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Access: Goldman

Access Comparison of Anthropological Institutions: AMNH and HSFA

When evaluating access policies for cultural institutions, several factors are considered: virtual access, physical access and the amount of metadata available about the collections are primary concerns. With regards to facilities housing moving image collections, these concerns are essential to the researcher's quest for knowledge and for time management. For my access policies review, I chose two anthropological organizations, the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and the Smithsonian's Human Studies Film Archives (HSFA). I find these collections particularly fascinating because of the constantly changing field of ethnography in view of ethics and cultural studies and, as time goes on and societies shift, film is becoming increasingly valuable resource to anthropological scholars. The viewpoint of the modern scholar in this discipline varies greatly from the original collectors of the information, who viewed anthropology not as a study of diverse cultures but a study of people as distinct from the rest of humanity. While some wish to avoid the prevailing racism of the past, many researchers are discovering these films are historically valuable.

The AMNH was founded in 1869 and according to the first sentence of its mission statement, it was established "To discover, interpret, and disseminate—through scientific research and education—knowledge about human cultures, the natural world, and the universe." The film collection began in 1908 and experienced its most significant development during the 1920s and '30s.

Discovering the online domain of the moving image collection was an expedition on its own. The AMNH home pages are predominately brilliant blue with other bright colors and intriguing images, a design I like to call a family friendly clutter because more attention is paid to creating a persuasive and visually stimulating page rather than the direct dissemination of knowledge. After about thirty minutes of searching, I finally located the link to the Research Libraries under the 'Science' tab and not the 'Plan Your Visit' or 'Education' tabs where one might expect to find the portal. The design for the Research Libraries pages are significantly different. The color scheme is a pale blue and white and the page is visually uncluttered with links to the different collections in the library including the 'Moving Image Collection'. Once here, the information is clear and easy to find. The entire archival film collection is a total of 291 films and the site offers different ways to search the collections online including a catalog search and a browsing option. I am a particular fan of the browsing option since it lists the films by number and also divides them by collection. The catalog also provides excellent metadata for the physical descriptions and content of each film as well as a MARC listing. This comprehensiveness is likely due to the fact there are not many films in the archival collection and new ones are not being added in this particular category. The library also stores films used in exhibitions throughout the museum and these items are available for viewing as well yet they are cataloged separately.

Finding myself quite impressed by the online catalog, I decided to visit this museum for the assignment. I began looking for information on physically

accessing the collection, which is easily found on the homepage and in a sidebar on the left that is on every page. The access policy is very clear in providing the phone number and email address to reach them but is a somewhat rigorous process for a research library. An appointment is necessary and they require a form to be filled, a resume or CV and a description of the project. They also ask for the formal application to be submitted three to six weeks in advance. At this point, I almost switched museums but I was curious as to how they would respond to a specific request. My original plan was to pick a film to view and report back on my experience. Instead, I sent an email to the provided address informing them of the purpose of this project. In less than one business day, I received a response asking if I would be available to come in the next day since the staff would be out of town the rest of the week after. I will be the first to say I was really lucky.

The visit was excellent. After checking in with security, I met Barbara Mathe, the head archivist, in the study lounge. The full time staff in the research library consists of her and the Special Collections Librarian, Gregory Rami, who had emailed me. A second year MIAP student is currently interning there and there are also temporary and part time catalogers currently working on cataloging photographs but the department is very understaffed. I received a great tour: she showed me the various stations where the intern and catalogers worked; a small screening room for viewing U-Matic, VHS and DVD formats; and the climate controlled vault where the moving images are stored. A few years ago, a different MIAP intern went through and re-housed and reorganized the collection for long-

term storage. Barbara also mentioned the films are also available for interlibrary loan but the wait time varies significantly. When I asked how many people request to visit the film archive, Barbara and Gregory took a moment to come up with an answer and determined somewhere around ten per year. Often, the researchers will visit to see other material unaware there is a film archive until one of them suggests it.

Although the information provided online and through the research library website was rich with material and clear on access policies, the link to the research library was problematic to find and apparently is not utilized often by researchers. As I mentioned in my presentation, the museum and research library at AMNH is an excellent example of one of the most important points regarding access: if no one knows the material is there, is it really accessible?

The second collection I chose for my presentation was the Human Studies Film Archives at the Smithsonian. The HSFA provides guides to the collection, which can be browsed by region and also provided indexes by geography, subject, ethnic and political groups. The catalog is informative and searchable through the National Museum of Natural History site. After the vibrant AMNH website, the HSFA is somewhat dull: white background with black, centered text although, this does make the information clear and concise. The application is not as strict as AMNH. To schedule a visit, a formal request is made through an online form and they will contact the requester within three business days to confirm or reschedule the appointment.

Physical access is a bit more complicated but still clearly defined. The archive is located in Suitland, Maryland, six miles from the National Mall. They offer a free shuttle to the archive and also recommend available public transportation. The archivists also take reference inquiries and reproductions of paper and a/v material are also available for a fee. If a researcher is unable to physically visit the archive, they also provide a list of local freelance archivists. I am quite impressed with the clarity of information and availability of research options. However, I do wonder if the amount of foot traffic is similar to the AMNH.

The HSFA says it quite right on the 'History of HSFA' page: "It is now, of course, a commonplace that anthropological science constructs its object of study. The practice of ethnographic filmmaking — with its established canon of a division between a modern 'Us' and a traditional 'Them' — is a prime example of this truism. In short, ethnographic film — like all other genres of film — is a form of communication using images to construct a particular version of reality." I strongly believe the films need to be preserved for the sake of preservation but also because it is important to understand the mindset of the filmmakers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the predecessors of today's documentary filmmakers. Yet, if researchers are unaware of the available materials, the openness of institutions or the information on the collections are of little to no value. In order for the collections to live up to their full potential, the archivists and organizational leaders need to take significant steps in promoting themselves as research centers.