

# CONSERVATION CENTER

*for Art & Historic Artifacts*

Archives Are Not Neutral





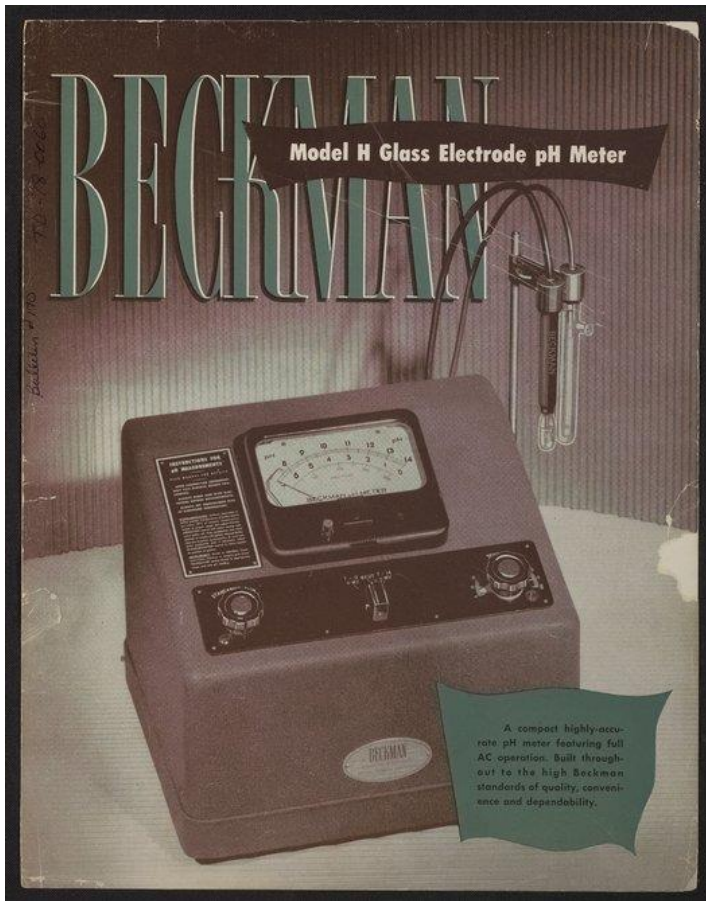
# Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts



*In a typical year:*

- Preservation Services specialists complete over 50 survey projects.
- Approximately 60 CCAHA-sponsored workshops, conferences, webinars, and training sessions are presented.
- The Digital Imaging Services staff digitizes thousands of pages of fragile archival documents, books, and photographs.
- Conservators assess and treat more than 6,000 individual artifacts, from over 400 clients.
- Housing & Framing Services house approx. 75% of the artifacts treated (folder, sleeve, box, mat and frame, or sealed package).





# Why should we care?

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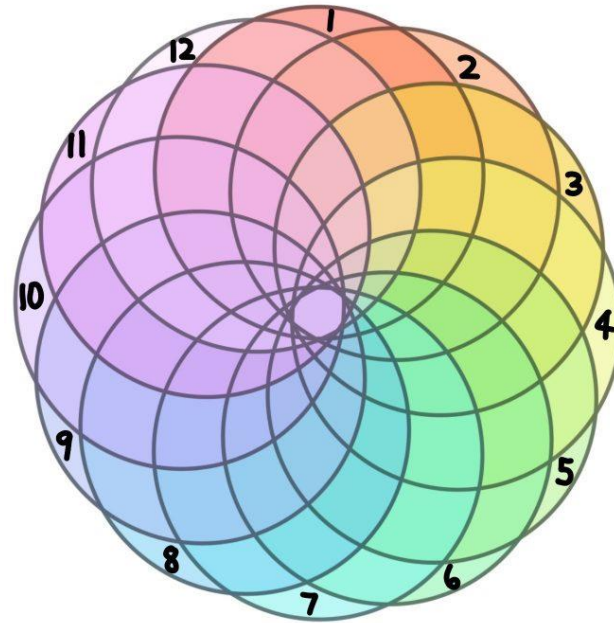
Beckman Instruments, Inc. "Beckman Model H Glass Electrode PH Meter," circa 1950.  
Beckman Historical Collection, Box 19, Folder 20. Science History Institute. Philadelphia.  
<https://digital.sciencehistory.org/works/v118rf01w>



# Personal demographics

- ❖ White
- ❖ European Ancestry
- ❖ Cis/hetero female
- ❖ 40s
- ❖ East Coast of the U.S.
- ❖ Advanced degree
- ❖ Both parents went to college
- ❖ Middle class
- ❖ Etc., etc., etc. ...

