

ABSTRACT
Art Framed by Archives:
Building a Special Collections Archive at The Grace Museum

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Although archives and museums may be viewed as institutions that have little to do with each other, both entities acquire and preserve objects of cultural importance and make them accessible to the public. This project focused on the intersection between museum and archival theory and practice through the exercise of setting up a special collections archive at The Grace Museum in Abilene, Texas. The two main goals of the project were to arrange, rehouse, and describe the Clint Hamilton Papers and to draft a processing manual for future special collections archival work. A one-page summary of the project was prepared for the board of The Grace Museum and several presentations were given to staff, board members, and potential researchers from the community. The successes of this project included seeing the recently processed archival materials used in an exhibition, increasing awareness in the community of the value of archival materials, and providing recommendations for future use and development of the archival collection.

Art Framed by Archives:
Building a Special Collections Archive at The Grace Museum

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I. Introduction

The intersection between archives and museums has been one of my interests throughout my time in graduate school and a topic that I have pursued through a poster presentation at a professional conference and through class projects. I knew that I wanted to find a graduate professional project that would connect my museum studies academic training with my interest and hands-on experience with archives. As a graduate assistant at The Texas Collection, a special collections library and archive on the Baylor University campus, I gained experience processing archival collections and working with researchers and other users. I began to make connections between the archival tasks I performed as a graduate assistant and the knowledge I acquired in the classroom in museum studies classes. Thus, when the opportunity arose to work at The Grace Museum to set up a special collections archive for the institution, I knew that it was a great fit for me as well as for The Grace Museum.

II. Site History

Housed in the historic Hotel Grace, The Grace Museum's building itself was vacant in the late 1970s and 80s and fell into disrepair before the Abilene Preservation League and Abilene Fine Art Museum representatives began cooperatively to develop a plan to restore the Hotel Grace as permanent museum facility. The two organizations envisioned an "innovative and remarkable cultural and historical gathering place," that began to take form after a \$4.8 million campaign.

The Grace Museum houses art and history collections that were originally cared for by the Abilene Fine Arts Museum and the Junior League of Abilene. The Abilene Fine Arts Museum began accessioning artwork in 1939 and started actively collecting for the history

component when the Abilene Preservation League and the Abilene Fine Arts Museum issued an announcement to the public asking for historical items in 1977. With the addition of the Children's Museum and the restoration of the Hotel Grace in 1997, all of the major collections and components of The Grace Museum were in place.

Over the years, The Grace's curatorial staff has faced significant and at times daunting challenges regarding collections management but has kept the museum up to AAM (American Alliance of Museum) standards and excelled in building, maintaining, and utilizing its collections, especially its art collection. Also, The Grace has used its collections in addition to loaned art to construct exhibitions that relate to Texas art, history, and science, often by Texas artists. Interpretive wall text, brochures, and active support by gallery docents supplement these exhibitions. The Education Department of The Grace also prepares educational material such as lesson plans, additional images, and discussion questions to use with tour groups of school children and to supplement teachers' in-class instruction of art. Today, the mission of the institution is that "The Grace Museum builds connections through new experiences in art, science and history within the evolving Texas story through exhibitions, programs and collections."

For three semesters (Spring 2011, Fall 2011, and Spring 2012) I worked at The Grace Museum as a Collections Management Intern for the Curatorial Department. As a Collections Management Intern, I assisted the Collections Manager and Preparator with a wide range of projects, including processing and cataloging new acquisitions and loans, adding and updating catalog entries in the Past Perfect database, supporting the installation or deinstallation of temporary exhibits, and aiding with the packing and unpacking of objects.

My first semester as an intern at The Grace was largely spent familiarizing myself with

the museum and its procedures, helping with the installation of a new exhibition, and processing and cataloging a collection given to the Grace Museum, the Clint Hamilton Collection, donated by the Clint Hamilton Foundation. According to the museum's Collections Development Plan, "The Clint Hamilton Collection is composed of the personal archives, mixed media assemblage works, collage work, drawings and prints from the estate of an Abilene native active locally and in New York during the 1950s. The Hamilton Collection also includes the artist's personal collection of works by Andy Warhol, Picasso, Miró and Matisse." I was tasked with assisting the Collections Manager and Preparator in processing the artwork component of the collection and transferring it to the museum. The work involved cataloging, condition reporting, photographing, and appropriately packing the artwork and materials for safe transportation to the museum and supporting the curatorial staff in creating proper storage conditions for the artwork once at the museum. At the time the museum was unsure how to best deal with the personal archives of the Clint Hamilton Collection, so processing that component was deferred until a later date.

