

The Role of Museums

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Museums have a significant role to play in preserving the anthropological record. Indeed, museums already constitute a major anthropological resource in the United States as some of the main institutions where documentary and artifactual materials are saved for use by current and future generations. Anthropology began in museums, and museums continued to be intimately associated with the discipline even after its center moved to university settings in the 1920s and 1930s. Archaeology and much of biological anthropology are conducted from a museum base, and as a result, practitioners in these subdisciplines tend to place their research and personal records in museums. This is less the case for ethnographers and linguists, since their work is not as often tied to material culture or other kinds of physical specimens. Nevertheless, museums have sponsored numerous ethnographic research projects, and the records of these endeavors remain within their walls. Moreover, ethnographers, ethnohistorians, and linguists frequently place their research records in museum manuscript collections, especially in state and university anthropology museums. Museums have extensive oral history, textual, and video/film collections as well as numerous paper documents, all of which are as important as objects.

Anthropological museums have actively sought out anthropological records of all kinds to a greater degree than have other kinds of repositories. This has been a fruitful relationship over the years, and it gives every indication of continuing. Nevertheless, there is much room for improvement.

Interestingly, the scope and richness of anthropological documentary records in museums are not widely known, even within the museum community. One reason is the great diversity of institutions with anthropological holdings. Museums with anthropological resources are not restricted to those institutions dedicated primarily to anthropology, but include art museums, tribal museums, natural history museums, historical societies, history museums, folklore and living history museums, libraries, and research institutes. In addition, people tend to think of museums as places where only artifacts and the records associated with them are kept, as treasure houses that hold things in secret. While there is unfortunately an element of truth to this notion, museums focus on generating and disseminating knowledge and hence



Franz Boas posing for a figure in the U.S. National Museum exhibit entitled "Hamats'a Coming Out of Secret Room," 1895 or before. National Anthropological Archives. Glass Plate Negative MNH 8300.

contain the records of many research projects that have little to do with objects. Such projects are often conducted by individuals not formally associated with the institution. They deal with all areas of anthropology, all times and places, and all aspects of cultural life and cultural history. The information such projects garner may be as valuable to the peoples with whom anthropologists work as it is to the discipline, and it is being used increasingly by native peoples. Any additional information about the peoples who produced the objects housed in museums is likely to be valued and preserved. Given these interests, and the fact that museums already hold much of the documentary materials as well as the artifactual data of anthropology, museums are positioned to serve as one of the cornerstones of any national effort to preserve the anthropological record.

While museum anthropologists will play a significant role in any national or local effort, such an initiative must not be undertaken haphazardly. Nor can the anthropological community leave this task to the museum

world alone because others are "too busy with more important work to do housekeeping" (to quote an anthropologist who voiced a commonly held sentiment). Preserving the anthropological record will require the concerted effort of anthropologists within and outside museums to make museum archives a priority on a par with that given to artifactual collections.



Betty Nixon (Kiowa) holding a photograph of her grandmother, Mary Buffalo, one of Weston La Barre's informants. Photo courtesy Stephanie Ogeneski, 2006.

Museum Archives

The documentary materials held in museums constitute a vast resource. At a minimum these materials consist of institutional records, operational and personnel records, documentation of collections, and manuscripts and photographs — in short, the historical memory of the institution and its activities. Museums differ in the services they provide and in their goals, and thus the nature of their archival materials varies, but there are commonalities. Generally all museums collect, preserve, use, and house artifacts for the benefit of society. Museums have actively pursued these functions for many years under a number of different legal mechanisms. Museums in the United States are chartered under federal, state, tribal or municipal authorities, as independent non-profit organizations, or in special cases as parts of corporations. Museums vary in their institutional character far more than do institutions of higher education and manuscript repositories. Such differences affect the funding sources of museums, the kinds of holdings they maintain, their

scope, mission and activities, and the nature of existing networks for cooperation and the exchange of information between institutions.

