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Institutional Knowledge Sharing
of Museum Records

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Library and Information Science

by

Melanie Tran

2012

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Institutional Knowledge Sharing
of Museum Records

by

Melanie Tran

Master of Library and Information Science

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Ellen J. Pearlstein, Chair

A comparison of record types from the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (NHM) museum archives and the registrars, in addition to interviews with archivists, librarians and registrars from NHM and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) lead to findings that knowledge sharing between museum archives and registrars result in enriched institutional records. This partnership is explored as a mechanism for promoting the services and resources provided by registrars and museum archivists to improve their visibility and permanence within an institution. The thesis is framed against a case study referencing how the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art (LACMHSA) became two separate institutions: NHM and LACMA; and illustrates how the strong connections between museum archives and registrars records illuminate the potential of collaborative efforts.

The thesis of Melanie Tran is approved.

Jonathan Furner

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University of California, Los Angeles

2012

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Introduction

We do not know what significant works have been destroyed through the ages -- we think those that have been spared are fully representative of their period...Fortunately, what we do not know we do not miss. – Man Ray¹

Following Man Ray's logic on lost works of the past, what we do not know does not harm us. But what if the opposite were true – finding knowledge thought to be lost would enhance our lives. It is man's nature to preserve valuable objects, as shown in the creation of museums, libraries and archives. These institutions provide a means through which we can take stock of our possessions and preserve the world's memories within them.²

Museums, heralded as places where memories are objectified,³ are given names such as the gallery, the cabinet and Wunderkammer throughout European history as an expression of private collections. Since the late seventeenth century, museums have been opened to the public and have taken on the responsibility of collecting, preserving and curating the world's objects for the purposes of research and education.⁴ As a result, museum work as a profession flourished and eventually made the museum archive movement a possibility.

The museum and archive professions developed separately from each other and it has been noted that even as recently as 1986, archivists and museum employees were isolated from each other in the course of their work.⁵ This may be one of the reasons that museum

¹ Man Ray, *Self Portrait*, (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1963), 241.

² Francis Henry Taylor, *Babel's Tower: The Dilemma of the Modern Museum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), 26 & 38.

³ Jens Brockmeier, "After the Archive: Remapping Memory," *Culture & Psychology* 16, no. 1 (2010): 6.

⁴ Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), 8.

⁵ Deborah Wythe, *Museum Archives: an Introduction*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004), 3.

archivists as an entity did not develop until after the museum profession had been established for at least a century.

It is a wonder how museums evolved without the establishment of museum archives and their uses for documentation of an institution's history. From the archive profession's perspective, it is difficult to imagine an institution dedicated to the preservation of the world's history neglecting its own institutional documentation. The museum archive movement, during the 1980s, defined a period in the United States in which most large museums were approaching centennial anniversaries with little or disordered documentation to help form celebrations. As the realization of a need for archives arose, the effort of establishing museum archives spread to museums across the nation – even museums that had been established fairly recently sought to organize their archives.⁶ One goal of this movement could be envisioned as the establishment of a museum archive from the onset of a new museum.

One major purpose of a museum archive is to capture and preserve the documentation produced about the museum's activities, more than solely being custodians of institutional records. Each department within the museum generates records on a daily basis and most of them contain information that is valuable to the institution. Specifically, a museum's collection is rendered ineffective if it does not have proper documentation. A few important records pertaining to a museum's collection are the accession record, catalog entry for each object, and all correspondence, legal documents and newspaper clippings

⁶ Ibid., 6.

concerning the object.⁷ These records serve as documentation for the provenance of the objects which support rightful ownership. They also preserve the context of how an object was acquired and how it is maintained. Although these documents are usually held by the registrars' department, they would also be valuable to museum archives.

Registrars and museum archivists can both contribute to a museum's reputation and to its responsibilities to the community. Each entity preserves information essential to the operations of the museum and with that the responsibility to share that information for the greater common good. The differences in how the registrar and museum archivist professions developed provide reasons for an independent approach to functions that could better be fulfilled with collaboration. This thesis analyzes the individual histories and functions of these professions and demonstrates the possible advantages of aligning their resources for use in collaborative efforts. Some benefits of collaboration include promoting a positive image of the museum in the community and contributing to provenance research. A working, collaborative relationship could also be viewed as demonstrating the necessity of an archive from the start of a new museum. In order to prevent information loss and ensure the preservation of complete records for an institution, the archive along with the registrar, should serve as a valued facilitator of preserving the institution's history.

This thesis derives from a case study exploring the issues that arose with the division of the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art. Separating a single museum into two museums proved to require sufficient documentation to substantiate

⁷ Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 129-130.

collection management decisions. Resolving such issues in the past would have benefited from an exploration of a collaborative relationship between the archive and registrars' department. Specifically for the case of the Natural History Museum, the study led to the discovery that the registrars' department inadvertently served as the archive before the institutional archive was officially established. Both registrars and archivists serve as conduits for preserving the operational history of an institution. Researchers and staff using the archive could also benefit from registrar records such as artist correspondence, acquisition files, loan agreements, etc. A registrar maintains and collects records pertaining to the collection objects, which could provide information that supports the administrative records housed in an archive. Utilizing the strong connection between registrar and museum archive records promotes intra-museum partnerships that will enhance the capabilities of a museum to share institutional knowledge.

Chapter 1. Museum Archives: The Development of a Profession

In order to understand the similarities and differences between museum archives and registrars' departments, their professional developments within the museum must first be explored. The surprising view that museum professionals were not aware of the value in preserving the records of their institutions⁸ was noted by several archivists and museum staff members from the 1970s, during the beginning of the museum archives movement. It was uncommon for museums to implement institutional archives; "museum professionals, although avid collectors by nature and necessity, generally did not recognize the importance of documenting their own activities by collecting, maintaining, and making accessible the records of their institutions."⁹ One exception to this statement is found in the role of registrars, who dealt with maintaining permanent records and information about collection objects. Their professional training lent to awareness that records needed to be preserved, but they did not specialize in those that were not directly related to objects in the collection.¹⁰ After the need for museum archives was recognized, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission enabled the first major contribution to the museum archives movement by providing grants for the establishment of museum archives.¹¹

In December 1979, Arthur Breton of the Archives of American Art organized a meeting of twenty-two archivists and librarians at the Smithsonian's Belmont Conference

⁸ Robert W. Rydell, "The Historical Researcher," *Museum News* 61, no. 4 (April 1983): 39.

⁹ Wythe, *Museum Archives*, 3.

¹⁰ "From the Editor: Museum Archives," *Registrars' Report* 1, no. 9 (1980): 1.

¹¹ Wythe, *Museum Archives*, 4.

Center in Elkridge, Maryland. This would mark the beginning of standardizing and formalizing the work of museum archivists.¹² The conference produced a set of guidelines that were eventually distributed as brochures to hundreds of museums and published in the *Registrars' Report*,¹³ a publication edited by the then Registrar of Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The progress achieved by the conference drew in more professionals. In January 1981, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) created the Museum Archives Task Force. The group was responsible for establishing general guidelines, policies and procedures for setting up archives. The Task Force publications led to the SAA publication, *Museum Archives: an Introduction*, by William A. Deiss in 1984.¹⁴ Just eleven years after the Belmont Conference, SAA formed Museum Archives as an official section, which produced *Museum Archivist*, a presently ongoing biannual newsletter.¹⁵

Across the archive profession, archivists need to demonstrate versatility and relevance to their governing administrators. This perspective has been circulated and published many times over since even the beginnings of the museum archive movement. In the November/December 1991 issue of *Museum News*, a series of articles about museum archives were published. These articles highlighted the Smithsonian Institution Archives, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Colorado Historical Society and focused on issues such as methods of collaboration to garner support and recognition within their

¹² Ibid., For more on an archivist's role and qualifications see: Gail Dexter Lord and Barry Lord, *The Manual of Museum Management* (London: The Stationery Office, 1997): 200.

¹³ Arthur Breton, "Professionals Join in Bemont [sic] Conference," *Registrars' Report* 1, no. 9 (1980): 8.

¹⁴ William Deiss, *Museum Archives: an Introduction*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984).

¹⁵ *Museum Archivist: Newsletter of the Museum Archives Section*, Chicago: Museum Archives Section of the Society of American Archivists. Referenced in Wythe, *Museum Archives*, 5.

respective institutions.¹⁶ Publications such as these and Deborah Wythe's *Museum Archives: an Introduction*, published in 2004, facilitate cohesion among archivists and impress professionalism upon outside communities. As museum archives continue to develop, archivists increasingly need to be viewed as valued members of the museum.¹⁷

Alan Bain at the Smithsonian Institution Archives encouraged a strategy for archivists; he stated that in order "to become more tied to the immediate needs of museums and perhaps less dispensable, archivists will have to display versatile talents."¹⁸ Bain recognized the danger that faced many museum archivists. Museum archives, as new additions, were at risk of being viewed as non-essential to the core museum operations and expendable to the institution when budgets and resources were under stress. Bain advocated that if museum archivists were to succeed it would be necessary to demonstrate their worth through the ability to effectively fulfill the needs of the museum.

Through the many uses for archives – outreach, community affairs, preserving institutional history and research, museum archives facilitate institutional knowledge sharing. The museum archive serves as the research arm of the museum. Aligning its goals and services with research allows an archive to serve all departments of the museum as well as outside researchers, and to maintain authority in archival and record management issues.¹⁹ The range of materials preserved by museum archives form a rich resource for researchers and staff alike. Institutional history is one of the research topics supported by the materials in a museum archive which also reference the objects in the collection,

¹⁶ *Museum News* 70, no. 6 (November/December 1991): 36-48.

¹⁷ Wythe, *Museum Archives*, 8.

¹⁸ Alan L. Bain, "The Muses' Memory," *Museum News* 70, no. 6 (November/December 1991): 39.

¹⁹ Wythe, *Museum Archives*, 12.

donors, dealers and creators of works. Within the museum, archival resources could be used to produce histories for anniversary celebrations, assist in legal audit reviews, and raise awareness of a museum's historical context and how it could be used to envision goals for the future.²⁰ The museum archive's role in outreach and the community will be explored in a later chapter.

²⁰ Kathleen Hartt, "A Manifold Resource," *Museum News* 70, no. 6 (November/December 1991): 41.

Chapter 2. Registrars: Establishing a Professional Reputation

In contrast with museum archives, the registrars' department organizes and maintains *objects* and their files. Registrars' departments emphasize the collection aspect in the following definition of museums, as being "responsible for collecting, preserving, interpreting, and displaying collections for the public."²¹ A museum's asset is its objects; therefore it is absolutely necessary that a museum maintain proper and accurate records.²² The registrars' department functions as a center of information management within a museum. The responsibilities of a registrar extend across museum department boundaries. Registrars have been described as being "close to the heartbeat of daily operations,"²³ which effectively describes how the registrar is fundamental to museum operations.

In 1906, responsibilities of registrars were identified in a description of the profession as tending to the movement of objects, loans and deposits, accessions, assistance to staff, and managing the storage and installation of objects.²⁴ The same responsibilities are referenced by Buck and Gilmore in 1997 as: information management concerning permanent collection objects and loans, collections management (including housing, moving and outsourced service contracts), exhibitions and operational

²¹ *The New Registration Methods*, ed. Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1998), xvi.

²² Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 129.

²³ Jack Foss, "'Let's Kill all the Lawyers': Registrars, Law, and Ethics," in *Registrars on Record Essays on Museum Collections Management*, ed. Mary Case (Washington: American Association of Museums, 1988), 133.

