ICFA wins the 2013 MARAC Finding Aid Award!

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Session 4
Finding Aid Award Winners

MARAC Fall 2014
October 17, 2014

Baltimore, MD

SLIDE 1:

- My name is Rona Razon, and I am the Archivist in the Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives (or ICFA in short) of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, an institute of Harvard University located in Washington, D.C.

SLIDE 2:

- On behalf of the ICFA team, I would like to thank the MARAC Finding Aids Award Committee for awarding us the Frederic M. Miller Finding Aid Award for the collection *The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers* (a.k.a. BI/DO amongst the team).

- As you can see on this slide, I've provided the link for the BI/DO finding aid, available in both PDF format and in our online inventory called AtoM@DO.

- We are truly grateful that our 3-years of work for this collection, from re-arranging, description, rehousing, to countless editing of the finding aid, has been acknowledged with this honor.

SLIDE 3:

- The BI/DO collection was acquired by Dumbarton Oaks starting in 1952 after the death of Thomas Whittemore, who is ICFA's leading protagonist and "who was a former English professor [at Tufts College], an amateur archaeologist…, and the [Byzantine Institute's] prime visionary and [director]"[1].

- Whittemore's and the Byzantine Institute's mission "was to conserve, restore, study, and document Byzantine monuments […] and arts in the former Byzantine Empire,"[2] particularly in Istanbul, Turkey. Two of their most important projects were the restoration and detailed studies of the famous churches Hagia Sophia (also known as St. Sophia) and Kariye Camii (also known as the Chora Monastery) which continue to attract tourists today for their architectural beauty and their decorations.

- To achieve their mission, they recorded their work and findings through fieldwork notebooks, photographs, drawings, and moving images.

SLIDE 4:

- On this slide, I have provided some examples of the collection items. On the left is a notebook from William John Gregory[3] and the one on the right is from Richard Gregory[4]. Both brothers, William and Richard, documented, amongst other things, the filming process of the wall in the northern tympanum of Hagia Sophia.

- During the first stage of processing, I learned that Whittemore instructed his staff to regularly record their daily activities at Hagia Sophia and Kariye Camii.

SLIDE 5:

- The fieldworkers also documented their observations and findings as they carefully removed the plasters from the walls in order to reveal the Byzantine mosaics of Hagia Sophia, as seen on this slide.

- When I started to process the "pre-processed," "processed," "re-processed," and "overly processed" collection in 2010, a collection with more than 150 linear feet of administrative and fieldwork papers, and audiovisual material, I became appreciative of Whittemore's belief in the value of documentation, a practice that I work to instill in my assistants and interns…a practice that we all try to incorporate in our work. This time, I wanted to make sure that every decision and change we made was well-documented for our successors

SLIDE 6:

- To start the re-processing of the BI/DO collection, my colleague Laurian Douthett and I evaluated the existing physical arrangement, as well as the existing finding aid. We conducted investigative work (meaning, we interviewed our colleagues, the former head of the department, as well as a former intern) and looked at legacy admin files, inventories, and other lists.

- We found that, although the existing arrangement of the collection is by authors' names (meaning last name and then first name), the legacy files showed that the collection was originally arranged chronologically by site but had been rearranged multiple times.

- After confirming our findings and observations (and after documenting all of those things, of course!), we decided to follow the original inventories and re-organize the collection, once again, in chronological order, then by site or by the order of fieldwork projects (and then by the authors' names, if applicable). This arrangement represents the Institute's administrative and fieldwork history more accurately.

- The original finding aid grew from 54 pages to a total of 122 pages, by the time we published it in April 2013.

SLIDE 7:

- In developing the finding aid, we used Describing Archives: A Content Standard (or DACS) and minimally, the Resource Description & Access (or RDA) as content standards.

- We used the requisite descriptive elements in DACS, but in order to enhance the existing finding aid, we switched the order of some of the elements. For example, we moved the Scope and Content and the Historical Note before the Administrative Information. We did this in order to make the "aboutness" of the collection more obvious for our researchers.

- From working closely with our researchers, we have learned that most users prefer to learn about the collection first (meaning its contents and subject matter) rather than reading the Administrative Information right at the beginning of the finding aid document.

- This does not mean that the Administrative Information element is less valuable than the Scope and Content and Historical Note. To enrich the Admin field, we provided a detailed account of the acquisition history of the BI/DO collection, as well as a detailed account of the processing history. While this level of information may not seem directly relevant to our users' needs, by providing this information we are, at least, informing our researchers about that "extra something" that may actually be deemed useful for their research (such as the increasingly relevant provenance information).

SLIDE 8:

- Furthermore, we expanded the Index Terms and divided them into four (4) categories: Names, Corporate Bodies, Locations, and Subjects. To enhance the terms, we added references and/or the permanent URIs to authorities for each primary term.