No one really knows the extent of anthropological resources in the nation's museums or even how many institutions have anthropological collections. In part this situation is due to the fact that significant anthropological collections reside in institutions not usually thought of as anthropological; for example, the Stewart Culin and Herbert Spinden collections are at The Brooklyn Museum, and the Gilbert Wilson collection is at the Minnesota Historical Society. It is also the result of the sheer volume and diversity of the materials — both artifactual and documentary — and the lack of inventory control. This is an immense national problem that is only slowly being addressed and will not be solved soon. It was estimated by the American Association of Museums (AAM) in 1989 that there are over 184 million anthropological objects in American museums. While the profession is working to gain control over the artifacts, less attention has been dedicated to the documentation records that accompany them. Computerization of basic inventories is progressing across the country, albeit with problems of incompatibility that will ultimately hamper cross-institution communication, but much less has been done to track and produce finding aids on the information in accession files and the irreplaceable materials that accompany catalogue cards. Even less is known about the scope and composition of museum archives and manuscript collections. While the AAM does not distinguish anthropological from other types of manuscript archives, the 1989 survey estimated that American museums house 12.7 million linear feet of documentary materials. This figure does not take account of the accession, cataloguing, and conservation records that deal directly with collections, which contain information of significance to various disciplines. A great task looms for the museum community in discovering what has already been saved and preserved.

Archives and collections are often closely related in museums, with the consequence that not all records or "archival materials" are housed in a central location, as would be the case in a university library or in special collections. Most records produced by a museum have multiple purposes and tend to remain in use for ongoing museum business indefinitely. Much relevant information on even a discrete research project may be retained but scattered in many locations. Different parts may be found in the conservation laboratory, in the director's office, with exhibits, or in the collections department interspersed with accession and catalogue records. Object or accession files, for instance, have value beyond the description of objects and of how each was obtained by the museum. Information about the peoples with whom an ethnographer worked may be contained in reports to the museum administration, while letters with unpublished observations will be housed in accession files. Archaeological materials may be found in site files and in photographic collections. These records are not controlled by professionally trained archivists but by curators trained in collections management, with the result that the materials will be organized and referred to by a different scheme than items transferred to a manuscript repository. The fact that museum records are multipurpose, scattered, and continually active affects the nature of museum archives, the location of records, and record retention systems. This situation, in turn, affects scholars'

knowledge about museum archives, their ability to utilize the materials, and the potential for sharing information.

Thus, a researcher using the documentary materials housed in a museum would not always find the items sought in the archives. This situation will not change rapidly. It will be the responsibility of museologists and anthropologists who teach research methods to train students in the effective use of the information that is housed in museums, just as they teach them to gather information in the field. In fact, the metaphor of "excavating" data from a number of sources in a museum is apt; the information is there and has been saved, but it is not always easy to retrieve.

Another problem that the museum community must address is the fact that not all museums have formally established archives, nor made the preservation of documentary records an institutional priority. This is a problem especially for small local museums, those that were founded in the rush of museum building during the 1960s and 1970s, and for older institutions that are experiencing financial problems and deteriorating infrastructures. Decreasing space as collections have continued to grow and the aging of buildings have become great problems for museums, just as they have for universities. Museums have properly focused their attention on saving objects in jeopardy from pollution and past neglect by stabilizing collections areas and conserving objects. But all this effort at conservation will have been fruitless for research unless museums also preserve documentary records. This entails not only a correct environment with temperature and humidity controls for paper documents, photographs, microfilm, and computer disks, but also inventory control and assessment. While documentary collections may not be in immediate jeopardy, they will quickly become so if museums do not make documentary and manuscript preservation an institutional priority.

Whether or not a museum has a formal archives and the importance it affords manuscripts and records depend mainly on the size of the institution. Large museums tend to have separate photographic and manuscript collections that are often referred to as archives. Sometimes archives are organized with a museum's library, sometimes with collections. In general, art and history museums are more likely to have well-organized archives than are natural history or anthropology museums.

