Articles

The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time*

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RÉSUMÉ Alors que les concepts de fonds, respect des fonds et provenance furent d'abord utilisés au Canada afin de contrebalancer les approches ad hoc de la classification et de la description, la réalité intellectuelle de la provenance et la réalité physique des documents sont devenues tellement entrelacées que la distinction essentielle entre ceux-ci et leur créateur a été perdue. Les *Règles pour la description des documents d'archives*, par exemple, prescrivent une approche pour le fonds qui ne permet pas la description d'ensembles virtuels de documents, accumulés à divers moments du temps et dispersés en divers lieux. Afin de réévaluer le concept de provenance, l'auteure examine l'utilisation de ce terme dans les domaines de l'archéologie et de la muséologie. En adaptant ces définitions au contexte de l'archivistique, elle soutient que les archivistes devraient décrire les documents qui subsistent, écrire l'histoire de leur créateur et de l'ensemble des documents créés et, enfin, décrire comment les documents ont été acquis par leur institution. Les archivistes devraient en fait étendre les éléments existants des *RDDA* pour la « source immédiate d'acquisition » et l'« historique de la conservation » et mettre l'accent sur une nouvelle façon de voir qui ne serait pas celle du respect des fonds mais du respect de la provenance, comprenant l'**histoire du créateur**, l'**histoire des documents** et l'**historique de la conservation**. La description des documents d'archives devrait comprendre tous ces éléments, ce qui permettrait aux archivistes de replacer les documents dans le contexte le plus large possible et, dans le même temps, de devenir plus responsables pour leurs décisions et plus transparents dans la gestion des documents dont ils ont la garde. Les archivistes doivent abandonner le concept de fonds parce que cette idée caractérise les documents comme ils ne pourront jamais être, en ignorant la réalité de leur existence dans le temps et l'espace.

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ABSTRACT While the concepts of the fonds, *respect des fonds,* and provenance were initially useful in Canada to offset *ad hoc* approaches to arrangement and description, the intellectual reality of provenance and the physical reality of the records have become so intertwined over time that the essential distinction between the creator and the created has been lost. The *Rules for Archival Description*, for example, establishes an approach to the fonds that does not allow for the description of virtual bodies of records, accumulated over time and scattered over space. To reassess the concept of provenance, the author examines the use of the term in archaeology and museology. Adapting these definitions to the archival context, the author argues that archivists should describe the records that remain and explain the history of the creator, their records and how they came to be in that institution. Archivists should expand the existing elements in *RAD* for "immediate source of acquisition" and "custodial history" and focus on a new vision, not of *respect des fonds,* but of *respect de provenance,* which would encompass **creator history, records history,** and **custodial history.** Archival descriptions should encompass all these elements, so that archivists offer the broadest possible contextualization of records and, at the same time, become more accountable for their own actions and more transparent about the management of the records in their care. Archivists should abandon the concept of the fonds, since that idea labels records as something they cannot be, ignoring the reality of their existence over time and space.

> Time and space are fragments of the infinite for the use of finite creatures.
>
> *Henri Frédéric Amiel*

The core principles of *respect des fonds* and provenance have been challenged by the changes in our modern record-keeping environment and our archival practices. In Canada, the strengths and weaknesses of the concepts of the fonds and provenance are most visible in the descriptions mounted on online networks, such as the British Columbia Archival Information Network (BCAIN), the Canadian North West Archival Network (CaNWAN), and now the Canadian Archival Information Network (CAIN). It is through these online tools that archivists are describing records as fonds, adding those descriptions to online databases, and working toward the creation of a virtual repository of collective holdings.[1] But do these descriptions fully depict the records we manage and the changes to those records over time and space?

A look back at the evolution of *respect des fonds* and provenance in Canada may help us understand our current dilemma.[2] One of the early Canadian

1 The Canadian Archival Information Network (CAIN) Web site was launched in October 2001 and can be seen at <http://www.cain-rcia.ca/>. The British Columbia Archival Information Network (BCAIN) can be accessed through <http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/bcaul.html> and the Canadian North West Archival Network (CaNWAN) through <http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/canwan.html>.

