School of Information Sciences Student
Scholarship

School of Information Sciences

January 2024

Protecting the Integrity of Archives

Sean Daigle
Wayne State University, ae7780@wayne.edu

Protecting the Integrity of Archives

Sean Daigle

ABSTRACT

This article examines the problem of fraudulent and stolen materials being introduced into archives. If these issues become common enough, people will not trust archives or history itself. Archivists can fight these problems by learning how to spot potential sellers of stolen or fraudulent items. They can also catalog unique aspects of their collections and share them on the internet, dedicate more resources to security, and hire experts when items' authenticity is called into question. The most helpful step they can take, however, is being so diligent about establishing provenance that provenance becomes a security measure in itself. Ultimately, resources and funding will determine how much archives do to ensure their collections' integrity.

Keywords: provenance, security, fraud, integrity, archives

METHODS USED TO INTRODUCE STOLEN OR FRAUDULENT ITEMS INTO

ARCHIVES

Archival institutions have been the victim of crime for hundreds of years, but the crime was thought to be the same one over and over: theft. Many scholarly articles, magazine pieces, and news reports are dedicated to the subject. These articles often catch the public's attention, because the stolen maps, documents, or artwork tends to be worth a lot of money. The subject of stolen or fraudulent items being brought *into* archives, however, has received much less attention. Although less prominent than theft *from* archives, the practice of selling fraudulent or stolen items to archives, sneaking fraudulent items into archives, and altering archival documents so as to make them fraudulent, can be even more destructive to institutions and society than theft.

The least peculiar of these offenses is the selling of stolen goods to archives. The motivation, which is greed, is no different than that for stealing from archives. Considering that many collections are housed at illustrious institutions with deep pockets, it makes sense that

people would attempt to profit by selling them stolen or fraudulent goods. Archives tend to specialize in certain subject areas, and a knowledgeable thief can exploit that fact by offering up goods that would help complete a collection or burnish its reputation. The infamous forger Mark Hofmann did just this.

Hofmann was raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and used his position of trust within the congregation to help commit his frauds (Seppi & Skeem, 2022). After forging and selling to the LDS a supposed Joseph Smith holograph known as the Anthon Transcript, Hofmann set up shop as a used and rare book dealer. He then sold several other forgeries to the church. He also may have collected as much as two million dollars for forgeries of documents by famous literary figures including Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and Jack London.

Finally, in what would have been his greatest "accomplishment", he nearly sold a fake copy of a 1639 broadside known as the "Oath of a Free Man" to the Library of Congress. The document is an important artifact in the early development of American democracy, and the Library of Congress obviously felt that it belonged in its collection. National Archives experts examined the Oath and found no evidence that it was fraudulent. The only reason the sale didn't go through was that the Library of Congress couldn't afford the $1.5 million price tag.

Another infamous con man, John Drewe, perpetrated a different type of fraud against archives. After discovering a teacher named John Myatt who painted copies of famous works of art for a modest fee, Drewe convinced Myatt to join him in a criminal enterprise. (Carter, 2007). Myatt proceeded to paint in the style of, among others, Henri Matisse, Jean Dubuffet, Alberto Giacometti, and Marc Chagall. Drewe then sold the paintings to numerous esteemed auction houses, museums, galleries, and collectors, earning between an estimated one and two-point-five

million pounds. The success of the con, however, had little to do with the quality of the fakes. By Myatt's own admission, "There was a negligence to everything I did." (Carter, 2007, p. 79).

It was Drewe's work rather than Myatt's that fooled so many people. Drewe went to extraordinary lengths to persuade potential marks of the paintings' authenticity. Many of his methods are beyond the scope of this paper, but one, the use of archives, is not.

While one hesitates to praise Drewe's strategy, it was undeniably clever. He knew that museums and collectors would be less inclined to pay him large sums unless they were sure of the paintings' provenance. Since the fakes obviously lacked provenance, he set out to create a provenance of his own. Employing various techniques, Drewe obtained access to most of England's important art institutions. Once within the archives, he slipped in forged invoices, correspondence, and photographs, all pertaining to Myatt's paintings. His work was so convincing that he managed to fool the head of Sotheby's British paintings department and the director of the Tate.