III. Project Summary

Several years after I had been an intern at The Grace Museum I met the Chief Curator, Judy Tedford Deaton, at a professional conference and after several conversations, came up with the idea to do a graduate professional project at The Grace Museum setting up a special collections archive. The two main goals of this project were to process the Clint Hamilton Papers and to draft a special collections processing manual for The Grace Museum. First, I would arrange, rehouse, and describe the Clint Hamilton Papers and make recommendations for providing access to the materials. I would then work on drafting an archives processing manual which would describe best practices and take into consideration the unique nature of an archive within a museum. Finally, I would write a one-page executive summary for the museum

describing the archive and making recommendations for future growth, and present my project to various communities of the museum as available.

IV. Project Workflow/Process

a. Processing Clint Hamilton Papers

My first step was the processing of the Clint Hamilton Papers. The Society of American Archivists defines archival processing as: “The arrangement, description, and housing of archival materials for storage and use by patrons.” Because the Clint Hamilton Papers was the first archival collection processed at The Grace Museum, while processing it I also worked to lay the groundwork for future work in the archive. Before I began processing the collection, the archival materials were in various storage containers. Some had been inventoried and assigned numbers, but unfortunately the inventory had been lost. Materials had also been sorted by year. Some of this organization was still present, but for the most part had been lost in a move from an off-site storage facility. The papers included correspondence, exhibition invitations and publications, small pieces of artwork, personal diaries and sketchbooks, biographical materials, some multimedia (including VHS and negatives), and lots of photographs.

One of the first challenges was that I lived about 3 hours from The Grace Museum, however, I had 3 weeks during the summer to work on the project full-time in Abilene. It was thus important that I manage my time well and figure out quickly where to start. I addressed this challenge by doing as much research as I could before I went to The Grace on what steps I would need to take setting up the archive (such as creating a registration system, etc). I also worked to manage my time by keeping a daily journal of the work I had accomplished and what remained to be done.

Another one of my initial challenges was figuring out what the difference between special collections archives and institutional records meant for my project and how it shaped how I thought about the archives. Because I was working with special collections, I was not trying to manage or archive institutional records such as staff files or exhibition materials, or to serve as a records manager for the institution—while all of these things are important, they were not within the scope of my project. Some of the things I did consider that were specific to many of the collections at The Grace Museum included how to work with unique situations found in artists' papers, such as artwork in the archives, and when something merits going to the item-level to describe.

Because I was setting up an archive within the context of an existing institution, the curatorial staff worked with me to help me identify existing resources at the museum that I could use. For example, the collections manager and I identified archival processing supplies the museum already owned that I was able to use. I was able to use the archive module of PastPerfect, the existing collections management database, to create a finding aid.

One of the challenges of creating the finding aid for the Clint Hamilton Papers was researching and finding accurate information on Clint Hamilton's life. Before I began the physical processing, my site supervisor Judy Tedford Deaton and I agreed that it would be important for potential researchers to have access to a timeline of Clint Hamilton's life and a list of exhibitions that he was in. When I began working we had a list of about 15 known exhibitions. By the time I had gotten through the collection we had a list of close to 45 solo and group exhibitions. This additional information changed the prominent portions of the collection and influenced how I wrote the finding aid. Once I was done with the physical processing, the

materials were arranged and rehoused with basic preservation tasks (such as removing staples and sleeving fragile materials) complete. The collection was about 12 linear feet once processed.

