funds. We were all building a master inventory and reaching out to nonprofits to let them know this was happening, what was available, and the process for receiving. And as we moved forward, their help in the archives was invaluable to keep us on schedule.

The collection covered archives, artifacts, photos, film, publications, and digital material – stored primarily by format, not subject. In deciding to provide bundles or lots by subject (rather than people cherry picking items), all items in the collection had to be unpacked and regrouped. In the master inventory, each bundle was given a lot number, title, description and the included items' catalog links.



The next step was to start emptying out exhibits. For most of the seven exhibits, the items in the exhibits were bundled together as a singular inventory item with additional bundles covering the same subject but of different items. Besides the land speed racing exhibit bundle including models as well as photos, publications and other artifacts, other items in the collection relating to land speed racing were bundled together and offered separately. Besides the items in the exhibits, the display materials as well as the cases also needed to be inventoried including a photo and description for each group of items.





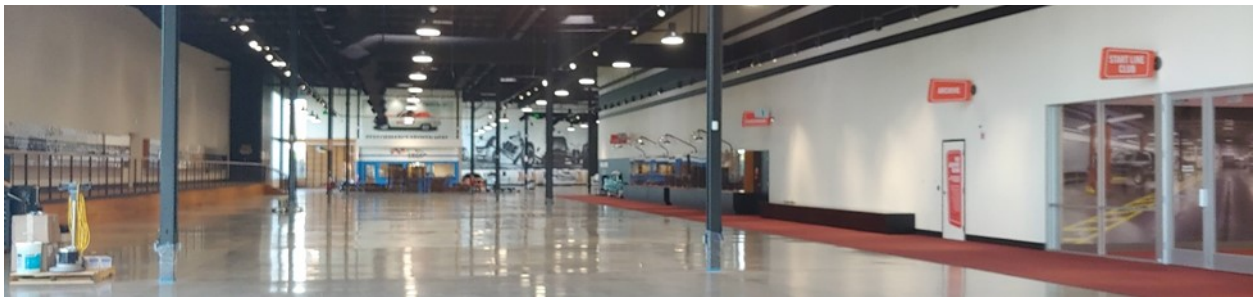
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Once all items had been bundled, it was time to decide what was going where. Over 50 nonprofits were approved as donation recipients, having gone through the review process by staff, board, and the state department. In some cases, staff had to do some hustling and bartering to have all bundles accounted for but then it was time to physically move the bundles to each organization's pile in the gallery.





After dissolving the museum's archives and collections over six months, I sad goodbye to my favorite oversized scanner, a host of resources now offline, emptied archives and processing rooms, and a building no longer a museum. But with the new year, a new group of museums and their archives and collection staff now have tons of material to process, preserve and make accessible for new audiences.



Reflections on Graduate Study Research: Born-Digital Collections Access and User Studies in Libraries, Archives and Museums

By Julie Rockwell

Museum Assistant/ Collections Specialist, Frost Entomological Museum, Penn State University



In December 2020, I completed a Master of Arts degree in Museum Studies with a Digital Curation Graduate Certificate from Johns Hopkins University. As a career transitional graduate student, I focused my curriculum on studying museums in the digital age, collections management, digital information management, and digital preservation and curation. I earned a digital curation internship at the Smithsonian Institution Archives (now merged with the Smithsonian Libraries) under Riccardo Ferrante, director of digital services. My project Born-Digital Collections Access Research and Planning involved reviewing current born-digital access archival practices and the Archives' born-digital workflows to provide recommendations to improve access to born-digital archival materials found in collections.

During my month-long onsite experience, I interviewed staff members from the Archives records management, reference, and digital services departments and analyzed an existing finding aid that includes an extensive collection of various types of born-digital materials and source media. On my last day, I gave Archives stakeholders a presentation to share my proposed strategies on improving access. These included: adding born-digital material descriptive fields into new and existing finding aids featured in the [UC Guidelines for Born-Digital Archival Description](#) (2017), incorporating the Digital Library Federation Born-Digital Access Working Group's (DLF-BDAWG) [Levels of Born-Digital Access](#) (2020), and adjusting the existing born-digital content processing workflow with duties shared by both records management and digital archivists. I wrote about the project in a blog post, [The Born-Digital Diaries: "Interrogate the Floppy!"](#) for the Archives' blog, The Bigger Picture.

