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Kelli Bogan

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To cite this article:

Bogan, K. (2024). Bridging the Gap: Integrating Archival Descriptive Best Practices in an Item-Level Dominated Museum Culture. *International Journal of Librarianship*, 9(2), 28-41. <https://doi.org/10.23974/ijol.2024.vol9.2.359>

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Bridging the Gap: Integrating Archival Descriptive Best Practices in an Item-Level Dominated Museum Culture

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ABSTRACT

Libraries, archives, and museum collections are distinct collecting entities that share similarities in their concepts and workflows, yet diverge in their fundamental approaches to descriptive work. While librarians and archivists are frequently associated due to their placement within institutional hierarchies and shared academic backgrounds, librarians and museum registrars are more naturally aligned in the realm of metadata. Both librarians and registrars traditionally emphasize item-level description whereas archivists prioritize a creator and collection-based approach. This article aims to explore the challenges of maintaining archival descriptive best practices within a museum culture that predominantly emphasizes object collections and item-level documentation. By identifying tools, techniques, and strategies archives can implement, museum staff can better understand and appreciate the unique contributions of archival practices. Additionally, advocating for archival standards to senior staff will foster a more comprehensive and holistic approach to cataloging and preserving cultural heritage. By recognizing the value of both item-level and collection-based approaches, the museum can create a more robust and interconnected system of documentation, enhancing the overall quality and accessibility of their collections and archives.

Keywords: Metadata, Archives, Advocacy, Collections, Cataloging

INTRODUCTION

Libraries, archives, and museum collections are distinct collecting entities that share similarities in their concepts and workflows, yet diverge in their fundamental approaches to descriptive work. While librarians and archivists are frequently associated due to their placement within institutional hierarchies and shared academic backgrounds, librarians and museum registrars are more naturally aligned in the realm of metadata. Both librarians and registrars traditionally emphasize item-level object description whereas archivists prioritize a creator and collection-based approach. This article aims to explore the challenges of maintaining and connecting archival descriptive best practices with a museum culture that predominantly emphasizes object collections and item-level documentation. By identifying tools, techniques, and strategies archives can implement, museum staff can provide better access across library, archives, and museum collections. Additionally,

advocating for archival standards to senior staff will foster a more comprehensive and holistic approach to cataloging and preserving cultural heritage. By recognizing the value of both item-level and collection-based approaches, the museum can create a more robust and interconnected system of documentation, enhancing the overall quality and accessibility of their collections and archives.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES

To effectively integrate archival descriptive practices within a museum culture, it is crucial to establish a clear understanding of the fundamental differences between item-level and collection-based approaches. It is important to note that although this discussion will involve generalizations, drawing upon common practices in the library, archives, and museum (LAM) communities, individual institutions vary in their cataloging and metadata approaches, tailoring them to their specific requirements. In addition, at many institutions, these departments may be combined or have overlapping responsibilities. At the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum (NBHFM), materials in our collections have transitioned between departments over the years as both best practices and the institution's organizational structure evolved. For our purposes here, we will treat them as distinct departments. Finally, this will not be an exhaustive review of the differences between the three professions and their practices. Instead, the goal is to provide sufficient context for our ongoing discussion.

An Item-level Approach

Item-level description involves thorough documentation of individual objects and is particularly suitable for libraries and museums. One of the primary advantages of item-level approaches is the precision and accuracy they supply in cataloging for search and retrieval.

Library collections in museums serve as vital repositories of information, supporting research, scholarship, and education related to the museum's exhibitions and collections. These collections, which typically consist of books, journals, and microfilm, offer valuable context, historical perspectives, and in-depth knowledge to both museum staff and external researchers. Catalog records for library items typically include essential fields such as call numbers, titles, authors, publication dates, publishers, editions, physical descriptions, subject headings, classifications, and locations. Additional metadata, such as summaries and annotations, may also be provided. Despite being time-intensive, this standardized approach ensures that users familiar with library catalog systems can easily locate desired materials across various libraries.

