Archives of Design and Architecture in the Museum: the case of M+

Kevin Forkan, Head, Archives and Library, M+
24 October 2019
A new museum dedicated at collecting, exhibiting and interpreting visual culture of the 20th and 21st centuries.
What do we collect?

20th and 21st century visual art, design & architecture, moving image, Hong Kong visual culture

- M+ Collection
- M+ Sigg Collection
- M+ Collection Archives
- M+ Library Special Collection
M+ Collection Archives

The M+ Collection Archives consists of archival material that is acquired into the M+ Collections.

- Almost 70 archival acquisitions since 2013
- Almost 60 fonds
- Architecture (55%), Design (29%), Visual Art (12%), Moving Image (3%)
- Fonds sizes vary from 20,000+ items to just a few items
- 60% of our fonds fully catalogued
Place of the Collection Archives at M+

M+ Policy has always been equality between our collections, whether artworks, design objects, moving image, or or archives.

Collection Archives are **acquired** in the same manner as artworks and design objects, they are managed and searchable in the **same CMS**, they are presented equally on the M+ Collections website, and are used in exhibitions in the same way as artworks and design objects.
Archives of Design and Architecture in M+
Hong Kong architecture

Classical modernism

‘Tropical modernism’

60s experimental
Hong Kong industrial design

Japanese postmodernism

Digital design

Hong Kong graphic design
Designing Archives into M+
Museums and archives...

MoMA
Plan your visit  Exhibitions and events  Art and artists  Store

Archives of American Art
Explore the Collections  Research & Reference  Exhibitions

Kandinsky Library
The Kandinsky Library is the research and documentation centre of the museum, containing books, archival and audiovisual materials. The library is divided into main sections, including books, research, archives, the photographic collection, and documents.

Tate Archive
The Tate Archive contains more than one million items on artists, art world figures, and art organizations in Britain, documenting the history of the British art scene in the UK. This includes letters, writings, sketchbooks, audio-visual material, photographs, ephemera, press cuttings, and objects. More than 52,000 of these include material by artists such as Francis Bacon, Felicia Browne, Aubrey Williams, Ethel Cooke, and Paul Nash, and can be explored online.

Documents
Ministry of Food
National Ration Book (B)

Collection of Digitised Archive Items
Tate Archive contains more than one million items on artists, art world figures, and art organizations in Britain, documenting the history of the British art scene in the UK. This includes letters, writings, sketchbooks, audio-visual material, photographs, ephemera, press cuttings, and objects.

Dancing Strangers
As well as browsing the collections online, you can...

Archival Collections
Explore the Collection  Images and Media  Finding Aids  Technical Specifications

Modern & contemporary art archive and special books

Archives...
Archives and museums: key issues

1. **Acquisition**: problematic practices?

2. **Cataloguing**: no hierarchical description, unsuitable CMS?

3. **Access**: pressure for exhibitions, loans, digitisation?

4. **Storage**: museum storage, impractical building designs?
Could this lead to...

(Doctored pulp fiction novel cover by Kim Allen Scott, University Archivist, Montana State University)
1. Acquisition
Acquiring archives at M+, 2013-16

• Mainly by the Design and Architecture curatorial team
• ‘Building M+’ exhibition 2014
• Hong Kong architecture
• ‘Prestige’ international acquisitions
• Japanese designers
Museum-style acquisition: the good, the bad, and the ugly

**The Good**
- Curator-driven acquisition: experts in their field.
- Close relationships with creators.
- Rigorous due diligence processes.
- Resources matched to acquisition ambitions.

**The Bad**
- Selection, sometimes series, sometimes individual items.
- Archives as artworks.
- Acquisition driven by exhibitions.
- No standalone archival acquisition policy.
- Monetisation of archives
The ugly

• Classically trained archivist.
• Government records acquisition and description at the National Archives of Ireland.
• No background in art, design, architecture.
• No experience working in a museum of any kind.
• Came to M+ in early 2016
Moving towards a solution

- Series of meetings with acquiring curators, 2016.
- ‘Summit meeting’ with curatorial, 2016.
- Explanation of archival acquisition ethics.
- Drafting agreed procedure.
The result? Compromises...

- Defining ‘Archives’ or ‘Collection’.

- No more selection of items, but ‘project archives’ can be acquired

- **Curators’ Questionnaire:**
  - selection criteria and fate of non-selected projects
  - archival history
  - possible accruals
  - archival material held in other institutions
  - All this information to be made public in our fonds-level descriptions

- Extensive consultation with Archives staff in archival acquisitions – this does not happen in every museum...
Controversial...?

• Yes, but museums are acquiring archives with or without the input of archivists!