# INTERSECTIONALITY



- 1 Race
- 2 Ethnicity
- 3 Gender identity
- 4 Class
- 5 Language
- 6 Religion
- 7 Ability
- 8 Sexuality
- 9 Mental health
- 10 Age
- 11 Education
- 12 Body size  
(...and many more...)

Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it locks and intersects. It is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and privilege.

- Kimberlé Crenshaw -

Figure 163 – What is your age? (Q83)

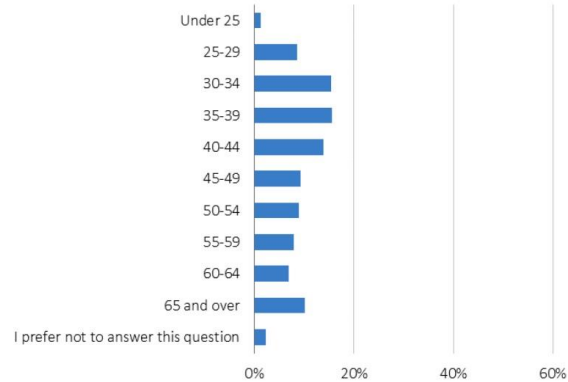


Figure 164 – Please indicate your race-ethnicity(ies). Select all that apply. (Q84)

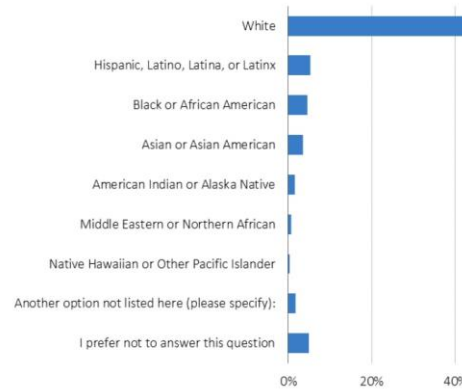
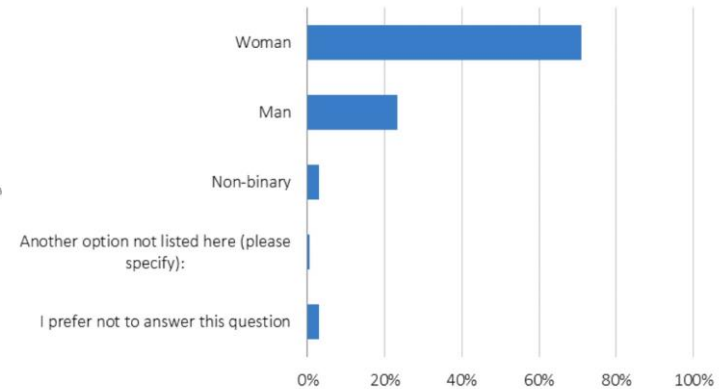


Figure 165 – Please indicate your gender(s). Select all that apply. (Q85)



