

OBJECT DOCUMENTATION IN ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS: TALES FROM THE AMERICAN SCHOOL OF CLASSICAL STUDIES AT ATHENS ARCHIVES

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Abstract. Documentation is a vital aspect of collection care. Archival/manuscript collections are often accompanied by 3D items such as leather goods, musical instruments, jewelry, coins, medals, badges, locks of hair, weaponry, to name but a few. All these items are called personal effects, artifacts, memorabilia or realia. It is not always easy to catalog and curate some of these items. But most archivists are thrilled with the little surprises that turn up with archival collections. Most of the times, the objects are by themselves intriguing and spectacular and hide fascinating stories. Some collections would not be complete without these objects. Documentation is therefore of utmost importance and archival repositories need to treat objects of archival collections, which are often unique, specialized or rare objects, with the utmost care. The paper will present some unique items from selected archival collections of the American School of Classical Studies Archives, their historical significance, their documentation and collection care as well as accessibility for researchers for data collection or historical interpretation.

Keywords: ASCSA, documentation, objects, cataloging, archival collections, CMS

1 Introduction

Archival collections are often accompanied by objects called personal effects, artifacts, memorabilia or realia which are ‘deviations’ in paper based collections. Archives, museums and libraries, we are all in a sense “partners in crime,” that is we share the same role: “to identify, collect, preserve, describe and make available the artefactual, intellectual and artistic products of the past and present in order that current and future generations may benefit from them.”¹ Documentation is a vital aspect of collection care. Besides the records which may exist before or after the accession of a collection and may (or may not) include information about objects, documentation includes also information regarding research on objects and their historical significance.

The goal for all is one: to make what we hold, whether this is a document, an object, a book and the available information surrounding it, accessible in a reliable, accurate manner. We should consider ourselves lucky as the boundaries between descriptive systems of archives, museums and libraries have been adaptable. Archival descriptive standards have borrowed from bibliographical descriptions, museum descriptive standards have incorporated fields from the previous two. Documentation is a core aspect of collection care for all three. Despite the fact that archival repositories are not museums often receive objects which accompany paper based collections as donations and gifts. These items, often unique and specialized, need to be catalogued and be accessible for researchers. Acquisition, preservation, conservation, management, display information, and the intellectual use of the object are core terms in collections documentation.

My presentation focuses on three dimensional objects in paper based archival collections, preceded by an overview of objects including thoughts on their handling from an archival point of view by presenting examples from my home institution, the Archives department of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens.

¹ Nancy Elkington, “Cultural Heritage,” Archives, Libraries and Museums Convergence: 24th Library Systems Seminar [Paris, 12-14 April 2000] (Paris 2001), p. 207 as cited by Katherine Timms, “New Partnerships for Old Sibling Rivals: The development of integrated access systems for the holdings of Archives, Libraries and Museums,” *Archivaria* No 68 Fall 2009 p. 68-9.

1.1 The American School of Classical Studies at Athens and its Archives

The School is a privately funded, non-profit educational institution founded in 1881, the first American overseas research center, and is now the largest, along with the American Academy in Rome. It is the largest of the fourteen foreign institutes located in Athens.

1.2 The ASCSA Archives

The Archives comprise administrative records concerning the function and mission of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, excavation records from American archaeological projects in Greece, personal papers of American archaeologists working in Greece, such as Carl W. Blegen, Gorham P. Stevens, William B. Dinsmoor, Virginia R. Grace, and Homer A. Thompson, as well as a rich and important collection of personal papers about the history and culture of Modern Greece and the rest of the Balkan peninsula, such as the papers of George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis, the two Nobel prize holders in literature for Greece. In addition, we hold photographic collections, an artwork collection and an antiquities collection for study purposes.

2 The ASCSA Collections

Our archival holdings are mainly paper based. We collect itemized objects on and off and of course we accept items which accompany archival collections. Two out of three of our paper based collections contain objects and their number varies. Among them one can find leather goods (suitcases and wallets), musical instruments, dolls, embroidery, weaponry and the list goes on and on. In small and medium sized repositories which are not museums this may not sound a lot but still their treatment requires special attention especially if they are delicate, rare and often require conservation. They vary in importance, value and historical significance. Despite staffing limitations we try to have at least a basic description and documentation of objects which accompany collections if there is no description included with the initial inventory. The levels of description which follow have varied over time. Overall, we have three distinct categories of objects housed at the ASCSA Archives: The Antiquities Collection, Artwork, and Items in paper based collections.