2 I am not the first to consider this topic. Other archival theorists, such as Debra Barr, Terry Cook, Michel Duchein, Terry Eastwood, Maria Guercio, Peter Horsman, Chris Hurley, Bob Krawcyck, Heather MacNeil, Tom Nesmith, and Hugh Taylor, have all wrestled with the concepts of provenance, *respect des fonds,* and the fonds. Below is a sample of the range of writ-

articulations of provenance appeared in the report of the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives in 1980. The authors of this report, known colloquially as *The Wilson Report*, interpreted provenance to mean that "records originating from the same source should be kept together and not interfiled with records from other sources." This principle, they argued, kept the context of the records intact. In defining provenance in this way, the authors of the report were reacting to the drawbacks of the "total archives" approach to archival management, wherein publicly-funded archival institutions were collecting all manner and medium of record from diverse sources and locations: public and private, corporate and personal, institutional and non-institutional. In the absence of codified instructions for acquisition, arrangement, and description, archivists were identifying these manifold acquisitions as accessions or classes or record groups or manuscript groups; they were categorizing the records themselves by subject, chronology, or medium. Little attention –

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ings on the fonds and provenance: Debra Barr, "Protecting Provenance: Response to the Report of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level," *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989), pp. 141–45; Terry Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era," in Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 52–64, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts," *Archival Science* 1, no. 1 (2001), pp. 3–24, and "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), pp. 14–35; Michel Duchein, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des fonds* in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 64–82; Terry Eastwood, "Putting the Parts of the Whole Together: Systematic Arrangement of Archives," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000), pp. 93–116; Maria Guercio, "Archival Theory and the Principle of Provenance for Current Records: Their Impact on Arranging and Inventorying Electronic Records," in Swedish National Archives, *The Principle of Provenance: Report from the First Stockholm Conference on Archival Theory and the Principle of Provenance, 2–3 September 1993* (Stockholm, 1994), pp. 75–86; Peter Horsman, "Taming the Elephant: An Orthodox Approach to the Principle of Provenance," in Swedish National Archives, *The Principle of Provenance: Report from the First Stockholm Conference on Archival Theory and the Principle of Provenance, 2–3 September 1993* (Stockholm, 1994), pp. 51–63, and "Dirty Hands: A New Perspective on the Original Order," *Archives and Manuscripts* 27, no. 1 (May 1999), pp. 42–53; Chris Hurley, "Problems with Provenance," *Archives and Manuscripts* 23, no. 2 (November 1995), pp. 234–59, "Beating the French," *Archives and Manuscripts* 24, no. 1 (May 1996), pp. 12–18, and "The Making and the Keeping of Records: (1) What Are Finding Aids for?" *Archives and Manuscripts* 26, no. 1 (May 1998), pp. 58–77; Bob Krawczyk, "Cross Reference Heaven: The Abandonment of the Fonds as the Primary Level of Arrangement for Ontario Government Records," *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), pp. 131–53; Heather MacNeil, "The Context is All: Describing a Fonds and its Parts in Accordance with the Rules for Archival Description," in Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 195–225; Tom Nesmith, "Introduction," in Tom Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance* (Metuchen, NJ, 1993); and Hugh Taylor, "The Collective Memory: Archives and Libraries as Heritage," *Archivaria* 15 (Winter 1982–83), pp. 118–30, and "Heritage" Revisited: Documents as Artifacts in the Context of Museums and Material Culture," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), pp. 8–20. The author is grateful to Terry Cook for offering suggestions for additional readings in this area.

administrative or descriptive – was paid to the idea that records represented the functions and activities of a particular creating agency, individual or corporate.[3] To combat this subject-oriented and, some said, library-influenced approach to archival management, the authors of the Consultative Group fixed provenance and *respect des fonds* as the underpinnings of archival practice. These principles were then reinforced in 1985 by the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards, which reiterated the importance of provenance as "the basis for the organization and arrangement of archival fonds."[4]

The findings of the Working Group were entrenched in Canadian archival practice with the publication of the *Rules for Archival Description,* or *RAD.* According to *RAD,* the fonds is defined as the "whole of the documents, regardless of form or medium, automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular individual, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities or functions." *Respect des fonds* is the principle that the records of one particular creator are kept together, in their original order, as an organic unit. And that unit was defined by its provenance: the person or persons, family or families, and corporate body or bodies that created and/or accumulated and used records in the conduct of their personal or business life.[5]

In essence the Canadian approach can be stated as follows: if you have the records of one creating agency, you keep them together according to that creatorship, as an organic whole. You do not break the records up by subject, or chronology, or medium; you do not interfile them with records from other sources. Respect the fonds. Respect creatorship. These acknowledge the organic unity of the records and reflect the sense that records come in whole, not in parts. While the initial concept had value in rejecting the *ad hoc* approaches to arrangement and description of the past, over time the intellectual reality of provenance and the physical reality of the records have become intertwined, and often the essential distinction between the creator and the created has been lost.

Today, Canada lays claim to tens of thousands of fonds. In the emerging CAIN database, which includes a total of 29,602 descriptive records, 25,538 are of fonds.[6] Some would say that these statistics prove the success of

3 Consultative Group on Canadian Archives, *Canadian Archives* (Ottawa, 1980); see especially pp. 15–16 and 63–64.

4 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards, *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa, 1984), pp. 6–7.

5 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, "Glossary," *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa, 1990–1996), p. D-4.