²⁴ Cited as a job description of a registrar in 1906 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in *MRM5: Museum Registration Methods, 5th Edition*, ed. Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2010), 3.

maintenance.²⁵ Given the above responsibilities and their evolution into today's roles, registrars are more than information managers or information specialists. They hold complex roles that also require knowledge of risk management, insurance, packing techniques, photography and conservation.²⁶

Registrars manage important information that holds great value to the operations of a museum. Without the records of a registrar there would be no indication of the legal status of an object, how certain objects were procured, who donated them, their estimated value, if they are out on loan and where they are housed, or any special instructions regarding the object. This is all information that is essential to the operations of a museum and its collection management.²⁷

Like the museum archive profession, museum registration as a profession arose in response to a recognized need. There is evidence of museum registration as early as the 18th century but the profession did not develop until the latter half of the 19th century.²⁸ As museums grew in the 19th century there was recognition that if they were to succeed in their goals of preserving, interpreting and displaying cultural materials, standards and procedures needed to be implemented. In America, the establishment of the American Association of Museums (AAM) in 1906 brought with it a new outlook on how to proceed with professionalizing work that had been performed in multiple capacities for centuries.²⁹

²⁵ *The New Registration Methods*, ed. Buck and Gilmore, xiv. For more on roles of registrars and select qualifications see: Lord and Lord, *The Manual of Museum Management*, 197.

²⁶ Virginia Mann, "From Clay Tablet to Hard Disk," in *Registrars on Record Essays on Museum Collections Management*, ed. Mary Case (Washington: American Association of Museums, 1988), 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁸ *MRM5: Museum Registration Methods*, ed. Buck and Gilmore, 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

The central role of the registrar in creating accession numbers for museum objects was inspired by methods adapted from the library profession. Before the adaptation of best practices for museum registration, museums created in-house systems tailored to their collections. A consequence for many older museums is the need to deal with system conversions and managing several numbering systems at the same time.³⁰ The importance of records and databases is stressed in Paul Marty's article for *Archives and Museum Informatics*, in which he discusses how the Spurlock Museum organized the move from one building to another. He demonstrates the use of museum information infrastructure to facilitate a smooth transition and to encourage collaboration among museum professionals. Marty labels the data points within the museum infrastructure as boundary objects, defined as "data elements that can be viewed from multiple perspectives and used in multiple ways yet still retain a degree of integrity, identity, and consistency."³¹ The infrastructure serves as a central point where information is gathered and interpreted differently, all towards completing the common goal of the move.³² Since each department in the museum takes part in this central information infrastructure, there is no information loss. This also allows large museums, especially ones with diverse collections, to maintain open communication and the transfer of information among its departments to solve problems collaboratively.³³

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Paul F. Marty, "Museum Informatics and Information Infrastructures: Supporting Collaboration across Intra-Museum Boundaries," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 13 (1999): 176.

³² Ibid., 170.

³³ Paul F. Marty, "Museum Informatics and Collaborative Technologies: The Emerging Socio-Technological Dimension of Information Science in Museum Environments," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 50, no. 12 (1999): 1086.

Early professional registrar principles were cultivated at the Newark Museum, founded by a renowned librarian and museum professional John Cotton Dana. He fostered registrar and major contributor to the profession, Dorothy H. Dudley, who had begun as an apprentice at the museum in 1925. She later collaborated with Irma Bezold Wilkinson to develop standards for the registrar profession and to publish the first registration manual, *Museum Registration Methods* in 1958.³⁴ While early strides in museum registration were made by staff at institutions such as the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Charleston Museum in South Carolina, it is Dudley and Wilkinson's manual that served the registrar profession as a guide for forty years until Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore decided to edit a new and revised edition. Based on the great lapse in time between the two editions, it can be inferred that Dudley and Wilkinson shared an effective vision of registrar work. The next major shift in object tracking came with the implementation of computers that became widely available by the 1990s.³⁵

A more recent major contributor to the registrar profession is Pat Nauert, who worked with Dudley before she took her position as Registrar at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In the mid-1970s, Nauert contributed to the formation of the Registrars Committee within AAM. She also created and edited a journal, *Registrars' Report*, which provided invaluable and current information on the registrar profession for those in practice.³⁶ The entire ninth issue of the *Registrars' Report* published in 1980 was dedicated

³⁴ *MRM5: Museum Registration Methods*, ed. Buck and Gilmore, 6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

to the museum archives movement, signifying the acknowledgement and support of the establishment of museum archives and its context within the registrar profession.

Chapter 3. Comparing Museum Archive & Registrars' Department Records

The separately formed professions of museum archivists and registrars, as illustrated above, lead to the hypothesis that their functions within museums are also completely detached: the registrars' department maintains records about the collection, whereas the archive maintains the institution's records. The two functions operate separately, but because of the pervasive nature of these functions there are some overlapping instances in the records collected and maintained by both departments. Although there are other sources of archive records within the museum, following the patterns of this case study, this thesis will focus on those physically housed in the archive and registrars' department.

The charts on the following page list the types of records generated by museums.³⁷ FIGURE 1 lists records according to the functions they fulfill: collections and administration. FIGURE 2 lists the same records found in the previous figure in relation to the department that might collect them: registrars and the archive, as demonstrated by the examples found at NHM and LACMA. The records that are most likely collected by both departments demonstrate the areas in which records could overlap due to relevant content and use. The overlap of both collections and administration records found in the archive and registrars' department suggest similarities in relevant content.

³⁷ Lists derive from Wythe, *Museum Archives*, 12-19.

FIGURE 1 Collections and Administrative Records

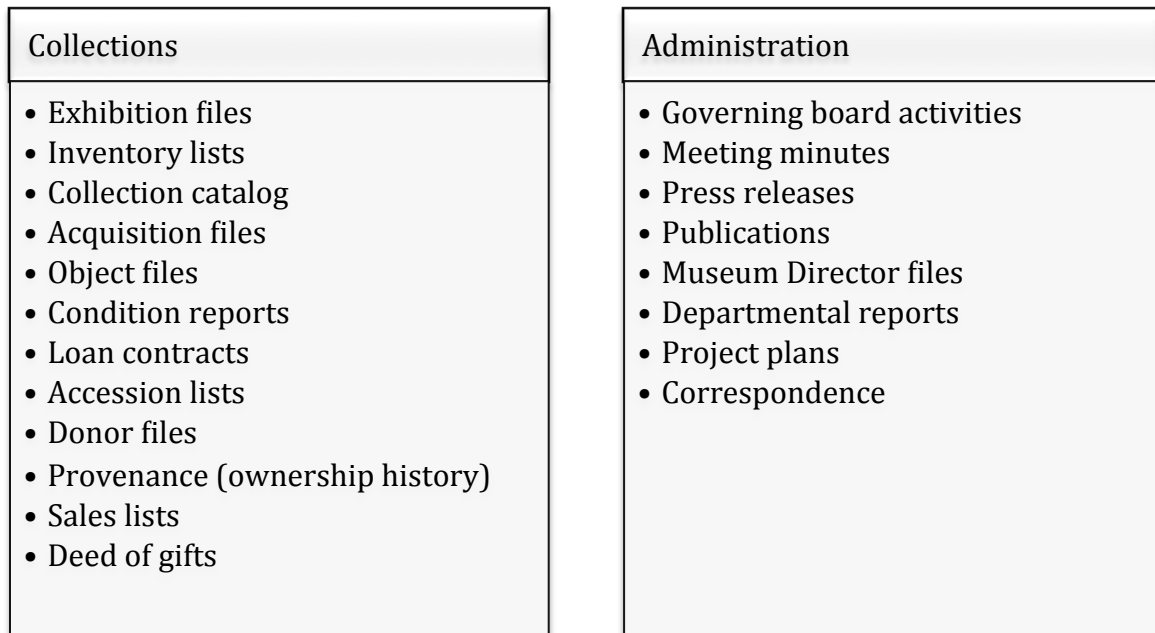
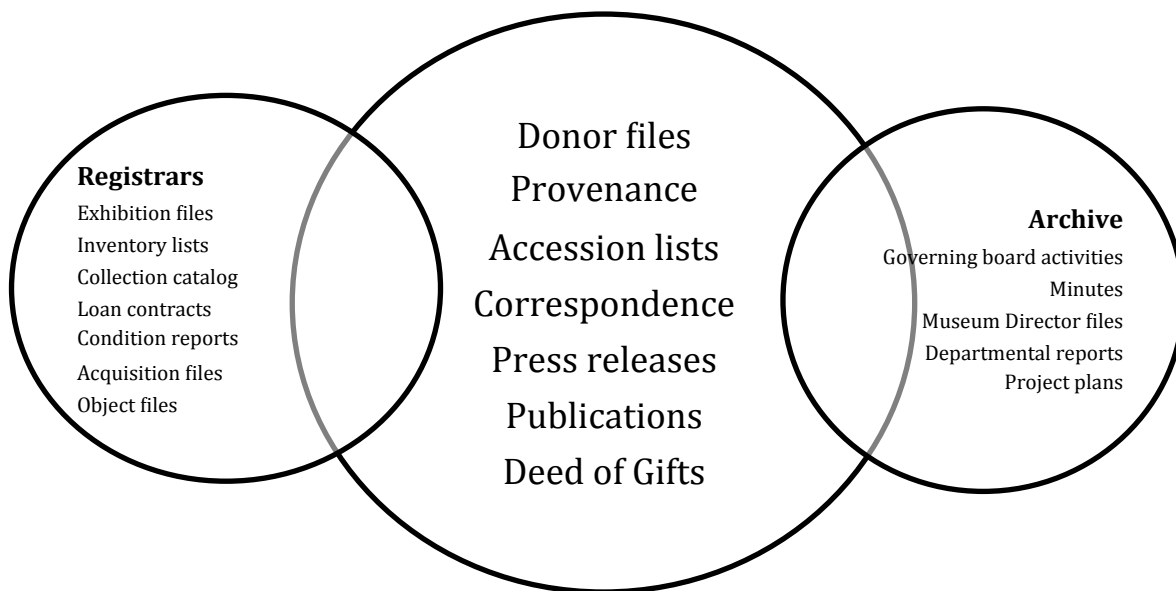


FIGURE 2 Archive and Registrar Records



Registrar and research files are compared in Reibel's guide for registration methods in a small museum. He asserts that a museum registration system is considered a component of museum archives.³⁸ Though the records may be housed in different places and perhaps, if fortunate, in optimal preservation environments, all of the records mentioned above are one and the same. It seems that the only difference between records that are housed in the archive proper and those housed in the registrar's files is the care they receive.³⁹ The physical safety of registration files is crucial because these records should be retained with ease of access for the life of the museum.⁴⁰ If it is decided that a set of documents needs preservation in their physical state, they would be transferred to the archive.⁴¹ Reibel wrote this manual with small museums in mind, so perhaps there is a bias and this theory would not work as well in a larger environment where the registrar would need immediate access to all the documents regarding objects, whether archival and not archival.

Museum archive records most often are not solely what they appear to be – meeting minutes and monthly reports, but can also contain information such as acquisitions, donor correspondence and appraisal pricings, which could also be housed in the registrars' department. On the other side, the registrar maintains records of exhibition loans and inventory lists which can aid archival researchers for reconstructing the historical timeline of popular subjects at a given time.

