




Fostering Capaciousness in the Provenance Research Profile through Extensible Stages and Strategies

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Abstract: Provenance research provides the solid foundation necessary for museums and archives to organize public-facing activities, such as exhibitions and interactive virtual platforms, with the heritage objects in their care. Institutions that have launched provenance research programs over the last two decades take pride in every new addition of information to their descriptive access points including item records, gallery labels, and collection-level catalogs. Yet as ever more institutions respond to provenance research needs and prospects, incumbent provenance researchers still encounter a highly localized milieu of subject-specific resources that may or may not map onto their scope of work and certainly lack attention to new trainee concerns, time-based project management, and clear goals for communicating provenance information. Drawn from a three-year ethnographic research study into provenance research methods that work in practice, this paper introduces the idea of extensible ‘stages’ for provenance research. Identifying key activities found implicitly in guidebooks today and supplementing them with three holistic strategies in use by provenance researchers in their professional capacities – expert collaboration, levels of provenance information, and narrative composition – the paper contributes a new people-centered view on provenance researching for transparent humanized storytelling.

Keywords: Collections workflow; provenance baselines; storyboarding; modular activity planning; task decomposition

Introduction and Provenance Theories

Provenance research as a professional practice has grown from niche pursuit to cultural survivance bid in the last two decades. When 44 countries adopted their non-binding agreement at the 1998 Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art to “publicize art” that had fallen into undocumented obscurity in the years after World War II, collecting institutions intensified their efforts to research the provenance and rights status of cultural objects in their care. In addition to five national commissions, practitioners launched the International Research Portal to provide access to records about cultural property housed in the participating institutions as well as innumerable in-house programs to digitize records and support knowledge production with their collections. Institutions have generously

shared their guides to conducting provenance research (on-site) on an open-access basis, for which they have had tremendous impact in promulgating provenance how-to as a matter of heritage work and informing archival literature worldwide. It could be said that such guides have brought the concept of provenance well into today’s inquiring bright light, but they leave some space. They motivate this paper’s goal: to better surface, if not generalize, some of the processes behind provenance research and build on the foundations that the guides have laid down. A thematic analysis of key guides plus a three-part narrative developed from data collected about provenance research work using ethnographic methods, constitute our research contribution.

Provenance is undoubtedly the major organizing principle practiced in US archives (institutions), and as a concept it enjoys growing influence

on the acquisition and accession activities carried out in museums. Generally speaking, the word 'provenance' refers to the origin of some physical or digital object; furthermore, the exact definition of the term depends on context and what goals the provenance information should achieve. For example, in digital infrastructures, provenance research is related to "history tracking, logging, integrity, authenticity, or error recovery."¹ In the art field, provenance research provides insight extending from the object's pedigree, such as its lineage of possession and/or ownership, the artist's popularity, prevailing social and political alliances, and market conditions. Why do collection archivists engage with the puzzle of provenance?

The Society of American Archivists defines provenance as "information regarding the origins, custody, and ownership of an item or collection."² That definition may seem straightforward, but in the archival discipline provenance is recognized as a fundamental principle that is intertwined with all facets of archival labor, including acquisition, appraisal, arrangement and description, and access for retrieval. Thus, the concept of provenance is multi-faceted in the profession and its definition will change and evolve depending on the task at hand.

Archival scholars such as Jennifer Douglas structure the view of provenance in archival theory into three categories: provenance as an organizing principle, provenance as a physical and conceptual construct, and provenance as a social and historical context.³ Provenance as an organizing principle relates to the term's original meaning as the basis for arrangement and description. The second category proposed by Douglas refers to the ancillary "rediscovery of the principle by Canadian and Australian archivists, who observed a multiple and multi-faceted provenance due to the changes in records digitally created."⁴ Provenance as a

social and historical context is associated with the significance of understanding the history of a record's creation as well as how it was (and will be) used. Still, archivists are not the only professionals engaging provenance in their everyday work with heritage collections.

Natalia Tognoli and José Augusto Chaves Guimarães advocate for a fourth category of provenance called societal provenance, which relates to the societal dimension that is infused throughout the concept of provenance. The authors ask archivists to "recognize that record creators do not act alone, since they are members of society, making and archiving records in social settings, and for social purposes."⁵

For many years archivists have relied on the principle of provenance for archive arrangement with the idea that records of a given provenance, or creator, should be separated from other records; however, when applied this arrangement can "flatten existing complexity by obscuring the ways in which human inter-connections, disruptions, false starts, and confusing circumstances produced records in the first place."⁶ That flattening effect is driving archivists to not only work to apply provenance to archives at their institutions but more recently, in Shelley Sweeney's view, to "pursue the meaning and application of provenance and original order vigorously."⁷

With this push for archivists to provide more detailed provenance information about records in their care arrives the issue of how to effectively establish that provenance. The International Federation for Art Research's *Provenance Guide* compares provenance research to a kind of detective work that must be "approached with creativity, persistence, attention to detail, and the ability to think outside the box."⁸ Those characteristics make the act of performing provenance research open-ended, with multiple starting points and an infinite number of paths to a conclusion. Though

1 James Cheney et al.: Provenance: A Future History, in: Object-Oriented Programming, Systems, Languages, and Applications (2009), 957-964, here: 960.

2 Society of American Archivists: Provenance, in: SAA Dictionary of Archives Terminology, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/provenance.html>, <01.04.2022>.

3 Jennifer Douglas: Origins and Beyond: The Ongoing Evolution of Archival Ideas About Provenance, in: Heather MacNeil / Terry Eastwood (eds.): Currents of Archival Thinking. 2nd edition, Santa Barbara 2017, 25-52.

4 Natalia Tognoli / José Augusto Chaves Guimarães: Provenance as a Knowledge Organization Principle, in: Knowledge Organization 46 (2019), 558-568, here: 563.

