

Impact of Archival Processing Decisions and Procedures on User Experience: The Library of Congress' Bronislava Nijinska Collection

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Abstract: Archival processing functions, in many ways, to serve as the language archivists use to communicate with researchers and the public. Through description and organization, archival institutions inform the public as to what materials they have, and do their best to convey the relevance of that material to the user's research. The relationship between archival processors and researchers is one of the most important elements of archival practice. Yet archivists have little understanding of how the processing procedures and the tools they provide for collections actually end up being utilized or understood by users. Research on the impact of processing decisions upon the research experience are quite limited. This platform presentation will assess how processing decisions may impact the utilization of collections for users, using an example from the Library of Congress: the Bronislava Nijinska Collection. Significant for innovative work in ballet choreography and as a ballerina, the LOC acquired numerous manuscripts, correspondence, musical scores, costume designs, and other materials documenting her life in dance and choreography. However, the collection processing was incomplete and included different individuals and various levels of description, including a finding aid over 300 pages long and too unwieldy to be of use to any but the most knowledgeable Nijinska scholars. Between 2015-2022, material from the Nijinska Collection was requested an average of sixty-five times a year, making it the most requested unprocessed collection of the Library's Music Division. This presentation proposes further research into the decision making behind processing and its effect on users. By examining the processing decisions and practices utilized in this collection, this presentation will highlight the potential impact on the value and utility of such decisions and practices for users.

Introduction:

Archival processing functions, in many ways, to serve as the language archivists use to speak to researchers and the public. Through description and organization, archival institutions tell the public what material they have, and do their best to convey the relevance of that material to the user's research. The relationship between archivists and their users



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is central to our field. It is a relationship that has not been widely studied, with research focusing on users or archival processing separately. A lack of information about a collection and its content has been shown to impede a researcher's use of a collection. But there are other questions to be asked, such as how the organization of a collection affects a user's experience. Before a finding aid is even written, the collection needs to be processed and organized, and if the organization makes little sense to an archivist or a reference librarian, it will likely make just as little sense to a user.

But what happens when there is a miscommunication, if the language and terminology are not clearly understood and the right information doesn't get through? How does that affect users and the public? This paper discusses how archival processing impacts a user's access and understanding of a collection, through the example of the Bronislava Nijinska Collection at the Library of Congress. In the spring of 2023, I interned with the Music Division at the Library of Congress, helping to reprocess the Nijinska Collection. Though hard data is unavailable for the impact of processing of the Nijinska Collection on user experience, an examination of the processing itself can provide insight into the potential impact on users. I then propose a pilot study to examine how the decisions made during processing can impact users experience.

Nijinska led a remarkable life, traveling with a variety of ballet companies, including her own, redefining modern dance as she went. Though much of her life is fairly well documented, there are gaps in the narrative, and portions of her life and work that are still unclear. It has only been in the past few decades, due in part to the fall of the Soviet Union, that researchers and Nijinska scholars have begun to investigate these gaps, and fill them in¹. As interest and research in Nijinska increases, her collection at the Library of Congress is likely to see increased research requests. In its previous state, using the collection was, at best, a trial. The re-processing was completed in June of 2023, and in October, an updated finding aid was published on the Library's website.

Literature Review

After the rise of the model of More Product, Less Process (MPLP) in 2005 by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, the practice of archival processing saw a large shift. The main goal for archivists now was to make collections available as quickly as possible, regardless of duplicates, excessive or unrelated material, or usability by researchers and the public. One of the most influential models of archival processing, the purpose of the model is to relieve the ever-mounting build-up of archival back-log. The intention was to limit arrangement, description, and preservation to the minimal amount needed to publish a collection, getting it into the hands of researchers and the public sooner. Greene and Meissner begin with the "working hypothesis that processing projects squander scarce resources because archivists spend too much time on tasks that do not need doing."² Though this is not wholly untrue, time has shown that there is a balance to be struck between taking too much time, and uninformative (or sometimes plain incorrect) collection description. MPLP has become a model against which many authors and researchers measure archival processing, whether they agree with it or not. Today, archivists

¹ Lynn Garafola, "An Amazon of the Avant-Garde. Bronislava Nijinska In Revolutionary Russia" *Dance Research*, v.29 n.2, (2011) p111

² Mark A Greene., and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing" *American Archivist*, v.68, n.2 (2005) p209

seem to have adopted a form of MPLP in one or two areas of their archives, while not adhering to all aspects of the model.