Money, however, is not the only reason someone might insert fraudulent documents into archives. Since archives are generally believed to be custodians of historical documentation, someone who wants to change history might attempt to change archives. This is what happened in the National Archives of the United Kingdom, where someone inserted a document purporting to prove that Great Britain assassinated a high-ranking Nazi official. (Carter, 2007). The criminal did this to further his political agenda, and luckily he was caught. However, nobody knows how many undetected similar frauds may exist.

There is a final and less glamorous method of inserting fraudulent documents into archives, and that is by altering items already within a collection. A retired doctor named Thomas Lowry did this to a letter of pardon issued by Abraham Lincoln dated April 14, 1864.

(Kastenhofer, 2015). Lowry noticed that if the year were changed to 1865, the letter would have

been signed a day before Lincoln's assassination, so he changed the date. Owing to this supposed

discovery, Lowry became regarded as a Lincoln expert and parlayed his crime into a book deal.

The pardon letter was prominently displayed at the National Archives and Records

Administration (NARA) alongside the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Eventually, a NARA archivist noticed that the "5" in 1865 looked darker than the other

numerals. Confronted with this evidence, Lowry admitted to having altered the document with a

fountain pen.

The crimes described above vary, but their result is the same. They undermine

researchers' and the public's confidence in archives. They make one wonder if the items in

archives are authentic, or if they're as yet undetected frauds. Also, since some of these crimes

purport to revise history, they could make one wonder if history as we know it is a true record of

what occurred. In this time of people rejecting truth, or arguing that they are entitled not just to

their own opinions but also to their own facts, a loss of faith in archives would be another nail in

the coffin of collective history. Archives are one of the few powerful mechanisms that hold

society together. It's important to protect them from theft, but we must also ensure that their

integrity isn't compromised.

ARCHIVAL INTEGRITY: PREVENTING FRAUDULENT OR STOLEN MATERIAL FROM ENTERING ARCHIVES

Intelligent, determined criminals are a problem for archives, but institutions can take

steps to protect themselves. To begin with, archivists can educate themselves on how to spot

potential stolen or fraudulent goods. They can also catalog unique aspects of their collections and

share them on the Internet, so that potential buyers of archival materials can check to see if a

seller's wares are stolen. The most important step institutions can take is an extensive look into

collections' provenance, which archivists should do even if not concerned with fraud. Referring

to industry standards on provenance, authenticity, and integrity can greatly assist someone

attempting to determine an item's history. Finally, if provenance is truly in question, experts can

be brought in to help determine authenticity or lack thereof.

Before discussing provenance, however, the subject of security deserves a brief mention.

Increased security is the most obvious method to reduce archival crime. (Totka, 1993). Hiring

additional staff members so that someone can monitor researchers is one idea. Another is

installing surveillance cameras throughout the archive. A third is requiring patrons to present

photographic identification and home address. However, these measures have already been much

discussed with regard to preventing theft in archives, and many institutions decided not to

employ them.

While increased security may reduce crime, it also creates new problems. More

employees and electronic surveillance mean more money. Many archives are already cash

strapped, so these new expenditures may not be possible. A greater concern is user access.

Institutions do not want to make researchers feel like criminals. Following patrons around or

spying on them is not going to make anyone want to use the archives. Requiring them to present

photographic identification or their home address can seem intrusive. Many institutions favor

access over security, but ultimately each archives must make its own decision based on a balance

between resources and user access.

Even without additional security measures, though, archives can do a lot to protect

themselves. One important step archivists can take is educating themselves about how to spot

stolen or fraudulent goods, as well as less than upstanding dealers. (Seppi & Skeem, 2022). A

good starting point is looking at the type of person or entity attempting to make the sale. Is it an

established dealer with a good reputation, someone who belongs to professional organizations

with high ethical standards such as the Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America? If so,

that's a good sign, though it doesn't mean you're in the clear. Every once in a while, someone

with similar credentials turns out to be a criminal. Forbes Smiley, an esteemed rare maps dealer,

was found guilty in 2006 of having stolen ninety-seven maps worth an estimated $3 million

dollars. For every Forbes Smiley, though, there are many honest business people.

 If, however, the dealer seems to lack a reputation, be cautious. Are they trying to rush a

sale? If so, slow down. Another important question is does the offer seem too good to be true? If

it does, take extra care to inspect the item. Is it what it purports to be? Might the seller be trying

to quickly get rid of incriminating evidence?