5 Tognoli / Chaves Guimarães 2019 (see FN 4), 563-564.

6 Society of American Archivists: Describing Archives. A Content Standard, Chicago 2019.

7 Shelley Sweeney: The Ambiguous Origins of the Archival Principle of "Provenance," in: Libraries & the Cultural Record 43 (2008), 193-213, here: 206.

8 International Foundation for Art Research, Inc.: IFAR's Provenance Guide, in: Educational Resources, https://ifar.org/provenance_guide.php, <10.04.2022>.

the open-endedness of provenance research can be daunting, when lay contributors come together across communities of practice to ‘join the hunt’, they only increase the chances of solving the cold cases of long-lost objects. For example, given the scale of the most-wanted lost art from World War II around the world,⁹ it is expected that more clues will turn up with more eyes on the hunt, positioning coordinators to soon take long-delayed next steps toward asset-based restorative justice.

The importance of provenance, and how it helps individuals connect with their geographic heritage and identity, is now widely accepted. Yet if the concept is so important, why is it not more purposefully embedded in information workers’ everyday responsibilities? Its abstruse qualities prevent institutions like museums from operationalizing provenance and putting it into practice, meaning that donors’ names are lost to, among other fates, abandoned filing cabinets, gendered erasure, naming privileges, and/or aftermaths of disgrace. The gap between provenance theory and its practice, therefore, leaves us with a great need to study how provenance is being applied given the legal and disciplinary frameworks shaping archival representations of ownership and access. An extensible approach is one that makes space for integrating expert or exhaustive contributions from many individuals across time and space into public-facing provenance narratives. It acknowledges the time pressures and scope constraints, or lack thereof, that have impeded broader progress field-wide on establishing provenance research baselines – or to what ideal it is that workers should be striving for with their compiled datapoints. This work asks what feasible and extensible strategies will support provenance researchers pursuing outcomes meaningful to information work, subject research, or biography?

9 Jamie Stengel: Monuments Men Group Bets on Playing Cards to Find Lost Art, in: Associated Press, March 23rd 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-arts-and-entertainment-dallas-world-war-ii-ce6b40c875e7daa27850cb1d49c15d38>, <10.04.2022>.

Professional and Practical Literature

The sample of provenance research guides examined during our review can be grouped into three categories based on their targeted reader audience: information professionals (ones working with objects or archives), subject experts (e.g. of an event or time period), and biographers (including genealogists and heirs). While the categories are not mutually exclusive, articulation of audience immediately connects the guide to an intended, even receptive readership and will propel the work of that reader forward productively. Even after accounting for our limiting the sample to English-language guides by mostly US institutions, with varied usefulness in their own ways,¹⁰ they neither provide new researchers with an answer ‘why’ nor do they offer actionable research methodology, leading researchers to seek out provenance trainings elsewhere. Rachel Searcy has similarly reinforced the need for applied theory: “By making our objectives more conceptual we made our program more concrete.”¹¹ It may be more accurate to categorize such materials as ‘lists of resources’ or ‘toolkits’ (as an Australian company later discussed does), since many assume a knowledge base of how-to-proceed that is yet to appear. For purposes of this paper, the verbiage ‘guide’¹² will still be used to describe such materials.

10 For researching across nations see Ann McMullen / Maria Galban: Lost and Found: Reestablishing Provenance for an Entire Museum Collection, in: Jane C. Milosch / Nick Pearce (eds.): Collecting and Provenance. A Multidisciplinary Approach, Lanham 2019, 229-242. For a German guide focusing on libraries see Stefan Alker / Bruno Bauer / Markus Stumpf: NS-Provenienzforschung und Restitution an Bibliotheken, München 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110318630>; see also Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung e.V.: Leitfaden zur Standardisierung von Provenienzanangaben, Arbeitskreis Provenienzforschung e.V. (2018), <https://www.arbeitskreis-provenienzforschung.org/arbeitsgruppen/ag-standardisierung/>; and Julie-Marthe Cohen / Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek / Ruth Jolanda Weinberger: Handbook on Judaica Provenance Research: Ceremonial Objects, Claims Conference (2018), <https://art.claimscon.org/work-provenance-research-archives/judaica/handbook-judaica-provenance-research-ceremonial-objects/>.

11 Rachel Searcy: Beyond Control: Accessioning Practices for Extensible Archival Management, in: Journal of Archival Organization 14 (2017), No. 3-4, 153-175, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2018.1517292>, here: 159.

12 Taylor Mordy: Implementation of New Guidelines For Museums’ Provenance Research, in: The Museum Scholar: Theory & Practice 4 (2021), <https://articles.themuseumscholar.org/2021/12/09/implementation-of-new-guidelines-for-museums-provenance-research>, <14.10.2022>.

