

Moving Beyond the Archival Collections Management Status Quo

ARCHIVERA

Success Story

THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON CHALLENGES

- Fast, reliable implementation
- Accessions and records retention tracking
- Ease of use, customizable without relying on IT
- Manage hierarchies and generate Finding Aids

“As a small archives staff of two, we need a system that we can maintain and customize on our own yet has all the functionality we need, out of the box. The customization options and flexibility of ArchivEra are unique; we are able to make it be what we want it to be.”

MARIE WISE

Managing Archivist

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), located in the Houston Museum District, is one of the largest museums in the United States. Its permanent collection spans more than 6,000 years of history with approximately 64,000 works from six continents. The museum’s archives houses more than 100 years of institutional records and associated manuscript collections that chronicle not only the museum’s history, but also the artistic and cultural development of Houston.

Within the archives there are approximately 7,000 linear feet of materials, in 100 different manuscript collections relating to the history of the museum, to significant artists, to families who are part of the museum’s founding and progress, and to the arts in Houston. The staff of two manage the collections and are also responsible for research and reference requests—10% of which take more than 5 days to fulfill and are “intensive”, while 50% of requests take a whole day’s worth of research, with the rest being transactional.

MOVING OUT, MOVING IN, MOVING FORWARD

Part of the push to get a system in place was to manage a move of the complete collection, which was previously spread across two different outside facilities. Getting container level information into ArchivEra quickly and accurately was key to merging the collections and getting them in order for the new facility—with confidence.

Says Managing Archivist Ms. Marie Wise, “Archival collections are very different from museum collections in that they house manuscript and other collections, as opposed to discrete art objects. A museum CMS doesn’t support the unique requirements of archival collections management. We need to describe complete collections, manage accessions, manage hierarchies, manage inventory and shelf locations, and get our finding aids current over time—down to the file level. We also have a records retention program, so tracking functionality is very important.”

Prior to implementing ArchivEra, the archives staff worked (and struggled) with a “hodgepodge” of databases and legacy information repositories. The move to a central location was the motivator to invest in a purpose-built archival collections management system. It needed to be simple and fast to implement, offer complete functionality out of the box (unlike open source software or an “adapted” museum or library system), and easy to learn and maintain, without scripting or coding—and without independence on the IT department.

ArchivEra enabled Ms. Wise and her colleague to harness the collections before the move. They could finally embark on a full-scale inventory, and because all their materials went on to the shelves in collection order, “one tool that captures all our information will be the ‘go-to’ source for anything and everything.”

SERENDIPITY

Per Ms. Wise, not only does ArchivEra fulfill all their known requirements, it has “ended up solving more problems than we set out to!” For example, the archives needed to replace their legacy exhibition database. Using ArchivEra’s templates, they built a new database that is being used internally to organize exhibition-related materials, and will eventually be publicly accessible. When they built a records program database, they ensured they could track destruction dates and easily segregate permanent and temporary record types.

Another advantage of their implementation is that they could pull their media and architecture collections into separate templates, holding the “massive amounts of data that make those collections searchable and accessible” in different databases. The archives’ collections are very diverse, and often complement the museum’s collections. For example, says Ms. Wise, “The archival materials connected with the museum’s Adolpho Leirner Collection of Brazilian Constructive Art are incredibly rich; they document all his research and how he built his significant Latin American collection, which is an important part of the museum’s artwork collection.” It’s critical to have a CMS that accommodates multimedia and contextual materials, and enables archivists to tie everything together and make it accessible.

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICIES AND STRATEGIES

ArchivEra has really improved productivity, with significant workflow time savings, and findability, with federated search that allows users to search all their databases at once.

Summer intern productivity is significantly increased as well; it was easy to train the intern who was helping to organize their hierarchies during implementation and preparation for their move. Going forward, it’s great to be confident that interns or temporary staff can get up to speed with ArchivEra very quickly.

Demonstrating productivity, impact and value is much easier with ArchivEra as well. Ms. Wise confirmed that they use it for tracking reference statistics and open requests. With the data captured in the CMS, they can understand the quantity of requests, their difficulty, the length of time it takes to fulfill them, and which collections are being used (or not used). Assumptions about what engages people aren’t always accurate, but with ArchivEra they have an “ongoing digital record” that gives a real sense of what collections people care about. That can inform both collecting policy and exhibition strategy.

TOGETHER IS BETTER

The relationship between Lucidea’s Client Services Team and the MFAH Archives is a real partnership, says Ms. Wise. “Working with them during implementation was ‘easy and fluid’, and because they’re invested in our success and interested in our challenges, led to moments of serendipity that caused me to say “Wow, I can use ArchivEra to solve that *other* problem!” With ArchivEra, the MFAH Archives has certainly moved beyond the status quo.



ABOUT LUCIDEA

Lucidea provides unrivaled archival collections management software, with innovative tools based on observing archives of all sizes for 25 years. Lucidea’s powerful web-based CMS, ArchivEra, is purpose-built, enabling archives large, small, or middling to describe and provide access to historical materials, save time and resources, and adhere to archival standards.

To learn more about ArchivEra and how it can help solve your archival collections management challenges, visit lucidea.com/archivera

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