³⁸ Daniel B. Reibel, *Registration Methods for the Small Museum*, (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2008), 76-77.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Dixie Neilson, "Museum Registration and Documentation," *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences, Third Edition* (2010): 3752.

⁴¹ Reibel, *Registration Methods*, 76-77.

A discussion with Tiffany Shea, the Associate Registrar of LACMA, provided evidence of collaboration between the archive and registrar's departments (see [FIGURE 6](#), page 65, for details about the current staff of LACMA and NHM). For example when the registrar receives inquiries about historic exhibitions, those files can be found in the archive; whereas inquiries about specific collection objects are directed to the registrar for most effective solutions.⁴² Both of these departments collaborate in many ways and it is essential in all museums to realize the potential in working together and the wealth of information that each possesses.

⁴² Tiffany Shea, (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Associate Registrar), in discussion with author, February 15, 2011.

Chapter 4. A Method of Knowledge Sharing: Collaboration

As discussed in the previous chapters the development of museum archivists and registrars as professions were independent of each other. Perhaps the rates of development and timing of the two professions contributed to their inherent separation; as there could not have been collaboration between the two before museum archives were established. There may be no official policies that connect the functions and roles of the two professions; however, museum archives and registrars' departments could share institutional knowledge through collaborative initiatives. Collaboration could manifest in the form of research and reference resources, and also as sources for public relations materials to enhance the image of the museum and further promote its presence within the community.

Explaining the value and importance of archives, Ramos and Ortega compare archives to archaeological excavations where the significance of each object is reliant on knowing in which layer and plot of land it was found – in other words, context.⁴³ Preserving content and its context is also relevant to registrars. If a letter from a donor is taken out of its context, it can be misconstrued. Ramos and Ortega then go on to discuss how archives must appeal to certain groups of people to justify their existence and continue to garner support from such groups as the administration, boards, donors and the community.⁴⁴

⁴³ Marisol Ramos and Alma C. Ortega, *Building a Successful Archival Programme* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2006), 41-42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

These principles can also be applied to the benefits of collaboration between archives and registrars.

Types of Collaboration within Museums

Katherine Kane provides an example of the benefits of collaboration between archivists and curators. As the director of collection services at the Colorado Historical Society in Denver, she believed that both of these professions appear to speak different languages and the first step is to solve any misunderstandings between the two.⁴⁵ It is important to realize that the two seemingly different functions of the museum serve the same goal – to make their collections accessible for research, study and interpretation. Each department competes to retain records, for resources and intellectual control over their collections which create opportunities for contention. But through open communication and focusing on similarities such as “protection of collection documentation through preservation and physical security,”⁴⁶ archivists and curators can work well together.

Kathleen Hartt, the Archivist at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston states that museums would find it beneficial if archivists could evaluate and cross reference object files with the archival records to maintain a richer context for their own archival work.⁴⁷ As early as 1991, Hartt acknowledged that the museum could benefit from the inherent multi-purpose nature of most archival records. For example, object and accession files, normally

⁴⁵ Katherine Kane, “Bridging the Gap,” *Museum News* 70, no. 6 (November/December 1991): 47.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁷ Hartt, “A Manifold Resource,” 42.

housed with the registrar, are “a continuing and growing history of the object.”⁴⁸ At the same time, it is of value to recognize that the “files are archival in themselves, the documents being primary sources of information about the object.”⁴⁹ Although object files should not be removed from the registrars’ department, they provide complete profiles of the collection and their uses can extend beyond the registrar.

Specifically relevant to this thesis is the collaboration between the archivist and the registrar. Patricia Nauert, the then Registrar of LACMA, suggested that the registrar and the archivist could be strong allies. Archivists view records through the lens of administrative history and the registrar’s focus is on museum objects, which provide complementing perspectives for the same set of documents. Though registrar records should not be moved to the archive, the archivist should have access to all museum records. As the two department staffs are already trained to document, Nauert says, “in the absence of an archivist, the registrar may be the staff member with the broadest point of view about records as well as one who generally understands the need for careful documentation.”⁵⁰ Nauert’s observation could lead to innovative changes with the operations in a museum. Without the presence of an archive in a museum, registrars take on the role of documenting and preserving the institution’s history through its objects.

Yet another example of cited collaboration between registrars’ department and archives is mentioned in Marty’s article about the Spurlock Museum move. Marty views this large scale move, and by extrapolation the LACMA one, as an opportunity to completely

⁴⁸ *The New Registration Methods*, ed. Buck and Gilmore, 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Patricia Nauert, “The Registrar,” *Museum News* 61, no. 4 (April 1983): 49.

inventory the collection, verify facts about the objects and update old records. The operation of the physical movement of objects might typically be a part of the registrar's functions.⁵¹ During the inventory process, each object moved out of the museum would need to be accounted for in the registrars' files. It would also be an opportunity to gather all relevant information about the objects. Sources of information about the objects derive from old accession ledgers, card files, labels and also the archive.⁵² The use of the archive to complete the object files signifies the potential relevance of archival content to fulfill the registrars' needs.

Provenance Research

One example of sharing institutional knowledge through collaboration can be found in the activities of provenance research, especially for the objects housed in the museum's permanent collection. Providing strong evidence of ownership and provenance is essential for all museum objects to claim legitimacy. A major contributor to provenance research, the Getty Research Institute, states that provenance "provides a documented history that can help prove ownership, assign the work to a known artist, and establish the authenticity of an artwork."⁵³ This type of research is essential to establish the legitimacy of an object in the context of a museum's ownership of it.⁵⁴ This is especially relevant for works that are

⁵¹ Marty, "Museum Informatics and Information Infrastructures," 173. For more on opportunities that arise from a move such as deaccessioning, see Ginger Henry Geyer, "Moving Imagery: Collections Management During a Museum Move," in *Registrars on Record Essays on Museum Collections Management*, ed. Mary Case (Washington: American Association of Museums, 1988): 107.

⁵² Marty, "Museum Informatics and Information Infrastructures," 174.

⁵³ "Collecting and Provenance Research," *Getty Research Institute*, accessed March 2, 2012, <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/provenance/index.html>.

⁵⁴ Catherine Herbert, "Restitution of Nazi Looted Art," in *Museum Archives: An Introduction*, ed. Deborah Wythe, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004), 187.

looted during war times.⁵⁵ Provenance research is most often discussed in terms of artworks, but the principles can also be applied to natural history, science and history collections since there is value in knowing the origins of an object, especially if it has important relationships with specific places or people. Verifying the accuracy of facts with documentation should be an ever-present goal in registrars' departments and museum archives.

A prime example of the discovery of an artwork through the records of an archive is detailed in Jonathan Harr's book *The Lost Painting*. Harr illustrates how a pair of researchers trying to confirm the existence of a painting, found it listed in an inventory along with payment to the artist, Caravaggio, in several entries of an account book. Findings in the archive led the researchers to locate a Caravaggio painting that had been forgotten.⁵⁶ This true story illustrates the potential of discovery within an archive. The recovery of the Caravaggio led from following the trail of evidence to find the painting, whereas typical provenance research begins with a known object and backtracking to its origins.

Edward Alexander describes provenance research as "programmatically research" in which research is done on the permanent objects of the museum to understand their use and significance through their physical descriptions and attributed origins. He then states that programmatic research is a complex issue and is most often performed as a team

⁵⁵ Herbert discusses a particular case of provenance research at the Philadelphia Museum of Art involving a painting by Gustave Courbet that was looted by the Nazis during WWII. She illustrates the use of the painting itself, sales receipts and letters to verify its provenance. See Herbert, "Restitution of Nazi Looted Art," 185-190. See also Reibel, *Registration Methods*, 27.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Harr, *The Lost Painting*, (New York: Random House, 2005), 64-67.

effort.⁵⁷ The significance of provenance research is that it also “serves as one of the building blocks for constructing the history of taste and collecting.”⁵⁸ The correct provenance of an object provides a part of the art historical context.

The implications of collaboration between museum archives and registrars in the vein of research work are various. While the registrars’ department maintains object and exhibition files, the museum archive provides a source of primary documents that may not have been incorporated into the registrars’ files. Since archives accumulate records from the entire institution, the uniting of documentation in the archive lends to a compilation of information that is valuable to provenance research. Institutional archives may contain documents about generous gifts, bequests or exhibitions featuring certain objects. When there are gaps in the history or discrepancies among sources, archive records become invaluable. The gaps that exist in an object’s history may not always be dubious but can derive from a lack of activity between sales, lost records due to no longer existing businesses or even anonymous sales.⁵⁹ Provenance research is interdisciplinary by nature and it is more than likely that it will involve knowledge resources from several departments within a museum.⁶⁰ Archives, either the museum archive or one outside of the institution, have great potential in supplementing registrar’s records to confirm an object’s provenance.

⁵⁷ Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 159-160.

⁵⁸ Nancy H. Yeide, Konstantin Akinsha, Amy L. Walsh, *The AAM Guide to Provenance Research*, (Washington: American Association of Museums, 2001), 1.

⁵⁹ Herbert, “Restitution of Nazi Looted Art,” 187.

⁶⁰ *MRM5: Museum Registration Methods*, ed. Buck and Gilmore, 63.

Institutional files such as ones found with curators or registrars would include information on an object's acquisitions, loans, sales, correspondence with vendors, donor information about previous owners, exhibitions, and also extensive records regarding object loans.⁶¹ In cases of disputed provenance, evidence must be found to either verify or refute an object's known provenance. The registrar will most likely hold records of dealer receipts, exhibition history and loan history.⁶² The registrars' contribution to provenance research is to reconstruct the timeline of an object's history. Since provenance research does require aspects of monetary values and legal issues, caution must be considered here since registrar materials can sometimes be sensitive and private. This issue will be discussed further in a later chapter as a limitation of collaboration.

Public Relations and Outreach

In utilizing the collaboration of a museum archive and the registrars' department there is immense potential for sharing institutional knowledge. Although there may be records that detail information that is sensitive, there are also plenty of materials that can be used to educate, inform and entertain. For instance, the archive and registrars' department can effectively work together to highlight the museum's collection through related archive materials. This can take the form of an exhibit, lectures or workshops which can be used as a way of promoting the archive.⁶³ In examples of exhibits and lectures, registrars can provide information about featured objects and archivists can contribute with complimentary records.

⁶¹ Yeide, Akinsha and Walsh, *The AAM Guide to Provenance Research*, 15.

⁶² Herbert, "Restitution of Nazi Looted Art," 187.

⁶³ Ramos and Ortega, *Building a Successful Archival Programme*, 96-98.

Another type of contribution to the image and presence of a museum is through what many museums have used for publicity and why most museum archives have been established – anniversaries, particularly significant dates such as centennial celebrations. “Too many administrators deal with their records for the first time when... [they wish to] celebrate the anniversary of the beginning of the museum and can’t find the documents from which to draw an historical essay.”⁶⁴ This seems to be a major reason of acknowledging the need for an archive and also moving towards establishing one. Preparing for anniversary celebrations inherently involves archival resources. Registrars could also contribute and enhance the project with added emphasis on the collection and the people who have made it possible – for instance highlighting donor families that have consistently supported the museum throughout its development. This could also emphasize notable acquisitions or loans to accompany archival materials such as exhibition catalogs or ephemera. The registrar would also contribute to object labels and donor/loan information.

