

January 1997

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Gloria Meraz  
*Texas Library Association*

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### Recommended Citation

Meraz, Gloria, "Cultural Evidence: On the Common Ground Between Archivists and Museologists," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 15 no. 1 (1997) .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol15/iss1/2>

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## **Cultural Evidence: On the Common Ground Between Archivists and Museologists**

**Gloria Meraz**

### **Introduction**

Museums and archives represent two of the most durable and long-lived means for perpetuating culture and social memory. Like their sister repository, the library, museums and archives fill long-established and specialized roles in the care of cultural materials. These roles, crafted over centuries of changing responsibilities and pressures, must be re-examined in the face of modern needs, technologies, and expectations. While archival repositories and museums have developed into two distinctive types of cultural institutions, they now find themselves amidst a need to consolidate their efforts and provide the public with a coherent means for accessing the increasingly fragmented and diverse cultural evidence produced today. Making this cultural evidence accessible implies not only offering the actual materials but also requiring concerted efforts to link the historical and intellectual functions served by all forms of historical records. Accordingly, it is incumbent upon archivists and museum professionals to provide a holistic context for the materials they hold and to build avenues by which users can connect information from all types of historical evidence.

While many agree that cultural institutions should work together closely, museum and archives professionals have collaborated only to a very small degree. They remain entrenched, rather, in their individual vocabularies and perspectives. While many factors contribute to this continued separation, perhaps the most glaring ones concern the mutually vague sense each repository has of the other. They falter in establishing a connection between the kinds of information available through archives and artifacts, and they falter in sharing the common ground between them. While most museum professionals and archivists generally acknowledge that both work in the overarching "cultural" arena, they define and limit their work exclusively by and to the particular methods of their own profession. Yet, ironically, the most fundamental concerns in one field echo the concerns in the other and thus reveal areas for common discussion: 1) the future of cultural institutions, 2) the changing perception of cultural materials, 3) current professional attitudes concerning the nature of collaboration, and 4) potential joint programs designed to foster a more comprehensive use of cultural materials.

### **Cultural Institutions**

Perhaps the gravest concern faced by cultural institutions is responding to the many changes occurring within the cultural community, while simultaneously maintaining their traditional identities. A shortage of funding, greater competition for public recognition and use, and the effects of an increasingly technologically based infrastructure for disseminating information have led museum professionals and archivists to "modernize" their professional techniques in order to address these pressures. And, at least as significantly as modernizing their respective approaches, both institutions have struggled also to stake out their positions amidst the merging of traditionally information-driven and cultural aspects of historical repositories. This dynamic and often

volatile relationship raises two essential questions in the archival and museum literature: whether traditional repositories will necessarily become more attentive to one aspect—informational or cultural—of their work, and what such a choice will mean for the future survival of institutions.

In many ways, the questions seem odd since cultural institutions have always functioned both as information sources and as cultural repositories.<sup>1</sup> That is, the cultural materials found in museums and archives are used to satisfy particular information needs; they also serve an important social function that relates to the public on a collective rather than individual level.<sup>2</sup> In this public sense, cultural repositories act as custodians of unique cultural evidence by insuring its preservation for future use. This function involves both the selection and maintenance of materials that may or may not be used by contemporary users. The criteria for saving and keeping these materials are based on the potential for future use and on the importance of the materials in providing evidence of events that institutions determine are valuable for society to preserve.

Although they fulfill both functions, museums and archives have traditionally shaped their institutional work along one primary course. Museums have identified most strongly with the cultural aspects of their work, and archives with the informational ones. Museums, for instance, primarily make

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<sup>1</sup> Because both museums and archives include diverse kinds of institutions, it is helpful to clarify the scope of coverage. While many archival repositories fulfill a more administrative role (that is, they are administrative archives), the phrase *archival repositories* will refer primarily to collecting archival repositories. Similarly, the museums discussed here are mostly history, natural history, and science and technology museums. However, all types of institutions will be considered when discussing the natures of the professions on the whole.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth E. Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," *American Archivist* 53 (summer 1990): 380.

their collections accessible through exhibits, a format that preestablishes the context of artifacts. Such an action emphasizes the museum's function in preserving culture(s). It demonstrates the importance of artifacts beyond any particular use museum visitors may have for them, since it is the museum staff that selects the items. In other words, the visitor views the artifacts the museum has established are important. Conversely, archivists view their records primarily as items for original research. While they too must preserve materials, users access only the material they request. Consequently, archivists focus most ostensibly on serving the information needs of the research community. The emphasis therefore remains on the records as information sources rather than as cultural items.

