

The Role of the Museum Archivist in the Information Age

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Museums, as institutional repositories of natural and cultural heritage, have a significant role to play within the community, a role which is advocated — or at least acknowledged — by society at large. The general mandate of museums to preserve the past and enlighten society as to its heritage is a valued service despite being an enormous task. An institutional archives would greatly assist the museum in its endeavours to document the past, if the value of archival materials were not underestimated, if not totally oblivious to many. How could an archival programme complement the artefactual collections? Would the general public support and use a museum archives? Why should a museum desire to establish an active archival programme? Society, which commends the role of museums as heritage institutions, needs to become aware of the important function of archives; like museums, they are valuable information-providing agencies for today's information requirements. Thus, in recently implementing a museum archival programme and carrying out an internal awareness campaign, the author envisioned and promoted her role as first, to help the museum carry out its mandate to preserve and enhance the understanding of national heritage; secondly, to play a valuable role in servicing the information needs of society in the "information age."

Today, there is a growing appreciation by society that museums are much more than exhibit halls filled with relics of past civilization, and that museums serve society by helping to provide the knowledge that is needed to understand the past and to progress into the future.¹ Museum visitor statistics confirm that more people are visiting museums every year. Society has expressed a clear interest in museums over the years, as well as tangible support through sponsorship and activity participation. Canada experienced a "museum boom" between 1964 and 1986, when the number of museums increased from 185 to nearly 2,000; an estimated 98,300,000 people visited museums in 1985.² The decade of the 1990s indicates that this trend of increasing public support of, and involvement in, museums will continue.

Museums are well aware of the influential role which they play in society. In 1990, the passing of Bill C-12, the new *Museums Act*, distinctly outlined the important functions of museums:

the heritage of Canada and all its peoples is an important part of the world heritage and must be preserved for present and future generations ... each museum ... plays an essential role, individually and together with other museums and like institutions, in preserving and promoting the heritage of Canada and all its peoples throughout Canada, and abroad and in contributing to the collective memory and sense of identity of all Canadians, and is a source of inspiration, research, learning and entertainment that belongs to all Canadians....³

The museum's role in society and its obligation to foster greater heritage consciousness are clearly stated. The key elements of the Act are first, the importance of the "heritage of Canada"; secondly, "the museum plays an essential role" in Canada by —thirdly — "preserving and promoting heritage"; fourthly, that heritage "belongs to all Canadians."

While each museum may establish different priorities, in general each houses and preserves holdings of artefacts or specimens; many strive to perform innovative research; and each offers applications of their knowledge through exhibitions and education programmes. The museum thus enables the community to understand better its heritage and physical environment both past and present, and allows it to make informed projections concerning the future. Museums are key players in bringing the public and their heritage together. A good museum attracts, entertains, arouses curiosity, leads to questions and thus promotes learning.

As an archivist in a museum environment, I participate in preserving and promoting heritage. An institutional archival programme enables an organization, such as a museum, to preserve and understand its own history. The archivist preserves the collective memory of the museum. Without an appropriate archival programme, the museum fails to retain its recorded institutional history. While the museum may generate, organize and disseminate information on natural or cultural history, it also needs to include its own heritage and institutional interaction with the community as part of its archival record. An archival collection is therefore a valuable component of a museum's holdings and should be established in conjunction with the institutional documentation strategy.⁴

There are many similarities between the curator and the archivist in regard to their acquisition practices and collections management.⁵ In fact, even the words "curator" and "archivist" conjure up similar images of an elderly person hidden among numerous jars of specimens or secreted among stacks of old documents. Both the museum curator and the archivist seek to acquire and preserve material because of its evidential and informational values for research and education. Both professions struggle with the issue of preservation of the item versus the importance of using it.⁶ Both curators and archivists store their materials in "closed stacks" and intellectual control is therefore critical. While they differ on principles of arrangement and description, the archivist and the curator recognize the urgent need to organize the material for efficient information retrieval. An archival component, in common with the specimen or artefact holding of the museum, may offer great insight into past and present activities of the institution.

Museums do more than merely hold and display material, whether it be archives or artefacts. Curators and archivists perform research by studying the holdings in order to extract their meaning within a cultural or natural heritage. How otherwise would it be possible to organize exhibitions that would be attractive to the public? It is the professional task of archivists and curators to *know* their holdings in order to communicate an understanding of it to others.

Museums and archives, therefore, share similar goals of sustaining national heritage. Both museums and archives undertake the enormous task of preserving the memory of the past by acquiring and describing selected materials, providing access to them, and affording knowledge through understanding.

Does collections management imply ownership? Who owns our heritage? The 1990 *Museums Act* stated that the museum “plays an essential role in preserving and promoting the heritage of Canada,” and that heritage “belongs to all Canadians.” Do museums and archives “own our heritage” or are they just the custodians? Does the public “own our heritage” or are they simply the users? Is heritage “ownable” at all?

