

Michelle ELLIGOTT\*

\* Museum Archivist the Museum of Modern Art

## Perspectives from the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

**ELLIGOTT, Michelle, Perspectives from the Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Atlanti, Vol. 18, Trieste 2008, pp. 369-377.**

*Original in English, abstract in English, Italian and Slovenian, summary in English*

*I will discuss the founding of The Museum of Modern Art Archives, in the larger context of the museum archives movement in the United States, and articulate its mission. The holdings of the MoMA Archives are incomparable; to that end, I will present a few distinctive items that far surpass their significance as simply institutional records and that represent quintessential documents in the history of modern art. I will also discuss the past decade, which has seen the Archives occupying a more prominent position within the institution. Finally, I will cover key components of the recent success of the Archives, such as advocacy and outreach, increased usage, and staff training.*

**ELLIGOTT, Michelle, Prospettive dal Museo di Arte Moderna di New York. Atlanti, Vol. 18, Trieste 2008, pp. 369-377.**

*Parlerò della fondazione dell'Archivio del Museo di Arte Moderna di New York, nel contesto del movimento degli archivi museali negli Stati Uniti, dettagliandone gli scopi. La consistenza dell'archivio del MoMA è incomparabile; a tal scopo, presenterò alcuni documenti che travalicano il loro significato di semplice documentazione istituzionale e rappresentano la quintessenza del documento storico nell'arte contemporanea. Parlerò inoltre del passato decennio, che ha visto l'archivio occupare una posizione preminente all'interno dell'istituzione. Infine, esporrò le cause del recente successo dell'archivio, come l'apoggio, l'estensione, l'incrementato uso, e la formazione del personale.*

For the past 80 years The Museum of Modern Art has been at the forefront of recognizing and defining modern art, modernism and the modern museum. The Museum was founded in 1929 to focus on contemporary art and its direct antecedents, an outlook not shared by any other museum in the United States at that time. From its inception, The Museum of Modern Art has been fully engaged with the art of our times and dedicated to showcasing the best and the brightest of new art trends. While this concept is repeated throughout the world today, MoMA was the first of its kind and established the canon for modern art museums, as well as created many standards and best practices for general museum procedures and programs.

Critical to an understanding of this institution's unique role in the evolution and codification of modern art is the archival record. For it is only the historical documents themselves - the evidence of activity - that allow scholars of today to study and understand what has come before them and to build upon it to create new forms of scholarship, installation display, and even art-making practices.

### Founding MoMA Archives

A more recent history is afforded to The Museum of Modern Art Archives which was founded only in 1989. With a resolution passed by the Board of Trustees of the Museum, the program was authorized to preserve and make accessible the Museum's historical records to staff, outside scholars, and researchers.

Though The Museum of Modern Art's archival program was established a full sixty years after the founding of the institution, this was not unusual in the context of museums in the United States. Indeed, it was only in the 1980s that there was a country-wide recognition of the importance for museums to have archives. This initiative was developed largely by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. As the nation's largest museum, the Smithsonian is composed of a multitude of genre-specific institutions (such as the Museum of American History, the Museum of the American Indian, the Museum of Air and Space, Museum of Natural History, American Art Museum, etc.). The Smithsonian is also a public museum, being funded by the United States federal government (though in

recent years the need for private funding has been on the rise). This institution, acting as the steward of our national heritage and providing leadership for all museums in the country, held a conference to address the issue of archival programs within the museum context. As a result, a Museum Archives Task Force was established within the United States' professional organization, the Society of American Archivists, to address the situation. The task force produced and distributed an information packet consisting of basic information for creating an archives, a draft set of guidelines for museum archives, and sample policy statements and procedures. Simultaneously, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), a program of the National Archives of the United States of America, launched a campaign titled "Federal Funding for Museum Archives Development Programs" and in the course of a decade provided funding for 24 new archives programs, with an average award of \$32,493<sup>1</sup>.

It is in this context that the Museum Archives at MoMA was founded. Along with donations from a variety of private individuals and foundations, the MoMA Archives also received critical start up funding from the NHPRC.

The department today forms part of the curatorial unit at the Museum, and exists under the authority of the Senior Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs.

## Mission

At the outset, the scope of the program was limited and clear: to document the history of the institution. The purpose of The Museum of Modern Art Archives was designated as follows - to organize, preserve and make accessible records not in current use and to collect documentation relevant to the work of the institution, including: a) records relevant to the Museum's history (minutes, committee reports, departmental papers, photographs, sound recordings and videotapes); b) personal papers of curators and directors when relevant to Museum interests or history; c) papers of individuals related to Museum interests, such as Trustees and former staff; and d) oral histories. The Museum Archives also provided necessary research support in order to enrich and enhance the Museum's curatorial and educational missions.

