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History of the Profession

This chapter presents a brief overview of the history of archives generally and the history of moving image archives more specifically. It is important to note that the history presented here is limited to institutions and perspectives in the Global North.

In this chapter, you will learn to:

- Identify major developments in the history of the archival profession
- Describe the ways archivists have conceptualized their professional role over time
- Explain the ways archival practice has evolved in response to changes in policy, trends in education, and other social or cultural influences

HISTORY OF ARCHIVISM

The history of archives is also, in some ways, a history of archival theory. It reflects trends and major changes in the ways that archives were understood and used over time, as well as the ways archivists have understood and positioned their own work. In different periods, archivists may have had very different ideas about what we do, how we do it, and the underlying values or assumptions that influence our work.

2000 BCE – 18th century: Archives for the Church and the Crown

Since the times of Babylonia and Ancient Egypt, through the Roman empire and medieval Europe, archival records were created by the church, the monarchy, and other administrative bodies to preserve religious history and records of their own wealth and power, like legal edicts and land ownership records.

1789 – 1790s:
Archives Open to the Public

Figure 2.1 - Pillage of l'Hôtel de Castries in Paris (1790), by Pierre-Gabriel Berthault,and Jean-Louis Prieur

The French Revolution, in 1789, is often considered a major turning point in archival practice. As armed revolutionaries infiltrated government institutions and church buildings, so they infiltrated the archives, seizing or destroying records of the aristocracy. After the Revolution, as liberal democracy replaced monarchy in many western countries, it was considered fundamentally important for citizens – though often only white, male, land-owning citizens – to have access to official records. In this period, archives began to become publicly accessible, and archivists began to consider their positions as crucial to maintaining transparency and accountability of government and other institutions.

19th century:
Archives as Collections

While archivists after the French Revolution continued to focus on official records – like government documents, business transactions, and legal proceedings – archivists in the 19th century began to purposefully compile collections of documents to reflect their own cultural histories. This is when local and state historical societies began to form in the United States, collecting photographs, diaries, and other personal and family records from prominent organizations and individuals to reflect shared regional cultural heritage and stories.

1930s-1970s:
Archivist as Custodian

Archivists in the mid-century often perceived themselves as custodians of archival material. Their emphasis was on the collection and preservation of documents within major institutions, like universities, museums, and historical societies. People who accessed archives were often representatives of the same institutions, those with government or academic credentials. The documents that most archives collected reflected what these institutions deemed to have historical value, usually material from people in power and people with dominant identities.

1980s-2000s:
Archivist as Steward

In the 1980s, influenced by the cultural theory that developed in humanities departments in the 1960-1970s – like women's studies and ethnic studies – archivists began to think of themselves more as stewards of historical information. While a *custodian-archivist* focused on the preservation of collection material inside the archive, the stewardship model emphasizes the importance of making archival records accessible and usable for broader groups of researchers. In this period, archivists also began to

actively collect records from more diverse groups of people, and they began to do more outreach, to explain to people outside of academic institutions how to access and use archival materials.

2010 – present:
Archives by the People, for the People?

Although most archivists continue to work within major institutions like universities and historical societies, trends in the profession in the last decade are more community-focused. Rather than taking material out of communities to hold within institutions, archivists increasingly consider how they can help community groups to preserve their own records and steward their own histories. In some ways, digitization and the internet has made it more possible for communities to keep and maintain their own archival records where they are, while still making them accessible to others.

PROFESSIONALIZATION OF ARCHIVISM

Early archivists often trained on the job, if they had any training at all. By the 1970s, there began to be movements toward standardizing archivism as a profession, including the development of formal professional education programs.

Another way to describe the theoretical change from the 1950s to the 1980s-90s was a shift from "Historian-Archivists" to "Librarian-Archivists." Both models of archivism involve doing the same types of work – collection development, arrangement and description, preservation, and access – but they come to the profession from different backgrounds, and they reflect different ideas about the primary role of the archivist.

HISTORIAN-ARCHIVISTS

- Until the 1970s, archivists were often historians, people with advanced academic degrees who trained on the job to work in archives.
- Historian-archivists put emphasis on collections acquisition and preservation as their primary role.