During the rest of my internship semester, I became most interested in the user experience and various user surveys on born-digital collections access. My curiosity prompted many questions: Where do the end-user and researcher of these collections fit into the LAM practitioners' scope for providing access? Have user studies improved access? What are the barriers to access? How do LAM practitioners best respond to the user experience? Can LAM practitioners benefit from more collaborative engagement in communities of practice to share resources and collectively improve born-digital stewardship as new access technologies and resources emerge?

These questions led to the research and writing of a digital curation research paper required to complete the program, "Reject perfection." The impact of user studies on born-digital collections access in libraries, archives, and museums (LAMs). [1] I wrote the paper in the spirit of DLF-BDAWG, emphasizing one of their Born-Digital Access Values, Reject Perfection:

Perfectionism is exclusionary, hinders research, and inhibits our ability to meet direct needs. To provide access to born-digital materials, we must reject perfection and cultivate action. There's no single solution that fits all resources and scenarios. Use what's on hand—a public access point computer, online shared storage—but advocate for resources to do more. Start simple, find out what your researchers want or expect, and then work on designing something that will support them. This work is messy. All solutions are temporary and flexible. Continually adapt to researchers' needs. [2]

The paper features Participatory Archival Research and Development (PAR&D). This new theoretical and practical framework values the need to advocate for providing the necessary time and resources for archivists to conduct research. PAR&D is the brainchild of four change agent archivists, Rachel Appel, Digital Archivist, University of Pennsylvania Libraries; Alison Clemens, Head of Processing, Yale University Libraries; Wendy Hagenmaier, Digital

(Rockwell, continued from pg. 11)

Collections Archivist, Georgia Tech Libraries; and Jessica Meyerson, Director of Research & Strategy, Educopia Institute. PAR&D is the outcome of acknowledging a gap in research on born-digital access focused on user experiences. The authors stress creating an inclusive and sustainable research culture that allows room for reflection and innovative practices:

The archives profession faces urgent challenges – from archival silences to the rapid pace of technological change, from unsolved questions of storage and security to the potential threat of climate change to our collections, and beyond. These challenges demand that practitioners expand our ideas and experiences and that we add new tools to the ‘archival repertoire,’ growing our capacity for knowledge creation that fuels practical progress (Clemens, 2020, p. 5). [3]

Using the research methodologies of meta-analysis and open-ended interviews, I analyzed four user studies on born-digital collections access published between 2016-2020 [4]. I then conducted open-ended interviews with ten LAM professionals. [5] An extensive Literature Review pinpointed vital technologies, standards, and resources that have improved born-digital collections access and user experiences such as the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) digital archives interface, SCOPE, [6], and the University of California, Santa Cruz Library’s Born-Digital Access User Guide and ‘Journey Map’ for Archives Request resources [7].



Photographic Collage of Source Media, Acc. 18-100, and Digital Forensics Tools used in The Smithsonian Institution Archives Digital Services. Courtesy of Julie Rockwell (2020).

The paper’s Findings revealed five formulated themes from the research:

1. Access cannot take place until institutions address digital preservation and establish and execute born-digital collections processing workflows.
2. Identifying users is an ongoing challenge.
3. Barriers to access continue to exist.
4. Implementing user studies needs various levels of support.
5. LAMs will benefit from vetted, and shareable models of user studies on born-digital collections access practices and standards, survey tools and resources, and education and scholarship.

(Rockwell, continued from pg. 12)

User studies on born-digital collections access in museums are not given the same attention as libraries and archives. In a section titled What about Museums? I addressed this issue opening with a discussion of museum informatics and the need for LAM convergence for maximizing access to shared information highlighted in the scholarship of Dr. Paul F. Marty, Professor in the School of Information at Florida State University. Marty (2009) states the necessity of digital convergence:

Educators and professionals working to meet user needs in libraries, archives, and museums ... [are] driven by the idea that the increased use of and reliance on digital resources has blurred traditional distinctions between information organizations ... encouraging more research examining how libraries, archives, and museums can collaborate and combine forces to better serve their users. [8]

Numerous challenges in addressing born-digital collections access in museums include how they allow access to born-digital materials for a broad range of users, namely the researcher. Museum user studies involving born-digital museum collections require tailoring to address their unique needs and special collections, such as ephemeral art materials and art research in web archives. [9] This tailoring relates to how museums gather information, which is notably different from libraries and archives. Also, museum user studies focus on web content usability studies and user experience (UX) testing to understand a broad range of audiences who engage with digital artworks/collections, applications, and digital engagement interpretive interfaces, either physically in the museum or online.

