

Building the Archives: Collaboration between Artist and Archivist in Collection Development

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Introduction

[Slide 1] Good morning. It is a pleasure to speak to you today. First off, I would like to thank the symposium organizers, funders, and presenters for an excellent symposium. My talk will focus on collaboration between artist and archivist at the University of Regina. This collaboration has been an implicit part of our collection development strategy for many years and today it is being strengthened and affirmed by recent forays by our institution into archival digitization. In our experience artists have, to a far greater degree than any other type of donor, been willing to work extensively with archives to document their art, their processes, and their community. We find that our artist donors have a clear understanding of the historical nature of archives and immediately understand the role of the archives to document the past in all that that implies. I will speak to the development of our collection and our efforts to digitize existing archival records. But first some background on our institution and its connection to the arts.

Background on the University of Regina

The University of Regina, and its predecessor Regina College, have a remarkable visual arts legacy. The first courses in art were

offered in 1916 at the College, then a small residential high school run by the Methodist Church. **[Slide 2]** Annual workshops for artists were initiated in 1955 at Emma Lake in northern Saskatchewan. The workshops were intensive two-week sessions held in the summer and led each year by a different prominent artist from outside the province. Jack Shadbolt led the first workshop. Instructors such as New York art critic Clement Greenberg and artists Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski attracted international attention to the workshops. **[Slide 3]** Minoru Yamasaki, who designed the new Campus of the University of Regina in the early 1960s and who would go on to design such seminal structures as the World Trade Centre here in New York, remarked that when he got off the plane in Regina “all I saw was the thin straight line of the horizon. That and the color of the sky. Nothing else. Then I met with all these vibrant, audacious people – from ministers to officials to educationalist to artists – who so believed in the creation of a haven of beauty and enlightenment on the flat prairies. I was caught up by their enthusiasm and I wanted to help” (Pitsula). In true western fashion, there was a sense of possibility, of new beginnings, and of exuberance that permeated all aspects of life including the arts.

[Slide 4] The workshops were, in part, the inspiration of Kenneth Lochhead, who was only 24 years old when he was appointed as director of the college’s School of Art. His desire was to expose his students to what was going on elsewhere in the broader visual arts community. **[Slide 5]** The Emma Lake workshops gained an international reputation. Attended by students from across North America and Europe, the workshops had a profound impact on those Saskatchewan artists who attended. “There is no question”

Saskatchewan artist Ernest Lindner later wrote, "that the artists' seminars at Emma Lake have caused the most important upsurge of creative work in those who participated. The intimate contact with contemporary New York artists of first rank, and especially with the eminent art critic Clement Greenberg has been simply invaluable to all of us who took part in these seminars" (Johnston).

[Slide 6] In addition to the Emma Lake workshops, Lochhead began assembling a faculty at the School of Art that would make a mark on the Canadian and North American art scenes. This included Ron Bloore, Ted Godwin, Arthur McKay, and Doug Morton. Together with Lochhead they would gain national attention when featured in a 1961 National Gallery of Canada exhibition entitled "Five Painters from Regina". All five were considered to be at the forefront of Canada's modern art movement at that time. Earlier their "Win Hedore" show – which showcased the work of a brilliant but supposedly recluse new artist – caused a sensation when it was discovered that the artist, Win Hedore, was a fiction and that the works were actually created by three of the five. Even *Time* magazine covered the story (*Time*, 17).

Collecting

[Slide 7] When Archives and Special Collections began its visual arts collecting program in 1985 and 1986 the records of the Regina Five were among the first to be acquired. The University Librarian and University Archivist coordinated several significant deposits of records from four of the five – the fifth, Arthur McKay is reputed to have burned his papers. The process of acquisition quickly became a back-and-forth dialogue between the artists and the then University

Archivist as the correspondence in the donor files suggests. Detailed questions about the donation process, the value of certain kinds of records (both monetary and historical), the organization of archives, and the uses to which they are put were raised. These artists, as others afterwards, were keenly aware that they were engaging in a process of documenting themselves for posterity. The correspondence clearly shows that the artists cared about this and developed a trust in the University Archivist to best advise them on archival matters. They became friends exchanging letters and visits long after the donation process was complete. In some instances it seems that my predecessor became their confessor. It must have been difficult for her to convince some artists that all records – not just the flattering ones – were part of the record and served to tell that artist's story. Some materials were undoubtedly culled before transit to archives but others weren't and significant restrictions to use were set – sometimes by the donor, sometimes by the archivist.

