



## EDITORIAL

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# It All Started with Etienne

## *Developing Fine Arts Outreach with Unique Archival Collections*

Since its inception, the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago has served as a vital repository for artifacts created by artists working in diverse genres of media. These collections offer unique opportunities and challenges for the institution, particularly in terms of preservation and collection development. However, beyond these traditional archival concerns, the distinctive nature of the artworks has also allowed the museum to develop meaningful strategies for community engagement, professional outreach, public education, and research. This essay will explore how the Leather Archives has navigated these complexities, using its collections and programming to foster connections with the communities it serves.

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### History

In 1991, The Leather Archives & Museum was founded by Chicago businessman Chuck Renslow and Field Museum mammalogist Anthony DeBlase as a community archive, library, and museum of leather, kink, fetish, and BDSM history and culture. The first core collection of the new institution was a body of artwork consisting of paintings, photographs, and line drawings created by Renslow's late partner Domingo Orejudos, better known in the art world under his pseudonym “Etienne.” These holdings were complemented by a second archival collection of all photos produced by Kris Studios, a male physique photography studio founded by Renslow and Orejudos. The development of the archival holdings in the next four decades saw significant growth in the genres of drawings, paintings, sculpture, photography, slides (both commercial and privately made), films (both commercially and privately produced), and stained glass. This diversity enabled the Archives to develop varied outreach strategies to the academic community and connect with contemporary artists and private collectors of works related to alternative sexualities. A detailed biography of Renslow, written by Tracy Baim and Owen Keehnen, would appear in 2011 from Chicago's Surrey Books as *Leatherman: The Legend of Chuck Renslow*. The career of his partner was profiled in Ron Ehemann's essay “Passion Art: Dom ‘Etienne’ Orejudos,” published in 2008 as part of the edited volume *Out and Proud in Chicago: An Overview of the City's Gay Community*.

Initially opened in a storefront space on Clark Street in Chicago's Andersonville neighborhood under the direction of writer and artist Joseph Bean, the Archives quickly outgrew its quarters due to a steady stream of donations in diverse formats from the North American and international sections of the leather community. A fundraising effort in the mid-1990s resulted in the successful purchase of the current facility on Greenview Avenue in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood in 1999. In the second issue of the Archives' newsletter in April 1996, a lengthy list of potential donations desired by the institution was included. The sixth entry called for the donation

of items of original art, defined as “Paintings, drawings, sketches, cartoons, sculpture, limited edition and/or signed photographic prints, and other media. Particularly those of a leather/SM/fetish-related erotic subject matter, or those produced by someone prominent in the greater leather community” (Leather Archives & Museum 1996, 4).

One of the first new art-related projects in the expanded space was the establishment of a guest artists’ gallery to provide a venue for rotating exhibits by alternative artists dealing with kinky (however defined) themes to exhibit their work and raise awareness of their existence and the mediums they used. As a feature of the Archives’ educational programming and to stimulate the generation of new works, one of the significant functions of the gallery was to provide a venue for works that mainstream galleries might not choose to show. The new space quickly proved popular and continues to be heavily used. Past guest artist exhibitions from 2009 to 2020 are profiled on the Archives’ homepage as part of the documentation of the Visiting Scholars Program.

Another benefit of having expanded exhibition space was the ability to effectively display large artworks and artifacts in all formats. Notable examples are a free-hand drawing by Etienne covering an entire wall of the main staircase; a banner carried in the 1993 March on Washington; and the faceless fabric and wire figures of the “Mineshaft Angels” designed by Muriel Castanis (Leather Archives & Museum 2004), which for many years was a feature of the bar of the same name in New York City. A set of Etienne murals that formerly hung in The Gold Coast bar in Chicago were reassembled in the Archives and hung on the north and south walls of the auditorium which had been renamed the Etienne Center. Given that the Archives is the collection of record for the erotic art of Etienne (complementing the Newberry Library’s holdings of his work in choreography, dance, and the theater) and the unique character of many of its print and nonprint holdings, it followed that when works of potential interest for acquisition appeared in the art market, Archives staff were aware either through their monitoring of the market or by vendors who would share the information with the Archives. In some cases, it proved possible to retrieve relevant items to augment existing collections. A notable relic of another of Renslow’s businesses is the mural from the bar Zolar’s, which depicts a sorcerer casting a spell. The bar opened near the tracks of the Chicago L network in the 1980s and was destroyed when a spark from a passing train ignited the building, with the mural being the only element to survive.