Museum collections typically consist of unique, individual objects, artifacts, artwork, specimens, etc. that were often used for a specific purpose. Item-level cataloging generally involves assigning unique identifiers (e.g., accession numbers), describing physical attributes, materials, dimensions, notable features, and providing cultural and historical context, photography, condition reporting, and location tracking. Metadata for museum collections supports scholarly research, enhances provenance tracking, and enriches visitor experiences. Detailed item-level descriptions also aid conservation efforts by enabling tailored preservation strategies, especially for delicate or sensitive objects requiring specialized care.

Item-level description also presents notable challenges. The time and resources required for such detailed documentation can be substantial, making it a resource-intensive process. As museums continue to be underfunded and understaffed, this approach may prove impractical for large or rapidly growing collections, potentially hindering the museum's ability to keep pace with acquisitions and ensure timely cataloging. As the seminal article, "More Product, Less Process" (MPLP) stipulates item-level cataloging and description contributes to the ongoing issue of massive backlogs of uncataloged materials in libraries, archives, and museums (Greene & Meissner, 2005).

Additionally, the emphasis on individual items may overshadow the broader context of a collection. While each artifact is meticulously documented, the overarching narrative of the collection as a whole may become obscured. This myopic focus may impede the museum's ability to convey overarching themes, trends, or historical connections that emerge when examining the collection holistically.

At NBHFM, we often receive donations that contain materials that span the collecting scopes of all three departments. In the past, those connections were lost as the materials were both physically and intellectually separated. Over time our staff has attempted to recreate some of these connections, a feat made easier in the age of digital collections and linked data, which we will explore in a later section.

A Collection-level Approach

In contrast to item-level approaches, collection-based descriptive practices revolve around understanding the relationships between items within a collection and their context within the broader historical or thematic narrative. This methodology seeks to streamline the cataloging process by treating entire collections as cohesive units, reducing the burden of exhaustive item-by-item documentation. Finding aids act as information gateways, enabling users to gauge a collection's relevance to their research before delving into individual items within a collection.

Museum archives house a variety of historical resources such as documents, records, photographs, artifacts, and other materials. These can encompass not only records pertaining to the institution itself but also manuscripts or special collections that align with the museum's mission and holdings. In contrast to library and museum collections, which may have holdings in the thousands or millions, a singular archival collection can contain thousands or millions of documents within itself. As such, it is common practice in archives to describe and provide access to entire collections rather than individually cataloging each item within. The level of description that is done beyond collection-level is determined by the specific needs of the collection and the institution's own best practices and procedures.

Collection-based approaches are efficient. Describing vast collections at the item-level is impractical and collection-level description expedites the cataloging process without compromising the integrity of the archival record. With the growing adoption of MPLP and extensible processing practices (Santamaria, 2014), institutions can describe collections at various levels, empowering them to determine the appropriate level for each collection and streamline the process from acquisition to access. Furthermore, collection-based approaches facilitate a holistic understanding of the museum's holdings in terms of broader historical, cultural, or artistic

contexts. This macroscopic view allows curators to identify trends, gaps, or unique characteristics within the collection, informing strategic decisions related to acquisitions, exhibitions, and educational programming.

Despite these advantages, collection-based approaches are not without their drawbacks. The streamlined nature of this methodology may sacrifice the level of detail provided by item-level descriptions. While overarching narratives and themes are captured, the individual stories and nuances of each artifact may lack depth and specificity. This limitation places more responsibility on researchers. It is particularly challenging at institutions like NBHFM that are located remotely and difficult to access in person. Moreover, institutions accustomed to item-level description may find the shift to collection-based approaches complex and burdensome. Curators, for instance, may struggle with reviewing finding aids, finding them confusing and time-consuming, potentially overlooking the broader benefits of collection-level description.