Today, however, the museum and archival literatures reveal a similar reexamination of these functions and question what priority should be ascribed to each given the changing expectations of the public. Museum professionals and archivists are attempting to decide between the merits of providing a balance between informational and cultural aspects of their work and the merits of minimizing the emphasis of the cultural aspect for the sake of the other. Speaking on the need to follow the former case, Canadian archival philosopher Hugh Taylor wrote that cultural repositories already work with a constrained interpretation of cultural materials.<sup>3</sup> Archivists, he argued, often fail to see the significance of records beyond their extant content. Perhaps because archivists are so immersed in the specific duties of their jobs, they give secondary attention to the cultural implications of archives. He called for a greater interplay between the cultural and informational dimensions of archival materials as well as for a more museum-like focus on the

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<sup>3</sup> Hugh Taylor, "'Heritage' Revisited: Documents as Artifacts in the Context of Museums and Material Culture," *Archivaria* 40 (fall 1995): 8-20.

relationship between records and the public, which, both as individuals and on a more abstract level, must be served.

In several works, David Bearman presents the most opposing and controversial view of Taylor's call for integration. Bearman calls for a complete separation between management archivists, who concentrate on the immediate needs of users and on justifying archival repositories in terms of their current value, and archivists whom Richard Cox labeled "manuscript-type" curators, who deal with primarily historical records and place at least equal importance (to that of current use) on the future use of archival records.<sup>4</sup> Although Bearman's and Cox's writings are based in their work in administrative archives, their stand on the future of the archival profession has provided the fodder for an increasingly heated debate in the profession as a whole. As Cox recently wrote, "[T]he curatorial types will become more a part of the museum community and play a lesser role in the issues of documenting society or any particular kinds of organizations. This will be a painful process, but in the end the *archival* profession will be strengthened."<sup>5</sup> Linda Henry, an appraisal archivist with the National Archives, recently denounced Bearman, his "cohorts" (among whom she counts Cox), and "Bearmania" as advocating an ahistorical and narrow view of the profession.<sup>6</sup> Henry provided what to date has been one of the most thorough arguments against Bearman's well-stated position. Essentially, Henry countered Bearman's stance that archivists could insure their

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<sup>4</sup> David Bearman, "Archival Strategies," *American Archivist* 58 (fall 1995): 380-413, and Richard J. Cox, "Archives and Archivists in the Twenty-First Century: What Will We Become?" *Archival Issues* 20, no. 1 (1995): 109.

<sup>5</sup> Cox, "Archives and Archivists in the Twenty-First Century," 109 [italics his].

<sup>6</sup> Linda Henry, "Schellenberg in Cyberspace" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Chicago, Illinois, 25-31 August 1997).

professional survival only by working exclusively on the information/records management aspect of archival work. Henry observed that, if indeed archivists assumed only that role, there would be no archival profession left—only records management.

While correct on many critical points, Henry failed to mention that, in several respects, Bearman has asked—and forced others in the profession to ask—difficult questions that archivists have yet to answer fully. Bearman, although not the first nor only person to address these matters, focused issues in *a new professional vision* regarding archivists' responsibility to current users, financial accountability, the options of long-term storage, custodianship of records, the need for technological solutions to technological problems, and a reexamination of the role of records in "preserving recordness." Whether one agrees with Bearman on the whole, in part, or not at all, his writings reflect a mounting tension. His description of the changes within the field, while important, fall second to the implicit recognition that the outside forces shaping the profession potentially are more revolutionary. No longer is it an academic or professionally delimited question whether archives are cultural, administrative, or somewhere-in-between kinds of institutions. Instead, if they are to prosper, cultural institutions must define their functions according to values the public will legitimize and support.

Museums, on the other hand, experience no difficulty understanding the cultural dimension of their work. Yet, lest one should assume that the museum profession is any less susceptible to the divisiveness of a professional debate, one only has to turn to the differing interpretations concerning the museum's role in conveying the meaning or value of objects. Traditionally, museum curators have assumed that visitors "receive" whatever ideas and information had been carefully presented. Yet, increasingly, museum professionals recognize that *meaning* is a constructive process in which the user plays

at least an equal part to that of the museum.<sup>7</sup> That is, the user brings to the museum interaction his or her own expectations and cognitive abilities to interpret and eventually to draw meaning from the objects and exhibits. Moreover, visitors want platforms that address their questions and concerns. Given the multiple ways in which objects can be presented and interpreted, museums misstep by ignoring the immediate demands of their constituencies and by confining the informational value of artifacts to a traditional and uncontested framework—issues and settings—that museums select as the means for access.

