

**THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF  
ARCHIVAL MATERIALS  
HELD IN MUSEUMS  
A PILOT STUDY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Archival material held in museums is often described using museum practices. The main hypothesis of this paper is that the decision about how a certain material object should be described depends on the curator's understanding of what is archival and what is museum material. As result, non-uniform descriptive metadata is created, causing difficulties in accessibility, especially for end-user searching. This paper focuses on documentary material on paper as primary medium.

**KEYWORDS**

archive, museum, descriptive standards, context, Postmodern approaches, curator

**Introduction**

In an archive, the finished or completed description of an archival object that is made available today to users for searching, regardless of its type and medium, will normally have been developed as a consequence of applying a certain descriptive standard. The description of archival material in museums is often according to whatever museum practices are being used by that repository to describe museum material. These practices may also be non-standard. Some curators also use archival description standards, but in those cases the selection of the description standard to be applied depends on the manner in which the curator sees the unit being described. The main hypothesis of this paper is that description of a particular material object depends on the curator's understanding of what is archival and what is museum material. As result,

1 Student's essay supervised by Professor Anne Gilliland.

non-uniform descriptive metadata is created, causing difficulties in accessibility, especially for end-user searching.

### Theoretical framework

As E. Ketelaar asserts: “The record is full of meanings”<sup>2</sup> How it is understood is layered, and in addition to reading several different meanings of the content of the record we necessarily need to “read” several different meanings into its form, the impacts of the passage of time on the tangible appearance of the medium, and its history and life.

It could be very useful to understand what is considered archival material when it is held in a museum setting. Is there a difference between how the record is understood when it is kept in a paper medium between archival and museum settings? Will an archivist in an archive and a curator in a museum approach the record in a similar way? What elements will a certain descriptive approach include, and will some aspects of archival or museum contextualization provide more complex and abundant information on the record itself than others might? What form does museum contextualization of archival material really take? Since materials in museum collections are mainly described at the item level, does this privilege individual archival objects over aggregations of records in archival fonds? Furthermore, are their descriptions superior to those of series of records in archival fonds?

Postmodernist “multi” approaches also lead to different conceptualizations of context in archival and museum settings. Context observed from the archival perspective primarily considers the context of the record creation, original use and structure of the system in which the record originated. Museum context includes considering the record creation, all subsequent uses, and also its interpretation by curators. It thereby supports a truly postmodernist view of re-contextualization. Museum context is markedly artificial.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore museum context is curatorial in nature, and includes various interpretations and re-contextualizations that occur when exhibitions are put together.<sup>4</sup> H. Taylor

2 Ketelaar, Eric. *Cultivating archives : meanings and identities*. // *Archival science* 2011, published online 22 June 2011 [cited: 2012-01-09]. Available at: <http://www.springerlink.com/content/b268186748544728/fulltext.pdf>

3 Maroević, Ivo. *Uloga muzealnosti u zaštiti memorije*. // *Baštinom u svijet*. Petrinja : Matica Hrvatska, 2004. p. 43.

4 Dietz, Steve; Howard Besser; Ann Borda; Kati Geber; Pierre Lévy. *Virtual museum (of Canada) : the next generation* [cited: 2012-03-06]. Available at: [http://besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/howard/Papers/vm\\_tng.doc](http://besser.tsoa.nyu.edu/howard/Papers/vm_tng.doc). P. 23.

considers an archival record to be an “instrument“for operations and compares it to the museum artefact. He writes that “Our documents have, in one way or another, made an impact on the lives of people to whom they were directed. They become powerful ‘signs’ in a semiotic sense, and they can move us if we can only enter in the context of their creation, which we endeavor to do as part of our profession“.<sup>5</sup>