- Besides DACS and RDA as content standards, we have relied on commonly used controlled vocabularies and these included:

    - VIAF or the Virtual International Authority File - to confirm or standardize the key names or individuals in the collection
    - AAT or Art & Architecture Thesaurus - to confirm or standardize the key subject terms
    - TGN or Thesaurus of Geographic Names and also Pleiades, which is "a community-built gazetteer […] of ancient places.[5]"

- You will also see in the BI/DO finding aid that we were very diligent about citing the Historical Note information, as well as the folder descriptions. We did and still do this extra work not only to back up our information but for the benefit of our users. As we have learned throughout the years, most of our users appreciate the endnotes as well as the list of Bibliography and the Related Archival Sources elements. Not only does this added information facilitate their research but this sometimes leads them to new lines of investigation.

SLIDE 9:

- To create the folder titles and folder descriptions, we used RDA's "Take What You See and Accept What You Get" principle in order to construct the formal or original titles. We also referred to AACR2 for parallel titles and the *Chicago Manual of Style* for folder descriptions.

- For example, for all original titles and notes in the BI/DO collection, we have transcribed them as they appear on the items. In folder 80 of Subgroup II, fieldworker Richard Gregory labeled his notebook, "Rough Observation Book I: OBSERVATIONS MADE AT JOHN PANEL, DEISES, AND VESTIBULE PANEL" (as you can see, some of the texts are written in title case and some are in all caps).

- Instead of normalizing the texts, we have transcribed the original title as it appears on the notebook in order to show the author's emphasis on the project as something monumental and significant. This approach highlights the author's intent and writing convention, adding another layer of context to the item. Furthermore, if the original title of an item is in multiple lines, then we indicate line breaks using forward slashes.

- In general, this strategy of transcribing original or formal titles as they appear on folders or items proved most effective for coordinating description among multiple processors for a collection of this size.

- As for folder descriptions, although we do not generally require creating folder description for each folder, we have learned from this experience that providing granular descriptions for our collections enable more efficient navigation for researchers and staff alike.

- I believe that the BI/DO finding aid give researchers a greater degree of autonomy, a departure from the concept of the archivist as "finding aid." With our approach, researchers are more informed about the collection and can more effectively articulate their needs.

- Because of its success with our users, we are following similar practices with our other finding aids.

- In addition, during this project Laurian and I developed a manual for processing and preserving archival collections in ICFA. We also developed a Style Guide for Finding Aids, which provides guidance and instructions on how to formulate and structure the folder titles and descriptions, and the finding aid as a whole. With the style guide, we aim to have uniformity for all of our finding aids, both in long-form and in our online inventory database.

SLIDE 10:

- Since the publication of the BI/DO finding aid in April 2013, there has been unprecedented interest in the collection from new and varied researchers.

- ICFA serves primarily doctoral and post-doctoral researchers who study the monuments of Byzantine art and architecture. This means we usually get reference requests from art historians and archaeologists. But since the publication of the BI/DO finding aid, we have received reference requests from unexpected sources, on topics as diverse as cultural history, philanthropy, conservation, and historic preservation.

- To give a few examples: Hitoshi Takanezawa of Kobe Shukugawa Gakuin University visited ICFA last October of 2013 to review the Byzantine Institute fieldwork notebooks because he and his small team are trying to determine if there are more covered Byzantine mosaics in Hagia Sophia. After finding the relevant information for his research, he was able to confirm that there are actually more covered mosaics of ornamental designs.

- Another example is Charles King of Georgetown University, a Professor of International Affairs and Government. He visited ICFA two years ago to learn more about the life and work of Thomas Whittemore, especially Whittemore's involvement with the restoration of the Hagia Sophia mosaics in the 1940s. Some of his research in ICFA is featured in the recently published book called *Midnight at the Pera Palace: The Birth of Modern Istanbul*.

SLIDE 11:

- To conclude, please explore the following links, especially if you would like more information about the BI/DO collection and Thomas Whittemore, our processing workflow and finding aid style guide, and our other finding aids.

References

[1] Razon, Rona, "Setting the Stage: Background on the Byzantine Institute," *ICFA* WordPress Blog, May 10, 2013, http://icfadumbartonoaks.wordpress.com/2013/05/10/setting-the-stage-background-on-the-byzantine-institute/.
[2] Ibid
[3] Gregory, William John, "Personal Diary No. 2," MS.BZ.004-02-01-02-181, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. late 1920s-2000s, Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, D.C., http://www.doaks.org/library-archives/icfa/special-projects/online-exhibitions/a-truthful-record/style-and-content/william-john-gregory-notebook-entry-for-july-20-1939.
[4] Gregory, Richard A., "Note-book No.2: Notes and Observations Taken at St. Sophia," MS.BZ.004-02-01-177, The Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. late 1920s-2000s, Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, D.C., http://www.doaks.org/library-archives/icfa/special-projects/online-exhibitions/a-truthful-record/technique/richard-a-gregory-notebook-entry-for-july-18-1939.
[5] Pleiades: http://pleiades.stoa.org/