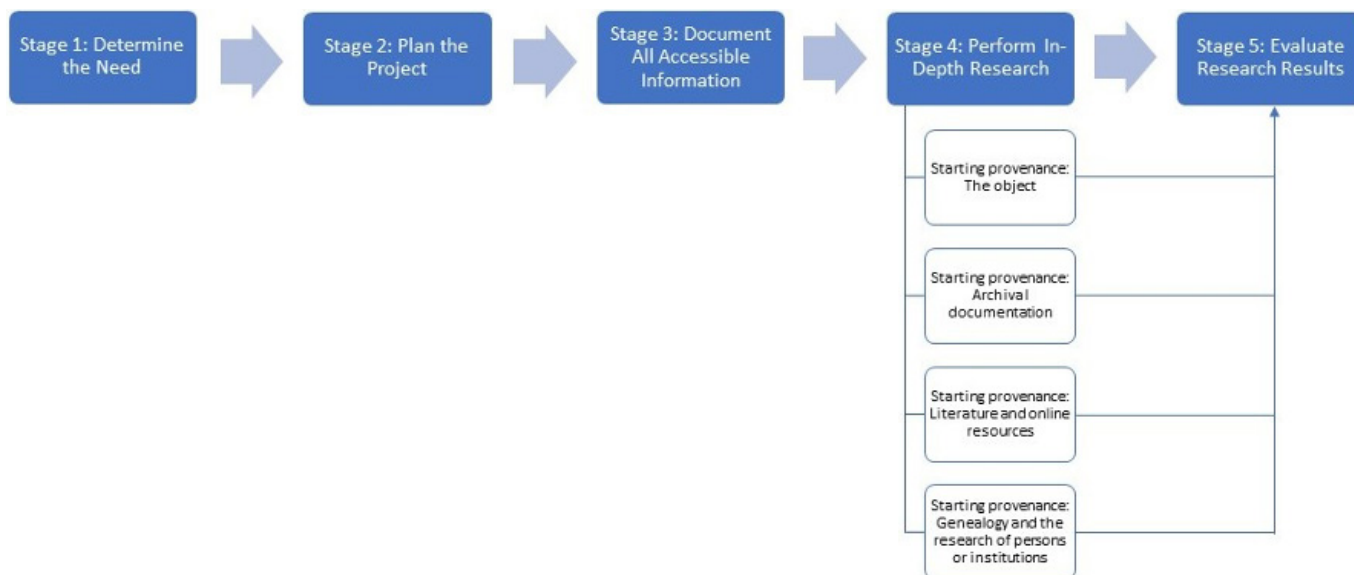


Figure 1: Provenance Research Stages Adapted from the German Lost Art Foundation's *Provenance Research Manual* (2019).

Review of literature on practices, rather than about particular case studies, was not limited in scope to a particular area or format of provenance research, and indeed cast a wide net across all disciplines both domestic and international especially when scoped around not just one institution's holdings but multiple related. The resources discussed in the below review are found to originate for the most part from art museums, with one from archives (an imbalance largely due to the latter institutions' relative independence especially before the 2018 US standards endorsement of the 'Protocols for Native American Archival Materials').¹³ Nevertheless, the resources show clear connections to archives whenever they elucidate the steps of processing new information, because processing happens to also be the key transformative activity in archival practice. Even when starting with art, provenance work extends into many domains (e.g. regional banking history to food and fashion trends), and it is important to understand that researchers, no matter their starting place or curiosity, may cross multiple domains during its hybrid research processes. Two major themes emerged from this literature review. First, there are multiple provenance research guides available, but their broad or specific effectiveness is yet to be determined. Secondly, storytelling is a powerful tool that provenance researchers can utilize to present the research in a new and interactive light.

13 Ricardo Punzalan: Book Review: Native Provenance: The Betrayal of Cultural Creativity (2019), in: RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage 20 (2019), No. 2, 121-123, <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.20.2.121>, here: 121.

Guides for Information Professionals

The German Lost Art Foundation's *Provenance Research Manual* is one of the most detailed and robust provenance guides.¹⁴ It contains a research methodology framework, though sparsely detailed. Though the *Provenance Research Manual* places a specific emphasis on provenance research related to cultural property that was seized under the National Socialist regime, its methodology can be applied to other areas of research and collections care and warrants further study.

The *Provenance Research Manual* was closely analyzed, and a proposed research methodology extracted, as shown in Figure 1. That methodology is comprised of five stages, with the specific activities in each stage detailed in Figure 2.

A provenance research project should not begin by performing detailed research, per the *Provenance Research Manual*; instead, the project stakeholders should first examine the need for the project and execute project planning activities, such as scope determination and resource allocation. A crucial component of planning is establishing whether one's starting place is in fact an object, archival documents, or a genealogical trace. Documenting that upfront, with consideration of such potential aspects as acquisition time frame or specific

14 German Lost Art Foundation: Provenance Research Manual to Identify Cultural Property Seized Due to Persecution during the National Socialist Era, in: Provenance Research Manual (2019), <https://www.kulturgutverluste.de/Webs/EN/Research/Manual/Index.html>, <01.04.2022>.

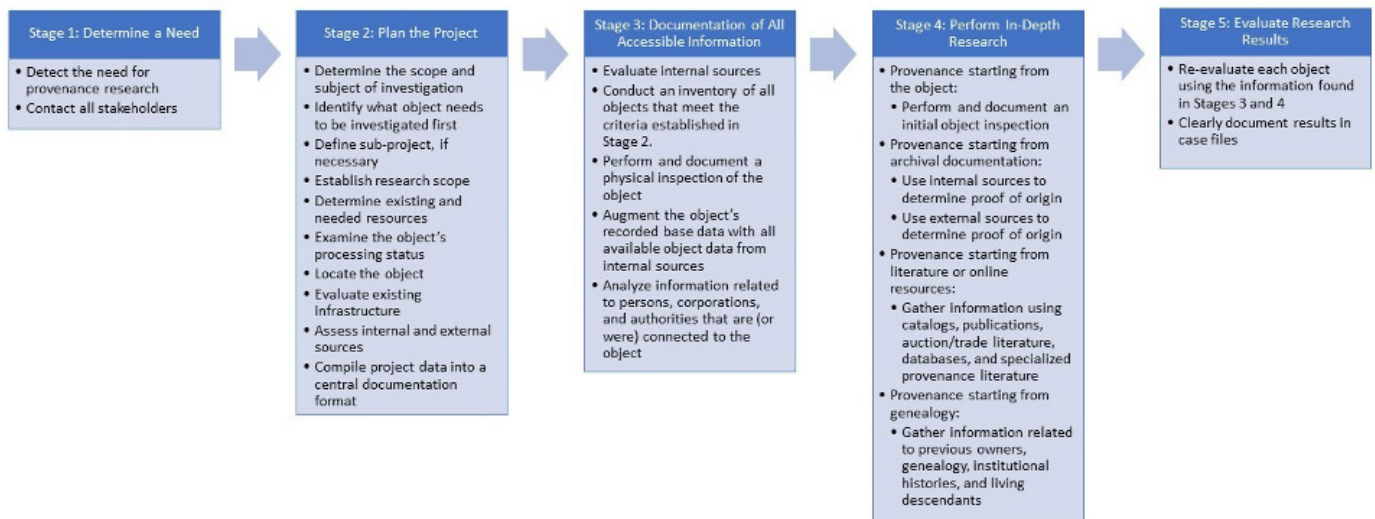


Figure 2: Provenance Research Stage-based Activities Adapted from the German Lost Art Foundation's *Provenance Research Manual* (2019).