6 Statistics were provided by Natalie Holst, Canadian Council of Archives, via e-mail, 9 May 2002. The author is grateful to Ms. Holst and the CCA for her prompt and informative reply to the request for CAIN statistics.

the concept of the fonds. I suggest that these statistics demonstrate flaws in the application of the concept of the fonds and, ultimately, in the concept itself. The intellectual reality of provenance and the physical reality of the records are not equal. One body of records can derive from many creators, and one creator can leave records in many physical locations. Provenance and the fonds are not the same, nor do they represent a constant, one-to-one relationship.

In archival description, the logic of the fonds fails with the application of *RAD* Rule 1.1A1. That rule requires that any archival description will include a title: specifically "the title of the unit being described, whether transcribed or supplied." The archival material in question – a single item, four boxes, or eighteen hundred metres of records – needs a title.[7]

The fact is, fonds don't have titles. This is not Alice in Wonderland. They don't come into repositories in boxes with little white labels that read "I am a fonds. Archive me." When creating a title for a fonds, archivists have to supply one. *RAD* instructs the archivist to include the word fonds for the nature of the archival unit, along with the name of the "person(s), family (families), or corporate body predominantly responsible for the creation of the fonds as a whole."[8] Identify provenance, add the word fonds, and – presto! – you have a title. But do you in fact have a fonds? I suggest not.

To consider that question, let us look at the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company, a quintessentially Canadian company. For much of the Hudson's Bay Company's history, its business was conducted by trappers and traders, chief factors, and ship's captains. They travelled on horseback and on foot; their offices were log cabins, or sod huts, or the captain's quarters of sailing ships. The records they "created, accumulated, and used" were exposed to wind and rain, to mud and dirt, to loss and damage and neglect.

Today, more than 3,000 linear metres of company archives are kept in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.[9] But not all records of the Hudson's Bay Company are in Winnipeg. A search of the CAIN database for the title keyword "Hudson's Bay Company" reveals ten separate fonds and four collections that identify the Hudson's Bay Company as the creating agency. One fonds, the "Hudson's Bay Company, Quesnel Post fonds," comprises twelve centimetres of records. A separate fonds, titled the "Quesnel Post fonds," consists of 5.5 centimetres of records. Another two bodies of records, one sixteen centimetres and one twenty centimetres, are identified simply as the "Hudson's Bay Company fonds." In British Columbia, the provincial archives holds the "Fort Nanaimo fonds," which

7 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description*, see pp. 1–10, 1–15, 1–19.
8 Ibid.
9 For information on the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, see the Archives' Web site at <http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/about/holdings/text.html>.

includes a document called a wastebook. The Nanaimo Community Archives also holds the "Fort Nanaimo fonds," which includes correspondence, a day book, and a fort journal. Each of the ten Hudson's Bay Company fonds identified is housed in a different institution, and none in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. Where is the totality of the Hudson's Bay Company archives? Where is the fonds?[10]

If the fonds is an organic whole, then one archives should not identify the wastebook as a fonds, and another should not identify the correspondence, day book, or journal as a fonds. Instead, they should both seek out the virtual fonds to which those records belong, in this case the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg. The records would find a place in the existing arrangement for that fonds, as a series or subseries, a file, or an item. By physically or virtually incorporating these fragments of records into the larger Hudson's Bay Company fonds, archivists could recreate an original order based on the functions and activities of the creating agency. Is that not the point of provenance – to respect the creating agency? It may be, but I believe it does not work.[11]

It is one thing to suggest that when the records in hand demonstrate a unifying origin – when they share the same creator – they should be managed as one unit and not divided up by subject, or chronology, or medium. But are archivists then suggesting that all the records generated by one creator should be retained in one physical location? Surely that idea is unreasonable, impractical, and unrealistic. If archivists are describing a virtual body of records, scattered over space, they can define it as a fonds and identify the location of the different series, files, and items. But if they are describing the items in their possession at the moment, then they are quite possibly describing a series, a file, an item, or a collection, not a fonds.

The fonds implies a wholeness, a completeness, a totality. I would argue that no archives now has, ever will have, or ever has had, "the whole of the records" of any creating agency. Records are destroyed, or lost, or transferred, or changed even before they get to the archives. Once they are in custody, they may be culled, and weeded, and selected. Archivists don't just manage records; they actively decide what will be kept and what will be removed, through the very process of appraisal. Archivists manage the residue, not the entirety; the remains, not the totality. If there is no fonds, where is the logic in assigning a title that identifies a fragment as a whole? As Heather MacNeil has asked,

10 To access the CAIN search engine, go to <http://www.cain-rcia.ca/cain-bin/>. The Fort Nanaimo fonds at the British Columbia Archives is described in CAIN record No. 6107; the Fort Nanaimo fonds at the Nanaimo Community Archives is described in CAIN record No. 11757.

