The Art of Description: Finding a Place for Works of Art in Archival Descriptive Standards and Practice
by
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Archival descriptive standards, while multi-media in intention, have been developed within the archival profession with the needs of textual records in mind. This thesis examines the current descriptive standards for visual materials, highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach, proposes possible improvements, and indicates areas that need further research and development.

The traditional version of history, as it has been taught, researched, and trusted, is now being challenged on a daily basis. History must now include those people, groups and regions that have previously been marginalized by society, habitually excluded from its history. This questioning of the traditional version of history has caused an explosion in alternative histories to emerge, drawn from a variety of previously underused sources. Many of these new resources are visual. As works of art become more and more sought after by the researcher as a means to illuminate forgotten and overlooked elements of the historical record, how these sources are treated in archival description and practice as viable primary source records becomes more important. Regardless of media, archival records must be presented as equal through description and practice.

The Rules for Archival Description (RAD) is the Canadian archival profession’s embodiment of descriptive standards. However, all visual media, regardless of how distinct they may be, have been lumped into one place, RAD Chapter 4, on “Graphic Materials.” If archives are going to give the time, funds, space and energy needed to house these visual items, and researchers are beginning to discover their value as primary source documents, the archival profession needs to examine better ways to describe visual records and present them to researchers.

To understand how archival description neglects visual materials, this thesis traces the development of archival descriptive standards from the origin of the concept of the fonds to the landmark Dutch Manual of 1898, and on to present practice. Through a qualitative analysis of existing literature on archival descriptive standards in Canada, this thesis discusses how RAD favours some forms of media, and neglects others. In addition, this study examines challenges to archival orthodoxy in Canada concerning description in general, and then in particular the description of visual materials.

While the analysis and conclusions of the thesis may be applicable to other visual materials in archives, such as film, photographs, or cartographic records, the focus here is on works of art (paintings, drawings, watercolours, etchings, prints, posters, etc.) that are found in the holdings of most archives.

Postmodern insights highlight the need for increased visual literacy, as well as the need for more attention to the contextual origins of works of art. Current approaches to the description of art are examined, using examples from Library and Archives Canada and the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives. The shortcomings of the RAD approach are exposed, exemplifying the need for more attention to context at all levels of description. The alternative series system of archival description, as well as descriptive approaches developed outside of the archival profession, are explored to suggest ways of improving the current approach to the description of visual materials are made.