

Fictions of the archive

Jessica Berenbeim

How does an archive transform an object? Everything in an archive is an object; even preserved digital codes have a physical existence. Charters, seals, rolls, registers: all of these have a material and formal character that is critical to their meaning. The objects I have in mind here, however, are of a particular kind: those without writing, not created as records, but which have somehow found their way into the archives. While medieval rulers kept some documents in their treasuries, modern states conversely sometimes keep paintings, sculpture, jewelry, and textiles in their archives.

My purpose here is, first, to consider the effect of this archival incorporation on the “unwritten object.” What happens, conceptually, to non-textual objects integrated into an archive’s ostensibly textual environment? Second, it is to consider the effect of such unwritten objects on an archive. What part do they play in the archive as a representational whole (and, hence, in its epistemic scheme)? The discussion that follows therefore involves both structural analysis of the archive as a functional context and the formal analysis of individual objects. I hope these two lines of inquiry will contribute to understanding how an object’s meaning can be constructed by

I would like to thank: Ann Blair, Pete de Bolla, James Fox, Carol Humphrey, Alexander Massouras, James Simpson, Tom Stammers, and Shannon Wearing; the Faculty of English and Jesus College, Cambridge; the Faculty of History and Magdalen College, Oxford. I owe particular thanks to The National Archives of the United Kingdom and Friends of the National Archives, for the Knowledge Exchange Fellowship that allowed me to embark on this research, as well as to many people at TNA who offered advice during the course of the fellowship and beyond: Amanda Bevan, Stephen Cable, Ann Chow, James Cronan, Sean Cunningham, Elke Cwiertina, Emma Down, Paul Dryburgh, Julie Halls, Vicky Iglkowski, Katy Mair, Jess Nelson, Rose Mitchell, Amy Sampson, Ruth Selman, Ben Trowbridge, and especially Adrian Ailes.

different kinds of institutions, as well as how different kinds of objects affect the production of historical knowledge.

Museums, of course, hold many objects like the ones I describe. Both museums and archives, and the ways their respective keepers have structured their contents, often figure in discussions of the construction of memory—that is, the institution as representation.¹ For example, in the words of Donald Preziosi, “the museum is one of the most brilliant and powerful genres of modern fiction... Museums are...representational artifacts in their own right, portraying ‘history’ or the past through objects and images.”² Compare this to the *Spiegelbildlichkeit* (mirror-imagining) of the organization of a government and its archive, to use Peter Rück’s term. As he describes it: “Archival sources represent power and law...[they] are a self-interpretation, a self-reflection, of the ruling power. Anyone who...has only archives at his disposal, if his position is

¹ Museums, archives, and libraries are often invoked collectively, but less often comparatively theorized. Some notable exceptions are: A. Blair and J. Milligan, “Introduction,” *Archival Science* 7 (2007): 292–94; A. Walsham, “The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe,” *Past & Present* 230, suppl. 11 (2016): 30–35. These articles preface two journal special issues on the history of archives, edited by the articles’ authors. See also the introductory essays for two further such special issues: A. Blair, “Introduction,” *Archival Science* 10 (2010): 195–200; F. de Vivo and M. P. Donato, “Scholarly Practices in the Archives, 1500–1800,” *Storia della Storiografia* 68 (2015): 15–20. There are also several excellent individual studies in all four issues.

² D. Preziosi, “Collecting / Museums,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. R. S. Nelson and R. Shiff, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 2003), 407–8. See also especially S. Bann, *The Clothing of Clio: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge, 1984), 77–92.

uncritical, necessarily falls prey to the image [*Bild*] that the archiving institution has formulated of the object under investigation.”³

Like many museums, archives can be historical representations; they can also be political and legal representations. A modern national archive will have elements of all three, having absorbed many subsidiary departmental, institutional, and private archives (which in turn, Russian-doll-fashion, once absorbed still others), and then subjected them all to successive reorganizations. This complexity confuses the traditional dichotomy in archival studies of collection and deposit, which distinguishes not only what museums and archives represent (history, government), but also how they represent: by iconic depiction or indexical trace. Both kinds of institution incorporate their contents as components of this representation.

The title of the present article is meant to evoke these notions, of the museum as a genre of fiction and the archive as a representation, also playing on the title of Natalie Zemon Davis’s *Fiction in the Archives*.⁴ The analysis here therefore draws on broader conversations about the fictionality of cultural institutions and of archival records themselves. The museum as fiction, the document as fiction—and, here, the archive as fiction. These fictions of the archive also offer a

³ “Archivalische Quellen repräsentieren die Macht und das Recht... [sie] sind eine Selbstinterpretation, eine Selbstbespiegelung der herrschenden Macht. Wer... nur Archivalien zur Verfügung hat, ist deshalb, sofern sein Standpunkt unkritisch ist, notwendigerweise ein Opfer des Bildes, das die archivbildende Institution über den untersuchten Gegenstand entworfen hat.” P. Rück, “Die Ordnung der herzoglich savoyischen Archive unter Amadeus VIII. (1398–1451),” *Archivalische Zeitschrift* 67 (1971): 100, 11–12. I will quote published translations where available; other translations are my own. See also E. Yakel, “Archival Representation,” *Archival Science* 3 (2003): 1–25; and A. L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ, 2009), 28, for “colonial archives... as technologies that reproduced those states themselves.”