11 If the records were consolidated into a virtual fonds, one would then need to ask if the "wastebook" ought in fact to be kept. What, after all, is a wastebook? As will be discussed, the story of how that wastebook came to be removed from the records in Winnipeg, and how it came to be kept by the archival institution in British Columbia, would likely be lost in the process of reconciling records into an imaginary whole.

[i]f the whole of the records of a given creator in an archives' possession amounts only to a few letters, a single manuscript, or a ledger, does it constitute a recognizable fonds?

Put another way, can the principle of *respect des fonds* be meaningfully applied to the remnants of dismembered fonds?[12]

Muller, Feith, and Fruin argued that one could indeed have a fonds consisting of a single item or small aggregate. If that is all that is left, then that is the fonds.[13] Canadian archivists have taken their advice to heart. Many of the fonds on the CAIN system are single items, small groupings, portions and pieces, partial remains. According to this logic, sixteen centimetres of records can be a fonds, if that's all that's left. But surely the sixteen centimetres that comprises one Hudson's Bay Company fonds is not all that's left if there is a twenty centimetre Hudson's Bay Company fonds in another institution, let alone 3,000 metres in another. The Hudson's Bay Company archives can be found all across Canada; we have to think of the records in a virtual, not a physical, context.[14] To refer to each of these discrete entities as a fonds is to diminish the value of the parts and, ultimately, to render nonsensical of the very concept of the whole.

One solution is simply to redefine the concept of the fonds. Rather than propose that the fonds is the **whole** of all the records created, accumulated, or used by someone, we could just say they are the **remains** of all the records created, accumulated, or used by someone. They are the residue, the fragments that have been kept. We could then take the ten fonds that identify the Hudson's Bay Company as the creator, integrate them intellectually with the Winnipeg archives, and create a virtual fonds of all these remains. But will this focus on creatorship provide the full scope of contextual information that archivists ought to be providing about records?[15]

12 MacNeil, "The Context is All: Describing a Fonds and its Parts in Accordance with the *Rules for Archival Description*," p. 203.

13 See S. Muller, J.A. Freith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York, 1968). This edition is the English translation; the original Dutch edition appeared in 1898.

14 For a discussion of the conceptual principle of the fonds, see in particular Cook's argument in "The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era."

15 In essence, this approach would place description at the top of the archival hierarchy, as the centre of archival practice. It has been argued by authors such as Terry Cook, Eric Ketelaar, and David Bearman that, indeed, the most significant archival task is not description but appraisal. The danger of tools such as *RAD* is that they can lead archivists to focus on the passive receipt and organization of archives, rather than the active process of appraisal and management. See Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 18–63, as well as Ketelaar, "Exploitation of New Archival Materials," *Archivum* 35 (1989), pp. 189–99, and "Archival Theory and the Dutch Manual," *Archivaria* 41 (Spring 1996), pp. 31–40, and, as early as 1985, Bearman and Richard H. Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985–86), pp. 14–27.

When archivists argue that the fonds represents "the whole of the records created, accumulated, and used," we focus on "created." We are not really looking at "accumulated" or "used." Our descriptions may tell us that the Fort Nanaimo records were part of the Hudson's Bay Company. But we may not explain who created the Nanaimo records and why, how the records were used in Nanaimo, how they came to be in Nanaimo or Victoria, not in Montreal or London or Winnipeg, and ultimately how they ended up in the storage vaults of a provincial or community archives. Is not that information also part of the record's history? Should it not then form an essential part of the description of that record?

To try to fathom how archivists might capture that part of the records' story, it is worth examining the practices of our colleagues in archaeology and museology. Archaeologists and curators both use the term "provenance." If they use the same word, do they mean the same thing? What can archivists learn from the sense of creatorship and origins in archaeology and art? What can we learn from different approaches to the idea of the whole and the parts?

In archaeology, the term provenience – a derivation of provenance – is used to refer to "the archaeological record of the object, its juxtaposition to other objects *in situ*, its relationship to those objects, and the strata above and below the level at which the object is found in the excavation."[16] Archaeologists map the location of the object in relation to exact spatial coordinates. The dirt found on an object's surface, the natural and artificial elements appearing around it in the ground, all help define the age, nature, and purpose of the object. The point where the object is found is referred to as the findspot: the last resting place, that final physical environment where the object was set aside, or cast away, by the one who had last used it.[17]

