



# J. Paul Getty Trust Institutional Archives

## Appraisal Principles

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SAA Museum Archives Section Working Group Example



## Archival Appraisal at the Getty

Paper and electronic records are created at the J. Paul Getty Trust for identifiable business or administrative purposes. The majority of these records can be disposed of once that purpose has been fulfilled and all legal and accountability requirements for their retention have been met, in accordance with the records retention schedule. There are some records, however, that have enduring value to the Trust due to the purpose for which they were created, the activity they document, and/or the information they contain. One of the most critical tasks of the Getty Institutional Archives is to identify these records of enduring value through the process of appraisal, in conjunction with the Archives Collection Policy, and preserve the legacy of the Getty.

Institutional Archives staff engages in the following activities to promote successful and consistent appraisal decisions:

- works with departments/programs to gather the information needed to make informed appraisal decisions,
- selects appropriate records for archival preservation;
- documents the selection of archival records.

## The Core Collection

The purpose of the Institutional Archives is to select, preserve, and make available the permanently valuable institutional records, in all media formats, of past, current, and future programmatic units of the Trust, including the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Conservation Institute, the Education Institute, the Information Institute, the Leadership Institute, the Research Institute, and the Foundation. It fulfills the same functions for all the administrative units of the Trust, including the Board of Trustees, Executive Leadership, Legal Finance and Investments, Human Resources, Facilities, Publications, Information Technology Services, and Communications.

The Institutional Archives gives priority to records that document the following broad areas of activity:

- Acquiring, exhibiting, and conserving museum and research collections
- Conducting and supporting advanced scholarship and research in the visual arts and conserving cultural heritage
- Interpreting collections, diffusing knowledge, promoting learning, and facilitating access to visual art and information about it
- Providing service and financial support to the field
- Fostering collaboration and partnerships
- Developing standards and best practices in managing cultural heritage assets
- Assuring institutional continuity



In addition to making available the permanent records of the Trust, the Archives will also collect and make available other evidence of the organization's accomplishments and activities:

- Getty publications (books, ephemera, press releases, etc.)
- Documentation of the Getty's building projects and public programming
- By-products of documentary projects such as *Concert of Wills* and *Art Works*
- Selected three-dimensional artifacts
- Papers related to important Getty-sponsored external projects
- Getty-related papers of former Trustees
- Press and media coverage of Getty programs and events

The following lower priority items may be collected as time and resources permit:

- Material related to J. Paul Getty's life as it intersected with the founding of the Museum
- Material documenting employee life at the Getty

## Sources of Archival Records

To meet the goals of the collection policy, the Institutional Archives acquires records from the following internal sources, usually in conjunction with the Getty Records Retention Schedule: staff members, departments, programs, and other administrative areas. The Archives will also accumulate material through donations of private papers relating to the Getty and its activities by founders, donors, former staff and their family members, collaborators, and contractors. In a few exceptional cases the Archives may assemble artificial collections from diverse sources.

## Records Retention Schedule

When records with potential long-term value come to the end of their retention they must be appraised by an archivist to determine if they have archival value. Records that are determined to have archival value must be transferred to the Institutional Archives for long-term preservation; records that are appraised as non-archival must be appropriately destroyed. The staff of the Institutional Records and Archives Department will undertake the appraisal process and make all final appraisal decisions. Under no circumstances should Getty staff be allowed to destroy records until the appraisal process has been completed.

## Materials Acquired from External Sources

Materials acquired from external sources should undergo the same appraisal process used for internal accessions. Initial appraisal must happen before the collection is accepted and accessioned. Ideally the initial appraisal will occur "in situ" or after the collection has been received by the Getty "on approval." The terms of the acquisition



should be formalized in a deed of gift. The deed of gift stipulates the disposition of materials that are not accessioned.

## Information Gathering

As a part of the appraisal process, the Institutional Archives works with departments/programs to gather the information necessary to make informed appraisal decisions. A primary sources of information will derive from conversations with the Getty staff who create and maintain the records and from documentation already in the archives holdings.

The significance of the functions and activities performed by the originating department or individual and the context within which the records were created are extremely important considerations. In order to make better-informed appraisal decisions, the context in which the records were created needs to be understood. For example:

- How, why and by whom were the records created?
- How did their creators use them?
- What functions and processes did they support?
- If these functions or activities were related significantly to organizational mission, which particular aspects need to be documented?

