



Archives in Context

Season 7 Episode 5: Rachel Chatalbash, Susan Hernandez, and Megan Schwenke

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SPEAKERS

Nicole Milano, Camila Zorrilla Tessler, Rachel Chatalbash, Susan Hernandez, and Megan Schwenke

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Intro 00:10

From the Society of American Archivists, this is *Archives in Context*, a podcast highlighting archival literature and technologies, and most importantly, the people behind them.

Nicole Milano 00:27

Hi, everyone, and welcome to the *Archives in Context* podcast. My name is Nicole Milano, and I'm here with a brand new cohost for the podcast team.

Camila Zorrilla Tessler 00:36

Hi, everyone. My name is Camila Zorrilla Tessler. I am an archivist at Yale University, where I've been working as a generalist for, oh my gosh, six and a half years now. It's feels like forever.

Nicole Milano 00:50

I feel like the pandemic really blurred time, Camila. You probably agree.

Camila Zorrilla Tessler 00:53

Yeah. Yeah. It's really been more like three years. It's just three of those years I was locked in my own house.

Nicole Milano 01:00

Yes, yes, we can relate. Well, we are thrilled to have you as part of our podcast team. And today we are also thrilled to speak with the editors of *Museum Archives: Practice, Issues, Advocacy*, published by the Society of American Archivists in 2022. *Museum Archives* articulates what museum archivists do, the impact of their work, and how they can position the archives as an indispensable hub of knowledge and activity within their museums. So, joining us today are coeditors Rachel Chatalbash, Susan Hernandez, and Megan Schwenke. Coeditor Rachel Chatalbash is Deputy Director for Research at the Yale Center for British Art. Prior to assuming her new role, she

was interim Deputy Director for Research and senior museum archivist, where she established a museum archives and records management program. She served three terms as secretary of the Society of American Archivists' Museum Archives Section, and has led the Section Standards and Best Practices Working Groups since its inception. Over the past fifteen years, she's organized symposia, outreach programs, and publications on artists records, advocacy, and born-digital records in a museum archives setting. She received her MS in archives management from Simmons College and her PhD in art history from the CUNY Graduate Center.

Camila Zorrilla Tessler 02:19

Coeditor Susan Hernandez is the digital archivist and systems librarian at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Her duties include record management; accessioning; and managing born-digital records, reference work, and overseeing library archives systems and digitization programs. Hernandez currently sits on the planning committee of the Ohio Digitization Interest Group, and in the past has served as a member of the Cleveland Archival Roundtable Steering Committee, cochair of the Society of American Archivists' Museum Archives Section Standards and Best Practices Working Group, and representative to the Regional Archival Associations Consortium. She received her MA in history archives and museum studies from Duquesne University. And coeditor Megan Schwenke has headed the Harvard Art Museum's archives since 2013, overseeing archival accessions, cataloging, research services, and outreach, as well as the museum's institutional records management program. She is currently cochair of the Society of American Archivists Museum Archives Section Standards and Best Practices Working Group and holds an MS with a concentration in archives management from Simmons College. So, to get this started, Rachel, Susan, and Megan, can you share how *Museum Archives* came about, both the book topic and the team of editors and writers behind it?

Rachel Chatalbash 03:45

Yeah, thank you so much for the question! And also thanks so much for having us here. We're really excited to talk to you about our publication. The publication developed organically out of the efforts of the Society of American Archivists' Museum Archives Section's Standards and Best Practices Working Group. I think you've heard that mentioned a few times in our bios. The working group was established approximately a decade ago to further engage our section and to work toward addressing issues in the field that were important to museum archivists. Museum archivists are a distinct group of archivists concerned with archives in the museum context. The challenges and experiences they have sometimes differ from those of archivists in other contexts or settings. So, over the past ten years, the working group developed an online resource guide with examples of documents, policies, and best practices for museum archives across the country. The working group also held an annual symposium to ensure that museum archivists had time at the SAA Annual Meeting to discuss and address topics of importance to their field specifically. So, I'm remembering one year, for example, we focused on born-digital records in a museum setting. One year we focused on museum archives advocacy, and another where we investigated postcustodial recordkeeping in museums; just to give you a sense of the topics. Sometimes the efforts took the form of symposia, while other times there were other components like interviews or sharing case studies. And we were continually learning and further contributing to our repositories in step with the rest of the archives profession, but we felt that the museum context influences our work and informs so much of what we do, so we really wanted to focus on that. The working groups activities were a place to articulate what makes museum archivists distinct, and also to develop conversations about archives and museums. So Susan, and I cochaired this group beginning in 2013. And in 2016, Meghan joined me as cochair. And based on the