It should also be noted that as we transition further into a digital-first society, the traditional boundaries between item- and collection-level descriptive practices are becoming increasingly blurred. Many museums, recognizing the merits and drawbacks of these approaches, are now embracing hybrid methodologies that amalgamate the strengths of both paradigms. This shift is highlighted in “Metadata Standards Across Libraries, Archives, and Museums,” which argues “whether or not LAMs are converging physically, a case can certainly be made for digital convergence as the user is often unable to distinguish between a digital library, an online archive, or a virtual museum” (Gabriel, 2017). A novel approach emerges wherein collection-based strategies are employed for initial cataloging, followed by the supplementation of comprehensive finding aids with series and folder-level inventories, alongside detailed item-level descriptions for specific artifacts.

By striking this balance, museums can capitalize on the efficiency of collection-based approaches while preserving the depth of information provided by item-level descriptions for key pieces within the collection. This hybrid framework addresses resource constraints while ensuring that the museum’s archival practices remain adaptable to the unique needs of individual artifacts. However, this approach comes with its own challenges, particularly concerning the selection of highlighted pieces. These choices are typically made by museum staff and are often influenced by factors such as upcoming exhibitions, revenue generation objectives, or simply the subjective judgment of catalogers deeming certain items intriguing or unconventional. Such an approach inherently introduces biases and may inadvertently silence the voices of underrepresented communities within the narrative of the museum’s collection.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

In the ever-evolving landscape of cultural heritage management, the merger of library, archives, and museum practices has become increasingly essential. Traditionally distinct in their approaches to preservation, documentation, and accessibility, LAMs are now recognizing the advantages of bridging the gap between their methodologies. This section delves into the tools and techniques that can facilitate this convergence.

In his article “Artefacts and Archives: Considering Cross-Collection Knowledge Networks in Museums,” Mike Jones delineates four interconnected issues stemming from historical practices of managing archives and museum collections:

1. Collection items often lose their connection to the narratives and contexts they belong to.
2. Many museum systems lack explicit, navigable links between objects and accompanying documents.
3. Institutions frequently rely on staff members' implicit knowledge for known but undocumented connections, missing opportunities to capture and manage information discovered by others.
4. The link between collection documentation and evidence supporting recorded details is often neglected (Jones, 2015).

To tackle these challenges and foster connections among collections, institutions must lay a solid foundation. While this endeavor will require time and labor, the efforts invested will fortify the institution and enhance its adaptability in the long term.

Aggregating Collections

In the article "Nobody Knows You're a Dog (or Library, or Museum, or Archive) on the Internet: The Convergence of Three Cultures," Susan Allen states that "in the digital world, the distinctions between libraries, museums, and archives go away. Distinctions between these three kinds of institutions disappear because those using the Internet are only looking for information. They do not care where they find it" (Allen, 2002). Digital cataloging systems, image recognition technologies, and database management tools have revolutionized how museums document and share information about their collections. These tools can be used independently or collaboratively. In this paper, we will discuss various tools, including online public access catalogs (OPAC), content management systems (CMS), and digital asset management systems (DAMS), collectively referred to as management systems (MS). While these systems share similar functionalities, it's important to note there are notable distinctions between the tools. They should be seen as vessels for an institution's data, subject to change over time.

MS serve as centralized hubs for managing, organizing, and retrieving metadata and digital assets, facilitating online access to collections regardless of physical location. Integration of MS into library, archives, and museum workflows allows item-level descriptions and collection-level metadata to coexist, offering users a unified exploration experience. However, this integration process may reveal disparities between descriptive practices, necessitating cleanup efforts for a successful user experience.

This repository can be structured as a single system or as a network of interconnected systems. Each approach has its own advantages and limitations. There is no definitive right choice as the optimal solution depends on what the best choice is for your institution. At NBHFM, we experimented with both options.

Initially, we attempted to consolidate all systems using Islandora, a Digital Asset Management System. However, we encountered challenges with this approach. While Islandora excelled as a digital asset tool, it faced difficulties with MARC cataloging, had limitations in tracking museum collections, and necessitated the development of a custom Encoded Archival

Description (EAD) interface. Achieving success in this system would have required extensive customization and ongoing maintenance, which our infrastructure could not support.

