

The Archival Principle of Provenance and Its Application to Image Representation Systems

Variouly described as a “powerful guiding principle” (Dearstyne, 1993), and “the only principle” of archival theory (Horsman, 1994), the Principle of Provenance distinguishes the archival profession from other information professions in its focus on a document’s context, use and meaning. This Principle, generally concerned with the origin of records, has three distinct meanings (Bellardo & Bellardo, 1992). First, and generally, it refers to the “office of origin” of records, or that office, administrative entity, person, family, firm, from which records, personal papers or manuscripts originate. Second, it refers to collecting information on successive transfers of ownership or custody of a particular paper or manuscript; and third, it refers to the idea that an archival collection of a given records creator must not be intermingled with those of other records creators. In this sense, the principle is often referred to by the French expression *respect des fonds*. A corollary principle, solemnly entitled, “Principle of the Sanctity of Original Order,” states that records should be kept in the order in which they were originally arranged.

The Principle of Provenance was independently developed by early modern French and Prussian archives managers in the nineteenth century, and had its origins in necessity, both theoretical and practical. Prior to the development of the Principle, archives were arranged and described according to the “principle of pertinence,” where archives were arranged in terms of their subject content regardless of provenance and original order (Gränström, 1994). With the development of state-run archives in France and Prussia, the sheer volume of incoming records made working by this ethic impractical. Furthermore, historians of this era were, as they still are, concerned with objectivity of their original source material. They wanted to be able to establish what really took place, and to do that, they felt that the written sources should be maintained in their original order, and not rearranged. So the Principle met both standards – it was much easier and faster to process collections if there was no need to assign subject headings to each document or fond; and it met the objectivity standards put forth by historians. Related to the historical standards, the Principle of Provenance also held with medieval diplomatic procedures, which were concerned with defining and evaluating records based on their authenticity and evidential, primarily legal, value.

However powerful, objective, and practical the Principle of Provenance might be, there is still a major complexity that bears some examination, namely the organic nature of archives. Peter Horsman has written two articles related to this problem. His essential argument is that an archival source (be it an administration, a person or a family) is a living organism, and its fonds grow and change with it, and there is rarely a time where one absolute, unchanging physical order for its documents exists. Rather, the fonds “are a complicated result of the activities of the creator, political decisions, organizational behavior, record-keeping methods and many other unexpected events” (Horsman, 1994). The traditional inventory or finding aid is simply a snapshot of the records at one distinct moment in time, typically at the end of their useful life, and acts only as evidence that this certain set of inter-related documents were physically gathered together at some defined instant (Horsman, 1999). The real power of an archive, as yet underutilized, is the notion of providing context. Context is a more complicated concept than “original order,” however, and in this case is concerned primarily with describing a continuum of relationships and inter-relationships over time and place. Preserving the physical original order of a fonds, which Horsman defines as the internal application of the Principle of Provenance, is merely a logistical artifact; valuable because it is, at least, “an original administrative artifact,” not defined from outside. To comprehend context, Horsman argues that the archivist not only has to describe and define the structure of the fonds in its series and sub-series, but also to define and describe the relationships between the agency’s characteristics or functions, and the records it has created throughout the range of its existence.

Unlikely though it may be, this idea of providing meaningful contextual information is also a problem being considered by art historians, in a quest to describe works of art from different cultures in significant and equivalent language. The most recent work is being done by David Summers, in his new tome, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (Summers, 2003). Although the two fields, archival science and the history of art might, at first glance, seem to have little in common, on the first page of the introduction, Summers states, “However the discipline of the history of art may have changed over the last few decades of theoretical and critical examination, it has continued to be an archival field, concerned with setting its objects in spatial and temporal order, and with relating them to appropriate documents and archaeological evidence.” In trying to develop a new descriptive language for works of art, Summers focuses on the “organic nature” of the work – concentrating on the overarching

theoretical construct of “facture,” which embodies the idea that the object itself carries some record of its having been made. The value of this physical and format-based characteristic is primary and unassailable.¹ There is an obvious parallel here with the “organic character of records,” discussed by Schellenberg (1961),

“Records that are the product of organic activity have a value that derives from the way they were produced. Since they were created in consequence of the actions to which they relate, they often contain an unconscious and therefore impartial record of the action. Thus the evidence they contain of the actions they record has a peculiar value. It is the quality of this evidence that is our concern here. Records, however, also have a value for the evidence they contain of the actions that resulted in their production. It is the content of the evidence that is our concern here.”

