

Archives in Museums

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It is a fact of life that museums maintain archival collections. How these collections are managed and the fact that museums hold archival collections raise a number of issues for archivists and the role they can play in their management. This article based on work from the author's MA thesis, attempts to quantify the museum archive scene, looks at the literature of museum archives and raises some of the issues concerned with museum archives.

SIR PAUL HASLUCK in his opening address to the Australian Society of Archivists' (ASA) 1981 Conference when speaking of the role of archives said

... the work of a library or a museum is quite different from that of an archives authority and each of the three institutions should keep to its own field.¹

While Hasluck's comment may have encapsulated the perceptions of the Australian archives scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the reality in 1995 is that museums, as well as other collecting institutions, maintain archive collections. In many instances these collections are large and some are of state or national significance.

How archival collections are managed in museums and the fact that museums hold archive collections raises a number of issues for archivists and the role they can play in their management. Before looking at some of these issues it is useful to have an some idea of the size of the museum scene in Australia and to decide what constitutes museum archives.

In 1990 according to the *Street Ryan Report*² there were at least 1 324 museums in Australia, with over seventy per cent concentrated in the southeast corner of the country (see Table 1). These museums covered the full range private and public and from local historical collections through to large state and national collections.

State	No. of Museums	% of Total
ACT	21	1.6
NSW	352	26.6
NT	46	3.5
Qld	110	8.3
SA	208	15.7
Tas	61	4.6
Vic	407	30.7
WA	119	9.0
Total	1 324	100.0

Table 1: Museums in Australia according to 'Street Ryan Report'

Archival collections in museums fall into two distinct groups. The first are those collections comprising records created by museums in the course of their business; for example minutes, correspondence, accession records, collection documentation and research data. The second group is that of collected archives. These are archival materials that are acquired as part of a museum's collecting activities. This material could be accessioned with objects and may document some aspect of the objects use, manufacture and/or ownership or are complementary to the objects. Alternatively they may have been accessioned as an archival collection independent of objects but falling within the scope of the museum's collection policy.

Providing they are extant, most museums would hold or have access to their own archives. How they manage these collections is largely unknown. The same could be said for collected archives. Since the estimated total number of museums is known we should ask is how many hold collected archives? The simple answer is no-one knows.

To gain some indication of the numbers involved I have analysed the lists of museums in the Queensland, South Australian, Tasmanian and Victorian Museum Directories. These directories provide a brief description of the

museums and their collections. Many of these descriptions refer to documents, records, letters, diaries and other record formats. Where an entry contained reference to records, other than photographs, it has been included in the following table.

Directory	Museums	Museums with Collected Archives	%
Queensland ³	191	22	11+
South Australia ⁴	166	69	40+
Tasmania ⁵	119	22	18+
Victoria ⁶	484	114	23+
Total	960	227	23+

Table 2: Museums with Collected Archives.

If you accept that there are in excess of 1 300 museums across the country and extrapolating from Table 2 it would not be unreasonable to suggest that at least twenty-five per cent of museums hold collected archives. This figure does not tell us anything about the size of individual collections, the range of record formats held, the information content of the records or how they are arranged and described or what access arrangements are in place. It does, however, point to the fact that there is a sizeable body of archival material in Australia's museums, whether the archives are collected or are the museums own archives.

The Literature of Museum Archives

When you look for the literature of museum archives there is very little available. In 1983 Stover observed that

A search of the literature yields nothing about museum archives written prior to 1979.⁷

In the United States of America in the late 1970s and the early 1980s there was an upsurge of interest in museum archives. This came about because of a number of factors. Daniels suggests institutional ageing, concern for museum history and anniversaries as contributing factors, as well as efforts to upgrade management and achieve savings in the storage and care of archival materials⁸.

Increased interest was reflected in two main areas. First there appeared a succession of published articles on museum archives. These articles generally concentrated on museum generated archives⁹ with little or no reference to collected archives.

The second aspect of increased interest was the formation in 1981 by the Society of American Archivists (SAA) of a Task Force on Museum Archives. One of the first undertakings of this Task Force was to organise a panel on museum archives. 'Museum Archives: Their Importance to the Museum and Research' was presented at the SAA's 1981 Annual Meeting.¹⁰ The results of the work undertaken by the Task Force were published in 1984 as *Museum Archives—An Introduction* by William A. Diess. This monograph addresses questions concerning the arrangement and description of museum generated archives. It contains four paragraphs that refer to collected archival material separate from museum generated archives. Questions about the best approach to the documentation of collected archives are not addressed. Should documentation be based on the museum approach, the archival approach or a hybrid of these approaches?

