

# A Beginners' Guide to Collection Policies

Elaine Burrows, Paolo Cherchi Usai,  
Luca Giuliani, Katie Trainor  
& Jon Wengström

**Elaine Burrows:** Independent Researcher (London).

**Paolo Cherchi Usai:** Senior Curator of the Motion Picture Department at George Eastman House (Rochester, New York), and Director of the GEH/University of Rochester graduate program at the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation.

**Luca Giuliani:** Curator at the Cineteca del Friuli (Gemona).

**Katie Trainor:** Film Collections Manager at the Museum of Modern Art (New York).

**Jon Wengström:** Curator of Archival Film Collections of the Swedish Film Institute (Stockholm).  
Head of the FIAF Programming and Access to Collections Commission.

*The issue of collection policies has been discussed within FIAF over the years, and was brought to the table again during the Second Century Forum of the 2010 FIAF Congress in Oslo. As a follow-up to the Oslo Congress, all FIAF affiliates were invited to submit existing policies, an invitation to which only a few responded. Therefore, at the Beijing Congress in 2012, the FIAF Executive Committee endorsed the Programming and Access to Collections Commission (PACC) to form a Collection Policy Project Working Group. At the 2013 Barcelona Congress, the sub-group's plans were announced. Besides an article in the Journal of Film Preservation, these plans included a space on the FIAF website where existing policies can be posted and a template to facilitate the making of policies for those affiliates not yet having one.*

## BACKGROUND

There is a much stronger tradition of collection policies in fine arts collecting institutions and museums than there is within the moving image archiving community. As cultural non-profit entities, most archives and museums in other fields have regarded a written policy for their collections as a natural instrument in car-

rying out their activities. Such a policy provides transparency and gives accountability in relation to funders and governing bodies, as well as being a useful tool for staff, and ultimately strengthening the identity of the institution.

The reason the notion of collection policies has been weaker within the film-archiving community may have something to do with the fact that many archives – even those which have now acquired the status of national bodies – were founded as a result of private initiatives, undertaken by passionate individuals or groups who despaired when large collections were under threat (as was the case with the first and second waves of archives emerging at the time of the industrial transitions, from silent to sound in the 1930s and from nitrate to acetate in the 1950s). Only later were they given their mission and funding by the public sector or other outside organizations. These heroes of the past saved what they could, and promoted and gave access to their collections at a time when films and the artefacts relating to them were not necessarily regarded as part of the cultural heritage, and, over the course of time, practices and methods as well as curatorial values evolved.



## TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

FIAF is currently made up of non-profit members and associates. Whether or not its affiliates are independent institutions or departments of a larger museum, library, archival or film funding organization, they are all cultural institutions devoted to the task of collecting, preserving, documenting, and making available moving image heritage. As long as this is their status, there are many advantages in having transparent and published collection policies which explain to funders, donors, trustees, governments – and ultimately the general public – why they exist, what they do, and why their work is important. A simple and coherent policy is the best assurance available to encourage continuous financial and public support for an archive's activities.

## DEFINITION AND RELATION TO MISSION STATEMENT

The first thing when establishing a collection policy is to set it in relation to the institution's mission statement. The main function of a successful collection policy is to explain, both internally and to external stakeholders (from

the public to funding agencies), how the institution aims to fulfill its overarching mission. If the mission of an archive is, for instance, to preserve and give access to the "regional film heritage", then a collection policy should explain how "regional" is defined, what constitutes the "heritage", and what measures are in place – at a strategic level – to accomplish this mission. If the mission is very broad – perhaps "to strengthen the nation's democracy" – then a policy should explain how the activities of the archival institution support this aim. On the other hand, if a mission is very specific, such as "to make non-professional films permanently available", or "to preserve films relating to sport", it is good if the policy explains why the mission is defined in this way. It may, for example, have something to do with the existence of other film-collecting agencies or museums covering other parts of the audiovisual heritage.

One important thing to take into consideration before establishing a collection policy is what kind of neighbouring institutions already exist. Are there other moving image archives (FIAF or non-FIAF) in the country or the region? Are there other institutions dealing with broadcast and other non-cinematographic audiovisual material, with their own clearly defined missions? Is your institution located in a country with prominent studio archives? It is always easier to get acceptance and support for a policy if it is seen to fill a void – that is, if its scope does not overlap with that of other institutions.

