

Collections Policy for the Vertical File Arab American National Museum

Prologue: Purpose of Vertical File Policy

The purpose of this Policy is to develop a series of guidelines for accession/deaccession, collection management and collection care for the Arab American National Museum. This collection is intended for public access, and this Policy seeks to adhere to the mission of the AANM and its Library while preserving access and vertical file materials.

To this end, this policy combines an examination of the current collection, targets current areas of need, and recommends policy actions for continued collections development and maintenance.

I: Overview of the Collection

The vertical file of the Arab American National Museum (AANM) is located in the library, in a single metal hanging folder unit. The collection is comprised of contemporary materials, generally mass market in nature, which reflect modern Arab and Arab American culture, with a focus on Arabs in Detroit/Southeast Michigan. Materials include:

- Nonconsecutive issues of Saudi Aramco World (alternatively titled Aramco World and Aramco World Magazine), Canvas, Museum, Arab-American Times and Arab American News
- Loose newspaper clippings from numerous sources, generally focused on Arab American activities and personages
- Ephemera, including calendars, maps and flyers
- Xeroxed materials of scholarly articles and US Citizenship paperwork
- Artist files and research materials from past exhibitions
- Myriad other materials in various media forms

The vast majority of materials date no earlier than the mid-1970s. The collection is made publicly available in the library, but there is of this writing no finding aid, no cataloguing schema and no organizing structure.

This collection primarily concerns itself with objects of a timely nature, and therefore access is paramount to usability. Collection is ongoing, with many items sourced from current publications. As the collection develops further, however, a shift from acquiring all relevant materials to a more selective approach may be in order.

This collection should be examined yearly and assessed for extraneous or irrelevant materials, damage and missing or stolen items. Collections should remain in a vertical hanging file with sufficient room between objects to allow for browsing and maintaining the current condition of materials, away from light and heat. The current location of the vertical file in the library is acceptable.

II: Issues with Current Collection

a. ACCESS and AANM materials combined

The currently collection is a combination of materials from the AANM's collection and ACCESS, the parent organization of AANM. This leads to both an overlap of objects found in the collection and a lack of focus for the vertical file itself. If the file is intended to be a resource for the general public intended for education purposes, a tighter focus that adheres to the AANM's mission is appropriate. While AANM also serves as an outreach component for ACCESS, it is important that visitors and users of the vertical file understand the purpose of the file and can access materials easily. However, that tie to ACCESS suggests a reciprocal relationship regarding records and materials.

Hence, I recommend that materials that refer primarily or only to ACCESS be placed in the institutional archive, with duplicates placed in the vertical file if appropriate or available. I also recommend that materials related to artists and exhibitions be placed in their respective artist/exhibition files to ensure all material remains together as a cohesive unit. The electronic finding aid should make note of the location of these materials. ACCESS materials do not always agree with AANM materials, and keeping ACCESS materials separate reduces confusion for users and ensures that ACCESS materials can be easily found. Users, of course, may always request items from both the archive and the vertical file, and these materials should be placed in the online catalogue. At this time holding ACCESS materials for the vertical file at AANM is not an issue; however, this situation should be readdressed annually, specifically regarding space and adherence to AANM mission.

b. Organization of physical materials in vertical file

In addition, the materials are poorly sorted. There is no clear classification or organization of the physical materials, and a finding aid does not exist. While adding MARC records will increase digital access to the collection, a physical organization is equally important, especially for occasional visitors or those only casually interested in the AANM's materials. Materials should be sorted for ease of access, but because of the breadth of materials available a sorting system should be developed to take advantage of the objects.

To this end, I propose that the materials be separated into three categories: Periodicals, ephemera and loose materials. Periodicals should be sorted alphabetically by title and ordered by date and issue number. Ephemera should be arranged alphabetically by subject; however, oversized materials should be stored in another location for preservation and handling purposes. Loose clippings should be sorted alphabetically by subject, and again any pertinent finding information for the objects should be placed in the online catalogue. An individual folder should be used to store each loose clipping and ephemeral object.

c. Objects not maintained for long-term preservation

Preserving materials of a public nature is always a compromise between physical access to the objects and the long-term survival of same. The artifactual value of original objects makes it difficult to place replicated materials in place of the originals, especially for ephemera which are often unique. However, in other cases a stand-in for an original may be acceptable, as long as the original is preserved elsewhere. Furthermore, the materials are not housed in acid-free containers and are flagged or bookmarked in such a way that the object can be permanently damaged as a result. For instance, almost all of the Saudi Aramco issues are flagged with Post-it Notes, which leave a residue that will damage the issue if not removed.

