



Looking to a Digital Future

In conversation with Anne Van Camp
Director of the Archives, Smithsonian Institution

The Smithsonian is a giant institution. It's not actually a museum in the conventional sense — it is, in fact, the largest museum and research complex in the world. Affectionately known across the U.S. as “the nation’s attic,” the Smithsonian is comprised of 19 museums and galleries which altogether hold more than 137 million items in its vast collections. Many are well-known destinations on the National Mall in Washington DC, such as the Air and Space Museum, the Museum of American History, and the National Museum of the American Indian, each attracting thousands of visitors daily.

A quasi-governmental entity, the Smithsonian also runs Washington DC’s highly popular National Zoo, and operates nine scientific research centres in several countries studying astrophysics, marine conservation, tropical research, and the environment. In addition, it works with 168 affiliate museums throughout the United States and abroad.

Ready for the Challenge

Anne Van Camp joined this massive enterprise in 2007 as the Director of the Smithsonian Institution Archives. Was she intimidated? Not at all. During a period when archives and museums

were being rapidly transformed, Anne was exceptionally prepared for tackling the huge challenges waiting for her at the Smithsonian. “I had a long, strong background with many different kinds of archives, but coming to the Smithsonian was a Mecca for me,” she said. “It brought together all my interests — museums, libraries and archives, because it was all of these things.” She hasn’t been disappointed, either. “It’s such a huge institution with so many hidden treasures, I learn something new every day.”

With Bachelors and Masters degrees in Library Science from the University of Cincinnati, Anne’s first professional position was working for David Rockefeller at the Chase Manhattan Corporate Archives in New York City. It was there she was first exposed to the imminent impact of technology on archive records, and readily saw and embraced the implications. “Over time, I was managing the Chase library and technological data purchasing, and being in a business environment, it was a lot further advanced than if I had been in academia. This was the first time I understood what it meant to work with lots of different kinds of technology, back when you needed a dedicated computer terminal for every different task you were doing,” she chuckled, remembering the workstations. >



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From the corporate world, she moved to academia as Director of Archives at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, a think tank dedicated to research in domestic policy and international affairs on the campus of Stanford University in California. At the Hoover Institute, Anne encountered another technology issue as an archivist: trying to record history as it was happening. "Technology was playing a big role in many of the revolutionary events unfolding around the world, and I was there at the very first burgeoning of uncontrolled online communication." She recalled, that one day shortly after she arrived, she got a call from someone who said she had to turn the video on and to get the video rolling immediately because the Berlin Wall was coming down. "I thought it was a joke, but it wasn't, it was the first time we could watch this amazing historical event in real time, and capture the scene ourselves." After that the Soviet Union collapsed, and it was a real frenzy, as Anne recalled, to capture it all so it could become part of the ongoing collection.

But that was not the only technology-based new challenge Anne had to solve as she watched current events become history. Another story she tells relates to the unprecedented protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989. "During the protests, it was the first time we really saw 'viral information,' as volumes of email, electronic messaging were coming out of China from local people trying to let outsiders know what was going on. There was someone at Hoover who was fascinated by this, and she was printing out everything coming across the internet in order to save it."

"I realised this is something we had to think about — how are we going to deal with this kind of electronic information? But there were no tools in place at the time to effectively save or organise emails like that. My vision was to make that extraordinary collection more known and accessible to scholars because it was so rich. It was a real eye-opener, because I began to see we had to figure out an effective way to deal with this massive amount of information being generated digitally so we could make sense of it over time. Experiencing those momentous events while I was at the Hoover Institute still haunts me today, and seeing that history put in context by the power of technology that created, captured and disseminated information was a real nexus."

Anne left the Hoover Institute to work for the Research Libraries Group (RLG), a consortium of 150 research libraries and similar institutions organised to share advanced research and development in technology, cataloguing systems, metadata management and related services. At RLG she worked with libraries, museums and archives all over the world helping them develop systems to make their collections accessible, such as creating online catalogues.

It was another effort to fit new technology into the archives environment, she explained. "We were at the point where people were starting to demand help for planning how to digitise their collections to put them on the internet, and I could see the whole landscape of cultural institutions, big and little, here and overseas, grappling with the very same issues. Problems relating to digitising media collections were especially on the rise, such as functional asset management tools and appropriate metadata standards. Our job was to help them come up with solutions that would work for diverse users through collaborations and by sharing their experiences."

It was this accumulation of leading-edge experience in the field that made her ready for the Smithsonian. "I thought, maybe this is another leap for me, to help this organisation come to grips with providing access to these amazing collections, tying them together, helping to preserve all this digital information that is becoming such a huge issue for the cultural heritage sector everywhere."

Directing the Smithsonian Institution Archives

Not part of any individual museum or other Smithsonian unit, the Smithsonian Institution Archives are an entity unto themselves. In the earliest organising documents of the Institution, the importance of maintaining archival records was explicitly mentioned, and the Archives' mission is to document the activities of the entire Smithsonian, all museums, galleries, research facilities and the National Zoological Park, to benefit the institutional pursuit of increasing knowledge and learning, and making it available to everyone.

The Archives is involved with appraising, acquiring and preserving the records of the Institution; >



About

Who: Anne Van Camp

Where: Smithsonian Institution

What: Director of the Archives

What video do you think readers should definitely check out? “The exhibit Art of Video Games currently on display at the American Art Museum on the National Mall in Washington DC, was controversial from the start because it recognised video games as an art form. But then they did a bold thing by inviting the public to vote on a list of games posted online, and included the 40 most popular selections. The exhibit has just been huge and has brought people into the museum who never, ever would have gone into an art museum. It shows how much the museum experience can change to reach new audiences and new learners — and it’s also been really fun.” You can check out videos from the exhibition here: <http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2012/games/artists/>.

providing research and reference services to the public; offering guidance on record-keeping best practices; promoting services that broaden understanding the history and culture of the Smithsonian; and providing professional archival and conservation expertise to the Institution as a whole.

