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# Visual Materials in the Archive: Determining and Maintaining Value in a Postmodern Climate

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# Visual Materials in the Archive: Determining and Maintaining Value in a Postmodern Climate

**Abstract**

This paper engages with the existing body of archival literature that addresses what has been termed "documentary art" in order to address questions regarding the treatment of visual materials in archival practice and theory. It will also borrow and apply theories from the disciplines of material culture studies and art history in order to form a comprehensive understanding of the overall treatment of visual materials in a variety of collections. Through the lens of such theories, a discourse emerges that addresses the larger implications of the bibliographical treatment of visual materials within the archive, leading to the proposal of a solution to the problem of maintaining archival value in both physical and digital form.

**Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

The very foundations of archival principles are based on textual records and their bibliographic organization. Within this framework, visual materials have gained significant importance within the broadened scope of archival collections. The elevation of their status to that of textual records therefore raises questions regarding the subsequent treatment of visual materials in practice and theory. Although the literature generally states that archivists are aware of these materials under their care, there has been little scholarly engagement with the larger issue of how visual materials are handled in practices such as archival arrangement and description.

The institutional nature of the archive places distinct limitations on the interpretations and understanding of works of art and images. In a discussion of this institutional framework through which we view visual materials, and the manner in which they are made accessible, it becomes apparent that recent processes of digitization carry larger implications, of which archivists may not be aware. The main concerns are regarding the retention of the archival value of visual materials, both in physical and digital form, and the ability of the archivist to recognize, maintain, and translate that value in order to provide optimal access for researchers. This ability is based upon the archivist's background and knowledge, ability to apply visual literacy skills, and their awareness of the variety of tools at their disposal for the creation and maintenance of digital surrogates.

This paper engages with the existing body of archival literature that addresses what has been termed "documentary art." It also borrows and applies theories from disciplines such as material culture studies and art history in order to form a comprehensive understanding of the overall treatment of visual materials in a variety of collections. Through the lens of such theories, a discourse emerges that addresses the larger implications of the bibliographical treatment of visual materials within the archive, leading to the proposal of a solution to the problem of maintaining archival value in both physical and digital form.

## Literature Review

Early writings on visual materials in archives focused on determining the documentary and evidential value of pictorial objects and recognizing that there is indeed an issue to be addressed. Hugh Taylor[1] and Greg Spurgeon[2] address this

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[1] Hugh Taylor, "Documentary Art and the Role of the Archivist." *The American Archivist* 42 (1979). http://archivists.metapress.com/content/9300l35714863163/fulltext.pdf.

issue in their accounts of the treatment and inclusion of visual materials in archival collections by determining the archival value of such materials. Before a larger discussion of Taylor and Spurgeon, it will be useful to explain the principles applied in making such determinations.

The theory of archival value stems from the manner in which recorded information is created, maintained, and accessed. Archives, as a series of records, are accumulated naturally without thought by the creator of the archive's future use. This process of creation imbues the archive with qualities of impartiality and authenticity, which in turn gives the collections their value as evidence of the past.[3] The authenticity of collections is determined by the evidence of its history and is based on the procedures of creation, maintenance, and custody rather than the individual documents themselves. Therefore the only truly authenticated documents are those that demonstrate continuous proof that they have remained in "proceduralized custody."[4]

The records within archival collections that have been deemed authentic hold two types of value: primary, that which is most valuable as evidence for the creator; and secondary, as related to the record's "historical and cultural functions for those other than the creator."[5] Secondary values are divided into evidential and informational value, and are of the highest importance during the processes of appraisal and selection.

Archival appraisal constitutes the intellectual decisions made by the archivist in determining the secondary values of materials entering the archive. Therefore, "the act of selection for permanent retention based on the evaluation of secondary values" is ultimately "responsible for transforming *records* into *archives*" (original emphasis).[6] The criteria for appraisal and processes of selection are based on institutional guidelines codified within mission statements, acquisition and collection policies, appraisal reports, and processing plans.[7] These guidelines place the archivist in the role of the *interpreter* of policies that allow for the retention or discarding of materials, rather than being the ultimate voice of authority.

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[2] Greg Spurgeon, "Pictures and History: The Art Museum and the Visual Arts Archives." *Archivaria* 17 (1983). http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/11020/11955.