Understanding how museum archives fit into the picture of born-digital collections access is problematic and warrants further investigation. The key will be to accentuate the evolving relationships among objects information, collections information, research data, description (metadata), and informatics that create relational networks of documentation that users can successfully retrieve and reuse. All of this directs back to the user, their needs, and their ease of accessibility.

Museum user studies will eventually involve studying access to born-digital collections, notably, artists' archival materials preserved in museum archives and institutional born-digital records. More robust user access to data and layered information among LAMs and collecting repositories, provided through Linked Data (LD) and Linked-Open Data (LOD), will depend on the relational and interoperable software systems that house captured data for reuse. And user studies that balance both qualitative and quantitative methodologies must become a more integral part of LAM born-digital collection access workflows.

Inevitably, LAM communities of practice and convergence regarding user studies on born-digital collections access will require a cultural shift. The paper's Next Steps includes recommendations for transforming this cultural shift categorized as User Studies Strategies, User Studies Communities of Practice, and User Studies Cultural Impact and Action. Continued development can be championed not only within LAM existing practices but within cross-disciplinary informatics, digital curation, and instructional technologies that embrace user experience research and development education among emerging and expert LAM professionals – PAR&D – and 'rejecting perfection' in the process.

My year-long research on born-digital collections access, and user studies was a valuable and impactful experience that concluded my graduate coursework. I hope my research will benefit knowledge seekers on the topic and will contribute to the scholarly record. As a passionate advocate for shared communities of practice and cross-disciplinary collaborations, especially with museums, I believe that with a commitment to LAM convergence, led by curious and dedicated scholars and practitioners, 'good enough' practices to provide born-digital collections access will prevail. And as the road to access from preservation prevails, born-digital stewardship transpires.

Citations

[1] This paper is pending storage in the [JScholarship](#) DSpace Repository at Johns Hopkins University, Advanced Academic Programs (AAP), Digital Curation.

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- [5] See (Table 1).
- [6] Stewart, K., & Breitwieser, S. (2019, February 14). SCOPE: A digital archives access interface. *Code4lib Journal*, 43. <https://journal.code4lib.org/articles/14283>
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Table 1

Respondents	Position/ Institution
Alison Clemens	Head of Processing, Manuscripts & Archives, Yale University
Tessa Walsh	Software Developer, Artefactual Systems
Jess Farrell	Community Facilitator, Educopia Institute
Wendy Hagenmaier	Digital Collections Archivist, Georgia Tech Library
Cate Peebles	Museum Archivist, Yale Center for British Art
Julia Kim*	Digital Projects Coordinator, National Library for the Blind and Print Disabled, Library of Congress
Liz Galvin	Head of Learning and Digital Projects, Victoria and Albert Museum
Brian Dietz	Digital Program Librarian for Special Collections, North Carolina State University Libraries
Kate Dundon and Jess Waggoner	Supervisory Archivist; User Experience and Web Services Librarian, University of California, Santa Cruz Library

*Julia Kim contributed the open-ended interview for this paper in her personal capacity. The views expressed are her own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress as an agency of the legislative branch of the U.S. government.

Stay Connected with the Museum Archives Section

The Museum Archives Section has an official SAA email list as well as a Museum Archives listserv. The listserv relays news items related to the profession and serves as a forum for members to assist one another with issues encountered in archives.

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.

Museum Archives Listserv (SAAMUS-L)

While emails do circulate on SAA Museum Archives email list, section discussion also takes place on the SAAMUS-L listserv. To join the Museum Archives listserv send an email to LISTSERV@SI-LISTSERV.SI.EDU with the following commands in the body of the email: subscribe SAAMUS-L firstname lastname. Replace "firstname lastname" with your own name; for example: subscribe SAAMUS-L John Smith. To post to the list, send email to SAAMUS-L@SI-LISTSERV.SI.EDU.

The Museum Archives listserv, SAAMUS-L, is hosted by the Smithsonian Institution. If you have any questions about the Museum Archives listserv, please contact [Marisa Bourgoin](mailto:Marisa.Bourgoin).