Peter Vergo, one of the most controversial writers in the museum field, voiced the concern of “new museology,” a disciplinary perspective of the museum community which holds that traditional museology focuses too much on methods for improving internal procedures and not for enhancing its service to the public.<sup>8</sup> Museums, Vergo warned, do not respond to the public’s cultural plurality, economics, and politics. Instead, museums stand primarily as unresponsive monologues that continue whether or not visitors are listening. “Unless a radical re-examination of the role of museums within society—by which I do not mean measuring their ‘success’ merely in terms of criteria such as more money and more visitors—takes place, museums may well find themselves dubbed only ‘living fossils’.”<sup>9</sup> Dierdre Stam, a critic of Vergo, noted that while new museology signifies a movement to exploit information about objects for use in wider museum

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Alan Watkins, director of the Appalachian Cultural Museum, discusses the impact of these perspectives, although he cautions that such a viewpoint suggests that every person can ultimately become his or her own curator—a position, he maintains, that weakens museums, “Are Museums Still Necessary?” *Curator* 37, no. 1 (1994): 27–8.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Vergo, ed., *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989), 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, note 4, 3.



functions such as interpretation and access, no specific mechanisms for doing so have been offered.<sup>10</sup>

Like the archival field, the museum community is searching for ways to maintain authority over its holdings. The status of museums as legitimate instruments to guard and present artifactual evidence is being challenged. The challenge results largely from the public's growing awareness that museum exhibitions of the past often represented limited views of cultures and events. Charles Alan Watkins observed that the public is demanding greater control over the content—in terms of artifacts displayed and exhibition themes chosen—and that it wants a closer interaction (not just passive viewing) with that content.<sup>11</sup> While the museum community is attempting to become more inclusive and open, the dissatisfaction, or the public's feelings of "alienation" from traditional repositories, has paved the way for the establishment of other forms of cultural enterprises. Profit operations, such as Disney's Epcot Center, and countless civil hall exhibits draw large crowds, which museums fear are relying on essentially entertainment-driven activities to provide accurate and authentic cultural evidence. Museologist Julia D. Harrison noted that while museums have necessarily adapted some entertainment practices to continue attracting visitors, they must still find a balance between meeting the shifting needs of their public and maintaining the legitimacy of their collections as the basis for a continuing portrayal of society.<sup>12</sup> The museum community's fear is that, if it becomes too focused on current needs, it will lose the

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<sup>10</sup> Dierdre C. Stam, "The Informed Muse: The Implications of 'The New Museology' for Museum Practice," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 12 (1993): 271-72.

<sup>11</sup> Watkins, "Are Museums Still Necessary?" 25-7.

<sup>12</sup> Julia Harrison, "Ideas of Museums in the 1990s," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 13 (1993): 170-71.

footing—the long-term vision and social responsibility—that makes museums an essential, public good.

Archives and museums are struggling to define themselves amidst two dual, sometimes conflicting, responsibilities. The first is meeting the expectations and information needs of an increasingly demanding public. The second is delivering the more abstract service of preserving culture, maintaining the integrity of records, and thus assuring the protection of rights and viewpoints. If the records that repositories hold did not so strongly serve both cultural and informational concerns, the debate would be moot since the repositories would have fewer options in developing services and shaping their futures. The nature of unique records, however, insures that cultural repositories must continually reexamine the inherent potentials for use of their holdings. While many professionals in both fields have offered the advantages of focusing on one area of responsibility (namely, Bearman and Stam), there are advantages in emphasizing both. The cultural and informational aspects of records do not have to work at odds; they merely need to be understood in their separate and multiple contexts.

Furthermore, the public expects its cultural institutions to fulfill certain duties. Chief among those duties is the responsibility to act for the collective good of the society. While the public is indeed pushing for a greater response to their individual information needs, it does not absolve cultural repositories from traditional mandates.<sup>13</sup> Much of the

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<sup>13</sup> A study sponsored by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and published by the Benton Foundation found that the public perceived libraries' importance primarily due to their social and cultural character. If such a view holds true for libraries, which are associated arguably more with meeting current information needs, the public's perception of the cultural value of institutions is easily applicable to museums and archives, "Buildings, Books, and Bytes: Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age," at <<http://www.benton.org/Library/Kellogg/buildings.html>>.

support—financial and ideological—that cultural repositories receive is based largely on their perceived role as permanent institutions whose interest in culture and society is long-term, not transitory. If repositories abandon that obligation, public support not only will end but also potentially will cast public suspicion on any activity the repositories would then presume to undertake. Perhaps the primary caveat is that while change is necessary, continuity is irreplaceable.