One could argue that the program was identical to any other institutional archives - a repository whose sole purpose it was to document its own organization. However, our institutional records surpass their value as simply documenting the administrative life of an institution, because of the nature and importance of MoMA from a historical viewpoint. The Museum of Modern Art is perhaps the best museum of modern and contemporary art in the world, and it reflects the vitality, complexity, and unfolding patterns of this art. As such, and as one of earliest significant institutions devoted to the topic, the records of MoMA form one of the most important cornerstones of primary source materials related to the history of 20<sup>th</sup> c art. Indeed the collections of the Museum Archives reveal the origins and evolution of modern and contemporary art. Chronicling the history of painting, sculpture, drawings, prints, illustrated books, photo-

**ELLIGOTT, Michelle, Perspektivne Muzeja Sodobne Umetnosti v New Yorku (Amerika). Atlanti, Zv. 18, Trst 2008, str. 369-377.**

*V prispevku obravnavam temeljne strukture muzeja sodobne umetnosti v sozvočju širšega konteksta gibanja, ki se je začelo v Združenih državah Amerike na področju muzejev, pri tem pa poudarjam tudi poslanstvo tega gibanja. Dokumentacija v teh arhivih je neizjemna, v tem pogledu bi rada predstavila nekaj značilnih predmetov, ki temeljno oz. značilno izstopajo iz celotnega gradiva in spadajo v navadno dokumentacijo posameznih institucij in zato predstavljajo pravo vsebino dokumentacije v zgodovini moderne umetnosti. V prispevku tudi razpravljam o preteklosti, v katerih smo videli arhive v neki pomembni poziciji posamezne institucije, končno pa predstavljam ključne komponente novih uspehov na arhivskem področju kot je to posredovanje, kako daleč seže zavest o pomembnosti arhivov, uporabnost in*

## SUMMARY

*An overview of The Museum of Modern Art Archives will be presented. As head of the Museum Archives, I will discuss the founding of the program, in the larger context of the museum archives movement in the United States, as well as to elucidate its mission. The purpose of The Museum of Modern Art Archives was designated as follows - to organize, preserve and make accessible records not in current use and to collect documentation relevant to the work of the institution, including: a) records relevant to the Museum's history (minutes, committee reports, departmental papers, photographs, sound recordings and videotapes); b) personal papers of curators and directors when relevant to Museum interests or history; c) papers of individuals related to Museum interests, such as Trustees and former staff; and d) oral histories. To understand the importance of the MoMA Archives, it is necessary to comprehend the incomparable nature of its holdings. To that end, I will present a few distin-*

1. Laurie A. Baty, *Federal Funding for Museum Archives Development Programs: A Report to the Commission* (Washington, D.C.: NHPRC, 1988).

*ctive items that far surpass their significance as simply institutional records and that represent quintessential documents in the history of modern art. Such examples include materials relating to: the historiography of modern art, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, MoMA exhibitions at home and abroad, and a presidential address from Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I will also discuss the past decade, which has seen the Archives occupying a more prominent position within the institution. As a result of the Museum's recent building campaign, the Archives now has the first purpose-built facility for its program, including an architecturally impressive reading room and secure storage area. Finally, I will cover key components of the success of the Archives, such as advocacy and outreach, increased usage, and staff training.*

graphs, architecture, design, film, and media works from 1880 to the present, MoMA's archival holdings constitute an essential resource for art, social, and cultural historians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

## Holdings

Let's just address a few select examples from the archives to understand the unparalleled significance of the holdings.

A typical component of any institutional archives is the papers of the director or the chief executive officer. While such records usually provide important insights into the mission and administration of the organization, in rare cases are the papers evidence of the activities of one of the most important individuals working in the field. This is the case at MoMA. The founding director of The Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., was arguably one of the brightest minds in the field of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century art, and the father of the historiography of modern art. The MoMA Archives includes all his papers, at 25 linear meters.

