Archives as Museum Objects

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In this article, the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences is introduced and its development and expansion briefly explored. Its present high profile generates acquisitions and donations of collections, included with which is often allied archival documentation. This is distinct from the internally-generated museum archives, which are also preserved. Unlike most government agencies, the museum has its own archival facility, but a qualified archivist is employed to work only on that category of archives acquired by/donated to the museum. The method of processing these is discussed, highlighting the special concerns associated with archives in a museum setting: the dual role of the records as information resources and as objects for exhibition. Five likely problems are identified, solutions proposed, and an existing case described. The major emphasis is the part these archives play in establishing the provenance of objects in their correct contexts, as the museum orientation is away from the display of objects in isolation.

Most people would not envisage an active archival function within a museum, especially a government institution, but every museum has archival material of one form or another. This article aims to explore the methods employed by one museum in its approach to its archives.

Background to the museum

The Technological, Industrial & Sanitary Museum, founded in 1880, opened in the Agricultural Hall in the Outer Domain, Sydney, in 1883, its object to

> provide a means for the better education and instruction of the people of New South Wales, especially in areas where industrial and technological changes were rapidly transforming life, and by its research and collections to be a stimulus for the economic development of the colony and its resources.[1]

Until the end of World War II, the reputation of the Technological Museum, as it became known, for excellence in scientific research into practical and commercial applications of the resources of the state, and its endeavours in times of national emergency, steadily developed until its stature was universally recognised.

After numerous changes in administration, name and address, the

Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences has moved away from its previous primary involvement with scientific research and education, 'but what remains is an institution that reflects the pragmatic and utilitarian ethos of our age, just as it did the Victorian era one hundred years ago'.[2]

With a State Government decision, in 1979, to recycle the Ultimo electrical power station, the 'Power House Museum' was conceived. Stage I, on the site of the old tram depot in Mary Ann Street, was opened in 1981. Stage II, in the renovated Power House which used to power the trams of Sydney from the 1900s to the early 1960s, is situated directly behind Stage I, and is due to be operational in 1988 to synchronise with the Australian Bicentenary celebrations. In concert with the physical restructuring, the inauguration, in 1982, of the Mint museum, and the transfer to the Museum's care of the Sydney Observatory, manifested a similar internal restructuring; a trend continued with the opening of another satellite museum on the site of the Hyde Park Barracks, in 1984.

A much higher public profile is the natural result of this expanding role of the museum in the display of scientific and cultural achievement, and this in turn generates an increased rate of acquisition donation of collections, which often incorporate archival material.

Archives in the museum context

Two distinct categories of archival material exist in the museum context:

a) internally-generated, mainly administrative records such as minutes of meetings, annual reports, correspondence, personal papers research notes of eminent employees, museum publications, stockbooks, microfiche, etc;

b) documentation with the same provenance as, and supportive of, object collections donated to or acquired by a museum; for instance, personal papers of prominent people, records of companies which have ceased trading in one form or another, craftsmen's drawings and sketches, etc.

The Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences instituted an archives facility at its Stage I premises in 1983, for the storage and preservation of a hundred years' worth of the first category of archives, and although there is no position of full-time archivist, it is administered by a qualified archivist. In addition, students enrolled each year in the Graduate Diploma in Information Management — Archives Administration, at the University of New South Wales, work in the museum archives in fulfilment of the field-work and 'special project' components of the course. The museum holdings date from 1882, and the rich resources reflect the development of scientific and scholarly endeavour in Australia in general, and in New South Wales in particular. Before World War II, the museum was considered to be at the forefront of research into the commercial advantages of our natural resources, including oils, timbers, wool and fisheries.

Until late 1984, the second category, that of archives relating to and accompanying object collections acquired by a museum, was not provided for in the system, even though they had existed for some time. In most cases, these papers would remain in their containers-of-transfer, stored under the desks of the relevant curators, regarded as objects and catalogued as such. This did not discourage the use and often the removal of material by anyone who required it. In the absence of an archivist/archives department/archival policy, this unprocessed information resource could not, at best, be used to any great advantage, and was, at worst, pruned and culled unwittingly, in the interests of space conservation.

With the unrelenting approach of 1988, all efforts are being concentrated on exhibitions for the bicentennial and for Stage II, the large extension to the museum at present under construction. Already an unprecedented demand for information for these exhibitions has caused a re-appraisal of the situation where these supplementary records are concerned. Late in 1984, I was appointed to a temporary position, by the Assistant Curator of Pictorial Collections, Mr Warren Wickman, with responsibility for making this second category of archives available for use in Stage II. (The Department of Pictorial Collections has joint jurisdicition, with the appropriate curator, over these archives.)

