From a Private Archive to a Public Museum

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SAŽETAK

U članku se iznose osobna iskustva kustosice u umjetničkom muzeju s nekoliko „pomoćnih" arhiva muzejskih zbirki, u kojima su najzastupljeniji različiti fotografski objekti. Tekst podcrtava problem stručne nepripremljenosti muzealaca za upravljanje i skrb o fotografskoj građi, što je još već izazov kada ona egzistira unutar heterogenog dokumentacijskog klastera koji je više puta iznova sastavljan. U nastojanju da se očuva koncepcijski integritet novog/starog arhiva, koji bi u što većoj mjeri odražavao sve dosadašnje primjene, intervencije i manipulacije građom, kao trag njezine *pred-* i *postakvizicijske biografije* (Edwards, Morton), a jednako tako i povijesti muzeja, pribjeglo se arhivističkim opisima prema principu odozgo prema dolje koji dosežu razinu pojedinačnog primjerka. Na taj se način nije iznevjerio arhivistički imperativ uvažavanja provenijencije i prvobitnog reda, a ujedno se osigurala vidljivost svake pojedine fotografije, koja se opisuje kao dokument i artefakt. Uzimajući u obzir činjenicu da takav pristup nije univerzalno provediv, izložene su sve njegove prepoznate prednosti i inherentna ograničenja. Na kraju, u članku se ukratko raspravlja o izazovima preslikavanja takvog pristupa u digitalni kontekst.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

ostavštine likovnih umjetnika, arhivi umjetničkih zbirki, fotografski objekti, muzejska fotografija, fotografije izvan muzejskih zbirki

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a curator's personal experience in a museum of art with several "auxiliary" archives of museum collections, in which various photographic objects are the most numerous. The paper underlines the issue of experts' unpreparedness within museum institutions for managing and preserving photographic material, which is especially challenging when it exists in a heterogenous documentation cluster that has been reassembled multiple times. In an effort to preserve the conceptual integrity of the new/old archive, which will as much as possible mirror all earlier uses, interventions, manipulations, etc. of the material, as a sign of its *pre-* and *post-acquisition biography* (Edwards, Morton), and equally the history of the museum, it has been resorted to a top-to-bottom archival description that will reach the level of each individual item. In this way, the archival imperative of acknowledging the provenance and original order is not being betrayed, while at the same time we are ensuring the visibility of each individual photograph, which is described both as a document and as an artifact. Taking into consideration the fact that this kind of approach is not universally applicable, all of its recognized benefits and inherent limitations are presented. Finally, the paper briefly discusses the challenges of applying the same approach to a digital context.

KEYWORDS

visual artists' estates, art collections' archives, photographic objects, museum photography, non-collection photography

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Od privatnog arhiva do javnog muzeja

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In art museums, the acquisition of a visual artist's estate frequently includes accompanying documentation and personal items: private writings, correspondence, diaries, journals, sketches and notes, various documents, books, small objects, and photographs, which are not necessarily and always linked to the artist's professional practice. Such material, being a secondary aspect of the artist's legacy, is (at best) placed in associated archives, or filed under "documentation" of respective museum art collections.[1] In practice, this means that the institutionalization of such material does not necessarily result in its greater visibility and availability, as it all too frequently remains uninventoried, let alone catalogued. In a considerable number of cases, these types of assets are seen only as an additional research tool and, as such, are subject to the volitional treatment of curators under whose part of the museum collection it should fall. In the grey area between public and private property, such material is frequently taken out of the institution, often without a written trace. This material is sometimes returned to the museum in the form of new intellectual and material assemblages in bizarre turnabouts, such as reacquisitions from the private archives of former curators. Photographs, because of their very nature, are especially sensitive in this kind of context. They are — sometimes due to easier storage and preservation, but more often because of a utilitarian approach pushed to the extreme — arbitrarily separated from their original context and embedded into a new one, often at the expense of their material integrity and original appearance.

This paper outlines a curator's personal experience in a museum of art with several such "auxiliary" archives of museum collections, in which various photographic objects are the most numerous. Among these objects, we can find examples of a variety of photographic processes, some of which date from the earliest history of the medium. In the sense of content, they range from family photographs and those related to artists' professional biographies to innumerable museum photographs that grew out of the core art collection[2] and which are, because they were created in-house and with a highlighted ancillary function, maybe in the most vulnerable position. Apart from original photo albums and scrapbooks, photographs in these kinds of archives can also be found in improvised albums and ad hoc folders, which greatly hampers all of their preventive conservation. This paper underlines the issue of experts' unpreparedness within museum institutions for managing and preserving photographic material,[3] which is especially challenging when it exists in a heterogenous documentation cluster that has been reassembled multiple times. In an effort to preserve the integrity of the new/old archive, which will, as much as possible, mirror all earlier uses, interventions, manipulations, etc. of the material as a sign of its *pre-* and *post-acquisition biography,*[4] and equally the history of the museum, I have resorted to a top-to-bottom description that will reach the level of each individual item which is also being catalogued. In this way, the imperative of acknowledging the provenance and original order is not

being betrayed, while at the same time, we are ensuring the visibility of each individual photograph, which is described both as a document and as an artifact. Taking into consideration the fact that this kind of approach is not universally applicable, I will present all of its recognized benefits and inherent limitations. Finally, I will briefly discuss the challenges of applying the same approach to a digital context.