 Archivists can save themselves a lot of grief by familiarizing themselves with institutions

that house collections similar to theirs. That way, they may actually know an item is stolen when

offered to them. Even if they aren't able to identify the item as stolen, they may know enough to

consult with other institutions that would have been likely to own similar things. Many archives,

museums, and special collections libraries catalog the unique markings of their collections and

share them on the Internet. This way, those who suspect they're being offered pilfered goods can

quickly scan the web to see if the items appear to belong to someone else.

 Being familiar with common ways to mask forgeries and theft can help an archivist

protect their institution. (Seppi & Skeem, 2022). For instance, when examining a rare book, look

for signs of tampering. Has someone bleached out stamps, erased pencil markings, or removed

bar codes? (Overmier & Doak, 1996). If so, the seller may have altered the book to hide evidence

of previous ownership. Be aware that withdrawn stamps can be faked to give the appearance that

the book is on the market legitimately. (Seppi & Skeem, 2022). Also, avoid purchasing what are known as "clipped" signatures, which are signatures on single sheets of paper without content or context. These may be forgeries. Even if they aren't, establishing their provenance is next to impossible.

The question of ownership is also critical. Is the seller also the creator of the documents or items? If not, do they have the right to sell or donate the collection? Are they acting on their own behalf, or someone else's? Can they legally grant your employer the publishing rights? If the answer to any of these questions is "no," you may end up having to return the collection to someone else or even face litigation. (Becker, 1993).

All of these measures are different ways to check an item's provenance. Maintaining high standards in determining provenance is a paramount concern in archival administration, as well as in related fields such as special collections and art collecting. The fact is that unless you have convincing evidence of an item's complete history, both its research value and its monetary value will suffer.

Another way to look at it is this: Provenance *is* security. It is the attempt to account for an item's whereabouts from its creation until the present. If you are skilled at it, you have a good chance of maintaining a collection that is authentic and trusted by users and the public. In order to be good at it, though, you need more than basic instincts (though those are helpful).

Before studying something's provenance, it's important to know what provenance is. It is not how an item came to be created. It's how did it get to where it is now, and can I show an unbroken chain of ownership from now until its creation? And while that may seem like a simple concept, it isn't. There are a variety of professional standards that can help one determine

provenance. This paper is too short to consider them at length, but what follows is a brief description.

There are three primary standards: the General International Standard in Archives Description (ISAD(G)), the International Standard for Archival Authority Records (Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families) (ISAA(CPF)), and the International Standard for Documenting Functions (ISDF). All three define provenance as "the relationship between the records and the organizations and individuals that created, accumulated and/or maintained and used them in the conduct of personal or corporate activity." (MacNeil, 2009). The ISAD(G) elaborates, stating that the extent of records' integrity is determined by considering the location of originals, related units of description, archival history, appraisal, scheduling and destruction of information, and system of arrangement. Archival history is most important when considering provenance as security because it addresses authenticity, integrity, and interpretation. The more confidence you have in each element, the better the provenance and therefore the security of your archives. However, it would be worthwhile to consult all three standards when attempting to determine provenance.

The international standard on records management, ISO 15489, is also helpful. According to ISO 15489, the four main characteristics of authoritative records are reliability, integrity, usability, and authenticity. (Kastenhofer, 2015). All four element should be studied, but authenticity is paramount. For purposes of archives, a document or record is authentic when it is what it claims to be. But how do you know if something is what it claims to be?

Unfortunately, the answer is problematic. Archives attempt to keep records by the same creator together in their original order. This helps preserve identity and integrity. However, archivists also typically describe the records. Describing records does not test their authenticity.

The authenticity is always, to a degree, assumed. The archivist's description, though, lends the appearance of authority to an item or collection. Since people generally assume archives to be authentic, they are attractive to some criminals. It is the appearance of authenticity that John Drewe sought when he littered British museums and collections with his forgeries. Despite these institutions' impressive reputations, nothing can absolutely prove authenticity. There is a very real chance that many undetected forgeries are in archives even today.

Closely reading ISO 15489 can help protect institutions against these intrusions. According to ISO 15489, an authentic record is one that can be proven to be (1) what it purports to be, (2) to have been created or sent by the person purported to have created or sent it, and (3) to have been created or sent at the time purported. An archivist can do their institution a huge favor by doggedly attempting to show that an item or collection meets all three elements. In doing so, they decide to keep or discard archives. Conducting this process makes archives more secure and, therefore, increases the likelihood of users considering them to be authentic. Just don't lose sight of the fact that one can almost never "prove" authenticity.