[3] Reto Tschan, "A Comparison of Jenkinson and Schellenberg on Appraisal." *The American Archivist* 65 (2002): 176–195.

[4] Terry Eastwood, "What is Archival Theory and Why is it Important?" *Archivaria* 37 (1994): 122. http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/11991/12954.

[5] Tschan, 184.

[6] Ibid., 180-181.

[7] Ciaran B. Trace, "On or Off the Record? Notions of Value in the Archive," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 47–68.

In determining the archival value of visual materials, Taylor and Spurgeon assess the informational and evidential qualities of pictorial objects. Hugh Taylor makes a case for the inclusion and acceptance of an artwork, such as a watercolor or oil painting, as "a document worthy of full membership in an archival family."[8] He addresses the reluctance and general lack of certainty of how such materials can fit into the archive's scheme of values and is aware that research undertaken with only textual records leaves a gap in human existence and expression.

A determination of value, for Taylor, lies in assessing the content of visual materials under the same textual models that are utilized for documents. In a discovery of evidential value, the archivist must grapple with issues of faithful representation, artistic style, the artist's perception, and selection and omission by the artist. The problem with Taylor's assessment techniques is that he is determining the value of a work of art based on content alone, and ignoring the object's material qualities. He is trying to make visual materials fit into the scheme and order of textual models instead of establishing a model that addresses the unique qualities of such works.

Spurgeon takes a similar approach in that he finds value in the content of the work. By highlighting the differing treatments of art in museums versus archives through the lens of two Canadian institutions, Spurgeon reveals how documentary content may be irrelevant to an artist, but is essential to a painting as archival material. Within such a consideration, he also emphasizes that content does not always create value as a historical document. For example, modern paintings of historical subjects are not necessarily authentic in depiction, but are useful in other ways. Authenticity in an archival context is therefore not based on a work's content but rather "on the concept of the unbroken history of control over it."[9] It is often the case that works of art do not enter the archive with this level of provenance, but rather gain authenticity through the context of the archive's existing collections.

Both Taylor and Spurgeon focus on the idea of a "statement of artistic truth," which does not consider the inherent material qualities that are potentially useful to researchers. These authors have expressed their desire for archivists to become familiar with artistic language and form. Spurgeon states, "Archivists and curators who recognize the cultural power and significance of the visual image must learn together to verbally describe pictorial content."[10] Their work provides archivists with a discourse that is useful for understanding how art fits into the parameters of an archival collection, and the manner in which documentary and evidential value of such works is determined. Both agree that works of art are

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[8] Taylor, 417.
[9] Spurgeon, 69.
[10] Ibid., 73.

more than just images and they warrant the same careful description and arrangement as textual documents.

Their proposed solutions for providing access to visual materials are to facilitate the intervention of art historians/curators for understanding art from a documentary point of view, and to utilize a specific language that adequately describes the works and expresses their value. Although they agree that there is indeed value for visual materials as records, neither Taylor nor Spurgeon directly addresses the processes of appraisal and description.

Archival literature has addressed the issue of visual materials in archives to some extent, but there are still many questions remaining. It is interesting to note that since Spurgeon's article of 1983, there has been only one dominant voice speaking to these issues and bringing them into the twenty-first century. Joan Schwartz has written extensively on existing archival theory and how it still does not address the nature and value of visual materials.[11] The changing nature of recorded information and the increase in visual materials and the types of visual materials that are consumed leads to a necessary reevaluation of archival practices. She questions how much longer textual models can be applied to visual materials with impunity, and suggests that it is necessary to reach outside of the archival discipline in order to improve the standard approaches to the processes of appraisal, arrangement, and description of visual materials. Schwartz would not agree with Taylor that the same techniques constructed for textual materials could be applied directly to visual works.

