

ORGANIZING, DIGITIZING, AND ARCHIVING YOUR WORK

Sam Sfirri and Mark Sfirri

You're a wood artist, and over the years you have amassed a large collection of photos of your work and pertinent information about the pieces you've made. Organizing this material and keeping it safe is important to your legacy as a maker. Imagine that one day you will be out of the picture—who will know where to find your work and the information about it? And even if you're not thinking of the life of your work after you're gone, better organization of your records can make your life easier now. Having quick, easy access to images of your work, as well as details about each piece, makes sharing information painless and can even inform new work.

This article is divided into two parts. Part I offers the perspective of an archivist, and Part II, that of a wood artist.

Part I: Understanding Archives

Sam Sfirri

What is an archive?

The term *archive* has become quite popular in recent years. You've probably seen the word on the Internet, sometimes used as a verb to describe an action, such as archiving your emails. This usage suggests that it means *to back up or to file away*. Sometimes it's used as a noun to signify, for example, past publications on a journal website, suggesting that it means *a collection of documents*. Sometimes it even refers to a place, like the National Archives, meaning *a place where documents are stored*. But what does the word *archive* actually mean?

The answer is, all of the above! As confusing as it may be, the word *archive* is used to refer to an action, a collection of records, and a place where collections of records are stored. What all these definitions have in common is a vague reference to the idea of safely storing records for posterity. But how exactly do you know with certainty that your records are *safely* archived once and for all?

The answer is, you don't. Not to be pessimistic, but in the archival field, we use the phrase *long-term preservation* to recognize that nothing is permanent; and something is only preserved long-term if proper measures are taken regularly, over time. Giving your records the best chance of survival means taking care of those records like the living, breathing objects they are. And no, I'm not just talking things like paper, sketchbooks, and photographic prints, but also computer files, as well as the information about the materials in the collection.

The goal of this article is to provide helpful tips for the long-term preservation of your archive. First, it is essential that you link the contents of your archive to the description of those contents. Without this explanatory element, it will become impossible for anyone (even you, if enough time passes) to know what the materials are, the context of their creation, and why they are important.

Key terms

I'll use the term *archive* to describe the entirety of the materials you want to preserve. A *record* is simply any archival item—anything that provides evidence

of an event. For example, a letter provides evidence that correspondents have communicated with one another on a particular date.

The term *analog physical format* is just a fancy phrase referring to things like paper documents, photographic prints, and artwork. A *born-digital format*, which is always a computer file, refers to information that was created in a computer environment, such as an image file generated from a digital camera. However, *born-digital* is not to be confused with the concept of digitizing or scanning, which also deals with computer files. For example, if you take a photographic print and scan it using a photocopier or other scanning device, you may create an image file that you can view on your computer, but it is not born-digital because the photograph originated in an analog physical format. You would instead call this *digitized*, meaning the information contained on the original photographic print has been converted to a digital copy.

A good example of a collection that has both analog physical formats and born-digital objects will be outlined in Part II of this article. My father, Mark Sfirri, describes the results of his method of project creation as having three components: creating artwork, taking digital photographs of the artwork, and writing project notes. The collection comprises projects, and each project includes the artwork itself (analog physical format), digital photographs (born-digital objects), and project notes (metadata). *Metadata* is simply the description of

the archival record, which contains keywords to help identify the record and its context, making it accessible to anyone looking for it. Importantly, although my father may sell his artwork, the value of his projects is not limited to the piece of art itself. In fact, digital photographs and project notes can be just as important, if not more so. They afford him the ability to refer to past projects when embarking on new ones, to have accurate information about his work when he prepares for an exhibition, and to have a better sense of the value of his work in the marketplace over time.

Whatever form your archive takes, in terms of size, quantity, and diversity of formats, and however old or new the items are, the goal is to maintain control of the archive as a whole, where everything is documented and stored safely.

The 3-2-1 rule

Despite the reassuring feeling you might get from your digital photos and other files being stored *in the cloud* or *backed up on a hard drive*, the truth is that those files are completely

dependent on the health of the storage device where they are backed up. And yes, *the cloud* is just another storage device somewhere in the world, accessible to your personal computer by way of the Internet.

Trevor Owens, in *The Theory and Craft of Digital Preservation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), says that “technologies will not save you from needing to get your metaphorical digital boxes off the floor before the flood comes.”

Understand that entrusting your valuable digital records to a single platform of any kind is risky business. What happens if an online storage company goes out of business and its website gets shut down? Even if your material is still intact somewhere, how will you access it? Similarly, it is not recommended to back up your computer files to just one external hard drive. If that device becomes corrupt, the data on it is more than likely corrupt, as well, with no recourse.

Assume nobody cares about your archive more than you do. Even if this isn't true, or won't be true in the future, you can't rely on others to have the same level of enthusiasm for the long-term preservation of your archive.

For digital records, the recommended solution is to have at least three total copies of your collection of digital records. American photographer Peter Krogh came up with the handy “3-2-1 rule” while writing a book about digital asset management, stating that you should:

- 3: Create one primary backup and two copies of your data
- 2: Save your backups to two different types of media
- 1: Keep at least one backup file offsite

This rule reduces the impact of a single point of failure, such as a drive error or stolen device. The “two different types of media” could be one external hard drive and one cloud storage. ►

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Environmental conditions

As a woodturner, you probably know that light, temperature, and humidity can cause dramatic effects on wood. Those conditions affect computer hardware, as well. Environmental considerations must be taken when considering where to store your external hard drives and your primary home computer.

