

## **Museum Archives Guidelines**

*The Museum Archives Section of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) represents those who are responsible for the organization and care of archival collections located in museums. These guidelines have been created by the Section to assist all types of museums in the development and administration of archival programs. They outline the components of a successful museum archives program and should be used in conjunction with detailed information on the administration of archives that is available through SAA and other professional sources. Specific examples of museum archives documentation, particularly with regard to policies, are available in the [Museum Archives Standards and Best Practices Working Group's Resource Guide](#).*

### **1. Introduction and Mission Statement**

#### **Introduction**

All museums should maintain an active, professional archives to systematically collect, organize, preserve, and provide access to organizational records of enduring value as well as the papers of individuals, groups, and topics associated with the museum. An archives program provides evidence, explanation, and justification for both past actions and current decisions. It is the role of the museum archivist to recommend policies and procedures for the creation, maintenance, and ultimate retention or disposition of current museum records in all formats, as well as to undertake the acquisition and stewardship of externally generated special collections. By supporting an archives program, a museum not only promotes its own history but ensures that its records are preserved and that information resources are readily available to support the work of its staff as well as to meet the research needs of scholars and the general public.

#### **Mission Statement**

The archives should have a mission statement, approved by museum administration and ratified by appropriate governing bodies, that defines the authority of the archivist within the museum and the scope of the archival program. The statement should explicitly recognize the archivist's role in the museum and in relation to its records management program. When possible, the mission statement should reflect and expand upon key aspects of the parent institution's mission.

### **2. Collecting Scope**

The museum archives identifies and collects records of long-term and permanent research value, regardless of format. The collecting scope of a museum archives should

be clearly outlined within the parent institution's overarching collections statement or maintained separately by the archives department. The materials described in the archives' collecting scope should add value to the museum's collections and exhibition programs and should reflect a commitment to diversity and inclusion.

A museum archives' collections may encompass:

1. Organizational records. These document institutional history and provide context for object collections. They may include, but are not limited to, records relating to programming, curatorial, administrative, legal, and fiscal activities.
2. Collection records, such as object, specimen, or conservation files. These may be part of the museum archives' collections or, if active records, kept in the curatorial, registration, or collections management offices. The museum archivist should advocate for and offer support for the stewardship of these records, including their potential transfer to the archives when appropriate.
3. Special collections. These may include papers of external and/or allied individuals and organizations as well as related topical collections that align with the museum's overarching mission.

### **3. Organizational Placement**

While administrative placement, structure, and governance will reflect institutional differences and cultures, the museum archives should be placed within the museum's organizational structure at the same level as all other collections departments, with the museum archivist maintaining the equivalent custodial and related authority delegated by the director of the museum, governing board, or parent institution. The archives department should also be an independent entity within the museum's organizational structure, though the museum archives may also be an administrative affiliate of a parent institution's archives, such as when a museum is part of a larger university.

### **4. Professional Archivist and Archives Staffing**

The museum should have a professionally trained archivist. If institutional resources do not permit the hiring of a professionally trained archivist, expert advice should be sought in the management of the museum's archives and archival training provided to the staff member(s) made responsible for them.

The responsibilities of museum archivists are to appraise, acquire, arrange, describe, preserve, and facilitate access to the records of the museum and collections of related materials acquired from outside the museum. These responsibilities may be divided among multiple archives staff members. Museum archivists may also provide archival instruction and training on how to utilize primary source material to parties internal or external to their institution. Performing outreach and advocating for the archival program communicates the value of the museum archives.

The museum archivist should be empowered to undertake strategic planning for the museum archives, assess its resource needs, and create policies and procedures that follow professional best practices and ethics. The museum archivist should also be responsible for hiring archives staff. Archives staffing levels should be aligned with staffing for other museum departments. Hiring should follow a policy of nondiscrimination and equal opportunity and hiring activities should be implemented in a culturally competent manner.

## **5. Policies and Standards**

Museum archives should adopt existing institutional policies and standards in place at the museum when possible, refining as needed to suit archival practice. When such is not appropriate, archivists should create standalone policies for their repositories that draw upon professional archival standards and practices.

## **6. Records Management**

The museum archives should be responsible for, or maintain an active role in, the museum's records management program, including identifying records and scheduling their retention. The criteria for permanent records retention include:

1. Evidence of the structure, development, mission, and functions of the museum over time.
2. Documentation of the actions, decisions, policies, and fiscal and legal rights and responsibilities of the museum.
3. Research and informational value.

These criteria apply to records in all formats and on all platforms.

The museum archivist should be involved in the development of policies, guidelines, and records retention schedules pertaining to the maintenance, disposition, and preservation of all museum records, with the aim of avoiding records duplication and the retention of nonpermanent records. The museum archivist, as well as the records

creators and general counsel, if applicable, should also approve the appropriate disposition of records that must be maintained temporarily for fiscal or legal purposes. The museum archivist should be consulted for recommendations on the maintenance of permanently active records of archival value in noncustodial situations such as collection object or accession records under the care of a registrar, collections manager, curator, or conservator, as well as computer network backups managed by the information technology staff.

## **7. Infrastructure**

Well-supported and maintained physical and digital infrastructure is required to manage records in all formats within the museum archives. Robust institutional commitment as well as collaboration with other museum departments are necessary in building, implementing, and maintaining the museum archives' physical plant, storage areas, study rooms, and digital systems.

## **8. Access and Use**

Museum archives should provide access to all records that can be open to research use. Select holdings should be limited only by reasonable restrictions related to privacy, confidentiality, copyright laws, cultural sensitivity, cultural property rights, moral rights, and other purposes. Museum archives should provide equal research access to archival materials, regardless of the patron's status, affiliation, or intended use; however, it is typical for an institution's own staff members to have increased access to certain materials. Museum archives should also strive to provide intellectual and physical access through archival description and delivery of resources both in person and online whenever feasible.

## **9. Outreach**

Museum archives may organize exhibits, workshops, publications, presentations, instruction, tours, and other programming to promote collections and services, foster collaborative relationships, share and build knowledge, and advocate for financial support and resources. Museum archivists work individually and collaboratively with colleagues to create programs that are meaningful to their constituents and support the institutional mission and specific goals of the museum.

## **10. Repatriation**

Museum archives have an ethical responsibility to assist with the processes of repatriation and are encouraged to develop modes of collaboration, engagement, and

partnership for archival or museum holdings that have problematic histories or unclear provenance. Archivists should strive to research, record, and make accessible as much information as possible regarding the provenance of the collections in their care and in the care of the museum. Establishing institutional guidelines to ensure consistent practices around releasing information is recommended. Museum archivists should aim to uphold rights and responsibilities that recognize the inherent sovereignty that affected communities have over their cultural heritage.