If cultural repositories acknowledge an imperative to pursue actively both aspects of their work, they ultimately must convince the public of the value in using records and artifacts both for the information they contain and the culture they embody. To do this, museum professionals and archivists must find concrete ways of showing this duality. And it is here that the two come to points of collaboration. Each repository already possesses particular expertise that can be used to broaden and *make tangible* an expanded range of functions and potential. By taking their respective positions within the overall cultural domain, museums and archives can help legitimize one another by supporting the role the other plays in maintaining the cultural record. They can share solutions to problems that clearly confront them both. They can affirm their professional status and institutional purposes by demonstrating a productive and necessary fit between archives and museums, between records and artifacts.

### **Cultural Materials**

On a general level, museums and archives acknowledge that life is a discourse conducted through both objects and records, where each type of record signifies a unique expression. Artifacts and archives complement the information in one another and simultaneously provide the basis for an understanding derived from the particular properties inherent in their form. Moreover, artifacts and archives indicate different representations of past activities. As primary materials, they are tools that serve as original

“participants” in events. Where the tool is physical, the tool creates the activity. Where the tool is textual, the activity creates the tool. And history is both a product of initiating an activity and weighing the evidence left from that event. Archives and artifacts are necessary for a complete historical narrative.

Yet, in practice, archivists and museum professionals fail to recognize that making historical evidence accessible not only means linking archives with archives and artifacts with other artifacts but also implies situating historical evidence within the overall environment of cultural materials. Museum professionals and archivists tend to focus exclusively on improving existing methods and perspectives within their particular domains.<sup>14</sup> By separating artifacts and archives from one another, cultural workers lose the opportunity to enhance the “voice” of their particular records. Not surprisingly, cultural records are isolated both physically and intellectually. This divide results not only from discipline-oriented biases but also from the chaotic and changing nature of cultural materials as well.

The increasingly fractured production of cultural materials makes documenting social groups particularly difficult.<sup>15</sup> Archivist Helen W. Samuels tackled the problem of documentation by outlining a series of documentation strategies designed to identify and preserve documentation about a particular area or activity.<sup>16</sup> Her pioneering work focused on documenting an activity by identifying, in advance, what records provided evidence of that action. Instead of allowing records to reconstruct the activity, Samuels specified

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<sup>14</sup> Randall C. Jimerson, “Redefining Archival Identity: Meeting User Needs in the Information Society,” *American Archivist* 54 (summer 1989): 332–40.

<sup>15</sup> Hugh Taylor, *Archival Services and the Concept of the User: A RAMP Study* (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Helen W. Samuels, “Improving Our Disposition: Documentation Strategy,” *Archivaria* 33 (winter 1991–1992): 125–27.

that the activity should guide the policies for retaining appropriate records. Moreover, she acknowledged that such a holistic approach must necessarily be conducted on a multi-institutional level. She was concerned with the fundamental task of all cultural institutions—the ongoing process of appraisal and preservation of the cultural record. While few others have proposed such an expansive view of cultural records and the conjugate need to integrate strategies for their preservation, she is not alone in recognizing the need for a more cohesive plan for bringing together multiple forms of evidence. Susan M. Pearce, director of the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, described the growing movement to preserve culture as a complex portrayal, in which “context” translates into “community,” and material culture, in all its forms, represents an expression of that community at all levels.<sup>17</sup>

Documenting modern communities proves particularly difficult in light of the often chaotic and unpredictable production of cultural materials. A look at the rise of social groups in the 1960s illustrates this point. Historian David E. Kyvig noted that the civil rights movement exposed weaknesses in social identity and legitimized discrete groups that demanded recognition of their roles in the cultural establishment.<sup>18</sup> This shift in political and social power led to a greater interest in understanding these groups, which, as never before, united in a forceful declaration of self-identity. These minority groups brought their own means of communication and cultural documentation into mainstream discourse. Not surprisingly, they often turned to multiple avenues of expression—music, speeches, symbols, films and,

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<sup>17</sup> Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1992), 131–33.

<sup>18</sup> David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982), 9.

more recently, Web sites and listservs. Cultural workers must now link intellectually these diverse forms of evidence if the groups that created them are to be represented accurately and studied from their original and diverse testimonies.

As never before, the by-products and records of culture are voluminous in quantity and varied in format, and the notion of cultural heritage necessarily embraces them all. From bra-burning symbols to feminist propaganda and black armbands to the thousands of letters written by African Americans to their legislators, these records document part of a common narrative. Together, they belong to the broader pool of cultural heritage. Awareness of this fact represents one of the most dramatic shifts in a collective understanding of cultural heritage, as well as in scholarship. The study of history, now realized, is a story of the masses and their grassroots forms of expression.<sup>19</sup> And consequently, the materials—records and artifacts—of those masses represent an essential component in interpreting the past. Social history, material culture, and ethnography reflect a changing academic and historical perspective which is increasingly relying on the combination and accessibility of historical evidence found in archives and museums.<sup>20</sup>