Maybe only the fact that the record originated then and there, and from a specific person or public body might be considered its original context. The reasons why and for which purpose the record was created need not be discussed in the description as the range of possible post-modernist answers are deafening because facts in the text are related to their past, present and future reinterpretations.<sup>6</sup> The postmodernist archival approach emphasizes that the meaning of a record is conditional, always plural and without final authority. Such an approach is very close to the museum understanding of the reality of a museum item: one item is related to a range of intertwined histories and persons in its pre-museum “life“, and most often belongs to several different realities. Different messages are, therefore, sought in it by different interpreters. An archival record found in pluralized museum setting has been privileged in that it has been considered in detail from all stated position except for one: the functional context of its creation. When the record is considered and described at the item level, it becomes intellectually separated (unfortunately, often also physically) from its original system and, therefore, its original context is not read, but interpreted. If an archivist is to elucidate the intended role and function of the record,<sup>7</sup> then the archivist or curator must become a postmodernist decipherer of multiple meanings. This could be seen as a similarity between archival and museum approaches. However, archival contemplation would include and exploration of the original function context of record, whereas museal contemplation would include that and all other subsequent contextualization of the record.

The artefact itself or the context of the artefact as part of some museum and/or archival collection is introduced through a curatorial view of what this record is. Is there a difference in curatorial views

5 Taylor, Hugh. *Herritage revisited : documents as artefacts in the context of museums and material culture.* // *Archivaria* 40(1995), 10.

6 Cook, Terry. *Archival science and Postmodernism : new formulations for old concepts.* // *Archival science* 1(2001), 3-24.

7 Schwartz, Joan M. *Negotiating the visual turn : new perspectives on images and archives.* // *The American archivist* 67(2004), 110.

based on museum and archival value systems? In what manner will he/she describe this record-artefact – using archival or museum standards? This will probably depend on fact whether the curator reflects on the record-artefact as museum object or as archival document. This record will become a part of some knowledge organization system. Which one? Archival or museal? If the record or a document, map, manuscript, photograph, technical drawing or something else that could be both archival and museal material in which category will description of such items fall, and what will be the consequences of that categorization?

### **Objective**

The objective of this pilot study was to obtain insight that might be used in more extensive research on the same topic with the population of curators within Croatian Museums. The starting point is to find out the ways in which museum curators think about archival and museum material and what types of material they identify as being archival as opposed to museum material.

### **Expectations**

This pilot study sought to get insight into the opinions of curators about the existence of possible differences between archival and museum material in museums. It was anticipated that curators would express such differences based upon:

1. The curators' educational background
2. The type of museum in which they work

An additional expectation was that certain types of material, such as technical drawings or documents would be considered to be archival material, while the greatest difference in opinion will be evidenced over the nature of photographic and cartographic material.

### **Methodology**

This pilot study employed a survey approach. The questionnaire used to survey curators consisted of 10 closed-ended and open-ended questions and was conducted by e-mail. It was written in both Slovenian and Croatian languages. The questionnaire was sent with a cover letter in which the purpose of the research and main assumptions of the research were explained.

## Respondents

The study focused on museum staff – primarily curators. Respondents came from museum institutions of various types in the region: in Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. All respondents are professionals with university degrees. In order to achieve a heterogeneous sample, when selecting an institution where a respondent is employed attention was paid to the range of types of museums, sizes of museum collections, and types of material that the museum collects. With a random sample of 10 museum institutions, and 10 respondents from each of the above mentioned countries, the aim was to cover all prominent categories of selection criteria. Data on the type of museum, types of collections and material were taken from official websites of individual institutions. A further sampling procedure involved the selection of the target person (curator). In the first selection round, respondents were selected according to the titles of their collection and the description of staff positions. This took into account curators who are in charge of a material collection in which paper is the main medium of the record. In addition to this approach a snowball technique was used, whereby the curators already identified were asked to forward the questionnaire to their colleagues who are in charge of similar collections in other museums. The sample size was small, but since this was a pilot study, it was considered that a certain degree of heterogeneity needed to be achieved as a precondition for obtaining data that would indicate whether this research direction is feasible.