My experience in dealing with photographic material has been closely related to a museum of a very specific and narrowly defined collecting mission — a pinacotheca — with virtually no photography management policy; however, it can be generalized into a paradigm of the state of most museums, including those with official photographic collections in which we are dealing with far more copious amounts of photographic material which, within those museums, exists outside those collections.[5] In this specific case, the photographic material has been dispersed across the museum Library Department and the museum Collections Department, whereas (not surprisingly) a large number of photographs ended up in the Photographic Service,[6] a joint service department of the main institution within which this particular museum operates. In the museum Library, we can mostly find the oldest, most richly bound photo albums — a practice which reflects an inclination towards classifying bound material objects as books, as well as the fact that those albums, just as individual large-format photographic prints, which are also a part of the library holdings, have by design been acquired in parallel with the artworks at the beginning of forming the Old Masters' art collection, as an ancillary tool in its exploration and processing.[7] The Collections Department, on the other hand, apart from the most diverse photographs used as a *tool of management*[8] of museum collections in the broadest sense, encompasses even the most heterogeneous photographic objects acquired as a visual artist's estate. The need for continuous work on museum collections in the pre-digital era required constant physical manipulation of all the comparative material. This, along with the unawareness of the fact that the incoming archival resources are not just an epistemic tool, but also a unique intellectual and physical creation with an integrity of its own, has led to their coalescence with conventional collection documentation into new intellectual and material assemblages. Ten years ago, when their arrangement and inventorying were finally undertaken, the physical chaos (in which the cacophony of amalgamated narratives built into those assemblages manifested itself) forced me to face a number of practical challenges and conceptual doubts. The architecture of such assemblages varies from case to case and is, at times, quite complex and layered. The non-existence of institutional guidelines for documenting and processing such material, which has, therefore, contributed to its previously non-defined status and subordinate position in the museum, has finally (in the fullness of time) enabled considerable freedom in choosing an approach to its arrangement. In retrospect, I realize that I had established, along the way, my very own *rhetoric of value,*[9] which reflects not only the ambition to formalize the status and thus secure

1
Cf. Edwards, "Thoughts on the 'Non-Collections' of the Archival Ecosystem", 68; Edwards, "Location, location", 2.
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For the term *museum photography,* see Crane, "Photographs at/of/and Museums". In this specific case, what is being referred to are the photographs which would fall under the first category of the author's classification.
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Cf. Edwards, Morton, "Between Art and Information", 7.
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Edwards, Morton, "Between Art and Information", 14.
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Cf. Edwards, "Location, location", 3–4.
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Cf. Edwards, "Thoughts on the 'Non-Collections' of the Archival Ecosystem", 68–69; Edwards, Morton, "Between Art and Information", 12.
7
Cf. Šamec Flaschar, "Zbirka umjetničkih knjiga i reprodukcija kao dio fonda Knjižnice Strossmayerove galerije".
8
Edwards, "Thoughts on the 'Non-Collections' of the Archival Ecosystem", 68; Edwards, "Location, location", 3.
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Kratz, "Rhetorics of Value". Cf. Caraffa, "Manzoni in the Photothek", 134–135. It is precisely the latter text to which I owe these insights.

the conservation of that material, but also a subconscious response to a self-perceived position of the then youngest curator in a specific intellectual hierarchy of the museum, who was, precisely for those reasons, assigned the task of processing "ephemera".[10]

