

## Disrupting the Archive and Why it Matters to History

<https://www.artworkarchive.com/blog/disrupting-the-archive-and-why-it-matters-to-history>

### What exactly is an artwork archive?

Traditionally, an archive is a collection of documents or records that provide information. Beyond its basic description, an archive is how we have gone about saving and organizing histories, preserving our pasts, recording our presents, and bringing insights into the future.

An archive can tell us more if we allow it to and if we work to [create archives](#) in ways that are holistic.

A comprehensive archive, or catalog raisonné, includes more than just a record of the artwork itself, however. Archives are often extensive catalogs of photographs, exhibition histories, documents, sketches, purchase records, and sales information. This supporting information can provide a full picture of that artist's life and the time in which they lived. Not only is this a boon historically, but being comprehensive in archiving increases the value of artwork and its market price.

Through archives of an artist's artwork, we are able to gain insights into the artist themselves and the life that they led. We know more about the materials and processes of that time, what that society valued, what was inspiring and new, and what the culture was thinking about on a larger scale.

Essentially, we get [the story](#) behind the artwork.

### How have archives been constructed in the past?

Join us in critically asking how we remember and how we record history through artwork.

By looking through the lens of the “archive” and history-making, we can try to evaluate our present, account for gaps in the past, and begin to investigate alternative ways of writing history.

Traditional archives are not comprehensive. They are incomplete, inaccessible, and fragile.

Traditional archives tell limited stories and preserve select histories. Paper archives are housed in official spaces of authority and power like government buildings—or in an artist's case, a museum. Aside from being limited in their content, these archives are difficult to access and at [risk for damage](#).

By critically asking how and we remember, we can start to understand how stories and histories are lost. We start to see the need for new, innovative ways to digitally construct archives and emphasize the importance for artists to take documentation into their own hands.

## **How are archives changing today?**

Sometimes, even though issues and ideas exist and shape our world, they don't land solidly in our minds until we give them a name.

Phrases like “disrupt the archive” and the focus on “decolonizing,” across all fields, allow us to think more expansively. Just Google “decolonizing”—people are looking to decolonize everything from knowledge, the internet, [museums](#), to faith and the classroom. And that's just on the first page of search results. This phrase, while perhaps separated from its [colonizer and native context](#), is one way in which we are working to understand how positions of power in our histories have shaped our present.

Rethinking and taking authority away from archives and other powered systems helps us organize and unpack historical and contemporary systems of oppression. We can take these new perspectives and work to question our present by better understanding of the past that made it.

The idea of truths existing but not existing openly until being systematized is the premise of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*. This book lays out the four moments of historical documentation—explaining how in each of these moments, histories, truths, and experiences are silenced and persistently forgotten.

These moments outlined in *Silencing the Past* create a framework for calling out moments where histories aren't recorded:

“Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).”

## **Finding the moments of historical silence allow us to write a more complete history**

Trouillot's four moments that create silence build on each other. Silence compounds, until recalling and understanding true historical representation from our present perspective is nearly impossible.

After silence grows through source making, archive assembling, and narrative forming, silence permeates cultural knowledge with the attention we give it in the form of looking back on the past—Trouillot's final moment, retrospective significance.

Retrospective significance manifests in sculptures, monuments, history books in classrooms, and the historical stories that help form identity. It is us looking back from the present to explain the past. With heavy compounded silence, these final narratives are often mythic or inaccurate.

Even though silence is difficult to hear, we need to try to listen for its presence and its weight within our day-to-day lives. If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it hit the ground, did it make a sound? It did.

Here's another common saying—the winning side writes history. While this may be battle specific, it's broadly true.

People in privileged positions, either as the winners in a battle, or more rudimentarily, the people with the social power and education to write and record in the first place, are the ones that create the source material we have today.

### **Identifying moments of historical silence in the arts**

Trouillet's first moment of silencing sources applies to artworks and artists.

Primary materials are first-hand accounts and records made by people who have immediate and intimate connections with a lived experience.

An artist's work is a primary source of their lived experiences.

Who is able to use art to express what they believe? Who has the tools to create and the opportunity to be seen in the first place?

During the boom of Renaissance art-making, [women were silenced](#) in source making. Women were not permitted to draw and study from nude human bodies, join guilds and find artistic support, and were limited in not only their subjects but in medium—smaller scale and more “domestic” mediums like tapestry and weaving.

The artwork from this period that we have and look back on to learn from is generally made by men. What [stories, perspectives, and experiences](#) might have been lost from those aspiring women artists? How can we look to fill gaps where sources don't exist?

**What people compile—and [the compiler's perspective](#)—affect how history is recorded and remembered.**

Source material ends up categorized, grouped, and classified—archived, essentially.