## WHAT CONSTITUTES A COLLECTION POLICY?

In basic terms, a collection policy really only needs to cover (a) what kind of moving images and related materials are to be collected, (b) how they are to be preserved, and (c) the extent to which the collections are to be made accessible.

If the mission of the archive is to collect, preserve, document, and give access to the "national film heritage", one may argue that the archive's policy ought to be to collect all the nation's films and the non-film materials related to them. However, this may be too vague, and the policy would benefit from stating what is meant by "films", and whether the term relates to purely cinematographic works or any kind of audiovisual material, or only



to films covered by legal-deposit acts and/or deposit by contractual obligation, or to any cinematographic work produced, or indeed screened (including non-national films), in a given country. The policy is also made clearer if it states whether films are to be collected only in their original formats or also in other formats, and whether viewing copies as well as original and/or master materials are to be collected and preserved. The archive's preservation policy should also be defined. This should include information on what kinds of films are to be subject to active preservation measures, as opposed to more passive storage arrangements, and the priorities given in this respect, as well as what elements are to be subject to duplication or digitization, and for what purposes. Another section of the policy should then cover to whom and under what conditions the materials in the collections are to be presented, which may include public screenings in original format and low-resolution access copies made available to scholars on the archive's premises, as well as temporary loans to outside organizations (FIAF colleagues, festivals, rights-holders, and so on).

## WHAT NOT TO COLLECT (DE-ACCESSIONING UNWANTED MATERIALS)

With clear definitions of the components of a policy as discussed above, it is relatively easy to declare – another very important function of a collection policy – what materials the archive should *not* collect. It is worth bearing in mind that it is always easier *not* to acquire something in the first place than it is to dispose of unwanted materials which are already in the collection. But, invariably, there will be films in the collection that should not be part of it, which is why the document must also include a policy on de-accessioning. For example, should (and could?) these unwanted items be offered to another trustworthy archival institution whose mission and policy relates to the material in question? In what circumstances should elements be destroyed?

Another reason for disposal may be that the policy stipulates a maximum number of viewing copies of each title and surplus elements ought therefore to be discarded. There may be elements in such a state of deterioration that they can no longer be copied and no further information can be extracted from them. Regardless of why certain elements ought to be discarded according to a given collection policy, it is important to demonstrate that the organization does not treat the matter lightly, that there are institutional parameters in place for guaranteeing that disposal happens only when strictly necessary and is not being implemented in order to exploit the collection for financial reasons (not, for instance, simply to save storage space, nor to generate income for the institution by selling off elements).

## A SIMPLE DOCUMENT TO ENHANCE THE ARCHIVE'S VISION

If a collection policy explains what the archive does, at a strategic level, to fulfill its statutory mission, and includes clearly defined components as well as a de-accessioning policy, it does not need to be a very long document. In fact, the simpler and clearer a policy is, the more likely it will turn out to be effective and useful. A good collection policy explains in a clear, objective, and persuasive way what the archive does. A document burdened with un-

necessary detail may confuse policies with procedures. A policy should explain what and why things are done, not how. Governing bodies and the external stakeholders will rightly assume that there are experienced staff and established protocols that ensure that procedures are in place in alignment with the policy. The ultimate goal of the policy is to make the archive's vision as clear and compelling as possible.

#### IS IT REALLY NECESSARY?

Given that a collection policy explains what the archive is already doing, why bother to create one if the archive has been doing fine for years without it? And doesn't a formal, written policy limit the flexibility of the institution, and restrict the authority of the curator?

In fact, having a collection policy makes it a lot easier for the outside world to understand the value of the archive's activities, something which can only be beneficial to the institution. A collection policy is therefore an excellent tool for lobbying, fundraising, and public outreach. If it properly describes the mission and strategic aims of the archive, a policy will be flexible enough to actually guarantee curatorial authority, and there can only be advantages in being transparent and accountable. Furthermore, to have a policy formally endorsed by a governing body or an executive board is the best way to protect the collections – and indeed, the curator – from undue or illegitimate interference from administrators, funding agencies, and other stakeholders. This is particularly true if your archive is not an independent entity, but a department of a larger institution, where threats to the authority of the curator are more likely to come from within the organization than from outside. Once a collection policy is endorsed, it is much more difficult to overrule curatorial authority or to impose undesirable actions such as the acquisition of unwanted material, unacceptable preservation methods, provision of viewing access to elements that ought to be considered as preservation material, and unethical methods of disposal, such as the sale or exchange of collection items. An established collection policy simply makes it more complicated for, let's say, a newly-elected government or a new board of trustees to alter the guiding principles of the archive's activity.