The following additional information should be gathered for use in descriptive information fields with the resulting finding aids:

- The establishment and history of the department
- Information about the administrative level of the office and its internal organization over time; its location in the decision-making hierarchy (generally, the higher the office the more unique the records).
- Duties and activities of the office and their impact on the mission, policies, and functions of the agency or organization.
- Descriptions/lists of the records created in the course of fulfilling assigned duties
- Evolution of department responsibilities and how the changes are reflected in the resulting records
- Major goals and accomplishments of the department
- Laws and/or regulations which govern the activities and/or recordkeeping of the department

## Selection Process

### Determination of Archival Value

The reasons for creating records are not necessarily the same as the reasons for keeping them for posterity. When appraising records, their full 'value' or 'significance' should be considered, including their value for purposes other than those for which they were created, since only some of the uses of a record may have been relevant or apparent at the time it was created or used. Records of the highest archival value are those that are



most capable of documenting continuity, change, and/or development over time, particularly when they provide a comprehensive documentary memory of what has transpired. At the end of active life, potentially archival records need to be evaluated on the basis of the evidence they provide and the information they contain in relation to:

- The functions and activities of their creating department and program and the purpose of the records in fulfilling those functions and activities
- Factors concerning the organization which may be incidental to the records' original functions and purposes, e.g. records containing significant evidence about how the organization was created, how it developed, how it is organized, what functions it performs, the consequences of its activities, etc.
- Other factors which are incidental to the records' original functions that may be of interest to researchers, e.g. records relating to significant persons, subjects, events, ideas, etc.
- The extent to which the records provide a reliable source of information for researchers either in a single subject area or across a broad research field

By examining these "values" and assessing their levels of importance, it is possible to determine which records should be retained in the Institutional Archives. This process helps to ensure that only the most relevant material is selected for the Archives.

**Note: There must always be a clear and justifiable reason why the records have been deemed worthy of preservation, and therefore merit investment in their long-term preservation and care. The Archives should never be used as a "dumping ground" for items that happen to be old, are being kept "just in case," or are being maintained solely for the reason that they were expensive to create or acquire in the first place.**

### **General Appraisal Methodology**

In appraising records to decide whether or not they have archival value, the following guidelines should be followed. Appraisal is not a science, so applying the guidelines to specific records should not be a mechanical process akin to adding up points or checking boxes. However, use of these guidelines will help with the decision-making process and should result in more consistent appraisal judgments.

If a record is deemed to have significant "value," one is obliged to ask: to whom, using what criteria, and why? The following appraisal criteria are suggested as a means of practically identifying those records that have the highest archival value. When developing appraisal recommendations the following criteria should always be addressed. The questions need to be considered together, rather than in isolation.

The aim of the Archives is to identify and select records that collectively build a comprehensive but compact picture of the institution over time by selecting records that provide answers to the following types of questions:

- What did the institution achieve?
- What were its goals?



- What did it do to accomplish these goals?
- Why did it do it in a particular way?
- When, where, and how did it do it?
- Who did it employ to do it?
- What resources did it bring to bear?
- What were the results of its actions?
- How successful was it and what impact did it have - locally, nationally, internationally?
- What was its relationship to the outside world?

## Appraisal Criteria

### 1) How significant is the source and context of the records?

The source and context of the records must be related to the strategic framework and objectives of the organization in order to determine which records adequately and appropriately document the Getty's key functions and activities. Consideration should be given to the following factors:

- The location of the department, individual, etc. within the decision making process
- The creator's degree of influence and impact on the mission, policies and functions of the organization
- The extent to which the Creator's work is illustrative of how the organization conducts its key business

The Institutional Archives operates on the basis that the substantive or mandated functions performed by departments (i.e., those that they were established to perform) generally generate records of greater archival value than other more "ancillary" functions. We do not forget, however, that mandates evolve over time. Nor do we overlook the fact that though the records created by 'higher level' offices and employees are often considered to be of greater value, those generated at all levels may possess a unique perspective not documented elsewhere. It is also important to identify other narratives existing within the records in order to leave for posterity competing 'truths' about the past for researchers to weigh, rather than just preserving the dominant, official, or prevailing voices. Great care should be taken to ensure such material is not overlooked when making appraisal decisions.

Questions to be asked of the records, therefore, can include:

- In general, how well do the records document the development and activities of the office or department that created them?
- Is the office or department from which the records were obtained the creator of the records?
- Do the records cover a wide range of subject areas or one particular subject?
- Do the records contain information about important periods in the development of the office or department?



- Are the interests, values, and experiences of the individuals involved in the development of the office or department documented in the records?