It seems to me that heritage is an entitlement and not a possession. Everyone is entitled to, or has the right to understand, her or his heritage. No one has the right to withhold or remove another’s right to that heritage. Archivists and curators, moreover, ensure everyone’s right to understand the national heritage by the very nature of their profession. In order not to be misidentified as simply guardians of records or caretakers of artefacts, archivists and curators first acquire and preserve valuable documents of the past; secondly, offer a context for such items; thirdly, promote an understanding of them on the part of the public. Museums and archives provide an essential service in preserving the nation’s heritage, as well as in communicating the nature of that service to the public in an era of “information overload.”

The dawning of the “information age” has created greater societal demands for information from information-gathering institutions. The information age has inundated society with vast quantities of information from innumerable sources, and technically very advanced in its transmission and storage.⁷ Society has become more demanding of simple information or raw data, as well as synthesized information or knowledge, and legislation has ensured their freedom and right to do so. Different client groups, moreover, are searching for different types of information.⁸ Is it not the role of the archivist to ensure client access to archival holdings, as well as to provide the needed contextual information pertaining to the records?

Museums play a distinct role in servicing the information needs of society. An archival holding is a significant and integral component of a museum’s collections and is to be considered a valuable dimension of any information-providing institution. As museums endeavour to respond to increasing societal demands for information, they must provide collections management to ensure efficient information retrieval. Administrative efficiency, legal necessity and academic integrity necessitate the proper regulation of museum information. Society increasingly demands access to, and rapid retrieval of, information. Are museums, as information-providing institutions, prepared to meet these greater demands? While curators are organizing their research collections for rapid information retrieval, archivists also are arranging and describing their holdings to keep abreast of greater information demands.

In the information deluge of the 1990s, a near-drowning society searches for the flood-gate operator:

We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge.... Uncontrolled and unorganized information is no longer a resource in an information society.... The emphasis of the whole information society shifts, then, from supply to selection....⁹

Archivists may become the controllers of a mechanism in which they manage all incoming information, assess which records contain evidential and informational value, and — with this relevant documentation — offer a provenancial context to the user. The archivist's skill at appraising and selecting only those records of the most archival value permits some degree of control in an age of information abundance.¹⁰ Moreover, limited resources demand that archivists retain only the most valuable records.

Terry Cook has advocated the emergence of a new archival paradigm — “the post-custodial age” — in which he proposes that, in terms of professional practice, archivists should move from “a content-based past to a context-based future.”¹¹ Changing from passive custodians to active documentalists, archivists are to appraise records in terms of context, function, interrelationships and creation — in addition to their custodial work.¹² Cook's concept of a “post-custodial age” endorses the basic principles of archival science, emphasizes the skills of the archivist and is timely in its relevance to the challenges of information abundance. Archivists are to assert their expertise in “contextualizing records” within repositories of information; their role should not be generalized or limited to that of merely “information managers or specialists.” Nevertheless, archivists may develop similar approaches to information specialists, in order to adapt to greater societal demands and to provide efficient information retrieval. Such a development is not to be viewed as detrimental but rather advantageous to the archival profession, and enhancing its ability to meet expressed needs and changing times. Not wishing to enter into the debate of “historian versus archivist” or “information specialist versus archivist,” and the definitive role of the archivist,¹³ it is nevertheless my opinion that, in an age when archivists are coping with information superabundance, they should not be intimidated into failing to extract elements from other information management professions which do not conflict with archival science. The information age will demand context for the vast quantities of information generated, and archivists, given the nature of their profession, must be prepared to meet these information demands.

To define archives as repositories of information, however, fails to encompass the necessary duty of archivists to understand their records. Information is only indiscriminate facts or data, whereas knowledge is the assimilation of facts and the synthesis of information. Terry Cook comments, “The quest for knowledge rather than mere information is the crux of the study of archives and of the daily work of the archivist.”¹⁴ To refer to archivists exclusively as information managers would deny their insight into, and knowledge of, archival records in terms of provenance, *respect des fonds*, context, interrelationships and original order. The archivist's skill in contextualizing the information which they contain allows archival records to be usable by others. Simply to retrieve lumps of data without a context, however, is only to add to the user's burden of sifting through the mountain of information. Concerned rather with the effective communication of the record to the user, the archivist seeks to appraise, acquire, arrange and describe valuable records in a meaningful way. The archivist's knowledge of and expertise with regard to the material for which he or she is responsible, not the ability to retrieve bits of information or data, is the essence of the archival profession and the value of the archivist's service to the public.