#### ADDED ADVANTAGES

A clear and simple policy gives the archive the status of a reliable and authoritative interlocutor, something that outsiders would want to be associated with, and will enhance the possibilities of attracting potential donors. It fosters support from the communities for which the archive exists, whether it is the general public or particular constituencies (for instance, scholars, students, or subject specialists). By explaining complex concepts in a clear, accessible and jargon-free language, a collection policy also gives strong motivation to anyone employed in the archive, and helps to create a unified and clear vision among all sections of the institution in the achievement of its goals.

A collection policy is never engraved in stone – it is a living document. Culture and technology are constantly evolving, resulting in developments in the field of moving image archiving, and institutions themselves evolve over time. Collection policies need to evolve as well, and it is a good idea to revise them at regular intervals, anywhere from once every 18 months to perhaps once every five years. Revising the policy in consultation with staff, administration, and stakeholders is also a good way to keep everyone involved, and minimizes the risk of those connected with the institution losing sight of the broader strategic aims of the archive. Apart from becoming outdated and therefore ineffective, a policy which is kept dormant for too long tends to be forgotten, and loses its value.

By creating and implementing collection policies, members of the film-archiving community have a better chance of being treated as equals to, and being given the same prominence, stature, and protection as fine arts collecting institutions and museums in other cultural fields. Once the collection policy is in place, there is no reason why it should not only be made publicly available, but also be actively promoted. We therefore hope that the existing policies and the Collection Policy "template" posted on the FIAF website ([www.fiafnet.org/uk/publications/fep.html](http://www.fiafnet.org/uk/publications/fep.html)) will serve as an inspiration and useful tool.

L'établissement par les affiliés de la FIAF d'une charte de gestion des collections («collection policy» en anglais) est depuis de nombreuses années au cœur des discussions au sein de la Fédération. Le sujet est revenu sur la table au Second Century Forum du Congrès d'Oslo en 2010, à la suite de quoi une enquête sur les chartes en vigueur dans les archives a été lancée – à laquelle relativement peu d'archives ont hélas répondu. Au Congrès de Beijing en 2012, le Comité directeur a donné son feu vert au projet proposé par la Commission de programmation et d'accès aux collections (la PACC) de constituer un groupe de travail sur le sujet. Ses propositions ont été annoncées lors du Congrès de Barcelone en avril 2013. Outre cet article dans le JFP, une section nouvelle du site internet de la FIAF permettra prochainement aux affiliés de la FIAF de publier leurs normes en matière de gestion des collections. Un modèle de charte sera également proposé, afin de faciliter la mise en œuvre d'une telle charte par ceux qui n'en possèderaient pas encore une. Le groupe de travail, composé d'Elaine Burrows, Paolo Cherchi Usai, Luca Giuliani, Katie Trainor et Jon Wengström, propose dans le présent article un guide pratique à l'intention des néophytes, dont les points principaux sont résumés ci-après.

Les collections des musées des beaux-arts bénéficient d'une tradition plus ancienne et plus solide en matière de normes écrites de gestion des collections que celles des archives d'images en mouvement. Ceci est dû autant à des facteurs d'ordre historique qu'à la nature intrinsèque des objets conservés (uniques pour les objets d'art, reproductibles pour les images en mouvement).

Les membres et associés de la FIAF sont des organisations culturelles à but non lucratif dont les tâches sont généralement d'acquérir, conserver, documenter et diffuser le patrimoine cinématographique et audiovisuel. Celles-ci auraient tout intérêt à publier une charte de gestion des collections simple et transparente, en lien avec leurs missions officielles, qui leur permettrait d'expliquer clairement à tous leurs partenaires (conseil d'administration, gouvernement, mécènes, mais aussi le public) pourquoi elles existent, en quoi leur travail est important et comment elles entendent remplir leur mission.

Il est important de définir la nature des collections conservées, ainsi que le positionnement de l'institution vis-à-vis d'autres institutions similaires ou voisines (FIAF ou non-FIAF), qui auraient pour but la prise en charge d'autres éléments du patrimoine audiovisuel, afin de pouvoir prouver qu'il n'y a pas de duplication de mandats avec d'autres institutions.