## 2) What is the informational or evidential content of the records?

All archival records, at a minimum, should have informational and/or evidential value. Records with evidential value are those records necessary to document the existence, organization, functioning, and achievements of organizations or institutions. Such records are useful for ensuring factual accountability within organizations and for writing organizational administrative histories. To provide this evidence, an Archivist should preserve records detailing the origins and the substantive programs of each entity. In this regard, according to Gregory S. Hunter, there is an important distinction between "substantive" and "facilitative" records. Substantive records are just what the name implies: the substance or core of the department's function and may include documentation for the development and execution of major programs, including such items as summary narrative accounts, policy documents, publications and publicity materials, and internal management records. Facilitative records are those supporting records necessary to carry out the main activity (scheduling, draft budgets, logistics, editorial work, etc.). Most modern records fall into the facilitative category and are of short-term value.

The usefulness or significance of records that have informational value is based on their content, independent of any intrinsic or evidential value; instead of focusing on evidence about the organization itself, one considers the extent to which the records are useful for researching people, significant historical events, and social developments. For example, the audiotapes of a two-day symposium about newly developed conservation techniques are an example of a record retained for its informational value. The unique information contained on the recordings is of primary research value to conservators and is directly related to the Getty's mission. Their evidential value as documentation of a Getty public event is (arguably) of secondary importance.

Questions to be asked of the records, therefore, can include:

- Is the information in the records detailed or general?
- Do the records contain significant details about how the Getty functions?
- To what extent do the records provide evidence of the organization, policies, activities and administrative structure of the Getty?
- Do the records contain significant information about people, events, trends, and topics related to the history of the Getty or of research value to the core Getty constituency?
- Are the interests, values, and experiences of a particular segment of the Getty community well-represented in the records?
- Do the records contain significant information by or about individuals of local, national, or international importance?
- Are significant local, national or international events, trends, and topics described?
- Are the records of art historical or conservation/scientific value for external researchers?



- Do the records provide information, insight, or perspectives not documented by other records or papers currently maintained by the archives?
- Does the information in the records complement other papers or records in the collection?

Examples of record content desired by the archives may include (but is not limited to), the following:

- Records that articulate the Getty's mission and document policy formation
- Records that show the development of the Getty's organizational structure and infrastructure
- Records that show evidence of important decisions or precedent
- Records that show the development of the Trust programs
- Records showing the development of relationships between the individual Trust programs and the administrative departments
- Records that reflect a unique way of thinking at a particular moment in history
- Work product of science, conservation, or art history projects
- Other records that highlight significant ("key") areas of work, including collaborations with outside organizations

### 3) Is the information unique?

Appraisal must be conducted in the context of all the other records that have been created both in one particular unit and across the entire organization. The appraisal process must determine whether the records under consideration are likely to be the only or most complete source for significant information. Records that contain significant information not available in other records are more likely to warrant permanent retention than records containing data that is largely duplicated in other sources. For example, most financial information is summarized in financial statements. For archival purposes, it is therefore not necessary to keep all bills and receipts. Even if the record or information is unique, one must consider whether it merely confirms impressions already recorded elsewhere. Does it supplement what is already known, or does it provide a fresh body of data? If the latter, its archival value will increase.

Look for records containing any of the following kinds of factual information *that is unlikely to be recorded elsewhere*:

- Information concerning significant people, events, buildings, trends and topics affecting the development and history of the organization
- Information concerning the impact of significant activities, e.g. policies, decisions, programs
- Information, insight or perspectives not documented elsewhere - a fresh or unique perspective

### 4) Do the records document decisions that set precedents?

Consider whether the decisions or actions that are documented in the records set any kind of precedents, or if each decision or action is merely based on adherence to policy that has been set at some higher level. If the former, the records are more likely to





warrant permanent retention. Policy development files are a good example of records that may set precedents, in which case their archival value is likely to be high.

### **5) How significant are the records for research?**

Consideration must be given to the current or potential value of the records to researchers. The future research potential of records is obviously an extremely difficult variable to determine. Nevertheless, it is important to consider this question when making appraisal decisions. It is necessary to think about what will be of future interest and use, both to outside scholars and researchers and to the organization. While future use cannot always be reliably predicted, it is possible to identify broad areas of interest that are reasonably stable over time.

Decisions to keep records permanently based upon some vague 'off-chance' that *somebody* might find them interesting *sometime* in the future must be avoided. There must always be some redeeming quality to the records, a solid reason why they are likely to prove interesting and useful to researchers in the future, in order to merit investing in their long-term preservation and care. Consideration should be given to the other appraisal criteria already outlined. Do the records have anything to say which seems genuinely interesting, useful, or unique? If this is in doubt, it will tend to suggest that they are probably not worth preserving.