16 Jessica L. Darraby, *Art, Artifact & Architecture Law* (Deerfield, Illinois, 1995), pp. 6–51.

17 The following readings offer a range of insights into archaeological provenience: Jeremy Coote, Peter Gaterhcole, and Nicolette Meister, with contributions by Tim Rogers and Frieda Midgley, "'Curiosities Sent to Oxford': The Original Documentation of the Forster Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum," *Journal of the History of Collections* 12, no. 2 (2000), pp. 177–92; Lore L. Holmes and Garman Harbottle, "Compositional Fingerprinting: New Directions in the Study of the Provenance of Limestone," *GESTA* 33, no. 1 (1994), pp. 10–18; L. Jacobson, W.A. van der Westhuizen, and H. de Bruiyn, "Geochemistry and Archaeology: A Creative Bond," *South African Journal of Science* 91, no. 8 (August 1995), pp. 381–4; James Wiseman, "Scholarship and Provenience in the Study of Artifacts," *Journal of Field Archaeology* 11 (1984), pp. 67–77. See also M Shanks and C. Tilley, *Reconstructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice,* (London, 1992), and Kevin Greene, *Archaeology: An Introduction* (London, 2002). See also the range of Web sites available on archaeological topics, including: English Heritage, Archaeology and Survey Department, at <http://www.eng-h.gov.uk/welcome.htm>; the British Archaeology Data Service, at <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/project/userinfo/standards.html>; and the Canadian Archaeological Association, at <http://www.canadianarchaeology.com/home.lasso>. See also the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; the Web site provides a variety of links about archaeological issues. Go to <http://www.upenn.edu/museum/Overview/archyanthro.html>.

A chunk of pottery is interpreted differently depending on its findspot. At one metre below ground, in what looks to be a fire pit, it could be part of a cooking pot. At three metres below ground, in an area rife with natural fertilizers, it could be the remains of a chamber pot. Its physical, logistical, and spatial context is the key to understanding the object and, through the object, its place and time. Thus, understanding its precise physical location is critical to contextualizing the object. In archaeology, the item found is not defined as a whole. It is not a fonds. All that may be left of the original object – and the room, the building, or the village in which it was found – is a fragment, the smallest of pieces of a long-gone whole. From that piece, interpretations are made as to what might have been, but never with the idea that what is left comprises the whole of what was once there.[18]

An example of the importance of physical location in the interpretation of artifacts has been presented by archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat. Schmandt-Besserat studied the location of tokens dating from the eighth to third millennium BC and found in Near Eastern archaeological excavations. In their day, these tokens served as counters. They were used not only to calculate quantities of goods but also to store data; they were in fact records. Schmandt-Besserat analyzed the purpose of the tokens in relation to their precise location in an excavation site. She noted, for example, that tokens dating from the sixth millennium were found in non-domestic structures, suggesting that they served a non-domestic function. Thus she interpreted that they were not just part of one household but were relevant to the larger society. Further, the tokens were not found in one particular area, suggesting they were handled and used by a number of individuals over time. By the fourth millennium BC, tokens found in the excavation increasingly appeared in administrative areas of the site, in pre-Christian "offices," suggesting that the society had bureaucratized its functions, dividing different tasks among specific people. The tokens had become the responsibility of delegated individuals within the society, not an informally shared task.

Schmandt-Besserat also noted that some tokens from the fourth millennium were also found in rubbish pits. Their precise location in the pit, above and below different types of food waste and related products from different seasons of the year, suggested that they were put there after the annual harvest, after the crops had been gathered and stored. Schmandt-Besserat argued that their location in the rubbish pits, in between layers of winter and spring and summer debris, defined the tokens as tools to count the products of the harvest. They recorded short-term transactions. Once the transaction was complete, the token was no longer needed, and so it was not kept. The tokens were discarded – not set aside but cast aside – and when they were found millennia later they were defined by their location in the pit. Their last resting place became their context. See Denise Schmandt-Besserat, "Tokens: A Prehistoric Archive System," in Piera Fendi, Enrica Fiandra, Gian Giacomo Fissore, and Marcella Frangipane, eds., *Archives Before Writing: Proceedings of the International Colloquium Oriolo Romano, October 23–25, 1991* (Rome, 1994), pp. 13–28. (See esp. pp. 20–21 about the location of tokens.) This publication includes a number of interesting articles on archives before writing and the relationship between archival management and archaeology. In particular are the contributions by Elio Lodolini, "Archaeologists and Archivists: a fruitful collaboration," and Donato Tamblé, "Perspectives for the history of archives before writing." I am grateful to Heather MacNeil for making this publication available.

18 This is not to say that archaeologists do not reconstruct objects and attempt to recreate an imagined entirety from the fragment. Archaeologists distinguish between reconstruction, restoration, and preservation. Reconstruction is the reproduction or construction of the "exact

In the museums world, provenance is approached from a different perspective. The concept of artistic provenance, most significant in the realm of the art gallery, is inextricably intertwined with the concepts of pedigree and authenticity. Provenance in art is defined as "a chronological history of a work of art traced to the creator by tracking the chain of transfer of ownership and possession, location, publication, reproduction, and display."[19] Artistic provenance is not the history of the creator of the object but of the object itself. Artistic provenance is derived from archival records, oral histories, sales receipts, gallery inventories, and even from the marks on the frame and from the stamps and scribbles on the backside of the work itself. The story comes also from the chemical composition of the paint, the construction of the canvas, and the formulation of the inks. Artistic provenance also recognizes the important, and subjective, role of the curator and the fact that art may be purchased and sold, transferred or auctioned, based on the needs and interests of the gallery or museum.[20]