⁴ N. Z. Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA, 1987).

response to longstanding discussions in the critical study of historical writing, by tracing the “fictions of factual representation” back a step.⁵ Before the historian fashions a narrative from an archive, how is that archive itself fashioned? In other words, the form of an archive, too, has content: the archival study of history takes place within a textual environment that is already a representation.

Archives are not for the most part specifically narrative fictions. They construct images—of nation-states, cities, religious institutions, professions. As fictive images, their expression is in the first instance spatial, in the disposition of records within the architectural space of the archive itself. That structure then manifests itself in the archive’s system of reference codes, usually a

⁵ H. White, “The Fictions of Factual Representation” [1976], in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), 121–34; H. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987). See also M. de Certeau, *L’écriture de l’histoire* (Paris, 1975), chap. 2, on the “historiographical operation” (l’opération historiographique); English trans.: *The Writing of History*, trans. T. Conley (New York, 1988). See also Paul Ricœur on the “phases” of the “historiographical operation,” which he defines as “archival research, explanation, and representation” (l’archivage, l’explication, la représentation); he also speaks of “unwritten testimonies” (témoignages non écrits), such as “urns, tools, coins, painted or sculpted images, funerary objects, the remains of buildings, and so forth,” but as historical traces external to archives as repositories of “written testimonies” (témoignages écrits). P. Ricœur, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (Paris, 2000), 170, 171, 215; English trans.: *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer (Chicago, 2004), 137, 138, 170. For discussions of archives and the production of historical knowledge, see the essays in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, ed. F. X. Blouin and W. G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor, 2007), especially Part II, and further in Blouin and Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authorities in History and the Archives* (Oxford, 2011).

series of letters and numbers.⁶ By incorporating them within these spatial and alphanumeric systems, archives turn all their objects, written and unwritten, into records. Unwritten objects—as it were, the readymades of the archive—in turn constitute a significant element in an archive’s descriptive fiction, by seeming to validate the archive as an authentic image of the past.

Readymades of the archive

Let me first clarify what I mean by “archive.” I mean, very simply, a specific repository of documents. The examples I will consider in detail below are mostly in The National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter abbreviated TNA), a large state archive with several record series of medieval inception. TNA is in some ways distinctive, but nevertheless shares a set of features with archives in general and other great national archives in particular—in the first instance, an organizational structure that embodies the (usually written) material traces of its state’s political and legal system. Records enter the archive by deposit, as they are either received or created through the interrelated functions of the departments of state: here, for example, the Chancery, Exchequer, Colonial Office, and so forth. Full subsidiary archives have entered as the result of institutional changes, and all the records have been subject to rearrangement among spaces and sites in tandem with political, legal, and cultural change—in this case, most broadly, the shifting structures and priorities of English government, and of the English and later British

⁶ These two systems, the spatial and the alphanumeric, do not inevitably correspond. Notably, records perceived to have particular value are often moved to more secure storage areas without a change to reference code—in those cases, then, the reference code is a vestige of a historical spatial disposition. On the relations between inventory and “topography” in the custodial history of the medieval *Trésor des chartes*, see: O. Guyotjeannin and Y. Potin, “La fabrique de la perpétuité: Le Trésor des chartes et les archives du royaume (XIII^e–XIX^e siècle),” *Revue de synthèse* 125 (2004): 18–20.

Empire, over the course of about a thousand years.⁷ This sense of “archive” therefore has a more literal and restricted meaning than “the archive” as conceived more broadly in critical theory and diffused throughout the humanities and social sciences. That said, the conceptual understanding of actual archives advocated here is strongly inflected by the Foucauldian sense of the archive as an articulated, relational system. Far from undifferentiated spaces of memory, it “is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass... [that] they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities.”⁸

⁷ For aspects of the history of TNA in particular, see especially B. Wilkinson, *The Chancery under Edward III* (Manchester, 1929); M. S. Giuseppi, *Guide to the Contents of the Public Record Office*, rev. ed. (London, 1963–68); *The Records of the Nation*, ed. G. H. Martin and P. Spufford (Woodbridge, 1990), especially E. Hallam, “Nine Centuries of Keeping the Public Records,” 23–42; A. Lawes, *Chancery Lane: “The Strong Box of the Empire”* (Kew, 1996). For medieval English imperialism, see especially R. R. Davies, *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles, 1093–1343* (Oxford, 2000). On the active and often gendered effects of imperial archives on the production of historical writing, see A. Burton, “Archive Stories: Gender in the Making of Imperial and Colonial Histories” [2004], repr. in *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing, and Teaching British Imperialism* (Durham, 2011), 94–105.