To illuminate his influence, let's consider just three selections from his papers. First, with his influential exhibition and accompanying publication, *Cubism and Abstract Art* of 1936, Barr set out to chart the evolution of modern art dating from 1890 to 1935, from its origins through a series of cross fertilizations. The diagram that Barr created to illustrate the development of this recent art connected the various manifestations of art movements through the turn of the century, and showed how the commingling of multiple sources led to later art forms. For example, Neo-Impressionism, with the addition of "Negro Sculpture" and "Machine Esthetic," led to Cubism. Cubism (along with various other sources) spawned such movements as Suprematism, Constructivism, De Stijl, Purism, "(Abstract) Dadaism," and Orphism. Barr's chart, which graced the dustjacket of the catalogue in its original edition, is now renowned and for many symbolizes Barr's role in the historiography of modern art. What is important to underscore, is that while these successions are well known to all art lovers today, at that time, no one had scientifically analyzed this evolution of modern art styles. And lest one think that Barr commandeered this idea all at once, like a fully-grown Athena sprouting forth from Zeus's head, the Archives disproves this theory and shows his labors. Note the erasures and the revisions in the multiple drafts; plus, of great value, one version even includes the names of the artists Barr was identifying with the specific movements.

For a second example, in 1931, the Museum held a retrospective exhibition of the work of Henri Matisse. While this might not seem that influential from our perspective today, it is constructive to underscore that this exhibition represented both the first major museum exhibition of the work of Matisse in the United States and the Museum's first solo exhibition. Further, it was considered a great success, not in the least by the artist himself. Matisse, after having viewed the installation photographs, sent a letter to Barr saying the photos gave him the idea of a perfect installation, and that he appreciated the great care Barr displayed in organizing the exhibition. As a

token of his gratitude, he sent back to Barr a copy of the accompanying catalogue, in which he added a beautiful sketch of two nudes and an inscription which reads, "In memory of an ensemble the harmony of which was born from a common understanding."

A third example may come as no surprise - that of Picasso. But this is due to Barr's life-long interest in the artist: he organized two retrospective exhibitions on the artist and wrote three books about him. [And I should say the outgrowth of this legacy is MoMA's superlative collections of the work of both Matisse and Picasso.] In Barr's papers one can find the evidence of his direct interactions with the artist, as seen in this photo of Barr with Picasso in the artist's studio [we even have in the Archives the notebook in Barr's hand, recording his thoughts at that moment]. Further, the camaraderie the two clearly felt is evidenced by the paper ties which Picasso made and sent to MoMA for the officers of the Museum to wear at the opening of the exhibition (for Picasso did not attend in person as he never traveled to the United States).

The MoMA Archives also contains vast amounts of administrative records. Among the most important of these are the exhibition files. Again, the documentation reveals in many cases the nascent field of the history of modern art and in many ways establishes the canon for such study. In addition to the now obvious shows devoted to Matisse and Picasso, the exhibition files also reveal how at mid-century, it was not uncommon for MoMA to mount exhibitions devoted to non-Western or non-Modern themes. The concept was to show the continuity of the past and present, and the similarities in the way historical, "primitive," and modern art expressed fundamental human concepts. So it was at MoMA (and not the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which declined the show) that the important 1940 exhibition *Italian Masters* was held, including Boticelli's *Birth of Venus*; works by Titian, Raphael, Verrocchio, Bernini, Masaccio; and the first Michelangelo marble ever to be exhibited in New York. Another example of this expansive approach to art was the exhibition *Indian Art of the United States* from 1941, which also included a ceremonial sand painting presentation in the galleries.

Another way in which MoMA exhibitions have become so influential is that the Museum established an office responsible for sending MoMA exhibitions around the U.S. and abroad in order to spread the gospel of modernism. One example was the *Steichen the Photographer* exhibition, which came right here to the Circolo Italsider in Trieste in January 1966.

Finally, the records in the MoMA Archives reveal much more than simply the current trends in modern art, for they are in fact a cultural relic of a specific moment in time. Providing a glimpse into social and political history as well as art history, the records illustrate the contemporary esprit de vivre. For example, in 1939, on the occasion of the Museum's tenth anniversary and the opening of its new building, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt used a radio address from the White House in Washington D.C. to congratulate the Museum. He stated that only when a society is free can the arts flourish and that MoMA, by encouraging the creation and enjoyment of beautiful things, was a citadel of civilization.

Today, the extent of the MoMA Archives numbers over 150 discrete collections, comprising about 1400 linear meters. In addition to paper documents, our collections also include other formats. Several years ago, the photographic archive of the Museum, which was previously held by the photo permissions department, was transferred to the Museum Archives. This solidified our comprehensive approach to institutional documentation. The photo archive consists of tens of thousands of photographs, including images of the Museum's personalities, buildings and grounds, as well as special programs in conjunction with exhibitions. Most importantly, the photo archive includes over 19,000 installation photographs of MoMA exhibitions, which are critically important to the study of art history as well as the history of installation and display design. These have recently been digitized by ARTstor, an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation-funded agency, which publishes them on the web via subscription.