Increased interest also saw the formation, by the SAA, of a Museum Archives Roundtable in 1986, which was constituted as a Section of the Society in 1990. It has its own newsletter¹¹ and continues to support the work of museum archivists.

From the point of view of published evidence, interest appears to have waned somewhat in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Apart from a conference held at the Smithsonian Institution on 'Museum Archives' in 1988 and the November/December 1991 issue of the American journal *Museum News*, which had a series of articles that focused on museum archives, little has appeared in the major archival or museum journals. Generally there appears to have been a general lack of energy in the area of publishing the work of museum archivists, although within their own community there is much discussion.

In Canada there is no evidence of any sustained interest in museum archives. A few articles have been published, one example being Nickerson's 'The Importance of Archiving'.¹² Again there appears to have been little activity in the area of publishing articles on the management of museum archives.

As with North America, in the United Kingdom little visible interest or concern in museum archives is evident. A joint statement of the Museums Association, the Society of Archivists and the Library Association entitled 'Statement of Policy Relating to Archives'¹³ was issued in 1981. This document

addressed issues concerning the legal requirements relating to collections, collecting responsibilities, disposal of collections and areas of collaboration among the three professions. It did not cover arrangement and description of archival material and it certainly did not distinguish between a museum's own archives and collected archives. This document was largely superseded in 1990 by a code of practice on archives for museums.¹⁴ Again like North America, written evidence of interest in museum archives in the major journals is not abundant.¹⁵ However, in 1994 Kristine Haglund, the then Chair of the SAA Museums Archives Section, presented a short paper on museum archives at the Fourth European Conference on Archives.¹⁶

Throughout the 1980s a number of articles and guides were published in both North America and the United Kingdom that described the contents of individual collections in museum archives.¹⁷ None of these papers attempted to provide an approach that could be used by archivists and museum curators when attempting to manage archival materials in museums. They did not discuss issues such as access or arrangement and description of mixed collections.

In conformity with the United Kingdom and North American patterns there has been little interest shown in museum archives in Australia. Work emanating from The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (now the Power House Museum) in Sydney in the early 1980s¹⁸ was published in this journal. Since publication of these articles nothing was published until 1991, when Cooke¹⁹ addressed the problem of memorabilia in school archives. At the 1992 and 1994 ASA conferences,²⁰ papers were delivered on the subject of museum archives. There was also a symposium at Deakin University on the problem of documenting both objects and archives.²¹ The local museum literature has published nothing that could be considered useful to the issues concerning archives in museums. However, manuscripts have been submitted to Museums Australia for two articles to be published in *Museums National* later in the year.²²

Documentation of archives in museums

Archivists use the principles of provenance and original order as the basis for intellectual control and documentation, whereas

Historical museums practise associated control, focusing on the life history of use with the effect of illuminating context and documenting relationship. Associations may be made by producers/manufacturers, owner or context and function or use, by individuals or by cultural groups. Identical objects used by different individuals or cultures will be uniquely described.²³

Museums, like archives are concerned with provenance. I think it would be safe to say that both the museum and archival communities have similar, if not common concerns about provenance. In this regard museums document information on the maker, date of manufacture, how and where an object was used and the history of the object's ownership. In a similar way archives document information on the creators of records, the reason for their creation and the functions and responsibilities and activities of the record creator.

In the archival context this information is usually recorded in the form of an administrative history or biographical note.²⁴ In the museum context this information would normally be recorded in a supplementary file with summary information being recorded on a catalogue sheet.

The more complex issues arise at the next level of documentation, that is, the documentation of the archival material itself. In the archival world each record series is identified and described. Information is gathered and recorded about the creation and maintenance of the records throughout their lifetime. The aim of the documentation is to lead the user to the information contained in the records and to document the evidence of the records creation and function.

Museum documentation²⁵ at this level focuses on a description of the physical attributes of the object—it's dimensions, materials of manufacture, association to other objects and physical condition and completeness. This form of description would not lead a user of archival material described in this manner to the information contained in the records. Museums also document each object on a separate catalogue sheet. This does not happen in the archival world. Once a record series is identified and documented, it's contents are listed on a shelf or contents list.

In research I have undertaken²⁶ on Victorian museums holding collected archives, it is apparent from the point of view of documentation that there is a very limited appreciation of the fact that archives are collected for the value of the information they contain, as well as any other values that may be attributed to them. The majority of museums try to document collected archives using museum registration methods. As a result they find it necessary to create a wide variety of supplementary finding aids to allow users to locate information in the records. If they do not create these aids, the museums carry out research for the user and generally rely on the knowledge of the museum staff and/or volunteers to locate information in the records.