Where records are kept in a museum is in part historical accident, as well as a result of the nature of museum work. Curators tend to be rather territorial about the materials in their sections, often to the detriment of the needs of the institution and of researchers. Given this situation, institutional and departmental territorial boundaries may need to be reconsidered. The appraisal and cataloguing techniques that archivists bring to historical documents can be used by museums to assess their entire records management systems. Museum object files, for example, can become a much richer information source for anthropology by ensuring that the information they contain takes into account the entire body of documents in the museum and in the region. This will protect against scattered material being overlooked and hence lost.

Most museums have a written acquisitions policy for collections, but few have a written policy for acquiring manuscripts and other forms of documentary records from independent researchers or a record retention plan and schedule for staff. Unfortunately, no one has surveyed institutions to determine the parameters that they have already established for archival acquisitions. Many museums accept documentary collections from individuals who have some relationship with the institution (i.e. persons who worked there or undertook research concerning the institution) or whose work is in areas of special interest to the institution. All museums need to make decisions about these matters and to write acquisition and use policies and procedural guidelines. Until this information is available, museums will not be able effectively to share information, nor determine whether materials are situated in the institution where they will be best used.

All museums should have an archive and a records retention schedule that have been designed by a professional archivist or information specialist. Almost all institutions house records that were created for a variety of reasons, and that document operations, histories, exhibitions, and collections. Among such records are documents of incorporation, mission statements, insurance and transportation records, loan forms, correspondence, grant files, accession records, condition reports, and documentation of objects. All museums should consider archives part of their permanent collections, and understand that the documentary records of the institution are as important as collections — for without documents, objects are all but useless.

Anthropological Records in American Museums

As mentioned above, anthropology and the museum world face the challenge of determining where records are currently held in American museums and of devising a strategy through which future records will be located in institutions with anthropological record programs rather than scattered haphazardly across the museum world. We must build on our strengths, and there are many strengths. Anthropology and museology need to designate appropriate museums as anthropological repositories in the areas that complement each institution's scope and mission.

This will not be an easy task, given the diversity of institutions that hold anthropological documentary materials. One of the first steps should be to survey those museums that are noted for their anthropological collections and determine whether they can serve as a basis for a regional repository system dedicated to preserving and furthering anthropological knowledge. This can be undertaken expeditiously, because museums have been surveyed about their scope of collections and museums do fall into definite types. The brief survey presented below is intended not as a comprehensive listing but to convey an idea of the investment museums have already made in preserving the anthropological record.

Unlike some countries, the United States does not have a national museum with a regional structure. There is no single museum that

serves as the national ethnology or archaeology museum, as is the case in Great Britain or France. The institution closest to this widely held model is the Smithsonian Institution. Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution falls specifically within the domain of the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), but it is also conspicuous in other museums of topical interest such as the National Museum of the American Indian, the National Museum of African Art, the Sackler Gallery, and the Museum of American History. This means that the documentary records of anthropology are located in several institutions. As Ruwell notes in her paper in this volume, anthropology is unique at the Smithsonian in having its own special archives, housed in NMNH. However, much anthropological material can be found outside the archives in NMNH; the main office of the anthropology department, as well as curators', specialists' and researchers' offices and the processing laboratory are filled with data on Smithsonian-sponsored projects. The central accession area of NMNH has documents on the research projects through which objects were obtained by the museum. The conservation laboratory and the special analytical laboratories have information on projects dealing with materials from around the world. The archives of the Smithsonian Institution housed in the Castle contain materials not duplicated in the National Anthropological Archives, as do the archives in other constituent museums.

