

About this unit

You might think of an archive as a collection of documents and records, files tucked away in boxes, or even the building that houses those records. But what do archives have to do with art? How do we store and preserve the things that artists leave behind, be that actual works of art or ephemera like sketches and drawings? Learn more about the nature of archives, see how artists work with ideas of memory, and go behind the scenes to see how Tate's team of art conservators bring science into the gallery to fix, preserve, and restore works in the collection.

What is an archive?

An archive can take any number of forms, from a folder of documents in a filing cabinet to a collection of materials and leftovers from an artist's studio. Essentially, an archive is any collection of documents and records that gives us insight into the history and nature of its subject. When it comes to archives of art and artists, these typically include sketches, drawings, clippings, and any preparatory materials for a final work of art. So why preserve these preliminary documents, which would likely contain mistakes, errors, and disregarded projects?

It is these early documents and objects that can give us special insight into an artist's practice and thought processes. By looking through sketches, models, and drafts, we can see the challenges—and failures—an artist had to experience in order to create a work of art. This gives us a better grasp on how they may have worked and how they developed over time. And for those who leave behind personal effects and letters for their archives, it can help us develop an understanding of their personal lives and identities in relation to their art, and how they may have fit into a broader cultural history.

In recent decades, artists have become increasingly interested in archives as inspiration for their work, but also in its use as an artistic medium. The impulse to accumulate, sort, and document drives the process of making assemblages and collages just as much as it dictates the creation of an archive. Many conceptual and performance artists use archival materials and formats in the work, blurring the line between art and documentation. And some artists have begun to question how to revisit and re-enact their own work after it has been archived. In what ways can archives go beyond documentation and foster inspiration? How do archives not only trace the creative process but also become part of that process itself?



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<https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/tate/archives-memory/what-is-an-archive/a/what-is-an-archive?modal=1>

Nina: Someone printed it in big for us, for me and my sister. And it was like - when he came for Christmas and they were already divorced - it was like a big deal that he came. And then I think it was the night that I got that bike that I wanted, and it was from my dad AND my mom. And I remember of that night we still have a picture and imprinted it in big and I think it's the last picture we have. I mean I would say it's the last picture; because otherwise I don't have a lot of stuff from him; Or like pictures - No.

Katta: Do you wish there was more.

Nina: No. I think it's fine the way it is because it's just - I think - I mean if I look at if I look back I would not see how there would be more and I'm just like "No it's OK". You know, I know his face, I know how he looks. I don't think it would have changed anything to have more pictures; for me personally.

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Katta: Because you say you do remember what his face looks like, but do you remember the way he was?

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Nina: Yeah, I kind of I remember... I don't remember a lot because, you know, it goes away, but I do remember his attitude and stuff that he was not the warmest person. I wouldn't call him - he wasn't the warmest person and, you know, he was a little bit distant but still, it's you know stuff like that. So actually, when I say that doesn't sound positive at all. I still have love for him but it's just that I don't have the warmest memory of him because I didn't see him like that at all. But I still see him as for me a good dad, you know. But I think it's a little bit different for me because I did find out a lot of stuff later about him that weren't good. So not that it changed anything for the way I viewed him because I always viewed him the same, but it does give you more explanation why you perceived him the way you did and why things felt that way because a lot of stuff that I heard, that I found out last year, it was really messed up things that I was like "Yeah. No, those are not the best - You know what I mean. So, I feel like my memories of him are quite neutral. It's not nor positive nor negative.

Leonie: Was this stuff you found out related to your family or your mom, to you ...

Nina: No, it was my mom. My mom and my brother, it was related to that - it IS related to that. And I mean I knew, but only last year I officially knew anything in kind of detail or more details. And stuff like that explains the divorce. It explains a lot of stuff and then you're like "Oh", you know. And it doesn't for me. For my sister, she handled it in a totally different way. But she also found out way earlier when she was 16 and for me, I always felt that - I don't know - for me it's all neutral. Also the day he died I felt like I handled it in a very neutral way and my sister handled it in a very harsh way like shit but she was she's two years older than me. And I wanted to see his body, you know, and get flowers and

stuff and I wanted to do the whole thing. I also wanted to see like his body man. Now I sound fucked up but I wanted to see the crimination. I wanted to stay and they asked us to be like "Okay, everyone good outside or the kids go outside now" and I was like "No, I want to see it" but I couldn't see it but it's fine. But, you know, I really wanted to experience it for some reason and I don't know -

Katta: I get that.

Leonie: Maybe you were still young enough to have quite a neutral experience of it. Your sister was a bit older so maybe it was too conflicting for her, I can imagine.

Nina: Yeah, I think, what happened is also, my sister is the big sister of the family, so she of course, because later after my grandpa died, I think at that moment my sister really felt, because now my mom also lost her dad, so at that moment I think - now we're talking about my sister by the way - [laughs]

Leonie: Yeah, but that's what happens.