Une politique des collections doit stipuler : a) quelles images en mouvement et documents connexes doivent être acquis, b) comment ils doivent être conservés, et c) dans quelle mesure et comment ces collections doivent être rendues accessibles.

La charte de gestion des collections ne sera évidemment pas la même si la mission de l'institution est d'acquérir, conserver, documenter et rendre accessible le patrimoine cinématographique national, ou une collection plus spécialisée. Il faut aussi déterminer ce qu'on entend par «film», s'il faut conserver les éléments dans leur format original ou si un autre format est admis ou requis, si l'on devra conduire une politique de conservation active ou si l'on pourra se contenter de l'entreposage d'éléments

reçus en dépôt. Une autre section de la charte de gestion des collections devrait stipuler à qui et dans quelles conditions les collections seront rendues accessibles.

Que ne faut-il *pas* acquérir? Les auteurs signalent qu'une fois définis les éléments entrant dans le cadre des collections, il est relativement facile de définir quels matériels il n'est pas utile d'acquérir. Il est en effet plus facile de ne pas acquérir un élément non désiré que de se dessaisir d'un élément déjà présent dans les collections. Par ailleurs, que faut-il faire devant l'épineux dilemme de devoir se défaire, voire détruire des éléments de la collection (comme des copies multiples ou à un stade de dégradation irrécupérable)? Il faudrait en tous les cas soumettre ces choix difficiles à des procédures à la mesure de la confiance placée dans l'institution.

Il n'est pas nécessaire que la charte de gestion des collections soit un document long et complexe. En réalité, plus elle est simple et claire, plus elle sera efficace et convaincante. Elle doit expliquer la vision de l'institution, tout en évitant de rentrer dans le détail des protocoles et procédures, qui demeureront la prérogative du personnel qualifié de l'institution.

Mais pourquoi créer un document dont la nécessité ne s'était pas fait sentir pendant de longues années et qui risque de limiter la flexibilité de l'institution, voire de restreindre l'autorité de son conservateur? Parce qu'une charte écrite de gestion des collections rend les activités d'une institution plus compréhensibles au monde extérieur, et devient ainsi un excellent instrument au service de la recherche de soutiens politiques, de sources de financement et de publicité. L'adoption d'une telle charte par les institutions publiques constitue aussi une garantie de légitimité et protège les collections ainsi que les conservateurs d'interférences non désirées en cas, par exemple, de changements de gouvernement ou de direction des organismes de tutelle.

Une charte de gestion des collections simple et claire confère aussi à l'institution le statut d'un interlocuteur solide et digne de confiance, susceptible d'attirer la bonne prédisposition de donateurs potentiels, ainsi que la confiance des chercheurs, étudiants et spécialistes. En interne, elle facilite également le développement d'une conception cohérente de l'institution tout en motivant le personnel des différents services.

Elle n'est néanmoins jamais définitive – c'est un document évolutif. Les archives d'images en mouvement sont en perpétuel renouvellement, le contexte culturel et technologique également. La charte de gestion des collections devrait donc être révisée périodiquement, avec la participation du personnel, de l'administration et de tous les partenaires, en vue de son actualisation et de la redéfinition des objectifs stratégiques de l'institution.

Pour conclure, l'établissement et l'application d'une charte de gestion des collections devraient permettre à la communauté des archives d'être traitée avec les mêmes égards que les collections et musées des beaux-arts et autres secteurs culturels. Une fois adoptée, cette charte devra être rendue publique et défendue le plus activement possible.

La política de gestión de colecciones ha estado en el centro de las preocupaciones de la FIAF durante muchos años. El tema fue debatido en el Second Century Forum del Congreso de Oslo en 2010 y se inició una encuesta sobre las políticas aplicadas en ese año. Durante el Congreso de Beijing 2012, el Comité ejecutivo aprobó el proyecto de la Comisión de programación y de acceso a las colecciones (PACC) y se formó un subgrupo de trabajo de Política de gestión de colecciones de la FIAF. Los planes de este grupo fueron anunciados durante el Congreso de Barcelona 2013 y dieron origen a varias propuestas concretas: la publicación en el Journal of Film Preservation de una guía de política de gestión de colecciones, la atribución de una sección en el sitio Web de la FIAF para facilitar la publicación de las políticas de gestión de colecciones de los Afiliados de la FIAF, y el desarrollo de un modelo (un template) destinado a facilitar la definición y aplicación de dichas políticas a los organismos que aún no disponen de este tipo de documento.

