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# Review of *Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum*

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# Review of *Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum*

## **Abstract**

This review summarizes the book *Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum*, based on recent doctoral research by author Mike Jones. It speaks to museum professionals at all levels and Library Science or Museum Studies students. Through a discussion of historical circumstances and an intensive case study of Museums Victoria, Jones covers the treatment of museum archives and broader issues related to collections management and documentation systems. This book adds new data to the overall challenges of information management in the history of analog to digital migrations, provides key figures, dates, and places in these initiatives, and compels the reader to reconceptualize collections management technologies and practice.

## **Keywords**

Book review, collection access, collection management, archives, museums, cultural heritage, museum studies, archiving, history, heritage management and conservation.

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

Jennifer Galipo is an early-career archivist and recent graduate student from the School of Information at San José State University. She has a B.A. in Art History and subject knowledge of Archives and Preservation, digital scholarship, and information management.

For an early-career archivist, *Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum* is a valuable read because its arguments and examples provoke new thoughts and considerations for improving archival and collections management practices. It speaks to museum professionals and students at all levels, and embraces cultural and theoretical shifts in the politics of representation. After reading this book, archival studies and my interest in digital scholarship felt more significant since the book placed value on often-overlooked, detail-oriented tasks and technology-based efforts.

The author, Mike Jones, is an Australian archivist, historian, collections consultant, and author. This book is based on his recent doctoral research and covers the treatment of archives in museums as well as broader issues related to collections management and documentation. His overarching criticism is that documentation and descriptive work in collections is disconnected from a legacy of complex divisions in technological advancements and implementations of collection management systems. His work explores both the history and current practices of institutions through a combination of archival research, recorded interviews, site visits and staff meetings, and surveys of public websites and secondary source material. During his research, he visited sixty museums, mostly in Australia, the United States, and England.

The primary case study used throughout the book is Museums Victoria (MV). This was an interesting approach as MV has a diverse collection of natural and social history, artifacts from Indigenous cultures, anthropology, and technology, as well as established archival programs, and has made many contributions to the development of collection management technologies. Using historical explanations, case studies, and models for improvements of digital discoverability, this book is organized into five chapters.

Chapter 1, an overview of the museum and archive profession, aims to display the division of physical and intellectual separations from collections. It provides a brief, easy-to-read overview of the history of archives and archivists, including key dates and significant political acts. The chapter focuses on the growth of archival programs and practices in museum collections, and the efforts in the mid-1950s in museums to centralize information in the absence of archivists. The Carnegie Museum of Art and their efforts and successes in centralizing information via their archive's website are highlighted. As an archivist, I found it particularly interesting to learn about the evolution of the profession and which institutions received funding for archival programs from the start. For example, in 1975-1976, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) bestowed upon the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts one of the earliest identifiable grants to establish and organize the archives of a museum.

Chapter 2 focuses on collection management technologies as Jones demonstrates the challenges and possibilities that shape access and description. Examples include the constraints of coding sheets in the early years of automation using computers for registration and the implementation of the EMu collections management systems at the MV. Overall, the author captures some of the pivotal moments when museums turned their focus to collection management.

Chapter 3 examines archival museum field books and focuses on the evolution of conservation practices and archival acquisitions for preventative care in provenance documentation. This chapter makes the reader reflect on the value of collections processing, access points for information, and the importance of detailed finding aids as compared to item-level processing for contextualization. Notably, it highlights the reparative work that needs to be done with archival collections and museum collections management given the challenges of database technologies and access to improved interdepartmental connections in content management systems.

Chapter 4 presents a case study of the internationally recognized Donald Thomson Collection at MV, exploring collections management and cataloging and description practices for this significant collection. Jones writes about issues of risk with the lack of collection

documentation, the decontextualization of objects removed from archival collections, and the value of relational description with implementations of tabs and tags in descriptors. His goal is to prompt professionals to think about how we can use improved technologies for more relational descriptions and links in archival collections, museum descriptions, and administrative information access in databases.

After presenting the historical circumstances and an intensive case study, Chapter 5 explores concepts that reshape our understanding of documentation in the relational museum. It explains the importance of reconceptualizing collections management and description practices and the links we make in our practice. Jones applies what he refers to as a “relational approach” to uncover the challenges of archival practice and collections management to critically display why and how collection database systems within institutional settings can be improved. He explains that the social contributions of museums will be more meaningful and multifaceted if we focus less on describing discrete objects and more on relationality. He applies the concept of relationality to museums, archives, and collections management as the means to create more connectivity between objects, society, meaning, and history.

This study adds new information to the overall challenges of information management in the history of analog-to-digital migrations and provides key historical figures, dates, and places in these initiatives. The examples in this book emphasize accountability and inclusion in postmodern archival practice – specifically diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility efforts and cultural competencies for description practices and reparative efforts. I found chapter 5 – “Beyond Networks: Reconceptualizing collections documentations” and its section “New model, New metaphors” – particularly compelling. It embraces the responsibilities of the archival practice, including the necessary innovations in thinking and research that go beyond dominant structures to support decolonization and democratization of cultural heritage institutions. Jones uses a model of the ecosystem of the Great Barrier Reef to show how efforts to go beyond mere classification methods for documentation can open complex, richer narratives of contemporary and historical relationships with land, community, and culture.

If you have gone through a graduate-level archival program, it is likely you have read articles on similar topics, but this case study and associated scholarship provide a rich list of resources for the fields of anthropology, history, digital humanities, and archival studies. In all, this book provides encouraging and accessible ideas for approaching collections management, the significance of documentation, the importance of inclusivity, and digital scholarship.