Donors and collectors are a significant part of museums and its operations. Without them there would be fewer objects to preserve, interpret and exhibit. They also provide opportunities for archivists and registrars to collaborate. For example, the Frick Collection launched an exhibition highlighting Henry Clay Frick’s last acquisitions of Vermeer. The exhibit, “Frick’s Vermeers Reunited” from June 3 through November 23, 2008, featured three Vermeers, highlighted Frick’s interests and evaluated him in the context of other

⁶⁴ Claudia Hommel, “Museum Archives: Thoughts from Non-Archivists,” *Registrars’ Report* 1, no. 9 (1980): 10.

Vermeer collectors from the same time period.⁶⁵ This small example of how a museum can incorporate a collector, and in this case founder of the museum, into an exhibit shows the use of archive materials to gather information about Frick and registrars' files for information about the artworks. The combination of the two sources created a rich context, perspective and background resources for visitors and researchers.

Limitations

Both archivists and registrars have ethical obligations attached to their roles within a museum. Registrars must ensure that legal documents remain secure, objects are well cared for and receive conservation treatment when needed, and deaccessions are properly documented.⁶⁶ Archivists are encouraged to be honest and fair in ensuring the authenticity, security, access and privacy of their collections.⁶⁷ Both codes of ethics emphasize the security and maintenance of collections and records in terms of physical state and intellectual content. Bernie Deasy posits that ethics are problems for most professionals because of their ambiguity and lack of examples about how to proceed in particular situations.⁶⁸ Most ethical situations are unique in nature and solutions to these kinds of problems often cannot be repeated. Deasy further says that if professionals wish to deal with ethical problems, they must self regulate and train themselves to be aware of potential

⁶⁵ "Past Exhibitions 2008," *The Frick Collection*, accessed March 16, 2012, http://www.frick.org/exhibitions/archives_2008.htm.

⁶⁶ "Code of Ethics for Registrars," *Registrars on Record Essays on Museum Collections Management*, ed. Mary Case (Washington: American Association of Museums, 1988), 229-238.

⁶⁷ "Code of Ethics for Archivists," *Society of American Archivists*, revised January 2012. <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

⁶⁸ Bernie Deasy, "From Principles to Practice: How do Codes of Ethics Translate?" in *Archives and Archivists*, ed. Alisa C. Holland and Kate Manning (England: Four Courts Press, 2006), 88-99.

ethical situations where they would need to be more cautious.⁶⁹ As with all collaborative efforts, there will always be limitations and restrictions on what can be accomplished. Some are inherent and some can be worked around with the right resources. These restrictions are enforced in consideration of the individuals involved and also for legal liability concerns.

Registrars inherently hold restricted information which was encountered in researching for this thesis. Most materials in the registrars' department reference monetary matters, confidential correspondence, private contact information and also donor privacy issues. These are sensitive pieces of information that should be protected under the ethical and professional guidelines held by registrars. The same also exists for archives. Sometimes collections are given to an archive under certain restrictive conditions that the archivist must respect the donor's wishes. However, Alexander posits that gifts that come with unwieldy conditions should generally not be accepted for the trouble they would cause for access.⁷⁰ Other times, there is legal or financial information that should not be released to the public.⁷¹ Although collaboration is beneficial for all parties involved, privacy and sensitive issues should be considered firsthand.

One other hindrance to collaboration is the issue of limited time and budget for these entities to truly collaborate on a project. If an archive or registrars' department is short staffed, on a tight schedule and holds a small budget, which most are, then the chances of collaboration being a high priority is minimal. Therefore this type of

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Alexander, *Museums in Motion*, 125.

⁷¹ Description of restrictions set by the archivist. Ramos and Ortega, *Building a Successful Archival Programme*, 84-85.

collaboration must also be supported by the administration to allow for time and resources to be spent on collaborative projects.

Chapter 5. Case Study: Outline of a Museum Separation

A major purpose of both registrar and institutional records of a museum is to document historical context and past activities. This thesis focuses on a case study of the records documenting how the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art (LACMHSA) became two separate institutions: the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (NHM) and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).

The Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art was once a tri-partite museum dedicated to the collection and exhibition of natural history, the fine arts, and the history of the Southwest⁷² (see [FIGURE 3](#), page 63 for museum development chronology). By 1950, the museum's collection and staff had outgrown its resources.⁷³ It was thought that "the creation of two Museums should enable each to advance within its special sphere more advantageously and rapidly than has been possible for each as a segment of one multi-purpose Museum."⁷⁴ Thus, it was decided that for the benefit of all involved, a new art museum (LACMA) would be built. Subsequently in 1961, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved the Art Department of LACMHSA to be transferred to the new museum including its collections, staff and administration.⁷⁵ While still maintaining

⁷² Herbert Friedmann, "Changes in the Los Angeles County Museum," *Curator* VIII, no. 4 (December 1965): 269.

⁷³ Image caption: "Early tiered method of hanging a wall, which recently the Museum has begun to approach again because of the overcrowded space problem." Richard F. Brown, "The Art Division," *Museum Association Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1960): 15.

⁷⁴ William T. Sesnon, Jr., "A Message from William T. Sesnon, Jr.," *Museum Association Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1962): 3. For more reasons of separation see Herbert Friedmann wished to "relieve the disturbing juxtaposition... [of] this unfortunate mixture of unblendable topics." In Friedmann, "Changes in the Los Angeles County Museum," 270, 275. See also Richard F. Brown, "A New Setting for Art," *Museum Association Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1962): 5.

⁷⁵ Sesnon, Jr., "A Message from William T. Sesnon, Jr.," 3.

connections with Los Angeles County, LACMA would be separated completely from the history and science museum.

In 1958, Jean Delacour, the director of the LACMHS, posed the question, "Is it wise to attempt to provide for continued expansion of a museum of history, science and art in one common location...or is it better to follow the pattern already established in other metropolitan centers of having separate buildings for the different subjects?"⁷⁶ This question changed the course of the museum and the subsequent activities provide a case study for this thesis considering how the separation of a museum affects collection management, registrar and archive records.

⁷⁶ Letter to County Chief Administration Officer Hollinger, April 9, 1958. Fred Gehring's Papers. Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archive.

Chapter 6. Research Methodology

The methods used to form this thesis involved gaining access to records from the archives, registrars' departments and libraries of both the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (NHM), interviewing staff from both LACMA and NHM archives and libraries and a literature search to better understand the comparison between the museum archivist and registrar professions.

Archives

The NHM Archive is an effective source of records relevant to the separation of the museums. NHM occupies the same location and space of what used to be the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science and Art (LACMHSA). This is a major factor in the completeness of the archive, since most documentation of the separation stayed with the originating museum. It is the assumption that a new museum, such as LACMA, would most likely only transfer records that are pertinent to the future progress of that museum.

Following a discussion with the NHM Archivist, it was decided to begin the search for documentary evidence about why LACMHSA decided to separate into two museums by exploring the meeting minutes of the Museum Association (MA), a support group within the museum that dealt with issues of membership, fundraising and museum publications (see [FIGURE 7](#), page 66 for more details on the Museum Association). The minutes dating from 1956 to 1965 provided the author with an understanding of the environment surrounding the separation issue, how events developed and why the separation was advocated. The minutes also draw attention to the prominent directors, board members and donors who were involved in museum operations. These records highlight the methods of separation and also its consequences and results for both museums. However,

they do not include any documents that explain how objects were selected to be deaccessioned and transferred to LACMA.

The NHM Research Library proves to be a good resource since the previous librarian had served on the Archives Committee, which was instrumental in establishing the archive at NHM. Files found here provide written documentation supporting statements made by the NHM Archivist during interviews for this thesis. Documents found in the library support the notion that the archive is not the only place to find institutional records and one method of locating pertinent records would be through intra-museum collaboration.

The LACMA archive operates out of the Balch Research Library and there is a collaboration of resources between the two entities. The LACMA archive contains meeting minutes, correspondence and also publications regarding the topic of LACMA's origins. The published works are useful in contributing to an understanding of the climate of the museum when it was first established. It is unfortunate that resources, particularly primary sources, were not cited in these publications. Following such citations would have enabled an understanding of the available archival resources. Records found at the LACMA archive, such as a file of photocopied MA meeting minutes also appeared in the NHM archive. It quickly became apparent that there are more archival materials at the NHM archive.

Returning to the NHM archive for more primary sources, the next set of informative records are the papers of Fred Gehring, who served as director of the museum as well as in other authoritative positions. Within these files are the reports that are mentioned in passing in the MA meeting minutes. Many of Gehring's records during the move of art objects over to LACMA reference the registrar and their activities. Gehring's papers only

provide half of the conversation on how objects were selected for the move, so the next logical resource was the registrars' department.

Registrars

In consultation with the Registrar of NHM, the records that pertain to the separation were culled and filtered for sensitive information. The resulting documents provide valuable insight into the movement of objects during the separation. Most correspondence was dated after the separation and provides a glimpse into the relationship between the NHM and LACMA directors and how they handled the issue of certain objects remaining at the Natural History Museum.

Interviews

Interviews of archivists, librarians and collection managers were initiated to establish a timeline of events that led up to the creation of institutional archives in both museums. This is necessary to understand the current status of each archive and how records were first accumulated.

On the LACMA side, the Head Librarian and the Assistant Director of Risk Management were involved with establishing the LACMA archive. The interview with Renee Montgomery, then the Head of Collection Management and now the Assistant Director of Risk Management, provides insight into the grant process. Since she had managed the first form of the museum archive at LACMA, she is familiar with the web tools that were produced from the archive records. Alexis Curry, now Head Librarian of the Balch Research Library, discussed the library's role in the development of the archive and its progress over time.

At NHM, the Archivist, Cathy McNassor, had been intimately involved with the process of creating the archive and had been with the institution for several decades. She was instrumental in advocating for the existence of an institutional archive and was most knowledgeable about its development. The interview with McNassor presents an in-depth perspective on the mechanics of the archive and its functional uses within the museum.

Assessing Limitations

Lack of access to detailed information in some cases served to limit the research performed. All research queries at the NHM Registrars' Department had to go through the Registrar, which limited spontaneous discovery of unexpected information that might have occurred with a more direct interaction with the records. The first restriction was that the short span of years relating to the separation of the collection created a smaller scope of potentially relevant registrar documents. The second restriction was the legal and sensitive information inherent within registrar records that prohibits an outsider from casually browsing the files. Another limitation was that most of the records that were relevant to this research topic were located at NHM. The imbalance of archival sources between the two museums affects the conclusions drawn from these results.

Chapter 7. Separating Institutional Records: Pre-Museum Archive

The archive and registrars' department records found at LACMA provide an opportunity to apply the above conclusions about institutional knowledge sharing and collaboration efforts by analyzing the consequences of separating institutional records before a museum archive was established. One particular example of the lack of knowledge sharing arose in a search for documentation that specifically explained the decisions of what constituted an art object. If an object had anything to do with art, it was de-accessioned from the museum and moved to the art museum.⁷⁷ It became clear that there were no written guidelines for which objects were transferred to LACMA. As the definition of an art object changed over the years, the art museum's collection policy would mirror that change by claiming or returning certain objects to NHM. Objects were still traveling between museums several decades after the official move.⁷⁸

Prior to the planning of the move, in the 1930s, the Art Department began separating the art objects that were acquired with county funds and the ones bought with Museum Association funds.⁷⁹ This created a clear line between what the art department owned and which objects the County could claim. For the move, LACMHSa had not devised a set of guidelines as to what the art museum could transfer.⁸⁰ Instead, LACMA prepared to

⁷⁷ Memo from A. Padersen to Fred Gehring, June 5, 1972, NHM Archive.