## Statistical description of response data

The question on types of material in the collection for which the curator is responsible was presented in open-ended form because the intention was for the material categories to emerge through respondents' answers. The respondents stated that the following types of material were present in their collections: photographs, posters, invitations, audio recordings, video recordings, newspaper articles, drawings, personal documentation and official documents. Since museum material is extremely heterogeneous, it would be very difficult through closed-ended questions to express all possible individual types of material that museum might hold. From all the responses, individual categories of material were generated that further served as the basis for analysis: photographic material (e.g. positives and negatives), personal documentation, official correspondence, screen and other form of prints

(e.g. posters and invitation), blueprints and cartographic material, newspaper articles and audio and video recordings. Personal documentation and photographic material represented the largest percentage of the responses (52.9 %) (Table 1).

|   | Categories of material in collections |       |
|---|---------------------------------------|-------|
|   | freq.                                 | %     |
| <b>Photographic material</b>                | 9                                     | 52,9% |
| <b>Personal documentation</b>               | 9                                     | 52,9% |
| <b>Screen prints (invitations, posters)</b> | 8                                     | 47,1% |
| <b>Official documentation</b>               | 7                                     | 41,2% |
| <b>Blueprints, cartographic material</b>    | 5                                     | 29,4% |
| <b>Newspaper articles</b>                   | 3                                     | 17,6% |
| <b>Audio and video recordings</b>           | 3                                     | 17,6% |

TABLE 1.

Responses to the question on categories of possible archival material in museum collections

Of 17 respondents, 11 stated that no collections are registered as archival collections, and 4 respondents stated that their institutions have a collection registered as a collection of archival material in their museums (Table 2).

|                       | freq. | %     |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|
| <b>Exists</b>         | 4     | 26,7% |
| <b>Does not exist</b> | 11    | 73,3% |

TABLE 2.

Responses on the existence of a museum collection registered as an archival collection

Although in the majority of cases collections of archival material in museums are not officially registered as archival collections, the respondents were given the opinion to estimate themselves whether such collection might exist in their institutions, and if it exists, according to which descriptive practices it is described (see Table 3). 71.4% of the respondents stated that such collections are described according

to museum standards, and 28.6 % that they are described according to archival standards.

|                           | freq. | %     |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|
| <b>Museum standards</b>   | 10    | 71,4% |
| <b>Archival standards</b> | 4     | 28,6% |

TABLE 3.

Responses to the question on the manner in which collections of archival material are described

Table 4 shows responses to the question “What material do you consider to be archival that exists in your museum? “. The largest percentage of respondents (47.1 on the frequency of 8 valid responses) stated that they consider archival material to be official correspondence (documentation), photographic material (29.4% on the frequency of 5 valid responses), screen and other prints (29.4 % on the frequency of 5 valid responses), and personal documentation (29.4% on the frequency of 5 valid responses).

|  | Seen as archival material |       |
|--|---------------------------|-------|
|  | freq.                     | %     |
| <b>Official documentation</b>                      | 8                         | 47,1% |
| <b>Photographic material(positives, negatives)</b> | 5                         | 29,4% |
| <b>Screen print (invitations, posters)</b>         | 5                         | 29,4% |
| <b>Personal documentation</b>                      | 5                         | 29,4% |
| <b>Blueprints, cartographic material</b>           | 4                         | 23,5% |
| <b>Newspapers articles</b>                         | 2                         | 11,8% |
| <b>Audio and video recordings</b>                  | 2                         | 11,8% |

TABLE 4.

The potential archival value of types of material when processing materials

Respondents were asked about which aspects they considered to be most important when processing a collection under their care or supervision. In Table 5 data are grouped in the following categories: content, medium, age, origin and author, and context of origination. The

respondents were asked to rank these categories on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 was the least important and 5 of extreme importance.

|                          | Range of importance |       |       |       |       |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                          | 1                   | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     |
| <b>Content</b>           | 27,3%               | 9,1%  | 9,1%  | 9,1%  | 45,5% |
| <b>Medium</b>            | 54,5%               | 18,2% | 9,1%  |       | 18,2% |
| <b>Age</b>               |                     | 18,2% | 54,5% | 27,3% |       |
| <b>Origin and author</b> | 9,1%                | 18,2% | 18,2% | 36,4% | 18,2% |
| <b>Context</b>           |                     | 25,0% | 25,0% | 33,3% | 16,7% |

TABLE 5.

The importance of different aspects of materials in processing collections

Categories of origin/authorship and context of origination in the museum system are related but separate categories. Depending on the view of the person examining and describing a museum object, one category will be of greater importance than the other. In the museum context the signature on an architectural blueprint of a famous architect will be more important when processing the blueprint than, for example, the registration and classification number printed on the back of the blueprint that would mark that the blueprint belonged to an individual folder in a certain registration scheme.