2.1 The Antiquities Collection

The ASCSA Antiquities collection stands by itself. It is a teaching collection of 1,782 archaeological objects and more than 10,000 sherds collected by ASCSA students before WWII. It is open and available for access to the researchers. Cataloguing is on item level and the information is on a database with the following fields: 1. Inventory Number, 2. Site Number (there is a controlled vocabulary for the archaeological sites), 3. Object Name (for example: Column fragment ionic or column fragment doric), 4. Context (where the object was found), 5. Date, 6. State Preservation, 7. Dimensions, 8. Description, 9. Publication (if any), 10. Comparanda, 11. Storage, 12. Photo Number, 13. Drawing Number, 14. Comments

The objects are displayed in steel vitrines while the sherds are stored in small boxes. The collection occupies its own room and can accommodate researchers without having to move objects from the premises. It is important to note that a considerable number of objects from the Antiquities Collection have appeared in scholarly publications.

2.2 Artwork

Artwork is in the form of paintings, sculpture, small objects, embroidery, rugs etc. Right now the items comprising what we call the ASCSA Artwork number 238 items. They are all fully catalogued and photographed and the information is on a database with the following fields: 1. Inventory Number, 2. Title (if not known a provisional title is given by the cataloguer in brackets), 3. Type, 4. Dimensions, 5. Location and 6. Notes. The Notes field which is free text field records all the available information since most of the items were gifts or acquisitions from the very early

days of the operation of the School. we also record in this field the information about their conservation treatment. The database is a comprehensive inventory of the artwork complete with photos.

2.3 Items in paper based collections

Turning now our attention to items which have reached the Archives as parts of archival paper based collections I would like to make a few remarks beforehand. The objects that we hold date from the 19th century to the 21st and include weapons, textiles, busts, ceramics, medals, artwork. The items I have chosen to highlight come both from the personal papers given to the Gennadius Library and from the personal papers of American archaeologists. They serve as testimonies of the multifaceted personalities of these persons. They are in general of varying quality and historical importance. Their value lies also in the amount of accompanying documentary information or any kind of information that we are able to gather either when the collection reaches the repository or through research if the collection belongs to a backlog or even by researchers in the process of their own work.

What we try to maintain, despite the existence of different databases for objects, is a level of good documentation both for us, the administrators of the collections, and for our target users. The information we record primarily provides evidence of ownership (collection, etc.), the object's history and physical condition, the object's unique identifier for easy access and any related information, especially links with other holdings (collections). The last piece of information is especially important as it helps us and our researchers in a number of ways: outreach and exhibitions, to name two. Right now there is no separate database compiled for the objects which accompany paper based collections. They are 'visible' as long as one locates them in the finding aids of the collections. However, we have recently acquired a Collection Management System and our focus will be on how information is structured and entered into the CMS with consistent and controlled data.

Gypsum Bust of Sophia Schliemann (GR GL GK 071)



Photo: Courtesy of the ASCSA Archives

The gypsum bust of Sophia Schliemann, philanthropist and the wife of Heinrich Schliemann, the German excavator of Troy and Mycenae, is the first object. The George Kastriotis collection was donated to the Archives in 2000. Kastriotis was a sculptor, student of the famous 20th cent. Classicist sculptor Emile-Antoine Bourdelle. There were two additional donations of material in 2002 and in 2005. The original deed of gift was accompanied by an inventory. The bust was not part of the original gift. One had to go through the administrative records to see that the bust was a separate gift of the donor. All this information should be available with the object. For the specific item, which is now on display in one of our reading rooms (the John Mandylas Room), it was relatively easy to gather the information needed for its description. There were inventories which accompanied the three donations and there was also information supplied from the donor itself at the time of the donation. The donor was also in a position to provide additional information for Sophia Schliemann since her sculptor husband and creator of the bust was a great nephew and godson of Sophia. The papers of Sophia Schliemann, part of Heinrich Schliemann's papers are housed in our repository as well. Photos and correspondence of Sophia Schliemann exist in four ASCSA collections (Kastriotis Papers, Hill Papers, Blegen Papers, Stephanos Dragoumis Papers).

The example of Sophia Schliemann's bust is illustrative of the way we want to relate items and create links between objects and documents. The process may take more of our time however the information is valuable. What is also

important is to record every possible information as connections sometimes are known but are not recorded as we rely sometimes on what we have been told by colleagues or what we discover in the process of cataloguing ourselves. This way we may miss to record important information for researchers.