## Demographics in the field: Archives

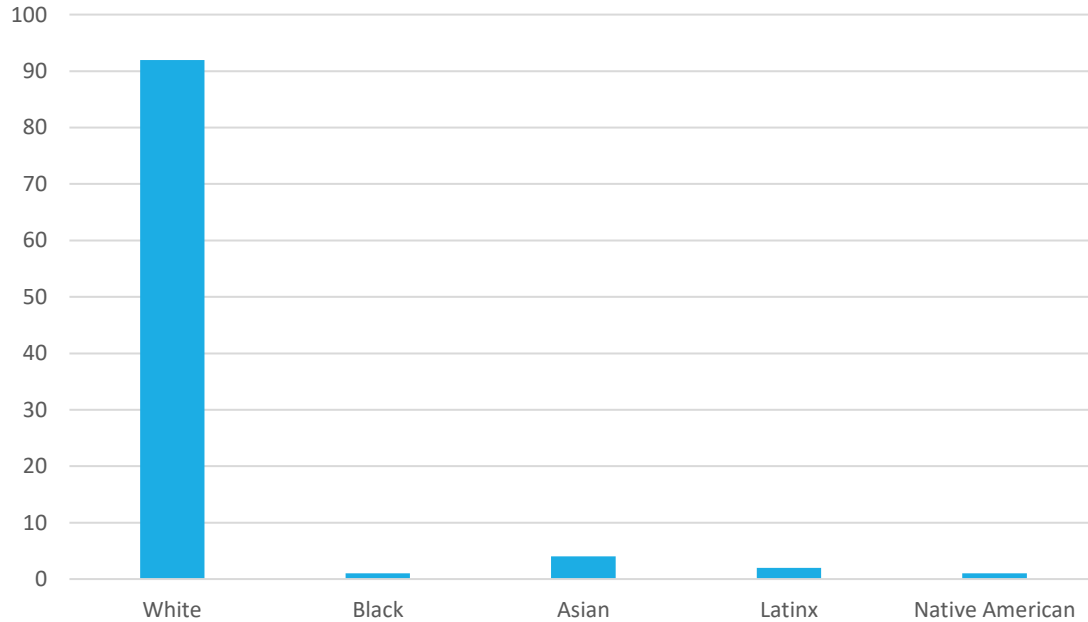
A \*Census Survey Report, 2022: <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/acensus-ii-all-archivists-survey-report/>

# SAA commitment to diversity

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*SAA promotes the value and diversity of archives and archivists. We are the preeminent source of professional resources and the principal communication hub for American archivists. — [SAA Mission Statement, Strategic Plan 2014-2018](#)*

*As a professional association that benefits from the participation of people from all backgrounds, the Society of American Archivists strives to ensure that its membership, the holdings that archivists acquire and manage, and the users whom archivists serve reflect the evolving diversity of society. — [SAA Statement on Diversity and Inclusion](#)*



## Demographics in the field: Conservation

AIC Membership Designation Working Group. 2018. 2018 AIC Member Designation Survey: Preliminary Report. Last Modified 15 May 2018.

# FAIC commitment to diversity

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*We welcome, engage, and support all voices, backgrounds, and perspectives to catalyze change in the field and foster a deeper understanding of our shared humanity. We support equity and equitable decision-making and opportunity. We strive to provide an inclusive environment and accessible opportunities for all partners and participants, especially those that are underrepresented or marginalized. — [FAIC Core Values](#)*



aids.  
The next few years will be crucial for seeing if Encoded Archival Description can live up to its promise of improving the creation of and access to archival finding aids.

## FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD FINDING AID

Whatever form they take—whether on the World Wide Web or in a three-ring binder—good finding aids tend to share certain features. A good finding aid is

1. *Intended for the researcher*, not for the edification of the archivist (who may be a frustrated researcher). The focus should be on *use by others*, rather than on showcasing the literary abilities of the archivist. First and foremost, a finding aid must help the researcher to *find* materials.
2. *Objective about the collection*. Finding aids should have a professional tone. Whether one is describing a collection from the NAACP or the Ku Klux Klan, an archivist's personal sentiments should not cloud the description.
3. *Aware of the needs of a wide variety of researchers*. An archivist who knows the interests of current and

# Objectivity $\neq$ Neutrality



AIP Emilio Segrè Visual Archives, George Gamow Collection

# Archives are not neutral!

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- ❖ Archives are created and described by humans – we all bring our own experiences, context, and biases to the work we do
- ❖ Even the systems and standards put in place to try to reduce choice and subjectivity were created by humans – typically white humans with relative privilege
- ❖ “True neutrality is an impossible aspiration, because we as archivists are individual practitioners called upon to distill the historic record through the inescapable lens of our personal worldviews. These unexamined paradigms shape our values, which determine what we collect, present, study, and name.” – Sam Winn, 2017

Archivists have changed “from being passive keepers of an entire documentary residue left by creators to becoming active shapers of the archival heritage.” – Terry Cook, 1997

# What would it look like for archives to be neutral?

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- ❖ Decisions are made based on a disinterested, possibly data-driven formula
- ❖ ***Authenticity*** matters, but not ***truth***
- ❖ ***Value*** is consistent and measurable
- ❖ Access is entirely equal to all
- ❖ Descriptions are clinical and standardized
- ❖ Representation in an archive is equal to representation in the community