Of interest to anthropology too are special archival projects undertaken by other federal institutions, such as the Archives of American Art located in the Museum of American Art. This archives is dedicated to the collection, preservation, and study of papers and other primary records of the history of the visual arts in America. It collects documents on the subject of American art, including correspondence, oral histories, and unpublished manuscripts, as well as photographs and other materials of artists, scholars, dealers, galleries, and other institutions and individuals. As part of an active research program, resident scholars in five regional offices collect materials, which are sent to Washington for microfilming; the original copies are kept mainly at the regional centers. Criteria for selection are that the documents must be relevant to the interests of working scholars, of national significance, and related to existing areas of strength of the Archives or to the work of an artist of some eminence. A current emphasis is on ethnic and folk art.

This pattern of a multi-centered institution is duplicated in some states. For example, in New Mexico, the major anthropology buildings — the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture and the Laboratory of Anthropology — are joined by the Museum of International Folk Art, the Palace of the Governor, and the Art Museum in housing anthropological records. Manuscript records are located in the central archives in the history museum, but each museum also has archives that deal with discipline-specific projects.

The largest natural history museums in the United States are flagships harboring major anthropological resources: the American Museum of Natural History, the Field Museum of Natural History, the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Illinois State Museum, and the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. These institutions dedicate varying amounts of their resources to

anthropology, but all have a tradition of long association with the discipline. For example, at the American Museum of Natural History anthropology is one of nine scientific departments, the largest in the number of permanent staff; while prestigious, it must compete with other departments for space and financial support. Many of these large natural history museums lack centralized archives and have no professional archivists. Important anthropological records in these institutions may languish at the departmental level without the attention of professionals trained in archival methods. In this regard natural history museums lag behind art museums, where there is more likely to be a centralized archives under the care of a trained archivist or librarian. The importance that the discipline attaches to the project of preserving anthropological records should help the professional staff of large natural history museums to convince their administrations of the key position that anthropology holds in their institutions and the scientific prestige that would accrue from making them research centers where their anthropological records can be used by scholars.

Museums dedicated solely to anthropology in the United States are often associated with universities. The Peabody Museum at Harvard, the University Museum at the University of Pennsylvania, the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico, the Arizona State Museum at the University of Arizona, the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at UCLA, the Alabama State Museum of Natural History at the University of Alabama, the P.A. Hearst (formerly Lowie) Museum of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley, and the Thomas Burke Memorial Washington State Museum at the University of Washington are but examples. On some campuses anthropology is a division within a major natural history museum, such as the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale and the Florida State Museum at the University of Florida; other campuses have museums devoted specifically to anthropology (e.g., the Museums of Anthropology at California State University at Fullerton and Chico, at the Universities of Kentucky, Michigan, Michigan State, and Missouri, and the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology at Brown University). University museums of anthropology are able to draw upon the intellectual resources of the associated academic departments, and in cases where an anthropologist has made field collections for the museum there are good reasons for it to acquire the anthropologist's records. This is always the case for individuals affiliated with the museum (through adjunct as well as staff appointments), and in most instances the museum will accept the materials of those individuals in the anthropology department whose work falls within its scope. Sometimes the university library will acquire the anthropologist's papers instead of the museum. The close proximity in such cases is a plus and makes the institutions centers of active research.

A number of independent non-profit museums and museums sponsored by municipal authorities are dedicated to anthropology or closely related disciplines such as non-Western art history. The San Diego Museum of Man, the Heard Museum, the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, the School of American Research, and the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian are examples. Art museums, which increasingly collect objects of non-Western art, are potentially important repositories of

archives with anthropological significance. Almost all large art museums have curatorial departments that focus upon Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, and with increasing collaboration between anthropologists and non-Western art historians, the archives of these institutions have a role in preserving the anthropological record.

Research institutes and regional museums also have significant collections and anthropological records. Among these are the American Indian Archaeological Institute, the Amerind Foundation, the Museum of Northern Arizona, and the Center for American Archaeology. These institutions tend to focus on specific areas or subfields. National Monuments and National Parks, as well as government agencies such as the Department of the Interior, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Bureau of Land Management, hold anthropological collections and anthropological archives.