Because many of the materials are paper based and housed in a closed container, I recommend that all materials be rehoused in buffered, acid free containers. If buffered materials are not cost efficient at this time, acid free-only containers (without buffering) will suffice in the short-term. The unit in which the materials are stored within is not climate controlled, nor is the library itself. However, because of the contemporary dates of the objects this is not an immediate issue. In addition, all markers and bookmarks within the objects should be replaced with acid free paper, cut in strips and placed within the object. In the event that this is not possible (i.e. a Post-it on a single sheet flyer or poster), a strip of acid free paper with the information on the Post-it should be placed in the same folder as the object. As long as the inner folders containing the objects are acid-free, traditional hanging folders should be acceptable.

It is acceptable that loose materials on newsprint and printed/released by a mainstream media outlet (i.e. newspaper articles) may be replaced with a printout. The printout should be made by a laser printer or copier onto good-quality office paper and identifying information such as author, date and publication should be noted, either on the object itself if already present or on a separate sheet placed with the object. If the object is available online, the link to the object, if known, should be added, either penciled onto the original in an area which does not interfere with the legibility of the object, or on a separate sheet of paper.

d. Digital access may replicate physical access

For some of the objects, there may be digital versions available. In this case, four things should be considered before disposing of the digital objects:

1. The cost of maintaining digital access for that object(s) in the future
2. The artifactual value of the original object
3. The financial health of the publication's host provider
4. The ease of access to that object(s) through the digital service provider

Digital preservation is still in its infancy, and access to digital assets maintained outside of any institution is never guaranteed. In addition, digital access that may be free or low-cost today may be cost prohibitive in the near future. The artifactual value of the object refers to not only the information contained in the object, but the visual presentation of the object, extraneous information attached to the object (for example, articles in periodicals that do not immediately reference the Arab American experience but may enhance understanding of what appealed to or was marketed to the Arab American community) and the format of the object which may contribute to its usefulness and meaning. Therefore, disposing physical materials in favor of digital access would be very difficult to recommend even in the most positive situations.

However, if space is needed over time, then digital access is an excellent solution for materials that must remain current at all times. Examples of this would be government issued materials such as brochures, citizenship information and demographic information. It is unlikely that government websites will expire, and the data present will be available elsewhere if web access is not possible. It is recommended that the library begin to budget funds for other materials that may be facilitated for digital access in the future.

III – What to Collect

The current collection has a strong core upon which to build. The criteria for future collecting should be based on the present collection, and these criteria should be considered when choosing materials for the vertical file:

- Materials should be relevant to the experience, knowledge or beliefs of the Arab American community
- Materials should connect to the mission of the AANM and/or the collections in a meaningful way and have lasting value for future scholars and patrons of the library
- Materials need not be unique; however, unique materials should be given extra consideration as a fleeting resource of long-term value
- Materials may be of an artistic, literary, religious, political, advertisement or informative nature, as long as the materials would not serve better as objects for the permanent collection
- Materials should not be generated by AANM; these materials are better suited for the institutional archive; copies of AANM materials may be placed in the vertical file if deemed appropriate
- Materials may be in any language, as long as the content is relevant to the collection

It is recommended that the vertical file contain only objects relevant to AANM and/or its mission statement. If objects relate to ACCESS, they must also relate to AANM in order to be considered. There is nothing physical precluding the possibility of developing an ACCESS vertical file, as space in the library permits such an arrangement. ACCESS materials are excellent candidates for storage in an archive, however, as many are foundational documents for the institution and contribute to the history of AANM and the development of the Arab American community in Dearborn. In an archive, these objects remain available to the public and will not be confused with objects for the vertical file.

Materials may be of a sensitive political, religious, racial or other nature, but must adhere to mission and must be marked as such. Care must be taken with potentially offensive objects, as they can be easily destroyed. The Arab American experience is one of both triumph and strife, success and failure, acceptance and discrimination, and the collection may collect these kinds of materials at their discretion. Materials with sensitive content may be stored separately if the staff feels the materials would be under threat if kept with the public vertical file, similar to many examples of special collections.