# At what levels does neutrality falter?

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- ❖ We exist within systems that aren't neutral
  - Institutional – collections “absorb and reflect the inequalities, biases, ethnocentrism, and power imbalances that exist throughout our host societies” (Chris Bourg)
  - Individual



# Institutional infrastructure itself

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- ❖ “Traditional” institutions were created largely for a certain type of privileged elite to begin with
- ❖ Even public libraries – now seen as so openly welcoming – inherently for the privileged populace who could read, then segregated
- ❖ Academic institutions are even more restrictive!
- ❖ “To accept institutions as neutral means to accept the existing distribution of power they enforce and contribute to.” – Nathan “Mudy” Sentence, paraphrasing Robert Jensen



The Braddock Carnegie Library in Braddock, PA. David Kidd

# Decisions about what to collect

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“The politics of what we’ve traditionally preserved means the archive is filled with silences, absences, and distortions, mostly affecting the legacies of the less privileged, including black women, LGBTQ people, immigrants, poor people, and victims of police violence, to name a few. In the name of neutrality, we’re erasing people, communities and their humanity from the historical record.” – Bergis Jules, 2016

“When we base our purchasing decisions on circulation and popularity, we eliminate a big part of the market for niche topics and underrepresented authors.” – Chris Bourg, 2015

# Silences/gaps in the record

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- ❖ It's impossible to collect and preserve everything - resources are finite
- ❖ Some exclusions are intentional, some are “neglectful complacency”
- ❖ Those lacking power and influence are the ones left out
- ❖ *(In other words, the “traditional record” has primarily been from the white, male perspective)*
- ❖ Ultimately, this means that many voices, perspectives, experiences, and contributions have been lost

<https://libguides.library.ohio.edu/archives-speccollections/silences>

# The problem with provenance

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- ❖ A colonial relic that, particularly with older records but still to this day, often exerts power imbalances
- ❖ Insufficient to address many born-digital resources
- ❖ “Users should see names not from an authorized source or agency but names asserted by people, organizations, and communities responsible for the shared creation, stewardship, and custody of records.” – Jarrett M. Drake

# Historic manipulation of the record

- ❖ **Freedom of Information Act** – enacted in 1967 as a result of misuse of government classification systems, amended numerous times
- ❖ **Presidential Records and Materials Act** – enacted in 1974 as a result of Nixon's attempts to destroy records (Watergate)
- ❖ **Sarbanes-Oxley Act** – enacted in 2002, partially in response to records destruction in companies like Enron



# Importance of language

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- ❖ Overtly offensive language
- ❖ Language once common and “inoffensive” now understood to be harmful
  - “Enslaved individuals”
- ❖ Language with ingrained bias depending on one’s position on the concept/issue
  - War in Ukraine vs. “special military operation”
- ❖ Language that has changed over time without positive/negative connotations
  - “Mobile phone,” “World Wide Web”
- ❖ Obscured identities
  - “Mrs. Husband’s Name,” records that were actually created by administrative assistants, secretaries, etc.





# The problem with the “default”

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“Tradition remains the sacred weapon oppressors repeatedly hold up whenever the need to maintain their privileges, hence to impose the form of the old on the content of the new, arises.” – Trinh T. Minh-ha



# Case study: Juan Gelman files

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- ❖ Argentine poet and human rights activist
- ❖ Princeton University, processed 2016
- ❖ Finding aid:  
<https://findingaids.princeton.edu/catalog/C1511>
- ❖ Includes typical contents of an artists' papers, but also "analog and born-digital files relating to the human rights investigations he conducted on the forced kidnapping and death of his son and daughter-in-law."
- ❖ Challenge opening and further processing electronic files with diacritics in the filename
- ❖ <https://medium.com/on-archivy/invisible-defaults-and-perceived-limitations-processing-the-juan-gelman-files-4187fdd36759#.937ja7vhb>



María Claudia García Iruretagoyena and Marcelo Ariel Gelman; circa 1976; Juan Gelman Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

