

Abstract

This paper discusses the suitability of oral history programs as an alternative tool for documenting the history of conservation and for teaching purposes. It also presents the research and conclusions of the Oral History of Photograph Conservation project conducted at the George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film, in Rochester, New York. The article provides basic information on methodology, techniques and guidelines for the practice of oral history and describes the process of preliminary research, choice of interviewees, preparation of interviews and storage and dissemination of the information collected.

Keywords

oral history, photograph conservation, documentation, George Eastman House

Documenting conservation through oral history: a case study

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Introduction

Oral history is a method of collecting and preserving information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life. Since its beginning as an academic discipline in the United States in the 1940s (Starr 1977), oral history has become an interdisciplinary research and documentation technique used by scholars of every discipline around the world. The topics covered in oral history archives are countless and diverse, ranging from the study of local folklore and ethnic issues to examinations of more general technical or social developments in large territories. Anthropology, literary history, media and art studies, folklore, sociology, women's studies and scientific history are some of the disciplines using oral history as a tool for data collection. For the last 30 years, oral historians have been filling the archives of universities, libraries, historical societies and museums with innumerable tapes and transcripts.

The applications of oral history are vast. Primarily, oral history serves as a method to complement or corroborate written material and historical records. In addition, by eliciting oral autobiographies, oral history can capture and preserve life stories that would otherwise be lost, or it can fill in the lacunae in a field by drawing out testimony from many people on one topic. At the same time, the taped or videotaped interviews convey the personality of the oral narrator, explain his or her motivation and reveal with spontaneity his or her inner thoughts and perception on the subject addressed.

In the sphere of conservation of cultural property, an important oral history project was launched by the Foundation of the American Institute of Conservation in 1975, under the direction of Joyce Hill Stoner. The idea originated with Rutherford John Gettens, who in 1974 said that "knowledge of the beginnings and growth of our profession is a necessary background for training programs in art conservation" and that "personal recollections, anecdotes and informal doings...tie together the serious events" (Stoner 1998). Today, this oral history file contains more than 100 tape recordings of conservators stored at the Winthertur Museum Library in Delaware.

Following Stoner's example, the George Eastman House started the Oral History of Photograph Conservation project in 2000 to collect the reminiscences of professionals who were involved at the inception and in the development of the field of photograph conservation.

Oral history methodology

Since the early 1960s, several guides for the practice of oral history have been published, most derived from sociology and folklore studies (Tyrrel 1966, Cash 1975). But today, the most widely used guide to oral history practice remains the *Oral History Association's Oral History Principles and Standards and Evaluation Guidelines*, published in 1991. Other guides and a myriad of articles exist on such practical issues as rapport, observation collecting, pre-interviewing and previous research, transcription curating and conservation of recordings (Dunaway 1996).

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The process of creating an oral history begins with the preparation of a project design. The design should have three main parts, corresponding to the pre-interview groundwork, the interviewing process and the post-interview treatment of data.

The following comprises the pre-interview groundwork: the subject matter must be clearly established and framed, finances have to be worked out, a list of interviewees (or oral authors) has to be made, extensive preliminary research on the history of the subject and on the oral authors needs to be done, and specialized collaborators have to be found. Additionally, a group of advisors has to review the project design and the interviewer needs to be trained in oral history techniques and recording technology. Before the interview, contact has to be established with the interviewees to obtain their agreement to the interview, and a work plan has to be established. As an estimate, recent data show that the price of processing one hour of an interview, from preliminary research to cataloguing, can run from \$300 to \$1200 (Dunaway 1996).

The interview usually consists of a visit to the oral author who has agreed to share his or her memories with the interviewer. The interview takes the form of a conversation, recorded on magnetic audio tape or digital videotape. The protocol of the interview is quite well established. The circumstances of the interview must be clearly described by the interviewer at the beginning of the recording (i.e. the day, date, place, names of the people present, and the particular circumstances), and several general questions about the socio-cultural environment of the interviewee should be asked (i.e. place and date of birth, family background and education) prior to addressing the main subject. The interview can last for as long as both speakers have agreed to or go on until the oral author considers the conversation to be over. The interviewer must always try to prompt the interviewee's memories with short questions and suggestions, and try to stay in the background. Before conducting the interview, the oral author and the interviewer must also sign a release form stating the conditions for future use of the recorded information.

Post-interview work consists of evaluating the fieldwork, and copying, disseminating and storing the material. Copying needs to be done onto the best archival material. Computer-aided storage needs to be taken into account: electronic systems for processing, retrieval and indexing do exist. Two other aspects of post-production have to be considered: editing and transcription. Editing of the tape would not be considered ethically correct by a professional oral historian. He or she would argue that the content and spontaneity of the interview are altered by post-production cuts. Transcription of the tapes is a costly and time-consuming task, but it seems that printed matter is overwhelmingly preferred by researchers. The preparation of a written summary is a cheaper alternative to transcription.

The preservation aspect of oral history involves storing all material (tapes, release forms and transcripts) in a convenient location that provides access and environment control. Curatorship relates to dissemination, which can be done by distributing copies, publishing or making special presentations in the academic world. Numerous equipped repositories for oral history material exist, principally university libraries and administrative archives, where tapes and related material can be safely stored and looked after.

The community of oral historians has worried for a long time about the quality of the work produced. The principles and standards for practice encourage those who produce and use oral history to recognize certain principles, rights and technical standards, such as the responsibilities of the oral author, interviewer and sponsoring and archival institutions.

In terms of ethical standards, the community has established that oral history "should be conducted in the spirit of critical inquiry and social responsibility and with recognition of the interactive and subjective nature of the enterprise" (Oral History Association, OHA 1991).