Researchers Cox, Anchor, Hauck, Krause, and Herzinger have found that processing time is the only area where MPLP is effective. It does not, however, increase efficiency in other areas of archival practice. Robert Cox argues that there are consequences to minimal processing. Beyond the consequences of poor description and organization, a lack of information about a collection and its contents can, and have been shown to, impede a researcher's use of a collection. The oft-reached assumption by researchers is that, if the information is not presented, it is not available at all.³ Cox instead proposes a processing model he calls Maximal Processing. This model views the publication of a collection as a step in the processing, where description is built up over time, as more information is learned through the process. Maximal Processing is based around providing the greatest amount of information in description possible, while spending as little time as possible in arrangement.⁴

Janet Hauck, Rose Krause, and Kyna Herzinger wrote "MPLP Ten Years Later: The Adventure of Being Among the First" (2019), a survey of literature and archives that adopted MPLP in the wake of the Greene and Meissner article. The surveyed institutions had applied MPLP to specific collections rather than their entire archival holdings, adopting what they refer to as the "least, best level of control" of their archival holdings, where greater emphasis is put on higher priority material, but the level of work is still only what is necessary to make that material available to the public.⁵ Anchor observed in "More product, less process': method, madness, or practice?" (2013) that minimal practices already existed to a certain degree in varying levels of UK archives. Anchor also point out that, regardless of intention, there is a gap in the research into how users interact with finding aids and how they are impacted by minimal processing and descriptions. "Arguably the lack of research into how users respond to finding aids has led to description that fulfils professional requirements rather than those of the end-user."⁶

Due to the dearth of archival user studies, especially when compared to library user studies, it can often be difficult for archival institutions to determine what their users may need or want. This is something Betts Coup laments in the 2021 article *The Value of a note: A Finding Aid Usability Study*.⁷ Coup tested the usability of three levels of archival description, detailed, aggregate, and minimal, on fifty-one users and found that, though all finding-aids were usable, the tested users reported an easier time with the aggregate and detailed descriptions.⁸ The study also showed that there is a direct relation between the use of notes, such as biographical, scope

³ Robert Cox "Maximal Processing, or, Archivist on a Pale Horse" *Journal of Archival Organization*, v.8, n.2 (2010) p140

⁴ Cox "Maximal Processing" p144-146

⁵ Jack Hauck, & Rose Sliger Krause and Kyna Herzinger "MPLP Ten Years Later: The Adventure of Being Among the First" *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* v.35 n.2, (2019) p78

⁶ Rachel Anchor, "'More product less process'; methods, madness, or practice" *Archives and Records* v.34 n.2 (2013) p166

⁷ Betts Coup, "The Value of a Note: A Finding Aid Usability Study" *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* v.8, (2021), p5

⁸ Coup, "The Value of a Note" p14

and content, and processing, and the level of detail of description and if it is limited to collection description or includes item-level description.⁹

Hea Lim Rhee, in her article *Reflections on User Studies* in 2015, suggests that, put simply, archival institutions value their users less than libraries. “The first priority of libraries is to serve their users...the most important function of archival institutions, traditionally is preservation... not user services”.¹⁰ Though this is likely not true for all archival institutions, there is a dual role these organizations play, balancing their duty to their collections with their duty to their users. Rhee notes that, in general, there are three types of user studies: information needs, information seeking, and information use. Information needs studies relate to the types of topics usually researched, or the types of reference questions asked. Information seeking is one methodology users apply. What materials do they look for and how do they access them? Rhee states this is the most popular type of user study, especially with the rise of technology enabling different, and faster means of access. Information use applies to how and why users choose certain materials, but who are the users. These types of studies have also begun to examine who the users are, for example, what their education level is.