Internship Profile: Cassandra Linder

Ingalls Library & Museum Archives, Cleveland Museum of Art



Figure 1 Cassandra Linder at Overhead Scanner, Cleveland, OH, personal photograph by author, August 2, 2021.

Through my internship at the Ingalls Library and Museum Archives at the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), I learned about the importance of providing open access wherever possible. When I started my internship, I was not expecting to complete work of significant value. The work I completed in previous internships never really had any notable outcomes, so I expected more of the same when starting at Ingalls. However, this was far from the case.

This summer, I had several projects to choose from; however, my focus was on the following three: digitizing [May Show](#) negatives and [historical CMA Members' Magazines](#), and cataloging born-digital [historical press releases](#). Scanning, while time-consuming, was a lot of fun as I got to see old submissions from local Ohio artists from the May Show negatives, and I also got to peruse the old Members' Magazines briefly. Although scanning the negatives was very interesting, I was enthralled by the large overhead scanner I used to scan the magazines. It was the largest scanner I had ever seen, and it was so much fun to learn how to use it.

While my internship at Ingalls Library and Archives taught me so much more about the digital aspects of archives, the most important lesson I am left with is the importance of making the push towards digitization and increasing access for patrons. While staffing, copyright, etc., are serious dilemmas that come into play, they are not impossible to contend with; and the benefits of overcoming these obstacles significantly outweigh the barriers of digitization. Virtually everyone benefits from open access: educators and students, authors and readers, libraries and universities, organizations, the government, and such access can even benefit other countries. While the path to complete digitization of an archive is riddled with complex issues, as is the dilemma of open access, there is a convincing case that the goal is a worthwhile endeavor.



Figure 2 Cleveland Museum of Art, "Cover Page," *The Cleveland Museum of Art Members Magazine*, October 2008.

As my brief but educational time as the archives intern at the Ingalls Library and Museum Archives comes to a close, I am eager to see where the field goes towards digital open resources. I am also very excited to see how I will eventually aid the cause once I complete my education. The public's thirst for knowledge is insatiable, and what better way to quench that thirst than by making information open.



Figure 3 Ralph Marshall and Marco De Marco, "May Show Poster, 1969," digital image, Cleveland Museum of Art Archives Digital Collections, accessed July 30, 2021

<https://digitalarchives.clevelandart.org/digital/collection/p17142coll10/id/4/rec/28>

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Cassandra Linder at Overhead Scanner, Cleveland, OH. Personal photograph by author. August 2, 2021.

Jain, Priti. "Promoting Open Access to Research in Academic Libraries." *Library Philosophy and Practice*, May 2012, 113. Accessed July 27, 2021. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1811&context=libphilprac>.

Marshall, Ralph, and Marco De Marco. "May Show Poster, 1969." Digital image. Cleveland Museum of Art Archives Digital Collections. Accessed July 30, 2021. <https://digitalarchives.clevelandart.org/digital/collection/p17142coll10/id/4/rec/28>.

The Cleveland Museum of Art. "Cover Page." *The Cleveland Museum of Art Members Magazine*, October 2008.

Joseph Cornell Study Center Collection Processing Project

By Anna Rimel

Archivist, Joseph Cornell Study Center



Joseph Cornell with Book Object, circa 1940

In the summer of 2017, I began work as the archivist of the Joseph Cornell Study Center collection in the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM). My task, to put it simply, was to arrange, describe, and make accessible a room full of the studio contents, personal and family papers, and library and record collection of collage artist and avant-garde filmmaker Joseph Cornell (1903-1972).

Working primarily from his basement studio at home in Queens, New York – a home that he shared with his mother and brother for their whole lives – he collected a wide range of materials that he would store in cardboard boxes or cigar boxes. Images clipped from magazines, articles from newspapers, and scattered notes often resided in overstuffed folders or in stacks along various surfaces of his studio. My first task was to familiarize myself with the history of the collection and how it came to be at SAAM – no small task, since the collection began with a donation from Joseph Cornell's sister, Elizabeth Cornell Benton, in 1978, and continued to grow with several additions and institutional transfers into the 1990s. A



Joseph Cornell's Basement Studio. Photographed by Terry Schutte.

