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Review of Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy

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Review of *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy*

Edited by Rachel Chatalbash, Susan Hernandez, and Megan Schwenke.
Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2022. 192 pp. Softcover.
\$69.00. ISBN: 978-1-945246-74-6

Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy is a much-needed update of Deborah Wythe's *Museum Archives: An Introduction* (2004). There are none better suited to oversee a volume on the intricacies and challenges of running an archive within a museum than the past and current co-chairs of the Society of American Archivists' Museum Archives Section's Standards and Best Practices Working Group. Rachel Chatalbash is the Deputy Director for Research at the Yale Center for British Art and has co-chaired the Museum Archives Section's Standards and Best Practices Working Group since its founding. Past co-chair (2013-2016) Susan Hernandez (Digital Archivist and Systems Librarian at the Cleveland Museum of Art) and current co-chair Megan Schwenke (Head of Harvard Art Museums Archives since 2013) served as co-editors with Chatalbash. The majority of *Museum Archives's* chapter authors are past and current members of the Museum Archives Section's Standards and Best Practices Working Group.

Chatalbash, Hernandez, and Schwenke's volume pays homage to Wythe's influence by mimicking her book's structure and intended audience. Both works are written for ALL museum archivists (those starting out through those with considerably more experience, lone arrangers and members of well-staffed departments). The first part provides an overview of basic archival theory, functions, and processes with museum-specific examples. The chapters in the next part individually address specific formats of archival materials. The third and final part of the book examines specific issues a museum archivist may encounter. *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy* accomplishes what it sets out to do, which is to cover every aspect of archival work from a museum archives perspective. The contents flow together and each chapter is well written, with useful and well-described examples. It is obvious that these authors have worked together and have a shared understanding of their field. Many readers will appreciate that the authors reiterate recognition of the challenges lone arrangers and very small staffs face in implementing or carrying out some of the activities as described in the text.

The editors make their themes for *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy* clear in the preface and the chapter authors fulfill their responsibility of expanding and supporting the themes throughout the volume. The editors had three main goals. Firstly, "this publication heralds the idea that museum archives, a unique type of repository, require constant and sustained advocacy to thrive and that [the museum archive's] activities are a central component of and contributor to a museum's

mission” (p. vii). Secondly, to help museum archivists clearly articulate their work and the ways in which their work benefits their parent institution (p. vii). Finally, to inspire museum archivists by reaffirming that their work is significant to their institution, the nation’s cultural heritage, the museum and archives professions, and each other (p. vii). These themes form the basis of every chapter in *Museum Archives*.

Having worked with individuals who acted as if advocating for the archives was equivalent to begging, nagging, or revealing weakness, it is highly gratifying to read a volume which places such an emphasis on advocacy by archivists for archives. Additionally, the authors understand and clearly articulate that the best form of advocacy is to demonstrate a high degree of proficiency in the core functions of their responsibilities. In the case of museum archives, their main purpose is records management for the museum. When a museum archivist skillfully manages the institution’s records, they can develop reciprocally beneficial relationships with the various departments. Ideally this will culminate in the archivist having the opportunity to advocate for the archives by helping colleagues imagine what added benefits their department would receive by increasing support for the archives. While this summary is overly simplistic, chapter authors Enneking and Gambling acknowledge that, “this work is highly iterative and not always smooth, requiring ongoing attention, patience, and dedication, with the recognition that appreciation for the archives may come slowly, ...” (p. 24). The theme of advocacy, especially by demonstrating competency, runs throughout the entire text.

After advocacy the next most frequent theme of *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy* is the uniqueness of museum archives and the work of museum archivists. Nearly every chapter argues that a significant part of advocating for museum archives is to share museum archives uniqueness. However, what makes museum archives unique was never defined; the state of being unique was just readily agreed upon by all authors. Maybe I do not know what inherently makes a museum archive unique because I might not be considered a museum archivist by many of the authors. My institution is so small that I am the solo librarian, registrar, archivist, AND records manager for ALL of our resources. I am fortunate that the previous archivist and librarian still work part-time and that the institution’s director is a former professional archivist and rare book cataloguer, but the main work of stewarding the institutions collections (books, archives, and objects) is my responsibility. Most special collections librarians and archivists that I have met have similar custodial responsibilities for published works, archival collections (containing paper, audiovisual, and digital formats), as well as physical objects (just differing collection sizes and content). The only difference is that an institutional archivist is responsible for the “permanent” records. But that records management responsibility is the same across every type of institution that maintains an archive. So, *what makes a museum archive unique?* It is probably obvious that I found the repetitive reference to the “uniqueness” of museum archives a bit grating as a reader who is not solely a museum archivist. I imagine museum employees in larger institutions might grow equally annoyed if most conversations with their museum archivist included references to the uniqueness of the museum archives collection(s). However, readers

who are museum archivists like the authors may be gratified by the recognition of their “unique” position within a museum.

At odds with the overuse of the word “unique,” the greatest strength of *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy* is the emphasis on museum archivists’ prospects for collaboration with other museum departments. Authors throughout the volume emphasize the opportunity that museum archivists have to work with their librarian, registrar, curator, and digital preservation colleagues which results from having to share collection management systems (CMS) and digital asset management systems (DAMS). In a museum setting, the CMS and DAMS will not be set up for archival finding aids or collections. This provides museum archivists the opportunity to work closely with those allied professionals on providing new ways of sharing collection information across professional divisions in order to meet the information needs of their colleagues and the museum’s public audience. And while museum staff and the general public are more comfortable with library discovery tools, Bauer and Thomas remind the reader that “the daily work of museum archivists is to educate users in their descriptive tools—or to come up with more widely accessible means of description” (p. 49). The authors are inspiring in their ability to convey the positive possibilities that come with having to share CMS and DAMS not intended for archives while advocating for archive specific CMS.

While *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy* succeeds in providing a much-needed update of Deborah Wythe’s *Museum Archives: An Introduction* (2004), it suffers from attempting to slavishly imitate Wythe’s structure and audience. There are better introductions to archives for entry level archivists and lone arrangers who would like a book to help them get up to speed on archives (even if those works do not provide museum specific examples). The editors and authors of *Museum Archives* recommend *Records Management for Museums and Galleries* (2012) by Charlotte Brunskill and Sarah Demb for the basics and every chapter has a “Further Reading” section. Early career museum archivists looking for such information would have been better served if Daniels’ chapter “The Archival Core and Beyond” could have been slightly expanded and supplemented by a bibliography consolidated from each chapter in Part I’s “Further Reading” sections. This would have allowed the chapter authors to provide a more in-depth exploration of the challenges and opportunities of managing archival collections within a museum.

An early-middle career archivist may derive some benefit from the second part of *Museum Archives* chapters on special formats. However, most of these formats are fairly standard (even if they are not treated as such in archival education). Additionally, depending on the museum, these formats might be considered by museum colleagues as more appropriate to museum collections than to the museum archives collections. By writing for a more experienced archivist, additional pages could have been spent addressing how to navigate acquisition, description, discovery, and preservation issues of special format materials as an archive within a museum. Again, an aggregate bibliography on special formats pulled from the “Further Reading” sections would be more useful. The final section of *Museum Archives*

addressed issues that all museum archivists benefit from staying up to date on at a level that is approachable for every experience level, even if some will not have the opportunity to implement the recommendations immediately. The chapter authors and readers would have been better served if Chatalbash, Hernandez, and Schwenke's would have updated Wythe's structure and not attempted to write for an entry-level archivist, but all museum archivists should find the final series of chapters vital for their work. Kathleen Williams final chapter on aggressive sharing should be required reading for all archivists.

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