Schwartz's suggestion to reach outside of the archival discipline is one way to address the issues that have been ignored by Taylor and Spurgeon. Two such fields that lend themselves to a discussion of archival materials are art history and anthropology. Theories of the history of photography touch widely upon the institutional treatment and archival existence of photographs, and many ideas from this facet of art history can be applied to a larger assessment of visual materials.[12] Within the field of anthropology, material culture analysis "allows us to question ingrained assumptions concerning the superiority of language over other forms of expression, such as visual/material forms, and constitutes objects

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[11] Joan Schwartz, "Negotiating the Visual Turn: New Perspectives on Images and Archives." *The American Archivist* 67, no. 1 (2004): 107–122 (http://www.archivists.org/periodicals/aa_v67/schwartz.pdf), and "Having New Eyes: Spaces of Archives, Landscapes of Power." *Archives and Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 1 (2007): 321–362 (http://archivo.cartagena.es/files/36-173-DOC_FICHERO1/15-schwartz_having.pdf).

[12] See John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

as important bridges between mental and physical worlds."[13] Through the lens of such theories, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how visual materials act as documents, therefore widening the scope of archival interpretations of value.

## The Postmodern Condition of the Archive

The "archive" is a buzzword across many disciplines, specifically in contemporary art history,[14] sociology,[15] and anthropology. The problem with its popularity is that there is a deep divide between the discourse of these other fields of study and the archival community. Rarely do these fields acknowledge archivists or the archival profession, and consequently archival literature does not address its own treatment in external discourses.[16]

However, the contexts in which archives are discussed have been addressed internally, namely the postmodern condition of archives and the archival profession. Postmodernism has swept across academia and has introduced ideas regarding the abandonment of a fixed perspective, leading to the exploration of multiple narratives of history. The application of postmodern thought to the field of archives has produced a newfound awareness of the state of the archive as an institution of cultural production and has facilitated a self-reflexive understanding of the role of the archivist as a producer and custodian of cultural memory.[17] Such an assessment is met with opposition not in the literature, but rather in practice because archival work is seen as being "most effective when it is unobtrusive or largely invisible."[18]

Within Pierre Bourdieu's field of cultural production,[19] institutions such as museums, libraries, and archives (what he calls "artistic mediators") act as social agents that are active participants in the production of value and cultivation of meaning (Bourdieu calls this "symbolic production") for the works within their collections. Archivists, therefore, play a role in this symbolic production in their

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[13] Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, "Introduction: Photographs as Objects," in *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 4.

[14] See Tagg, 1988.

[15] See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[16] Schwartz, "Having New Eyes."

[17] Issues of memory in the archive constitute a large portion of contemporary archival literature and would be impossible to explore within the scope of this paper.

[18] Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives." *The American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 28.

[19] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. R. Johnson (New York, NY: Columbia University Press).

active selection and omission of recorded information through the process of appraisal.[20] An overall awareness by archivists of their role as an active mediator and creator of collective memory adds another layer to our understanding of the visual materials that exist in this context. In the space of the archive, visual materials must be understood as a document or record; art and images are as much a part of collective memory as textual materials, and their treatment within the institution of the archive should therefore reflect this documentary status.

## Institutional Treatment of Visual Materials

The understanding of a work of art or pictorial object "changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader."[21] Depending on the collection to which a work belongs, the institution as an artistic mediator attributes various meanings to the same object. Spurgeon traces the intersecting history of two institutions – the National Gallery of Canada and the Public Archives of Canada – in order to determine how art is understood in each context. He notes that archives collect textual records that contain "inherent evidential, informational, and historical value," while museums contain a collection of art that is an expression of "taste, beauty and creative excellence."[22] In the space of the National Gallery, art is utilized for exhibition and as a cultivation of taste. Spurgeon uses the example of Canadian landscape paintings in the Gallery's collection that were known for their national fame and artistic expression, but when these same works were accepted into the National Archives they were regarded as the documentation of the Canadian landscape.

Materials such as photographs, illuminated manuscripts, and maps readily lend themselves to serve as documentary evidence because of the nature of their content and the intention behind their manufacture. Their evidential nature provides an easy assessment of an exact truth, while paintings, drawings, and prints are not generally utilized as records but are rather used for their content and seen as an interpretation rather than a truth. Although aesthetic content is a significant aspect of visual materials, there is much to be gained by also exploring the materiality of images.