• Museum archivists need to look beyond the records of the institution, towards what their curatorial colleagues are acquiring.

• We cannot sit on the sidelines and grumble, we need to engage with curators and museums on this issue.
2. Cataloguing and Collection Management Software
TMS: it’s called *The Museum System* for a reason...

MoMA  
Tate  
LACMA  
The Met  
National Gallery, London  
Getty Museum  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien  
Royal Ontario Museum  
Munch Museum  
Australian National Maritime Museum  
Peabody Museum  
Philadelphia Museum of Art  
Musée d’Orsay  
Smithsonian  
Canadian Centre for Architecture

It is NOT an archival database...
Configuring and Cleaning
Archives and TMS: Configuring, Cataloguing, Cleaning, and Communicating

M+ policy has always been equality between our collections, whether artworks, design objects, moving image, or archives. For collections management and curatorial access, this means managing them on the same CMS. This presentation, by the Database Manager and the Archivist at M+, demonstrates how we configured TMS to catalogue archives according to ISAD(g), cleaned up a mass of legacy issues that had built up prior to this change, and how we are now working with our digital team and software developers towards making our archival collection available online on the same basis as our art, design and architecture, and moving image collection.

Kevin Forkan, Head, Archives and Library, M+

Jim Whittome, Database Manager, M+
Arrangement and Description

• Ongoing since 2016
• Use MS Excel template for uploading data
• Cataloguing rules developed and finalised along with overall museum cataloguing standardisation
• ISAD(G) based, but takes account of museum needs
# Procedure for the Arrangement and Description of Collection Archives

**Table of Contents**

1. **Introduction**
   1.1 Glossary
   1.2 Standards
   1.3 Information sources for arrangement and description of Collection Archives
   1.4 Data elements and cataloging templates

2. **Arrangement**
   2.1 Artificial collections versus organic archives
   2.2 Creating artificial subfonds
   2.3 Series and subseries based on projects
   2.4 Single files and items without a series

3. **Archival Reference Code**
   3.1 Fonds level codes
      3.2 Lower level codes

4. **Object Count**

5. **Accession Number**

6. **Level of Description**
   6.1 Record the archival level of description
   6.2 When to choose between file and item?

7. **Area**

8. **Category**

9. **Region**

10. **Title Type and Language**
    10.1 General rules, fonds and subfonds level

11. **Scope and Content**

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<th>Record number</th>
<th>Accession Number (Own)</th>
<th>Object Count</th>
<th>Level of description</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Category 1</th>
<th>Category 2</th>
<th>Region</th>
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<th>Condition notes</th>
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<td>Preservation/Storage requirements</td>
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3. Access and Exhibitions
Opposites attract?

**Archivists**
- Preservation v Access
- Long-term view
- Happiest when things are in boxes

**Curators**
- Projects and programmes
- Engagement and learning
- Exhibitions
- Object, not context
Traditional Archives Institution?

Users usually from outside the institution...

Museum?

Users inside the institution with the archivists (and the archives)

Internal users are mainly curators, but can also include website/social media, learning and interpretation, and other teams
An Introduction to the M+ Collection Archives

M+ Collection Archives

22 March 2016, Read under Archives

From the Archives: M+ Collection Archives

This is the first post in a new "From the Archives" blog series, which will shine a spotlight on a selected work from the M+ Collection: the M+ Collection Archives. Below, with the help of the eight members of the M+ Archives, Architecture, and Design team, we will explore this important part of the collection.

What are the M+ Collection Archives?

A new section named "M+ Collection Archives" replaced in the collection in 2011. Each work that we have selected for display from the M+ Collection so far, has a series of images that provide a visual overview of the collection. This is the first post in a series that will continue to explore the M+ Collection Archive.
M+ Collections Website
4. Building a team and physical infrastructure
The M+ Research Centre

4/F and 5/F
• 4/F: offices, processing room, archive storage

• 5/F: public research area, library storage
Archives and Library team, Oct 2019

(L-R)
Rebecca Yiu, Assistant Archivist
Ceci Leung, Library Assistant
Angharad McCarrick, Institutional Archivist
Kevin Forkan, Head, Archives and Library
Nicole Lee, Collection Management Intern
Alan Yu, Assistant Librarian
Of course, designing archives into a museum is always a work in progress…

March 2016

October 2019
Next steps

• **Research Centre Committee:** Curatorial and Archive & Library collaboration

• **Backlog questionnaires:** tapping curatorial brains to get enriched fonds-level descriptions

• **Outreach:** Art Libraries and Archives Network Asia (ALANA)

• **Museum Opening:** late 2020/early 2021
Questions?

kevin.forkan@mplus.org.hk
mplus.org.hk
mplusmuseum
@mplusmuseum
@kevforkan