

Looking After Your Records: Personal Collections Guidance Notes from V&A Theatre & Performance

Many people find that they have collections of papers or archives in their care and would like some guidance in how to look after them. The scope of personal collections can be very wide: they can range from large archives of individuals or families through to small stamp, postcard, or cigarette card collections. Personal collections relating to performing arts often include programmes and press cuttings.

There are also many reasons why you may have personal collections: they may be a record of your own work or hobbies, or you may hold them in trust for a deceased relative or a friend. You may be hoping to sell or bequeath them for a substantial sum, or you may have no interest in their monetary value but feel that they should be kept for posterity.

For businesses, including self-employed people, there may be some legal requirements to keep certain records, often for a set period of time, and in any case it makes good business sense to manage records properly. Those issues are beyond the immediate scope of this guidance but see the section on “Where to get advice”.

First steps

The first decision that needs to be made is whether you want to keep the papers at all. Do they have a sentimental value to you or someone close to you? Do you use them in your work or study? Do you enjoy holding them and looking at them? Do you feel that they should be kept for future generations of your family? Do you feel that

they should be in an archive or a museum? Do you need advice as to their importance? Could you give them up? Do you want to sell them on the open market and, if so, how would you feel about them going to a private collector or abroad?

These are decisions that you need to take, in consultation with family members or others who may be involved. If you are thinking of selling, giving or bequeathing an archive, you do need to be certain that you own it or have been authorised by the owner to do so.

Keeping archives yourself

Archives tend to be defined as papers or records that have been selected as important enough to be kept “permanently”. With personal papers held by individuals or families (rather than in an archive or museum) it is difficult to say what is meant by “permanently”.

If you decide that the best course of action is to keep the collection yourself then you need to think about the long term: if you think the collection is important enough that it should be kept for future generations, then you will need to make arrangements as to what happens to it after your death. Does your family know of its importance? Will they be willing and able to care for it? Do you need to make other arrangements?

These are difficult and to some extent morbid questions. It may well be that you like owning the collections but that you don't think it has a huge value (whether monetary or historical) for others. If you are not sure then maybe you should seek advice.

Storage

If you decide to keep the collection yourself, you should think about providing a suitable environment. There are commercial archive storage businesses which may be able to offer solutions, but you may

need or prefer to keep the items at home. If you are doing this, you should ensure that they are kept:

- Securely (i.e. under lock and key – if they have a high monetary value you may wish to discuss this with your insurer);
- Safely (not somewhere prone to flooding, excessive heat, rodents, or alongside flammable materials);
- In a environment which is beneficial to the collection (cool – below 20 ° C if possible and dry – below 60% relative humidity; free from dust and direct sunlight). There are more stringent standards for archive institutions.

You should also avoid the use of particularly damaging storage materials, particularly adhesives and sticky tapes / labels, as these can leave a damaging residue.

From time to time you should monitor your collection and the environment in which it is stored. In particular you should watch out for changes in humidity and temperature, which can lead to mould growth. If the collection includes fabrics it is important to check for insect pests such as moths. Regular cleaning and dusting can also help prevent damage and infestation, and in particular you should not store an archive where there might be food waste.

In summary, you should definitely try to avoid storing your collection:

- in direct sunlight or artificial light;
- anywhere damp, or where humidity fluctuates;
- next to a heater or where temperature fluctuates;
- near a source of polluted air such as a coal fire or opening window;
- anywhere vulnerable to insect or rodent infestation, such as a food storage area.

Specialist materials

There are plenty of specialist materials out there to help you to preserve your collections. Before you go spending any money, you should think about some principles:

- A box or a good cabinet protects items from dust, light and water (floods) and also reduces the effects of temperature and humidity changes – boxes should be of archival quality (lignin-free) materials; cabinets should be metal rather than wood, preferably coated steel.
- It is good if you can use inert or lignin-free materials to store items, but most damage comes from poor handling – if you can get individual items into inert polyester sleeves this means that they can be seen and handled without damage. Be careful though – some things don't take well to polyester sleeves, notably pastels and glass negatives;
- Plastic and brass paperclips and fastenings don't rust – try to replace steel ones with these;
- Most paper items can be cleaned using a soft brush – don't introduce chemicals unless you really know what you're doing;
- If you have mounted pictures try to make sure that you use good quality mount board and make sure the picture does not come into contact with the wooden frame.

Insurance

It may be worth going to a specialist broker in order to get the most appropriate cover. Some points to consider are:

- have you taken measures to reduce risk? This may help to lower premiums;
- what level of cover is needed? Are you concerned about loss of value or do you just want to be able to cover the costs of repair if something is damaged?

Conservation

At times you may wish to get advice from a professional conservator, or to have individual items treated or repaired professionally. The best place to begin is the Conservation Register (www.conservationregister.com), searches can be carried out by object type and geographical location, or by an individual conservator's name. Each business has met specified criteria to be included and between them cover a wide range of skills.

Intellectual property and copyright

This is a very confusing area and if it is important to your collection you should take some time to read more about the subject, or even seek legal advice. The intellectual property (copyrights, patents etc) in your collection is not the same as the ownership of the physical items. A simple example would be if you receive a letter: you own the physical item but the author of the letter owns the copyright. It is particularly worth being sure of the copyright status of your collection when:

- publishing or allowing publication of items (including websites, TV programmes etc);
- selling the collection or donating it to an archive;
- allowing a researcher to see it.

Using archival repositories

One solution for your archive may be to deposit it with an archival repository, such as your local record office. They will usually need to take ownership of the archive (but not necessarily copyright etc) in order to justify their expense in storing, cataloguing and preserving it. They will usually allow access by the general public to your records, so make sure you tell them about confidential or sensitive

records. Giving your archive to an archival repository means that it can be accessed, researched and enjoyed by future generations.

Some points to remember are:

- public bodies operate under strict rules – once they own a collection they will not be able to lend it out (even to the original donor) unless certain conditions are met;
- it is not usually good practice for an archive to be “split up” between different repositories, as this makes research access difficult;
- try not to be offended if a repository cannot take your collection – repositories have to be selective (only about five per cent of the records created by government departments get into The National Archives, so you’re not alone).

Performing arts materials

Some specific issues relate to performing arts collections: for instance, these types of collection often contain programmes or playbills. Although some may be rare and valuable, there does not appear to be much of a market in more recent programmes, and you may have difficulty in finding a specialist dealer who will take them. The V& A Theatre Museum can provide information on both dealers and on archive repositories that actively collect theatre programmes: contact their enquiry service for more details.

Another type of material often found in theatrical archives is newspaper cuttings. These are often on poor quality paper and are easily damaged. You should try to reduce handling as much as possible, and of course, keep them in a box to protect from light and dust.

Where to get advice

The National Archives offers a number of advisory services to all custodians of records, including private owners, archivists and anyone with responsibility for caring for archive collections. A list of regional liaison officers is available from the website.

Website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives

For clear practical advice on all aspects of collection care, see the Collections Link website, which provides authoritative information on security, preservation, insurance, copyright etc.

Website: www.collectionslink.org.uk

The Theatre Information Group (TIG) exists to provide a specialist network for those working with performing arts collections in the UK. It offers information, meetings and events and it encourages (and in some cases manages) collaborative projects. Membership is open to any institution or corporate body in the United Kingdom concerned with the acquisition, preservation, display and recording of material relating to any branch of the performing arts, and to all similarly interested individuals.

The above information is by no means comprehensive but is intended as a brief introduction to the subject. If you have any comments or feedback please contact V& A Theatre Collections (tmenquiries@vam.ac.uk).

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