⁷⁸ Shea, (LACMA Associate Registrar), February 15, 2011.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

move everything that was accessioned under the art department.⁸¹ Guidelines and a complete inventory list of all the transferred objects during the initial move⁸² were not found at either NHM and LACMA's archives and registrars and neither institution had any recollection of its existence. According to common registrar practice, the acquisitions, loans and deaccessions process should be documented and executed according to collection management policies.⁸³ At the time, the separation of objects seemed to be straightforward and creating the documentation for collection policies was overlooked until after the separation.

The following memorandum to Fred Gehring sums up the approach to the separation of LACMNSA's collections: "the general rule of thumb was that anything primarily "Art" was to go to the Art Museum and anything regarded as important because of its historical importance, was to remain here. I saw nothing in writing."⁸⁴ In a letter found in the NHM archive, from the Director of NHM to the Assistant Director (see [FIGURE 8](#), page 67, for details and timeline of directors), "The general division of material by subject matter decided by the then board members was not spelled out in the legal articles of separation...nothing to my knowledge was recorded in written form."⁸⁵ Mead was concerned with LACMA claiming several objects, and was also unsure of what belonged to which museum for objects that fit into the categories of Old World and New World

⁸¹ For more details on the move: "Art Museum Preparing to Move." *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)* August 30, 1964, accessed March 16, 2012, <http://www.proquest.com/>. See also Jack Smith, "They Moved 500,000 Things and They Broke Only a Jar," *Museum News* 43, no. 10 (June 1965): 19-23.

⁸² Shea, (LACMA Associate Registrar), February 15, 2011.

⁸³ Rebecca A. Buck & Jean Allman Gilmore, *Collection Conundrums Solving Collections Management Mysteries* (Washington: American Association of Museums, 2007), 84.

⁸⁴ Memo from A. Padersen to Fred Gehring, June 5, 1972, NHM Archive.

⁸⁵ Letter from Giles W. Mead to C. F. Gehring, April 24, 1972, NHM Archive.

primitive artifacts, costumes and Western Art.⁸⁶ The works related to Native American Art and cultural objects were not transferred as it was seen, at the time, to be a better fit for the NHM collection than LACMA. Mead in the same letter addressed to Gehring states, “While I believe that much material should indeed be in Art, this Museum cannot become a great reservoir of materials to be claimed by Art whenever their definition of art, because of popular interest or otherwise, changes.”⁸⁷

What is the Definition of Art?

The above information from the records of LACMA pose the question of what is the definition of art and does it include objects such as Native American artifacts. David Clowney, in his article discussing the definitions of art and fine arts, introduces several authors as having the view that the term and concept of art was invented in the Enlightenment period and that anything that originated outside of the eighteenth century Western sphere would not be considered art since the concept was entirely outside of their scope of knowledge.⁸⁸ In arguing against these scholars who have tried to define art and its use as the word, concept and thing, Clowney proposes that there is no definition of art in either of the forms mentioned above. He argues a successful definition would “delimit what exists in the world and...clarify our concepts.”⁸⁹ Yet in the world of art these two entities coexist, as shapers and limiters of the other, which makes it harder to reach a satisfactory definition.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ David Clowney, “Definitions of Art and Fine Art’s Historical Origin,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 309-310.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 311.

Clowney continues with the discussion of the use of the term 'fine arts' as describing activities such as painting and sculpture. During the Renaissance artists could be defined as people who were also called craftsmen. But after 'fine arts' was defined, "ceramic arts, weaving and embroidery, woodworking and stonemasonry...that had enjoyed more respect in previous times were now more likely to be seen as unimaginative manual labor."⁹⁰ Although this seems to be a bit of an exaggeration, the description fits the philosophy of the NHM-LACMA separation where such activities above were classified as evidence of historical activities rather than fine art or even art. Works such as Native American basketry or ceramic works were viewed as objects that documented techniques and ways of life that were no longer existent, keeping these objects were more a way of preserving that life rather than collecting a piece of artwork.

Another perspective focusing on the anthropological and archaeological view relevant to the NHM and LACMA case is provided by Warren D'Azevedo. He posits that because anthropology focused on collecting objects as artifacts that demonstrated material culture, the term 'primitive art' was applied. The term did not allow artifacts to be viewed and understood as art.⁹¹ From this standpoint, D'Azevedo claims that anthropological literature discussed art in terms of "the museum approach."⁹² He states that the discipline's approach is one that narrows and views artifacts as "by-products or instruments of other categories of social phenomena which appear to be more amenable to analysis and

⁹⁰ Ibid., 312.

⁹¹ Warren L. D'Azevedo, "A Structural Approach to Esthetics: Toward a Definition of Art in Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 60, (1958): 702.

⁹² Ibid., 703.

structuring – political, economic, and religious activities.”⁹³ This view provides an apt description of what was seen in the case of NHM and LACMA during the separation. As this opinion changed over time, whether due to a change in the approach of social and political phenomena or a change of aesthetic values in the art community, the definition of what constituted art or an artifact started to blur. This created issues where Mead, the NHM director, was faced with claims for objects that were not previously considered to be art.

In cases like the NHM-LACMA separation, where there were claims made to objects years after the separation, more accurate and complete records would have aided in resolving the issues. Documents that record the provenance of an object can validate and increase their historical, scientific and monetary value.⁹⁴ Daniel Reibel discusses documenting deaccessions as a necessary action and that records belonging to an object that has been deaccessioned should be kept by the institution with an indication on the file that it has been removed from the collection.⁹⁵ This would be ideal in a museum which frequently transfers objects in and out of the collection.

Registrar Records at the Natural History Museum

As opposed to the above example of the results of lacking institutional knowledge sharing, the following discussion details the potential benefits of enabling resource sharing using specific examples. The relationship of the registrar to collections and records in a natural history museum, where there are also multiple collections managers, is different from that of an art museum. Natural history museum collections usually have the largest

⁹³ Ibid., 702-703.

⁹⁴ Mary Case, “What Registrars Do All Day,” in *Registrars on Record Essays on Museum Collections Management*, ed. Mary Case (Washington: American Association of Museums, 1988), 14.

⁹⁵ Reibel, *Registration Methods*, 71.

collections that consist of separate collections for the disciplines of history, ornithology, biology, herpetology, paleontology and many more. Each department's specimens require different needs which registrars must learn to balance for the entire institution. Margaret Santiago provides several examples of the kinds of issues registrars are apt to run into on a routine basis. One example describes a registrar that receives an unknown specimen and must collaborate with scientists to verify its origins and details. Another example provided is a department that had accessioned an object without providing the registrar any records of the action.⁹⁶ These are noted as issues that might arise in a museum that manages such a diverse collection.

Another characteristic of the NHM Registrar is the occasional overlap of archive and registrar records. These records proved to serve as a supplement to the archive records mentioned in the section above. One example is evident in a letter that was found in both locations which listed art objects that were marked for an auction sale. The copy found in the archive is dated December 28, 1966 and the registrar copy is undated and most likely a draft.⁹⁷ The fact that the letter pertaining to objects of the collection was also found in the archive points to the overlap of subject relevance to both departments. Registrars could use the record to determine the origin of a particular object and the archive would find the record useful as document of the process of reclaiming art objects for NHM's collection.

Also seen in the registrar records are correspondence of varying types. Some are between curators, directors of both the natural history and art museums, and also between

⁹⁶ Margaret Santiago, "The Registrar in the Cabinet of Curiosities," in *Registrars on Record Essays on Museum Collections Management*, ed. Mary Case (Washington: American Association of Museums, 1988), 66 and 68.

⁹⁷ Letter from John Dewar to Ruth Mahood, December 28, 1966, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles Archive. See also same letter in Registrar records at Natural History Museum of Los Angeles.

registrars. The central theme of these letters was the collection and its movement. There are also inventory lists and memos that were most likely circulated internally within NHM. Among the inventory lists were those accompanied by letters from Herbert Friedmann to Kenneth Donohue, the second Director of LACMA. Both letters are dated about a month apart detailing the desire for Donohue to extract a list of items from NHM that belonged to LACMA.⁹⁸ Friedmann was always finding ways to free up the space for NHM collections, unfortunately there was no third letter to describe the resolution of this matter.⁹⁹ Since a majority of the objects did not have an accession number, it is not likely that these items could be traced in today's registrar records.

⁹⁸ Letter from Herbert Friedmann to Kenneth Donohue, December 6, 1966 and January 9, 1967, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Registrar.

⁹⁹ LACMA at the time was also eager to extract certain art objects that had not been transferred in the first move, but after several unsuccessful attempts the effort was given up. According to Tiffany Shea, (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Associate Registrar), in discussion with author, February 15, 2011.

Chapter 8. Establishing Museum Archives

The separation of the museums cited in the previous chapter also included the separation of the institutional and registrar records. In order to understand why certain records were kept and not others, the development and recognized need for each museum archive is explored in this chapter. The NHM and LACMA archives derive from entirely different methods – one being a retirement project and the other prompted by an outside grant with a finite goal. Although different techniques were used, some of the resulting characteristics of the archives match the recommendations provided in *Building a Successful Archival Programme* by Marisol Ramos and Alma C. Ortega,¹⁰⁰ a straightforward guide for archivists starting new archives. Comparing Ramos and Ortega's recommendations to the principles and methods from this case study substantiate the efforts of NHM and LACMA to create functional institutional archives.

Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archive

The NHM archive is an example of a retired museum staff person's determination in 1976 to preserve the history of the museum and eventually garner enough support to create an institutional archive in 1980. An evaluation study performed in 1986 by an outside consultant provided recommendations for the new archive, and what started as a retirement project quickly transformed, in 2000, into a more standardized and trusted official museum archive with a professional archivist (see [FIGURE 4](#), page 64).

Gretchen Sibley, a retiree with thirty years of service to the Education Department, was intent on creating a more comprehensive history of the Natural History Museum of Los

¹⁰⁰ Ramos and Ortega, *Building a Successful Archival Programme*.

Angeles County than that previously written for the 50th anniversary in LACMHSA's publication, *Museum Association Quarterly*, from Spring 1960.¹⁰¹ Although Sibley was not able to complete the work she had intended, she was monumental in beginning the process of preserving the museum's history. Collecting documents and ephemera that recorded the history of the museum became a hobby for Sibley and she continued collecting anything that related to the operations, exhibits and administration of LACMHSA.¹⁰² The archive developed without any visible collection policy as Sibley accumulated records from retirees and departments that were running out of office space to store old files.

In the process of creating the archive, NHM staff formed an Archives Committee to oversee and hire an archive consultant to survey the institution and its records. Consultant Lynn Bonfield wrote up the report in June 1986 and used survey and qualitative methods for gathering her data.¹⁰³ As explained by Ramos and Ortega, the survey method collects information directly from people about how they feel and what they know about a topic.¹⁰⁴ Bonfield interviewed each member of the Archives Committee, including staff members of the library and the history division. The report recommended that the Archives Committee membership be more widely representative and consist of members from the various curatorial and administrative offices, development, registrar, history division and life

¹⁰¹ "Los Angeles County Museum 50th Anniversary 1910/1960," *Museum Association Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (Spring 1960).