After investigating the situation at other museums and art galleries, it appears that this position is one of the few, if not the only, of its kind, at least where government institutions are concerned. The work involved includes the processing of these 'allied' archives relevant to Stage II exhibitions, employing generally-accepted archival principles of arrangement and description, as far as is possible in a museum context. Ideally, the objective in the six months' duration of the project, is to create a general finding-aid to as many of these collections as time permits, encompassing:

— description down to series level;

— a biographical note (in the case of personal papers) or an administrative history (where a company is concerned);

— a bibliography;

— references, including those to the related holdings of other institutions;

— and to preface it all, an explanation of the methods used in the arrangement or processing thereof.

These finding-aids are all stored on disk, facilitating immediate updating on a microcomputer. The most recent 'hard copy' (on paper) is available in the archives and in the relevant files, for access by interested parties.

With regard to security, only the archivist and personnel of Pictorial Collections may gain entry to the actual archives storage area, so any

restriction placed on material by donors is respected, and can be maintained.

Deviations from archival tradition as such, are mostly compromises with museum systems which do not differentiate between archives as information resources, and archives as artifacts, with the attendant problems of co-ordinating, to everyone's satisfaction:

— respect for the integrity of the material, and its preservation, for posterity;

— concentration on curators' and researchers' areas of interest;

— identification of exhibition possibilities (the object vs the data therein);

— incorporation of finding-aids different to the subject-based museum system;

within the limitations imposed by acquiring only archives connected by provenance to existing object collections.

Possible Problems and Suggestions for their solution:

1) At present, priorities dictate that only those archives likely to be exhibited in Stage II, for the Bicentennial Project, or those crucial for research into Stage II exhibitions, are to undergo conservation treatment.

* Interim measures available are the requisite fumigation, acid-free paper folders, boxing, and storage in the optimum environment which, fortunately, the 'Basement' accommodation at Stage I provides.

2) A multitude of areas is incorporated in the paramount role of museums to mount exhibitions for the edification of the public. In contrast to the average archival agency, an archivist working on 'allied' archives in the museum deals with curators, researchers, exhibition-designers, conservators, display-preparators, all having a stake in the material, and whose needs have to be accommodated.

* Prior consultation between interested parties and archivist will help to highlight exhibition priorities, research areas-of-interest, and the level of detail required in the finding-aid, and will hopefully prevent the damaging image of archives existing in a vacuum, where a researcher/user has to be almost as skilled as an archivist in order to retrieve and use the material.

3) Often subject concerns predominate format or function groupings, where a user finds it preferable that all the material pertaining to one subject is kept together regardless of the diverse forms that subject takes — for instance: photographs, scrapbooks and plans containing material relating to designs for something.

* In this case it has been useful to go 'beyond' a strictly series-oriented

categorisation, not grouping disparate formats together, but not obscuring the different subjects in one series either — so instead of one series for all photographs, one series for all scrapbooks or one series for all plans, etc. — regardless of subject content — one can divide each into sub-series, with titles identifying subject/content, under a series-title stressing the format, without compromising the integrity of the material.

4) A body of archives is considered, in the museum context, to be a single object (regardless of its volume) and when accessioned by the museum is given an object number. (Prior to 1985, paper collections were given a "P" number; from 1985, an annual single numbering system has been introduced, eg 85/1, 85/2, 85/3 etc.) These archive 'collections' contain items that can be used in displays, but the process of extracting an item for exhibiting requires the allotment of an additional number.

* In order to avoid long strings of numerals, once the annual single number has been allocated to an archival collection it can be further divided numerically by series or sub-series numbers, and only when a document, chart or photograph, for example, is required for exhibition need a running number for that 'object' be provided, and only for the duration of its absence from the archives.

5) The lack of a documented policy/mandate for acquiring archives means that by default, the museum concentrates only on records connected by provenance to a specific object collection. This probably results in the loss of valuable manufacturing and industrial archives, for example, to other institutions.

* A place like the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, with curatorial fields of expertise such as: transport, furniture & architecture, ceramics, glass, science, technology, astronomy, electronics, costume & textiles, arms & armour, prints & drawings, etc., is uniquely equipped to bring to the fore the technical aspects of these archives, which, in a more conventional repository might not be highlighted. However, to make individuals and businesses aware of this facility at the museum, an official mandate for a more assertive acquisition policy is essential, as an ad hoc system generates more caution than flair.

