



Guidelines for assigning significance and processing plans – large pictorial collections

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Introduction

NSLA libraries face common issues with processing their large pictorial collections. Key issues identified by the NSLA Large Pictorial Collections Group include:

- Significant backlogs of materials with little or no user access;
- Increasing offers of large photographic archives which cannot be controlled by traditional cataloguing practices;
- Dealing with physical, digital and mixed collections concurrently.

The Group has identified a need to take an “archival approach” and expand on some of the work undertaken in NSLA 8 Project: *Faster access to archival collections in NSLA libraries*.

NSLA libraries must take proactive steps to ensure that existing backlogs are made discoverable and that new acquisitions are processed effectively. The starting point, outlined in this document, is a framework that incorporates existing NSLA libraries’ strategies, policies and procedures to provide a holistic view of processing large pictorial collections consistent with their priority.

Objective

This document is intended to provide guidelines for assessing the significance of large pictorial collections and then articulating processing plans based on that significance level.

Scope

This framework is intended to provide a practical guide to staff from NSLA libraries involved in processing large pictorial collections. These guidelines are designed with a level of flexibility, to enable NSLA libraries to modify them to suit their particular circumstances.

This document’s main focus is how to assign priority levels to collections and what implications those priority levels have on arrangement, description, conservation, digitisation and access. The methodology is equally applicable to physical and digital collections. It is important to note that priority levels may change over time and should be reviewed.

Related documents

These Guidelines are modelled on the approach outlined in the Library of Congress document *Criteria for choosing effective processing levels for visual materials*.

Criteria

According to this methodology, three main criteria contribute to a collection’s assigned priority level.

These criteria have been adapted from the Library of Congress document *Criteria for choosing effective processing levels for visual materials*, which articulates three criteria: value, usage, viability.

The term “content” has been used in place of “value” to avoid the impression that monetary value is the only consideration for the criterion.

1. Content

Assessing the content of a collection is an essential stage of the appraisal process. The main factors in assessing content include:

- Historical significance
- Informational value
- Research value
- Evidential value
- Aesthetic appeal

2. Usage

A collection’s anticipated usage will play a large role in how much time will be invested in processing a collection. This rating should take into account:

- Anticipated usage/demand – how much do you anticipate people wanting to access these images?
- Category of user – who do you anticipate wanting to access these image?
- Upcoming anniversaries of significant events/broader agendas that may lead to higher than normal demand for the images.

Some libraries may place greater emphasis on a large, general audience being a key target demographic. Others may prioritise specific communities of interest that they are seeking to engage, particularly in combination with planned exhibitions and public programs.

3. Viability

The viability of a collection takes into account the ease with which a collection can be processed. Considerations in rating a collection’s viability include:

- Copyright status – does the copyright status of the collection allow the images to be used, including online display and networked access?
- Preservation – physical condition, re-housing requirements, digital preservation?
- Descriptive information – what level of accompanying metadata is there?
- Arrangement – is there an inherent order to the collection?

Scoring

Scores for each criterion are assigned as either High, Medium or Low (3, 2, 1 points, respectively.)

The standard weighting for each criterion is 1. However, if there is a particular organisational focus on a particular area, a higher weighting can be applied to that criteria to give it more influence in the total score. For example you may be asked to prioritise the processing of highly significant images for an upcoming “Treasures” exhibition. In this case, Content would be given a weighting value of 2. Alternatively, it may be decided that projected usage of a collection is a key driver for processing activities. In this case, Usage would be given a weighting value of 2. The original score is multiplied by the applicable weighting.

Priorities levels would have the following total weighted scores:

- Standard level (1 – 3)
- Enhanced level (4 – 6)
- Premium level (7 – higher)

Examples

A collection of 10,000 negatives belonging to a wildlife preservation society, depicting unidentified volunteers and native wildlife.

	Score (High=3,	Weighting (2=High,	Weighted Score
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	Med=2, Low=1)	1=Standard)	
Content	1	1	1
Usage	1	1	1
Viability	1	1	1
TOTAL			3 (Standard level)

A collection of 500 architectural photographs. Your organisation is hosting an upcoming exhibition of architecture from the period. Each photograph has its location and date listed.

	Score (High=3, Med=2, Low=1)	Weighting (2=High, 1=Standard)	Weighted Score
Content	2	2	4
Usage	2	1	2
Viability	2	1	2
TOTAL			8 (Premium level)

Special circumstances

Invariably, special circumstances will require a particular collection to have its processing fast-tracked. Generally, this will be due to external factors, such as a donor requiring digital copies, a significant partner requiring access to the collection, or the material having to be loaned to a strategic cultural sector colleague. In this case, add 3 points to the final score.

A collection of 100 family photographs belonging to a private donor looking to make a sizeable cash donation to your Library Foundation. The photographs depict social scenes and family life during WWII.

	Score (High=3, Med=2, Low=1)	Weighting (2=High, 1=Standard)	Weighted Score
Content	2	1	2
Usage	2	1	2
Viability	2	1	2
TOTAL			6+3 = 9 (High)

There may also be occasions where factors that would normally affect the Viability of a collection, actually make it a higher priority. This may include highly significant collections with urgent preservation needs (eg. vinegar syndrome). In case like this, 3 points can also be added to the final score to increase its priority level.

Standard-level procedures

The following is standard procedure for every large pictorial collection:

- collection is accessioned, whereby it receives a unique identifier
- collection-level, bibliographic record is created
- physical items are housed in archival boxes
- material is stored in general repository conditions suited to physical characteristics of collection.

For some collections, this will be the extent of processing they receive. They would be identified as standard priority. Some collections, however, will receive further treatment depending upon their significance assessment.

Enhanced and premium-level procedures

Options for more in-depth processing include:

- expanded collection-level records
- hierarchical records – comprising series/items
- non-archival enclosures and objects (eg. paper clips)
- writing/assigning item numbers on each individual image of a collection
- providing image-level descriptions for all/selection of items
- conservation treatments (from stabilisation to in-depth treatment)
- extensive use of archival enclosures (eg. Mylar sleeves, Tyvek envelopes)
- storage conditions specific to format-type (eg. negatives in cold storage)
- digitisation

Standard, enhanced, premium workflows

A typical “standard-level” collection would receive:

- unique identifier
- basic collection-level record
- basic archival housing
- basic repository storage suitable for format-type.

A typical “enhanced-level” collection would receive:

- unique identifier
- full collection-level record (more biographical history, more specific subject headings etc)
- housing provided at a more detailed level, with greater use of specialised archival enclosures
- removal of majority of non-archival enclosures and objects
- format-specific repository storage
- basic listing
- individual cataloguing of a selection of individual items
- arrangement to a series component level
- consideration for digitisation.

A typical “premium level” collection would receive:

- unique identifier
- full collection-level record (more biographical history, more specific subject headings etc)
- archival housing applied at an item-level
- removal of all non-archival enclosures and objects
- format-specific storage
- detailed listing
- individual cataloguing of high proportion of individual items
- arrangement to a series/item component level
- priority for digitisation.



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