

Preserving cultural narratives: the quest for museum archives in the Netherlands

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The current situation in Dutch museum archives is heavily influenced by developments in the museum sector in recent decades. The privatization of Dutch museums in the 1990s and the subsequent variations in legal character among these institutions has resulted in inconsistent management structures and inexplicit legal obligations, which have slowed the development of a cohesive approach to the management of museum archives in the Netherlands. Research conducted by Roosmarijn Ubink into the current state of information and archive management in the Dutch museum sector has revealed a structural lack of resources and frameworks for the management of museums' institutional archives. Beginning in 2022, museum archivists and information professionals in the Netherlands have come together to respond to this situation.

In his inaugural lecture on the occasion of his appointment as endowed professor of Dutch Cultural History, Willem Hupperetz, former director of the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam, stated that a museum,

...is a medium that is used to get a grip on the reality that surrounds us. Museums are a cultural player in this modern society. From the modernist point of view, this is about objective knowledge that is presented from an authoritative, respected and trust-inspiring position on the basis of museum collections.¹

As the custodians of cultural heritage collections, museums play a role in the construction of cultural memory. In the forming of the collection and engagement with their communities, museums are simultaneous producers and products of their environment. For better or worse, museums reflect their cultural moment: choices regarding acquisitions, exhibition topics, and even language used in wall texts can be interpreted in light of contemporary social, cultural, and political norms. Such choices have, for example, historically led to the underrepresentation of certain groups such as women, people of color, and the LGBTQIA+ community in museum collections and projects.

Within the museum, institutional archives contain valuable insights into the collection itself, acquisition decisions and conditions, educational programming, and exhibitions, as well as past policies and policy changes. They are not only practical sources of information for the successful functioning of the museum, but also serve as historical records for researchers and the public.

In practice, however, museum archives in the Netherlands do not always meet this need. Hupperetz observed that the memory of museums is often inaccessible, and that the motives behind the acquisition of collections and presentation are not fully recorded or preserved:

But how strong is that memory of a museum collection? How often do we hear that it is linked to curators who are far from able or willing to record everything they know about a collection. And how strong is institutional memory, and what is and is not archived? As good as the collection is often scientifically described, we know very little about the substantive motivations for acquiring or presenting collections. What motives did a curator have for promoting a

1. Wilhelmus Michaël Hupperetz, "Het Museum Als Medium van Het Geheugen: Over de Biografie van Erfgoedcollecties" (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2017), 4, https://research.vu.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/14266429/Oratie_Hupperetz_W.pdf.

particular object to a top piece, or why did another object disappear into storage for years?²

Hupperetz singles out here the museum archive as the holder of institutional memory. Indeed, the information he alludes to can reasonably be expected to be present in the archives of the museums. After all, unlike in publications and annual reports, it is the internal discussions and decision-making which are recorded in the archive—in documents which do not take into account the eyes of the outsider or the funder. In this way, archival records provide insight into internal and external forces, shifting collection policy, changes in leadership, and financial developments. Such insight is critical for understanding context.

Visibility and accessibility

By the end of 2019, the total museum collection in the Netherlands comprised slightly over 78 million objects registered in collection systems. Of these, 65% had been digitized, with 34% accessible online.³ As Hupperetz points out, these collections are well-researched and described: online visitors are provided with an image of the object and practical information, such as the name of the sub-collection, creator, date, material, and inventory number. Some museums opt to provide additional context, including more extensive background information about the object and related items from the collection. However, entry points for further research—such as the circumstances and decision-making surrounding acquisition, as described by Hupperetz—are absent. At the majority of collecting institutions in the Netherlands, the museum archive itself remains inscrutable for the researcher; archival inventories, summaries, and policies are conspicuously lacking.

This inaccessibility of museum archives is in stark contrast to peer institutions elsewhere, namely those in Anglo-Saxon countries, where attention is more commonly paid not only to the development and management of institutional archives themselves but also to accessibility and reference services.

In order to understand the unique situation of Dutch museum archives, it is necessary to understand the development of the Dutch museum sector.

Privatization of national museums in the Netherlands

Prior to the 1990s, the majority of Dutch museums were governmental entities—in other words, national and municipal museums. The government held full responsibility for all museum activities, including security, finance, business operations, and the preservation and maintenance of collections. The archives of museums were considered public records, and museums were required to comply with the Archives Act (*archiefwet*).⁴

With the publication of the Act on the Privatization of State Museum Services (*wet verzelfstandiging rijksmuseumse diensten*) in 1993,⁵ museum foundations became the legal successors to the national museums and their services, subsidized by the government and supervised by the Cultural Property Inspectorate (*Inspectie Cultuurbezit*).⁶ The government remained the owner of museum buildings and collections.