The Archives also serves as the collection of record for two other noted artists working in the erotic genre. In July 2019, a major donation was received from Portland, Oregon, cartoonist Bill Schmeling, better known in the art world under his pseudonym “The Hun.” The donation covered all his published works and the associated records of his career and established the Archives as his collection of record, with licensure granted for the use of his images. The other major collection was added to the Archives in 2022; it covers the work of San Francisco photographer Jim Wigler, noted for his portrait volume *101 Faces of AIDS* and a long involvement with the leather community. Photography has continued to be an area of collection development and patron interest for the Archives through the acquisition and donation of individual works by major names such as veteran physique photographer John Palatinus. The Archives’ extensive collection of periodicals, which published the output of these individuals, contains many titles not held by other research institutions.

Another fine arts genre present from the earliest days of the Archives is the holdings of erotic film and video, eventually including reel-to-reel, VHS, DVD, and streaming formats, with themes relevant to areas of collection emphasis. Beginning in 2023, a film series was inaugurated to make selections from this

body of cinematography more accessible to the public. Data on films is also available as a component of some of the personal paper collections, such as the Desmond file in the Anthony DeBlase holdings and corporate materials from several private and commercial studios.

An unexpected medium also present in the Archives' art collection is stained glass. While many of the panels are unattributed, one example (the colors of the defunct Chicago leather club Trade-Winds) was rediscovered in a barn in rural Illinois and given as a donation by its creator Gary Plazyk in 2015 (Ridinger 2015).

The historical value of these bodies of work can best be understood by contrasting the careers of artists who work in the erotic medium with their mainstream colleagues. Rather than being able to exhibit regularly in galleries where their works can become familiar to both their fellow artists and those of the public who take an interest in the arts, their work is often produced and distributed through a network of personal contacts and created for a variety of reasons. An example is Etienne, who produced some of his art to decorate the bars and businesses owned by his partner Chuck Renslow and for use in advertisements for them. Documentation for the work of these artists also differs from the familiar landscape of gallery exhibitions with accompanying catalogs or book-length, illustrated studies of an individual artist's output and creative vision. Many, if not most, erotic artists have no collection of record or catalog raisonné (or, at best, a fragmentary one), and in the field of book-length studies, volumes exist only for Tom of Finland, Quaintance, and Etienne. Having an institutional repository that can preserve the work of this marginal (and often fugitive) community of artists for contemporary and future researchers and historians is invaluable.

### **Scholarship as outreach**

In 2010, the Archives initiated a visiting scholars program for individuals working in relevant disciplines, enabling them to travel to Chicago for onsite research. Over the ensuing thirteen years, five participants in this program specified interest in using art-related collections for their research. In 2011, David Johnson requested access to the collection of materials from Kris Studios for the development of his book manuscript, which subsequently appeared in 2019 from Columbia University Press as *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement*. He was followed in 2017 by Kirin Wachter-Grene of New York University, who drew upon the Archives' collections to explore the historical involvement of Black women with the kink, leather, and fetish communities. Her research provided content for the fiftieth-anniversary issue of the journal *The Black Scholar*, whose theme was "At the Limits of Desire: Black Radical Pleasure," published in the summer of 2020 under her direction as guest editor. In 2019, independent artist and curator Heather Racquel Phillips from the University of Pennsylvania came to the Leather Archives as that year's visiting scholar. Her research focused on the representation of marginalized people *by* marginalized people within the leather community, with particular attention to people of color. She accessed many different collections related to clubs and individuals, including artwork, handcrafted leather and cloth banners and garments, and portraiture.

In 2020, Michael Thomas Vassallo from Temple University was awarded the scholarship to assist his research for a documentary film on The Leather Man, the oldest surviving leather business in New York City, founded in 1965. A slightly more mainstream use of the archival arts holdings was made in 2022 when Jay Sosa of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, investigated the

imagery used in comics, advertisements, and artwork for a forthcoming book on the social history of the use of amyl nitrate.

The active support given to working artists bore unexpected fruit in the spring of 2022 when the Ruth Foundation for the Arts of Milwaukee awarded the Archives an unsolicited grant of \$10,000, followed by a second grant in the autumn of 2022 for \$50,000. Their statement of purpose notes that “Our goal is to explore new possibilities for art philanthropy through an artist-driven approach” (Ruth Foundation for the Arts n.d.). The success of the collection and related programming is reflected in both the output of scholars and the support of the Ruth Foundation.