⁸ “Mais l’archive, c’est aussi ce qui fait que toutes ces choses dites ne s’amassent pas indéfiniment dans une multitude amorphe... qu’elles se groupent en figures distinctes, se composent les unes avec les autres selon des rapports multiples, se maintiennent ou s’estompent selon des régularités spécifiques.” M. Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir* (Paris, 1969), 170; English trans.: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London, 1972), 128–29. On the “blurring” of “‘the archive’ for historians and ‘the Archive’ for cultural theorists” as a mode of scholarship, see Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 45; for a range of ways authors have used the term “archive,” see E. Yale, “The History of Archives: The State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 18 (2015): 335–36. Jacques Derrida’s widely influential *Archive Fever* lecture, which took place in London in June 1994, has been published in various forms in both English and French; the earliest English version in print is J. Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” trans. E. Prenowitz, *Diacritics* 25 (1995): 9–63. For the dissemination, publication, and translation history of *Mal d’archive*, see C. Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (Manchester, 2001), 1–10, especially 5–9 and n. 1, with some analysis of its reception in the historical profession. Although as Stoler points out, “Derrida’s intervention came only after the ‘archival turn’ was already being made” (44).

Let me also clarify further the distinct kind of object to which I'm referring. In the first place I mean objects without writing that became documents exclusively by virtue of context. This category of unwritten, unintended records excludes artistic documents, no matter how critical their material features may be: something like, say, the 1254 diplomatic charter of Alfonso X (E 30/1108) (fig. 1), the illuminated indentures commissioned by Henry VII (E 33), or Francis I's ratification of the treaty of Amiens (E 30/1109) (fig. 2).⁹ Tally sticks may at first seem especially object-like, but they are just documents on a wood support (E 402/1–3B) (fig. 3).¹⁰ Maps, photographs, and registered designs are perhaps more complicated. These can have little or no text, and can often be of professional execution no different from that of contemporary painting, printmaking, engraving, fine art photography, and graphic design—that is, from objects executed in the same or similar media, some explicitly created as works of art. Art museums now collect all these types of objects. But those now in archives do ultimately tend to be “intentional” documents, deliberate bearers of visual testimony: for example, the mid-sixteenth-century map endorsed “The Plan of the Debatable Land between England and Scotland” (MPF 1/257) (fig. 4), or the mid-twentieth-century photographs of railway stations “in need of repair or renovation” (e.g.,

⁹ All document references are to TNA records unless otherwise noted; I have also consulted the TNA catalogue in all cases, which is in typescript on the open shelves of the reading room and online at <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>. For the Henry VII indentures, see also M. Condon, “God Save the King: Piety, Propaganda, and the Perpetual Memorial,” in *Westminster Abbey: The Lady Chapel of Henry VII*, ed. T. Tatton-Brown and R. Mortimer (Woodbridge, 2003), 59–97.

¹⁰ H. Jenkinson, “Exchequer Tallies,” *Archaeologia* 62 (1911): 367–80; H. Jenkinson, “Medieval Tallies, Public and Private,” *Archaeologia* 74 (1925): 289–351.

AN 28/5/3) (fig. 5).¹¹ The creators of these works, like those of the illuminated charters, tally sticks, and registered designs, conceived these objects as records, even if they didn't necessarily envision all the vicissitudes of their custodial futures. A purse, a pin, a portrait: their creators did not.

These are what I would call the “readymades” of the archive. In some cases, one might more closely compare them to Duchamp's notion of the reciprocal readymade, as articulated in one of his *Green Box* notes: “Readymade Réciproque—Se servir d'un Rembrandt comme planche à repasser” (Reciprocal Readymade—Use a Rembrandt as an ironing board).¹² Rather than an object transformed into a work of art by virtue of context, the reciprocal readymade is an “intentional” work of art transformed by its use as something else. Archival context and function effect profound changes on these unwritten objects, even if the objects themselves in no way vis-

¹¹ However with the caveat that TNA's map and photography holdings are vast, varied, and complex. For the maps, see especially R. Mitchell and A. Janes, *Maps: Their Untold Stories; Map Treasures from The National Archives* (London, 2014), 28–29 for MPF 1/257. For the photographs, see “Photographs” (TNA Research Guide) at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk.

¹² M. Duchamp, *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires même* (Boîte verte) (Paris, 1934). See the catalogue entry and digital facsimile of London, Tate Britain, no. T07744, at www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks. See also S. Bloch, “Marcel Duchamp's Green Box,” *Art Journal* 34 (1974): 25–29.

ibly change.¹³ If a gallery or fine art museum can turn everything into art—from preindustrial implement to mass-manufactured commodity—then an archive turns everything into a record. What, then, does it mean for an object to become a record?¹⁴ For the purposes of this discussion, I would say that an archival record has two essential features:

1. It constitutes proof or evidence of some event or fact.
2. It belongs to a structured, hierarchical system of classification that articulates its relationship to other records.