I then turned my attention to creating a finding aid for the Clint Hamilton Papers that would also serve as a model for future finding aids. The Society of American Archivists defines a finding aid as: “A tool that facilitates discovery of information within a collection of records,” or “A description of records that gives the repository physical and intellectual control over the materials and that assists users to gain access to and understand the materials.” I chose to create two different formats of the finding aid, using Microsoft Word and PastPerfect. I chose to use Microsoft Word for several reasons. The first was that I had experience creating finding aids in that format. Additionally, while I was processing the Clint Hamilton Papers I was unsure how I wanted to use PastPerfect, and so entering the information into Microsoft Word allowed me avoid the problem of putting information in PastPerfect in a haphazard manner. One of the main goals of the project was also to set up a special collections archive that would be sustainable in the future and would be intern and volunteer friendly. Looking ahead to the future, volunteers and interns who are not familiar with PastPerfect may have an easier learning curve creating a finding aid in Microsoft Word. I did eventually develop a finding aid using the archives module of PastPerfect that meets the needs of the museum. More detail about the process determining how to best use PastPerfect is described in more detail in the next section of this paper.

b. Drafting Processing Manual

A processing manual is a document that outlines policies and procedures for the management, care, and use of archival collections. It helps ensure proper intellectual control and documentation, appropriate physical stabilization and preservation, and helps promote research, exhibition, and other types of use and access. The manual includes processing guidelines,

database instructions, forms, and resources. A processing manual is needed to provide a consistent, high standard for processing and caring for archival collections. Drafting the manual helped ensure the sustainability and continuation of archival work at The Grace Museum after the conclusion of the graduate project to help the curatorial department work on other archival collections already at the museum or any future acquisitions.

One of the first challenges in drafting the processing manual was how to explain archives to museum-oriented people. Museums and archives often use the same word to mean different things, and while both institutions often have similar goals, they may have very different ways of achieving them. One of the main differences I focused on in the manual is that while museums are focused on the item-level, archivists are more concerned with the aggregate and the collection as a whole.

In addition to considering differences between museums and archives in the manual, I also worked to customize it for The Grace Museum. I did so by considering appropriate use of resources such as staff, time, funding sources, and PastPerfect. For staffing considerations I worked on ensuring that if interns or volunteers will be working on projects in the future that the processing manual will provide them with the information they need to know, or direct them to resources that can help them.

Throughout the drafting process I was able to use examples of processing manuals from other institutions. The processing manuals from The Texas Collection and The University of Texas at Arlington were invaluable. I also utilized the excerpts from manuals online through the Society of American Archivist's Museum Section. While these materials were helpful in drafting most of the manual, they were primarily from archival institutions that do not use PastPerfect. The challenge was then to figure out how to build a finding aid in PastPerfect.

As mentioned before, museums are often focused on the item-level while archives are more concerned with the aggregate. Because PastPerfect is a museum-oriented software, even the archive module leans toward item-level description. There were two main reasons that I did not want to describe The Grace Museum special collections on an item level. The first is that, like most institutions, the Grace does not have the time, staffing, or resources required to go through the incredibly labor intensive practice of item-level description for archives. The second reason is that, in the vast majority of situations, going to the item-level does not actually aid the researcher or staff. A finding aid will almost always be enough information to let the researcher know if he/she is interested in the collection, and will likewise help the staff person find materials or answer any reference questions.

I began researching how other institutions were using PastPerfect for museum archives. During my research I came across the manual “‘PastPerfect-ion’: Optimizing PastPerfect for Archival Description,” which was created by Celia Caust-Ellenbogen while working on the Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories, a project of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (Learn more at <http://hsp.org/hcipsar>). In her manual, Caust-Ellenbogen addressed many of the problems I had been having with PastPerfect and provided step-by-step instructions and screenshots to input the collection into PastPerfect. I was able to use the manual to input my Microsoft Word-based finding aid into the Grace PastPerfect database, to ensure that it was indeed a good model for the museum. I contacted Celia Caust-Ellenbogen and received her permission to use excerpts in my manual.

Drafting the special collections processing manual gave me an excellent opportunity to take the time to figure out what archive best practices mean in a museum setting, and to convey

policies and procedures clearly in a written format. I was able to apply my hands-on knowledge about archival practice and learn more about archival theory to successfully draft this manual.

V. Outreach Challenges and Opportunities

While working on the two main components of my project, processing the Clint Hamilton Papers and drafting the processing manual, the question of significance was often on my mind. I asked myself questions such as, what does my work mean for the museum? What does it mean for the broader community? Who should care? Why should they care? And finally, how do I tell them about it?