working group's activities, the annual topical investigations that I mentioned, and member participation, we also endeavored to create a new publication, which is what we're here to talk to you about today. This group this- this book is really emerged from the group; we're the cochairs- we're the former cochairs, and we are now for the editors. And the chapters were authored by the Section members, many of whom participated in our working group as members and program participants. So, in many ways, this publication is a result of a community effort filled with museum archivists, partners, participants, advocates, and supporters. And this working group and it's resulting publication, without a doubt, has really enriched our professional lives and those of our Section. And for that we're immensely grateful.

Megan Schwenke 06:30

So, if I may, I just want to tease out a little piece of what Rachel shared, and add that the working group- the working group projects, annual symposiums, these were all really needed. Because museum archives are distinct from other parts of the field, and they needed their own literature and they needed their own community. There is a literature review of museum archives and related topics early on in our book that reveals just how little there is out there. And so, if I may, I also wanted to tell you a little bit about what's in our publication and what we aimed to do, which was present fundamental archival theory and practice, but through a museum archives lens as has been outlined. So, there are chapters on things that all archivists attend to, so appraisal access and use, records management too in many cases. But what we've done is woven in museum archives specific best practices and examples. There's also several chapters on records formats that are often found within museum archives, and photographs, AV materials, things like that, but also artists records and architectural plans and field notes. These chapters cover stewardship of those things, but also the collaboration and all the postcustodial work with records creators and other departments in the institution that museum archives or archivists are often tasked with. And then the final chapters of the book are focused on issues. So, fundraising, ethics, restitution, repatriation, return; these are all really crucial topics within the museum archives contacts and the museum context in general.

Nicole Milano 08:04

So, you mentioned the many topics that this publication covers, but something that we didn't mention in our introduction is that this publication has three editors and twenty-seven contributors, wow! Can you tell us about what it was like to work together?

Susan Hernandez 08:20

There were spreadsheets. There were so many spreadsheets to keep track of everything. No, but overall, it was complicated, but very rewarding. It was important to us that the book came out of the Museum Archives Section, so recruiting this long slate of contributors was natural for us. And it was so great to work with authors who cared so deeply about museum archives and about the content of their chapters. There were challenges too, especially when the pandemic hit, and our authors and editors were impacted in a wide variety of ways. And at that point, near the beginning of the pandemic, the editors- we sat down together, well, we virtually- virtually sat down together. And we decided that we just couldn't push things too much; the book would just have to take as long as it was going to take to finish. And it did take a while. We worked on the book individually and collectively for over five years. And actually we were talking about yesterday, I think closer to seven actually, all of a sudden done. During that time, Megan got married, and Rachel and I both had babies, which are now

five- and six-years old. So, it was a real- it was a large part of our lives before, during, and after the pandemic as well. So, I feel like you'd have worked with these coeditors who are so smart and dedicated, and I think now are really close friends.

Camila Zorrilla Tessler 09:45

Okay, so how has the landscape of museum archives evolved since Deborah Wythe's *Museum Archives: An Introduction*. It was published in 2004, so I assume this is going to be a big question.

Rachel Chatalbash 10:02

Well, the 2004 publication was so important for the museum archives fields, I really want to want to emphasize that it carved out a place for museum archives and recognize them as a distinct subset of the field. It very importantly spoke to the need for museum archives and how they might be created and administered. Our publication, so we jump ahead twenty, almost twenty years later- published almost twenty years later. It really arrives at a moment when the archives field as a whole has expanded and evolved, and I think we all understand that over twenty years that it certainly has, and museum archives are not an exception. Our publication reasserts the ideas that were presented in the previous publication, they're still incredibly important. However, it really adds a focus on how to sustain successful museum archives programs over time, how to advocate for the role of the archives and the archivists within museums, and how to continually demonstrate value. So, the shift that we're pointing to with this publication is really the maturing of the museum archives field to one that- that is more established and recognized than it was two decades prior. Museum archivists can make so many valuable contributions to their institutions and our publication really embraces that outlook. I would say that, I think most museum archivists are aware of the progression that's taken place in the- in the museum archives field since 2004. And, in fact, it was Deb herself who suggested that we embark on this book project. So, I think everyone was united and our- our desire to have this publication exist and kind of to take it, you know, the next step twenty years later.