Case Study

A brief resume of archival holdings (excluding internally-generated archives) reveals a diversity of creators/creating agencies, including:

— Lawrence Hargrave, aeronautical inventor;

— Mrs Harry 'Lores' Bonney, pioneer aviatrix;

— Wunderlich Ltd, manufacturers of terracotta roof tiles and pressed metal ceilings;

— Berlei United Ltd, manufacturers and exporters of women's underwear;

— Universal Totalisers Ltd, manufacturers of the first electronic totalisator;

— Fred Tod, master-craftsman and woodcarver of ecclesiastical architecture;

all supplementing and illuminating their respective object collections, and together reflective of great achievement in the fields of science, technology and applied arts in New South Wales and in Australia.

The Mrs Harry 'Lores' Bonney collection is a case in point. A little-known pioneer pilot, she achieved four historic feats in roughly eight years of flying in the 1930's:

- the Australian long-distance record for a one-day flight, 26th December, 1931;
- the first circumnavigation of Australia by a female pilot, 1932;
- the first solo flight by a woman from Australia to England, 1933;
- the first and only solo flight by anyone from Australia to South Africa (via Asia), 1937.

It has been suggested that the recognition Mrs Bonney's achievements deserve has not been forthcoming in Australia, either because she was a woman, or because she was never involved in a tragedy, or because she was a modest person and therefore not as newsworthy as someone like Kingsford-Smith. Elsewhere, however, her deeds were acknowledged. In Britain, she was the first woman pilot to receive the MBE; in America she was elected governor of the Women's International Association of Aeronautics, and at the St Atrio Mission, California, her name is on a wall of "Famous Flyers" honouring great aviators.

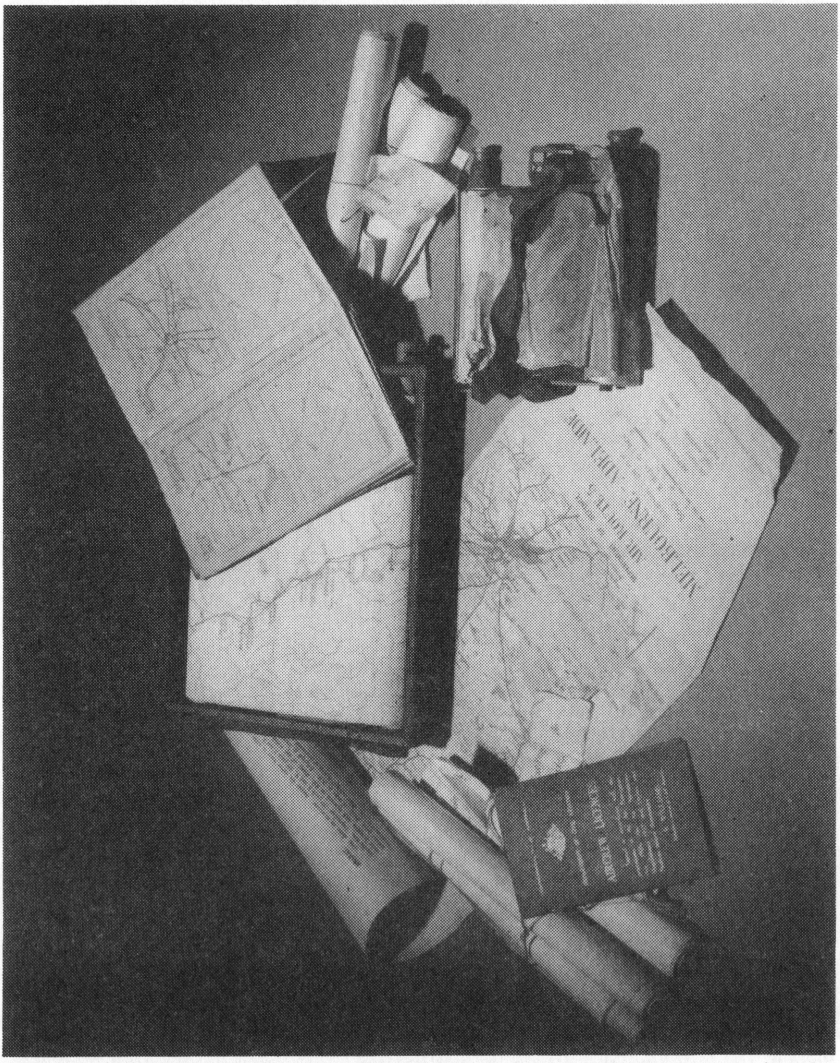
It is only since the 1970s that Mrs Bonney's deeds have experienced a resurgence of interest, manifested in articles, a book and a documentary about her flying-career.[3] It is probable that these gave impetus to the following tributes:

- in 1982, a lounge at Brisbane Airport was dedicated in her name;
- in the same year the Australian Women Pilot's Association bestowed upon Mrs Bonney their 'Woman of the Year' award;
- in 1984, a knoll at Mick Shamburg Park was named the 'Lores Bonney Look-Out'.