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form and detail of a vanished building, structure, or object, or any part thereof, as it appeared at a specific period." Restoration is the process of "recovering the form and details of a property and its setting as it appeared at a particular period." And preservation is the "process of applying measures to sustain the existing form, integrity and material of a building or structure, and the existing form and vegetative cover of a site." (See, for example, the University of Minnesota E-Museum, which includes considerable background information about archaeological issues. Go to <http://emuseum.mnsu.edu/archaeology/archaeology/reconstruction.html#>.)

19 Darraby, *Art, Artifact & Architecture Law*, p. 2–50.

20 The following readings examine artistic provenance: Doris Athineos, "Phony Provenances Shake the Art World," *Forbes* 158, no. 4 (8/12/96), pp. 168–71; Martin Bailey, "British Provenance Probes," *The Art Newspaper* 102 (April 2000), p. 14; Peter Barberie, "Thoughts on Exhibiting a Pende Mask," *Record of the Art Museum* 58, nos. 1 and 2 (1999), pp. 62–69; P. Budd, R. Hatterty, A.M. Pollard, B. Scaife, and R.G. Thomas, "Rethinking the Quest for Provenance," *Antiquity* 70 (1996), pp. 168–74; Hubertus Czernin, "Law of Return?," *Art News* 97, no. 10 (November 1998), p. 80; Michael Daley, "The back is where it's at," *Art Review* 52 (June 2000), pp. 44–45; Antony Griffiths, "Scribbles on the Backs of Prints," *Print Quarterly* 12 (March 1995), pp. 75–78; Robert Read, "Probing Provenance," *The Art Newspaper* 83 (July–August 1998), pp. 25; Raphael Rubenstein, "Museums and Holocaust Heirs: An Update," *Art in America* 88, no. 4 (April 2000), pp. 33, 35.

The quest to document artistic provenance has become more urgent with the search to recover or claim works of art lost or displaced during the Second World War. One significant case is the Bloch-Bauer case, in Austria. The Osterreichische Galerie in Austria has several works by Gustav Klimt, which had been given to the gallery in the 1920s by Adele Bloch-Bauer under two conditions. First, the paintings were not to go to the gallery until after the death of her husband, Ferdinand, and second, they were only to be given with his explicit approval. With the rise of the Third Reich, Ferdinand went into exile, and by the time he died in 1945 the gallery had been authorized by the Nazis to take the paintings. Now the Bloch-Bauer heirs are trying to regain ownership of the works, and they are relying on provenance research to bolster their claim. See Czernin, "Law of Return?" p. 80. Details of the case can be found at <www.adele.at/>.

Artistic provenance documents the life of an object over time, guaranteeing that the object is, in fact, a Picasso or a Renoir or a Kandinsky. Since the items in question do not stay still over the course of their lives, their travels must be documented to "prove" that they are what they claim to be, as they change location over decades or centuries. In the art world, the item is not the fonds. An artist's oeuvre, or body of work, could be considered and equivalent of the fonds. But no one institution ever pretends to have the totality of that oeuvre, and curators do not represent their items, their fragments, as a whole. Indeed, the search for new pieces of the oeuvre, and the interpretation of those pieces, is one of the excitements of artistic curatorship.

The archaeologist protects the information that defines the piece of pottery in time and space. The curator also traces the movements of a work of art over time and space in order to ensure its integrity. But the archaeologist does not declare unilaterally that one fragment of pottery is a chamber pot. And the curator does not pretend that one painting is the sum total of Picasso's work. Rather than pretend we have the fonds, archivists should explain what we have in hand, explain its temporal and spatial history, and let users create the linkages and so establish their own definition of the "whole." We should identify the Hudson's Bay Company archives not as a fonds but as archives: as wastebooks and correspondence and logbooks. Then, if we wish, we can spec-

