

Photography Archives Organization and best practices

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ARCHIVE PLANNING

- The common thread is photography - yet each archive is different
- Important to determine the SCOPE of the archive
- what kind of photographer? and what kind of archive?
Important to determine since for many the main goal is to place the archive in an institution/collecting archive

- Determine the 'value' or the SCOPE of the archive:
 - fine art (market for prints and collecting)
 - commercial (licensing revenue)
 - research archive - whether art or historical
 - or some/all of the above

Essentially 3 main principles in archives:

- Preservation
- Organization
- Access

These have their own elements but inform each other, especially in small archives, in terms of practical and financial resources

PRESERVATION

Preservation for a small archive can be selective based on organization and priorities, based on understanding the scope of the archive, but there are basic principles to follow

1. importance of temperature and humidity control

- does not have to mean cold storage - no basements/attics or hot storage units
- maintenance of archive in environments that do not fluctuate

2. archival boxes, sleeves, and archival folders for papers

- polypropylene sleeves/boxes for negatives and important prints
- not every print needs a sleeve, only the best prints, paper does not need sleeves (use vertical folders)

3. FLAT storage - avoid overpacking or creating weight

4. Replace/do not use: plastic (PVC), acidic paper, cardboard, glassine, rubber bands/paper clips, inks (use light pencil)

ORGANIZATION

- Every archive has its own inherent organization based on the photographer's own practice - no one size fits all
- Emphasis on organized *approach* and creating a means of intellectual access to the collection
- Understanding the scope of the archive

1) Keep as much of the **original order** of the photographer's archive as possible

- chronological, subject files, projects, books, exhibitions -- how did this photographer work?
- if a project and its related prints were kept separate by the photographer, keep this distinction
- keep checklists and paperwork related to exhibitions and gallery shows
- for preservation purposes, prints, negatives, and paper materials should ideally be kept in separate appropriate archival boxes
- keep reference to related content by keeping in the same order

- 2) Focus as well on importance of papers, correspondence and ephemera - an important part of the photographer's archive
- context and history of the photographer, their art, their colleagues
 - early material very important
 - preserve/organize papers as well as prints

3) Think about the bigger picture instead of focusing on 'item level'

- photography archives pose a challenge in that they are often art and archive
- photography archives are unique in that they have duplicate prints
- important to distinguish parts of the whole and assign value/importance to different levels of materials

- archives at institutions are organized by SERIES, within which are boxes/folders with general subject or chronological headings
 - archives at institutions not cataloged (or digitized) at the item level
- for time and financial resources, important not to think linear ‘start to finish’ - think in terms of groups or sections
 - create an intellectual arrangement of materials that allows access and an overview, then selectively pull or digitize best quality
 - not every print needs to be catalogued as a fine art print or inventoried to the same degree

Chronological print divisions: vintage/modern/estate

In addition, think about the following divisions of the archive:

1. Research archive
 - representation of the entirety of the photographer's work
 - a selection of existing prints that encompass the entirety of the archive
2. Fine art/Best prints
 - selected from the above and directed towards museum or gallery sales
3. Personal/Family
 - prints that are either designated for family to keep, or personal materials that family would prefer to keep

Important to have an appraisal to determine value

- determine if there is a fine art or collecting market, and the values for vintage/modern/estate
- seek estate planning/legal advising where appropriate

ACCESS

- 1) Database / Digitization
- 2) Guide to the collection
 - written overview of the archive

DATABASES/DIGITIZATION

DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

- preserve and process materials then selectively digitize to best represent the collection
- digitization is both access and preservation but should not override physical preservation
- film based media should be digitized promptly

- create a hierarchy for digital photography files that is consistent with physical archive organization (e.g. FOLDER/SUBFOLDER/FILE)
- create naming conventions for digital photography or digitized photos
- best practice for filenames is generally a code that includes:
 - year
 - subject or source
 - sequential number
 - ex. 1955_NewYorkCity_001
- keep physical archive in original order and use the database to create cross-reference and subject access

GUIDE TO ARCHIVE

- create a written guide to the archive
- overview of the archive, not a full inventory
- overview at the BOX level; as time/resources permit, include print counts or folder counts for more important materials

Example:

- 6 archival flat boxes of test prints, arranged by subject (list subjects/years)
- 2 file drawers of tear sheets, arranged in alphabetical order (list subjects/years)

In conclusion:

- focus on the scope of the archive and organize/prioritize according to that purpose and keep the photographer's original order
- preparation is important, however remember if the archive is donated to an institution, it will be well taken care of by professional archivists
- preservation to protect the materials - and - intellectual organization that supports the photographer's vision that is done in the present will help to preserve the archive for the future

RESOURCES

- *Photographs: Archival Care and Management* (Mary Ritzenthaler, ed., 2006)
- Society of American Archivists - <http://www2.archivists.org>
- Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division
- Northeast Document Conservation Center
- Archival suppliers - Archival Methods, Hollinger
- view online finding aids at archival institutions for examples