Confronted with these obstacles, we ultimately opted for a network of three interconnected descriptive systems. For cataloging, we selected LibraryWorld, a cloud based solution that aligned with our needs and budget. ArchivesSpace (ASpace), an open source archives information management system was selected for the creation and management of our finding aids, while TMS Collections (TMSC) became our platform for accessioning and item-level descriptive work. Maintaining a single system for accessioning was crucial for our organization's operations.

In addition, we implemented eMuseum, a digital collections interface, for TMSC. This configuration allows each department to utilize their preferred cataloging system and adhere to industry standards while facilitating data linkage between systems. All three public interfaces integrated with finding aids exported into basic MARC format and uploaded into LibraryWorld, where they are linked to the full record in ASpace. Furthermore, folder- and item-level records in eMuseum are directly linked to records in both LibraryWorld and ASpace, enabling users to easily navigate between the three systems.

When implementing MS, it is imperative for archives staff to advocate for a system that not only accommodates but also enhances collection-level description. Too often, systems are chosen to fulfill the requirements of other departments, leaving archives to devise makeshift solutions such as sharing finding aids through PDFs or costly custom implementations. In the age of linked data, a finding aid that lacks meaningful connections to other information within the collections loses its utility. Fortunately, systems like the aforementioned ArchivesSpace or any platform that supports EAD excel in facilitating these connections.

It is worth noting that during NBHFM's system selection process, TMSC's archives add-on was demoed. However, at the time of review, it was found to be clunky and non-compliant with "Describing Archives: A Content Standard," (DACS) or EAD standards. Given the prior experience with the custom interface in Islandora, it became imperative to select a system that not only provides the best interface for collection-level description but also aligns with industry standards.

Ashley Blewer, founder of Archives of Tomorrow, has curated and continues to maintain a crowd-sourced list of digital repository options (Blewer, 2017). It is an excellent starting point for evaluating new systems.

Standardization

Establishing standardized metadata fields and taxonomy across collections departments is crucial for preparing metadata for connectivity. This ensures comprehensive and consistent records, whether describing items or collections. Upholding high-quality metadata standards enables efficient search and retrieval across libraries, museums, and archives. However, implementing these practices can be challenging due to existing entrenched practices. Successful implementation requires effective communication and adaptability.

In the past, NBHFM's descriptive work was performed in silos, even within departments. Lack of guidance and accountability left decisions up to the discretion of the cataloger, leading to the use of multiple fields or terms for capturing the same information. In 2016, recognizing the need for standardization, we took a proactive approach. A committee was formed, composed of content creators from all three departments. The facilitation and oversight were provided by a fourth department, initially known as Digital Strategy and later renamed Digital Assets. This department, responsible for managing the MS, facilitated discussions.

The committee selected three established structured vocabularies: the Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) was selected for genre terms, Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) for general subject headings, and Library of Congress Name Authorities (LCNAF) for people, institutions, and events. In addition, the committee began developing a new local vocabulary for terms that did not already have records in these existing structures and to assign overall classifications to objects. The overarching goal was to make our taxonomies output-neutral, capable of accommodating both the item-specific details found in catalog records and the broader collection context present in finding aids.

The committee initiated its work by reviewing the existing terminology in use, aiming to identify any instances of term duplication. When terms were found to be synonymous or closely similar, discussions ensued regarding whether both (or all) terms should be retained or if a single term could adequately address everyone's needs. If the decision was made to remove a term, it would be designated as an alternate term in the MS controlled vocabulary interfaces. This approach ensured that users searching for the alternate term would be redirected to the approved one. This technique was also used to update racist and sexist terminology. In instances where discussions became contentious, voting was used to reach a resolution with the committee chair making the final decision in a case of a split vote.