occasions, can serve later to keep the documentation search on track and goal-oriented especially when the search requires that one ascertain the history of an associated place without losing oneself to a 'rabbit hole' of one interesting kind or another. The documentation at the center of Stage Three should capture a dozen or so pieces of information and their source citations, e.g., identification numbers, degree of concern, provenance, and images, comprising a thorough content audit. The *Provenance Research Manual* places an emphasis on planning activities and does not call for an in-depth research activity until Stage Four (out of five). Research shows that project planning is crucial to the success of any project. For example, André Augusto Choma and Swati Bhat performed a study seeking to determine what factors result in the success or failure of a project.¹⁵ The researchers concluded that the most successful projects were those that had the highest level of planning completeness before project execution. Notably, the *Provenance Research Manual* situates itself in a justice-oriented social framework, calling in the heirs of Nazi victims in assessing restitution decisions and power.

Guides for Subject Experts

In 2017, the International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR), a US non-profit organization that

has served owners and collectors of art since 1969, published a revision to their *Provenance Guide*, which was initially created in 2008. IFAR's new open-access revision included additional information and links to digital material relating to provenance research on the World War II era. It is "intended to serve as a primer" for provenance research, but due to the lack of available provenance-focused guides, IFAR's guide is quickly shifting to a comprehensive resource for researchers with diverse expertise.¹⁶

While the German Lost Art Foundation's guide provides a more complete research methodology, IFAR's *Provenance Guide* does describe two research stages well: establishing the provenance and recording the provenance. The activities for each stage are detailed in Figure 3. Regarding the recording format specified in Stage Two, IFAR provides a nine-line example and notes that "punctuation indicates transfers. A semicolon indicates that the work passed directly between two owners, and a period is used to separate two owners if a direct transfer did not occur or is not known to have occurred. The life dates of the owners, if known, are enclosed in brackets or parentheses. Uncertain information is indicated by the terms 'possibly' or 'probably' and explained in footnotes."¹⁷ Then the guide is silent on ways for sharing such documentation.

15 André Augusto Choma / Swati Bhat: Success vs. Failure: What is the Difference Between the Best and Worst Projects?, in: Project Management Institute Global Congress 2010 (2010), <https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/improve-project-failure-performance-success-6618>, <15.04.2022>.

16 International Foundation for Art Research, Inc. 2019 (see FN 8).

17 International Foundation for Art Research, Inc. 2019 (see FN 8).

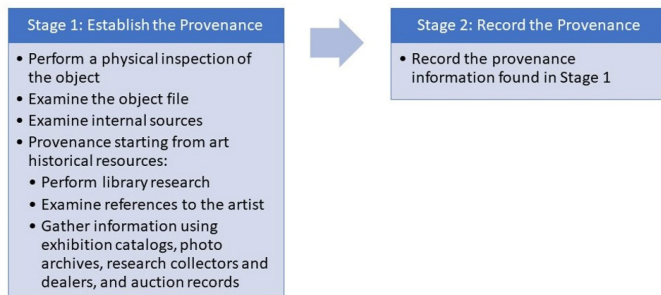


Figure 3: Provenance Research Stage Activities Adapted from the IFAR *Provenance Guide* (2017).

The revised *Provenance Guide* does provide researchers with valuable background information related to the importance of provenance research. Additionally, the guide compiles a variety of helpful resources for researchers' own use, such as databases and archives. As the guide actively transitions from a primer document to a comprehensive resource for users, gaps in the guide will need to be identified and narrowed.

Archivists at the Autry Museum of the American West hosted a yearlong series of workshops on repatriation of archival materials, that focused on adhering to the new standard 'Protocols for Native American Archival Materials' in managing both collections and tribal relationships. The workshops culminated in draft publication of *Repatriation Meets the Protocols* (or *RMP Workbook*) in autumn 2021.¹⁸ The *RMP Workbook* remains a living document providing guidance around the US legal framework, activities for compliance, and the spectrum of returns. It is useful for individuals in multiple professions or vocations engaged in tribal / non-tribal relationships, especially those with certain aims of cultural and/or economic vitality.

The Getty Research Institute has long supported research as indicated in its online provenance guide, with the Getty Provenance Index[®] at the center. The Getty Provenance Index[®] provides researchers with a growing database of records related to the domestic and international art market. As of 2019, the index featured approximately 2.3 million art-related records that were, and continue to be, separated into categories, including archival inventories, sales catalogs, dealer stock books, payments to artists and public collections (The Getty

Research Institute, 2019).¹⁹ Like other guides, the material from the Getty Research Institute serves less as a universal resource and more as a singular tool for researchers.

Guides for Biographers

The Smithsonian's *Guide to Provenance Research* has as its goal to "enhance access to the Archives' World War II era provenance research collections."²⁰ The guide narrows the provenance focus specifically to World War II era collections housed internally at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. In lieu of providing users with a comprehensive resource, the guide directs users to different facets of the institution, such as the Jacques Seligmann & Co. Gallery Records, and to specific collections of personal papers that have been digitized, such as those of six of the Monuments Men.