Historical societies and history museums also contain important materials for anthropology. The Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, for instance, has a wealth of information for ethnologists, archaeologists, ethnohistorians, and historians. Such institutions are becoming increasingly important as work in ethnohistory expands. Local archaeological societies often place their materials in these institutions, and in states like Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, and Colorado they hold a great deal of documentation on the native peoples of the area.

States often maintain their own archives, and the anthropologically relevant data may either be separated from state governmental records or in the same facility. For example, the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology is by law the curatorial facility for archaeological collections and records of the state. A historical society may also be a state's designated repository.

Other types of museums and cultural centers may contain significant anthropological information. Those organized under tribal authorities, such as the Navajo Tribal Museum, the Acoma Pueblo Museum, the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center and the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, curate collections from designated areas, including unpublished reports, site files, and other archival materials. Similarly, museums dedicated to preservation of the history and culture of specific ethnic groups house records relevant to ongoing anthropological work.

There is thus a constellation of museums that house anthropological records, representing federal, state, municipal, private, tribal, university, and professional interests. A great deal of time, effort and money has gone into these institutions, and anthropology must utilize what is available and build on the strengths that already exist. But this is not always easy. Efforts at consolidation and information sharing that override issues of territoriality will need to be undertaken. For example, materials pertaining to Chaco Canyon are scattered not only around New Mexico but also out-of-state, in federal, state (including university), municipal, and tribal archives. To organize this extraordinary diversity of archives so as to give researchers access to unpublished sources about Chaco Canyon, anthropology in New Mexico, and the history of

archaeology is a major problem that must be addressed by the anthropological, archival, and museum communities. The basis of a network exists; it remains to us to discover how it can be organized and utilized effectively.

Special Needs of Museums

In spite of the diversity of museums with anthropological resources in the United States, they share common problems concerning the unpublished anthropological record. Few museums are entirely satisfied with all aspects of their collections management, including their archives, and most institutions have historically devoted more of their human and financial resources toward improving collections than archival management. Museums face problems with acquisition, conservation and preservation, documentation, and access, which the anthropological community can help them address.

The needs of archival conservation are becoming increasingly important in this country, as the Brittle Books initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities attests. Yet no anthropological institution has submitted a proposal to NEH for funds to save anthropology's published record, let alone its unpublished record. A group of museums together with libraries and archives forming a regional consortium in long-term collaboration could make a strong case to NEH for assistance in saving our irreplaceable resources.

Conservation is expensive, and it is sometimes difficult to locate conservators with the required qualifications. New training programs must be initiated to train collections managers and conservators in the special problems of documentary records. A start was made in this area when the National Institute for Conservation and the Bay Foundation provided funding to four institutions to develop curricula and training methods. The Arizona State Museum developed the program for anthropology in the late 1980s; a publication describing this program (Odegaard et al. 1990) contains some information on documentation and archives. The National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property has expanded on this beginning with their publication *Caring for Your Collection* (Schultz 1992), which contains a section on the needs of library and archival collections (Hamburg 1992). But more needs to be done. Museums require archivists and other specialists trained to deal with vast quantities of documents. Collaborative training programs that combine museology, anthropology, and archival-information management are much needed.

Some form of documentation always accompanies objects and photographs in museums. Minimally this might include the accession number, cultural affiliation, date and place of acquisition, donor and year acquired. More complete documentation offers the opportunity to provide much more information on the history and significance of individual items in the collection and on the interrelationships among items. Inadequate documentation continues to plague anthropology museums. This is especially a problem when the papers of the individual who collected the objects are housed at another institution; often crucial information that informs the collections is contained in these materials.

Data-sharing initiatives between museums and other manuscript repositories are needed that will bridge the gap between different organizational schemes. Computerization efforts that include documents as well as objects must also be initiated. While a great deal of progress has been made, much more needs to be done before the anthropological record becomes accessible to future researchers. As it stands, much of the material needed for research projects can be found only with a great deal of effort on the part of the researcher.