To maintain consistency in the vocabulary as the project progressed, preventive measures were implemented within the system. Instead of importing the entire libraries of authoritative sources like AAT, LCSH, and LCNAF, Digital Assets maintained an internally built vocabulary indicating the origin of each term. Whenever a user added a new term, a workflow was triggered, prompting an alert for review by the broader committee. Additionally, Digital Assets staff routinely reviewed the controlled vocabularies across systems to identify and rectify accidental duplication or redundancy, ensuring the integrity and coherence of the vocabulary.

In addition to developing taxonomies, we also established minimum level descriptive standards across all three departments. These standards are modeled on the hierarchical approach outlined in DACS, which defines levels of description in finding aids (TS-DACS, n.d.). Setting minimum field requirements for both collection- and item-level descriptions ensures uniformity in descriptive work across all departments. Additionally, we mapped fields across systems, aligning them with the digital collections portal. This guarantees a consistent public interaction experience, regardless of the department of origin or the corresponding presentation system.

Cross-Referencing

With the systems and standards in place, the next step is to provide the connections. This integration ensures that item-level descriptions are not isolated but linked to pertinent collection-level information. For instance, consider a scenario where a museum receives a donation from a

prominent local family, consisting of both photographs sent to the archives and clothing sent to museum collections. In the past, these distinct sets of materials might have been independently described, leading to a potential loss of connection between them. In today's era of interconnected systems, a finding aid can be created for the overall collection and detailed records can be interlinked to that finding aid. This cross-referencing approach enhances the visitor experience by offering not only specific details about individual items but also a broader historical or thematic context for the entire collection.

Finding aids play a crucial role in assisting researchers in navigating and locating specific materials within archival collections. Integrating these finding aids with museum practices can enhance the contextual understanding of artifacts and artworks.

Museums frequently showcase artifacts without delving into their broader historical context. By cross-referencing archival finding aids, museums can elevate the narratives surrounding exhibited items. For instance, a painting from a specific period can be linked to contemporaneous letters, photographs, or documents from archival holdings. This linkage provides visitors with a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the cultural and historical background associated with the showcased items.

The NBHFM can leverage collection- and item-level connections. Many of the items in the museum collections are game-used or originate from a player's personal collection. Through interconnected systems, the museum can now establish links between these individual items and finding aids associated with the respective player, events linked to the item, and resources within the library collection that enrich the item's narrative. This approach also enables a discovery system to aggregate similar items and collections using algorithms, presenting new opportunities for users to engage with the institution and encouraging interdisciplinary research and dynamic and content-rich physical and virtual exhibitions.

Collaboration

Collaboration is key to successfully integrating archival descriptive practices into a museum culture. Fostering collaboration encourages the exchange of knowledge and expertise. Museum staff can learn from archival best practices, incorporating them into their item-level descriptions, while archivists gain insights into the significance of highlighting individual items within a collection.

Digital platforms enable museums to create dynamic, searchable databases that provide both a macroscopic and microscopic view of their holdings. Depending on a system's capabilities, technological expertise, and bandwidth, a platform can be presented where users can navigate between overarching narratives and detailed records, fostering a more immersive and accessible experience.

Utilizing these tools and techniques, institutions can break down silos between library, archive, and museum departments, creating a more interconnected approach to descriptive work. As technology continues to evolve, museums have unprecedented opportunities to enhance their archival practices. Digital tools empower institutions to create dynamic, accessible, and immersive experiences for audiences while preserving the integrity of their collections. By embracing innovation and finding a harmonious balance between different descriptive approaches, museums

can weave a tapestry that not only preserves the past but also engages and enlightens present and future generations.

When linking archival materials at NBHFM, we follow a structured process. Using the Goodwin & Co. cigarette and cabinet cards collection, we will show this interconnectivity. First, we create a library catalog record, offering a basic description of the finding aid. Within that record, users will find a link to the finding aid, accessible at <https://archives.baseballhall.org>. There, users will find a comprehensive collection-level description of the materials. If the collection includes digital objects, users can conveniently navigate to those materials directly from the finding aid to our digital collections portal accessible at <https://collection.baseballhall.org>. This allows users to navigate across collection- and item-level descriptions and select the record that best suits their needs.