It is this problem that causes institutions, typically as a last resort, to consult experts. If the authenticity of an important historic document or work of art is called into question, the owner usually wants to affirm its worth. Depending on the context, this can be fairly simple or next to impossible. In the matter of the altered Lincoln letter mentioned above, it was relatively easy. A staff member at NARA, closely observing the letter, noticed that the "5" in 1865 was darker than the other numbers. Luckily NARA had an expert on-hand and didn't need to contract out the work. Most of the time, though, experts need to be brought in from outside.

Different kinds of specialists are required depending on the issue. If antiquated documents are at issue, conservationists can typically determine the relative date of the paper,

parchment, or vellum. The age and type of pen can often be determined as well. Works of art,

however, especially little-known ones, can be problematic. Someone steeped in

"connoisseurship" may evaluate a painting's authenticity based on their familiarity with the

artist's oeuvre. (Mar, 2021). A scholar would study the provenance and archival history.

Someone with a scientific background would study the materials and physical attributes. All

these experts' opinions will help archives decide whether something is or isn't authentic. But as

with the various archival standards, none can prove authenticity.

Looking into these matters will help protect your reputation and investment. Institutions

don't want to spend time and money on an acquisition only to discover that it isn't what they

thought it was. And donors certainly don't want to hear that their monetary contributions were

wasted.

CONCLUSION

The public's faith in the authenticity of archives is crucial for these institutions to

survive. If their integrity is compromised by fraudulent or stolen items being housed in archives,

users' trust will deteriorate. Since archives encompass many of the documents and items that

record our history, our society's sense of collective experience will fray if a significant portion of

the public distrusts archival materials.

While institutions have taken significant steps to protect against theft from their

collections, they've done less to preserve the integrity of what they already have. Simple security

measures can help protect against stolen or fraudulent items coming into archives, but traditional

security is less important than being diligent about establishing provenance.

There are many tools to help with the task. Archivists can learn to look for signs that a

dealer is attempting to sell something stolen or fraudulent. They can also document the unique

markings of their collections and share them online, so that others, when presented with a sale item, can check to see if it looks like something from a different institution. It's also important that they familiarize themselves with similar institutions, so they know what others own or might like to own.

Another way to tackle the problem is to consider provenance itself to be a form of security. Being diligent about establishing provenance increases the likelihood that the public will have faith in collections' integrity. Various international standards provide useful guidelines for establishing provenance, with an emphasis on demonstrating authenticity. If an item's authenticity is especially difficult to establish, archives can use either internal or external experts to help determine if the item is what it purports to be.

It is important to remember that nothing can "prove" provenance. It is possible with the right tools, though, to come very close.

REFERENCES

Becker, R. L. (1993). On Deposit: A Handshake and a Lawsuit. *The American Archivist,* 56(2), 320–328. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40293733.

Carter, Rodney G.S. (2007). "Tainted Archives: Art, Archives, and Authenticity". *Archivaria* 63 (1), 75-86. https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13128.

Kastenhofer, J. (2015). The logic of archival authenticity: ISO 15489 and the varieties of forgeries in archives, *Archives and Manuscripts*, 43:3, pp. 166-180, DOI: 10.1080/01576895.2015.1074085.

MacNeil, H. (2009). Trusting Description: Authenticity, Accountability, and Archival Description Standards, *Journal of Archival Organization*, 7:3, pp. 89-107, DOI: 10.1080/15332740903117693.

Mar, Bethany. (2021) "Experts' Role in Art Authentication." Student Works. 1243.

       https://scholarship.shu.edu/student_scholarship/1243.

Overmier, J., & Doak, E. (1996). Provenance Records in Rare Book and Special Collections.

       Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship, 11(2), 91-99,

       doi:https://doi.org/10.5860/rbml.11.2.134.

Seppi, G. & Skeem, D. (2022). Picking up the Pieces: Library Processes and the Theft of Rare

       Materials. *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage. Vol 21*

       (2), p. 98, DOI: https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.21.2.98.

Totka, V. A. (1993). Preventing Patron Theft in the Archives: Legal Perspectives and Problems.

       The American Archivist, 56(4), 664–672. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40293773.