The museum's contribution to the establishment of Mrs Bonney's rightful place in aviation history will be to feature objects donated by her in an aviation exhibition in planning for Stage II.

Brown, suede flying-suite (made by her husband, a leather-goods manufacturer), leather flying-cap and goggles, with photographs depicting Mrs Bonney in the apparel, in the 1930s.

Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences
Photographer: Roger Dekker



Instruments for unrolling and rewinding of strip-maps and notepaper used in the cockpit of Mrs Bonney's plane while airborne, with the aerial route maps and her pilot's licence.
Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences
Photographer: Roger Dekker

Her donation, negotiated in 1984, includes flying gear, various instruments, tools, and archives. The latter, comprising loose photographs, scrapbooks of press cuttings and photographic prints, publications, correspondence, aerial route maps, etc., comprehensively document her achievements, and are extremely useful for relating the objects to each other, and for placing them in their correct context.

Apart from one or two exceptions, such as the contents of the scrapbooks which are in chronological order, no specific arrangement for the records was discerned. Mrs Bonney had always been kind enough to allow access to her records, which through passage of time and frequent handling, have become fragile and for the most part have lost their original order.

Treatment for their physical condition by Ms Bridget Pears, a qualified paper conservator employed at the museum, commenced soon after receipt of the first instalment of the material, and sorting and describing began a few months later with the second group, when my appointment came into effect. Where scrapbooks contain various media, e.g. photographic prints and press cuttings, I have not presumed to separate them, in order to preserve what little remains of Mrs Bonney's original intentions, and because the conservation methods being used take the needs of the different media into account.

Two opposing choices of arrangement were available: the 'researchers' choice' (categorising the papers according to subject), and that of the archivist (arrangement according to format, often requiring a very general series-title, possibly obscuring the subject-content). In order to accommodate the needs of the people who would be the most frequent users, and therefore the most supportive advocates of the archives, a compromise was reached. The material is divided into series according to format — all scrapbooks in one series, all photographs in one series, all correspondence in one series, etc. But within those series it has been possible to highlight the subjects (by dividing into 'sub-series'), allowing users an immediate entry-point without threatening the integrity of the material. Consultation with potential users has provided positive feedback for this system, and its flexibility facilitates its adaption to all the other 'allied archives' awaiting processing.

As each series was identified and arranged, the data was entered onto disks, using the Microsoft WORD word-processing package. The advantages of disk storage are:

— increased security as the archivist is in physical control of the medium (assuming proper precautions for storing the disk itself are taken);

— the updating facility which allows for as many changes in the finding-aid as are required while the product is being tested, or if

material arrives in instalments.

Ultimately the intention is to have all finding-aids stored in a data-base, available for on-line searching and retrieval.

Conclusion

Conscious of the value of archives to the placement of object collections in perspective, the Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences is concerned to employ the proper approach to the task of making this material available for use.

The word 'provenance' is not used exclusively by archivists. In institutions like the museum the orientation is away from objects in isolation, and towards objects in their correct contexts: their raison d'etre, location in time, the identity of their creator, the relationship to other objects or artifacts, and the circumstances of their transfer to the museum.

What better evidence can be provided of their correct context than that of the records left by their common creator?

FOOTNOTES

1. Mitchell, T 'Museum Archives: A Case Study — The Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, Sydney' *Archives & Manuscripts* vol 9, 1981 p 67.
2. ibid, p 69.
3. An article about Mrs Bonney, by aviation writer, Terry Gwynne-Jones, was published in the Brisbane *Sunday Mail*, on 18th November, 1973. The subject was taken up by Adrienne Swanton of ABC-TV, who produced a documentary in 1977, entitled 'Somehow We Almost Forgot Mrs Bonney', and then in 1977, *Pioneer Airwoman — The Story of Mrs Bonney* by Terry Gwynne-Jones, was published (Rigby Ltd, Adelaide).

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