¹⁰² Lynn Bonfield, "Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County: Documenting the Past for Present and Future Use; A Report on the Museum's Archival and Records Management Program" (cumulative report from a study on the archives and records completed by an archival consultant, June 1986): 3.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Ramos and Ortega, *Building a Successful Archival Programme*, 11.

science division.¹⁰⁵ Also mirrored in the survey is the report analysis by Bonnfield which includes several factors that affected the institution such as physical condition, preservation issues, uniqueness of the collection, types of records, and opportunity for growth.¹⁰⁶ Bonnfield also included recommendations for oral history projects and operational policies for collecting, appraising, arranging and access.¹⁰⁷

Around the year 2000, Cathy McNassor was overseeing the archive of the George C. Page Museum in Hancock Park (see [FIGURE 6](#), page 65 for current staff). Since the Page and NHM were considered sister museums and McNassor showed experience regarding the development, operation and maintenance of an archive, McNassor was appointed archivist of the NHM institutional archive. She had also worked at NHM for several years in the archaeology, exhibits and other departments.¹⁰⁸ McNassor has been the only professional archivist at NHM and is consistently collecting, re-housing and organizing the records.

Once McNassor took over the archive, she was inundated with records that people had been keeping over the years. It is surmised that there were some people who did not trust Sibley with their papers, works and other archival materials because the archive had not been fully institutionalized.¹⁰⁹ Trust plays a large part in the image that an archive and the archivist portray. If an archivist is not respected or trusted, then the archives might

¹⁰⁵ Bonnfield, "Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County," 9.

¹⁰⁶ Ramos and Ortega, *Building a Successful Archival Programme*, 12-14.

¹⁰⁷ Bonnfield, "Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County."

¹⁰⁸ Cathy McNassor (Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archivist), in discussion with author, November 17, 2011.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

portray a negative image¹¹⁰ which might discourage the deposit of personal/business papers. It was evident to McNassor that curators and museum staff were holding onto their records, which signifies that they acknowledged the value of an archive and would only trust their papers to an official museum archive.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art Archive

Contrasting with NHM, the LACMA archive was prompted by a force from outside of the institution that realized the value in LACMA's institutional history. As the result of a Getty Foundation initiative entitled "On the Record: Art in LA 1945-1980," the historical records at LACMA that contribute to the development of the art scene in Los Angeles were proposed to be surveyed, processed, preserved and made accessible.¹¹¹ With some input from the Research Library, Renee Montgomery, Head of Collections Management at LACMA, succeeded as one of 22 institutional applicants including universities and museums in securing funds (see [FIGURE 5](#), page 64). LACMA is distinguished as "the oldest and largest art museum in Los Angeles and has played a fundamental role in the development of 20th century art on the West Coast."¹¹² Being one of the oldest art museums in Los Angeles warranted efforts to preserve and make accessible the institutional records, contrary to what the institution had believed in the past.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Richard J. Cox, "Professionalism and Archivists in the United States," *The American Archivist* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1986): 231.

¹¹¹ "The Getty goes on the Record about L.A.'S Postwar Art Scene," *The Getty Foundation*, September 12, 2006, accessed December 20, 2011,

http://www.getty.edu/news/press/center/foundation_on_the_record_release091206.html.

¹¹² "Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980 Archival Grants Awarded," *The Getty Foundation*, accessed December 20, 2011, http://www.getty.edu/foundation/funding/access/current/pst_fact_sheet_archival.html.

¹¹³ Alexis Curry (Los Angeles County Museum of Art Head Librarian), in discussion with author, December 21, 2011.

In 2002, Lyn Kienholz, through the California/International Arts Foundation (CIAF), advocated for a survey¹¹⁴ of the historical records found at LACMA. Kienholz collaborated with Montgomery to apply for the Getty Foundation grant, resulting in an award of \$422,000 “to catalogue their archives and eventually make them publicly accessible.”¹¹⁵ After the grant was awarded to LACMA, Montgomery hired Maggie Nelson as an archivist.¹¹⁶ While Nelson was contracted from 2005-2007, she assessed the records and developed policies, procedures and retention schedules.¹¹⁷ Comparing the LACMA archive to Ramos and Ortega’s recommendations, some similarities are performing an assessment study of the types of records in the collection¹¹⁸ and the importance of policies as a way to “ensure standardization of practices and procedures,” not only to cultivate the collection but to protect the archivist’s decisions in ambiguous ethical and political situations.¹¹⁹

At the time, the main focus of the archive project was to create online tools for public access on the museum’s website. These included a historical timeline of the museum, online exhibitions and oral histories.¹²⁰ At this point, the collections were not being processed in the way of arrangement and description as detailed in *Museum Archives an Introduction*. This would have involved organizing the records physically and in an intellectual order for access through finding aids.¹²¹ LACMA took a different approach to

¹¹⁴ Naomi Sawelson-Gorse and Maggie Nelson, “Los Angeles County Museum of Art: L.A. Art History Project-Site Survey Report,” October 2002, Spring 2004.

¹¹⁵ “Pacific Standard Time” *The Getty Foundation*, accessed December 20, 2011.

¹¹⁶ Curry (LACMA Head Librarian), December 21, 2011.

¹¹⁷ Curry (LACMA Head Librarian), December 21, 2011.

¹¹⁸ Ramos and Ortega, *Building a Successful Archival Programme*, 9-14.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹²⁰ Renee Montgomery (Los Angeles County Museum of Art Assistant Director Risk Management), in discussion with author, November 8, 2011.

¹²¹ Wythe, *Museum Archives*, 35-54.

providing access to their archive materials. Creating straightforward tools rather than finding aids was a less time consuming method of providing access, promoting the archive and making effective use of a limited term contractor.¹²²

In 2010, the archive was transferred to the library's jurisdiction, which in turn hired Jessica Gambling as a professional archivist. It was at this time that boxes of records were discovered in the basement of LACMA West, an adjacent building that was acquired by the museum several years before. There is no documented explanation of how and why the records were there.¹²³ But they were deposited in the basement starting in the late 1990s when LACMA acquired the May West building. Most of the records date from the 1960s and 1970s, when the museum was first transferred out of LACMHSA.¹²⁴ Since the basement was exposed to moisture, heat and pollution, the records are in a poor condition and it is estimated that there are more missing records, either from the move or lost in a previous warehouse fire.¹²⁵

¹²² Ramos and Ortega, *Building a Successful Archival Programme*, 83.

¹²³ Curry (LACMA Head Librarian), December 21, 2011.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter 9. A Case for Collaboration

After both the NHM and LACMA archives were established, the records were made accessible and the following is an analysis of specific examples to demonstrate the necessity of shared resources between the archive and registrars' department. The focus was from 1959 to 1965, which contained the most relevant information. One main reason given for the separation was that LACMHSAs were overcrowded¹²⁶ and exhibitions were forced to be displayed in hallways.¹²⁷ The separation was cited as being mainly for the purpose of allowing both museums to fully develop. Speaking from the perspective of the Natural History Museum, "our policy with regard to the Art Museum is one of cooperation and of avoidance of needless friction or animosity. The separation is not a rift but a matter of needed and healthy growth for both institutions."¹²⁸

Museum Association

From the NHM archive, the records that pertained most to the separation were the meeting minutes of the Museum Associates, a governing body formed in 1938 to "receive gifts and bequests for the Los Angeles County Museum."¹²⁹ Since the Associates dealt with LACMHSAs's governing boards, their records contained information about fundraising plans, bylaws of the committee, reasons for the separation, plans for the new museum expenses and relocation committee recommendations.

¹²⁶ This was mentioned several times in separate publications and correspondence: Michael Govan, *The Broad Contemporary Art Museum at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, (Los Angeles: Museum Associates Los Angeles County Museum, 2008), 89. See Los Angeles County Museum Biennial Report, 1961-1963, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Research Library. See Also Hoyt B. Leisure, "Museum Association to Double," *Museum Association Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1962): 24.

¹²⁷ William Osmun, "Art Museum Materializing," *Museum Association Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1962): 7.

¹²⁸ LACM Biennial Report, 1961-1963, NHM Research Library.

¹²⁹ Museum Association History to July '59, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archives.

Museum Associates created a group under their jurisdiction named Museum Patrons Association which was later renamed Museum Association (MA)¹³⁰ (see [FIGURE 7](#), page 66 for specific dates). At the time of separation, it was agreed that Museum Association would also split into two to facilitate growth in membership activity, programs and also to expand the influence of the museums in their respective communities.¹³¹ The Board of Directors of the Science and History Alliance would govern the science and history museum and the Museum Associates would govern the art museum.¹³²

The records of MA provide insight into the preparation of separating a museum. The Association hired two separate consultant firms to conduct a survey on MA and its governing strategies. The use of outside firms Crescent, McCormick & Padgett and G.A. Brakeley & Co. to organize the structure of separation¹³³ and to support fundraising logistics, respectively¹³⁴ were useful tools to inform the administration. These reports are significant to the reconstruction of the separation because they provide a written document to compare suggestions from outside consultants to how the actual separation was carried out.

Correspondence and Papers

Another valuable resource is the correspondence and papers of directors and staff of LACMHSA. One prominent director, Fred Gehring, started working with LACMHSA and continued on with NHM after the separation (see [FIGURE 8](#), page 67 for more details about

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Hoyt, B. Leisure, Annual Report of the Museum Association, May 29, 1962, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archive.

¹³² Executive Committee Meeting, July 7, 1961, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archive. See also Leisure, "Museum Association to Double," 24.

¹³³ Executive Committee Meeting, May 5, 1961, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archive.

¹³⁴ Art Museum Building II, April 9, 1959, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archive.

the museum directors from 1952-1979). Since Gehring held an authoritative position for a majority of his time at the museum, his papers contain information that discerns what the administrative role was in the separation of the museums. For example, correspondence between directors and the registrars' department provide information about how the collection was transferred and some of the policies or lack thereof behind these decisions.

Gehring's correspondence regarding the separation includes letters from Giles W. Mead, the then Director of NHM. The letters highlight Mead's concerns over the disposition of certain objects claimed by both institutions.¹³⁵ In response to the inquiry Gehring sought out Padersen, then staff of the NHM Registrar, who provided a list of items that transferred to the art museum and also art objects that were still in NHM after the move. This set of correspondence demonstrates the issue of maintaining proper records during a move.

As alluded to above, the registrar's role in this situation is paramount in maintaining accurate records for both museums. Gehring's papers demonstrate this through reports from the registrars' department, titled: "Progress report and summary of early discussions with Mrs. Paderson," and "Registrar-Functions and Duties."¹³⁶ These reports give insight into some of the procedures of the registrar, especially at a time when the collection was being separated. The reports show concern about the only complete set of bound registrar reports maintained by LACMHS. The registrar recommended that if particular volumes were given to the art museum, then the "pages containing history-science material be

¹³⁵ Letter from Giles W. Mead to C. F. Gehring, April 24, 1972, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archive.

¹³⁶ Progress report and summary of early discussions with Mrs. Padersen, C.E. Miller report to C.F. Gehring, June 28, 1963, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archive. See also Registrar-Functions and Duties, C.E. Miller to file, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archive.

microfilmed and filed in the [NHM] registrar's office."¹³⁷ Following this process, both museums would still be in possession of relevant registrar records that provide insight into how these records were handled and distributed among the two museums.

Yet the registrar records were not handled as in the above description. The registrar had reviewed the listings of objects and if they contained a mix of objects from the art, history or sciences disciplines, the listing was copied. The original would then be given to the museum that had the most objects included. If the listing was entirely comprised of objects from just one of the disciplines, the entire list was given to the respective museum without a copy being made.¹³⁸ Padersen, the Registrar, stated: "not having a copy of any file which they considered all Art, now makes it impossible for us to know whether or not we might feel a claim to something they may have taken."¹³⁹ Although there was still a record in one of the institutions, there was no complete record of the holdings of LACMNSA.