Among other commitments, the oral author "must be informed of the purposes and procedures of oral history before making his or her contribution and must be informed of the mutual rights in the oral history process, such as editing, access restrictions, copyrights, royalties and expected dissemination of all forms of record" (OHA 1991). The interviewer "must respect the rights of the oral author to refuse to discuss certain subjects...and should strive to record candid information of lasting value and to make that information accessible" (OHA 1991). He or she also must "provide complete documentation of the preparation and methods used

including the circumstances of the interviews” as well as “make public the sources of funding and sponsorship” (OHA 1991). Finally, “the sponsoring institution has the responsibility of maintaining the highest technical, professional and ethical standards in the creation, archiving and preservation of oral history files and to provide basic instruction to interviewers” (OHA 1991).

A case study: the Oral History of Photograph Conservation

In the last decades of the 20th century, the conservation of photographs has developed into a professional field of its own, recognized now as one more of the conservation specialities. This evolution started in the 1960s with the growth in awareness of the historical value of photographs and the fragility of the originals, as well as the rise in market value of fine photographs.

Since then, many changes have occurred, but no analysis of the evolution and progress of the field has been undertaken. In view of that, it was considered that enough time had passed to attempt to prepare an account of the inception and evolution of the field. Other reasons to attempt such a project were the fact that significant figures and records were being lost or could be only retrievable now. The need to inform the current generation of the origins and progress of the discipline as part of the basic professional training experience was also apparent.

To do so, the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, a premier institution in the conservation of photographs, undertook an oral history project to collect through videotaped interviews the reminiscences of selected individuals active in the field of photograph conservation from 1950 to 2000. The tapes are portraits of conservators who participated in the creation and development of the field, and are intended to give privileged access to the historical and current development of the profession. In doing that, the project contributes in a significant manner to the preservation of conservators’ memories, increasing our knowledge of the practice of conservation. Furthermore, it promotes a historical and critical approach to conservation, and creates a research resource that can stand apart from contemporary historical analysis.

During the first year of the project, 31 interviews were conducted with personalities from the United States, England and France, representing the early stages and evolution of the field, as well as its interdisciplinary range (conservators, curators, scientists and dealers). Their recollections were videotaped, transcribed and stored in archives. This material has already been used for historical analysis of the evolution of the profession (Maynés and Romer 2001) and is now used as an educational resource.

The choice of the interviewees was made after consultation with four individuals, each with 20 years’ experience in the field:

- Gary Albright (Mellon Conservator, George Eastman House, Rochester)
- Debbie Hess Norris (Director of Arts Conservation, University of Delaware)
- James Reilly (Director, Image Permanence Institute, Rochester)
- Grant Romer (Director of Conservation, George Eastman House, Rochester).

With their guidance, a list of people significant to the development of the field was established. This list included those who represent the early stages of the field as well as its interdisciplinary range. The interviewees, in alphabetical order, were as follows: Peter Adelstein, Gary Albright, Susan M. Barger, Thomas Barrow, Irene Brückle, James Enyeart, Roy Flukinger, Nicholas Graver, David Haberstich, Joe Iraci, Daniel Jones, Nora Kennedy, Dan Kushel, Janet Lehr, Constance McCabe, John McElhone, Paul Messier, Jeffrey Morrow, Douglas Munson, Peter Mustardo, Douglas Nishimura, Debbie Hess Norris, José Orraca, Marc Osterman, Roy Perkinson, Irving Pobboravski, Els Ryper, James Reilly, Andrew Robb, Grant Romer, France Scully, Chris Tahk, Brian Thurgood, David Wooters and Harvey Zucker.

Background research prior to the interviews consisted of a bibliographical study of the history of photograph conservation and the compilation of a thorough bibliography for every interviewee. Other oral history projects such as the George Eastman House Oral History Library and the International Oral History Project of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works provided examples of methodology.

The interviews, recorded with a digital video camera, were organized in three parts. The first part consisted of short personal questions such as those about birthplace, education, hobbies and family situation. This provided the necessary socio-cultural background for the portrait. In the second part, the professional career of the subject was reviewed through questions based on preliminary research. Specific questions included those on education, apprenticeship, training and influences, the history of the laboratories where the subject worked, his or her treatment methodology and practice, research conducted and conferences attended, the role of professional associations, the relationship with other conservators and the public, and suggestions for other interviews. The intent was that by the end of the interview the subject would speak more freely about the significance of his or her work to the field. The third and final part of the interview consisted of questions related to ethics and the future of the profession.

The videotapes are stored at two libraries: the George Eastman House and the Winthertur Museum Library, home of the International Oral History Project of the American Institute of Conservation. There, they serve as a record, a resource for research on the history in conservation and a didactic tool.

Learning with oral history

Further experience with the Oral History of Photograph Conservation project has revealed that oral histories, by their spontaneity and narrative character, are very good teaching aids. Recorded interviews make history more accessible to students and permit varied teaching strategies. Used as a didactic tool in lecturing and assignments, oral histories acquaint the student with the personalities of the field and break the gap between impersonal curriculum and the community from which the history has come. At the same time, the practice of interviewing has proved to be a very effective way to motivate students.

Conclusions

Oral history is a method for collecting oral memories to complement and corroborate written materials. A growing community of oral historians has recently developed a methodology to improve research methods and results. These guidelines for practice include recommended pre-interview research procedures, techniques for conducting interviews, and post-interview directions for dissemination and preservation. A code of ethics also exists, stating the rights and obligations of both interviewer and interviewee. In the field of conservation of works of art, some oral history archives exist, allowing researchers and students to have access to conservators' memories that would otherwise be lost. The Oral History of Photograph Conservation project has collected the reminiscences of people who were instrumental in the development of the field. The project, housed at the George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film, is now part of the basic professional training experience, used as a teaching aid to bring history alive to students

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