The *Provenance Guidelines & Resources* at Cornell University's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art is a noteworthy example among those from academic museum settings.²¹ Rather than use the terminology of 'guide to the field' it instead presents itself as a pointer for interested researchers seeking direction and resources related to provenance. Additionally, the Cornell guidelines place an emphasis on how to read and write provenance information, which is a specialized skill in the discipline (syntax is briefly discussed in the below Findings section).

The Clark Institute also has created a provenance research guide that is specific to the material housed at the Clark Library. In the "Methods" section of the guide, the Clark Institute provides a list of three books that "describe methods of provenance research for objects of various kinds,

18 Autry Museum of the American West: Repatriation Meets the Protocols: RMP Workbook, in: Repatriation Meets the Protocols Workbook (2022), <https://rmpworkbook.wordpress.com>, <15.04.2022>.

19 The Getty Research Institute: What's Covered in the Getty Provenance Index?, in: Search Tools and Databases (2019), <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/provenance/index.html>, <15.04.2020>.

20 Smithsonian Institution: A Guide to Provenance Research at the Archives of American Art, in: Smithsonian (n.d.), <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/a-guide-to-provenance-research-at-the-archives-of-american-art>, <15.04.2022>.

21 Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University: Provenance Guidelines & Resources, in: Johnson Museum of Art (n.d.), <https://museum.cornell.edu/provenance-guidelines-resources>, <11.04.2022>.

especially fine art objects and books.”²² Though the three are not in turn and of yet open-access, the guide explicitly mentions that a copy of each resource can be located on-site. Another interesting facet of this guide is that it does not only focus on art, instead acknowledging that provenance is cross-disciplinary.

Provenance guides written for at least three audiences – information professionals, subject experts, and biographers – are all at present freely available online. Though the above guides are informative in one way or another, the issue remains that provenance researchers do not have a concrete research methodology to follow, nor do they have generalizable yet detailed case studies to help illustrate the process and highlight lessons learned.

Methods and Findings from Provenance Researchers

An activity theory framework motivates the data activities conducted and considered in the subsequent sections. Activity theory takes account of “subjects ... acting upon an object in ways directed by a predetermined goal, using tools in the course of the activity, which has some result.”²³ In activity theory, actions have consequences on society as well as the subject itself, and it is a most conducive framework for seeing how the components interact and create change in a wider activity system (such as heritage management). Indeed, the study from which our original data are drawn is concerned not with tracing one object provenance, but with observing and comparing any higher-level provenance research activities employed from one setting to another. The goal is to articulate which extensible, modular methods would best complement and enhance the subject-specific resources introduced above,²⁴ therefore serving practice and serving the public interest toward collections use.

22 The Clark Institute: Provenance Research at the Clark Library: Methods, in: *Methods in Provenance Research* (2020), <https://lib-guides.clarkart.edu/c.php?g=746769&p=5350307>, <15.04.2022>.

23 Thomas D. Wilson: A re-examination of information seeking behaviour in the context of activity theory, in: *Information Research* 11 (2006), No. 4, paper 260, <http://InformationR.net/ir/11-4/paper260.html>, <15.04.2022>.

24 Additional subject-specific resources are collected into four initial domains of study at Provenance Research (2022), <https://provenanceinfo.wordpress.com/resources/>, <15.04.2022>.

The scope of research comprises a multi-sited study over three years using ethnographic methods and related artifact analysis, a qualitative approach aimed at fully comprehending provenance research at sites where it is well-established locally. Purposive site selection ensured wide coverage of provenance research activities as they are performed in four information institutional domains studied in the project (with legal frameworks especially considered within each): art collections, special collections and archival manuscripts, Native and Indigenous research, and rural history. Data were collected during twelve virtual site visits each averaging 90 minutes in length, with 13 individuals currently engaged in professional provenance research work in the US, across a span of six months during the COVID-19 pandemic from November 2020 to April 2021. A dataset comprising 1.080 minutes (18 hours) of direct one-on-one interviews is the basis for the below development of three thematic findings about provenance research strategies observed at three or more of the sites, presented through authentic vignettes. Transcripts of each interview were generated and loaded into ATLAS.ti subscription software, which is equipped with coding, comment, and query support for multiple textual and visual data inputs. Participants’ names are anonymized and presented as a numbered participant followed by their domain and timestamp in the transcript of the interview (e.g., P10 [Art, Archival, Native, or Rural], 12:07). Having reviewed various components of the planned study including the interview protocol and COVID-19 mitigation plans, the home Institutional Review Board issued exempt approval, which is renewed annually, and registered the project under number 2028704 on August 24th 2020.

The Extensible Strategy of Collaborating with Experts

Researchers such as archaeologists and art historians have been interested in knowing (if not reconstructing) the provenance of works of art from the point of their acquisition and accession in a museum institution, for a variety of reasons. Museum provenance researcher P4 calls attention to the “fun” aspects of provenance that have wide appeal across museum communities, saying:

“It’s a fun part of the history of the museum and I’ve been able to talk to docents and other staff members about provenance and then it gets them excited about the collection. So, you do it for ethical reasons but also, just, to understand the objects better. Understand a part of them that people haven’t really had a lot of time to research before. So, it is fun.” (P4 Art, 1:42:54).

Here the provenance researcher faces only encouragement, not resistance, from colleagues eager to integrate her provenance findings “about the collection” into the different work they do: as docents, educators, development officers, curators, and art or archaeology scholars producing object-based research. Given said specialists’ high interest in matters of provenance, collaborating with others on communicating “provenance” is not a drain on her work, but happens effortlessly. Another example of painless collaboration with expert communities with their own interests, reasons, and talents in studying a collection is seen in the everyday work of special collections instructional librarians. As the first hire into that role at her university, P9 says:

“I weave provenance into my discussion with education students – pre-service teachers – of what a primary source is and how it is different than a secondary source. We talk about the life cycle of a specific item (I usually go with an item rather than a whole collection because they’re usually working with one to five distinct items). It’s easier to [teach provenance] on a micro level. How does a primary source get to an archive or a library, how does that happen? I don’t use the term ‘custodial history’ or ‘provenance’ with them but I’m trying to get them thinking about how does it get from that time period in which it was created to here today in front of your eyeballs.” (P9 Archival, 31:00).