(Rimel, continued from pg. 17)

veritable treasure trove of material giving insights and contextual clues to Joseph Cornell's work and life, the collection has been previously included in comprehensive exhibitions and publications on the artist. But the collection was essentially a hidden collection, since access was previously limited by the extreme extent and variety of the materials and there was no public-facing inventory or complete finding aid.

The next step was to familiarize myself with the physical materials, the extent of groups or types of material, and determine if the creator of the collection, Joseph Cornell, had any organizational systems in place and maintain those systems. I also needed to determine if there were any conservation or preservation concerns, which ultimately required going through all the items in the collection to make a preliminary assessment.

As most gatherers of things are aware, materials kept in basements and attics where temperatures and humidity tend to fluctuate, are often more at risk for mold, rust, and pests. Since the collection has been in a climate-controlled space for upwards of 40 years, any discovered damage was likely due to the materials themselves degrading. For example, archivists are generally averse to keeping old paper clips in collections because these tend to rust and damage paper, and this was no exception in this collection. Also, in a collection like this it is not unusual to discover unstable film and paper materials, such as old newspapers and newsprint or nitrate and acetate film negatives.



An array of damaged negatives found in the Joseph Cornell Study Center during processing. Photograph by Anna Rimel, 2019.



An example of a rusted paperclip found in the Joseph Cornell Study Center collection during processing. Photograph by Anna Rimel, 2019.

(Rimel, continued from pg. 18)

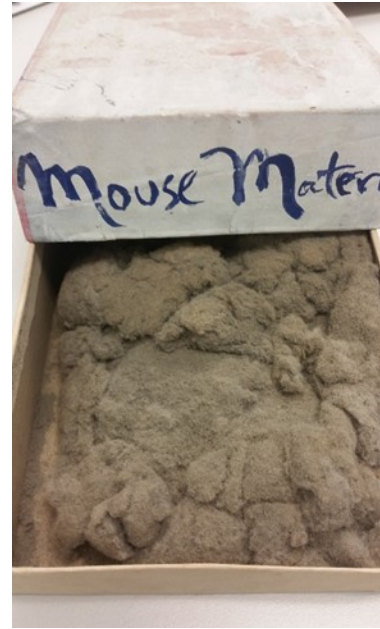
Acetate film negatives were introduced in the 1930s and the popular film negative used until the more stable polyester film was introduced in circa 1960. Acetate negatives, after several years and depending on their storage conditions, can break down and off-gas, becoming a risk to materials stored near them, and negatives can warp and wrinkle, rendering the image inaccessible. Newspaper, inherently unstable and acidic, becomes brittle over time.

These materials need special housing considerations and take more measured and planned approaches as other processing and arrangement work continues. The extent of this type of material, material that needed more attention and care, turned out to be much more than originally anticipated, causing me to necessarily adjust workflows and timelines.

But my work hasn't been all rusty paperclips and brittle pages. Some of the most interesting aspects of Joseph Cornell's life has been how nostalgic he appeared to

be about so many things. He might be having a good day, taking a walk, and find a rusty bit of metal or a pull tab from a soda can. He would pick up that found bit and attempt to capture that good day by scrawling a little note, or a date and a word, and fold it around that bit of metal. These were the constant surprises of the collection, in addition to whimsically labeled boxes of other stuff – "Mouse Material" being one of my favorites. Much to my relief, this box doesn't actually contain mouse fur, but what appears to be gathered dust or lint from a vacuum.

While working through what amounts to Joseph Cornell's life and a kind of fractured story of his artwork and ideas, there's a certain urge to create groups of material based on known works of art. This urge simply comes from wanting to understand Cornell's mind and present a body of material that makes sense to outside eyes. However, the work of an archivist is not to contrive groups of material or force things to fit into our human need for order, it is to understand the original intent behind a stack of paper given contextual clues, folder titles, or material type. With Cornell, the complexity of a found objects artist combined with an individual who nostalgically collected and gathered so much, this work was often like untangling an especially knotted bundle of chain jewelry. This meant that I never decided a group of material was about any one thing unless explicitly stated through labels and notes by Cornell himself. Oftentimes, a group of material was about more than one thing, idea, person, or memory.