# Reparative description practices

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- ❖ “Aims to remediate or contextualize potentially outdated or harmful language used in archival description and to create archival description that is accurate, inclusive, and community-centered.” – Yale University Libraries
- ❖ “Working towards collections’ description that appropriately represents subjects and is discoverable by patrons” – Dorothy Berry
- ❖ Think of archival description as an *iterative* process – can go back and adjust
- ❖ Engage communities to learn how *they* want to be described – don’t assume/project. Compensate them for their labor.
- ❖ If records are not in English, hire or engage practitioners who speak that language to process or consult
- ❖ Keep notes of changes so users can examine the history of the finding aid as an artifact
- ❖ Not a quick process, not necessarily one-and-done

# Harmful language statements

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❖ The Cataloging Lab - <https://cataloginglab.org/list-of-statements-on-bias-in-library-and-archives-description/>

“When processing (arranging, organizing, and describing) archival collections, and cataloging rare books, SCRC staff must make choices about what language to use when describing not just the books, papers, and records, but the people and organizations who created or who are represented in them. We recognize that many of our materials are created by and/or represent marginalized groups of people, and we believe it is our responsibility not only to describe those people and organizations accurately and respectfully, but to do so in a way that will not be harmful or offensive.

However, many of our finding aids (descriptions and inventories of collections) and library catalog records, which were created years or decades ago, may well include harmful language. SCRC is dedicated to revising and updating our descriptive language, but with hundreds of finding aids and thousands of library catalog records, this is ongoing and will take time.

Additionally, when processing new collections we will occasionally re-use language provided by creators or former owners of the collection, either because it provides important context about the materials or because it is a way to make the collections available for research use more quickly. In book cataloging, it is a common practice for efficiency to re-use catalog records created by other libraries.”

- Temple University Special Collections Research Center (excerpted from <https://library.temple.edu/policies/scrc-statement-on-potentially-harmful-language-in-archival-description-and-cataloging>)

# Conservators / Collection Care Staff Aren't Neutral

Strategic Goals from AIC's *Held In Trust* report:

- ❖ GOAL #1: Reconnect communities with their objects and incorporate community-based knowledge
- ❖ GOAL #2: Engage local and stakeholder communities with cultural heritage and preservation in inclusive ways
- ❖ GOAL #3: Cultivate more equitable, diverse, and inclusive recruitment, advancement, and work environments

El-Beshir, Isra and Sarah Scaturro. 2023. "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility." *Held in Trust*. <https://www.culturalheritage.org/docs/defaultsource/publications/reports/held-in-trust/held-in-trust-report.pdf>



# What can we do to continue building a truthful, meaningful historic record going forward?

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- ❖ “Re-examine [our] own professional assumptions, methods, and practices in light of the desired outcomes of justice and diversity” – Randall C. Jimerson
- ❖ Incorporate cultural competency training into academic programs
- ❖ Hold institutions and professional associations accountable for actually pursuing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility
- ❖ Involve new types of communities in the entirety of the archival process
  - Listen
  - Partner rather than trying to teach and/or take
- ❖ Provide access to a wider user base, in part by being receptive to a wider range of needs
- ❖ Be willing to take a stand – individually and collectively



# Reparative description initiatives

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- ❖ Yale Working Group: <https://guides.library.yale.edu/c.php?g=1140330&p=8319098>
- ❖ Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia *Anti-Racist Description Resources*: [https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr\\_final.pdf](https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf)
- ❖ Penn State *Inclusive Description Resource Guide*: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1axKzWaVY0SI00rbWrWsvhal4NN9eU1Xs/edit#gid=1609140969>
- ❖ Sunshine Digital Network “Introduction to Conscious Editing Series:” <https://sunshinestatedigitalnetwork.wordpress.com/2020/09/16/introduction-to-conscious-editing-series/>
- ❖ University of North Carolina Chapel Hill University Libraries *A Guide to Conscious Editing at Wilson Special Collections Library*: <https://library.unc.edu/2022/06/conscious-editing-guide/>

# Community-centered collecting initiatives

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- ❖ Crowd-sourced community-based archives and projects list (over 140 and counting!): <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1GlpATJhAJqmPvqWfDKpU5rQLA7eTUwmAsUEF83QrdAw/edit#gid=0>
- ❖ Documenting the Now: <https://www.docnow.io/>
- ❖ Archivists Responding to Climate Change: <https://projectarcc.org/>
- ❖ Digital Transgender Archive: <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/>
- ❖ A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland: <https://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/>
- ❖ Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project: <https://lgbthistory.pages.roanoke.edu/archives/>

# Questions?

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