The object itself may never change, but the nature of both proof and context does change over time as the archive changes, with successive reorganizations and incorporations into other archives. Therefore, an unaltered object’s meaning shifts again and again, along a path that can be traced through the composition of its archive.

¹³ For the lives of objects, compare, for example, the very different perspectives presented in I. Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), 64–91; G. Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, NY, 1974); G. Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (1984; repr., Evanston, IL, 1997); A. Gell, “Vogel’s Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps,” *Journal of Material Culture* 1 (1996): 15–38; H. Molesworth, “Work Avoidance: The Everyday Life of Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades,” *Art Journal* 57 (1998): 50–61. For the lives of written documents, see de Certeau’s comments on the “transforming [of] certain classified objects into ‘documents,’” *Writing of History*, 72–73 and 74–75; and Jenkinson’s definition of the specifically archival document, for the purposes of archive administration, which was both functional and contextual: “one which *was drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether public or private) of which itself formed a part; and subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors.*” H. Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (1922; rev. ed. London, 1937), 11.

¹⁴ For the traditional distinction in archival studies between “records” and “archives,” see E. Ketelaar, “Muniments and Monuments: The Dawn of Archives as Cultural Patrimony,” *Archival Science* 7 (2007): 343–44; for an early definition of “record” in what he terms the “correct sense,” see Jenkinson, *Manual*, 2n2.

In addition to the comparable effects of institutional context and function, analogy to the readymade is particularly significant here in relation to concepts of disinterest and affect, objectivity and subjectivity. The readymade draws fundamentally on longstanding discourses in aesthetics, and particularly its critical proposition of disinterest; in the words of Margaret Iversen, “Duchamp pushed the logic of disinterestedness to such an extreme that it bites its own tail.”¹⁵ Disinterest likewise figures centrally in the philosophy of history, where the relation of perceiving subject and perceived object appears in another guise as the relation of historian and source.¹⁶ That is to say, the “objectivity question” can be reframed in aesthetic terms, with the readymades of the archive as a meeting point between these two discourses of disinterest in aesthetics and historical epistemology. In both cases, an “extreme” manifestation of disinterest constitutes a kind of validation. This is what happens on the level of archival context, where the presence of unwritten, unintended records signifies the exemplary detachment of the archive’s rationalized system. On the level of the object itself, when submitted to visual rather than contextual analysis, that perceptual encounter conversely becomes a moment of profound affective engagement. These unwritten records create ruptures or disturbances in the historian’s disinterest—and as such, seem to constitute an opposite but nevertheless equal validation. It is this interplay of de-

¹⁵ M. Iversen, “Readymade, Found Object, Photograph,” *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (2004): 47. Note that she further comments: “While no direct line can be drawn between Kant’s disinterestedness and Duchamp’s aesthetic of indifference... the so-called anti-aesthetic tradition in twentieth-century art is, in fact, a development of one of the defining features of the aesthetic itself, one that became a strategy for short-circuiting the imposition of subjectivity” (48).

¹⁶ For objectivity and/or subjectivity in historical philosophy and practice, see especially W. H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History*, rev. ed. (New York, 1960); P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988); R. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 138–41; and F. Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca, NY, 2017), 220–25.

tachment and emotion that gives the archive and the “unwritten object” such mutually expressive power.

For although these kinds of objects represent a small proportion of the contents of archives, their numbers in absolute terms are significant. More significant still is the emotional impression they make on historians working in archives—their affective charge. In Arlette Farge’s classic *Goût de l’archive*, for example, the author describes her encounter with two textiles in two different archives: a letter written on cloth and a purse of seeds attached to another letter:

I feel cloth under my fingers... I slip the cloth out from between two pieces of paper. The fabric is white and solid, covered in beautiful firm handwriting. It’s a letter, the work of a prisoner in the Bastille, many years into a long sentence. He is writing his wife a pleading and affectionate letter. ... I come across a slightly swollen file, open it delicately, and find a small pouch of coarse fabric pinned to the top of a page, bulging with the outlines of objects that I cannot immediately identify. A letter from a country doctor accompanies the pouch. He is writing to the Royal Society of Medicine to report that he knows a young girl, sincere and virtuous, whose breasts discharge handfuls of seeds each month. The attached bag is the proof. ... These two objects discovered accidentally while consulting the documents communicate the feeling of reality better than anything else can.¹⁷

The last sentence in the original is: “On ne peut mieux décrire *l’effet de réel* ressenti qu’avec ces deux objets retrouvés au hasard de la consultation des dossiers [*italics mine*].” Her echo of Barthes’s “reality effect” is presumably conscious; the echo of *objet trouvé*, found object, in *objet retrouvé* is likely unconscious, but nevertheless suggestive.¹⁸

¹⁷ A. Farge, *Le goût de l’archive* (Paris, 1989), 18; English trans.: *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. T. Scott-Railton (New Haven, CT, 2013), 9–10.