The problem is that few mechanisms exist to help adhere these disparate elements into a meaningful whole. Simply put, the systems for accessing artifacts and archives are largely incompatible. Although many professionals and laymen alike had hoped that electronic access would provide the means for users to find all types of pertinent materials, only now are they beginning to understand how best to apply technology and grasp the mammoth amount of work necessary to make cultural materials accessible. It is ironic that much of the

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>20</sup> Harrison discusses the importance of material culture scholarship for anthropological research in “Ideas of Museums,” 168.

renewed interest in historical artifacts and archival documents emerges largely from their accessibility via digital environments, in which the unique qualities of these records all but disappear. In providing access, cultural workers no longer can assume that users will have the benefit of the context provided in the physical repository. Not only must cultural institutions maintain the integrity of cultural records in this mutable and highly unstable environment but also they must be able to provide some intellectual blueprint for finding and unifying scattered pockets of cultural materials. As the public becomes increasingly conversant with the potential offered by electronic access, people will demand that cultural institutions provide more compatible services.

Regardless of the state of technology and its potential use in linking information among cultural repositories, technology has created a push for more cohesive access. This pressure is likely to increase both as a result of the expectations of what technology ideally should provide and from the growing technological fiefdoms which will require multiple forms of access.<sup>21</sup> These concerns, of course, are not lost on museum and archival professionals who, despite the existing division between repositories, acknowledge the need for a more developed relationship.

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<sup>21</sup> While technology has globalized communication systems, it has also enabled individuals and groups to form private information systems that are designed according to widely differing specifications, software, hardware, and modes of access. In many respects, technology has enabled people to live and work in extremely individualized environments that are not easily compatible with other environments, a fact that makes collaboration and interchange extremely difficult. Terry Cook, "From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives," *Archivaria* 19 (winter 1984-1985): 31.

### **Professional Attitudes**

When asked about museum and archives collaboration, cultural workers readily acknowledged an overall benefit in bridging the work of both fields. Despite this general endorsement and a desire to open lines of communication, however, museum professionals and archivists described a working environment that proves often incompatible with collaborative efforts.

These perspectives emerged from a survey of museum and archives professionals conducted in fall 1995 and spring 1997 by the author. The survey aimed at gauging the attitudes of cultural workers concerning museum and archives collaboration and the relationship between artifacts and archives. Toward this end, cultural workers were questioned in three areas: 1) their individual work environments, 2) their willingness to increase awareness and use of artifacts and archival records, and 3) perceived barriers to the interuse of cultural records.

Of twenty-one surveys sent to regional archives and museum professionals, a total of ten responses were received: five from museum professionals, four from archivists, and one from an archivist working in an archives and museum. The five archivists worked in a state agency, a university archives, a special collections in a city library, a private research center, and an archives and museum. The museum professionals worked in a university museum, state department, historical society, and two worked in private museums. Of the nine respondents who provided information on their educational background, eight held master's degrees and the other held a bachelor's degree and an archival certification.

### *Individual Work Environment*

The survey began with questions concerning the individual's work environment. Respondents provided an estimation of the visitor/researcher rates for their institutions. Museum professionals reported an annual average of 267,000



visitors and 48 researchers, while archivists reported an annual average of 10,678 visitors and 9,154 researchers. The single respondent who worked in the archives/museum reported 90,000 visitors and 140 researchers. When questioned about their holdings, archivists' responses revealed that archival repositories consisted of 99 percent records and 1 percent artifacts on average. Museum professionals broke down their collections as 90 percent artifacts and 10 percent archives average.

As indicators of institutions' primary areas of responsibilities, these basic figures suggest from the onset certain logistical and cost questions. For instance, why would museums emphasize research activities for 48 people when they receive an average of 267,000 visitors? How can archives, which have only 1 percent artifacts in their holdings, conduct more museum-like programs? While all ten professionals surveyed maintained a belief that combining the use of artifacts and archives was important in a general sense, they were still left with intractable statistics that made it difficult to justify—to themselves and their institutions—why such an undertaking is valuable *despite* those numbers.

#### *Use of Artifacts and Archives*

The respondents also addressed their individual willingness to expand the use of cultural materials (those beyond their traditional holdings) and to encourage users/visitors to do the same. Eight out of the ten stated a willingness to undertake such projects and collaborate with other institutions. The two respondents who said they were unwilling to participate in this type of collaboration wrote "too much to do already" and "not part of our mission" as their primary reasons. The archivists (three out of five) stated that they would consider increasing such activities because of their overarching obligation to researchers to provide them with as many possible relevant sources. The motivation of museum

professionals (four out of five) was based on a desire to help visitors gain a balanced and full understanding of a topic.

