

Why arts archives?

Project Art360

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In our work at [The National Archives](#), we seek to support people and collections across and beyond the archive sector, advising the private and public sectors on how to better care for records and archives.

We aim to identify gaps in knowledge or in collections themselves, and work to remedy these gaps, often focusing on particular themes and areas, most recently with [Archiving the Arts](#). This work aims to support arts archives held in many places, by organisations and individuals. It takes a practical approach, to safeguard and open up collections; encouraging new partnerships to share skills and knowledge. We work on the principle that the more we know about collections, the safer they are — so gathering and sharing knowledge of collections impacts on the wider network of ownership and access of archives and cultural property. We know about the location and nature of archive collections: how they are being cared for, who by, who owns them, and who has rights to access and re-use them.

In this piece, I'm exploring the *value* of arts archives: why should we care and why are they important?

Arts archives are made up of unique original documents, in many formats, from paper to video, sound and digital. They document the activities and decisions of arts practitioners, collectives and organisations.

They could range from the sketchbooks, photographs, and correspondence of an artist, the administrative records of a gallery, to the music manuscripts of a composer, to the video recordings of live art and performance.

They can be held in a range of places, from a university's special collections, by the individual artist or organisation who produced them, to a local or national record office.

Arts archives are valuable, and the wide scope of their subject matter and content makes securing their future all the more vital, especially in light of ever increasing channels for creating and sharing information.

The value of arts archives

What do we mean by value? In this case we're not talking about monetary value, though this becomes an important consideration for artists and estates in seeking to exploit the potential of these archives. We're talking about historical value: what does it tell us, what wouldn't we know if we didn't have this? So historical value translates as significance, both of the creator of the material, and of the information the material contains.

Arts archives provide another story to a completed piece of art, exhibition, event, or organisation — whether that's within painting, sculpture, moving image, concept, text, digital, environmental, live art or performance. Arts archives document the creative process, the business transaction, and why certain decisions were made.

Start by thinking about what arts archives can tell you: think of the activities of a visual artist or creative practitioner; what do they do? What are their activities? These will create records: outputs, traces, whether physical or digital documents. These records will become part of a personal or collective archive. The archive can tell us where an idea came from, what it was based on, could include correspondence with contemporaries, family, business contacts, drafts, sketches, details of materials, exhibitions, technical requirements, decisions. The archive gives an insight into these activities and processes, a behind-the-scenes narrative account of how the artwork came to be, its construction and deconstruction. And like art, this archival narrative may be linear, it may be cyclical, it may or may not make conceptual sense.

It provides a different story to the finished work than the work itself; it is part of and separate to that creative output. This is of value not only to researchers and audiences in a thematic or historical sense, but it is also of value to other creatives and the artist themselves. We draw upon and extend those narratives for inspiration, and as part of our own intellectual and creative activities. An archive can initiate another conversation with the artwork and the activities around it.

We ask the same questions of art as we ask of archives.

What is it? Who made it? What does it tell us? What doesn't it tell us? What questions does it answer? What questions does it ask? What makes it *unique*?

So the value of art archives, for an archivist, researcher, or creator is around what they can tell us, how they can speak to us as texts, material or digital objects — but it's not only about knowing these archives are important, it's about actively valuing them.

Valuing something means that you care about it. Caring about something means you will look after it. If people value their own archives and archives more generally then they are much more likely to be cared for and therefore survive for future use. To make sure archives can be used in the future we need to also think about the care of current records, as these are the raw material to be selected for the future archive. This is particularly pressing for those records in digital and machine readable format, as without actively managing and preserving these types of records they may become unreadable and unusable fairly quickly.

So arts archives have value for research, for revealing another story about an artwork, and also for their potential as inspiration for creative re-use. Actively valuing records and archives means they are more likely to be well-managed, can survive and be used in the future.

Archives help us to explore the *who, how, what, where, when, why* of artistic and business practice. To take the example of a time-based performance, this would include scripts, designs, correspondence, staging, stylistic and technical documentation, music, stage management, light, sound, sketches, research, and effects. The relationship between these documents can tell us more about all of this; archives gain meaning from the relationships between individual items.

The relationship between the creator and the act of creation is crucial to material, conceptual and virtual artworks and archives; the creator and the act of creation. This embraces the thought, idea, decision, the action, the evidence, the trace. Relationships between documents in an archive collection, and across collections can tell us all of this.

We have a rich arts scene in the UK and across the world. We acknowledge that it is under-funded and under-resourced (in many cases). It is the talent, creativity and tenacity of our arts people, groups and organisations that keep this going. Artists and practitioners have to work hard to sustain their work and keep their place in the arts scene. To share this rich legacy, we need strong archives of the arts, to document creative and business processes, to drive inspiration and understanding, and to perpetuate an on-going cycle of work and learning. Arts archives are rich sources, which deserve support and exploration within the wider cultural scene.

Led by [DACs Foundation](#), Art360 will bring together an important partnership of shared expertise between [DACs](#), [The National Archives](#), the [Art Fund](#) and [The Henry Moore Foundation](#). Our involvement in Art 360 will allow us to gather and share knowledge of artists' archives for inspiration and research, and deliver relevant guidance to artists on how to preserve their work for the future

The National Archives are archival partners in the work, providing advice to secure and share archives of UK artists, largely in private collections. This project aims to provide free online access to selected material for researchers and the public, and opportunities for commercial re-use. It is a major outcome of [Archiving the Arts](#) and will contribute to sustainably embedding the work over the next few years.

Working with colleagues and partners through Art360 helps us to reach that vital tranche of individual artists and creatives, to ensure that this work is prized, cared for and shared. As work on Art360 progresses, we look forward to identifying and sharing examples of artists and their unique archival materials that are unearthed in the process to identify, secure and share selected elements of their working process and careers.

Our work on Archiving the Arts has raised questions of archival, artistic and cultural value; and of the relationships between archives and finished artworks. Without the artwork, what is the archive? Without the archive, what does the artwork tell us?

What makes archives different? What makes art different? Is it a sense of purpose, or indeed no purpose, beyond the act of creation itself? That's how the journey of a document begins; it has a purpose to communicate an idea, thought, action, decision. But then it becomes something else when it is selected and becomes part of the archive; it has a purpose beyond the original act which created it.

Though they may appear static, perhaps *controlled, rigid, dull?* with their carefully ordered storage, structures, packaging, and systems, archives are about **activity**: someone did something; it was recorded and documented; it was selected and became part of the archive. So they have been and can be very **active**... And archives are also about **people**, who they were, what they did, what they thought. When we engage with archives, we bring those activities back to life, telling the stories, about people, behind key decisions and their impacts, and behind essentially creative activity; the stories behind the work, the painting, image, sculpture, installation, performance.

Art and archives are vital to our understanding of ourselves and the world; to our quest for knowledge, ideas, expression and action.

We need art as we need archives; we need archives as we need art. They are not created for the same purpose, though they are the result of *activity*. When we engage with art and archives, we once again call those activities into action; call the past into the present and on into the future.

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