¹³⁷ Progress report, C.E. Miller report to C.F. Gehring, NHM Archive.

¹³⁸ Memorandum from A. Padersen to Fred Gehring, June 5, 1972, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County Archive.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

Chapter 10. Application of Theory to Case Study

The case study provided a frame through which the results of this thesis could be tested and applied. Institutional knowledge sharing is demonstrated with the following examples of applying provenance research principles and initiatives of public relations to the museums, NHM and LACMA.

Provenance Issues for the NHM-LACMA Separation

As seen in the case study of objects that were disputed between NHM and LACMA, claiming an object is difficult without proper documentation. *MRM5* discusses claims of ownership using the example of Nazi-era objects and the results of looting. This is an example that involved entire nations and requires a larger scope of research to determine where certain objects originated and when they changed hands, whether from looting or as an attempt of protective custody.¹⁴⁰ The NHM-LACMA case is not as complex as the Nazi-era example given in the manual, but the same principles of documentation research could apply.

As mentioned before, Giles Mead, the director of NHM in 1972 was concerned over some of LACMA's claims of a list of objects. Although only a few records discussed this topic, we can see that there was collaboration between the Assistant Director and the NHM Registrars' Department. It seems that neither NHM nor LACMA produced and maintained documentation of the selection process. According to *MRM5*, it is recommended to work with varying levels of officials within a museum in finding evidence of ownership through

¹⁴⁰ *MRM5: Museum Registration Methods*, ed. Buck and Gilmore, 71-72.

the use of sale receipts, photographs and other documentation.¹⁴¹ The approach of utilizing the tiered level of authority figures allows the researcher to gather documentation from a variety of sources and build a more complete file on the provenance of an object. In the case of Mead's distress over the objects in NHM, he would have benefited if the selection process were documented, to act as a general policy that could be referenced in the future if an issue were to arise. For this case study, it is more important to establish which department acquired the object, possibly which funds were used to purchase it and who instigated the transaction. Answers to these questions would most likely clarify which museum had a legitimate and documented claim to the object.

Public Relations from the LACMA Archive

An example of public relations initiatives has already been envisioned by LACMA and the form of its initial archive. LACMA was attempting to create a more pervasive and informative web presence through their website. This is yet another form of promoting archives and the potential of materials housed within.¹⁴² The first archive initiatives were to create timelines and snapshots of the museum's history to highlight the importance of the collection and LACMA's presence within Los Angeles and the art world. These initiatives were published online as guides to the public and ready reference tools that were derived from materials found in the archive.¹⁴³ Through the use of these tools, LACMA was connecting to the community to promote its presence and celebrate its history. This

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁴² Ramos and Ortega, *Building a Successful Archival Programme*, 98.

¹⁴³ Montgomery (LACMA Assistant Director Risk Management), November 8, 2011. Also Curry (LACMA Head Librarian), December 21, 2011. See also the LACMA Collections Museum History links, accessed March 8, 2012, http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=browpage;dept=archives;method=history_events

was also a method of placing LACMA's goals within the context of how the art scene developed in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s. The registrars' department's contribution is evident in the collection highlights and significant acquisitions in the timeline.

The presence of a museum within its community is important to establish from the very beginning if the museum solicits its support. The combination of the expertise, resources and training of the registrar and museum archivist can contribute to a positive impact on a museum's image, reputation and presence within a community. Collaboration between registrars and archivists can benefit from a reciprocal relationship. Since registrars are deemed essential for the operations of a museum, by associating with registrars in collaborative projects, archivists can also gain in status and in time become as indispensable as registrars. Collaboration with the registrars' department may revitalize the museum archive profession to ensure that administration, donors and board members view museum archivists with value and as effective members of the museum.

Conclusion

The NHM-LACMA separation provides a case study for analyzing the records that were preserved by both institutions. It may not have been intentional, but the NHM Registrars' Department in fulfilling its duties was also collecting records that are archival in nature. The overlap of collecting interests between a registrars' department and museum archive prompts the exploration of how this relationship could promote institutional knowledge sharing. One method, as discussed previously, is the use of collaborative measures in matters of provenance research and public relations. As evident in the discussion of this case study, the use of collaborative efforts through institutional knowledge sharing could have aided in situations such as verifying claims on certain objects in the collection. The examples provided illustrate the need for the ability to share knowledge within a museum, especially between museum archives and registrars.

This partnership also falls under the overall records management initiatives of an institution. The roles of an institution-wide records retention schedule lend to the important function of determining when which records are considered archival. An example of the manifestation of records management policies is found in museum wide knowledge management systems, which was illustrated in the case study as a need for accurately shared documentation. Pieces of information relevant to a museum's overall goals and functions must have a central location accessible by the staff. The ease of information discovery for encouraging collaboration within an institution provides a valid reason for the investment of resources into the development of such a system. The advantage of shared information systems is the allowance of the preservation of knowledge in conjunction with its use in routine tasks required of registrars and archivists.

In comparison to the registrars' profession, museum archivists have not developed into a visibly essential component of a museum's operations. For this reason, they must work towards becoming as crucial as registrars – in that when a museum is first established, museum archives are incorporated into the administration's initial plans. One method of raising the awareness of value and need of a museum archive is by ensuring that the archive is used by the administration and museum staff. Through the use of the archive, the administration will realize its worth and be more willing to advocate for its existence. The establishment of a museum archive must be planned from the beginning of a museum's life in order to capture and preserve its irreplaceable records.