Rather than assessing visual materials as images and passive objects, they "can be seen as a material document that has played an active role in history."[23] The centrality of the medium is not commonly a consideration for textual records,

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[20] Nesmith, 28.
[21] Bourdieu, 30.
[22] Spurgeon, 60.
[23] Joanna Sassoon, "Photographic Materiality in the Age of Digital Reproduction," in *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 199.

which explains the lack of material literacy within archival practice. A further investigation of the physicality of visual materials facilitates an understanding of the social interaction between objects and people, as well as the impact of this relationship on the life of the object. Through an exploration of a work's materiality by considering the evidence of its manufacture, as well as the work's origins, history and social existence, it becomes apparent that there is a distinct separation of form and content that leads to a further consideration of the object as a document. By considering the value of the work's material qualities, those elements that define the work as a document are no longer tied to content alone.

The potential result of applying textual models to visual materials is the loss of this archival value. By ignoring the inherent qualities of pictorial images, it becomes difficult to assign value beyond that which is obviously expressed in its content. It is generally assumed that images are more easily understood than text, which could lead to an inferior assessment of their archival value. Spurgeon suggests that the solution is for the archivist to have an understanding of the history of art in order to define or assess the aesthetic and documentary value of a work of art. Although this process is necessary, archival description cannot be executed from surface content alone.[24]

An alternate solution that allows for a consideration of the work beyond its content would be to advocate for the archivist's familiarity with material and visual literacy.[25] Such skills would enhance the archivist's understanding of the material and intellectual concerns of visual materials and would facilitate "an ability to critically dissect a document composed of elements such as time, light, sound, and motion; and an ability to translate these elements into a verbal description."[26] In utilizing the skills of visual literacy, archivists would be able to recognize the unique characteristics of visual materials and use written language in order to express the contents of a collection, leading to the creation of improved finding aids and cataloged records.

There are three levels of visual awareness described by Elisabeth Kaplan and Jeffrey Mifflin, that are followed when analyzing visual materials: 1) Superficial awareness: determining the content, or the "of". This is the most straightforward step. 2) Concrete awareness: the work's "aboutness." Determining concrete subject content often requires additional knowledge. 3) Abstract awareness: addressing purely visual elements. This is the most elusive step, and requires "an understanding of the convention of particular media in their

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[24] Schwartz, "Negotiating the Visual Turn."

[25] Ala Rekrut, "Material Literacy: Reading Records as Material Culture." *Archivaria* 60 (2005): 11–37. http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12513/13640.

[26] Elisabeth Kaplan and Jeffrey Mifflin, "Mind and Sight: Visual Literacy and the Archivist." *Archives and Social Sciences: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 1 (1997): 137. http://archivo.cartagena.es/files/36-167-DOC_FICHERO1/09-kaplanmifflin_mind.pdf.

particular context."[27] The possibilities of a visually literate interpretation of an image are enhanced when the archivist maintains the visual works in context with related materials.

Utilizing a combination of aesthetic and material qualities, visual materials present users of archival collections with unique research opportunities. Within the context of the archive, "individual visual records, acquired comprehensively, extensively, and according to plan, can provide sufficient visual information to permit the verification of hypotheses about the nature of various phenomena."[28] When organized by form or subject, e.g., a specialized collection based on medium, the collection, with the aid of accurate and complete metadata, facilitates research rather than search. Large numbers of visual records provide evidence and comparative material that is not accessible in sparse collections.[29]

The evidential value of visual materials, when considered through the lens of their material qualities, is therefore based on the collection as a whole. In studying a group of works, a researcher is able to examine the comparative contexts, rather than single images that do not belong to a larger narrative of physical or intellectual manufacture. This value can only be preserved if the provenance, origins, and connections are maintained with metadata, because when works are extracted from their contexts or original order (e.g., photographs taken from an album to be placed with similarly themed photographs) visual narratives are reduced to individual images and the opportunities for research become limited.[30]

## Digitization

The issues associated with the description and maintenance of the archival value of visual materials are further complicated in processes of digitization. Although the implications of digitizing visual materials have been widely examined in the fields of anthropology, art history, and media studies,[31] there has been an alarming lack of discussion of such matters in the archival literature. Beyond the well-documented guidelines for best practices, there is an alarming unawareness of the larger implications of digitization in the archival community. Only through an understanding of the aforementioned techniques that facilitate the description and proper definition of the archival value of visual materials will archivists be equipped to transfer that value into a digital format. The literature also has yet to address the individual "archival properties of digital surrogates" as

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Estelle Jussim, "The Research Uses of Visual Information." *Library Trends* 25 (1977): 765.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Schwartz, "Negotiating the Visual Turn."

