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CONTEXTUALIZING AND DECONTEXTUALIZING AFRICAN HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS

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In the summer of 1992 I was fortunate enough to visit two large collections of photographs for the purpose of African historical research.¹ Muse and subject of this essay, these collections are housed in the library of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (hereafter FCO) and the library of the Royal Commonwealth Society (hereafter RCS), both in London.² Although comparable in some respects, the two contrast sharply in styles of organization. It is this contrast which motivates the present writing, as it illustrates certain effects of the organization of collections on the usefulness of photographs as historical sources, and it leads as well to some reflections on the nature of historical evidence and visual images.

Both the RCS and the FCO have substantial holdings of photographic materials which should be of interest to Africanist historians generally. The size of the RCS collection has been variously estimated at between 45,000 and 70,000 photographs, while that of the FCO is approximately as large.³ In both cases, the researcher must make an appointment to see the collections, and neither is open to the general public. At the time of this writing, the FCO, having moved to a new location, has closed its photo collection, with no plans to reopen in the near future.⁴

Specialists on Nigeria will find that the FCO and RCS each have over 30 albums relevant to this country's history. The FCO has somewhat larger Nigerian holdings, while the RCS collection will be of greater interest to historians of Sierra Leone and other West African countries. The Nigerian materials in the FCO are generally older, many falling roughly between *ca.* 1890 and *ca.* 1920, while the RCS holdings tend to concentrate on the mid-twentieth century. The FCO's Nigeria albums are approximately equally divided between the northern and southern portions of the country, while those of the RCS focus more heavily on northern Nigeria.⁵

At the FCO, when I requested to see the Nigerian photographs, I was simply handed a typed list of the Nigerian albums. Having chosen the ones that seemed relevant to my area (the southwest), these were wheeled out to me on a library cart. Albums of different shapes and sizes, some intact, some in boxes or envelopes or tied with string to keep them together, filled the cart to capacity.

More than half were personal photo albums of individuals in the colonial service (e.g., Album 2: Yorubaland 1908, photographs by Mr. Scruby, District Commissioner Saruba). Some were official compilations (e.g., Album 9: Tribal Studies, *ca.* 1910, 5 vols.; or Album 31: Photographs used in the annual report on Nigeria for 1955). A few were scrapbooks, personal *History in Africa* 23 (1996), 429-437.

(e.g., Album 15: Photographs, press cuttings, letters and sketches of C.T. Lawrence in Nigeria 1916-18) or otherwise (e.g., Album 18: British Empire Exhibition, Wembley 1924, photographs and press cuttings on Nigerian section by C.T. Lawrence). As such, they varied as greatly in quality and documentation as they did in states of preservation.

Within the albums, some of the photographs were unlabeled. Some carried a label only as a group or a series (e.g., "Cotton in Nigeria," group of eight photos, in Nigeria Album 11: Photographs, mainly Nigeria, taken by C.T. Lawrence 1901-1939; or "Nupe" series in Nigeria Album 9: Tribal Studies, vol. 3, virtually an album in itself). Some were quite poorly labeled (e.g., "Savvy Book Nigger," Album 14: Nigerian photographs by C.T. Lawrence 1900-1910), while others were rather well labeled (e.g., "Meeting with King at Oyo," from "Lagos-Interior Expedition" series, Nigeria Album 26: Lagos, General views—interior expedition ca. 1890s). But whatever the case, there they were, contextualized in their albums.

The physical appointment of the photographs in their albums provided invaluable clues about the photographs themselves. For example, an album labeled as "1888" (Album 25: Lagos, general views, including expedition to Jebu Ode in 1888) carried on its last page a group of photographs entitled "Expedition to Jebu Ode." Clearly, this set of photos was a late addition to the album.⁶ In some cases, it was possible to distinguish photographs labeled in a different hand, or printed differently from their companions, providing more clues.

Such are among the types of raw data that the historian can and must work with. These include the physical characteristics of the photograph itself (size, type of print, condition, etc.), its placement in the album (as chronology, or as part of a group by subject matter or by place), whatever comments someone saw fit to give it, and the person's handwriting (perhaps different, perhaps the same, perhaps in a different pen).⁷

These clues of context, together with the image itself, constitute the primary evidence that the historian must use to date and identify the photographs. The context is crucial. Manners of dress and items of material culture have in many cases changed so dramatically in the last century that it would be a grave error to rely on the visual image only. Were it not for their disposition in the albums, many of these images could easily be mistaken for depictions of geographical areas or time periods other than those to which they truly belong.⁸

With the contextual clues and those contained within the images themselves combined, one can begin the process of trying to match the photographs to oral, written, and other types of evidence in order to identify people, places, times, and events. In some cases, the results are startling. One thus finds poverty where it should not have been, turbans where they should not have been, and all manner of things which are generally not supposed to have existed where and when these photographs show that they did. The reason for this simple: the photographs constitute a largely untapped, new, and

immensely valuable body of evidence for a wide variety of historical phenomena.⁹

Decontextualized, however, the photographs lose much of their usefulness. When they are removed from the contexts of their albums, a crucial set of data is lost. The images become disembodied, and it may never be possible to reconstruct that body. Once disembodied, divorced from their ties to time and space, photographs lose much of their potential value as historical evidence. Deprived of that potential, their main usefulness can be as illustrations only.