Near East Industries Doll (GR ASCSA GWRA 088)



Photo: Courtesy of the ASCSA Archives

The cloth doll is part of the Jack L. Davis Collection, Jack Davis is *Carl W. Blegen Professor of Greek Archaeology* at the University of Cincinnati and a former director of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens (2007-2012). The rest of the collection includes embroidered pouches and memorabilia of an association called “The American Friends of Greece,” a group which was founded in 1920-21 with the mission “to promote friendly relations between Greece and the U.S.” (The AFG later published booklets in support of Greece during World War II and a monthly newsletter, “The Philhellene,” which circulated from 1942-1950.) It is one of the 13 dolls currently in the collection. However, we should note that the donor keeps purchasing dolls and related material and sends them to the Archives to enrich the collection. The doll was handcrafted in Athens, Greece by Near East Industries, of the Near East Relief Foundation founded in 1915 as American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR) or the relief of Armenians, Syrians and Greeks who were persecuted during the Great War in the lands of the Ottoman Empire. The Near East Industries provided work for refugee women and children to support them. Dolls and other handcrafted items such as bags, embroidery and rugs were sold to support the relief work of the foundation. The amazing work of the foundation which is still active has been wonderfully documented online <https://neareastmuseum.com/>

The item is a cloth doll of 20 cm. We are in the process of cataloguing all the items of the collection. Luckily enough, there is a good number of those dolls in museums around the world. Therefore, we have consulted the descriptions of those institutions (where available) in an attempt to share as many fields and controlled vocabulary as possible. The levels of description details of course vary for each institution.

Leather suitcase (GR GL ENP 039)

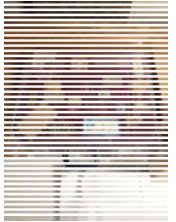


Photo: Courtesy of the ASCSA Archives

A third example from the ASCSA collections is a leather suitcase which belongs to the Elias Petropoulos Papers. Petropoulos, a well-known Greek writer and essayist, called by many ‘an amateur cultural anthropologist,’ wrote widely about aspects of Greek life which were rarely considered objects of serious study: the design of the ubiquitous balconies, courtyards, ironwork, and windows of Greek buildings, cemeteries, the methods and vocabulary of preparing coffee and the art of telling fortunes from coffee-grounds, or the specialized slang of the Greek homosexual scene. He had donated, along with his papers, musical instruments and various handmade objects, crafted by prisoners serving their time during the dictatorship in Greece (1967-1974). The suitcase, was also used by him to send some of his manuscripts to the Archives, and ‘carries’ a number of interesting stories – some of them recorded on its surface.

It is a leather suitcase typical of the 1950s-1960s in Greece, with straps that are fastened with metal buckles. On the exterior of the suitcase there are numerous paper labels. Some are extracts from official documents recording Petropoulos's orders from police and court authorities. Other labels document his days in prison during the dictatorship and before his escape to Paris where he resided permanently until his death. The suitcase and its paper labels are a fascinating timeline of his life during the dictatorship in Greece. Since there is no other record with this kind of information among his papers (meaning the times he served in prison) the suitcase is not only a personal object but a valuable tool of information about an important period of his lifetime. By cataloguing thoroughly all the paper labels on the surface of the suitcase we have an additional important piece of information about him.

3 Conclusion

The documentation and cataloguing of three dimensional objects in archival collections demonstrate the adaptability and flexibility of archival cataloguing tools and good practices. Ideally, documentation and finding aids are ongoing processes. We call our finding aids – 'live' catalogues. We believe that there is always room for additional research. Objects have hidden histories as well. By making them visible and accessible in a collection we provide access to the collections in full.

For us, a relatively small sized repository, the use of different databases has worked well so far. There is no question that a single search interface where the user would have access to all would have been better and it is a work in progress, especially since we are interested in the relations between our collections, with consistent and controlled data. A Collection Management System (CMS) is the next step. We only recently acquired one and we are currently working on its implementation. A collection management software with an easy to use relational database application that we will help us publish easily our objects on the web is the target. However, whatever we choose to do regarding cataloguing and documentation we need to keep one thing in mind. We need to cater for the off-site users as well in the best possible manner. Often the users who express interest for these items may not be the people who are used in searching the hierarchical orders created by libraries and archives. These non-experts, who use google and other search engines as their default mode of searching need to have the information available in the simplest manner.

I would like to close this short presentation with a cataloging project that literally struck upon us some months ago when we were preparing to move parts of our collections in our new on campus premises in the renovated east wing of the Gennadius Library of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. It is a collection of typewriters, dating from the first days of the operation of the School in 1881 to the newest item, the School's first laptop. Items will be inventoried – luckily enough we are in a position to know most of the persons (members of the School and staff) who owned or used them throughout these years. Some have their initials on them, others carry tags, for some there is no information. What is amazing is that people, members of staff, old school friends, who had the opportunity to browse the 'collection' in one of our open days, as part of the opening of the renovated facilities of the Archives, had also stories or information to share about the items and the people behind them. And this is the fascinating power of an object I guess- the stories behind them, the memories they may trigger. After all, we are all, museums, archives and libraries, memory institutions.

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