When asked in what ways they could best make use of both artifacts and archives, the respondents (eight out of ten) stated that exhibitions were the most logical form of joint use. The respondents also listed the sharing of information about holdings and educational programs for staff and visitors/researchers as important avenues for collaboration. Despite these responses, few professionals stated that their institutions currently conduct most of these activities. Respondents listed only exhibits as a collaborative forum they regularly use and, even in those cases, are limited by their own collections.

### *Perceived Barriers*

Respondents listed four significant barriers to starting collaborative programs: 1) a lack of information about the holdings of other institutions, 2) the unavailability of cultural materials (outside of an institution's own materials), 3) diverse preservation and conservation needs, and 4) the limited knowledge each group has about maintaining different types of records. Some comments from the respondents included the need for "more exchange concerning each other's holdings and missions"; a "better understanding of [the] time factor involved in putting up exhibits"; and "[g]ood old communication and awareness that each exists and could be used for the benefit of each other." Half of the respondents in each group stated, moreover, that although they had borrowed materials from other institutions, the availability of artifacts (for archives) and records (for museums) was so limited that a combination of items often was difficult and too complicated to arrange. While all five museum professionals expressed a desire to pursue collaboration, only three of the five archivists expressed the same interest.

The survey comments on this topic were vague but gave the impression that while professionals would not object to

greater interaction between cultural repositories, none seemed sure how to overcome potential obstacles. The comments were telling. All of the respondents assumed that interuse and shared programming involved a substantial "shifting" or "shuffling" of cultural materials. In other words, they assumed that providing access to other types of cultural records necessarily involved physically transferring cultural materials from one repository to another. Consequently, chief among their concerns was the need to accommodate the physical requirements of a different type of record. The survey showed that seven of the ten respondents were concerned about lacking an appropriate knowledge base to handle/maintain a different type of cultural evidence, implying again that most professionals equated "interuse" with merely adding to one's existing collection.

### *Results*

The survey indicated that cultural workers, despite an appreciation for the potential benefit of using both artifacts and archives, face tremendous difficulty in finding ways to describe the importance of this work in relation to existing responsibilities. If collaboration is to be achieved, cultural workers must consider ways not just for developing programs but also for evaluating the impact of that work. The traditional system of door counts proves inaccurate and incomplete. While that criticism applies to the evaluation of many aspects of cultural work, it is especially true in the case of such a qualitative and different enhancement of service.

Other static conceptions further hamper archivists and museum professionals. The traditional notion that interuse of artifacts and archives involves necessarily "bringing in" more things to the repository influenced greatly how professionals described their vision of collaboration. That view leads many cultural workers to focus on obstacles, many of which might be prevented altogether by exploring different forms of collaboration and by specifically considering how the purviews

of the museum and archival fields intersect in today's environment.

### **Interuse and Potential Programs**

By sharing information about their records and collections and by becoming more knowledgeable about the overall use of historical evidence, cultural institutions have the ability to provide a more comprehensive, more accurate, and more diverse interaction with the past than has yet occurred. Librarian Lawrence Dowler wrote that users would be better served by: 1) having a better understanding of the use of documentation, 2) not excluding non-archival sources of information when meeting users' needs, 3) systematically building access to records with links to other sources of information, and 4) understanding that the purpose of intended use, not the physical form of information, is the primary archival concern.<sup>22</sup> Museologist Frans F. J. Schouten similarly noted the need to provide more diverse forms of information for museum visitors. He commented that contemporary museum visitors "behave" in a much more purposeful manner because they actively construct, rather than passively accept, information.<sup>23</sup> Given this change, museums must attempt to connect their collections with other forms of cultural evidence. Dierdre Stam summarized this notion in the following comments:

[B]oth internal and external aspects of museum operations involve the integration of things formerly

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<sup>22</sup> Lawrence Dowler, "The Role of Use in Defining Archival Practice and Principles: A Research Agenda for the Availability and Use of Records," *American Archivist* 51 (winter/spring 1988): 75-7, and Elsie T. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archival Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (spring 1984): 85.

<sup>23</sup> Frans F. J. Schouten, "The Future of Museums," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 12 (1993): 383.

seen as separate. . . . Central to this change is the recognition of information as a basic and shared resource. The peculiar qualities of information allow it to penetrate physical walls and thus to foster closer links among parts of the museum, and closer contact with the outside world. Museums are exhorted to take a holistic approach to the information with which they deal, and to the enterprise in which they are engaged, the museum itself. This approach involves integrating internal information . . . providing wider access for staff and public to newly coordinated institutional data, [and] drawing more deeply from sources that reveal the context of objects (through more assiduous use of published materials and original archival resources) . . . .<sup>24</sup>

As it stands, museum and archival work lends itself readily to collaborative projects, since each institution already conducts activities which are compatible and can be modified, in certain instances, to accommodate a general interpretation and use of cultural materials. The range of potential programs for cooperation includes both basic techniques for referring people to additional sources of cultural heritage and more sophisticated programs designed to unify intellectually information in objects and records. As the survey indicated, museum professionals and archivists recognize the potential for collaborative work in three primary areas that relate to work in both museums and archives: exhibits, information about holdings, and educational programs for staff and researchers/visitors.