It holds approximately 46,800 feet of paper records and nearly 3 million photographic images, and the collections include official records of the Smithsonian; personal papers of individuals associated with the Smithsonian; oral and video histories; and other special materials as well as materials documenting the history of American museums, science, technol-

ogy, art and cultural development. Anne supervises two-dozen staff, and has found one of her key responsibilities to be providing leadership across the Institution to promote greater public involvement with the Smithsonian through access to the collections. “We are the official archive for the whole institution, but we also provide advice on various kinds of preservation to the units across the board. There is a lot of expertise on my staff, particularly with audio and visual materials, and in addition to advice we offer equipment, guidance, and training on how to preserve digital materials as well as paper and other materials. We cover the gamut.”

But the advice was not always welcome, and it wasn’t long before she realised that collaboration was not part of the institutional culture. “Because I’d been working at RLG, my focus was on collaboration and getting people working together across institutional divisions. When I got here, I found many of the units were working in silos and had no interaction with each other.” Fortunately, over the last several years, new leadership has come to the Institution with needed changes. Now Anne notes “you can see a much stronger willingness to try to collaborate on all kinds of things, like collections, digitisation, and exhibitions. It’s a marked improvement.”

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Right away, she was drawn into most of the planning activities designed for the Institution system-wide, such as the *Strategic Plan to Create the Digital Smithsonian*, released a year ago. This ambitious document outlines a five-year framework for digitising the Smithsonian’s >



vast collections, rooted in the goals of *Broadening Access, Preserving Collections, Supporting Education, and Enriching Content.*

According to Anne, Secretary Wayne Clough (current head of the Institution) is very focused on making sure the collections become more accessible to the public. "He's been talking about the 'digital Smithsonian' since he's been here, and he makes a lot of statements about wanting to digitise everything. Although we know that that won't happen, it is still an important aspiration."

"This isn't one of those plans that just lands on people's desk, they're using it as a way to talk in a more common language. And from the plan we've created a new digital programme office, which is shaping plans for digitisation, such as assessing how much of an object collection can be digitised given our current resources, and creating useable guidelines and policies when people begin thinking about digitisation." "We've built up quite a community across the institution now of 'digi-savvy' staffers who understand the whole process and are focused on

standards for managing data so it can work and play well with other data. It's beginning to be a real support group working together."

As for actual digitising, Anne thinks progress at the institution has been slow. "The vastly different materials we have throughout the museums and collections live all over the place, and there's been very little measuring or baseline surveying to locate them in preparation for preservation. However, we do know that there are large volumes of videotape in all the museums and collections, and also audio in every format that exists. These are becoming endangered themselves, and we are very concerned about how quickly the video might disappear. Stabilisation is a big issue, so we're trying to get a better sense of how quickly can we digitise our video collections and at least get them into stable storage conditions."

"Needless to say, it's a really big job. Even with our expertise and equipment, it's a pretty small scale when you think about the thousands and thousands of videotapes out there." >



Smithsonian Institution Archives



"At least we are creating some workflows and guidelines on how this should be done" she says, "so if staff at any individual unit of the Institution gets some money for digitising, we can give them guidance on how to do it. But preserving the media held by the Smithsonian is a huge project that's going to be with us for a long time."

Big Success with Social Media

While these steps are building momentum inside the Institution for coordinated digitising efforts, Anne is very enthusiastic about using social media. "Our ability to measure public satisfaction with an online exhibition is still pretty nascent, but our leap to social media has been really successful. What we're seeing now is that people really want interaction with the information and objects in the museum, and with the people here."

"For example, when I first came in, the Smithsonian Archives didn't have a very good website and we weren't doing anything that was engaging our public in any way. Now we have the most active blog here, and people across the Institution are jumping on the bandwagon. I think we have over five hundred social media sites coming out of the Smithsonian — blogs, games, Twitter accounts, online interactions, it's astonishing."

"And we were very early on Flickr Commons. The first collection we put out was a set of old photographic portraits of scientists. The response was amazing — we got thousands of people swarming on the site right away, and within days somebody had taken the photos and tried to link them with their biographies on Wikipedia. That was something we would never have paid anyone to do, but the public did it for us! It was very exciting and we have gotten a tremendous amount of public good will. For me, it's also a really rewarding thing to do."

"When we first went on Flickr, there was a lot of anxiety among the staff to protect our brand. But we said 'let's just start small and see what happens' and now, it's been so successful most of that fear has been overcome."

"On an entirely different level, our CIO has done something quite remarkable. Each museum here has its own data management system, so there were twenty different collection and catalogue systems in place. Our CIO figured out a way to network all of them, so you can do a central query against all the databases and produce a unified search. Anyone can do a query from the Collections Search Center on the main SI site, and it will draw results from all catalogues across the entire Institution plus deliver images if there are any associated with that search. It's brilliant, and I think it's going to be a real model."

The Smithsonian Looks to the Digital Future

Having her career move along the crest of the ever-advancing digital wave, Anne is ready for more of the same. From her current view, she is convinced that cultural heritage institutions can finally find some appropriate tools to manage and control their digital collections, in part because large institutions like SI have been testing the waters to make them safe.

"The ability to create more digital stuff is not slowing down, not at all. I want to find better ways to make our collections more interactive and more accessible to people so they will make an impact. I truly think we are on the verge of igniting this whole notion of the 'Digital Smithsonian,' which is just beginning to blossom. We are definitely on the right track, and there's a sense of excitement around here. I'm very hopeful in our ability to take our message out to the public, who really want to help us on this journey. And at the Smithsonian, it will never end." ■ NR