All staff in charge of the vertical file will be trained in preventing theft, and a disaster plan will be in place to care for the objects in the face of catastrophic events. Care will be taken to prevent the collection from:

- Theft, human negligence or intentional damage caused by users
- Environmental damage from flooding, light exposure, water damage, mold, insect or rodent damage and fire
- Climate control issues such as extreme temperatures and humidity fluctuations

All formally accessioned objects will follow ethical guidelines as outlined in the Donor Agreement Form and will be considered available for loan to other institutions. All materials are the property of AANM and may be used for institutional or promotional purposes.

Training should be provided to all AANM staff in the care and handling of vertical file items, and ongoing efforts to develop and safeguard the collection should be in place.

IV: What Not to Collect

A collections policy is intended to define certain objects for selection over others. It is a matter of expedience and efficiency as well as space to create parameters for acceptable collecting. Therefore, a collections policy must also define what does not belong, as well as what does.

Objects not intended for collection:

- Entire runs of publications that do not focus a majority of its coverage on Arab-American issues, literature, art or culture
- Materials more appropriate for an object or exhibitions file; for example, research materials used to support an exhibition belong with that exhibition; while there may be interest in that material beyond the exhibition, because of its purpose within the AANM it would be more appropriate to keep those files with the exhibition file.
- Artist files; these belong with the object files related to the artist. If no object is available, the artist file may be kept or destroyed according to the needs of the institution
- Expired objects that refer to phenomena of an immediate or current nature; i.e. tax forms, citizenship materials
- Objects or materials not relevant to the mission of the AANM, or of negligible or no artifactual, research or social value

While some of these objects not intended for the collection may be of some archival or research value, there must be a strong case for inclusion in order for that material to be considered. For materials proposed for donation in which some of the collection is appropriate for the vertical file and others not, the AANM should consider what gap the desired material may fill before taking on the materials en masse.

Materials offered for donation to the vertical file and not accepted will be returned to the potential donor.

V: Deaccession

Of the materials in the current vertical file, few if any are candidates for deaccession at this time. Files should only be deaccessioned with the greatest care, and with an eye toward strengthening the entire collection. The item to be deaccessioned should be carefully evaluated by the Librarian and the Archivist to determine that it indeed has no lasting value to the collection. If the object remains a candidate for deaccession, the material should be offered to other institutions or organizations for their own collections, either in exchange for other materials or as a gift. ACCESS should be given priority consideration for accepting materials. The deaccessioned material may be offered for sale as well, and all proceeds from the sale must go to purchasing other materials for the vertical file. Destruction of deaccessioned materials is not recommended except in the most extreme cases. Catalogue numbers and records for deaccessioned materials should remain in existence and should not be given to other objects.

Deaccessioned items should not be offered for sale, or be purchased by, current AANM or ACCES personnel. This may constitute a conflict of interest. This policy requires that all staff adhere to the Code of Ethics for Museums, as outlined by the American Association of Museums, especially in the light of unique collections. The policy may be found at <http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ethics/coe.cfm>.

VI: MARC records for digital searching

A MARC record should be made for each individual object in the vertical file. MARC records are standardized criteria for placing identifying information regarding an object into a catalogue for searching purposes. AANM already uses MARC records for its library materials and using MARC for the vertical file makes sense from an institutional and an access standpoint. MARC is a recognized standard and as such will allow AANM to catalogue its material without undue difficulty.

A proposed MARC record example, derived from AANM records already in place:

049	-	-	¶b AANM (Identifying institution)
245	0	0	¶a Title of Article/Object
300	-	-	¶a Physical description of object (magazine, leaflet, Xerox, etc.) Include condition of object
500	-	-	¶a AUTHOR
500	-	-	¶a PUBLISHER
500	-	-	¶a Contact information and address of AANM
520	0	-	¶a Summary of material's contents
538	-	-	¶a Mode of access: Library vertical file
590	-	-	¶a AANM Vertical file
590	-	-	¶a The AANM physically catalogues and maintains these resources in the Library and Resource Center. Access to vertical file materials may be granted at the discretion of library staff

600	1	0	‡a LC SUBJECT PERSONAL NAME
610	2	0	‡a LC SUBJECT CORPORATE NAME
650	-	0	‡a LC SUBJECT TOPICAL TERM
655	-	7	‡a Vertical files.
690	0	4	‡a LOCAL SUBJECT (optional)
856	4	0	‡3 Web address (optional; for materials found in print and online only)

MARC record fields should be filled in as much as possible, with as much information at hand. However, in places where information may be lacking (i.e. no byline or publication information on an article or leaflet), then the corresponding field may be skipped. The above are the bare minimum guidelines recommended for MARC records, and additional fields may be added as needed.