Figures

FIGURE 3 LACMHSA Chronology

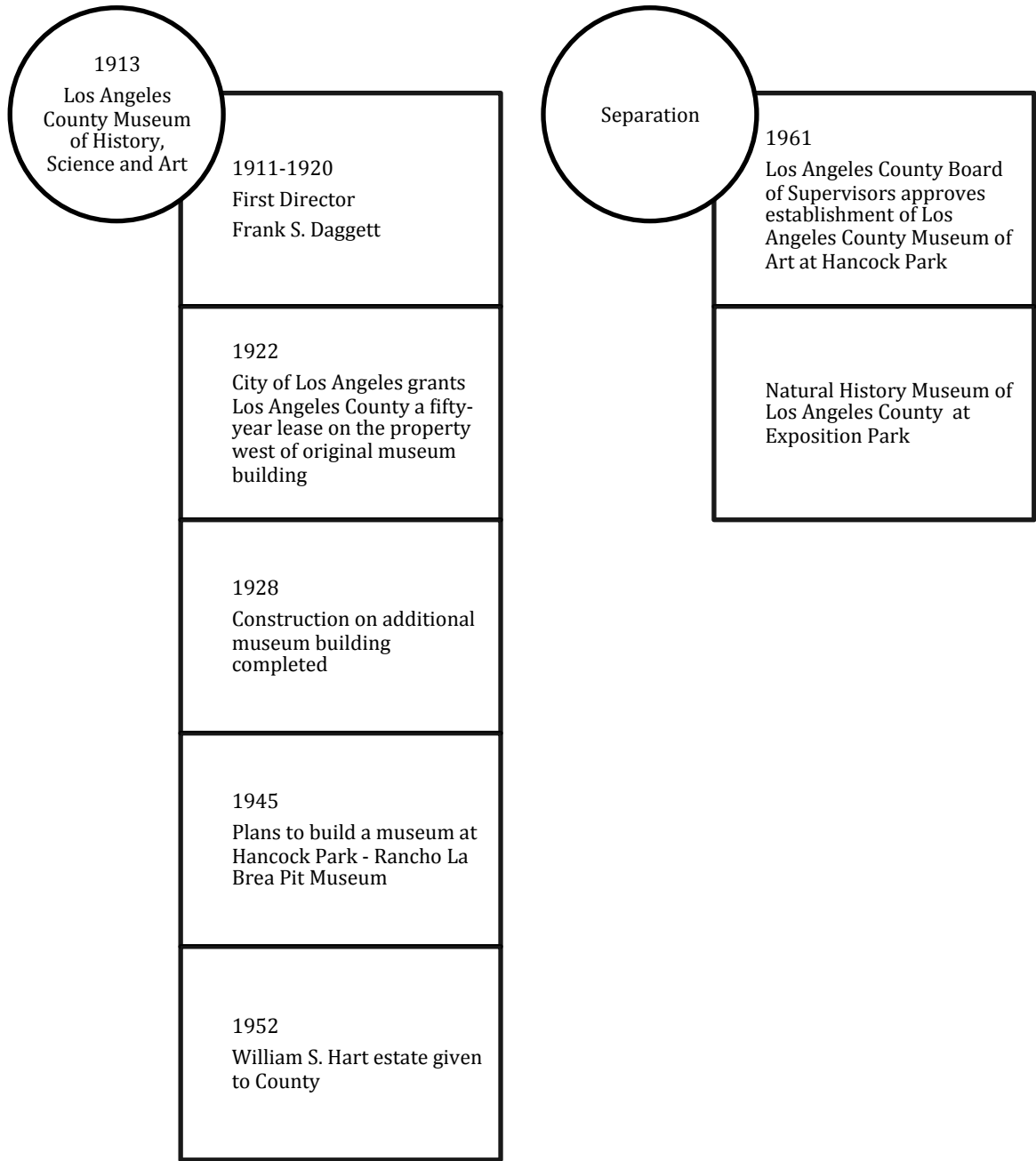


FIGURE 4 NHM Archive Chronology

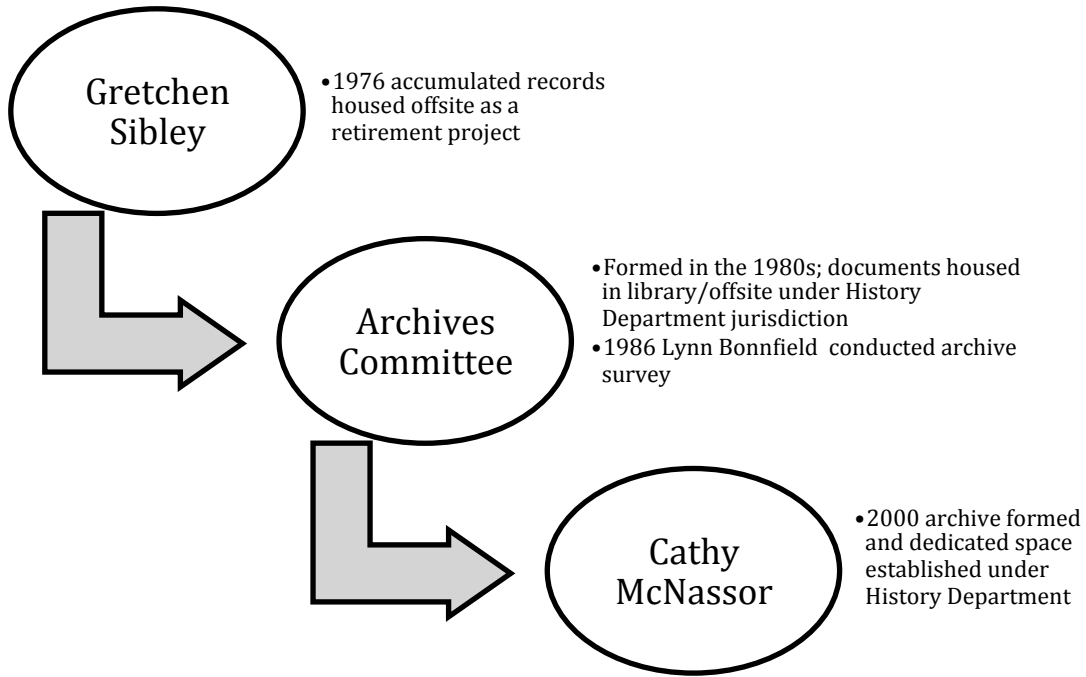


FIGURE 5 LACMA Archive Chronology



FIGURE 6 Current staff at NHM and LACMA

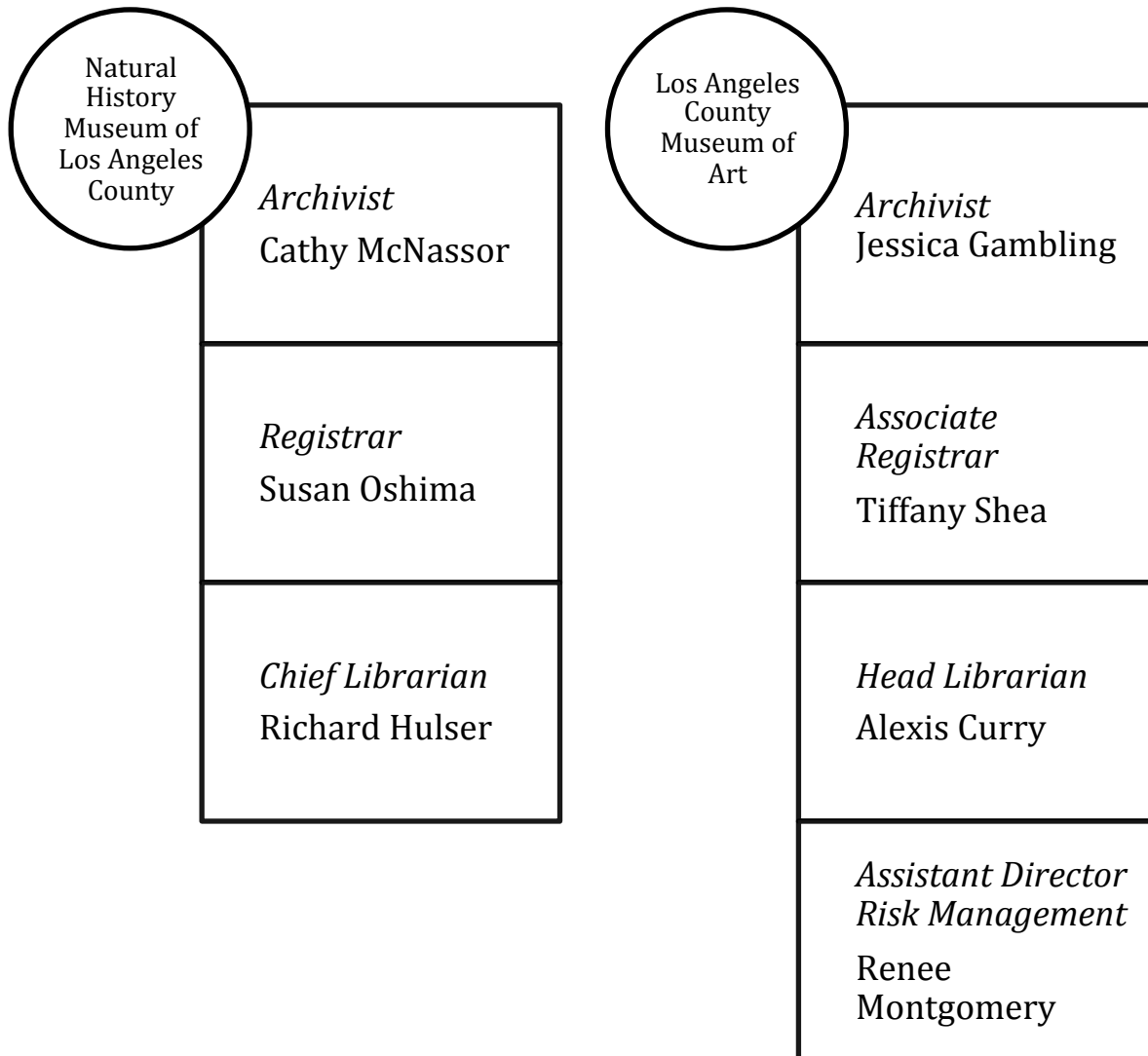


FIGURE 7 Museum Association Timeline

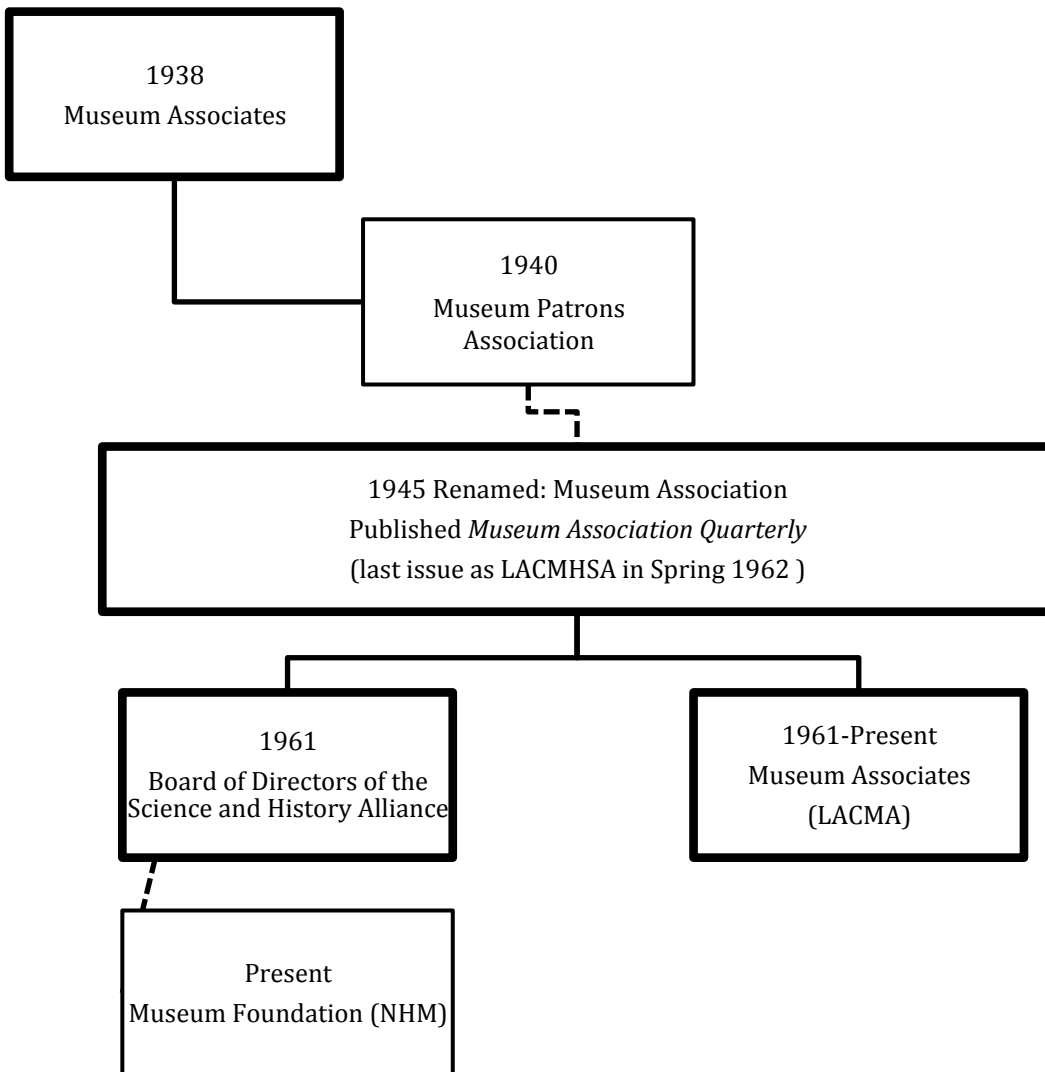
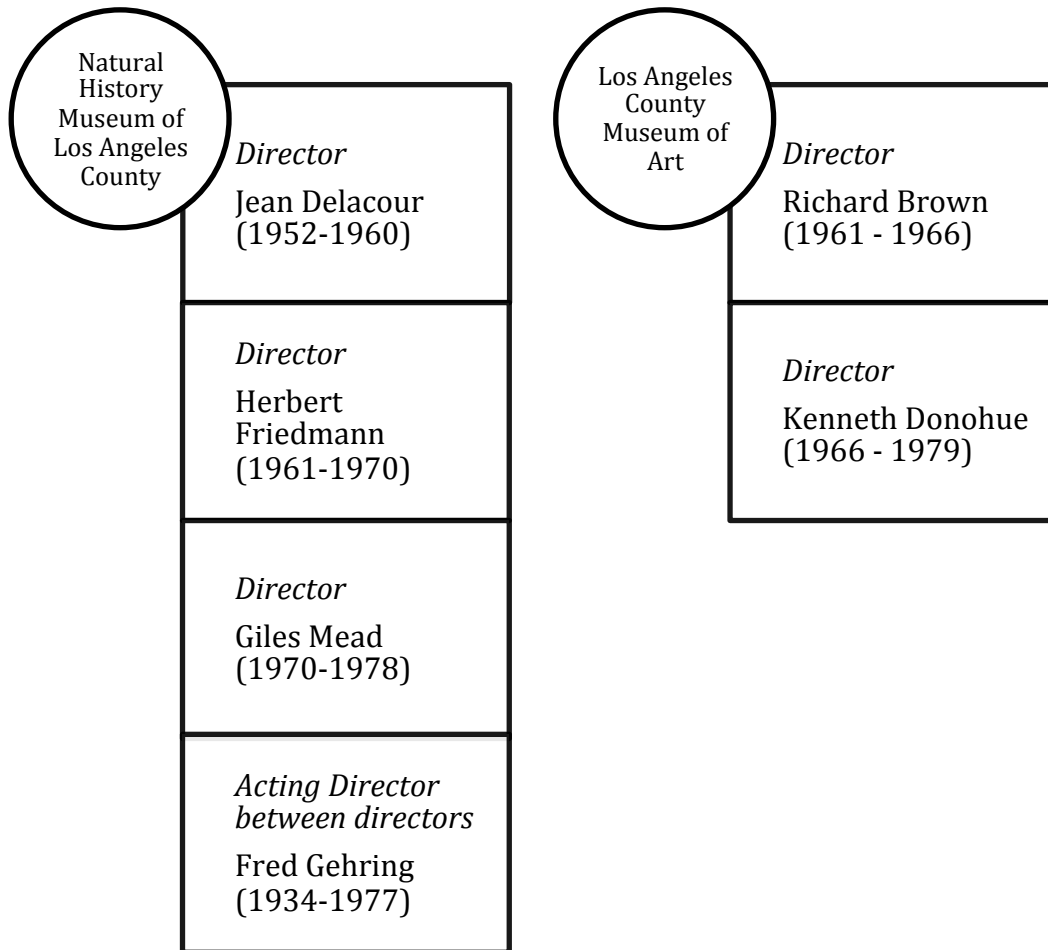


FIGURE 8 Directors of NHM and LACMA (1952-1979)



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