At the RCS, instead of decaying photo albums, the researcher is presented with a notebook of neatly typed information, containing a description of each photograph, each with an index number, and each with a discussion of its historical pertinence. On inquiry, I was told that this monumental task had been accomplished by a previous librarian, who wanted to preserve the photographs from possible future damage.¹⁰ The photographs had been carefully removed, microfiched, indexed, described, researched, and stored. What one reads in the notebooks is the product of the former librarian's research and taxonomy. Based on this information, one can request to see the relevant plates of microfiche. Based on those, in turn, one can request to copy individual photographs, which arrive, neatly preserved, in boxes and envelopes.

The key phrase in the above paragraph is "the former librarian's research." This is the material available: pages of neatly-typed notes which do not inform what parts are contextual and what parts research, or what sort of research. The unsuspecting graduate student (myself) did not realize this until, turning the page of the loose-leaf binder, I found neatly entered there a letter from John Pemberton, informing the library of errors in its identification of certain photographs.¹¹ Afterwards, alerted by this *caveat* that all was not as neat as it appeared, I compared and examined copies of the photographs at leisure. Other errors became apparent.

As one example, the Oba of Lagos identified as "Oba Eshugbayi of Lagos (d. 1935)" by the librarian's research, in fact wore, in that very photograph, a cap embroidered with his name and title: "FALOLU THE OBA OF LAGOS" (Y3043II, plate 57). Considering that Oba Falolu Dosunmu reigned from 1932 to 1949, after the reigns of Oba Esugbaya Eleko (1900-1925, 1931-1932)—who died in 1932, by the way—the pictured Oba could not have been Esugbaya wearing his successor's cap. Lest there remain any doubt, additional photographs have been published of both rulers, making it abundantly clear that Falolu was indeed Falolu.¹²

In another instance, a set of photographs labeled as depicting the Ilaro and Ijebu expeditions because of "their resemblance to prints in FCO Album Nigeria vol. 25" poses another set of problems. The resemblance of the Ilaro photo (Y3043PP, plate 4) to Ilaro photos in the FCO is clear. However, the relationship of photographs of groups of canoes and groups of Europeans (Y3043PP, plates 5-7) to photographs of groups of soldiers, of women and men, of women and children, and of men (group of photographs labeled

“Expedition to Jebu Ode,” FCO Nigeria Album 25), is less than obvious.¹³ One can say that the identification based on this supposed relationship appears to be spurious, but one can neither reconstruct the missing context nor hypothesize an alternative identification.

My point here is a simple one. Historical sources, of whatever type, need to be handled with respect and care from the very beginning for the meaning they may have to future researchers. The desire to preserve these sources is an admirable goal, but one that should be carried out by a trained archivist, so that any loss or distortion of evidence may be kept to a minimum. An index system to reference individual photographs, as one might reference individual archival documents, is a helpful and convenient device for scholars to make use of, but not if the price is the destruction of the original context of the photographs themselves.

No amount of supplementary research, interpretation, or description can replace lost contextual data. The first three must always be clearly distinguished from the latter, and the data themselves are what must be preserved. An interpretation that appears correct today may be proved faulty tomorrow, but only if scholars have access to the original data with which to confirm or refute the analyses of colleagues. This process is an integral part of research itself. Replacing data with interpretations, or failing to distinguish between the two, amounts to destroying primary evidence, and effectively disables future research.

Once this has been done, it is irrevocable. But where it has not been done, or has not *yet* been done, it should not be done. In the desire to preserve their photograph collections, the FCO and other holders of such collections should be mindful that their holdings are unique historical documents, no less so than the holdings of the Public Record Office or the British Museum. Indexing and preservation are certainly desirable, but not at the price of destroying or obscuring historical evidence.

This point touches on two important issues in the use and abuse of photographs. These twin themes trickle through the rather extensive literature on the subject which has recently appeared in print. The first of these is the nature of historical evidence, and the second is the nature of visual images.