[Slide 8] As the collections grew artists began approaching the archives of their own accord. The word was spreading of what the archives was doing and deposited materials were making their way into use by graduate students, curators, documentary film makers, and others with an interest in the history of Saskatchewan art. Artists were referring their colleagues to the archives and soon a network of artists and art galleries were informally advising Archives and Special Collections on how best to document the visual arts community in Saskatchewan. Artist archives from Manitoba, our neighbor province to the east began to make their way to Regina causing so much consternation that questions were raised on the floor of Manitoba's legislative assembly and reported in the newspapers.

Digitization

[Slide 9] More recently, the collaboration between artist and archivist has expanded to the digitization of archival materials. The original concept for this expansion came to us from an art exhibition curator. Terrence Heath is a freelance writer, consultant and curator who, in his past life, was an associate professor of history at the University of Saskatchewan and later director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Completing work on a major retrospective show on Joe Fafard, Heath approached Archives and Special Collections in 2005 proposing that the archives digitize Joe Fafard's extensive slide collection as a step toward creating an online "research center" on the work of Fafard. This online research center would allow for serious scholarship and was envisioned as aggregating the material of archives, galleries, and other institutions and individuals.

[Slide 10] Internationally acclaimed artist and sculptor, Joe Fafard is one of Canada's leading professional visual artists and has exhibitions of a wide variety of work in galleries and museums across the country and around the world. Much of his early sculpture used clay then in 1985 he shifted to bronze as his chief sculptural medium. Successfully establishing a foundry in Pense, a small Saskatchewan town, **[Slide 11]** Fafard portrays his neighbors, farm animals, and famous artists that he came to respect as he learned his craft.

Slides documenting almost his complete body of work from roughly the mid-1980s to 2002 were duly acquired by Archives and Special Collections in 2006 and 2007. Over 3,700 slides were received and organized chronologically by project. **[Slide 12]** Fafard's staff

maintained a series of log books that documented project details such as medium of the work, size, number of castings, and purchase information. While these log books were not part of the archival donation the information in them was recorded by archives staff and formed the basis of the archival finding aid produced for the slides. Archives and Special Collections is a component unit of the Library at the University of Regina, and at roughly the same time that the slides were being described the Library's Access and Systems department began the digitization of the slides.

[Slide 13] High quality master images were created of each slide using a high-end slide scanner and scanning software capable of producing high resolution TIFF format files. Master TIFF files at 4000 dpi were created with smaller derivative JPEG files created for eventual display on the internet (MacDonald).

[Slide 14] Numerous staffing and organizational changes at the Library resulted in the project being placed on the back burner in 2008. It would be almost three years before Archives and Special Collections was again in a position to devote time and attention to the Fafard slide project. But these weren't three wasted years. The University Archivist undertook an educational leave that saw him in Australia learning about digital archives in that country, the Library hired a Digital Collections Administrator with significant technical knowledge appropriate for digitization, and Archives and Special Collections undertook two smaller digitization projects to develop and refine its work processes.

[Slide 15] A significant aspect of that process was an understanding of the importance of the context of the original archival materials and conveying that contextual information as accurately and as completely as possible in the digital world. Archives have long been about “context” and their very methods of organization, description, and access reflect that. In the past decade, however, archives tended to forget this central principle when it came to the new task of digitization. Materials were regularly digitized out of their context and archives routinely failed to refer researchers back to the full body of records. Archives weren’t creating electronic research presentations of archival collections but were developing web resources more akin to an exhibition, highlighting documents that were perceived as interesting or seminal (Vajcner, 2). While interesting, it could be argued that these archival exhibitions were of little use to a serious researcher.