Nicole Milano 11:44

Your introduction to the book is titled *Advocating for Museum Archives*, and several chapters are devoted to aspects of advocacy. Now, of course, advocacy has been a hot topic in the archival community for many years, but can you describe to us why it's so important specifically for museum archives?

Susan Hernandez 12:03

So, taking it back a few years for a little context, in 2014 and 2015, the Museum Archives Section, and I think SAA generally, focused its activities on advocacy. So, in response to that, the Standards and Best Practices Working Group issued a call to museum archivists for personal narrative essays demonstrating the importance of museum archivists and museum archives. And we asked the authors to address questions like, "What is a museum archivist?" And "Why does a museum need an archives?" And the questions sound really straightforward, but as the authors of the essays pointed out, explaining what a museum archivist is, and does, to museum colleagues, who may not be familiar with archives or the importance of the records housed there, can be really difficult.

Megan Schwenke 12:52

I'm really glad to have this question. I'm glad we're talking about this, because it is really challenging explaining value and the value of what we do every day, I think, for all archivists, but it's probably one of the most important things museum archivists do. I don't know if everyone else in their particular context feels that way, but I think for museum archivists it's the work. It's an ongoing practice. It's a long game. And I think we all agree that without it, our daily efforts can really easily go unnoticed, they can go unchampioned. If the museum doesn't recognize value, it follows that the resources it's allocating might not be adequate for the museum's program- museum archives program, and collaborations within the institution, and also outside of it, can become pretty difficult to undertake. So, we're hoping that this publication will help give museum archivists the tools that they need to convey that value in big ways and in small ways every day, and to build the relationships that they need to create and maintain a thriving program.

Camila Zorrilla Tessler 13:54

So, building on that thread, what are some of the challenges that are unique to working with archives and museums?

Rachel Chatalbash 14:05

Well, I think every archivist working in a museum would tell you that museum archivists have the unique challenge of stewarding archival collections in institutions that also have object collections. So, we're talking about artwork, specimens, artifacts. These objects are typically the focus of museums with the archival- archival collections often considered supporting or secondary. It's the role of the museum archivists to advocate for the museum's archives within the broader museum context, so the value of its collections can be better understood, and that is really the premise that underlies our publication.

Susan Hernandez 14:43

Another challenge is that museum archives, even if they are staffed by professionally trained archivists, which of course that's what we advocate for in the book as being ideal, they are usually overseen by nonarchivists. So, the staff of museums are comprised of many different fields, ranging from graphic design to finance. And while museum professionals like curators, librarians, and registrars belong to allied professions, and our work certainly overlaps, they don't usually have formal archival training. So, museum archivists often have to be comfortable going back to basics when explaining what an archives needs to function optimally. For example, museums, this is a- one we use a lot, but museums and libraries generally describe their collections at the item level, and if a museum archivist decides that existing museum systems won't work for archival description, they need to be able to explain why archival collections are usually described in the aggregate in order to advocate for acceptable systems for archival description.

Megan Schwenke 15:50

It's, you know, it's- it's tricky to talk about challenges. I think, we want to be positive, but no job really is without challenges. And this book, you know, is really very much about how to confront those challenges head on. And as Susan was talking, it was reminding me that being the sole archivist, as museum archivist often is at their institution, or an archivist who is part of a small museum archives team like I am, working primarily among nonarchivists every day can be a little lonely, sometimes a little trying. So, I think one of the other things this

book does is makes clear that, you know, these challenges are not unique, they're really common within our context, we share them, and we're all taking them on together as a community of practitioners.

Nicole Milano 16:38

So, what did you all learn during the process of actually bringing this book to fruition?