Frequently couched in pseudohistorical terminology about “primary documents” and “the reconstruction of cultures,” the dominant currents in much of this literature derive from recent theoretical concerns in the field of anthropology. Prominent among these are concerns with the photographer’s opinion of the subject, the reaction of the person(s) photographed to the event of being photographed, the influence of the person(s) photographed on the resulting image, and the various constructions of “meaning” and “reality” by photographers, subjects, and viewers.¹⁴

The question of the relative (in)utility of this sort of thing for the field of history has been very ably dealt with by Beatrice Heintze.¹⁵ She has pointed out the risks of overinterpretation, of imputing too much to the data, of mistaking analysis for fact. Nevertheless, some additional comments on the

nature of the historical endeavor and its sources will perhaps not be out of place.

Currently fashionable concerns in the anthropological literature about photographs appear to be rapidly revising the meaning of the term "historical evidence." Perusing this literature, it is not uncommon to encounter passages which define "historical evidence" as subsidiary or later written sources, but not as internal or contextual data. Also not uncommon are instances in which "historical evidence" is referred to as something that can be imputed, reconstructed, created, or otherwise brought into being by the efforts of scholars.¹⁶ In light of the literature and the state of the RCS photo collection, it seems necessary to emphasize that it is not normally the business of scholars to create historical evidence, but to construct historical arguments.

I hope it is not becoming old-fashioned to insist that there is a difference between historical evidence and historical argument. Historical arguments are the analyses, interpretations, descriptions, narratives, and so forth that historians construct on the basis of historical evidence. Implicit in this process is the assumption that the evidence used will be available to colleagues so that they may check, critique, revise, attack, deconstruct, reconstruct, or whatever they wish, making new historical arguments from *the same body of evidence* looked at differently. Equally implicit in this process is the assumption that every scholar has the right to be wrong, and that every scholar's work is therefore subject to evaluation, revision, and re-evaluation by colleagues and successors. This process is inherent to the nature of scholarship itself.

Thus, if a colleague publishes two photographs of two different men and interprets them as two photographs of the same man, that is simply a mistake.¹⁷ If another scholar asserts that different photographic collections frequently contain the same photographs differently labeled, and that many of those labels must then be wrong, that is interesting.¹⁸ But if custodians of photographic collections, believing materials in their care to be wrong or false or uninteresting, decide to remove or correct them, that is alarming.¹⁹ This last is no simple mistake, but one verging on an Orwellian vision of history in which the archivist edits the sources.

When evidence is replaced by argument, whether in the name of creating or preserving data, future scholarship on the subject is effectively precluded. Such is already the case at the RCS. As other photograph collections begin to be reorganized and cataloged, some agreement on the definition of data and the principles of its preservation becomes imperative.²⁰ So also, as interest in photographs grows and Africanist historians begin to 'discover' their value as historical sources, some agreement about method becomes equally imperative.²¹ With salvage operations in course, and interest still growing, the consequences of a failure to reach informed consensus about the nature of the evidence provided by photographs can only be further irreparable loss. If this necessity is not soon enough realized, invaluable bodies of evidence may well be rendered historically useless before historians have even seen them.

Enough similar losses have already been suffered in other fields to serve as a warning. Modern archeologists still lament the blundered excavations of the

last century, each one an irremediable loss. Collectively, the science of archeology has learned from its mistakes, and now carefully records every bit of material and stratigraphic context, preserving evidence for the future in the form of samples, drawings, measurements, and photographs.²²

Removing a photograph of historical interest from its album is in many ways analogous to removing an artifact of archeological interest from its stratigraphic setting. In both cases, the object is rendered useless to scholarship even when scholarship fails to realize this. Equally to the point is the case of medieval manuscripts. Their illuminations once removed from their texts, the pictures and the words now reside separately in museums and archives, with no way of knowing which belongs to which.²³ Seals too once met the same fate, and now often reside apart from their documents; thus robbed of their contexts they can be objects of beauty or curiosity only, not evidence for history.²⁴

Such are the products of an overzealous desire to organize and categorize. In the early part of this century, that same zeal was visited on the photographic archives in Tervuren. Individual photographs were diligently removed from their contexts, and filed according to someone's categories of material culture and so forth. As a result, these photographs remain safe in their files, as they can be of little use to historians.²⁵

Corollary to the desire to organize and categorize is the desire to describe. Photo collections in which one must pass through a verbal description, however detailed, in order to select and view photographs are no models of organization. To catalog or index visual images by verbal descriptions is to misunderstand the nature of visual images.

Any verbal description of a visual image is interpretive. In describing a picture as a group of "canoes," as I did above, I am not only leaving out every other aspect of that image, but defining as "canoes" what another viewer might define as some other sort of flotation device, or even as something else entirely. I could be wrong: the boats might not be canoes, or they might not be the most important aspect of the image. Distilling into words means reducing the image to whatever feature is interpreted as important, rightly or wrongly.