[31] See Schwartz, "Having New Eyes," 2007 and Sassoon, 2004.

unique objects.[32] This transference is inseparable from the institution's goals in providing optimal access to digitized works and facilitating an understanding of the new uses for digital materials.

There are a number of reasons why an institution decides to digitize all or parts of their holdings, the main reason being access. Archives are discovering that patrons now expect instantaneous access to materials, especially pictorial images. It is important to note that digitization is not commonly utilized as a method of preservation, as digital preservation has its own set of issues and it can be argued that the nature of digital materials does not allow for the faithful or consistent depiction of their analog counterparts. Regardless of the reasons for digitizing, there is always the act of mediation in the active selection of materials that will and will not be made available in digital form.

As in the processes of appraisal and selection of materials for disposal and retention, the archivist takes on a fundamental mediating role while communicating between the image and user.[33] The postmodern nature of the role of the archivist is expanded to include the institutional control over what is made accessible, but the criteria for the selection of materials for digitization is neither regarded nor documented under the same policies and guidelines as the procedure of appraisal.

The production of digital images is a technical process that is not limited to creating an image but includes the manner in which the files are stored, labeled, and accessed. As previously explained, the archival value of a pictorial object can be validated through its aesthetic qualities as well as the evidence of its manufacture. The creation of a digital surrogate eliminates the latter in favor of the former, and instead of revealing information about the object's origins, surrogates reveal contemporary cultural practices regarding the mode in which the data is constructed and transferred. In an examination of the type of file, the embedded metadata, resolution, modes of storage, etc., it becomes easy to determine by and for whom the digital object was created. The information related to the digital replica that relates to the creation and movement of the data replaces the material evidence of the work's manufacture.[34] Digital information does not allow for the examination of the material qualities that make up a work of art, and the viewer is not prompted to seek this information from the surface of the image, but rather from the embedded and stored data. In changing the way in which we evaluate visual information (by physical examination versus the

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[32] Paul Conway, "Modes of Seeing: Digitized Photographic Archives and the Experienced User." *The American Archivist* 73 (2010): 430.

[33] Ibid., 427.

[34] Jasmine Burns, "Digital Facsimiles and the Modern Viewer: Medieval Manuscripts and Archival Practice in the Age of New Media." *Art Documentation* 33, no. 2 (2014): 148-167.

investigation of technical elements) there evolves a distinct separation between the viewers of the digital and material objects.

Therefore, an implication of digitization of which archivists should become aware is the loss of physicality and the material information that supports archival value. Digital surrogates carry visual, technical, and archival properties that influence the way in which users interact with digital material,[35] while the material forms often "reflect the content of the images through reference to other kinds of objects."[36] Images separated from their material forms are standardized in processes of digitization during which the distinction between the material forms is eliminated. Without the material evidence of a work's unique existence,[37] questions of fidelity and authenticity are raised. Additionally, the popularity of image editing platforms leaves open the question of the reliability of digital information as a record.

Through the separation of materiality and aesthetics, digitization encourages a focus purely on subject content.[38] It could be argued that digital surrogates limit the understanding of the work because of the treatment of visual materials in digital form as aesthetic objects instead of documents of evidence. Such a separation results in the destruction of original order through the de-contextualization of archival materials. In physical form, there exist "complex problems with the relationship of physical structure, intellectual integrity, and the representation of spatial hierarchy," which are eliminated or left out in digital form.[39] Images that have been removed from their archival narrative (such as single photographs taken from an album) become content-based digital orphans, without context and therefore without evidential value.[40]

The solution to the problem of lost archival value is to provide substantial and complete metadata and complex data structures. By utilizing appropriate metadata schemas that have been specifically constructed for visual materials, the physical qualities of the work can be expressed in writing. Universal metadata schemas and cataloging standards are similarly based on bibliographic materials and are not always adaptable to the needs of image cataloging. However, there have been a number of advances in this field as standards have been adapted and controlled vocabularies have been constructed to create better access to image collections. The literature in this field addresses concerns related to the intellectual control of visual materials, subject analysis, and providing access.