As an academic librarian P9 is striving to increase awareness of provenance issues that widen items’ appeal and engagement potential. She communicates the provenance research conducted with paper holdings records about the primary sources to an Acquisitions Archivist colleague who rolls out the information to their hosted ArchivesSpace finding aids portal.

Increased digitization of subject-specific provenance resources has enhanced the quality and accuracy of provenance research and the ways it is purposed by institutions. P4 offered a clear example of such progress over a short time span:

“The Met [Museum] was still in the process of digitizing their Brummer Gallery records when I started. I looked for our objects in their archives in like fall of 2017 and didn’t find anything. And then I just casually decided to look again the following spring and there were photographs of them there that hadn’t been there before. That can be really exciting! The Artstor Hearst Archive images [also] appeared during the course of my research. You have to go back to places you’ve already searched and see if there’s anything new.” (P4 Art, 1:41:28).

Such milestones certainly occur externally to the provenance researcher’s own project plans, but can substantively enhance the quality and contextual knowledge of their work locally.

The Extensible Strategy of Leveled ‘Passes’ to Shift Topic and Volume

The dawning realization on the part of museum administrators that concentrating resources toward carrying out provenance research will ultimately benefit the institution still leaves open the issue of scope-management and flexibility. When he was new to the role of Registrar (and has now taken on the more senior role of Curatorial Director), P8 spent time getting to know the collection by completing (the first) collection-wide inventory:

“That was the first thing I did when I started here. A collection-wide inventory told me what the next steps would be for me, and I gained an appreciation for the contents of the collection. Now that that’s been done and I know what we have, and what’s there – that was about four years ago – now I’m more focused on learning about the artists and their intentions in creating the pieces that we have. Understanding the works not just strictly from an object-based standpoint.” (P8 Rural, 7:04).

Here a collection-wide inventory helped enumerate and quantify the various organizational categories used by staff in their collections catalog, hosted on the CatalogIt app (see Figure 4). That initial “pass” across the entire collection led directly to the realization that an entire third of the collection “was missing on paper. From a documentation standpoint, if objects were not labeled or photographed I would obviously have no idea what I was looking at. So that was both probably my least (the realization) and most (the work afterwards) favorite experiences in getting to know the collection.” (P8 Rural, 8:12). That “work afterwards” comprised taking a paper printout of his spreadsheet, “organized by location for efficiency’s sake” (9:36), into one room at a time which made the task manageable; over months even as he encountered unnumbered objects, the spreadsheet made it possible to match incomplete records to those ‘found’ objects and later complete more detailed cataloging. Overall, the collection managed by P8 remains a compilation of a variety of provenance descriptive levels, and P8 continues to work not quite on standardizing or normalizing them to one level, but supplementing and focusing attention on those that are thinner.

Establishing levels of descriptive information for a scoped collection is an approach clearly endorsed in the German Lost Art Foundation’s *Provenance Research Manual*. The great contribution of that manual that we aim to build on in studying strategies for ‘shifting’ one’s provenance work either in topical area (in Figure 4, e.g., say from Sculpture to Drawing, and then from Native American Collection to Textile) or properly quantified collection volume, is its avoidance of open-endedness when it comes to provenance research projects and writing up said outcomes. Certainly, there are cases where it would be unwise to close up a provenance search prematurely, before key information has been found out, and in those cases leaving the object search in a ‘dormant’ status is the best way forward. Such decisions are best taken when there are one or more clear pieces of information still needed (especially those identified, in Figure 2, in the Planning Stage 2), and not because the given provenance ‘project’ simply has vague and undefined requirements, relying on intuition to suggest when enough information is gathered, which accompanies only decades of experience. The levels of information needed will assuredly vary from one scope to another, and indeed finding out one single name might be an entirely complete success in itself.

For curator P3, defining what successful provenance research looks like, both, to themselves and their senior curator colleague, is an ongoing conversation that involves shared understanding of flexibility and ethical decision-making. When P3 joined a provenance research program then in its third year their initial focus was on researching objects then “on view” in the public galleries (several subject areas). Like we saw with P8, P3 also said:

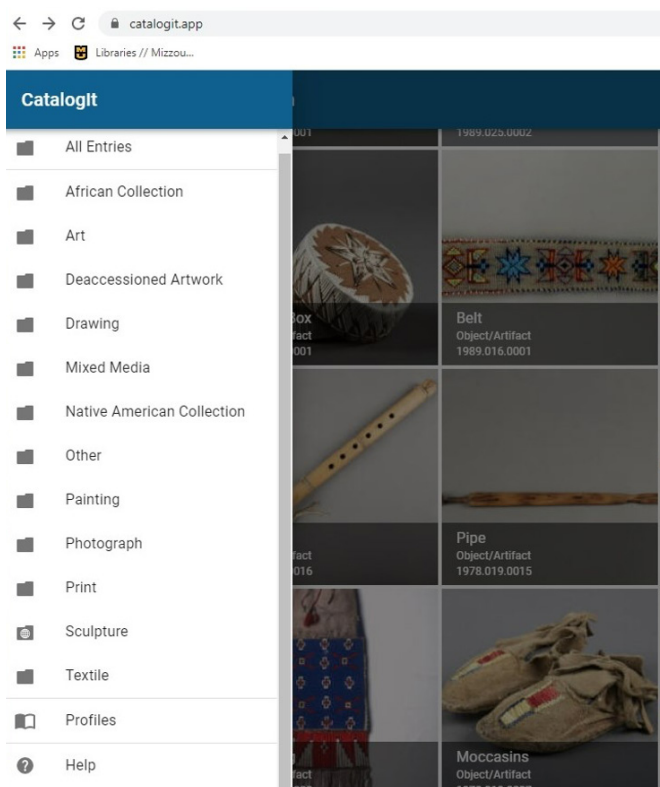


Figure 4: Cataloger View of Collection on CatalogIt in Rural History Setting.

