



Putting Archival Audiovisual Media into Context: An Archival Approach to Processing Mixed-Media Manuscript Collections

Megan McShea, *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution*

Abstract

The Archives of American Art has completed a three-year project, funded by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). The project focuses on collections documenting postmodern art movements that rely heavily on audiovisual documentation. The media-rich nature of these collections has allowed project staff to investigate ways to keep audiovisual media from being hidden within larger mixed-media collections in manuscript repositories. Through this project, the Archives has developed tools for processing mixed-media collections that integrate traditional archival processing procedures with best practices for archival audiovisual media. Our approach includes developing media-specific tools for surveying collections, defining levels of processing, collecting metrics to help in planning, and creating guidelines for arrangement strategies and for describing audiovisual media in EAD. This paper outlines some of the details of these tools and guidelines and how processing archivists can use them to ensure better physical and intellectual access to audiovisual materials.

Introduction

The Archives of American Art is a research unit of the Smithsonian Institution that has been collecting archival materials documenting the history of art in America since 1954. Like many organizations in the manuscript repository category, the Archives does not primarily collect audiovisual material, but does collect it in substantial quantity and variety, nonetheless. At latest count, the Archives has more than 15,000 analog and digital audiovisual objects in more than 800 of about 5,000 total collections. Our recordings exist in about 40 different audio, video, and motion picture film formats. About 90 percent of these materials are in analog audiovisual formats.

When we started to investigate the audiovisual holdings, the state of intellectual and physical access to them varied. In general, these holdings were poorly understood and had been inconsistently and often inaccurately documented and

described over the years through several generations of staff. This was as true for collections considered processed¹ as for those that were unprocessed. As such, they constituted a sort of insidious, hidden backlog of inaccessible material within collections that were no longer considered part of the Archives' processing backlog.

To address this issue, a general one across the profession, the Archives undertook a three-year project to investigate methodologies for processing mixed-media collections. These are collections in which archival audiovisual documents and paper documents exist together.²

1 The Society of American Archivists' *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* defines archival processing as "the arrangement, description, and housing of archival materials for storage and use by patrons" (Pearce-Moses 2005).

2 More information on the project, *Uncovering Hidden Audiovisual Media Documenting Postmodern Art*, is available on the Archives of American Art's website at <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/projects/clir>. Benchmarks, ratings, rehousing guidelines, and description guidelines described here are all available in the project's technical documentation at <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/documentation/av>.



The primary goal of our Hidden Collections project was to create tools for processing archivists that would help integrate best practices for audiovisual material with best practices for traditional archival processing. The aim is to provide guidance that will enable arranging and describing mixed-media collections so that audiovisual material is just as accessible, both intellectually and physically, as other kinds of records in the collection, and to accomplish this via traditional processing workflows.

Project Goals: Tools and Guidelines

We created tools for planning processing, and guidelines for arrangement and description, that could be adopted by any archivist undertaking traditional processing of collections with an audiovisual component. The three planning tools include: (1) benchmarks defining what is expected of the processing archivist at different levels of processing; (2) metrics on processing rates and extent changes to understand how long media-specific tasks could be expected to take, and how much the size of collections changed when processed; and (3) a ratings system to help archivists assess the pre-processed state of media in collections and its needs.

In addition, guidelines developed during the project address arrangement and description of audiovisual material, including instructions for when and how to replace media housing and how to seat media in collection containers, detailed guidelines for description of audiovisual media in Encoded Archival Description (EAD), and some broad guidelines for intellectual arrangement of media in collections.

Planning Tools: Benchmarks

The benchmarks developed for this project were designed to make explicit what is expected of

processing archivists at each level of processing, specifically for audiovisual media. At the Archives, levels of processing for all collections are defined as preliminary (tasks completed upon accession), minimal (the standard now for all but specially-funded processing projects), intermediate, and full.

For audiovisual media, preliminary processing involves a brief, minimal identification of media in the accession record for a collection, and a more detailed survey. When a new collection is accessioned that contains audiovisual media, the collecting archivist includes the extent, location, and general content of the media in the accession record. The audiovisual archivist then conducts a more detailed survey, documenting its condition, the condition of its housing, format characteristics such as recording speed and size, date, content description, and an assessment of the uniqueness of the media and its likely rights status. With this information, we document and can track the media and its current state, regardless of when the collection gets slated for further processing.

More detailed processing has three defined levels: minimal, intermediate, and full. Although it is always difficult to create rules that apply to all collections because each collection presents a unique case, a few rules were established to guide archivists in their decision making about audiovisual media in the collection. For instance, for minimal processing, rehousing of media in damaged or unsupportive housing is not required, nor is playback of poorly labeled media. Unlike intermediate or full processing, archivists processing at a minimal level can use the term “unidentified” to describe unlabeled media. They are encouraged to describe labeled media in the aggregate, and they do not have to include every detail available in their finding aids. Instead, they



can list a date range and higher-level description of a group as a whole. With these few established benchmarks, archivists working on minimal-level processing projects, which are typically large-scale and fast-paced, can note media accurately, associating it with related records, without slowing their pace. The benchmarks are meant to be flexible, however, so archivists can use their judgment to decide whether the media merits the extra effort required to provide more granular intellectual access or greater physical protection to collection material found in poor condition.