*Joseph Cornell's source material box of "Mouse Material" in the Joseph Cornell Study Center.
Photograph by Anna Rimel, 2018.*

(Rimel, continued from pg. 19)

Understanding this, my next step, apart from reading extensively about Joseph Cornell, was to come up with a planned arrangement for the collection. With a collection numbering hundreds of boxes, a planned outline is necessary to make the work doable. Having gone through the collection and legacy inventories, I could estimate which boxes would include which kind of material, according to my arrangement, and approach the collection work in this way. Of course, with all great plans comes the possibility for adjustments along the way, and that is part of the work as well. Having tackled the overall high-level approach to the collection, I then spent the next several years working through each item to provide full-level processing – unfolding notes, removing paper clips and staples, removing materials from envelopes, interleaving acidic documents with archival paper to extend the life of the material, and properly house everything in new, acid-free and lignin-free folders and boxes. I began with the paper-based documents, which made up a large part of the collection. My approach was to think of the collection as large groups of material: with the paper-based materials as one group, including photographs, prints, magazines, letters, financial records diaries, etc.; the three dimensional objects that require special housing considerations and a different approach, as another part of the collection; the library collection of hundreds of boxed books with notes and annotations, as another part; and the record album collection, as another part. Each of these larger groups has been described in the same comprehensive



finding aid to the collection, but housing and planned physical approach differs for each type of material.

Going forward, further work can be done to physically get the collection to where it needs to be, but the collection now has a publicly accessible, comprehensive, description of its contents in the form of a finding aid. This project also directly led to the re-discovery of early Yayoi Kusama watercolors that Joseph Cornell had purchased directly from Kusama in 1964, among other significant materials. This is a big step towards accessibility and findability of such a significant, unique collection of an important American artist.

Shifting work in progress as files of material are placed in their appropriate locations. Photograph by Anna Rimel, 2019.

To learn more about the Joseph Cornell Study Center at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, please visit: <https://americanart.si.edu/research/cornell>

To view the finding aid to the Joseph Cornell Study Center Collection, please visit: <https://sova.si.edu/record/SAAM.JCSC.1>

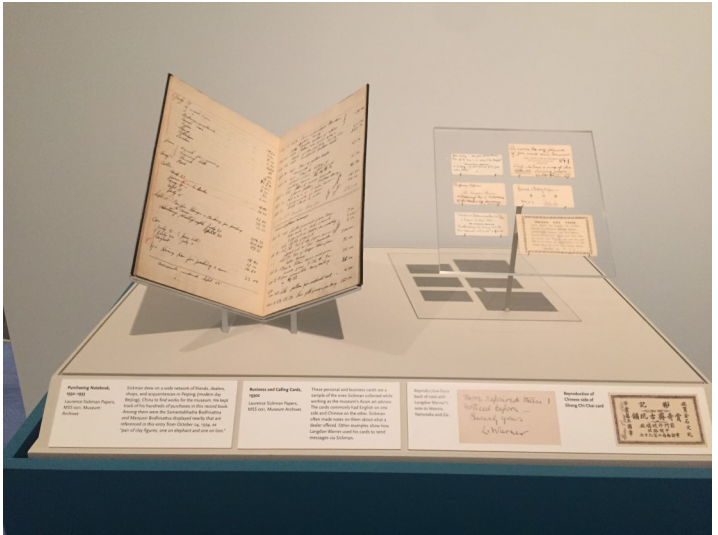
Feature Exhibition on Nelson-Atkins Early Collecting Incorporates Archives

By Tara Laver

Senior Archivist, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City opened its doors in 1933, but the art collection was beginning to be built at a frantic pace three years prior. Through art and archives, the new exhibition, *Origins: Collecting to Create the Nelson-Atkins*, opening Aug. 14, explores the very beginnings of the collection and the people who made choices about what types of art to collect, the challenges and opportunities of acquiring art during the Great Depression, and the vast diversity of the museum's first objects.

The managers of the trust William Rockhill Nelson established in his will to purchase art for a museum for Kansas City were prominent local businessmen who were not knowledgeable about museums, art, or the art market, yet they had to figure out how to fulfill Nelson's wishes. They considered the legacy of his collection of fine copies of Old Masters (which by 1930 had been on public display since 1897), partnered with other museums in archaeological expeditions, and ultimately hired agents to find and acquire works on their behalf. Key dealers



Purchasing notebook and business cards of Laurence Sickman (before placement of vitrine)



View of the Laurence Sickman section of *Origins: Collecting to Create the Nelson-Atkins*



Archival reproductions on entrance ramp of exhibit.