“We’re happy to say we’ve given everything at least an overview or a look through. We’ve given approval to every record. That doesn’t mean the work’s done! But when we were doing those updates on the daily, what it would look like would be: we’d have an object file or a group of object files from one constituent, donor, or dealer, and we’d process what’s there. See if that agrees with what’s in the database, do research to confirm life dates, other sales we might have missed, research the object to see if there are parallels. You know, if it’s a famous dealer, a collector, then you have a lot more to work with! And sometimes it was simply to just verify that this person had indeed donated the object and to see if anything they said about it could be corroborated.” (P3 Art, 10:18).

The first level of public-facing provenance work here involved verifying consistent information in the archival accession or holdings records for the objects, and the parts of those records that were keyed into the public catalog database: “see if that agrees.” P3 also readily makes it clear that bringing all object records up or down to one idealized level of provenance information is not feasible, and that much more information is available for well-known dealers or collectors than for others. In addition to fame or renown prompting a shift in focus due to the availability of information, the digitization and online release of major sets of auction catalogs can prompt making a topical or volume-based shift. Such developments are taken in stride, since as P4 said separately, “the resources available and the colleague network we have is so much stronger now. ... There’s no way to work on this without talking with other archives and museums. ... Provenance is basically never done, for objects on the art market.” (P4 Art, 11:44).

The Extensible Strategy of Composing the Narrative

Provenance researchers aim to present a data-informed provenance narrative for public view. To do so, they may capture notes and ‘breadcrumbs’ about incomplete information in a database or system accessible only by certain staff. One provenance researcher reflected on their own improved way over time of recording information in progressively more formalized capture systems – from of-

fline Excel sheets with categories, to a Microsoft Access database, to the in-house TMS (The Museum System) collections management system:

“I’m still recording all of my information in an Excel spreadsheet, [which] allows me to put it into categories. The one thing I’ve tried to be better about, that I didn’t really know I needed to do at the beginning, was be really explicit about where I got that information from. Like, a note or yellow Post-It that says “handwriting [annotation]” is helpful. I didn’t anticipate that as an issue when I first started [on Mediterranean], so I was recording everything in the spreadsheet and then at the end of the project I was going to take the information from the spreadsheet and put it into the TMS database. That’s been completed. So what I’m trying to do [now] with the European stuff is like anytime I add something new to my own notes that’s verified, I put that immediately into the database. I might not be finished working on that object. But whatever I feel good about, I’m trying to put immediately into the database.” (P4 Art, 1:21:52).

The vignette demonstrates the close attention to detail that is part of provenance researching, where precise source documentation will allow a future researcher – either the same individual many months later or a new individual with or without the original person nearby – to pick up the work from its earlier stopping place and not sink time into duplicate efforts.

Additionally, archivist P10 expressed a high value placed toward providing open access to the products of their work: “I feel strongly about making the most materials that we have accessible to the public, so that has been sort of my agenda, to categorize all of that stuff and put it in that package and put it out for people to find” (P10 Archival, 12:07). Here we see support for new researchers to “join the work” of making discoveries and contributing new research. In addition to making source materials available open-access, provenance researchers are often tasked with sharing the provenance of their collection in long form – such as P2 who has a book forthcoming about their collection – or short form outlets: also P2, who related that:

“I’ve been working with one of our social media managers to help create a series of posts informed by the concept of hidden histories, which is just a way of highlighting aspects unseen about objects. So whether that’s conservation, whether that’s construction questions, or in some cases provenance.”
(P2 Art, 1:40:51).

Such blog and social media series render selected provenance information searchable and easy-to-find online, unlike highly structured catalog records about objects (although linked data promises otherwise). Clearly both writing examples indicate that storytelling is a tool for effectively communicating provenance research findings.²⁵ For too long provenance was quite a cloistered area of inquiry – treated as something mystical, scholarly, erudite, or requiring of qualifications to be learned, an approach that generated gallery labels visitors may choose not to read thoroughly.²⁶ Now story maps, cataloging fields, and blog posts offer many ways, and altogether they show that provenance (on its own) can actually be the more approachable story about an object than even its visible characteristics, if only it is given such a storytelling platform. Provenance might one day be core and central to many museum experiences under such accessible conditions.

Cataloging provenance information raises a somewhat long-standing issue that several participants addressed at some level but remains a high-interest future work area: syntax, punctuation, and language choices. The Art Tracks project issued in 2016 a Digital Provenance Standard that helpfully “eases the transition”²⁷ between the CIDOC-CRM model of provenance and the “formatting” rules offered online by the J. Paul Getty Museum²⁸. Between those three resources as well as individual Getty catalog records, a new

provenance student could glean a working understanding of how to structure the names, dates, and transfers associated with an object into a compact provenance paragraph. Still the field must support efforts to make its lessons, skills, tips, and even key resources openly accessible rather than localized and temporary. By learning how provenance researchers carry out their work, such skills can be taught, and adapted by trainees for a wide range of settings. We expand on that approachability in a concluding discussion of AgriFutures below.

Provenance-Driven Storytelling

Both, the above literature review and the original data, indicate that a clear purpose of provenance research is to facilitate new, accurate storytelling by the institution. This section details two ongoing examples of such storytelling driven by underlying provenance research. Provenance research, often akin to detective work, requires out-of-the-box thinking and attention to detail. Storytelling, when placed in the provenance researcher’s toolbox, becomes a powerful instrument that can present provenance information in a multipurpose and interactive light. The act of storytelling allows them, and their colleagues, to connect known materials with new audiences, while providing transparent information about their authenticity and origin.