Integraron el grupo de trabajo Elaine Burrows, Paolo Cherchi Usai, Luca Giuliani, Katie Trainor y Jon Wengström, quienes proponen la Guía práctica elemental de política de gestión de colecciones cuyos principios se detallan a continuación.

Las colecciones de los museos de Bellas Artes gozan de un estatuto más antiguo y más sólido en materia de pautas de gestión de colecciones que las que rigen en el ámbito de los archivos de imágenes en movimiento. Esto se debe tanto a factores de orden histórico como a la naturaleza de los elementos conservados (únicos en el caso de los objetos de arte; reproducibles en el de las imágenes en movimiento).

Los miembros y asociados de la FIAF son entidades culturales que no persiguen objetivos comerciales. Esto permite a sus afiliados aplicar una política de gestión de colecciones sencilla y coherente y poder así beneficiarse de una mejor comprensión por parte de sus organismos de tutela, mecenas, donantes, depositantes, investigadores, y del mismo público.

Toda adopción de una política de gestión de colecciones está basada en una definición clara del mandato de la institución. Esto permite mantener las mejores relaciones con sus asociados estratégicos – externos e internos – tales como patrocinadores, públicos, investigadores, etc. También conviene definir los objetivos en materia de colecciones (nacional, regional, temático, especializado, etc.) e identificar el posicionamiento de la institución frente a otros organismos de archivos o museos (FIAF y no-FIAF), evitando duplicaciones de mandatos o de atribución de recursos.

Una política de gestión de colecciones debe abarcar varios aspectos de las actividades de la institución, y en particular responder a preguntas importantes tales como ¿qué imágenes en movimiento y elementos vinculados con ellas (no-film) conservar?, ¿cómo se deben conservar? y ¿en qué medida, en qué condiciones y quiénes podrán beneficiarse del derecho de acceso a ellas?

Otro aspecto es la definición de lo que no hay que conservar en los archivos (los materiales no deseados), teniendo en cuenta que es más sencillo no adquirir ciertos elementos que deber desprenderse de los que ya forman parte de la colección. Una política de gestión de colecciones también debe contemplar el caso de materiales que por diversas razones podrían ser enajenadas o destruidas (material irrecuperable, copias múltiples, etc.).

La política de gestión de colecciones, enunciada en un documento sencillo, debe reflejar la concepción y los objetivos de la institución y complementar la definición de su mandato. El objetivo final de una política de gestión de colecciones es el de definir el *qué*, mientras que el *cómo* será la responsabilidad de personal debidamente cualificado.

¿Por qué crear un documento del que se prescindió durante muchos años sin mayores problemas? ¿Es realmente necesario? ¿No peligraría la autonomía de la institución, o la autoridad de su director? La adopción de una política de gestión de colecciones constituye más bien una garantía de legitimidad y protege las colecciones y sus directores de interferencias no deseadas, como por ejemplo en casos particulares como los cambios de gobierno o de dirección de los organismos de tutela.

Una política de gestión de colecciones sencilla y transparente ofrece ventajas adicionales. Hacia afuera transmite la imagen de una institución sólida y digna de confianza, capaz de captar la atención de depositantes, donantes potenciales, investigadores, estudiantes y especialistas. Hacia el interior, facilita la formación de una concepción coherente de la estrategia de la institución, reuniendo a colegas de distintos servicios en torno a objetivos comunes.

Una política de gestión de colecciones nunca es definitiva; es un documento en evolución, como lo son los organismos que conservan las imágenes en movimiento y las normas que las rigen. Estas políticas deberán ser revisadas periódicamente con la participación del personal, la administración y los asociados externos, con vistas a la actualización de los objetivos estratégicos de la institución.

La definición e implementación de una política de gestión de colecciones, debería contribuir a que se atribuya a la comunidad de archivos de imágenes en movimiento el mismo prestigio que a las colecciones de los museos de Bellas Artes y otras disciplinas culturales.

Una vez adoptada, toda política de gestión de las colecciones deberá ser publicitada adecuadamente.