To build on the success of the scholar program, board member and working artist Heather Racquel Phillips, during a board of directors’ meeting in 2022, reviewed the institution’s history of involvement with the arts community in the areas of collection development, outreach, exhibits, and research support. She then proposed a new initiative for the establishment of an artist-in-residence program—similar to the visiting scholar program already in place—to address the growing demand for access to the Archives’ holdings. The board endorsed the idea and implemented it in the summer of 2023. The first artist to utilize the new research option was Gabe Martinez of Philadelphia, who was present at the summer 2023 board meeting and shared with the board both samples of his prior work and his ideas for an exhibition based on a reimagining of the imagery of Etienne. The completed installation was opened on December 1, 2023, under the title *Sparks in A Dark Room: Exchange, Pleasure and Pain*. Members of the Ruth Foundation board of directors attended the opening reception, marking their first visit to the Archives. On January 8, 2024, “When Etienne Grew Wings: A Review of Sparks in A Dark Room at the Leather Archives & Museum” by Annette LePique was posted to *Newcity Art*, a website “dedicated to news, reviews and features about Chicago’s visual art world” (LePique 2024).

In addition to providing space for the recognition and promotion of artists utilizing BDSM themes in their work, the Archives, from its inception, worked closely with museums and galleries nationwide by loaning requested items from its collections to support planned shows and long-term exhibitions. Since 2015, the list of partner institutions has included the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), Artists Space, the Museum of Sex, the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in New York City, Illinois State University, Chicago’s Swedish American Museum, and the Block Museum at Northwestern University.

Within the literature of librarianship and the archival sciences, the definition of outreach as it relates to programming and networking with various communities has taken different forms, depending on the type of institution. A distinctive feature of the Leather Archives & Museum is that it is entirely the vision of members of a marginalized community who have successfully created and managed a unique collection of primary and secondary materials without being limited by the priorities of a mainstream archive and the cultural assumptions on which they are based. One of its founders, Anthony DeBlase, brought to the project his experience in collection management gained during his time as a mammalogist on the staff of the Field Museum. The involvement of academic and public librarians in the volunteer pool from the Archives’ earliest days provided access to professional standards of documentation and

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processing of the collections' materials. The initial publicity for the Archives described, in frank terms, the need for an institution to preserve materials from these communities—materials that are frequently destroyed following the death of their owners by families who are uncomfortable with them.

A survey of the literature of librarianship and archival science conducted in the EBSCO database *Library Literature and Information* in February 2024, and focused on archival collections and their outreach programs, revealed that most articles identified spoke to the relationship of mainstream archives to marginalized populations, along with strategies for improving their representation in archival collections. The issue with this admittedly desirable goal is that the purposes of mainstream archives (as defined in their mission statements or charters) express and define institutional priorities rooted in dominant cultural factors and histories. Thus, any community not explicitly included in the mission statement must have its data interpreted through these established definitions and categories rather than being described and evaluated on the terms of its creators and the cultural parameters and values of the population that claims it. The question is further complicated by the fact that the idea of what an archive is for and its place within a larger society has demonstrably shifted over the centuries.

The history of this complex debate in archival science was explored in detail by Terry Cook in his lengthy essay “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” published in the Canadian journal *Archivaria* in 1997. He begins with the description of archives as “houses of memory,” noting that “such societal or collective memory has not been formed haphazardly throughout history, nor are the results without controversy. Historians...are now studying very carefully the processes over time that have determined what was worth remembering and, as important, what was forgotten, deliberately or accidentally. Such collective ‘remembering’—and ‘forgetting’—occurs through...archives—perhaps most especially through archives” (Cook 1997, 18). Considering the intellectual history of the profession, Cook lays out a series of questions that form “the central issues of archival history”: “How...have archivists reflected...changing societal realities and power struggles as they built their ‘houses of memory’? How have archival assumptions, concepts and strategies reflected the dominant structures and societal ethos of their own time? Upon what basis, reflecting what shifting values, have archivists decided who should be admitted into their houses of memory, and who excluded?” (Cook 1997, 19). Cook continues by considering the changing rationales used to appraise, arrange, and describe archival collections, beginning with the publication of the *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* in the Netherlands in 1898. Since that time, a variety of approaches have been used, ranging from focusing on government, corporate, and public records (with private and personal archives assigned to libraries); regarding archives as vast bodies of evidence to be selectively curated; employing the ideas of the “record group” and “provenance”; and recognizing the importance of context.