Whatever materials you have in your archive, it is best to store them in a cool, dry, pest-free environment, with as little temperature and humidity fluctuation as possible. Use common sense when selecting a location for your archive; for example, keep your computer out of direct sunlight, and don't store materials anywhere near water or where a water source could affect the materials, such as under a pipe, or directly next to or on top of a heat source. It is best to have your archival material on a shelf or at least not sitting directly on the floor, especially if the floor is at or below ground level.

Papers should be housed in acid-free folders and boxes; photographic prints should be kept in mylar sleeves; VHS or other cassette tapes should be kept in appropriate archival boxes and stored vertically, to address the requirements of just a few common media. There is an enormous number of media types, so you will inevitably have to research the best storage solution for your archival records. A good place to start is Gaylord Archival (gaylord.com) or Hollinger Metal Edge (hollingermetalede.com). ►

Back up computer files



Redundancy is a good thing when backing up your files. Don't rely on just one storage device. Note: External hard drives should not be stored as shown here, as one can demagnetize another if they are stacked; they should be stored separately.

and you have it only in low resolution, they will either not use it or reduce the printed dimensions in order to include it. This would be a missed opportunity.

Note that if you have slides, it is not safe to assume that digitizing them makes it okay to toss the originals. It is possible an original slide could outlive the digitized version of it. If the digitized version is lost and the original was discarded after digitization, you would be left with nothing. If, however, you retained the original slide, it could be re-digitized. In this scenario, it is good to understand how the digitized copy was lost and reevaluate your digital-records strategy.

Record-keeping software

Historically, I have used an Excel spreadsheet to keep information about my work, with the first entry being “Active” (meaning available) or “Inactive” (meaning the piece was sold, donated, traded, or destroyed). The next entry is the item number, followed by the title of the piece, dimensions, and category. Subsequent headings include the price, the purchaser, and the sales venue. Excel allows me to sort by Active or Inactive first and then by number in decreasing order, allowing me to see the most recent piece first, down to the oldest piece I have in my possession. The Inactive list follows the same chronology.

One issue that bothered me for a long time was not having a corresponding

image tied to the spreadsheet. A colleague introduced me to FileMaker Pro and now I am a huge fan. I use it for my own artwork, my research, and my personal collection of other people’s work. I needed a little help getting set up but have found it intuitive and easy to use. Excel spreadsheets can be imported directly into FileMaker Pro. Each entry has its own page in “Form View,” which allows for the storage of much more legible detail than in a spreadsheet. For example, I can now list any exhibitions that the work appeared in and, if sold, who bought it and for how much. The entries can also be viewed in “Table View,” which looks similar to an Excel spreadsheet but with a thumbnail photograph. When you need to edit the record if, for example, you sell a piece, you can change the entry from Active to Inactive and the application automatically saves it to the correct category in chronological order. One disadvantage of this software is that it is a bit pricey.

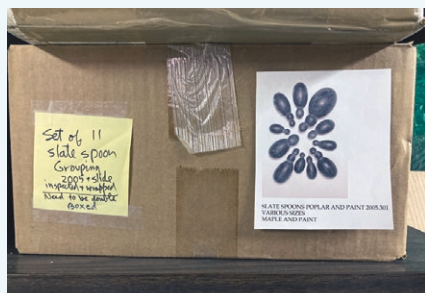
Because digital records are fragile, take the necessary steps to protect your files. For FileMaker Pro, I keep two sets of printed copies (one in my studio and one in my house). I update them yearly. I also save the file as a PDF every six months or so. To protect my FileMaker Pro files and digital images, I back up my computer monthly. I have also kept all of my external hard drives (and their corresponding cables), each labeled with their inclusive dates.

Lastly

A good record of my work is important to me while I’m alive, and it will leave a legacy of what I’ve done with my career after I’m gone. I suspect that my interest in organizing and chronicling my work might be unusual, but I recommend doing it. Artists need to be responsible for creating their own records. You are your own best advocate. Another person or organization isn’t necessarily going to have the resources, time, or interest.

There are, of course, organizations that keep records. It’s worth researching local organizations that you think ought to have information about your work. In my case, the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, set up a section on their website dedicated to artists in Bucks County, where I live, called Bucks County Artists Database (bucksco.michenerartmuseum.org/artists). In Philadelphia, the Senior Artists Initiative helps artists 55 and older learn how to organize and preserve their legacies, approach legal issues regarding their work with their estate, figure out what will become of their unsold work, and set up an oral history, which is preserved on the organization’s website (seniorartists.org). I also served on the steering committee of the Furniture Society, which led to an oral history that has been archived by the American Craft Council. ■

What’s inside?



When physical pieces are put into storage, the author affixes images of them, along with their object numbers, to the outside of the box or wrapping. This practice creates an efficient reminder of what’s inside.



Sam Sfirri is an archivist at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, at the University of Pennsylvania. He specializes in born-digital and audiovisual preservation. Sam is also a pianist and composer who has performed and has had his music performed across the U.S., Europe, and Japan. For more, visit madacyjazz.bandcamp.com.

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