[Slide 16] In his original approach to Archives and Special Collections, Terrence Heath envisioned something significantly more than a web exhibition of Fafard slides. The University Archivist, in his reading, study, and work in Australia had become convinced that a logical way to create digital collections of research value would be to replicate digitally the contextual principles that archives follow with non-digital records. Luckily all the Fafard slides had been scanned in 2006 and 2007 and the contextual information was dutifully recorded by archives staff from the Fafard logbooks. Now the task was to devise a system to attach the contextual information to the digitized slides and to create a web presentation that would provide further background and information on Fafard and his art.

[Slide 17] To this end Archives and Special Collections developed an internal metadata element set for the Fafard slides. This set, based on the elements already used in earlier projects, was supplemented and modified using *Dublin Core*, *PREMIS* a standard for preservation metadata in digital archiving systems, and *Categories for the Description of Works of Art* from the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Our element set combines descriptive elements for the original art object (the sculpture) with descriptive elements for the archival object (the slide) and technical elements about the scanning process and resulting digital files. Specific elements are designed to record contextual information. **[Slide 18]** In addition to obvious elements, such as artwork medium, edition, date and measurement, others provide a short biography of Fafard, a brief custodial history, and lists of further readings and related materials. All metadata elements are linked to the digitized image of the slide they describe in the CONTENTdm application utilized by the project. Some elements are also being embedded directly into the JPEG file of the slide to ensure that it may be contextualized should it be separated from the CONTENTdm application. **[Slide 19]** Thus, even if a researcher downloads a single slide and over time forgets its origins, certain contextual information will be available simply by viewing the file's properties.

As the project website develops, it will contain a series of contextual essays introducing the researcher to the work of Joe Fafard. These essays provide another point at which artist and archivist collaborate. Heath and other art historians and curators have been approached to prepare these essays. Ultimately essays could be available on societal contexts, governmental policy regarding the arts,

art technique and processes, and a whole host of other relevant access points. These essays would prepare the researcher to go beyond the materials to the less visible and complex ideas and trends behind them. A researcher could always go directly to the materials and avoid the essays at will, or choose to read some and ignore others. We are currently also considering audio and video essays where Fafard can speak about his work and processes and even react to how his materials have been archived, digitized and presented.

Future Directions

[Slide 20] The Fafard project has become the nucleus of a broader effort to digitize art archives in Saskatchewan. Funding has recently been provided to the University of Regina Archives and Special Collections by the province and we are now expanding the project to include archival materials from several significant artists that have been active in Saskatchewan since 1950. At this point these additional materials are being selected and scanned by a masters-level art student at the University. This addition to the project will be presented as a digital exhibition rather than as a digital research collection simply because we are not in a position to undertake a comprehensive digitization of these additional artists. Nevertheless the full element set is being used to collect metadata and contextual essays are being planned. We are designing the project to be scalable and hopefully in the future we will be able to digitize more and more materials creating several truly online research collections.

Conclusions

[Slide 21] I hope that what I have presented today shows, in some part, the collaborative approach to building archival collections employed at the University of Regina. We began these collaborations in 1985 with the acquisition of the records of the Regina Five and have continued to the present day. That collaboration was most noticeable in the field of acquisition as artists worked with archivist to ensure that art careers were documented. Later artists began to work with other artists spreading the word of the archives and ensuring that the local arts community was documented.

Today that collaboration is being strengthened and affirmed by the new practice of archival digitization. In the experience of the University of Regina, artists are receptive to the scanning and online presentation of their archives and are becoming involved in explaining and interpreting their works and records. Art historians and curators are stepping forward to interpret these digital archives and are providing context to aid researchers in the impending use of these new digital collections. It promises to be a new and vibrant field of collaboration in building the archives. Thank you.

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