For intermediate and full processing, archivists are explicitly required to play poorly labeled media, if it is stable and if the playback equipment is available, in order to provide an adequate description. For film, they must inspect the leader and head of the film to discover titles and dates. They are required to rehouse media that is in substandard housing. Description also gets more complex at higher levels, and there are a range of enhancements archivists can consider to provide more granular and nuanced intellectual access.

Planning Tools: Metrics

Metrics were collected throughout the project to investigate how long processing tasks take for audiovisual media, the factors affecting those rates, and changes in overall extent of collections after processing. Data on extent changes showed that an increase in collection size is typical, with the median increase being 24 percent.

Tasks that were timed included surveying material, arranging and rehousing, and writing and entering the description in Archivists' Toolkit, the tool we use to author finding aids. Calculating the data collected, we found that audiovisual portions of collections took an average of 12.7 hours per linear foot to process, and the processing times for mixed-media collections as a whole

averaged 15 hours per linear foot. These collections were all considered processed to the "full" level, that is, the highest level of processing.

Although the project collections represent a small sample, it is interesting to compare these numbers to the rates of processing for our collections that do not contain substantial audiovisual material (the latter average 18.1 hours per linear foot for full processing at the Archives). It was significant to discover that large audiovisual components of collections do not necessarily result in longer processing times. In fact, on average they seem to take less time than collections without media. And in the AV-rich collections, the audiovisual portion is taking less time than the non-AV portion. The assumption used to be the opposite. As we gather more metrics, including rates for minimal processing of mixed-media collections, they will surely provide more insights. Already, these preliminary numbers indicate that mixed-media collections need not be excluded from processing projects based on concerns about processing speed.

Planning Tools: Ratings

The metrics also helped identify factors that affected the rate of processing. As with any type of archival material, audiovisual media in unprocessed collections present a wide range of needs. Three factors emerged in the course of the project that seemed to most affect the rate of processing: the extent of rehousing needed, the extent of playback needed to identify content, and the extent of analysis needed to determine relationships among recordings and between recordings and other documents in the collection.

We created two rating scales based on these factors to help archivists assess what level of work will be required to process the audiovisual media in a collection. The housing rating is simply



a range—from a poor rating, indicating that all media need to be rehoused, to an excellent rating, meaning no media need to be rehoused. The audiovisual access rating combines an assessment of how much playback and analysis are needed to properly arrange and describe the media. If everything needs to be played and analyzed to determine the content and the relationships among records, the audiovisual media gets a poor access rating. If nothing needs to be played or analyzed, it gets an excellent rating.

For example, a collection might contain audiovisual media that is completely unlabeled and lacks corresponding paper documentation describing its contents. In this case, extensive playback will be required to arrange and describe it. If everything is well-labeled, seems to have been created in an orderly way, and is accompanied by transcripts or shot lists, it will have a higher access rating. The audiovisual access rating is also related to complexity. One series of interviews in the same format will be a lot easier to arrange than multiple media productions with many versions and production elements in multiple formats, where everything has been boxed together and needs to be sorted out.

Guidelines: Rehousing

Guidelines developed for this project are designed to assist processing archivists with the tasks of rehousing, arranging, and describing audiovisual media. The variety and complexity of archival audiovisual media, and of the repositories that collect it, make it difficult to provide guidelines that can apply to every possible circumstance in every setting. Guidelines written for this project were designed to summarize published standards (Adelstein 2009 and ISO 2000), and to apply those standards to common circumstances specific to mixed-media archival collections.

Rehousing guidelines address both housing and the physical orientation of audiovisual media in storage containers, particularly in cases where audiovisual material is found in containers with other types of records. Archival repositories have a variety of storage resources and therefore will have different approaches to housing and storing special formats. At the Archives of American Art, we keep audiovisual materials in mixed-media collections in their collection of origin, rather than remove them to a special format storage area. Currently, although the general collections storage areas are effectively climate-controlled, there is no storage alternative for materials that would benefit from a cool or cold climate. Without the ability to improve the storage climate for audiovisual media, there is no rationale for separating these materials from their collections of origin.

The rehousing guidelines created for this project are designed to spell out what is expected of processing archivists at the Archives regarding rehousing, and to help them improve the physical stability of audiovisual material for long-term storage as they physically arrange collections. Generally speaking, archivists should apply their knowledge of archival materials and their physical vulnerabilities to the housing of audiovisual media. This means getting rid of deteriorating, dirty, or unsupportive housing, and photocopying or scanning original housing to preserve the information it carries. Specific supplies, seating, and handling instructions vary by media format.

Guidelines: Arrangement and Description

As with any other type of archival record, the arrangement and description of audiovisual media should provide intellectual and physical access to all records, regardless of media, and should preserve and express the relationships between the records within a collection.