What Summers calls “facture,” and Schellenberg calls “evidential value,” are related, and I think not explicitly spelled out due to the varying nature of their tasks: Summers is presenting a highly theoretical descriptive language for works of art, and Schellenberg, while concerned with theoretical underpinnings, is primarily interested in providing a real framework within which real, physical organizations (namely archives) can arrange and describe their collections.

How does this relate to image content management systems? While Summers’ framework, such as it is,² could be expanded to include descriptive languages for “anything that is made,” it was developed first and foremost for cultural, artistic artifacts. He argues that access to and understanding of artifacts will improve if we could provide more complete information on a given artifact’s facture (Winget, 2003) and provenance. Significantly, Summers is using the term “provenance” in an archival sense – he is concerned with documenting the name of the creator as well as the organization or entity for which the artifact was created, that creator or entity’s functions, relationships, and predecessors; and the artifact’s successive spaces and uses throughout the range of its life. The fact that a Renaissance triptych, for example, started out as a functional devotional device, lost that functionality, was collected by a host of individuals for its monetary or artifactual value, let’s say the last individual to collect the triptych was a German Jew, whose collection was perhaps stolen by the Nazis, and now it resides in an American Museum collection – is all noteworthy and interesting information, and, Summers argues rather forcefully, significantly more valuable than simply providing subject access to that image.

¹ I think it’s relevant here to point out that for Summers, a “work of art” is not limited to traditionally considered art objects. His definition is wider and more inclusive, and consists of “anything that is made.”

² Real Spaces is a nine-hundred-page book. It doesn’t put forth a “framework,” so much as a dense theoretical construct.

Right now, image database managers, after worrying about quality and sustainability issues, seem to be primarily concerned with providing thematic or subject-oriented access to their collections. They are working with the “principle of pertinence,” as it were, and they’re running into the same problems that early-modern archivists had. It takes a very long time to provide robust subject access; it’s not objective, and in worst cases, can hinder retrieval. If they could twist the Principle of Provenance to relate primarily to providing access through description, rather than focusing on its use in arrangement,³ meaningful use of these image collections might rise, and retrieval problems might decline. The people in charge of image content management systems have a unique opportunity to develop a new system based principally on the user – providing facture and provenancial information without the difficulty of keeping a strict hierarchical structure that archives face. What’s more, for artifacts collected by museums at least, most of this information is already available: when acquiring a new work, curators research the artifact’s provenance to ensure that it is authentic and not stolen; conservators keep deliberate records about the format, materials and processes inherent in an artifact, and they furthermore tend to document any changes that happen to the work over time. There are a multitude of administrative attributes that are noted within the course of owning and maintaining culturally significant artifacts. The only problem is that these artifacts aren’t typically considered “important,” and they’re usually in paper form. If they are available digitally, access points are typically not provided (you can’t search on these terms).

Summers’ new framework now gives us the theoretical tools to recognize these attributes’ importance, and the archival profession gives us a practical framework within which to work. Metadata initiatives like the Dublin Core and METS provide specific requirements for collecting information and describing these objects; the CIDOC-CRM provides an ontology that could be used to add semantic meaning (and hence understanding) between disparate attributes within these schemas; and OAIS provides frameworks within which information can be shared across space and disciplines. The pieces are all there. Provenance has proved to be a powerful and uniquely user-centered concept for the archival profession. With the advent of ubiquitous digital technology, which tends to help transfer ideas across traditional professional boundaries, it’s time to expand and translate that notion to other fields for other uses.

³ I say that arrangement is not so important for image database structure because image databases generally don’t rely on hierarchies to the same extent that traditional archives do.

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