A museum's collection management policy should include archival materials and provide guidelines for acquiring unpublished anthropological records, including texts, photographs, videos, and sound recordings. In addition to caring for and disseminating information about unpublished anthropological records already in their care, museums should actively solicit appropriate materials currently in private hands. For example, they might want to solicit the unpublished records of staff who played a significant role in the history of the institution, beyond what they left behind as institutional work product. The same could be done with outside researchers associated with the institution, or others whose work contributed significantly to its mission. The papers of important donors, board members, or volunteers might be appropriate for the museum's archives.

In regard to collections, museums should be diligent and even aggressive in soliciting information regarding acquisitions. Instead of merely accepting materials that "grandfather collected in the 1930s," museum officials should pursue donors for correspondence, photographs, receipts, or other pertinent information on the history of the object, collection, or donor. Museums should plan for the growth of their archives, not only care for current collections and passively receive new materials from persons who sought out the museum. After all, museums prepare for their future by collecting in the present.

The new repatriation law requires many museums to inventory their Native American collections, a process that will force some attention to their archives and documentary records. Many native peoples appear to be as interested in gaining access to information as they are in gaining control of objects, and we can expect increasing pressure on museums to document collections properly and to put their documentary materials in order. Unfortunately, Congress has not supplied the necessary funds to undertake these projects, so that there will continue to be a disparity between responsibilities and resources in fulfilling the mission of museums in this area.

Access to the anthropological record is an especially difficult issue. "Access" may refer to guidelines established by museums to govern accessibility to archives, or it may mean the physical restrictions museums place on the use of original documents, sometimes based on conservation or preservation requirements. One can distinguish between access to original documents and access to the information they contain. Certainly one of the issues that needs to be addressed by the museum and anthropological communities is how museums can share information with other types of manuscript repositories, especially libraries and archives. Issues of standardization of terminology, software

compatibility, and networks, and questions concerning the comprehensiveness of the information exchanged are being raised and must be dealt with in the near future. Museums need to join larger bibliographic and computer networks that exist beyond the museum field, such as OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) or RLIN (Research Libraries Informational Network). Simultaneously, museum professionals and anthropologists must inform the originators of these systems of the needs of the museum and anthropological communities. Luckily, organizations like the Museum Computer Network and the Museum Archives Section of the Society of American Archivists are beginning to discuss these matters.

Many needs of museums are straightforward and already well understood. To effect proper care of anthropological archival materials, museums require advice on accessions policy, documenting the collection, conservators' services, and proper storage facilities. To meet this need will require the dedication of museum staffs, time and money, and the commitment of the anthropological community to saving the anthropological record as a disciplinary priority.

Making the preservation of the unpublished anthropological record a national priority will offer museums the opportunity to reassess and improve all aspects of museum archives — acquisitions, access, training, preservation, conservation, and information exchange. If the discipline emphasizes the importance of this goal, essentially putting its collective authority behind it, it will create an intellectual and institutional framework that will facilitate the search for financial support necessary to improving museum archives. Then anthropology can, in turn, build on the wealth of anthropological materials that exist in the nation's museums.

Summary

- Museums hold a vast amount of unpublished records of anthropology; all museums need to make their archives or designated manuscript collections institutional priorities.
- A survey of existing museum facilities, archives, and their acquisition and preservation policies is needed.
- The relationship between the preservation of original archival materials and the sharing of information needs to be addressed in terms of the existing array of museum archives, the possibility of regional repositories, and the potential to transfer information rapidly.
- Support for training, documentation, preservation, and information exchange relating to archives is needed through the extension of existing federal programs dealing with collections management and conservation.
- Museums' collection management policies should provide for active solicitation of unpublished records significant to the history of the institution, its holdings, or its mission.