My first example refers to a famous representative of Croatian Modern Art — Bela Csikos Sessia (1864–1931) and his estate.[11] After his son donated several hundred works of art to the museum in the 1970s, the cession of archival material with several hundred documents and photographs followed. What is absurd, however, is that we do not really know when this took place because, unlike when the artworks had been donated, the act which would document this acquisition was not saved, nor were the accession registers for non-artistic material kept. Another problem arises from the fact that the art collection, even though donated and ceded to the management of the museum, remained a part of the family's physical property for two more decades. The curator who dedicated himself intensively to exploring the collection recorded in one of the museum catalogues that the wife of the in the meantime deceased donor "enriched the collection" with valuable documents, without specifying, however, when this occurred.[12] From his expert texts, some of which date back an entire decade before the donation of the artworks, it is obvious, however, that he used the accompanying archival material profusely in his research. What we do have preserved, however, is correspondence which (after the curator's death) in the early 1990s took place between his widow and his successor as the curator and the museum director. In it, we can see the donated archival material in the possession of the deceased being claimed in a delicate manner. The material was indeed given over to the museum shortly after, this time along with a handover report, which is, however, quite generic and concise.[13] Apropos, the widow donated her husband's personal archive to the Croatian State Archives. When I took on the task of arranging the Csikos art collection archive some ten years ago, a part of the archival records was systematized into larger units — sometimes freely inserted into ad-hoc folders, other times affixed or even glued into improvised albums, whose creator or the time of origin are more often than not difficult to identify. Furthermore, the donor added to his father's estate some of his personal documents and sketches, as well as written records of his father's career, which he himself had collected. Alongside those, we have to mention the material that was collected or created during his research by the aforementioned long-standing curator and, after him, his successor, who secured the return of the archive into the possession of the museum. Although there is a slew of indications that most of the sometimes very diverse and chronologically disparate material, were formed by the first curator, it is conceivable that the distinctly oldest ones — with newspaper clippings — might have been formed by the donor. Furthermore, many of these improvised physical-intellectual units are formed by an additional series of subunits, for which it is also difficult to determine whether they originate from the same period.

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For the connection between the institutional status of museum photography and the position of the employee to whom it is assigned within the social and professional hierarchy in museums, cf. Crane, "Photographs at/of/and Museums", 496; Edwards, Morton, "Between Art and Information", 12. Both texts refer to the seminal work: Born, "Public Museums, Museum Photography, and the Limits of Reflexivity".
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For the artist, see *After (the) Psyche, Painting!*. For the donation, and the processing of the archival segment of the estate, see Katušić, "Ostavština obitelji Csikos u Strossmayerovoj galeriji starih majstora HAZU".
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Zlamalik, "Donacija Julius i Marijana Čikoš", 140.
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Katušić, "Ostavština obitelji Csikos u Strossmayerovoj galeriji starih majstora HAZU", 100.
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It is a common practice that archival materials in museums, libraries, institutes and other "non-archival" institutions are organised and described according to the practise and needs of particular institution. In this particular case, but very broadly, certain rules contained in ISAD(G) were applied. As for the value of adhering to the principles of provenance and original order in preserving the original context of the records, see for instance Theimer, "Archives in Context and as Context".
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For the artist, cf. *The Gift of Sympathy*. For the donation of Vanka's estate, cf. Gržina, *Exhibition of works of art from the Maksimilijan Vanka Memorial Collection of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Korčula.*

Even though I am not an archivist, the depicted complex unit structure and unclear genesis of its individual components have logically led me to follow the archival concept of *respect des fonds,* i.e. to apply the principle of provenance and the principle of original order.[14] As an introduction to the archive inventory, a passage is composed in which the rationale behind the material arrangement is explained; what follows after that is the analytical inventory. A top-to-bottom description provides us with an insight into the architecture of the archive and all the complexity of its individual components. It has been consistently carried out to the level of individual items, which have initially been recognized in the museum as the only legitimate subject of interest for users. This is partially a consequence of the inherent logic of a museum professional accustomed to cataloguing museum objects and partially that of the practical experience with numerous documents and photographs from the archive being consulted in research and used in exhibitions and publications. Around a hundred postcards within this material, among which dominate photomechanical reproductions of different works of art, have no clear provenance. From both curators' eras originate the entire series of photographs, which surpass in number the originally donated photographic material. Photographic prints prevail among them, but the share of diverse negatives and slides is also not negligible. The family donation included only prints taken within the 1880s-1930s timespan, which represent all the commercially prevalent photographic processes typical of particular periods within that era. Amongst them, there is an equal portion of amateur shots and professional photographers' work. Fortunately, as the photographic prints were not glued into the folder, which was the case with some other types of material in the archive, their description and storage were facilitated significantly. Individual series of photographic objects were formed while sorting out the material based on its content and physical characteristics, which were then individually described in the manner in which photographs are normally catalogued within photographic collections in museums.