The archivers choose what material stays and goes. Even if there are muffled sounds within the first moment of silencing--moments where a reader or viewer could find the truth within a single-sided account, these sounds are further silenced as source materials are archived and manipulated.

In 1908, Belgium's King Leopold finally handed over Congo, withdrawing from decades of concealed colonial destruction and bloodshed. The furnaces at Leopold's Belgian palace burned for eight days, "turning most of the Congo state records to ash and smoke." This handover was paired with violent restructuring, [an erasing of an archive](#)—an archive that recorded numbers that revealed Belgium's violence in the Congo.

How we [categorize, save, and treat](#) information—source material, has a role in how we interact with and understand it.

### **How “Un-silencing” is Bringing More Women Artists into the Record**

We like to think that artists are harder to silence than history makers. Their primary sources are wilier, their motivations less straightforward to authority.

Judy Chicago was famously dissatisfied with the existing narratives about important female historical figures. She worked to fill the gap in women's representation in historical and cultural knowledge by telling a different narrative in her work, [The Dinner Party](#)—a narrative that [remembers and celebrates](#) the world's great women throughout history.

By seating 39 important women at the table and inscribing another 999 names of significant women in gold on the tile at the base of the work, Judy Chicago puts these thinkers and women of action in dialogue with the vices to tell a female story of impact, power, and innovation.

Other projects by museums have worked to include women in the record retroactively. Whether it's through criticism like the Gorilla Girl's [famous posters](#) about the lack of female representation in the art world, or through more thoughtful exhibiting—we are on the right path.

In an attempt to write a woman into the archive, [Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler recreate Flora Mayo](#), her identity, and her work, to write her into history.

Flora Mayo was a sculptor in her own right but was defined by her relationship as Giacometti's muse and lover. Mayo's life work was destroyed over time as no one sought to preserve it. Her identity was diminished as just a footnote in Giacometti scholarship.

It's unusual to attend an exhibit featuring an artist where there is, in fact, none of that artist's work on display. An exhibit like this asks more of a visitor and think of how we choose to record artistic history.

Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler literally had to recreate Flora Mayo's art. The artists created a bust that they learned Mayo sculpted and then reframe her history through a documentary film for viewers. To follow the metaphor of un-silencing, they voice her source material to bring her back from silence.

The purpose of this exhibit is for its visitors to understand the perspective of Flora Mayo as a prominent artist of her time. Although she was never recorded, and in part because of this lack of documentation, she is worth remembering.

Even if visitors don't get deep into ideas about historical recording or misunderstand the art they are seeing as Flora Mayo's, this exhibit serves its purpose. Flora Mayo is given back her source material that was never recorded and it's available to us—there is sound where there wasn't before in sources and in the archives.

### **How the internet is changing the archive**

We are not only recognizing that archives of the past are incomplete, but we are also working to create new and powerful ways of archiving the present.

The power of online and public tools are allowing us to redefine and create new archives that are inclusive and accessible. New digital archives can generate, crowdsource, and share specific and [previously unrecorded experiences](#) in an official way.

[New digital databases](#) have greater reach and impact than traditional archives.

The advent of the Digital Humanities as a field allows scholars and internet users to newly access and interpret past documents. [Online tools](#) enable us to process text and look for patterns so we can more critically approach the past. As such, there are [countless digital projects](#) that work to expand our relationship to and understanding of the past.

In the spirit of information sharing and in contrast to out-moded traditions of archiving, digital humanities projects and writing are generally free and easily accessible. [Syllabi](#) are made public and writing is public and widely shared. The digital humanist community has become a collaborative and supportive new type of open-source archive.

### **How we can democratize the archive by taking it into our own hands**

Online projects are being used to tell new stories, make information and perspectives accessible, connect and create communities, and to process old histories in new ways.

Online and interactive archives are tools to investigate and write histories that wouldn't otherwise be accounted for.

So, how can you preserve your own artistic legacy?

There has never been a better and easier time in history to create and document yourself.

Whether you are [already established](#), or just starting to professionalize—[the time is now](#). Continue to shake up the idea of a traditional archive and make sure that there are fewer silences within history-making by taking charge of your history and life narrative.

[Artwork Archive](#) is one of the ways you can [preserve your](#) legacy and write yourself into lasting public memory. Your work and your perspective is important, don't let it be silenced or lost.

Accounting for your past and present allows you to not just record yourself, but your documentation expands the larger "archive." Your own [personal legacy](#) adds to the information about artists and art that's out there for people in the future to find and learn about.

With more information available and more information public, we can create a more complete understanding of our own time.