In addition, we hold several thousand audio and video recordings of Museum events, such as lectures, symposia, special events, and television and radio coverage of the Museum. While I appreciate that our materials are significantly younger than those held by many of your institutions, I do want to underscore that many mediums from the 20<sup>th</sup> century are particularly fugitive and require a high level of maintenance or risk of certain obsolescence. To that end, we are involved in a long-term campaign to preserve and reformat the recordings into digital copies.

Furthermore, to supplement the written record, the Archives launched an oral history program. To date, we have conducted over 60 interviews with individuals who have had a long and unique association with the institution, such as former staff and trustees, like Kirk Varnedoe and Philip Johnson and even artists who formerly worked at MoMA, usually as security guards or receptionists, like Jeff Koons, Robert Ryman and Sol LeWitt. The interviews are recorded and transcribed; the interviewee has the opportunity to edit and possibly restrict passages, and the edited transcript is made available to the public.

In order to ensure the proper disposition of records of enduring value, the Museum Archives also has the responsibility of records management for the entire institution, which has a staff of 850 employees. In order to provide leadership on this issue, we met with every department, conducted a functional analysis of their roles, identified the types of records they create as a by-product of such work, and advised them on the retention of each. We have developed a *Guide to Records Management* which gives detailed instructions for transferring departmental records to the Museum Archives. It includes retention and disposal schedules that authorize periodic disposal of records, future review of records, and transfer of materials to the Archives. Fundamentally, we have ultimate responsibility for *all* the museum's vital records. In addition to our stewardship of the documents important to research, we also must address records such as legal, financial, employment - all the way down to every last receipt from the bookstore. Working closely with legal counsel, we ensure that records are kept for an appropriate amount of time, and when necessary, destroyed according to legal guidelines. Currently, we have 1750 linear meters of material in records management, with an

annual growth rate of about 100 meters.

Due to the resounding success of the institutional records program, in 1998 the Museum Archives was amplified and it was designated as being the repository for all archival or primary source collections across the institution, including those from non-MoMA sources or creators. Thus, several collections previously under the custody of the Library were transferred to us. Furthermore, in recent years we have made some rather important acquisitions of such private archives, including the papers of artists and art historians and the records of commercial galleries. Rather than review this information again, I will simply direct you to the article I wrote on the topic published in *Atlanti* Vol. 17 (2007). Suffice it to say that while we are dedicated to adding to our program collected private archives which deal directly with the goals and interests of the Museum and which would enhance and complement our holdings, we do not consider it our obligation to collect *all* such material. In the United States, there is a vast repository called the Archives of American Art which forms part of the Smithsonian Institution and which attempts to broadly document all aspects of art in America. Similarly, there are a few other private institutions, such as the Getty Research Center, which acquires archives on the topic of the history of art.

## A new era for the Archives

The substantial work of the past decade has taken the Archives from a fledgling program within the Museum to a more central position with a raised profile. For starters, the Museum has recognized the essential role of the Archives in the institution and highlighted it in its mission statement. In the first paragraph, it clearly notes that sustaining an archives that is recognized as an international center of research is part of the Museum's official mission. Recently, the Museum has taken this commitment and made it manifest, by providing the Museum Archives with an utterly elegant (as well as highly functional) new space.

On the occasion of MoMA's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the institution undertook a major building campaign to expand and create a museum worthy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As part of that process, I was charged with strategically developing the program and the attendant physical spaces of the revamped Archives department. The long planning process (over ten years since I wrote the original needs analysis report to in the end determining the exact position of every last piece of furniture) resulted in a facility which reveals the Museum Archives for the first time for what it is - a professional, internationally-recognized center of research. We are strategically located in the Education and Research Building, adjacent to the curators and next to the library.

The Archives is deeply concerned with security issues. Researchers must have an appointment, check in with the receptionist, and check all coats and bags (including laptop computer cases) in lockers in the lobby. Then they are issued an elevator key card, which will only allow access to the ground floor and the sixth floor, which is where the Archives is located. Once there, they can access the archives reading room only through a separate door. Flanking either side

of the Archives entrance is the workstation for a reference archivist and the private office of the Museum Archivist. A security camera videotapes all activity in the room, and the back door is key card accessible only to archives staff for the delivery of materials to the reading room. In addition, site lines from the reference archivist to the materials on the table are preserved by having the researchers seated in a U-shaped configuration around the sides and back end of the table.