In terms of processing photographs, the Maximilian Vanka (1889–1963) art collection archive posed a much greater challenge. Vanka was a Croatian artist from the generation that came after Csikos.[15] The backbone of the archive is made up of documentary material that arrived as a part of a donation of artworks in the early 1960s. For the purpose of forming his Memorial Collection in his homeland, the painter's American family also donated a part of his correspondence and personal documents as well as various types of photographic objects, amongst which were two photo albums. The donation included a scrapbook with diverse content (newspaper clippings, exhibition invitations and various advertising materials, as well as photographic and photomechanical reproductions of his works), and, based on word of mouth between researchers that had been in contact with the living relatives of the donor, we know that several similar samples are kept in his family circle. The documentation accompanying the acquisition also included

a summary list of the donated archival material. Although the existence of the list facilitated the identification of the originally donated material, its aggregated character and the conciseness of additional information point to the fact that it was considered insignificant compared to the artistic part of the estate. In this case, the curator's work on the collection resulted in an additional number of notes and photographs related to the artworks, which were added to the originally donated material, along with the respective written and visual material collected in the meantime. As reflected in the above-mentioned practice, in this period, improvised albums were formed, as well as ad-hoc folders that encompass all the material. In some cases, the material was merely inserted into the folders, but more often than not, it had been glued to thick paper sheets, which were bent, not bound, forming improvised albums and folders. Unlike the photographs from the Csikos estate, where those photographs were found dispersed in various boxes and drawers in the museum office space, the majority of the oldest photographs from the Vanka archive (mostly the private ones) were, unfortunately, glued into one such unsightly album. Apart from the fact that such an environment contributes to the deterioration of the photographic material in the long run, it also aggravates the procedure of its processing, storage and preventive conservation. Gluing the photos onto secondary support makes it impossible for us to see the back of the photographs, whether we are discussing the original cardboards of the oldest photographs or potential handwritten inscriptions. Such a procedure is also problematic in terms of preserving the material integrity of the photographic objects as well as from the perspective of their content analysis. As an additional peculiarity, there is also the fact that the creator or the last user of the album from the ranks of the museum employees added their titles in pen, which sometimes resulted in following a completely false lead. In a sizeable number of cases, through insight into related material in possession of other institutions or private owners, it was determined that the photographed people and episodes were misidentified. The notorious album finally turned out to be a conservation challenge. Experts in photograph conservation indicated that it would be unfeasible to potentially separate the prints and return them to their original state, but I was also preoccupied with an additional ethical dilemma: the awareness of the fact that while arranging the archive, I should follow not only the imperative of maintaining the material traces of the pre-acquisitional life of individual items and archives in their entirety but also all traces of institutional practices that molded them once they reached the museum.

The fact that in the case of both described archives — and the same goes for all the other photographic material (both analogue and digital) that originated in the museum from both within and around its core art collections — the photographs of museum objects were stored totally carelessly and without keeping track of their physical or virtual location, or the author and the time of inception, speaks volumes of these practices as well as the discourses which dictated

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them. In these concrete cases, their processing required a comparative study of countless illustrated museum publications, researching archival material about the history of the museum, as well as informal surveying of the oldest employees who might have been able to witness its hidden and undocumented side and the practices that were orally transmitted from one curator generation to another for lack of a prescribed procedure.[16] This way, we have come a full circle: penetrating the archaeology of institutional practices was an important prerequisite for understanding and processing the material, which, in turn, led to a description that, through its structure and content, amongst other things, and to the maximum possible extent, tries to mirror both the known and the still unwritten history of the museum. Finally, let us just assert that the described approach to processing the material, apart from some minimal competence in understanding photography, requires good background knowledge of the history of the parent institution, as well as long-standing and often frustrating research work in unraveling the internal logic that dictates the architecture of one such archive. This, in turn, means it is difficult to apply it in institutions with a far greater amount of similar material.

Translating the approach outlined in this paper into a digital context carries with it a whole slew of conceptual and technical challenges. For this reason, we have to first consider whether it is always, or at all, justified. Taking into consideration opposing arguments in the debates about the advantages and limitations of digitizing physical archives, a remark by Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert on the matter stands out: "physical and online archives are in fact two different yet interconnected ecosystems in which photographs behave differently and tell different stories".[17] In other words, perhaps it is best to take into account in advance the awareness of users, at least those more experienced ones, of the fact that digitized physical archives are not supposed to aspire to be a true reflection of the materiality of the original and the pre- and post-acquisitional biography embedded in it.

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Cf. Caraffa, "Manzoni in the Photothek", 133. ("[…] much of the current work on the Photothek is possible thanks to the 'calligraphic' expertise of some of its longer-serving staff members.")
17
Stylianou-Lambert, "Photographic Ecosystems and Archives", 385. Summarizing the various arguments in this debate, the author refers to some, in this sense, paramount texts, e.g. Sassoon, "Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction"; Cameron, "Beyond the Cult of Replicant"; Conway, "Modes of Seeing". At this point, it is worth mentioning that, at the conference *Photo Archives VIII. The Digital Photo Archive. Theories, Practices and Rhetoric* (May 2022, University of Basel), the doyen Joan M. Schwartz made a recent contribution to the topic.

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