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[35] Conway, 425–462.

[36] Edwards and Hart, 426.

[37] For a discussion of the significance of singularity and material evidence of a work of art, see Benjamin, 1978.

[38] Sassoon, 186–187.

[39] Conway, 446.

[40] Sassoon, 186–187.

These vocabularies are designed not only to describe content – iconographical themes and visual processes – but also to communicate context – media, style, artistic genre, etc. The use of multiple vocabularies is to support picture researchers who are interested in "subject content (the information communicated, conveyed, or documented in an image) as well as genre and format (the processes, techniques, and materials used to make the image)."[41] The main issue with such in-depth cataloging is the specialized knowledge required of the cataloger. This refers back to the solutions proposed by Taylor and Spurgeon in facilitating a larger understanding of the field of art history, as the cataloger will have to decide which terms are most accurate and will be utilized by image researchers. Such difficulties are exacerbated by the subjective nature of art and visual materials: their aesthetic qualities and the potentially emotional responses complicate the process of providing consistent records.[42]

Metadata has the potential to be used to preserve archival value and integrity through thorough description, but it also has to take a larger role than to "simply replicate the ordering schemes of the past."[43] Although it is difficult to preserve the relationships between materials in a digital environment, it is possible with complex data structures that communicate informational hierarchies and original order. Tools such as hypertext can be used to create archival associations and construct a web of relative and relevant information that is not bound by the contents of a single collection, because "technology challenges the notion that a collection can reside only in one archive."[44]

## Conclusions

The three major benefits of digitization are new research, increased use, and new users.[45] Opportunities for new research are of particular interest to image researchers, as they may face the problem that many of their resources are fragmented and spread across several collections in various geographic locations. Digital access to these works is instantaneous; therefore, scholars who previously spent most of their time trying to see the objects, can now spend that time analyzing them. The increased use of resources stems from the notion that researchers may not have been aware of the existence of some of the resources, as

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[41] Arden Alexander and Tracy Meehleib, "The Thesaurus for Graphic Materials: Its History, Use, and Future." *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 31 (2001): 191.

[42] Jane Greenberg, "Intellectual Control of Visual Archives: A Comparison Between the Art and Architecture Thesaurus and the Library of Congress Thesaurus for Graphic Materials." *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1993) 85-117.

[43] Sassoon, 199.

[44] Trace, 62.

[45] Peter Hirtle, "The Impact of Digitization on Special Collections in Libraries." *Libraries and Culture* 37 (2002): 42. https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/libraries_and_culture/v037/37.1hirtle.html.

in hard copy the material is deemed obscure and is rarely cited, whereas in digital form it becomes a core resource.[46] Perhaps the largest impact of digitization on image collections is the introduction of new users. The widespread availability of images on the World Wide Web produces hundreds of thousands of search queries per day, which may lead the right person to the right archive, the key to which is the production of complete and accurate metadata.

This level of institutional mediation in providing access to cultural heritage information supports what Bourdieu has termed the "hierarchy of genres." Within the fields that facilitate the production of culture, the symbolic production of art and literature is defined by their institutional treatment. This status creates a hierarchy of genres within each field that has been debated from Plato to the nineteenth-century Salons of Paris. The present-day translation of Bourdieu's hierarchy as it applies to the field of art manifests in the digital environment, where the most important creators and artistic genres are reproduced online at an extremely high frequency (e.g., images of the Mona Lisa, paintings by Picasso, etc.), while works lower in the hierarchy may require more specific search terms. Within the digital environment the hierarchy is expressed through metadata. In the archive, metadata takes on much the same role in establishing the frequency of use and determining the hierarchical relationships between records and collections. The duties then fall onto the archivist to suitably express these relationships, while also maintaining the research value of the individual materials.

In the application of visual and material literacy in processes such as appraisal, arrangement, and description, archivists are able to communicate the content and context of virtual materials through language. The use of specialized tools and knowledge in creating metadata and indexed records enhances these processes in defining and translating the archival value and original order of visual materials into a digital environment. Utilizing these resources in archives fosters an understanding of visual materials beyond their aesthetic qualities, therefore leading to more effective description and appraisal practices that ultimately allow for better access to visual information.

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[46] Ibid., 44.

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