Identified by both museum and archives professionals as forum for the use of artifacts and archives, exhibitions offer an important means to establish the relationship between

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<sup>24</sup> Stam, "The Informed Muse," 280.

artifacts and archives in the interpretation of ideas.<sup>25</sup> Few juxtapositions work as closely to “reconstruct” an event as do the natural associations of thing and thought that together describe the world. Moreover, the combination of object and text serves to highlight individual dimensions of each type of cultural material.

Take for instance, the recent exhibition of “The Jewels of the Romanovs.”<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the exhibition represented high culture in that it consisted of jewelry, elaborate period clothing, and art. While droves of people attended the exhibit for the sake of seeing such valuable items, they also experienced some of the more personal aspects of the Romanovs through the inclusion of their correspondence, diaries, and photographs. Judging by the addition of such material, the curators were concerned with designing an exhibit that demonstrated more than just an assemblage of “pretty” things. The curators aimed at giving a more personal view of the Romanov family, a view that enabled visitors to relate with and understand the individual family members. The archival records presented the context of the family: the relationship among its members, the character of their communications with one another, and the role each individual viewed for himself. Without this more personal view, the gowns and jewels would have remained extravagant but emotionally remote curiosities.

Additionally, as many museums are now discovering, the public is demanding greater physical access to objects. As Charles Alan Watkins pointed out, museum “masqueraders,” such as theme parks, are attracting many museum-goers

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<sup>25</sup> For an excellent case study of the use of both archives and artifacts, see Nancy Allyn, Shawn Aubitz, and Gail F. Stern, “Using Archival Materials Effectively in Museum Exhibitions,” *American Archivist* 50 (summer 1987): 404.

<sup>26</sup> “The Jewels of the Romanovs: Treasures of the Imperial Court,” Houston Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas, 11 May–20 July 1997.

because they offer the public an intimate interaction with objects.<sup>27</sup> This interaction engages partly because it is immediate and self-determined in that the viewer—not the curator—decides what information to extrapolate from the object. While Watkins remained cautious about overenthusiastically applying the theme park approach, he affirmed the need to incorporate such a perspective in museum operations.

The acknowledgment of the user's primacy in making meaning is the foundation of archival institutions. Archives enable people to find and interpret information for themselves. The interaction is personal, wherein the researcher decides what records to use and assumes control of the archival records for a certain period of time (albeit under the supervision of the archival repository) and uses the records in the way he deems most appropriate. This sense of intimacy gives researchers an investment in the records they use and helps establish a personal relationship between the user and the record. Museums can encourage a similar condition of investment by helping users to scrutinize objects in multiple ways, by limiting the distance between the object and the viewer, and by including cues to help the viewer bring a methodical reading of objects to their encounters as with records in archives.

Beyond the use of exhibits, museum professionals and archivists can build an intellectual connection among artifacts and archives for the researcher. Through the inclusion of information about other forms of cultural materials within their respective systems for description and access, cultural workers broaden the intellectual content of their repositories, if not the physical ones. This sharing of information offers the most consistent and integral method for museums and

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Alan Watkins, "Fighting for Culture's Turf," *Museum News* (March/April 1991): 62-3.

archives to link information about cultural evidence. Often, researchers assume that finding other types of cultural materials that are relevant to their particular projects are too difficult to find, or worse, they do not even consider the possibility of expanding their research to include other forms of primary materials. Including references at the minimum (photographs or exhibit pamphlets on the higher end) to museums collections or archival groups makes the researchers aware of other possibilities for accomplishing their work and provides a way of finding that material.

By linking information, cultural institutions set the example: artifacts and archives are primary materials that, used together, facilitate research. Archives help complete, for example, the information necessary to understand artifacts. While artifacts provide clues—through their material construction and form—to ascertain their function, the researcher does not know how that artifact was customarily acquired nor how much value (and what kind of value) society placed on the artifact. That information generally comes in the form of archival records.