Respondents stated that the content of the material is the most important aspect they considered during processing (45.5% respondents marked it 5). Of moderate importance are the origin and author of the material (36.4% respondents marked it 4) and the context in which the material originated (33.3% respondents marked it 4). Intermediate importance was assigned to the age of the material (54.4% respondents marked it 3), and least importance to its medium (54.5% respondents marked it 1).

If we compare the responses of those who stated that archival material in their museums is described according to museum descriptive practices and the responses on the importance of individual aspects that are important in the description of the material (contents, medium, origin and author, age, context) we may conclude that most important are considered to be contents (average ranking 3.7), then age

(average ranking 3.3), context (average ranking 3.3), origin and author (average ranking 2.9), and medium (average ranking 2.6).

The majority of respondents belong to the age groups from 51 to 60 years (41.2%) and 41 to 50 (35.3%), of which most have worked in museums for 21 or more years (41.2%), with 23.5% having worked 16 to 20 years in museums. In terms of their educational background, the majority of respondents graduated in history (29.4%) and art history (23.5%). Only one respondent has a university degree in museology, and one has a degree in archival studies.

### **Discussion**

The finding that the museum curators who responded consider official correspondence (i.e. the category of official documentation) that is kept as part of some museum collections is in fact archival material in its character is in line with the initial assumptions of the pilot study. As this pilot study only surveyed a small number of respondents it would certainly be necessary to confirm these opinions using a more representative sample. The same would also have to be done to substantiate the opinion expressed by several respondents that photographic material is also in its character archival material, especially since the majority of respondents stated that it is described according to museum standards. Also in line with the study's initial assumptions is the fact that the content of material is the most important aspect considered when describing an item. However, we would need to consider whether in archival descriptive practice, the functional context would be the most important aspect to consider. In future research, this data category might be a place where it would be possible to discern differences between archival and museum directions.

This pilot study proved to be successful in some segments and in some other significant improvement is required. Open-ended questions proved successful in questions where respondents were asked to state what types of material they had in their collections and what type of material they considered to be archival material. With this approach, categories of material could be independently generated from obtained responses, without setting a frame in advance, where some responses might have not been identified.

The question asking respondents to rank by importance those categories they consider important when describing a unit of material was, however, insufficiently defined. As many as 7 respondents provid-

ed invalid or non-usable responses because they incorrectly interpreted the Likert scale from 1 to 5 or they skipped this question.

It must be stressed here that in museum practice, at least in the museums in the region to which the surveyed curators belong, there are different levels of museum material. There are original document (for example personal testimonial) and required photographs of the document (a photograph or nowadays digital photograph of a personal testimonial). This personal testimonial will enter a museum collection as a museum object and its photograph will be incorporated into the fonds containing the museum's supporting documentation. The difference between these two levels is not investigated in this survey, but it is an important topic to explore further. The same is also the case in terms of defining personal documentation.

Although an initial assumption was that respondents from older age groups and with more work experience would consider context to be more important than content, the pilot study was unable to verify this and could not establish a connection between the two questions, possibly because of the small sample size.

### **Where does the curator end and the researcher/visitor begin?**

Museum context has a postmodern character by its very nature because it is highly artificial, includes various interpretations of museum artefacts, and often recontextualization materials in exhibits. Multiple meanings of an object are always given, because the artifact is observed across different time periods. Different periods and social frameworks generate new information about the object.<sup>8</sup>

Museum context is given and defined by each institution's curatorial framework and interpretation. We tend to agree with M. Ames when he asserts that academic categories (materialized in some institutional forms) are arbitrary divisions of a world more complexly interwoven.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless such divisions exist not just in distinguishing different heritage institutions but also in distinguishing different institutional frameworks that influence the viewpoints of professionals working in them.