By building these collaborative platforms, libraries, archives, and museums can develop more cohesive approaches to collections care in general. Understanding what each area has and is actively collecting ensures that the strengths of all areas are leveraged to build comprehensive and well-rounded collections that reflect the diversity of human history and creativity. They also allow LAMs to pool their resources, making it possible to undertake large-scale preservation projects that benefit all three sectors. This collaborative approach enhances the overall preservation infrastructure within cultural heritage institutions.

Extensible Metadata

While the previous sections focused primarily on bridging existing collection- and item-level descriptions or enriching archival collection-level descriptions with more detailed information, we are now going to shift our perspective and explore strategies to extend the advantages of collection-level description to traditional item-level descriptive work which can optimize resources and enhance user experiences.

In their article “Designing a Multi-Level Metadata Standard Based on Dublin Core for Museum Data,” authors Jing Wan, Yubin Zhou, Gang Chen, and Junkai Yi delve into this approach, examining China’s distinctive method of cultural relics management. They propose a standard of description comprising “core metadata based on Dublin Core, and specific metadata extensions for drawings, porcelain, ancient buildings, and inscriptions. For each metadata category, [they] provide terms, definitions, refinements, registration rules, and detailed samples” (Wan et al., 2014). This extensible description approach in museum collections contrasts with the United States’ focus on the intricate nuances of individual pieces.

At NBHFM, a collection of photographs captured by Charles Conlon, widely regarded as the pioneer of baseball photography, illustrates this approach. Since many of Conlon’s portrait photography shared similar descriptions, particularly those featuring the same subjects, metadata creation for each individual image would be redundant. Instead, the institution opted to develop descriptions that outline overarching features of the photographs within each folder. These photographs were then consolidated under a single record in the digital collection, allowing users to seamlessly browse through the images, simulating an in-person experience. A similar approach could be taken with museum collections objects that meet the same criteria such as sets of baseballs signed by Hall of Famers at a NBHFM event.

This approach could also be implemented even earlier in the museum collections workflow. At NBHFM artifacts will often arrive from the same event, game, or individual. If these were archival materials, they were accessioned together and treated as a collection. If they were museum objects, they were separated and individually described in detail, with any historical significance documented in a historical note. Occasionally, these objects might receive a “see also” note to establish connections between them. Unfortunately, users often had to manually track down objects from the same event using tags and keyword searches to reconstruct these connections.

As silos within the institution began to break down and cross-departmental collaboration increased, discussions emerged regarding the approach to description and its rationale. Staff members began borrowing from each other’s methodologies, leading the museum collections team to group materials arriving together and provide overarching descriptions of their shared significance before delving into more detailed item-level descriptions. Moreover, as new donations containing materials spanning multiple departments were received, new workflows were implemented. These donations were assigned a single accession number based on the predominant LAM department’s numbering system, and then stored in their appropriate department and storage facilities.

This approach is not without its challenges. Museum artifacts will often still require a high level of item-level description, including conservation reports, location tracking, and exhibition information. However, these challenges should not deter institutions from recognizing the benefits of exploring a collection-level approach beyond the archives. By leveraging overarching descriptions to enhance access to individual items, institutions can streamline workflows, optimize resources, and offer users enriching experiences that highlight the interconnectedness and significance of museum collections.

ADVOCATING FOR ARCHIVAL STANDARDS

Considering the complexities outlined above, navigating the nuances and subtle differences can be challenging even for professionals within these fields. Leadership and individuals outside of the LAM sector do not need to understand every detail. Instead, they should understand how to advocate for their collections staff and how this work aligns to the museum’s mission. This section will discuss strategies to advocate for the adoption of archival descriptive practices to leadership.

Emphasize Contextualization

Advocacy for archival standards should center on the value of contextual information in preserving cultural heritage. By highlighting the importance of understanding the relationships between items and their broader context, advocates can demonstrate how archival practices contribute to a more profound and nuanced understanding of cultural artifacts. For instance, in the context of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, showcasing the interconnected stories of players, teams, and historical moments through archival practices can enhance the overall narrative presented to visitors. This emphasis on context adds layers of meaning to individual items, making them more than standalone artifacts.