(Lever, continued from pg. 21)

such as C.T. Loo and many Kansas Citians themselves also played a role in developing the collection. All of this happened very quickly and against the backdrop of the Great Depression, which had a significant impact on both what was available and what the trustees could afford. The exhibition incorporates all of these themes.

With the focus on the museum's early history, *Origins* features archival materials in a way seldom seen in a feature exhibition at the Nelson-Atkins. Nine original archival items and reproductions of 17 more help tell the stories of the 50+ works of art. These include photographs, postcards, agreements, newspaper clippings, letters, audio-visual recordings, and other documents. One highlight is the in-gallery projection of a 1937 16mm home movie documenting the visit of dealers Paul and Marguerite Mallon to Kansas City and the museum. A section on Laurence Sickman, one of the agents for Asian art, offers an especially strong representation of content from the archives.

A graduate of Harvard and a former student of the Nelson-Atkins' original advisor for Asian art Langdon Warner, Sickman lived in Peiping, China (modern day Beijing) 1930-1935 while studying on a fellowship in Asian studies. Warner caught up with him there and soon involved his protégé in purchasing for the new Kansas City museum. From 1931 to 1935, Sickman collected much of the foundational Chinese collection, including many of its most important works. Sickman's success led the trustees to appoint him curator of Asian art in 1935, a post he held until 1973. In addition, he served as vice-director of the museum, 1949-1953, and director from 1953 to 1977.

In Beijing, Sickman drew on a wide network of friends, dealers, shops, and acquaintances to find works for the museum. The section on him includes a sampling of some of the objects Sickman acquired in the 1930s plus a selection of calling cards and dealer's business cards that he collected while in China, most of which have notes on them. The notebook he kept of his purchases is also displayed, open to a page recording the purchase of a "pair of clay figures, one on elephant and one on lion," which are two bodhisattvas on view next to the book. A quote from a letter from Warner to the trustees about his involving Sickman--the first mention of this important figure in the museum's history--is featured in large vinyl, and audio of Sickman recounting how he came to be an agent for the museum is linked for visitors through the Smartify app.

Origins: Collecting to Create the Nelson-Atkins offers an exciting opportunity to showcase the museum's archives and to help visitors understand both how we know what we know about the art collection and for them to gain exposure to the idea of archives in general. We also hope including these archival elements brings a tangible immediacy to the objects and people they are associated with and helps visitors put themselves in that place and time.

Senior Archivist Tara Laver served as a co-curator of the exhibit. It is on view August 14, 2021, to March 6, 2022, and is part of the museum's *Past, Present Future* initiative, a series of exhibitions that highlights little-seen works in the collection and came about in consideration of the effect the Covid pandemic had on feature loan exhibitions.

Additional information is available at <https://nelson-atkins.org/exhibitions/origins/> and <https://nelson-atkins.org/news/past-present-future/>.

Publication News:

Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum



By Mike Jones

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[Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum](#) provides the first interdisciplinary study of the digital documentation of artefacts and archives in contemporary museums, while also exploring the implications of polyphonic, relational thinking on collections documentation.

Mike Jones, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Research Centre for Deep History, Australian National University

Drawing on case studies from Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the book provides a critical examination of the history of collections management and documentation since the introduction of computers to museums in the 1960s, demonstrating how technology has contributed to the disconnection of distributed collections knowledge. Jones also highlights how separate documentation systems have developed, managed by distinct, increasingly professionalized staff, impacting our ability to understand and use what we find in museums and their ever-expanding online collections. Exploring this legacy allows us to rethink current practice, focusing less on individual objects and more on the rich stories and interconnected resources that lie at the heart of the contemporary, plural, participatory ‘relational museum.’

Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum is essential reading for those who wish to better understand the institutional silos found in museums, and the changes required to make museum knowledge more accessible. The book is a particularly important addition to the fields of museum studies, archival science, information management, and the history of cultural heritage technologies.

Mike Jones is an archivist, historian, and collections consultant with more than 12 years of experience working with the GLAM sector (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) on digital, archival, and public history projects. His interdisciplinary research explores the history of collections-based knowledge, and the ways in which contemporary technologies can help us to develop and maintain relationships within and between archives, collections, disciplines, and communities.

Learn more about Mike Jones and the Research Centre for Deep History [HERE](#)