In short:

- Assess the anticipated use of the materials based on past reference activity and the significance and popularity of the topic.
- Assess the potential increase in the value of the record to future researchers.
- Are there restrictions on the use of the records?
- Do we hold the rights to these records?

### **6) Are the records related to other permanent records?**

All else being equal, records that add significantly to the meaning or value of other records already appraised as permanent are more likely to warrant retention than records lacking such a relationship. For example, records that are chronological continuations of records already in the Archives are generally likely to warrant permanent retention. If annual reports for the years 1990-1995 are already held in the Archives, it is likely that those covering 1996-2000 should also be added.

### **7) Which are the most useable records?**

Does the way the records were gathered, organized, presented, or used in the course of business affect their usability? Records whose arrangement, indexing, or other identifying information makes it easy to locate pertinent information are more likely to warrant retention than records which are extremely difficult to use. For example, it is probably not worth preserving unprovenanced photographs that lack any kind of identification, since without such contextual information they are unlikely to prove useful in the future. Consideration should also be given as to whether the physical condition of the records will affect their usability. Can the archives preserve and use the record in its original format? If not, does an alternative format affect the value of the record and the information it contains? For example, some records may have deteriorated to the point that the information they contain is not as accessible as other



records containing the same basic information. Preserving an accurate paper transcript of an important speech is likely to be preferable to preserving a poor quality audio recording of the same speech.

Questions that may be asked of the records include:

- Are the records primarily made up of original source materials, transcriptions or secondary sources?
- How complete are the records?
- Do the records cover a long or short time period in the development of the office or department?
- Are there significant gaps in the time period covered?
- Do the gaps limit or impair the completeness of the documentation?

### **8) What is the volume of the records?**

Records that are clearly archival, in accordance with these other appraisal guidelines, should always be proposed for permanent retention, regardless of their volume. Volume should only play a role in the appraisal of records whose archival value is marginal. Other things being equal, records that are compact are more likely to be appraised as permanent than records containing similar information that are more voluminous. For example, a high quality microfilm version may be preferable for retention in the Archives in place of an original printed version occupying significantly more storage space.

### **9) Other possible considerations**

- Does the value of the record, especially compared with current holdings, warrant the time, cost, and space that will be required to maintain it?
- Does the value of the record justify the application of needed conservation measures?
- Can the archives adequately store and access the records?
- Does accessing the information on the record require the acquisition of special equipment or material?
- Does the record have intrinsic value as a particularly significant or revered document, or because of the identity of the author or an original signature?
- Is the physical form, material, or design of the record unique, special, or important; does it have exhibition value?
- Is the medium upon which the information is recorded difficult to access or preserve?
- Is the record intact?
- Is the value, accessibility, or reliability of the record's content affected by its condition?

## **Documentation**

Finally, it is the Institutional Archives' responsibility to document the selection of archival records. Appraisal can, and, in some cases, must be done at several different points in the process of accepting records. Ideally, an initial appraisal will be done by



an archivist in partnership with creating staff during annual disposition or the initial application of the records retention schedule. It will often be the case, however, due to press of time, that additional appraisal will occur after material has been accessioned. This may occur when there is no question that the Archives must generally accept the material and, in these cases, the appraisal will serve to provide both an after-the-fact justification and general guidelines for future weeding.

An appraisal note for accessioned material should be entered into Archivists' Toolkit – specifically in the Accessioning module. Notes are not made at the file or document level, but rather at the box or accession level. In cases where the majority/entirety of the decision making has been in partnership with creating staff, the note may simply say that the material was taken with the approval of the person/department during the given month and year.

Appraisal notes are also entered into the Box notes field in OmniRim. The notes should generally indicate the percentage of the box that was retained (or destroyed) and a brief description of the material.

Rough appraisal notes can also be found on the spreadsheets used to track large box review projects and legacy appraisal projects. The notes are always initially handwritten and then transcribed into the electronic versions of the spreadsheets. Abbreviated versions of the notes are entered into OmniRim (field size limitations often prohibit entering the full note).

[Note: Forms and plans to document appraisal in a more regular and thorough manner exist, but 1) they were over ambitious in the first place and 2) after the 2009 layoffs they became impossible (our department was cut in half and other departments were cut back as well - no one had the time to partner with us to write the reports).]