LIBRARIAN-ARCHIVISTS

- By the 1970s-1980s, archival training moved into existing graduate programs for Library and Information Studies, incorporating more traditional librarianship skills, like reference work, classroom instruction, and community outreach.
- Librarian-Archivists put emphasis on service as their primary role, on helping researchers locate and use materials

Most archivists do not consciously proclaim themselves to be "Historian-Archivists" or "Librarian-Archivists." The distinction is presented here to illustrate the tension between two ways archivists may conceptualize their professional roles. Do archives exist primarily to collect and preserve material, or do they exist to make material accessible and usable? Both opinions are valid.

The history above describes archives generally, usually paper records, with some photographs, maps, artwork, and other types of written or printed materials. In some ways, film and media archives have a more specific history.

Late 19th century: Recorded sound collections

Around the turn of the century – in the "Archives as Collections" period described above – some archival institutions began to collect audio recordings. However, they rarely acquired existing audio collections as records of audiovisual culture in itself. Instead, institutions like the British Museum and the Smithsonian began to send researchers out to collect audio recordings as ethnographic documents, including documents of early languages and early folk music.

1895-1916: Library of Congress Paper Print Collection

Until 1912, in the United States, motion picture films were not protected by copyright. In order to copyright their work, film producers submitted "paper prints" to the Library of Congress, rolls of photographic paper depicting every frame of a motion picture film, each copyrighted individually as a photograph. Today, the Library of Congress Paper Print Film Collection contains more than 3000 paper print films. In many cases, these are the only remaining copies of early cinema films from the U.S., France, and Denmark. If you have seen an early silent film that appears to be grainy and high-contrast, it is likely that the version you're watching was photographed from a paper print, after all original photographic prints were lost.

Figure 2.2 Paper Print of The Untamable Whiskers (George Méliès, 1903), Library of Congress

Importantly, however, the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection was not created as a film archive specifically. Material was submitted and maintained for the sake of copyright protection, but the collection was not arranged and described, carefully preserved, or intended to be accessed for research or other use at the time.

1930s: Film Archives

Though the Netherlands founded the first national film library in 1917, the film archive movement did not begin until the 1930s, when four organizations came together in 1938 to form the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF):

- British Film Institute (1933) – founded by Royal Charter as the National Film Library
- Reichsfilmarchiv (1935) – the state film archive of Nazi Germany
- Cinémathèque Française (1936) – founded by Henri Langlois and Lotte Eisner
- Museum of Modern Art film archive (ca. 1935) – led by curator Iris Barry after 1937

The Cinémathèque Française and the MOMA film archive relied on the strong personalities of their founders and directors to advocate for the preservation of film as art. In contrast, the British Film Institute and Reichsfilmarchiv were projects to define and elevate a distinct national film culture in their respective countries. In all cases, FIAF archives contained carefully curated collections of films, and FIAF archivists were particularly interested in identifying quality in filmmaking and bestowing legitimacy to certain canons of filmmakers. As a result, early film collections often excluded mainstream commercial entertainment, non-theatrical films like educational or industrial films, and films made by and for people of non-dominant identities.

Because the founders of these archives were often cinephiles and curators, they had varying degrees of experience in the everyday work of preservation and collection management. Ernest Lindgren, in Great Britain, was known as a staid and methodical archivist, who carefully preserved and catalogued the BFI film collections. On the other hand, Henri Langlois of the Cinémathèque Française was notorious for refusing to even keep a thorough inventory of the films that he had. In 1959, when a fire broke out at a Cinémathèque storage facility – not uncommon with large collections of extremely flammable nitrate film – Langlois could not offer a complete list of the films that were destroyed.

Nevertheless, the work of the FIAF curators was vital, because few institutional archives were interested in collecting media material at the time. Entertainment media – film, radio, and television – was rarely considered to be historically significant to archivists experienced in collecting official government and legal papers. At the time, early radio and television programs were often broadcast live, leaving no recordings that could be preserved.

1960s:
Film Studies

In the 1960s, the perception of cinema among academics as frivolous entertainment began to change. A new generation of young people, the first to grow up watching old Hollywood films on television, began to talk and write about film history and film theory in more sophisticated and academic ways. The first university film studies programs began to emerge, which – before the advent of home video in the 1970s-80s – required dedicated collections of film prints to screen for classes and for public audiences. Many moving image archives were first developed as film libraries to serve these new film production and film studies programs.

At the same time, the new field of film historical research inspired more archives to collect unique and original historical papers related to media history. The archive at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for example, was able to acquire significant historical collections from companies like NBC, Warner Bros, and RKO, simply because few other archives at the time considered these materials to be historically

significant or worth the resources to preserve. By the 1970s, as more universities developed programs in women's studies, Black studies, and other cultural studies, it became more and more common for academics to give serious scholarly attention to products of popular entertainment and media.