Nina: There's my sister. I think at that moment she felt a certain need like "OK now it's my responsibility to make us happy", you know, so I can get she really took that responsibility and maybe I took the role of the baby, you know, being the baby of the family - or not necessarily the baby but like, you know, the one that can be careless, that can just do and just do whatever.

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Katta: Yeah at least the one that doesn't have to take charge; Fill someone's shoes who is not there anymore. Do you - So you've always had pretty much a neutral image of your dad and that's not changed even though you've heard more stories.

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Nina: Yeah, I think so. I think because for me it doesn't - I mean it matters what he did and I feel bad for my mom, you know, and I'm like "Yeah." Sometimes I go like: "Well, why did you have to be so fucked up?" you know. But at the same time, it doesn't change the relationship that I had with him because what I had was what I had, you know. So it can't change that; Those little fragments that I remember, it doesn't really change that now; nor the sentiment because there was not much left, you know. So of course. You know it's more like - if I would look back now it would be hard to watch you know maybe that more.

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Katta: When you look at pictures that you have of your dad do those sentiments kind of come back, like the snippets of memory that you still have an are more vivid than others that you've forgotten about. Do you get like a moment of emotion when you look at them or is that also quite neutral.

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Nina: I don't know. When I look at him sometimes it's [unclear]. I'm more busy with trying to feel something; Some type of like "Oh" - not that I'm like "oh that's my dad". I know it's him, you know, I know but it's like "well it's been it's been this long now", you know it's like it's a reminder of the distance, you know, that you have with that memory and instead it's like "Oh." You know so it's more me trying to figure out, like - at that moment think - "Who are you?" I don't think anything really gets triggered because I'm more busy with my head with 'Where am I now' and 'What am I remembering now'. But then I don't really remember anything.

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Katta: Do you feel bit guilty that it doesn't strike you as a very emotional sort of -

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Nina: No, I don't feel guilty or something. Sometimes I feel weird because sometimes I feel like I'm emotionless about it but I know I'm not.

Katta: Yeah, I know; You've been able to come up to cope with it. You've been able to establish a rational relationship with what happened.

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Nina: Maybe... sometimes I doubt I'm like 'Did I really - Is it okay now that I deal with it'; because it's weird.

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Leonie: I know this feeling so well. Like, is this it? Am I done? I can't be done.

Katta: It's kind of sad to know. 'Oh, I've come - I'm over this.'

Leonie: Because it's such a big part of your identity. And then when you're over it you think you're over it, it's still this hole and since we're talking about violence in absence that's also a big part of what happens when one of these situations unfold.

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Nina: Did you guys have the same thing that - because I remember when my dad, of course I was sad it's not like I didn't - I was like "Oh, fucked up", you know, I know that I was sad you know but like that for me, I think, one of the hardest part is that now I was the girl without the dad, that for me got me the most because I already felt kind of like an outsider because my mom and my dad were already divorced and my dad is like is black, you know, so I was the only coloured child and now he was dead so it was like everything for me was like "Oh, no, I'm the ultimate outcast or something" which is stupid because now I'm making his death about me and it's very selfish as a kid. Now I look back on it "Damn, girl, that is not an issue", you know what I mean? But as a child I was so like.

00:09:01

Katta: That's the only thing you can do. The other person is gone so why can't you be a little bit selfish. But, yeah, you definitely immediately get that stamp of "oh she's a half an orphan. Let's not you know choose any of these topics to talk about." And we did talk about it earlier: As soon as we would walk into someone else's house and we'd see their parents together... Yeah, we're not used to that. We feel a bit strange. For us the kind of default state of a family is one parent and sometimes you go back to being like oh right they're like what's considered normal, or classic.

Nina: But then but then I always have a feeling when I do see a full family I'm not I'm not like they're normal because it's rare these days that parents aren't divorced. So for me I'm more like "Look at them, ya'll made it". [Laugh]

Katta: [laughs] "Good on you guys!"

Leonie: [laughs] "Good for you!"

Nina: A lot of my friends have divorced parents.

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Katta: Also with one parent who has died and there is definitely some single parenting issues. And then it's like "OK. This is fun to see. This is an interesting dynamic."

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Nina: Or a lot of people have a stepdad or stepmom. This was something I never, me personally, I never knew: Having a step person or a stepdad. I never knew that. I'm so glad because I think, thank God, obviously for me personally.

00:10:45

Leonie: I do have a stepmom now because my dad married another woman which is quite weird for me. Also, because we didn't get the best start, me and the new wife. It's been weird anyways because I think the first time, I met her was while I was still in this huge fight with my dad. The hardest thing for me is, I think, I know a lot of people of which one parent died and I'm kind of in the same situation, but my dad just chose to leave and he's still alive. And then they'd ask me you know you know the feeling of absence and not being able to be with one of your family members. And then I'd always have to explain my dad just chose to not see me which stings a little bit - stung though because I am seeing him now and it's not like it's all good now. It's just I saw him for the first time past October in six years. I'm going again within a month. So that's the second time I'm gonna see him. There's still a lot of work to do but at least you know -

Nina: Did you guys ever had conversation about it?