8 Maroević, I. Op. cit., p.25.

9 Ames, Michael M. *Museology interrupted*. // *Museum international* 57, 3(2005), 44.

If professionals want to preserve the identity of the document that is being described (document in term of M. Buckland<sup>10</sup>) then they must first identify significant properties of that document.<sup>11</sup> As G. Yeo stated “nothing is the same as something else”.<sup>12</sup> What is significant to describe in a document is up to the curator to decide. There is a lot of power in description. Every description is in fact some sort of representation of what is document about. As Duff and Harris have asserted – there is no representation without interpretation.<sup>13</sup> Every new interpretation supplements existing information and creates new and exciting meanings attached to a given document. In this aspect, records in the museum context can be considered as privileged. The curator devotes his or her description to individual items. Groups of artefacts form a collection. The same case is with collection in an archive. Archival description can also be based at the item level, but there is a difference. Archival description emphasizes the functional context of the item being described providing a broader picture of the original creation of the described item. The descriptive emphasis that a curator will give in a museum context depends on his or her point of view.

### **Archival context and museal recontextualization**

From a museal point of view there are multiple contexts that need to be described. There is the creator’s context and the various contexts of different times, places and people that in some way came in contact with the museum document. The curator’s description of a museum object therefore involves ongoing interpretation and recontextualization. However the archivist also does some interpretation, albeit less overt, while describing archival documents. Whether there really is a difference in these description processes needs to be further explored. Maybe the idea of a finished or completed description (as opposed to one that is constantly evolving) that can provide access to a given document is

10 Buckland, Michael K. Information as a thing. // *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42(1991), 351-360. Available at: <http://people.ischool.berkeley.edu/~buckland/thing.html> [cited: 2012-03-06].

11 Yeo, Geoffrey. Nothing is the same as something else : significant properties and notions of identity and originality. // *Archival science* 10(2010), 85-116.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

13 Duff Wendy; Harris Verne. Stories and names : archival description as narrating records and constructing meaning. // *Archival science* 2(2002), 275.

in practice illusory because as E. Ketelaar argues different meanings are assigned to the same resource by different people at different times.<sup>14</sup>

It was expected that curators responding to this survey would think of official documentation as archival material in character. It would be expected that the ground-plans and blueprints as well as cartographic material would be regarded as archival material. However, most of the curators surveyed didn't see them in the light of "official documentation".

Most of surveyed curators answered that content is the most important aspect in museal description. From an exhibition perspective this is understandable. Museum do not need (as archives do) to use their objects as proof of some legal activity. The content of museum artefacts/documents is an aspect that will be the most interesting to work with in the exhibition context. Of course, authenticity and reliability of the artifact are important, but they seem to be understood by the very fact that the object is in a museum. Museum's objects are "de-function-alized and de-contextualized, which means that, as from that time onwards, they are no longer useful for their original purpose but instead become a part of a symbolic order which grants them a new meaning and a new value. They thus turn into sacred evidences of culture."<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

In the research that will follow this pilot study, more attention muse be given to exploring whether official documentation and photographic material are really archival material when held by a museum and seen through curators' eyes. This must be confirmed or negated by a bigger sample of curators. It is also important to make a distinction between original museum documents and the different kinds of documentation regarding them.

14 Ketelaar, E. Op. cit., p. 7.

15 ICOFOM. *Museology : back to basics*. Study Series 38, 2009 [cited: 2012-05-22]. Available at: [http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user\\_upload/minisites/icofom/pdf/ISS%2038-2009.pdf](http://network.icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/minisites/icofom/pdf/ISS%2038-2009.pdf). P.81.

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## Biographical sketch

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## KONCEPTUALIZACIJA ARHIVSKOG GRADIVA KOJA SE ČUVA U MUZEJIMA PILOT ISTRAŽIVANJE

### **Sažetak**

Arhivsko gradivo u muzejskim ustanovama nerijetko se opisuje pomoću muzejskih opisnih standarda. Osnovna pretpostavka ovoga rada jest to da kustosi donose odluku o uporabi opisnih kategorija ovisno o vlastitom razumijevanju toga što je unutar muzejskog fondusa muzejski predmet, a što arhivsko gradivo. Različito razumijevanje rezultira različitim kategorijama opisa što za posljedicu ima niz nestandardiziranih metapodataka koji krajnjem korisniku otežavaju pristup. Ovaj se rad bavi isključivo dokumentarnom građom na papiru kao osnovnom mediju.

**Ključne riječi:** arhiv, muzej, opisni standardi, kontekst, postmodernizam, kustos