Another case involves the work of Dutch painter Jan Vermeer. His seventeenth-century work *The Astronomer* – a portrayal of a man in a blue robe, sitting in his study, contemplating a celestial globe and surrounded by a compass, an astrolabe, and an open book – now hangs in the Louvre Museum in Paris. The work had been the property of the Rothschild family for nearly a century, from the time Baron Alphonse de Rothschild purchased the painting for his private collection in 1886. A plaque beside the painting indicates that it was donated to the Louvre by the Rothschilds in 1982. What that plaque does not reveal is that during the Second World War the painting lived not in a Rothschild sitting room but in a Nazi warehouse, part of the Rothschild family treasures taken by Adolph Hitler for his private collection. It was not until after the war, when the Americans liberated Berlin, that the collection was found and returned to the Rothschild family. The painting's provenance – its story – is depicted not in the plaque in the Louvre but in Nazi inventories of works of art and in the records of the ERR or Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg fur die Besetzten Gebiete, the Nazi government agency responsible for "acquiring" works of art. A small swastika, stamped in black ink on the back of the canvas itself, serves as visual testimony of the painting's journey. As Doris Athineos noted, "like stickers on a steamer trunk, labels stuck on a painting's backside chronicle its trip through galleries, museums and private collections." See Athineos, "Phony Provenances Shake the Art World," pp. 1–4. For more on the story of the Vermeer, see Hector Feliciano, *The Lost Museum: The Nazi Conspiracy to Steal the World's Greatest Works of Art* (New York, 1997); see esp. pp. 13–23, 44, 47, and 179.

Recent projects to trace provenance are underway around the world. See for example the Art Institute of Chicago Provenance Research Project, "Overview," <www.artic.edu/aic/provenance>; and the Harvard University Art Museums, Provenance Research project, outlined at <www.artmuseums.harvard.edu/research/provenance>. See also the Getty Research Institute, Getty Provenance Index project, <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/provenance/>.

ulate on a hypothetical whole. We can interpret the records to create our arrangements – which we ought to acknowledge are artificial constructions – and compile our administrative histories and contextual analyses.

But first archivists need to acknowledge the fact that the archives left in front of us – like the Fort Nanaimo wastebook – are only fragments of a larger story, part of a journey. Our job is to tell as much of that story as possible. To that end, I propose that we draw on the archaeological and artistic interpretations of provenance to expand our own definition, so that the concept encompasses not just the creation of the records but also their history over time and our role in their management. The question we need to ask is not "how did the records come to be?" The question, rather, is "how did *these* records come to be *here*?"

Rather than limit provenance to creatorship, we should expand the concept to incorporate the spatial and temporal qualities of archaeological provenience and artistic provenance. We already have in *RAD* an element that identifies the "immediate source of acquisition" of the records.[21] This field is, in effect, our archaeological provenience, our findspot. We also have in *RAD* an element that identifies the "custodial history" of the records.[22] This field is, in effect, our artistic provenance. We have identified these fields in our descriptive tools, but the fields are woefully underused. I believe they are crucial to our understanding of the records, and to the defence of the archival provenance that we should be protecting. Therefore, we should elevate them from mere optional descriptive entries to core tenets of archival practice. This new descriptive information should be prominent and searchable in our networks if we wish to surround our records with an enriched context and provide a better understanding for our users.

I propose that we redefine provenance to encompass three related components. First would be **creator history,** or the story of who created, accumulated, and used the records over time. This history should focus on the creator, not the records. The emphasis needs to be placed on who, not what. This is our existing archival provenance, enhanced to accommodate organizational and functional changes over time. The creator would not be defined in a single word or phrase. Rather it would be, as proposed by Terry Cook, "a virtual and more elastic concept reflecting those functions and processes of the creator that caused the record to be created, within and across constantly evolving organizations ... linked to function and activity."[23] Records can have many creators over time and space. All should be identified in this component of provenance. The creator of the Fort Nanaimo records was the Hudson's Bay Company; but

21 Bureau of Canadian Archives, *Rules for Archival Description,* Rule 1.8B12, p. 1–60.

22 Ibid., Rule 1.7A1, p. 1–45. It is ironic that custodial history is not in fact formally defined in the glossary to *RAD*. An unofficial definition was created during the drafting of *RAD*, then removed from the final version. The author is grateful to Bob Krawczyk for providing this background information about custodial history and *RAD*.

23 Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts," p. 21.

the creator was also Fort Nanaimo; and the Chief Factor of Fort Nanaimo; and perhaps the trader, and trapper, and ship's captain who helped keep Fort Nanaimo running. Creator history would encompass all these realities.

The second component of provenance would be the **records history,** or the story of the physical management and movement of the records over time. This would be an adaptation of artistic provenance. The records history – perhaps more accurately called the history of record-keeping – would be the story of the archives themselves: how they were created and used; who had them and when; where they were moved to and why; and whether any records were lost or destroyed, enhanced or altered, and why, up to and including the time they were transferred into archival custody. Why was the Fort Nanaimo wastebook created? What was it used for? Was it considered administratively important or ephemeral? Did the organization create indexes, apply retention schedules, or destroy obsolete files? Were records destroyed by fire, lost in a move, or given away in a company transfer? The history of record-keeping has been neglected far too long; the time has come to resurrect it.[24]

The third component of provenance would be **custodial history,** or the explanation of the transfer of ownership or custody of the records from the creator or custodian to the archival institution and the subsequent care of those records. This custodial history would be an enhanced understanding of archaeological provenience or the findspot. It would provide an essential but also neglected layer of contextualization in the archival process. Custodial history would document how the records came to be in the archives, and how they were managed in that institution over time. The Fort Nanaimo wastebook ended up in a provincial archives. The correspondence and daybooks ended up in a community archives. Why? How? What decisions did the archivist make? What was accepted in the acquisition and what was rejected? What was left after appraisal decisions were made? What descriptions or catalogues or indexes were prepared, and how did those descriptions change over time?