In attempting to bridge the gap between archivists and their users, Melanie Griffin suggests in her article “Postmodernism, Processing, and the Profession: Towards a Theoretical Reading of Minimal Standards” that a certain level of thinking-outside-the-box would greatly benefit archives. One of the archives she surveyed chose to adopt elements of MPLP, recognizing that the community they serve would be overwhelmed by detailed description, choosing to tailor their finding aid and description policy for their users specifically.¹¹ Griffin acknowledges that this is not a one-size fits all plan, but reportedly enhanced the experience of the archive’s users. This postmodern approach to archives is echoed in Joseph Deodato’s 2006 article “Becoming Responsible Mediators: The Application of Postmodern Perspectives to Archival Arrangement and Description”. Deodato rightly points out that postmodern thought draws into question the role of the archivist, and how influential their position makes them to the researcher.¹² The subjectivity of the archivists has not frequently been addressed when the question of processing is raised, though there are consequences if archivists refuse to acknowledge the impact of their own lived experiences in their decision making.

But there are other questions to be asked, such as how the organization of a collection affects a user’s experience. Before a finding aid is even written, the collection needs to be processed and organized, and if the organization makes little sense to an archivist or a reference librarian, it will likely make just as little sense to a user. As described above, there are limited user studies that have been conducted for archival collections, however, careful evaluation of the processing itself can provide some understanding of potential problems for users. As mentioned previously, archivists often have little understanding of how effective the tools they provide end up being for

⁹ Ibid p16

¹⁰ Hea Lim Rhee “Reflections of Archival User Studies” *Reference and User Service Quarterly*, v.54 n.4 (2015), p31

¹¹ Melanie Griffin “Postmodernism, Processing, and the Profession: Towards a Theoretical Reading of Minimal Standards” *Provenance: The Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists*, v.28, (2010) p102

¹² Joseph Deodato “Becoming Responsible Mediators: The Application of Postmodern Perspectives to Archival Arrangement & Description” *Progressive Librarian*, v.27 (2006) p54

users. However, the preferred question for research has been about the use of finding aids, how they are used, and the experience of using one from a user's point of view. That is not to say that these questions are not vitally important for archivists to answer. If we don't know how our users think and conduct their research, we can accidentally, as with the Nijinska Collection, create a three hundred page finding aid with twenty-one series that is practically inaccessible.

Nijinska Collection

Born in Minsk to Polish parents in 1890, Bronislava Fominichna Nijinska was brought up surrounded on all sides by dance and the stage. Her brother Vaslav would be remembered as one of the most remarkable dancers of his era, writing and choreographing *L'Aprè-midi d'un Faune* and *The Rite of Spring*, which caused a riot on its opening night.¹³ Nijinska was considered one of the most promising students graduating from St. Petersburg's Imperial Ballet School in 1908.¹⁴ She would go on to have one of the most influential careers of any choreographer of the 20th century. In 1915 she moved to Kiev where she formed the School of Movement, "challenging the conventions of the dramatic stage."¹⁵ Given the political climate of the era and the area, it has not been until recently that Russian and Ukrainian scholars are rediscovering the story of her time in Kiev before fleeing in 1921.¹⁶

Her papers, consisting of letter, costume and set designs, books, photographs, news clippings, ephemera, and more were purchased by the Library of Congress in 1999. Published as twenty-one series, and a more than three hundred page finding aid, the collection was highly inaccessible by the public. Materials had not been organized in a manner that would promote the collection. There was also a great deal of material, approximately thirty-three boxes, that remained unprocessed.¹⁷ Duplicates of not only individual materials, but whole series, was a major problem with the finding aid and container list. Information as to what processing actions were taken, and by whom, is limited. There are several individuals known to have worked on the collection over the years, but there is little information as to what work they did.¹⁸

In order to provide greater access to the collection, the Library determined that the collection must be reprocessed. The twenty-one series were instead reorganized into eight: Choreographic Works, Teaching Materials, Writings, Business and Personal Papers, Correspondence, Nijinska's Library, Music.¹⁹ In reprocessing, files had to be renamed to better reflect their content. Instances where letters were filed under the name of an individual rather than under the names of the organization they represented would make locating relevant material difficult at best.