In their practice of ‘visual storytelling’, story maps hosted by ESRI ArcGIS were recently created by graduate students at the Pratt Institute. Digital humanities students completed multiple case studies that focused on Nazi-looted artworks. Then visualization techniques in the form of interactive digital story maps were applied to the information to “support the restitution and/or repatriation of stolen artworks” while also bringing a new awareness to the artwork’s story.²⁹ The use of that narrative design technique breathes life into the past and helps to solidify the fact that provenance is not just an abstract concept; instead, it can be visualized and interacted with. Often the stolen artworks travel long distances and change hands multiple

25 Kate McDowell: Storytelling Wisdom: Story, Information, and DIKW, in: Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology 72 (2021), No. 10, 1223-1233, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24466>.

26 Martin Tröndle et al.: A Museum for the Twenty-First Century: The Influence of ‘Sociality’ on Art Reception in Museum Space, in: Museum Management and Curatorship 27 (2012), No. 5, 461-486, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2012.737615>.

27 Carnegie Museum of Art: The CMOA Digital Provenance Standard, in: Art Tracks (2016), <http://www.museumprovenance.org/reference/standard/>, <15.04.2022>.

28 J. Paul Getty Museum: Research on Museum Collection Provenance, 1933-45, in: Conservation, <https://www.getty.edu/research/tools/provenance/search.html>, <15.04.2022>.

29 Miranda Siler: Lasar Segall’s Eternos Caminhantes (The Eternal Wanderers), 1919, in: Emma Boisitiz et al.: Mapping Provenance. Navigating the Narratives of Nazi-Looted Artworks, New York (2021), <https://studentwork.prattsi.org/mapping-provenance/>, <15.03.2022>.



Figure 5: The Storytelling Process Adapted from AgriFutures' guidebook (2020).

times to arrive at their current (perhaps surprising) location. Such movements of the artwork “through time and space become part of their story, adding layers of meaning” to their existence.³⁰ Story maps help to situate artworks along their known journeys geographically, toward a comprehensive timeline detailing the life of the object.

The Australian company AgriFutures has published a provenance storytelling guidebook that recognizes that storytelling is a process businesses can take to “deliver [stories] in ways that are informative, entertaining and engaging, so they resonate

with customers and consumers.”³¹ The authors of the guide segment the storytelling process into six steps, as shown in Figure 5, to help agricultural businesses tell their stories. Though AgriFutures is focused on food provenance, their step-by-step approach to storytelling could be utilized to enhance provenance from other disciplines. Like the German Lost Art Foundation, AgriFutures places an emphasis on initial project planning and content gathering, rather than immediately jumping into the project.

30 Molly Boarati: Off the Map: The Provenance of a Painting, in: Nasher Museum of Art (2021), <https://nasher.duke.edu/exhibitions/off-the-map-the-provenance-of-a-painting/>, <15.04.2022>.

31 AgriFutures: Provenance Storytelling for Success. National Rural Issues, in: AgriFutures Australia (2020), <http://www.agrifutures.com.au/rural-industries/provenance-and-story-telling/>, <01.04.2022>.




Conclusion: Bounded Everyday Progress on Baselines

Seeking to articulate the processes involved in completing provenance research, this study examined published guides and qualitative data about provenance work practices and developed a modular methodology informed by activity theory and cultural contexts for how to initiate provenance research. The guides alone provide a solid starting place for information professionals, subject experts, and biographers to start researching provenance, but they leave open questions of process and outcome that ethnographic observations can complement. Both data sources indicate that provenance research set up with purposeful, collaborative strategies along the way can generate creative and convincing storytelling products. Three particularly extensible strategies outlined in the data – expert collaboration, levels of provenance information, and narrative composition – can be generalized in future work beyond the settings examined here. The published examples and scholarly products visitors can interact with today indicate that provenance research rarely proceeds along a simple linear path from no knowledge to expert knowledge about a given collection scope. More frequently, provenance information is discovered for adjacent items that is only useful in combination with other pieces of information ultimately discovered sporadically (though unintentionally so, given the hours of time invested). Future development of extensible strategies useful in various domains may more deeply explore specific needs: object-handling within distinct Native worldviews on knowledge sharing, negotiating decomposed provenance research when it occurs at post-accession midpoints of a collection-processing workflow, developing a related baseline for ‘due diligence’,³² and collaborative problem-solving and/or public reconciliation following the diligent and exhaustive efforts. The articulation of provenance research as a series of attainable rather than vaguely defined goals will foster its embedding into everyday work routines and its easy sharing with interested research contributors. Overall, such boundaries

32 John Henry Merryman: Due Diligence?, in: IFAR Journal 3 (2000), No. 3-4, 41-45; Linda F. Pinkerton: Due Diligence for Acquiring Cultural Property in the New Millennium, in: IFAR Journal 3 (2000), No. 3-4, 50-52.

ought not to be seen as limiting the depth of provenance research that should be conducted, but rather as steps taken toward provenance researchers’ ongoing efforts to establish baselines by which progress, and success, can be marked in time.

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List of Illustrations

Fig. 1: Provenance Research Stages Adapted from the German Lost Art Foundation’s 2019 *Provenance Research Manual*, 2022.

Fig. 2: Provenance Research Stage Activities Adapted from the German Lost Art Foundation’s 2019 *Provenance Research Manual*, 2022.

Fig. 3: Provenance Research Stage Activities Adapted from the International Foundation for Art Research (IFAR)’s 2017 *Provenance Guide*, 2022.

Fig. 4: Cataloger View of Collection on CatalogIt in Rural History Setting, 2021. Used with permission.

Fig 5: The Storytelling Process Adapted from Agri-Futures’ 2020 guidebook, 2022.

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