¹⁸ R. Barthes, “L’effet de réel” [1968], repr. in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris, 1984), 167; English trans.: “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. R. Howard (Berkeley, CA, 1989), 141–48.

It's also a revealing set of examples, these "two objects discovered accidentally while consulting the documents"; are they not-documents, or are they unusual documents? In fact, these two objects, though both pieces of cloth amid piles of paper, are actually a contrasting pair. The letter on cloth is like a tally stick, a document on an unusual material support (although it differs from a tally stick in being an unusual support for the period as well). The purse is more complicated: it has no writing, no documentary function by design. However it is being used as evidence, and its meaning is clarified by its place in the archive as a whole.

As Farge notes, the purse comes from the Bibliothèque de l'Académie nationale de médecine, SRM 179.¹⁹ It is therefore now within the walls of a library, although a library that among its holdings includes an archive, that of the Société royale de médecine. The SRM has two major classes of record: Registers (*Registres*) and Bundles (*Liasses*). The purse belongs to the latter, within a category identified by catalogue rubric as "Medical memoranda, case reports, and correspondence addressed to the SRM, accompanied by directives and notes of the superintendents responsible for processing them."²⁰ This category is designated by a range, SRM 115B–201A, not by a subsidiary class number; within this range, SRM 178–179 dossiers 1–28 are doctors' correspondence and reports, of which dossier 4 is that of Bousquet de Gassendi, a doctor in Draguignan. Within dossier 4, items 2–13 include those described in Farge's ekphrasis. The catalogue describes these items as pertaining to a "Case report on a girl of thirteen, who produces worms through her breasts, and these worms change into butterflies." These involve letters, re-

¹⁹ Farge, *Allure of the Archives*, 10n8.

²⁰ "Mémoires, observations et correspondance médicale adressés à la SRM, accompagnés d'instructions et de notes des commissaires chargés de leur traitement."

ports (“Report of Jussieu: these are not butterflies, but flower seeds”), and—among the letters and report catalogued as items 7–12—“samples of these seeds

—

—

— .”²¹

The purse of seeds was a witness in a professional debate, and survives within dossier 4 as testimony to the phenomenon described; the debate takes place within a series of such medical reports, which then belongs to a longer series of more varied reports and memoranda. These are preserved as the records of a professional institution, and finally, housed within a wider collection devoted to the history of that profession. As such, that collection incorporates this unwritten object into the archive’s larger constructed image of the profession as an institutionally coherent processor of scientific knowledge.²²

The archive’s objects

There are purses among TNA’s records as well, to take a notable example of one ready-made record, which has likewise been transformed into cloth evidence through its archival context (fig. 6). In this case, its testimony is not medical, but rather both—sequentially—legal and

²¹ “Observation sur une fille de 13 ans qui rend des vers par les mamelles et ces vers se changent en papillon”; “Rapport de Jussieu: ce ne sont pas des papillons mais des graines des fleurs”; “Même sujet avec échantillons de ces grains”. See: “Inventaire détaillé des archives de la Société royale de médecine (Bibliothèque de l’Académie de Médecine, SRM 88–204),” at <http://bibliotheque.academie-medecine.fr/static/SRM>.

²² See A. Abbot, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor* (Chicago, 1988), 1, on the idea of the system of professions as “a thread that ties the lawyer in a country village to the justice on the Supreme Court bench.”

historical. It is a rectangular envelope-style purse, embroidered with the same scene on both front and reverse: a shepherdess on the left points to a small white dog standing beside her on its hind legs; on the right, another female figure kneels in front of a colonnade, while a brightly colored bird perches on the balustrade above. A tree divides the scene in half, while a doe and a herd of sheep wander in the fore- and middle ground, and a butterfly hovers at the upper left corner. On the reverse, the triangular flap has an abbreviated variation of the same image, which partly obscures the repeated full scene when closed; when opened, it reveals a pink silk interior lining. Inside is a three-sided crystal seal.

The purse, with its enclosed seal, belong to the archive's Chancery Exhibits. In the course of a Chancery case, both the complainant(s) and defendant(s) in a suit could submit "Exhibits" as evidence, or petition the court to order that such evidence be produced by the opposing side. Some parties later collected their Exhibits, but others did not. The codes C 103–16, C 171, and J 90 all contain Exhibits in early modern Chancery equity suits, although the exhibited objects themselves—mostly written documents, but by no means always—can be many centuries older. In fact, the Exhibits include some of the earliest documents in the archives. For example, C 115/59/4095 is a land grant of Robert de Losinga, eleventh-century bishop of Hereford. Issued in 1085, it survives now within series C 115, also known as the "Duchess of Norfolk's Deeds." This refers to the nineteenth-century Duchess of Norfolk, Frances Fitzroy-Scudamore (1750–1820), whose mental illness led to the estates' supervision in Chancery, with proceedings only concluded in 1829.²³