Item level description was used for all Music. Composer, Title, Date of Composition, Type of document, and any other information are all cataloged, to allow for easier access. Books that were of no relevance to the collection, as well as duplicates of materials, were not retained. Instances of material such as periodicals and magazines that had been collected by Nijinska or

¹³ Lynn Garafola, *La Nijinska, Choreographer of the Modern* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2022) p.xvi

¹⁴ Garafola, *La Nijinska*, p1

¹⁵ Garafola, "An Amazon of the Avant-Garde", p109

¹⁶ Garafola, "An Amazon of the Avant-Garde", p110-11

¹⁷ Internal Document: Nijinska Collection Assessment, Report p1

¹⁸ Internal Document: Nijinska Collection Assessment, Appendix C: Collection Timeline

¹⁹ Internal Document: Nijinska, Collection Assessment, Report, p1

her daughter, Irina, were assessed for annotations relevant to the collection, as well as duplication with the Library's current holdings, before being surplus.²⁰

Between 2015 and 2022, material from the Nijinska Collection was requested an average of sixty-five times a year, making it the Music Divisions most requested unprocessed collection. Its highest pull year was 2019 with 178 requests. The most common type of researcher using the Nijinska Collection is academics (usually PhD students), which seems to be the norm for archival use. Given the wide variety and number of people Nijinska encountered in her profession and lifetime, the collection is often accessed to view the material from or pertaining to other individuals, rather than in pursuit of Nijinska. The library does not keep records of reference questions due to the volume of inquiries.

Due to the lack of hard data showing how researchers used and interacted with the Nijinska Collection, or any issues they may have had with accessing the collection or understanding the information, we cannot know for certain that the poor processing of the collection affected user experience, however, data from both user and usability studies can allow us to guess as to what their experience may have been like. The Library does not keep a record of user questions, only how long it takes for reference staff to answer the questions. Tracking the types of questions asked, and how they relate to the organization and description of the collection would allow for a better understanding of what description type is best for users in a given collection.

Proposal

The relationship between archival processors and researchers is one of the most important elements of archival practice. As Andrew Janes pointed out, archival description is the language archivists use for “mapping the metaphorical landscape of archives”.²¹ Communication and understanding between archivists and users are vital for archives. In order to determine how archivists can better serve their users, further research is needed. I am proposing a pilot study that would document the archivist's decisions during processing, followed by a user study, where users rate their experience with the collection, discussing what they found difficult or easy to understand. This study is designed to be easily tailored for different institutions. This would be done with a combination of survey questions and interviews for the users and the archivists. The main questions for the archivists would center on how they made their decisions during processing and the development of finding aids.

1. How do you decide on the quantity of description for collection material (series, folder, item, etc)?
2. What language/ terms are used in these descriptions?
3. Does your institution track user questions and resolutions for collections?
4. Does your institution assess user experience?

For users, the questions will focus on how easy or difficult they found a collection to navigate.

²⁰ Internal Document: Nijinska Collection Assessment, Appendix B, p4

²¹ Janes “Making maps of records” p96

What descriptive material did you use in you search/ research?

1. How would you rate your understanding of the finding aid descriptions? (5-point Likert scale)
2. Did you have questions about the collection in your research? Did the institution have a mechanism to ask and resolve questions?

The flexibility of the Likert ranking system of the questionnaire will help to speed the questions along, and ensure respondents do not get frustrated with the survey. It is also important in this study to have an understanding of what descriptive material in a collection users accessed, ensuring the correct areas in a collections description are addressed.

The answers to this survey will hopefully tell us what kind of information users are able to get from a collection. As different archival institutions have vastly different user bases, not all results will be equality applicable. Smaller institutions with smaller user base will more easily be able to tailor their decision making to their users' needs, while larger institutions may have to take a broader approach. However, this research will provide further insight into the relationship between archivists and users, allowing archives to better serve the public.

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