For their part, objects reveal in concrete form the subjects of historical discourse. Take for instance, research concerning a prominent historical figure. While the figure may well be long gone, his material possessions may survive. Such artifacts render the tastes, physical stature, wealth, and material context of a *particular* person—information that can be garnered from no other source as authentically and directly as from artifacts. Moreover, artifacts give researchers the opportunity to establish their own connections to the objects of study instead of relying solely on others' descriptions. Through that original interaction between person and object, researchers undergo an experience that is comparable to one experienced however long ago by their subjects. Yet, given the researcher's own background, that same interaction enables the researcher to describe the relationship between



that object and the subject in both historical and contemporary terms.

The work of David B. Gracy II, professor of Archival Enterprise at the University of Texas at Austin, on the life of Moses Austin demonstrates the influence of consulting artifacts for historical research. In examining the contributions of Moses Austin to the lead mining industry, Gracy encountered numerous references to the high quality lead shot produced by Austin's technique.<sup>28</sup> While archival documentation clearly proved the value that Austin's contemporaries held for his work, it provided a limited basis from which to describe the merits of Austin's work to modern readers. Gracy overcame this problem by consulting examples of Austin's lead shot. The examination yielded a fuller description than what was possible using only textual records. It allowed the researcher to judge Austin's shot from two perspectives—that of Austin's contemporaries (through archival documentation) and the researcher's own modern analysis, which could only occur through actual physical knowledge of the objects. The weight, the texture, and the varying sizes of the shots made the telling of history both real and accurate.

Museums and archives can also rely on information from each other to help researchers define their work more efficiently. According to a study of historians and their research processes conducted by Barbara Orbach, a cataloger in the Prints and Photograph Division of the Library of Congress, one of the most difficult elements in the research process lies in the framing of what is to be studied.<sup>29</sup> Many researchers have a difficult time identifying a suitable

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<sup>28</sup> David B. Gracy II, *Moses Austin: His Life* (San Antonio: Trinity Press, 1987), 35, 38, 63.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara C. Orbach, "The View From the Researcher's Desk: Historians' Perceptions of Research and Repositories," *American Archivist* 54 (winter 1991): 33-5.

beginning and ending point in their investigations. Because museum exhibitions represent a concise presentation of some historical theme, they offer a quickly readable treatment of a topic. Exhibits can be relatively fluid reflections of contemporary perspectives and so form a gauge of shifting concerns and interests.<sup>30</sup> Viewed as examples of approaches to and coverage of a particular topic, exhibits offer researchers useful models that can be adopted, adapted, or rejected.

Finally, in order to make any sort of collaboration fruitful, museum and archives professionals must educate themselves and the public about the relationship between artifactual and archival records. Cultural institutions should create a dialogue with researchers and visitors by offering programs such as gallery talks about the multiple uses of cultural evidence. Similarly, both archives and museums should undertake activities that explain how cultural institutions gather cultural materials and make them accessible. Exhibitions can be used, for example, to demonstrate the process of developing an exhibit or to chronicle the appraisal function in archives. By publicly demonstrating traditional aspects of cultural work, repositories enable users to witness the process of selecting the topics to be documented and of appraising and gathering the evidence for doing so. This window into the cultural workplace demystifies reasons why certain records are kept and others are not. It establishes that all cultural evidence comes from a general pool of everyday things from which the elements used to record history will eventually be drawn. Moreover, it aids the public in understanding artifacts and archives as vital components of a common historical narrative.

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<sup>30</sup> William Joyce notes that traditional finding aids are static documents that emphasize traditional political points of view and cannot draw attention to new perspectives on or approaches to historical research, "Archivists and Research Use," *American Archivist* 47 (spring 1984): 125.

## Conclusion

Archivists and museum professionals share many concerns and face many of the same problems. By collaborating, they each gain a respected ally. Moreover, collaboration permits them to offer their users two important advantages—the opportunity to better understand how different materials express aspects of society and the ability to interpret and use historic evidence more fully. In working to promote the use and value of primary materials, archivists and museum professionals promote the same characteristics for all cultural institutions. Given the intense competition for audience and support, establishing a wider forum for action makes sense.

Archivists and museum professionals are in what archivist Gerald Ham, sixteen years ago, called the “Post-Custodial Era.”<sup>31</sup> He warns that archivists must look beyond the contents of their individual repositories and focus on making existing holdings more accessible. More than ever before, professionals in the cultural arena must demonstrate the multiple ways cultural materials benefit society. One essential means for museums and archives to do so is by working to make accessible a holistic cultural record that includes and links all forms of cultural evidence. By assuming this responsibility, cultural institutions fulfill diverse types of information needs and, correspondingly, make their work more visible and more valuable.

**Gloria Meraz** is a doctoral student in the Archives Program at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Texas at Austin and is the archivist for the Texas Library Association.

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<sup>31</sup> F. Gerald Ham, “Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era,” *American Archivist* 44 (summer 1981): 207–16.