Leonie: Yeah. No. So [laugh] no. The first time I was there I really wanted to talk about it but I just did not want to because

things were so fragile still because so much has happened. Because he left when I was 14 and it was just one big drama and it was very very heavy and if I was gonna talk about this now I could ruin the chance of this - I thought maybe I should give it chance to grow.

Nina: That is also a great possibility on you.

Leonie: Oh yeah. I don't know, I always felt a certain moment that he was the kid you know and that I was the parent because I was trying to fix all this stuff within the family and he was like..

Nina: Did you also feel like you had to grow up way quicker also because of that?

Leonie: Well I think we talked about this: I don't feel like I missed part of my childhood. I mean, I was 14 anyway, but part of my teenage years. But I did feel like I grew up way faster than I could have grown up and I think that's why, you know, a lot of people would tell you "Really, are you that age? You seem so much older!" but everyone here does that when you get into a situation like that. And I do think it had quite some negative effects. I was we way too grown up I guess. You want to control everything because once stuff like that happens you get quite scared and, I don't know, it's just been such a mess; I'm still trying to figure out where to put all the pieces.

Katta: Do you actually almost actively in some situations feel that gap? Knowing that there's something that is supposed to be there. And you're kind of just missing out on it?

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Leonie: Like my dad? Oh yeah. I think. Yeah I think the biggest one happened when I got my high school diploma. It was such a big moment because high school I'm very hard on me because of him as well. And then I was just standing over my diplomas on my mom's and in the audience and was like "OK this is one half. Where is the other one?" And then for him not even knowing that I got my high school diploma. You know that's just that's fucked up. Yeah it is. It really is. And then when I got into contact with him again which I did - not him - which is also weird - but then he wrote "Oh yeah, you got your high school diploma, right?" he typed. "Yeah, thanks for noticing". And stuff like that, it just keeps up behind you.

Nina: It's hard to not build up resentment.

Leonie: It's really hard.

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Nina: A lot of it was his choice.

Leonie: And that's the part that is the hardest for me because now that I am in contact with my dad again, if I want to build this relationship I have to accept the fact that my dad is not gonna be able to see my point of view. It's not gonna happen or it's not going to happen very soon at the least. He just doesn't understand what happened. Either that or he feels so guilty or he knows it's so

wrong that he just blocks it out. Because he still thinks that he had no choice and that when I got angry that that was kind of me being immature. And that my mom is basically the devil which he is also convinced of. And it hasn't changed, and it's been seven years. If I really do want to build this relationship from the ground up again I'm just gonna have to accept the fact that I know what happened and I know who I am and I know how I handle it and that's fine that way. But it's still really hard. Also we've been talking about this a lot and me going away in a month it kind of stirs up things so I am getting kind of nervous, you know, about how the holiday will be. But I think it's good as well because I'm doing all the thinking now instead of when I'm there with him and the stepmom and all those brothers. So I think that's good.

Katta [directed at Nina]: Did you ever build up any resentment? Against to your dad.

00:16:21

Nina: No I don't think so. No not at all.

00:16:25

Katta: You didn't feel any resentment against basically - you know the classic image of 'why is the world it's so unfair; why is this happening to me?'

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Nina: Like a little Emo-moment? No, I was a little Emo-child! But I don't feel like it was anything, you know, I don't feel like I was in the Emo-culture but I fit the image, you know, I was wearing black and stuff.

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Leonie: [laughs] Oh me too [...]

00:17:14

Katta: We basically have two examples of one being able to - I'm going to say able to this feel some resentment, being able to direct some sort of anger to someone or there not being anyone that you can be angry towards to. What do you think, out of your own experience, what does better? Do you think one is better and helps you cope?

Nina: I think in a weird way I think your situation is worse.

Katta: Because it's it keeps coming.

Nina: It's not gone and it's someone choosing. So it's something that's consciously made. Whether someone's dead it's painful; there's nothing you can do about it because it's the reality of life itself it's. But I think it's much more painful To realize that someone just left and that it was a conscious decision. And that is harder to deal with because it can only be towards someone because it's a person that shows that.

Leonie: I think the harshest thing I've ever said aloud is I wish he'd just been dead it would have been easier.

00:18:33

Katta: You pretty much right about that, though. I agree. Do you wish there was more moments that you could remember of the good times.

Leonie: Oh yeah. I don't remember quite as much as I'd like to but...

Katta: ... but it is being overshadowed by the recent experiences with him?

Leonie: Yeah but also, I'm glad that my parents took quite a lot of pictures and even some videos because otherwise I would not remember the good stuff. I wouldn't. And at first of course I was like 14 till 17 years old. I can look at the pictures at all because the only thing I felt was lost but now it's actually really nice because now, when I look at the pictures, there's still a bit of the negative things, of course, but I'd say the overwhelming feeling is just "Oh that was such a nice sign and we were all together and we're canoeing all the time" you know. Generally, I feel happy when I see the pictures. I think that's interesting how the same type of archiving can cause different emotions depending on in what part of the process you are because now, I really do like to have them around as well.