Cook ends by defining five themes of change in archival practice. The first theme notes a shift in the justification for archives away from a justification rooted in administrative and legal significance “to a socio-cultural justification” where archives are “able to offer citizens a sense of identity, locality, history, culture and personal and collective memory” (Cook 1997, 44).

The second and third themes address changes in how archival collections have worked to preserve the authenticity and reliability of records, and a move in archival theory away from a focus on arrangement and description of records to an analysis of the process of their creation. Cook’s fourth theme

recognizes the abandonment of the idea of the archivist as impartial, stating that “Archivists have...changed over the past century from being passive keepers of an entire documentary residue left by creators to becoming active shapers of the archival heritage...from being, allegedly, impartial custodians of inherited records to becoming intervening agents who set record-keeping standards and, most pointedly, who select for archival preservation only a tiny portion of the entire universe of recorded information” (Cook 1997, 46).

The final theme of Cook’s analysis is that archival theory can no longer be seen as a set of fixed principles but should rather be regarded as flexible and capable of reflecting and integrating societal and technological changes and “the relationship between the archivist and ...contemporary society, both now and in the past” (Cook 1997, 46). These five points reflect the emergence of the role of community on the collection priorities and practices of archives. Community outreach, then, is integral to the shaping of an archive.

Writings in the field of history about community archives, found in the database *America: History and Life*, were more directly applicable to the Leather Archives. From its inception, the Leather Archives has claimed a unique identity within the global archival community, as reflected in its initial motto: “Located in Chicago, Serving the World.” It represents a specialized example of the power a community possesses to create a collection defined by its own priorities and histories. In their 2013 article “New Frameworks for Community Engagement in the Archives Sector: From Handing Over to Handing On,” authors Mary Stevens, Andrew Flynn, and Elizabeth Shepherd, writing from a UK perspective, note that “the defining characteristic of a community archive is not its physical location, inside or outside of formal repositories, but rather the active and ongoing involvement of members of the source community in documenting and making accessible their history *on their own terms*” (Stevens et al. 2013, 68). This emphasis on maintaining the authority to define and present the narratives of a particular community through its body of archival materials is extended in another 2013 paper, “Archivist as Activist: Lessons from Three Queer Community Archives in California.” Authors Diana Wakimoto, Christine Bruce, and Helen Partridge explore the histories of the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, the Lavender Library, Archives and Cultural Exchange of Sacramento, Inc., and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Historical Society based in San Francisco. Using both institutional records and oral history interviews, they trace the creation and evolution of these archives and analyze the implications of their work for the archival profession using the concept of activism. The authors define activism as “those practices which are used to challenge injustice and discrimination in order to create a more inclusive and just environment, both in archives and in wider society” (Wakimoto et al. 2013, 295). The question of how this concept energizes and informs the work of community archives was explored in greater detail in the 2018 article “‘What We Do Crosses Over to Activism’: The Politics and Practice of Community Archives” by Marika Cifor et al. (2018). Surveying seventeen community archives staff, volunteers, and founders at twelve sites in southern California, the authors asked whether the archives personnel defined themselves as activists and, if so, how they served their activist communities and social movements for change.

In 2022, an historical perspective on the idea of connecting archives with user populations appeared in the series *Advances in Library Administration and*

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*Organization as "From Peripheral to Essential: The Evolution of Outreach as a Core Archival Function"* by Erin Lawrimore, David Gwynn, and Stacy Krim. While its focus is on the internal discussions held at the annual conferences of the Society for American Archivists (SAA) and the gradual recognition of outreach as a vital activity, it also cites a basic definition of what outreach should mean. In an archival context, outreach is defined as "bringing the products of archival research, the techniques of research in archives, or other aspects of humanist learning derived from primary sources to the user public, rather than to other archivists" (Lawrimore et al. 2022, 91) The authors note that the expansion of archival focus to include outreach "coincided with a growing interest in the United States in public history as an academic discipline and cultural history as a field of focus" (Lawrimore et al. 2022, 90).

From its foundation, the Leather Archives & Museum recognized outreach as an integral function of an archive and, having done so, made it an essential part of its collection development as the new institution grew. As noted, the lengthy call for donations issued in April 1996 served as a report on the current state of the collections and an explanation of what classes of items constituted primary and secondary sources. The inclusion of art (in various forms) within its unique mission highlights how nonprint elements can define and fuel an effective outreach program for all libraries and archives.

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