²³ Public Record Office, *Master Harvey's Exhibits: Duchess of Norfolk's Deeds (C 115)*, List & Index Society 274 (Kew[?], 1999); I. Atherton, "Scudamore Family (per. 1500–1820), gentry," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

Other documents submitted as Exhibits in the same suit as the purse and seal date as late as the mid-eighteenth century, but these objects are probably earlier in manufacture, likely seventeenth-century or early eighteenth-century. Near the corner of the purse's lining is inscribed the number 36, its item number within C 106/149, one of the boxes of Chancery Exhibits for the case *Northleigh v. Spicer*. The series designated C 106 comprises "Master Richards's Exhibits": in addition to their reference codes, Chancery equity records also bear the names of their final custodians, the last cohort of Chancery Masters when the office was dissolved in 1852.²⁴ The embroidered purse's current reference, however, is no longer within C 106 of Exhibits. It is now SC 16/45: Special Collections, an "artificial" series. Of course, no archive series is natural, but this distinction signifies a true difference—although the operative word is really "collection." This is a museological, rather than an archival series. The purse did, in fact, become an exhibit in the old Public Record Office Museum, listed under the rubric "MISCELLANEOUS OBJECTS" in the museum's catalogue, and displayed within a case alongside seven other objects of various kinds (for example, "*A round chip-box, lined with paper, and covered with dark-green leather. The lid is ornamented with a rose crowned and inscribed 'Vivat Regina'*").²⁵ These changes in reference code and context signify a series of changes in meaning. The seal shifts from an object

²⁴ In addition to the catalogue entries, especially the introductions to individual series, see also H. Horwitz, *A Guide to Chancery Equity Records and Proceedings, 1600–1800*, 2nd ed. (Kew, 1998), as well as the TNA research guides "Chancery Equity Suits before 1558" and "Chancery Equity Suits after 1558," both at www.nationalarchives.gov.uk. See also: Public Record Office, *Chancery Masters' Exhibits*, List & Index Society 13–14 (London, 1966). I refer to these as "legal records" in a general sense, rather than in the specific sense of law as distinct from equity.

²⁵ See H. C. Maxwell-Lyte, *Catalogue of Manuscripts and Other Objects in the Museum of the Public Record Office*, 14th ed. (London, 1933), 88–89. The catalogue is organized according to the display, which it describes precisely. The introduction to the fourteenth edition briefly outlines the catalogue's history, noting those objects—including the purse and crystal seal—that were not part of the original display in the catalogue's first edition of 1902 (iv–vi).

for validating documents (at least through closure, if not also through authentication), and becomes a document itself—first legal, then historical. Given the significant role of embroidery in female education at that time, the purse perhaps began life as a domestic personal object, in its creation as well as its subsequent function.²⁶ It then became an object for display in a legal context, and finally an object for display of yet another kind, in the museum. The purse’s transformation from Exhibit to exhibit signifies its transformation from part of a legal representation to part of a historical one.

Although readymade records appear in many other series, the Chancery Exhibits particularly abound with objects that create vivid impressions in a context generative of theoretical reflection: “Re: ROSS, a bankrupt: Box of coral and glass beads” (C 104/151); “UNKNOWN CAUSE: Lock of hair: a letter accompanying it states that it was to be made into two rings for a Miss Hatch, the hair belonging to a friend of hers” (C 114/86). In each case, an arresting and often startlingly intimate detail, often hinting—but obscurely—at some half-perceptible suffering or loss, effects a kind of ellipsis, a passage of intense connection with the dead followed by a lacuna of their ultimate unknowability. That emotional intensity of connection offered by the object itself is then locked in a mutually reinforcing opposition with the ostensibly disinterested context of the archival system. This dynamic relation therefore fuses the subjective and objective states that are, paradoxically, both fundamental to ideas about the production of historical knowledge.

²⁶ L. Arthur, *Embroidery 1600–1700 at the Burrell Collection* (London, 1995), 27, 101; M. M. Brooks, *English Embroideries* (Oxford, 2004), 7, 10–12, 64; M. M. Brooks, “Performing Curiosity: Re-viewing Women’s Domestic Embroidery in Seventeenth-Century England,” *The Seventeenth Century* 32 (2017): 1–29. Many thanks to Carol Humphrey at the Fitzwilliam Museum for discussing this object with me in correspondence.