Furthermore, advocacy should highlight the research and educational benefits of adopting archival standards. Researchers often seek comprehensive information extending beyond individual artifacts, and aligning museum practices with archival approaches can attract scholars interested in studying broader historical or thematic contexts. Additionally, educational programs can benefit from a richer pool of resources, allowing museums to develop more robust materials that showcase the interconnectedness of historical events.

Code Switching

Effectively advocating for archival standards within the LAM sector requires bridging the gap between specialized terminology and practices and the broader institutional context. To engage different departments within the museum, it's essential to frame discussions in ways that resonate with their objectives. While development is highlighted here, these principles apply across departments.

When interacting with development, emphasize the significance of historical context in donor relations. Illustrate how treating materials as collections rather than individual items establishes a lasting legacy for donors and their families. For instance, the Don Wingfield photographic materials at NBHFM is a collection of over six linear feet of black-and-white and color negatives created by Wingfield. In an item-level approach, Wingfield's name may appear in the credit line in an exhibit if a photograph is ever selected for display or will eventually be connected to digital images of the negatives if they are ever digitized. But with a collection-level description, a finding aid was created for Winfield which includes biographical information and an overview of his collection. This collection-level approach, facilitated by finding aids accessible via the museum's website, fosters a deeper connection between donors and the institution, promoting support for preservation, conservation efforts, and exhibits aligned with donors' interests (Purcell, 2015). Additionally, having a publicly available overview of the collection allows development to fundraise for additional processing and imaging support.

The end goal is to help other departments recognize the value that archival practices bring to their work. By establishing these connections and demonstrating the broader impact of archival standards, you can cultivate allies who will advocate for your department from their unique perspectives. Building these connections fosters advocacy for archival initiatives across the institution, ultimately strengthening the museum's overall mission.

Talking Points

When seeking stakeholder buy-in, it is imperative to highlight the value of collection-level processing. Here are several benefits of collection-level description that can be effectively communicated during discussions:

- Establishes a baseline level of description. The primary objective of libraries, archives, and museums is to facilitate access. Collection-level processing ensures that users receive sufficient information to understand the content, relevance, and accessibility of materials.
- Detailed processing of one collection can impact the allocation of time and resources for other projects. Factors such as anticipated research significance, institutional priorities,

restrictions, collection size, and material type influence the necessity of a more thorough description process.

- Description is an iterative process. While there is always the option to revisit and enhance descriptions over time, initial investments of time and resources cannot be reclaimed. Therefore, it is crucial to allocate resources thoughtfully to meet the needs of the institution, researchers, staff, and the collection itself.
- Processing encompasses both arrangement and description, but these are distinct tasks. As noted by Carrie Hintz in “Processing Levels: The Hows and Whys,” “by breaking apart these two aspects of processing we have more flexibility in how we approach and make available collections, and we can be more efficient and effective in managing each individual collection and serving our users” (Hintz, 2015).

Continuing Education

Advocacy efforts should also include proposals for training and professional development programs to equip museum staff with the necessary skills for archival practices. Workshops, seminars, and collaborative projects can facilitate knowledge exchange between museum registrars and archivists, fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation. This is particularly vital for organizations that have historically emphasized and entrenched an item-level philosophy. Even archivists familiar with archival standards may benefit from refreshers, particularly in environments where collection-level description has been discouraged. Educating other departments on finding aids’ functionality and navigation will encourage their effective utilization.

CONCLUSION

By recognizing the value of both item-level and collection-based approaches, the museum can create a more robust and interconnected system of documentation. Integrating archival descriptive practices enriches the understanding and appreciation of cultural artifacts. Through collaboration and strategic advocacy, museums can embrace the best of both worlds, enhancing the overall quality and accessibility of their collections.

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About the author

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