The DACS (Describing Archives: A Content Standard) and EAD standards are effective in supporting these goals, but they do not provide consistent or thorough guidance on audiovisual material. And although audiovisual cataloging specialists have made significant progress in standards development for item- and collection-level description of audiovisual media, there is little published guidance for describing archival audiovisual media in finding aids. In fact, the DACS standard even refers to item-level standards for those looking for guidance in describing audiovisual materials in their collections.

Although item-level standards provide a reference point for elucidating and defining certain elements of description in finding aids, a wholesale adoption of item-level standards for describing audiovisual materials can be problematic. Finding aids provide a hierarchical structure meant to express relationships among records in a collection and to make use of efficiencies in multi-level description, where a component can inherit description from higher levels. Item-level descriptive information systems tend to be flat and do a poor job of expressing relationships among records so described. They also tend to repeat common metadata in each record, which is not efficient. Also, as DACS states quite explicitly, the level of description for a particular component of an archival collection is supposed to match the level of processing. The flip side is that more detailed description means more laborious processing. While some recordings might merit such time and effort, many do not, and a high level of detail may mislead researchers as to its significance in relation to other records in the collection that have been more efficiently described. If item-level description is the only tool a repository has for describing its audiovisual

material, it may be tied to that process even when the material could just as easily be described in a single aggregated component or a simple list in a finding aid.

Item-level records are very good at capturing the many possible metadata elements of audiovisual media that do not exist for paper records. However, following the “more product, less process” approach now widely accepted as archival best practice, a critical assessment must be made of how much the researcher gains by knowing many of the format details one could include in the description of recordings. At the Archives of American Art, guidelines direct archivists to limit their description to the minimum needed for physical and intellectual access. That is, we include what is necessary for researchers and archives staff to understand what the content of a recording is, how it relates to other documentation in the collection, and how it may be accessed. Many of the details about its recording characteristics and technical specifications can be left out of the finding aid. If researchers are interested in such details, they can find them when they access the material for research.

That said, archivists must ensure that their arrangement and description of audiovisual material are clear and make sense of the material, which can often be complicated by multiple versions, formats, and production elements. If the material does not make sense to the processing archivist, it will not make sense to the researcher. Disambiguating versions and components of archival media is the sense making of processing work. If this work has not been done, the material has not been processed.

Other principles of arrangement and description will be familiar to any processing archivist. First, as with any format, processing should preserve



and express relationships among records. In any mixed-media collection, chances are that at least some of the audiovisual media is related to paper or other types of records in the collection, so media should not automatically be segregated from the paper records. Also, audiovisual media can be effectively described in the aggregate. If a collection contains 30 cassettes of annual meetings with detailed notes on their cases, “annual meetings, 1975-1993, 30 sound cassettes” is an adequate description for a minimally processed collection. Archivists can guide the researcher to key documents in series descriptions that will help unlock the content, and they can go back to heavily used collections to provide more detail in their descriptions if merited.

At the other extreme, overemphasizing format where audiovisual media is concerned can also lead to under-described material. An inventory of media types is not an adequate description of archival recordings, although such description is commonly found in finding aids. The DACS guidance for devising titles applies here, as anywhere: “When devising title information, compose a brief title that uniquely identifies the material, normally consisting of a name segment, a term indicating the nature of the unit being described, and optionally a topical segment ...” (Society of American Archivists 2013, 17). Use names, genres, locations, and subjects to devise a succinct and unique description of the recording content, and express media formats in the physical description area.

A chronic problem in the adoption of EAD has been the tendency to retrofit description to display, leaving the metadata compromised and out of standard. For example, the existence of a copy or a location gets noted in a unit title. The issues this creates become painfully apparent when migrating or sharing metadata between

systems. In this era of aggregating and linking descriptive metadata, it is increasingly important to follow standards for tagging metadata so that the code that underlies the archival description is in standard. If a stylesheet is improperly designed and does not display the metadata elements used in audiovisual description (perhaps because these elements are not used for other types of records and have not been accounted for), the stylesheet must be corrected.

The instructions for describing audiovisual material in EAD at the Archives of American Art were designed to be a local document integrating guidelines for audiovisual description with local guidelines for general archival description, with a few notes on arrangement as well. They provide detailed instructions and refer specifically to local practice, and will be updated as tools evolve. As of this writing, the guidelines specify where certain types of metadata are to be entered in an Archivists’ Toolkit environment, referring to metadata elements in the EAD 2002 standard. The guidelines were developed through a process that began with a close review of the EAD 2002 tag library and DACS (second edition), a review of the Archives’ EAD and DACS implementation, consultation with archivists at other organizations on their use of EAD for describing audiovisual material, and a refinement and interpretation of the standards to establish local rules. Because of the variety of institutional practices and contexts, the Archives’ guidelines would likely need review and adaptation to be adopted by other repositories. We also anticipate a significant revision with a future migration to ArchivesSpace and EAD3. Still, the guidelines provide answers to many of the questions that arise in the course of processing audiovisual components of mixed-media collections. As such, they fill a gap in existing standards.



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