One of the most evocative Exhibits is a large cache of such records, possessions stored together in a box with the words “Re. Mary Smith a Lu[nat]ic” written in ink across the top (C 114/190) (fig. 7).²⁷ Next to these words on the top of the box are modern stickers with the reference code on the left, and a red seal impression on the right. An inventory pasted inside the lid, dated May 30, 1811, and signed “Thomas Long | Christ’s Hospital | London,” identifies the contents as “Property of Mary Smith a Lunatic.” On the front of the box, the words, “Mary Smith | a Lunatic” appear yet again in black ink, but in a different hand. These words run across a hand-painted pattern of squares, dots, and lozenges in dark blue (possibly faded black), which decorate the top of the box as well. This design obscures pages of printed text lining the box, placed in different orientations. Some of this text is intermittently legible behind the painted pattern and ink handwriting: “In Russia, the betrothing is performed with ecclesiastical rites”; “He was buried in Westminster abbey”; “calyxes hairy”; “a native of Denmark”; “the territory comprehends 290 kiliometres [*sic*] and 12 communes.” These apparently miscellaneous contents in fact come from that paragon of ordered information, an encyclopedia: the pages are torn from volume 4 of Abraham Rees’s *Cyclopaedia*, at the entries for “Betrothment,” “Betterton, Thomas,” “Betonica,” and “Bettembourg.” Rees’s *Cyclopaedia* was issued in eighty-five parts between 1802 and 1820, so these pages had been published less than ten years before their reuse, but more like-

²⁷ For C 114/190 as an example of TNA’s depth of source material for the history of mental health, see V. Iglkowski, “A Glimpse into Mental Health History” (2015), at <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/glimpse-mental-health-history>; C 114/190 was also the subject of several short video works submitted to TNA’s Files on Film competition.

ly less than five.²⁸ Even as it was still in the process of being written, compiled, and published, this contemporary effort to control information—part of the same broader cultural impulse as the formation and re-formation of national museums, archives, and libraries—was simultaneously fragmented and transformed, from a manifestation of order to one of disorder.

The box holds many objects, including four miniature portraits (C 114/190/2/5–8); a pocket watch (C 114/190/2/27); six shirt pins, two with flat glass pictorial heads (C 114/190/2/1–6); a ring (C 114/190/2/24); one portrait “locket” (C 114/190/2/EXT 1); a silver box (C 114/190/2/21); and an almanac in a red leather portfolio cover (C 114/190/31).²⁹ Then, in a pocket in the portfolio’s inner cover are four circlets of paper, one with a painted quiver of arrows and three with delicate paper cut-outs of nature scenes. The pins’ figurative decorations have similar forms and themes: one depicts a sheaf of wheat, the other a minute landscape with two figures in the foreground. Most of the objects are numbered, and hence conceived, as two separate subsets within C 114/190, the reference code for this Exhibit. The configuration of assigned reference codes therefore changes this group of objects from a personal collection into a structured archive of evidential records, with the relationship among objects defined by their series, file, and item numbers.

When museums incorporate portrait miniatures, they appear in a wide range of contexts. Groups of miniatures can be selected and composed according to the artist’s perceived trajectory,

²⁸ *The Cyclopaedia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, ed. A. Rees (London, [1802]–1820). On encyclopedias, see R. Yeo, “Lost Encyclopedias: Before and After the Enlightenment,” *Book History* 10 (2007): 47–48. The box’s pastedowns also include pages from another text, which I haven’t been able to identify.

²⁹ The assignment of reference codes seems to have become somewhat confused, as evident from the overlapping numeration of pins and portraits.

the sitter's perceived status, or a perceived role in the development of the genre, its style or technique—in other words, they become part of the museum's constructed historical representation. The configuration here expresses something different. Though classed together under C 114/190/2, the portraits are not numbered sequentially, but rather the reference codes appear to divide them by perceived function. That division follows the 1811 inventory pastedown, which describes them respectively as “a Locket with Portrait” and “Four Miniatures.” These classifications are somewhat confusing, as three of the “four miniatures” are in what would probably more accurately be called lockets, with hinged covers, while the “locket” is in an open frame, designed as a pendant with suspension ring; the fourth of the “four miniatures” is unframed (fig. 8a–c). In formal and material terms, one might see these five objects divided into two groups: three of relatively finished execution, those in hinged frames (e.g., 8b); and the unframed miniature and the pendant, both sketched in lighter, less-saturated color (8a, 8c). By contrast, the 1811 pastedown inventory and the archive's reference system isolate the portrait pendant from the others.

There's some justification for this separation based on subject: the pendant depicts a child, while the others all portray adults. But it's also the pendant's context, its combination with other similar objects yet also its isolation from them, that lends it a peculiar emphasis, first as a legal and then as an archival record. In a way, this structural isolation distinguishes the pendant among all the other records at this item level, underlining it as a kind of “thesis object” of the file (C 114/190). Although all five portraits could have been either stored or carried, the pendant's suspension ring calls attention to its ability to be worn on the body, and the setting displays—but, within the papered box, also hides—the rather sentimental image of a child of vulnerable age. All of this together suggests some painful separation and acute sadness, while at the same time alien-

ating those emotions through the controlled nature of the systematic structure of reference codes. Paradoxically, this imposition of order further accentuates the sense of melancholy, through the dissonance of the personal and (implied) emotional nature of the original collecting principle, and the impersonal and externally regulated nature of legal and archival order. That dissonance—between the archive’s objects and its image—is part of what gives the archival readymade its affective charge, and the archival fiction its reality effect.