While the privatization increased the efficiency and independence of the Dutch museums—making them leaner and more businesslike, and less beholden to the machinations of government bureaucracy—the subsequent legal status of museum archives and museums' obligations around archiving have not always been clear. Since the privatization, the former national museums are no longer bound by the Archives Act, which applies only to, "an organ of a legal person established under public law; any other person or body vested with any public authority."⁷ Since the privatization, museums are still largely financed in the form of government subsidies, thus forming a social domain that lies between private initiative and dependence on the government. However, a subsidy relationship does not make an institution a public entity and the museums are no longer beholden to the Archives Act for this purpose.

At the same time, the collections which these museums care for fall under the ownership of the state. Museums are therefore bound by the Cultural Heritage Act (*erfgoedwet*) and legally required to keep adequate records with regard to the collection.⁸

This is not to say that museums do not comply with their legal responsibilities, but that the trajectory of former state museums following the privatization has led

2. *Ibid.*, 22.

3. "Museale Objecten," Erfgoed Monitor, Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur, en Wetenschap, accessed November 2020, <https://erfgoedmonitor.cultureelerfgoed.nl/mosaic/dashboard/museumcollecties-en-objecten>.

4. "Archiefwet" (28 April 1995), <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0007376/2022-05-01>.

5. "Wet Verzelfstandiging Rijksmuseumse Diensten" (24 June 1993), <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/stb-1993-398.pdf>.

6. That is, until it was merged in 2005 with de Rijksinspectie voor de Archeologie, de Rijksarchiefinspectie, en de Rijksinspectie Monumentenzorg to form the Inspectie Overheidsinformatie en Erfgoed.

7. "Archiefwet," article 1.

8. "Erfgoedwet" (9 December 2016), <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0037521/2024-01-01>.

to an ambiguous situation around museum archives as a whole. Museums are no longer obligated to comply with archival legal obligations for the preservation and accessibility of information from a cultural-historical point of view. The core business of the museum—and their legal obligation according to the Cultural Heritage Act—is to manage and present the collection. The question of whether time and money should be invested in organizing and making an archive accessible to the public then becomes a pragmatic one.

Museums and (the idea of) the archive

In addition to the lack of an obligation for institution-wide archiving, there is also some confusion in the museum field about what museum archives *are*. When referring to archives in museums, there is a tendency in the Dutch professional literature to lump a range of collections and systems under the name of “archives.” For example: collection management systems in which the museum’s (object) collections are documented; or the archives of third parties included in the collection; or the act of making the collections digitally accessible to the public. In publications where “archiving” and “museums” are mentioned, the subject matter often focuses on collaboration between institutions or digital accessibility.

Many museums have portals available online which allow users to browse past exhibitions—often named the (online) “Exhibition Archive”. At the Centraal Museum Utrecht, for example, visitors can look at exhibitions online as far back as 2007.⁹ Each exhibition is provided with a plethora of visual material in order to provide the viewer with an impression of what the exhibition looked like. Visual material is supplemented with an exhibition concept, a list of which objects were on display, and the name of the designer. Some museums offer a more extensive experience. The Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, for example, offers access to the Management and Exhibition Archive via their online media bank. This gives the user the opportunity to view a press release, poster, leaflet or other archive document from the museum’s archive. In addition, a large part of the museum’s management archive is available digitally. Similarly, the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden has made it possible to consult correspondence and a selection of other documents from the museum’s foundation, dating from 1818 to 1923, via an online archive portal.

While such online exhibition archives are excellent initiatives, they show only selections of resources and are lacking in references to the rest of the institutional archive. Online exhibition ‘archives’ leave little possibility for further engagement with the institutional archive for the researcher who is interested in the decision-making and production-forming elements of the exhibition. Such online exhibition archives reflect the final product rather than the context and process. They are not sufficient as a complete source if a visitor or researcher wants to know about the context, why an object was collected, displayed, or researched the exhibition history or an art movement.

Research

Such shortcomings in the area of museum archives seem to have their roots in the privatization and a subsequent lack of attention. Research conducted by Roosmarijn Ubink in 2021 makes it clear that the importance of museum archives is recognized by cultural heritage professionals, however she also observed that this recognition is not yet sufficiently translated into policy in the field of museum information and archive management.¹⁰ The research also makes it clear why attention and policy are lacking: museums do not have sufficient knowledge; museums are—out of necessity—not investing or investing too little in their information and archive management; and museums do not sufficiently focus on creating the internal awareness that is needed to nourish and safeguard the museum’s memory. Digital information and formats, including e-mail and special file formats, pose additional risks to the sustainable management and accessibility of the archives of the future.