As Kane has observed

Archivists organise and describe material by grouping items as much as possible in their original order; curators—at least art and history museums—organise and describe more often by individual item. Curators see documents as information and may not recognise the continuing value of the document itself; the archivist sees the document as an artefact and would strive to preserve the original if handling threatens it.²⁷

Because of this view by museum curators the links between objects and archives emanating from the same context are generally not documented. Museums tend to adopt one of two approaches. Document the objects and ignore the associated archives or document the objects and archives in a museum system without recognising the need for access points to the archives. No matter how the museum documents its collection there needs to be documented links between associated objects and archives.

Most museums holding archives cannot afford to operate two systems of documentation. The question facing them is how can they document both archives and objects within the constraints of a museum cataloguing system and still provide for users to access information in the archives. If there is no documentation, access will be made very difficult and the evidentiary value of the information if located would be limited, because the context of the records creation and maintenance is not recorded and available to the user. Access to the archives is also hindered if the museum approach is used for documentation.

The museum system, by focusing on the physical characteristics of the material does not provide guidance on how to access information contained in the records. This means that a researcher has to depend on a staff member's knowledge of the records. This may not be available, or if it is, it may not be accurate. Alternatively the researcher would need to look at the museum documentation in the hope of locating possible material of relevance and then using his or her own initiative to access the information in the records. The museum approach to documentation is certainly a barrier to access to the archives in the collection.

From personal experience this was the case when I sought access to a collection at the Australian Gallery of Sport. I initially located reference to the Gallery holding records of relevance to my research interest through the Bicentennial Historic Records Search. The Gallery had the foresight to recognise that the records in this collection and others would be of interest to researchers and that the consolidated results of the records search would be readily available in libraries, either in microfiche or CD-ROM format. I then

approached the Gallery to access the records. Staff were very helpful and courteous, however, when I asked what finding aids were available to the collection I was shown eighteen boxes of archival material and some objects and told I would need to start at box one and work my way through. What was interesting was that the overall collection had been registered using the Gallery's museum system, and when individual items were removed for temporary exhibition, each item was documented in the system. There was no documentation to guide a user to records in the collection that would be relevant to their research interest.

Bearman provides a summary of the differences in the museum and archival approaches when he states

Archivists, . . . , describe their holdings with a focus of provenance and in order to effect life-cycle management. A body of records might physically change while having the same description. Its identity derives from provenance, so the record is constant even if life-cycle management includes weeding, sampling and description.

Historical museums practice associational control, focusing on the life history of use with the effect of illuminating context and documenting use relationships. Associations may be made by producers/manufacturers, owner or context and function of use; by individual or by cultural groups. Identical objects used by different individuals or cultures will be uniquely described.

Science museums practice typological control, focusing on physical features in order to classify items. Distinguishable individuals may share a record. Specimens serving the same ecological functions with different structures are uniquely described.

There is nothing inherently 'right' or 'wrong' about these perspectives but they try to answer different user needs.²⁸

An approach needs to be found that will take into account a museum's inventory and display needs but also allows sufficient description to permit researchers to access the information contained in the collected archives. Such an approach needs to recognise the principles and practices of both professions and to provide for the proper management of the collection. There has been work undertaken in this regard but details of the success or otherwise are not easily obtained.²⁹

Ultimately, from the archival point of view, the records need to be preserved. They also need to be documented in such a way to provide for archival principles and to allow potential researchers access to the information in the archives. Whatever approach is adopted it needs to meet the needs of a range of users, not just archivists and not just museum curators.