The tragic significance here comes entirely from the archive context—from the object not as an object, but as a record. That context includes not only the catalogue’s structure, but also the viewer’s experience. First, this set of objects is not displayed, but needs to be summoned, as it were, from the vaults. Then, the excessive repetition—itself irrational—of the word “lunatic” all over the box, on top, in front, and inside primes the eye and mind. The disjointed and thematically disparate scraps of text running beneath the painted pattern and the repeated word “lunatic” themselves create an aesthetic of madness—ironically, given the nature of the source, as the cutting-and-pasting obscures its own organizing principle and reverses the encyclopedia’s extreme order into extreme disorder. And yet nothing about these objects themselves, individually or collectively, specifically indicates mental distress, confusion, or isolation. In fact, like virtually all of the examples discussed so far—the seeds at the SRM, the purse, the Duchess of Norfolk’s Deeds—what one sees again is a woman’s body, labor, or property subsumed within the archive’s implicitly male organizational system, and redefined in the service of the archive’s representation.

The archive’s image

What part do such readymade records then play in that archival representation? In the contemporary historical picture, these objects tend to be physically extracted from their series for secure storage or for display, or extracted virtually as the focus of special attention. In their perceived ability to “communicate the feeling of reality better than anything else can,” they contribute to the notion of an archive as a portal into the past, and therefore lend a kind of epistemological credibility to the archive’s other records.

But recall the situation of the embroidered purse in its artificial series (fig. 6): that constructed historical picture seems, counterintuitively, deliberately directionless and arbitrary. The Public Record Office display specifically extracts what are in fact mostly readymade records and isolates them from their previous archival contexts to create a purposefully “miscellaneous” group. The catalogue description emphasizes this apparent irrationality: “Exhibits in a Chancery suit. . . . These are interesting examples of the miscellaneous objects which are accidentally preserved among the Public Records.”³⁰ Compare this attraction to the “accidental” to Duchamp’s sense of *hasard*, and to the objects Farge encounters *par hasard* in the archives—but also to Alfred Gell’s comments that “objects of concept art are only *apparently* arbitrary.”³¹ The designation within their twentieth-century museological representation as (apparently) “MISCELLANEOUS OBJECTS” at first seems somewhat mysterious; such a display presents these records as a diversion from, rather than the essence of, the more true or fitting written sources of historical knowledge.

³⁰ Maxwell-Lyte, *Catalogue*, 89.

³¹ See H. Molderings, *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance: Art as Experiment* (New York, 2010); Farge, *Goût de l’archive*, 18; Gell, “Vogel’s Net,” 35–37.

This presentation of the objects, however, can also suggest the authority of an archive as a whole: even these extraneous items, which enter the archive “accidentally,” nevertheless remain there. Once they come in, they never go out—however extraneous, a record is something that will never be lost or destroyed. The Chancery Exhibits are again an interesting case, as in the normal course of action they would have been claimed by the parties to a suit, and indeed many others were. The retention of unclaimed Exhibits over generations calls attention to this impression of indestructibility, but also allows the Chancery archive, as a legal representation, to depict the full course of the equity process from initial pleading to final decree.³²

The public display of these ostensibly miscellaneous objects also evokes a kind of authoritative mode of representation, through its allusion to acquisition by deposit rather than collection, disinterest rather than desire. An archive—the display suggests—passively submits to the actions of history and bears even its irrational material traces, rather than actively selecting objects from the past (and therefore perhaps distorting the picture of “how it really was”). Finally, in their “*apparently* arbitrary” presence, readymade records actually deny the ordered and constructed or fictional character of an archive’s image. They make the archive seem natural.

FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. *Privilegio rodado* of Alfonso X, King of Castile, 1254. Ink on parchment, with gold seal attached on silk cords. Kew, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, TNA E 30/1108.

³² See also Steedman, *Dust*, 163, on the nineteenth-century development of “History, as a form of narrative and as a modern academic discipline” and its “resemblance to the life-sciences, where the task was also to think about the past...about the imperishability of matter.”

Figure 2. Ratification of the Treaty of Amiens, by Francis I, King of France, 1527. Ink on parchment, with gold seal (not pictured). Kew, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, TNA E 30/1109.

Figure 3. Tally sticks, 1290s. Ink on wood. Kew, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, TNA E 402/2.

Figure 4. Map of disputed land on the border of England and Scotland, 1552. Ink on paper. Kew, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, TNA MPF 1/257.

Figure 5. Sowerby Bridge Station Roof, 1956. Gelatin silver print. Kew, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, TNA AN 28/5/3.

Figure 6. Embroidered purse with three-sided crystal seal, probably late seventeenth or early eighteenth century (by 1748). Kew, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, TNA SC 16/45.

Figure 7. Box of Mary Smith's possessions, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (by 1811). Ink on printed paper, wax, modern paper labels. Kew, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, TNA C 114/190.

Figures 8a–c. Portrait miniatures, later eighteenth century (by 1811). Watercolor on ivory. Kew, The National Archives of the United Kingdom, TNA C 114/190.