In the present age of information overload, archivists need to reaffirm the important role which they are to play and the steps which they are taking in order to keep abreast of increasing information demands. Archivists are well-prepared for the information age if they are able to offer a contextual approach to information management. Indeed, as

Terry Cook points out, archivists "are in the understanding business, not the information business."¹⁵ A museum archival component permits the management of information, and a museum archivist can provide knowledge and understanding of the holding through proper appraisal for acquisition, arrangement, preservation, description and access—a valuable service for the institution in accommodating the demands of the information age.

A museum archivist can therefore be a key player, first in assisting the museum to carry out its mandate to preserve, and promote an understanding of the nation's heritage, and secondly in helping to service the information demands of society in the "information age." The museum archivist preserves heritage records and encourages public use, offering her or his services not only as an information manager, but also as a contextual records expert in order to promote understanding. In the information age, an archival holding is a significant and integral part of a museum's collections, and is to be considered a valuable component of any information-providing cultural institution.

Notes

- * A previously edited version of this paper entitled, "Ensuring the Public's Entitlement to Their Heritage: Museum Archives and the Information Age," was presented at the Ontario Association of Archivists Annual Conference, Kingston, June 1992.
- 1 George F. MacDonald and Stephen Alford, "The Museum as Information Utility," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 10 (1991), p. 305.
- 2 Jean Trudel, "The Decade of the Museum?" *Muse* (Winter 1990), p. 5.
- 3 *An Act respecting Museums*, Statutes of Canada, 38 Elizabeth II, Chapter 3, pp. 1-2.
- 4 The value of museum archives was recently highlighted by *Museum News* in its November/December 1991 issue entitled, "Museum Archives: Vital Repositories of Museum Memory," which included several brief but informative introductory articles on American museum archives. See Alan L. Bain, "The Muses' Memory," *Museum News* (November/December 1991), pp. 36-39; Kathleen Hartt, "A Manifold Resource," *Museum News* (November/December 1991), pp. 40-42; George M. Davis, "Unlocking Nature's Story," *Museum News* (November/December 1991), pp. 43-45.
- 5 For a more detailed analysis of the common professional and ethical basis of the museum curator and the archivist, see P.J. Boylan, "Museum and Archives in the Contemporary World," *Archivum* XXX (1984), pp. 39-52.
- 6 Katherine Kane, "Bridging the Gap: Archivists and Curators Think Differently about the Role of Museum Archives," *Museum News* (November/December 1991), p. 48.
- 7 For further insights into the transformation of information and the impact of the information age, see Hugh Taylor, "Transformation in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift?" *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88), pp. 12-28; David Lyon, "From 'Post-Industrialism' to 'Information Society': A New Social Transformation?" *Sociology* 20 (1986).
- 8 As different people have different information needs, demands and expectations, several scholars have suggested that a shift towards a new information profession will occur. On meeting user needs see T.D. Wilson, "On User Studies and Information Needs," *Journal of Documentation* 37, no. 1 (March 1981), pp. 3-15; Randall C. Jimerson, "Redefining Archival Identity: Meeting User Needs in the Information Society," *American Archivist* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1989), pp. 332-40.
- 9 John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York, 1982), pp. 12, 24.
- 10 For further information on the need for archivists to re-examine their role as selectors in an information-drenched society and the proposal for documentation strategies, see Helen Samuels, "Who Controls

- the Past," *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (Summer 1986), pp. 109-24; Helen Samuels, "Improving Our Disposition: Documentation Strategy," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 125-40; F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance," *American Archivist* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1984), pp. 11-22.
- 11 Terry Cook asserts the need for archivists to take a contextual approach to their work. Understanding the records-creating context allows a broader vision. This concept of "the post-custodial age" was presented by Cook at the Ontario Association of Archivists Annual Conference in Kingston in June 1992.
- 12 Terry Cook, "The Post-Custodial Age": *supra*.
- 13 See George Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 5-25; *idem*, "Instant Professionalism: To the Shiny New Men of the Future," *Archivaria* 20 (Summer 1985), pp. 149-57; Patrick Dunae, et al., "Special Feature: The Debate Over History and Archives," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 286-308; Hugh A. Taylor, "Information Ecology and the Archives of the 1980s," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984), pp. 25-37; *idem*, "Through the Minefield," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-86), pp. 180-85; Terry Cook, "From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 28-49; Tom Nesmith, "Towards the Discipline of Archives," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 16-20; *idem*, "Archives from the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship," *Archivaria* 14 (Summer 1982), pp. 5-26; Jay Atherton, "From Life Cycle to Continuum: Some Thoughts on the Records Management-Archives Relationship," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-86), pp. 43-51.
- 14 Cook, "From Information to Knowledge," p. 49.
- 15 *Idem*, "Rites of Passage: The Archivist and the Information Age," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91), p. 176.