Furthermore, the study shows that, with some exceptions, Dutch museums do not have dedicated guidelines and procedures. The requirement for management and preservation of museum archives is not part of policy or assessment frameworks such as the Dutch museum standard (*Museumnorm*).¹¹ Neither the Museum Association (*Museumvereniging*) nor the Royal Society for the Archives

9. “Tentoonstellingsarchief,” Centraal Museum Utrecht, accessed 26 april 2024, <https://www.centraalmuseum.nl/nl/ontdek/tentoonstellingsarchief>.

10. Roosmarijn Ubink, “Museumarchieven” (Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2022).

11. Museum Vereniging, *Museumnorm*, 2020, <https://www.museumregisternederland.nl/Portals/0/Museumnorm%202020.pdf>.

of the Netherlands (*Koninklijke Vereniging Archiefsector Nederland*) have drawn up any guidelines for museum archives. An exception to this is the Basic Selection Document (BSD) for National Museum Institutions (*BSD Rijksmuseum instellingen*),¹² which is based on the basic selection document of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and was developed in response to the privatization of the state museums. The BSD provides museums with guidance regarding records retention periods and archival transfer. However, museums report that this document does not suffice and, after investigation, does not sufficiently take into account the specific tasks of museums and the importance of archiving work processes.¹³

The Knowledge Institute for Culture and Digital Transformation (*Kennisinstituut Cultuur & Digitale Transformatie*), a government-funded organization which supports the cultural sector in their digital transformation, points out in its 2021–2024 policy plan that cultural institutions are insufficiently aware of the importance of archiving processes in ways which can be reconstituted later.¹⁴

Initiatives

In recent years there has been a growing awareness within the Dutch museum sector of the importance, function, and accessibility of museum archives. A development in this regard is the establishment of the Taskforce Museumarchieven (*Samenwerking Museumarchieven*), of which the authors are members.¹⁵ The taskforce is a partnership of more than a dozen museum professionals and archivists, who are committed to raising awareness and sharing knowledge in the field of information management and archiving in museums.

In June 2021, on the initiative of Roosmarijn Ubink and Maarten Heerlien, among others, a nationwide online symposium on museum archives took place in which many museums and archive institutions participated. During this symposium, participants indicated that Dutch museums still pay too little attention to the importance of their own information management and archiving. Even in institutions where attention is paid to archiving, there is a lack of tools and guidelines to use this information effectively. There are two explanations for this, which were widely recognized by the attendees:

1. Museums are still insufficiently aware of the importance of good archiving. There is a need for capacity, knowledge, instruments and clear frameworks on the basis of which they should organize their (digital) information management and archives.
2. Since the privatization of the state museums, the Archives Act (*archiefwet*) and the resulting selection lists no longer apply. A replacement framework for design and management with associated management tools has never been drawn up for paper archives, much less for digital archives and information.

Following the first symposium, the Museum Archives Taskforce was established. The goals of this Taskforce are: to address the various needs in the field of museum archives; to exchange knowledge at an operational level; to jointly develop practical tools for the sector; and to adopt a coordinated attitude towards decision-makers, partner organizations outside the museum sector, and the market. Experiences were shared in a second symposium,¹⁶ which took place in May of 2022.

In 2022, with financial support from the Digital Heritage Network (*Netwerk Digitaal Erfgoed*), the Museum Archives Taskforce commissioned and supervised a case study of four Dutch museum archives. This research included municipal as well as privatized state museums.¹⁷ In a series of conversations, information specialists and/or their managers gave an insight into the challenges they face and the way in which they tackle them.¹⁸

In facing these structural challenges, cooperation is of great importance. There are, for example, various guidelines that can be used by Dutch museums when setting up and managing a museum archive. The Archives of American Art organized a conference on museum archives as early as 1979, and the resulting Draft Guidelines served as a foundation for museums to establish their archiving programs. Archivists William Deiss and, later, Deborah Wythe have made important contributions by providing practical guidance and basic knowledge of archival principles to museum professionals in the handbook *Museum Archives: an Introduction*.¹⁹ The recent SAA publication *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues,*

12. Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, *Basis Selectie Document van de Rijksmuseum Instellingen 1946–1995*, 2014, <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/archiveren/kennisbank/bsd-rijksmuseum-instellingen1946-1995>.