1970s-1980s: A/V Preservation Crisis

It was not until the 1970s-1980s that most major archival institutions outside of cinephile communities began to recognize audiovisual records as proper cultural heritage materials that warranted archiving and preservation.

Partly, this timing was due to the rise of magnetic media – audiotape and videotape – as the primary media format for everyday use. Because audio and video cassette tapes were relatively inexpensive and easy to use, the volume of media being created and circulated increased enormously. At the same time, magnetic tape is flimsier and degrades much faster than motion picture film. While motion picture film, when properly stored, can remain stable for 100 years or more, magnetic audio and videotape will last only a few decades in the best conditions. Advocates of media preservation began to sound the alarm about the need for dedicated preservation programs for magnetic media as early as the 1970s. In this period, a number of additional organizations were founded to address the A/V preservation crisis, including the Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC, 1966), the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA, 1969), and the International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT, 1977).

However, the concern over the short shelf-life of magnetic media has been greatly overshadowed by advocacy for the preservation of motion picture film. In the 1970s, the cinephiles of the 1960s film schools began to bring popular attention to film preservation as an issue of national cultural heritage. Because theatrical film prints had been dismissed by archival institutions for decades – and because early nitrate film stock was highly flammable and unstable – much of our early cinema history has been lost to time. By the late 1990s, the issue of global film preservation had become a significant subject for Hollywood fundraising, education, and advocacy, led by industry figures like the director Martin Scorsese.

In 1980, the United Nations' Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) issued their first "Recommendations for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images." In 1988, the US Congress passed the National Film Preservation Act, which created the National Film Preservation Board. The NFPB chooses up to 25 films to preserve each year in the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress. These achievements legitimized audiovisual preservation as an issue of cultural heritage on a national and international scale. At the same time, by focusing on motion picture film specifically, both UNESCO and the NFPB solidified the privileging of film material over magnetic audio and video content. Though the National Film Registry has increasingly sought to include media from historically underrepresented perspectives – and to include educational and industrial film in addition to theatrical and artistic work – the limitation of the registry to 25 films per year has reinforced the curatorial model of archiving and preservation, which privileges a carefully selected canon of individual titles.

In the same period, archivists in traditional institutions increasingly recognized the need to preserve media materials within their own collections. University archives, historical societies, government archives, and museums acknowledged the many diverse types of media they held – publicity and industrial films, home movies, event recordings, etc. – and they began to create dedicated plans to meet the unique preservation needs of these materials.

1990s:
Professionalization of Media Archivists

It wasn't until the 1990s that media archiving began to reach the level of professionalization that traditional archiving had in the 1970s. In 1990, the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) was founded in the U.S, as a forum for American and international archivists to share knowledge and discuss issues within the profession.

In 1993, the NFPB issued a call for the development of post-graduate education to train professional film archivists. At least three major film preservation graduate programs were founded in the US over the following decade:

- The Selznick School of Film Preservation at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York (1996)
- Moving Image Archival Studies at the University of California Los Angeles (2002)
- Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) at New York University (2003)

The result of the founding of AMIA and the establishment of these dedicated training programs is that media archivists have increasingly standardized their workflows and best practices. At the same time, traditional archivists and the administrators of cultural heritage institutions have increasingly recognized media archiving and preservation as a distinct and vital professional expertise, putting more funding and resources toward the care and management of their film, video, and audio materials.

2010 – present:
Democratization of media archiving?

Like traditional archives, media archivists since 2010 have trended toward teaching artists, community groups, and individuals to learn to preserve and steward their own historical media material. Groups like the Center for Home Movies (2005) and the Community Archiving Workshop (2010) have developed robust resources and models for sharing the skills of media archiving and preservation directly with families and community organizations. Traditional archives and library studies graduate programs have increasingly incorporated media preservation training into their curricula, even as a distance education option, while the University of Colorado Boulder has begun exploring an undergraduate-level media archiving and preservation program. In some ways, as moving image archivists have worked to legitimize their professional expertise and establish their necessary role in cultural heritage institutions, they have also worked to make the knowledge and skills of media archiving and preservation more accessible to everyone.

AMIA's updated list of media archiving and preservation education programs is available online.

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Figure 2.2 – "Paper print of The Untamable Whiskers (Le roi du maquillage, 1904), photo by Library of Congress, public domain. From Wikimedia Commons

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