Megan Schwenke 16:45

Well, I'm gonna take this one. And I think I learned even more about being a museum archivist. We had a lot of conversations amongst ourselves while working on the book that revolved around why museum archives are important. Why are we doing this? And how might we distill that down for readers? And, you know, we- Susan mentioned the symposium that the working group did years ago that was devoted to this question, too. And there's so many good and- and quality answers, and we'll probably still talk about it into the future, but I think, if I'm going to speak for all of us, where we are today is that it really depends on who's asking you. And it will vary for the archivist depending on their own repository. And then your answer might be different if you're talking to an object curator, or if you're talking to a museum administrator. Museum archivists steward their own distinct collection, they describe it, they provide access to it, they interpret it, they promote it. So, there are many, many similarities to the curatorial function and a museum that can be pointed to when you're talking about curator. The museum archives also maintains the institution's memory and keeps it accountable to itself and others, particularly if it maintains a records management function; there's risk management involved there, too. I found that very useful when talking to administrators about the importance of the museum archives and our work. So, there's lots of different ways and- but that said, working on this book also reinforced threads, very regularly, that it is really up to us. And that's not the editors, the museum archivists, to explain what it is that we do and why it's important to our own institutions and to the various communities we belong to. And we can't really wait for others to ask us while we're- why we're important. I think that we've said this, a couple of times, that our role and our work is not necessarily always understood, you know, within the institution among our own archivists, peers, with allied groups like registrars and librarians, but there's so much good work being done in museum archives, so many ideas, so many initiatives, and museum archivists should really take every opportunity they can; make opportunities to share and promote the really exciting work that we're doing for its own value, of course, but also because it likely touches on other aspects of the work that's being done at the institution elsewhere. So, there are chapters in the book that take on how to do this directly with practical examples for readers that other museum archivists have- have tried, but it's a thread that carries all through the publication.

Camila Zorrilla Tessler 19:25

So, I'm going to ask a question that might help our colleagues in bibliographic cataloging. In one or two words, what do you want your readers to gain or take away from the book?

Megan Schwenke 19:38

Well, none of us... we have more than two words, I'm gonna guess. Who's gonna start? I'll start. Okay. So, I think that there's so much to do, and that's okay. The pile never goes down. But, I hope that the book shares people- shares with people that there's a lot within their reach that they can do.

Susan Hernandez 20:05

Yeah, kind of going along with that, I hope there's like an actionable idea too in the book, for all museum archivists, regardless of their level of experience.

Rachel Chatalbash 20:18

Alright, I guess I would say, the exciting potential of museum archives, I would hope that that- that is a takeaway.

Megan Schwenke 20:25

Few words was really hard; it's hard. Sounds impossible.

Nicole Milano 20:26

You all cheated on that answer and gave more than two words, but we'll accept it because they were great answers.

Susan Hernandez 20:36

It's hard for all of us to not- to not hold ourselves back.

Nicole Milano 20:44

So, we have one final question for each of you to answer, and even after successfully editing a volume of twenty-seven contributors, you may still find answering this to be more difficult. What superpower would you each like to have and why?

Megan Schwenke 20:58

I will start. I would love to be able to time travel. And specifically, while time traveling, I would go back and kindly ask records creators now to put post-its all over everything, and also to throw a date on there to help their future- their future archivist counterparts.

Susan Hernandez 21:24

I would want to be able to talk to computers. I do so much troubleshooting in my job that it would really expedite things for me.

Rachel Chatalbash 21:34

And I would like the ability to make more time because really, there's never enough of it.

Nicole Milano 21:40

Wonderful answers. So, thank you three so much for joining us today. It's been wonderful having this conversation with you.

Megan Schwenke 21:46

Thank you, Nicole. Thank you, Camila, for having us. And we also just want to thank our twenty-seven fantastic authors who worked on this publication with us. We couldn't have done it without you.

Outro 21:59

You've just listened to an episode of the *Archives in Context* podcast, the official podcast of the Society of American Archivists. Members of the podcast team include Rose Buchanan, Chris Burns, Mary Caldera, Abigail Christian, Stephanie Luke, Nicole Milano, Lolita Rowe, Camila Zorilla Tessler, and Anna Trammell. All opinions expressed in this podcast are our own and are not reflective of a particular institution. Be sure to subscribe and listen wherever you get your podcasts or at archivesincontext.archivists.org. And join us again next time.