In addition to being secure, the room itself is quite lovely. It features a wall of windows which is level with the neo-gothic stained glass windows of St. Thomas Church. I like to say that our researchers receive “divine inspiration” when they are with us. Also, due to the stunning architecture, the Museum Archives reading room is now a stop of the tour of MoMA given to VIPs.

We also developed a storage area in our new facility. It features two levels of security (electronic key card as well as an old fashioned lock and key) and compact shelving in metal with a powder coating. The environmental conditions remain constant, somewhere around 18 or 19 degrees Celsius with a 35% relative humidity. While this area is designed to our specifications, alas, it is not large enough (as you can imagine how expensive real estate in mid-town Manhattan is). To that end, we also outfitted a sizeable area in the Museum’s art warehouse and study center in Queens for archival collection storage. In order to minimize handling of the materials, researchers must travel to Queens to consult these collections. The good news is that we have room for growth for another 25 years, something that few archival repositories in the United States can claim.

## Advocacy and Visibility of Archives Program

Beyond the new building project, a further testament to the heightened role of the Archives in the institution is evidenced in the following examples.

To commemorate the institution’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I was asked to co-author a history of MoMA, which would be the Museum’s first self-published history. In an effort to elevate recognition of the archives holdings, we conceived of the publication as a documentary, historical records publication project. That is, instead of weaving a narrative of the story of the institution from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, we presented quotes from and facsimiles of original documents in the Archives, to let the primary sources tell the story directly.

Also, the Museum has sought to incorporate archival materials into the public areas of the institution. For example, I have created a permanent installation of photo reproduction enlargements from the photographic archive which illuminate the rich and varied history of the use of the Museum’s beloved sculpture garden. The installation is distinctive because while the viewer contemplates the historical imagery on one wall, he may also turn to the opposite wall’s floor-to-ceiling windows to gaze out onto the actual sculpture garden in use today.

Similarly, we have instigated a series of small, focused exhibitions culled from the Archives. Perhaps the most unique of these was one devoted to the letters of artist James Lee Byars to Museum curator Dorothy C. Miller. Here, the boundaries of art object and archival artifact clearly began to blur.

Finally, we recently began a highly successful collaborative relationship with the Museum's retail team. With them, we developed a line of products that stem from an item in the Archives - a pictogram that was created in 1940 to identify the activities of the Museum's new building. Highly successful, the product line includes a tote bag, a watch, coasters, a mouse pad, pens, packing tape, etc. In addition, the Museum creates an appointment calendar, or agenda, each year with a different theme in relation to the art in the collection. In 2009, for the first time ever, the calendar will feature not art, but items from the Museum Archives.

## Access / Usage

While we have undertaken a plethora of public relation activities, it is important to state that this does not detract from our scholarly activities. On the contrary, our usage has radically increased (over 200%), and we sometimes have a waiting list to get into our reading room which seats twelve researchers. We also sponsor public programs, which take the form of a formal lecture in the Museum's auditorium, and then we adjourn to the Archives to inspect first-hand the relevant archival documentation. In addition, last year, I taught a MoMA adult and academic programs course in the Archives reading room and used archival materials to illuminate all the topics under discussion. Finally, I even have a regular column in *Esopus*, a visual arts magazine, where we publish select archival documents with an article contextualizing them.

## Staff Training

Because the materials we deal with are so specialized and because our researcher population is composed of some of the leading experts in the field, I firmly believe that any staff member of the Museum Archives must be a trained art historian. However, in addition, they must also be trained as an archivist. In the United States, there is a trend of granting archival degrees in library schools, with not enough emphasis on either the unique qualities of archival work nor subject expertise. Similarly, most young art history graduates think that there are only two tracks for an art historian - professor or curator. So we have created a Fellow position (funded by the Dedalus Foundation, which is the estate of artist Robert Motherwell) explicitly to train the next generation of art archivists.

In addition, all professional staff of the department are provided opportunities throughout the year to attend seminars on specific topics in the field of archives. Such courses are routinely offered through the Society of American Archivists, research universities, and even a local professional association, the Archivists Roundtable of Greater New York.

## Conclusion

As we look forward to marking twenty years of existence of the MoMA Archives, we celebrate our past achievements, while at the same time embracing new challenges. We are dedicated to the steady and never-ceasing work of accessioning, arranging and describing archival collections. But we also seek new solutions and new paradigms for preserving our collections and for delivering information about the art of our time.