13. Ubink, “Museumarchieven”, 69–72.

14. “Beleidsplan 2021–2024,” Kennisinstituut Cultuur & Digitale Transformatie, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://www.den.nl/over-ons>.

15. The Taskforce was co-founded by Roosmarijn Ubink, Michiel Goosen serves as Chairman, and Courtney Lynch is a member.

16. “Museumarchieven: Symposium over informatie-huishouding en archivering in musea,” Rijksmuseum, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/zien-en-doen/lezingen-symposia/museumarchieven>.

17. The following museums were included in this case study: the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterloo, the National Museum of World Cultures (with branches in Amsterdam, Berg en Dal, Leiden, and Rotterdam) and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

18. Margreet Windhorst, *Bijzaak van Belang: Musea en hun archieven*, (2022).

19. William A. Deiss, *Museum Archives: An Introduction* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984) and Deborah Wythe, ed., *Museum Archives: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004).

Advocacy provides an update.²⁰ In Spain, best practices have been developed for archiving exhibitions,²¹ while Dutch studies such as *Documenting Curatorial Practices in Dutch Art Museums* emphasized methods to better preserve information from exhibitions.²²

The guidelines of the Society of American Archivists²³ can also serve as the basis for a translation, or rather a derivative version, for Dutch museums. In addition, the Basic Selection Document of the National Museum Institutions, in combination with the Belgian Archive Selection List,²⁴ and the checklists of Esner and Konijn²⁵ and MACBA,²⁶ can serve as a starting point for the preparation of a new basic selection document.

Going forward, the Museum Archives Taskforce will build on the results of the two symposia and work on important observations and recommendations from the studies. It is clear that there is some overlap in the scope of the Museum Archives Taskforce and other museum partnerships active in the Netherlands, such as the Museum Association (*Museumvereniging*),²⁷ the Digital Heritage Network (*Netwerk Digitaal Erfgoed*),²⁸ the Knowledge Platform Information and Archive (*Kennisplatform Informatie en Archief* or KIA),²⁹ and the Royal Society for the Archives of the Netherlands (*Koninklijke Vereniging Archiefsector Nederland*).³⁰ In light of their mutual interests, the need for collaboration between the museum and archive fields is abundantly clear. In 2024, the Museum Archives Taskforce will transfer its platform to KIA to provide a more centralized location for knowledge sharing around the management and accessibility of museum archives. A centralized platform serves as a valuable tool for the Museum Archives Taskforce to communicate its activities and invite feedback from stakeholders.

Further activities of the Taskforce Museum archives include the organization of professional workshops and symposia, as well as the development and exchange of best practices—including basic selection criteria and retention schedules templates, guides and working methods for the management of archives, and resources for practitioners regarding available archival systems and technological integration.

Conclusion

It is clear that, among professionals who work closely with cultural heritage collections at the former state museums in the Netherlands, the importance of well-kept archives is recognized. Working to translate this into policy in the field of museum information and archive management is the next step. Because a museum archive is not just about the collection—it is also about the museum itself, its history, and its impact. Special thanks to Courtney Lynch, Information Specialist at the Van Gogh Museum, for her translations and real valuable editorial contribution.

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20. Rachel Chatalbash, Susan Hernandez, and Megan Schwenke, eds., *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2022).

21. Maite Muñoz, Marta Vega, and Núria Gallissà, *Folding the Exhibition* (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2014).

22. Rachel Esner and Fieke Konijn, *Documenting Curatorial Practices in Dutch Art Museums, 1945-Today* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, 2020), <https://www.boijmans.nl/collectie/onderzoek/documenting-curatorial-practices-in-dutch-art-museums-1945-today>.

23. "Museum Archives Guidelines," Museum Archives Section Steering Committee, Society of American Archivists, last modified February 2022, <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/museum-archives-section/museum-archives-guidelines>.

24. Geert Leloup and Montens Valérie, "Instellingsarchief van de Koninklijke Musea Voor Kunst En Geschiedenis En Archieven van Er Gevestigde Vzw's: Archiefselectielijst." (Brussels: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 2008).

25. Esner and Konijn, "Documenting Curatorial Practices in Dutch Art Museums."

26. Muñoz, Vega, and Gallissà, "Folding the Exhibition."

27. Museum Vereniging, <https://museumvereniging.nl/>.

28. Netwerk Digitaal Erfgoed, <https://netwerkdigitaalerfgoed.nl/>.

29. Kennisnetwerk Informatie en Archief, <https://kiacommunity.nl/welcome/>.

30. Koninklijke Vereniging Archiefsector Nederland, <https://www.kvan.nl/>.