Endnotes

1. Sir Paul Hasluck, 'Opening Address', in *Promoting the Better Use of Archives in Australia, Papers from the 1981 Conference of the Australian Society of Archivists*, ed. Andrew Lemon, ASA, Melbourne, 1981, p. 5.
2. Street Ryan and Associates Pty Ltd, *Development of a Training Strategy for the Australian Museums Sector*, Arts Training Australia and Council of Australian Museums Associations, 1990, p. 13.
3. Phillipa McNaught (comp.), *Directory of Queensland Museums*, Queensland Museum and Museums Association of Australia Inc. (Queensland Branch), Brisbane, 1991.
4. Geoff Spiers (ed.), *Museums in South Australia—Directory*, History Trust of South Australia, Adelaide, 1991.
5. Museums Association of Australia, Tasmanian Branch, *Tasmanian Heritage Directory*, The Society, Hobart, 1991.
6. Kirsten Freeman, Fiona McFarlane and Andrew Moritz (eds), *Museums of Victoria*, 3rd ed., Museums Association of Australia, Victorian Branch, Melbourne, 1993.
7. Christine Stover, 'Museum Archives', *Drexel Library Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 3, Summer 1983, p. 66.
8. Maygene Daniels, 'Developing New Museum Archives', *Curator*, vol. 31, no. 2, April 1983, p. 99.
9. Examples of articles include: Claudia A. Hommel, 'A Model Museum Archives', *Museum News*, vol. 58, no. 2, November/December 1979, pp. 62–69; and Evelyn K. Samuel, 'Documenting Our Heritage', *Library Trends*, vol. 37, no. 2, Fall 1988, pp. 142–53.
10. Carole Schwartz, 'Keeping Our House in Order. The Importance of Museum Documentation', *Museum News*, vol. 61, no. 4, April 1983, p. 38.
11. The newsletter is called *Museum Archivist* and according to the September 1994 (vol. 8, no. 2) issue it has a circulation of 450.
12. Roger Nickerson, 'The Importance of Archiving', *Muse*, Winter 1992, pp. 32–33.
13. Museums Association/Society of Archivists/Library Association 'Statement of Policy Relating to Archives', *Museums Journal*, vol. 81, no. 3, December 1981, pp. 165–169.
14. Museums & Galleries Commission, *Code of Practice on Archives for Museums in the United Kingdom*, The Commission, HMSO, 1990.
15. Articles that have been published include—Patrick J. Boylan, 'Museums and Archives in the Contemporary World', *Archivum*, vol. XXX, 1984, pp. 39–50; British Records Association 'British Records Association Annual Conference 1981', *Archives*, vol. xvi, no. 69, April 1983, pp. 83–85; Claire Colvin, 'Forms of Documentation and Storage in the Tate Gallery Archive', *Archives*, vol. xvii, no. 75, April 1986, pp. 144–152; and Janet Wallace, 'The Central Archives of the British Museum', *Archives*, vol. xix, no. 84, 1990, pp. 213–223.
16. Kristine Haglund, 'Strategies for Success in Museum Archives', 4th European Conference on Archives, University of Lancaster, 13–16 September 1994.
17. Two examples of these articles and guides are—Peter B. Boyden, 'The National Army Museum Archive Collection 1960–1985', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 8, no. 1, April 1986, pp. 23–29; and Bernard Pothier, 'Archival Material at the Canadian War Museum', *Archivaria*, no. 26, Summer 1988, pp. 149–53.
18. See Tony Mitchell, 'Museum Archives: A Case Study—The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 9, no. 1, May 1981, pp. 66–71; and Judy Seeff, 'Archives as Museum Objects', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 13, no. 1, May 1985, pp. 39–48.

19. Anne Cooke, 'What Do I Do with the Rowing Oar? The Role of Memorabilia in School Archives', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 19, no. 1, May 1991, pp. 57–62.
20. These papers were: Bruce Smith, 'Windows on Museum Archives', Australian Society of Archivists Inc. Conference, Wagga Wagga, 29–30 May 1992; and Barrie Reynolds, 'Archives and Museums', Australian Society of Archivists Inc. Conference, Townsville, May 1994.
21. 'Do Documents and Objects Mix?', A Symposium Conducted by Deakin University and the Health & Medicine Museums Section of Museums Australia Inc. June 1993.
22. Advice received from the author, Helen Yoxall, Archivist, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.
23. David Bearman, 'Intellectual Control Methods', *Archival Informatics Newsletter*, vol. 2, no. 4, Winter 1988/89, p. 69.
24. See Judith Ellis (ed.), *Keeping Archives*, D. W. Thorpe, Port Melbourne, 1993, Chapter 8.
25. See Seddon Bennington (ed.), *Handbook for Small Museums*, Western Australian Museum, Perth, 1985, for a description of the museum documentation process.
26. 'Untapped Sources. A Survey of Selected Victorian Museums to Determine What Archival Practices are Undertaken in Connection with Collected Archives', Master of Arts (Archives & Records) Thesis, Monash University, 1993.
27. Katherine Kane, 'Bridging the Gap', *Museum News*, November/December 1991, p. 47.
28. David Bearman, 'Intellectual Control Methods', *Archival Informatics Newsletter*, vol. 2, no. 4, Winter 1988/89, p. 69.
29. An example of a computer package that may be suitable is *Argus*. This package is said to allow for the recording of data on both archives and objects in a single systems. It also has the facility for the import and export of MARC format records. A suggestion for an integrated approach is contained in Paul Eisloeffel and Lisa Gavin 'Archival materials in the History Museum: A Strategy for Their Management', *History News*, vol. 47, no. 3, May/June 1992 (American Association for State and Local History Technical Leaflet No. 179).