Some of the challenges with working on raising awareness about the new special collections archive at The Grace Museum were that I was not often on-site in Abilene, there was an inherently limited scope of my graduate project, and, as my advisor pointed out, there is always more one can do on any project. Despite these obstacles, I did have several opportunities to present my project and share about the archives at the Grace.

While I was on-site processing the collection during the summer of 2013, the staff was working on an upcoming exhibition, “On Display: The Art of Clint Hamilton” which was up from October 1, 2013-February 15, 2014. I was able to consult with the curatorial staff and learn some of the themes they were thinking about showcasing, and then share with them what archival materials would support their ideas, and provide suggestions for other routes to go. The curatorial staff found some innovative ways to use the archives in the exhibition. The staff created a slideshow of Clint Hamilton’s pictures from Europe to display by his European art. They also digitized an Andy Warhol cat book and placed the content on an accessible iPad. The challenge of how to display 8-inch by 10-inch photographs of display windows was solved by

digitizing the images and then projecting them on a blank wall in a darkened area of the gallery so it gave the effect of walking by on the street and seeing the window for the first time.

The archives were also used for three participatory activities. In the first, the curatorial staff drew upon Hamilton's interest in collage, and digitized some of the items he did not use for collage that are now in the archives (such as ticket stubs, envelopes, etc) and made magnets out of them. Once placed on a magnet board in the gallery, it provided visitors with an opportunity to create their own collage out of Hamilton's materials. Second, they scanned one of the display windows and removed the mannequins from the image to allow visitors to draw themselves into the picture. The papers were turned into a tablet that could then be torn off and taken home. And finally, they created a response area, where people could write their recollections of Hamilton or let the museum know if they would be interested in doing a more extensive interview about Hamilton.

In conjunction with "On Display," I was able to attend "Speaking of Clint," which was a panel discussion of people who had known Hamilton about his life and his artwork. I spoke briefly at the event about my project and about the Clint Hamilton Papers. The event was extremely well attended and I was able to discuss the archives with several individuals interested in doing research.

The Grace Museum also ran a short article on my project, focusing on the Clint Hamilton Papers and the establishment of a special collections archive, in *Artifacts*, the museum's quarterly publication. While on-site in Abilene during the summer I was also able to meet other institutions in the community to share with them about my project and also to learn more about their archives and discuss possibilities for future collaboration between archives. Specifically, I met with the librarian and archivist at the Old Jail Art Center in Albany, Texas, as well as with

the Associate Dean for Digital Initiatives, Special Collections, and University Archives at Abilene Christian University.

I also presented my project to faculty and staff at Baylor University towards completion of departmental requirements. Finally, I attended a Collections and Exhibition Committee luncheon at the Grace and spoke with the members of the committee about my project and its continuing significance for the institution. I presented my one-page executive summary and answered questions the committee members had and discussed where the project may go in the future.

VII. Significance and Conclusion

This project was a success for The Grace Museum for several reasons. First, the Clint Hamilton Papers are now processed. This includes the physical processing, as well as the intellectual management of the papers, which took form through the finding aid and publicity materials. Second, the institution now has a working draft of the processing manual for special collections. This manual can now be used to begin work on other archival collections, as well as serving as a starting point for developing an institutional records management system. The final success of this project for The Grace Museum is the recommendations for use of the archives. By talking to various audiences of the museum about my project and the archives I worked to raise awareness of what the museum has, and that it is accessible to the public. The museum was also able to already use archival materials as a significant component of the recent exhibition described above, "On Display." Had the Clint Hamilton Papers not been processed, the staff said that they would have been much more unlikely to exhibit the archives.

This project gave me an opportunity to practice my existing archival skills in a new setting and to gain more skills by working through the process of setting up an archive. Because I

was also drafting the processing manual, I was challenged to think beyond archival practice to also consider archival theory—I was compelled to move beyond this is “how” we do something, to really consider “why” we do it a certain way, and if that method is indeed in keeping with best practices for that institution. I also learned the ways in which the fields of archives and museums are similar and yet different, and how to adapt the tools and skills of one field to aid work in the other field. The final success of this project was the networking experience I gained. I had the opportunity to tap into the experiences of others and ask for input and help. This included my existing network as well as new connections, near and far. My sincere thanks to all who enthusiastically supported this project and helped to make it a success for me as a graduate project and also a success for the newly set up special collections archives at The Grace Museum.