The archivist is an active player in the life of the record: we do not passively acquire records and stick them on shelves. We appraise and cull and weed, based on our naturally imperfect sense of what is or is not worth keeping over time. We describe, and redescribe, and index, and reindex. And sometimes we are not the last resting place for the archives, just a stop on the way. Are we not a bit arrogant in thinking we are some sort of St. Peter at the gates of archival heaven? A greater emphasis on custodial history would

24 At the Association of Canadian Archivists conference in Winnipeg in 2001, Tom Nesmith offered valuable insights into the issue of custodial history. See "Through Various Vicissitudes: Custodial History and Archival Theory" (unpublished paper, copy provided to the author in June 2002). In March 2002, Barbara Craig, Philip Eppard, and Heather MacNeil proposed the delivery of "A working conference on the history of records, records-keeping and archives," to be held in Toronto, Ontario, in October 2003. It is hoped that this conference marks the beginning of a renewed interest in the history of records.

require us to be more accountable for our own actions and more transparent about the management of the records in our care.[25]

What then of *respect des fonds?* I propose we replace that term with a new one – *respect de provenance.* This principle would encompass the three components identified here: creator history, records history, and custodial history. We cannot respect a fonds that can never exist. But we can respect the archives that do exist and document fully the context of their creation, use, and management.[26]

And what about the fonds*?* It is time to bid farewell to the term. We make a folly of our work by pretending to a totality we can never achieve. By referring to records as fonds*,* we are labelling them as something they are not and cannot be. And in the process we are ignoring how they came to be parts, not wholes. We manage records, and we manage archives, but we do not manage the fonds. In this case, the actual parts are greater than their sum as a hypothetical whole.[27]

25 Another related area worthy of investigation, beyond creator history, custodial history, and collection history, is the history of the use of the records. Who studies the records and why? What findings or consequences come from the use of those records? Climatologists use personal diaries to track weather patterns, and lawyers use church records to prove – or disprove – claims of abuse or mistreatment. And historical records have become the lifeblood for those researching land claims, especially in British Columbia. Archivists should also consider whether such information about the use of records ought to be tracked much more closely, as part of the story of the record. It is worth debating whether such information is also part of the "provenance" of the records and whether it should be incorporated into provenance descriptions or maintained as a separate administrative and descriptive element.

26 Respect for the reality of the records leads us to another failing in the *RAD* environment: the limited regard for the existence of collections. In principle, the CAIN system does not include items or artificial collections. The organizers of provincial and territorial networks have already established policies that focus on the description of fonds, not items or collections. According to the planners of the BCAUL system (which as the first union list has established a basis for practice in other jurisdictions), "single items are considered as fonds only if they meet the following criteria: whether the item is all that remains of the fonds, whether the item covers a span of years, whether there is evidence of an accumulation." (See Chris Hives and Blair Taylor, "Using Descriptive Standards as a Basis for Cooperation: The British Columbia Archival Union List," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), p. 74. (Also available at <http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/cain4.html>.)

If archivists are responsible for preserving and describing the records in hand, then if those records come in as single items or as collections, does that make them any less legitimate? Certainly, archivists ought to seek out groups of records, for the more we have in hand, the more of the story we can tell. But if the story comes as a collection of photographs or paintings or letters, is it less legitimate? When is something a collection and when is it "an archives" or "a fonds?" Rather than turn away from this conundrum, archivists should address the reality of collections and allow for their management, so that they too are described in our online systems and so are equally accessible to our users.

27 Here I must add a truly daunting coda. If there is no such thing as a totality of record; then is there such a thing as total archives? After having spent $100,000 and four years studying that subject for my Ph.D. dissertation – more than some Canadian archives have invested in the concept – I confess I am not ready to journey down that path quite yet.

Archaeologists rely on the layers of dirt to bear witness to what happened over time, by studying where objects are found in space. Museum curators turn to the “scribbles on the back” to explain the history of an object as it travels from place to place over time. Archivists need to be careful not to clean up the dirt and erase the scribbles, as we try to explain the history of archives over time and space. Let us explain who was involved with the creation and use of records, how those records were managed over time and space, and how they came to be in our institutions. Let people draw their own conclusions and make their own linkages. The Hudson’s Bay Company records in Nanaimo, and Victoria, and Winnipeg will cease to be fonds. They will be archives. And then, maybe, we will learn the story not just of how they came to be, but of how they came to be where they are now.