A descriptive catalog is by definition faulty, incomplete, and difficult to use. Seeking pictures, the researcher is obliged to pass through an interpretive barrier of words. Unavoidably, the researcher is led to images not relevant to the topic, while missing others important for the topic. That was my experience of the RCS collection, catalog descriptions several pages in length notwithstanding.

The only effective way to index visual images is to index them visually.²⁶ If photographic collections are to be cataloged, then there must be a visual catalog. It must be a visually legible catalog, not mysteriously ordered plates on microfiche, and not negatives in translucent packaging.²⁷ At the limit, photocopies would be easier to work with than either of these, provided the copies are not too small.

One understands the reluctance, in the name of preservation, to allow researchers to browse indiscriminately through original albums.²⁸ One also understands the frustrations encountered by researchers attempting to sift thorough materials, written or visual, on microfilm or microfiche. Even so simple and inexpensive a device as a photocopy or photographic reproduction of a complete album, bound in its proper order to serve as a facsimile of the whole, would facilitate the browser's search.

For the sake of caution, the only prudent description of a photograph is a contextual reference, e.g., unlabeled photograph, Nigeria Album x: title of album; or photograph labeled as "x" in Album x: title of album. Index numbers and accession data should be included where they exist. Archival documents are normally indexed and referenced with such few essentials, and museum objects are cataloged and referenced in like manner.²⁹

There is good reason why the Public Record Office does not catalog its holdings with descriptions. There is equally good reason why the Museum of Mankind limits its cataloging and retrieval system to the barest of data, and why its accession catalogs contain drawings of the objects.³⁰ What is needed for photographs is an equally rational and circumspect logic.

Notes

1. I gratefully acknowledge permission to do research among the collections and the assistance of their staff. Thanks are also extended to Nicolette Bromberg, David Henige, John Pemberton, Stanley Schultz, and Jan Vansina for their advice and comments at various stages in the preparation of this paper. The opinions expressed in this essay, as well as any errors, are my own.

2. These collections were first brought to my attention in 1989 by John Pemberton. The Royal Commonwealth Society is located at 18 Northumberland Avenue, London WC2N 5BJ. Its library, however, is to be transferred in its entirety to Cambridge University Library (T.A. Barringer, Librarian, RCS, letter of 25 February 1993). The Foreign and Commonwealth Office moved in 1992 to its new location at King Charles Street, London SW1A 2AH (Penny Prior, Librarian, FCO, letter of 24 February 1993).

3. Estimates of 45,000, 50,000, and 70,000, respectively, in: Andrew Roberts, ed., *Photographs as Sources for African History: Papers Presented at a Workshop Held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, May 12-13, 1988* (London, 1988), 168; John Falconer, "African Photographs in the Royal Commonwealth Society Library," *African Research and Documentation*, 31 (1983), 13; Gemini News Service, undated press release, enclosed with letter of T.A. Barringer, 25 February 1993.

4. John Pemberton, personal communication, 27 June 1993. The FCO was in the process of moving when I was there, and the photographs were scheduled to be moved immediately after my departure. Both the RCS and the FCO permit photographic reproduction.

5. These are estimates. I have made no systematic study of the holdings, as I visited the collections to seek out materials for a specific research project only, and did not then envisage an essay such as this.

6. The Ijebu Expedition took place in 1892. Some discussion of these photographs and their context can be found in Carolyn Keyes, "Adire: Cloth, Gender, and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria, 1841-1991" (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993). Additional research based in part on these and other photographs is in progress.

7. These are but a few of the types of historical evidence available to researchers when photographs are kept in their original contexts. For discussion of these and many others, including the types of technology used to make the photographs, the thicknesses, sizes, shapes, and colors of mounts, see Arnold R. Pilling, "Dating Photographs" in *Ethnohistory: A Researcher's Guide*, ed. Dennis Wiedman (Williamsburg, 1986), 167-226.

8. While costume may be effectively used by Americanists to assist in dating

photographs (see Pilling, "Dating Photographs," 172-73), for Africanists the reverse is true, as photographs must be used to date types of dress. The interested reader will find examples and discussion of the use of photographic materials for the history of African dress in Betty Wass, "Yoruba Dress in Five Generations of a Lagos Family" in *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, ed. Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz (Hague, 1979), 331-48; Keyes, "Adire;" and Adenaike, "The Fashioning of a Male Elite: Dress and Political Power in Southwestern Nigeria in the 19th Century," forthcoming.

9. These were only some of the surprises yielded by photographs in my own research. Americanists have recorded similar sorts of surprises for their own areas and topics. See, e.g., Michael Thomason, "The Magic Image Revisited: The Photograph as Historical Source," *The Alabama Review*, 31 (1978), 87-88, who notes the presence of an African object and of African-Americans in unexpected places.

10. Neither John Pemberton nor I were able to obtain further information from the RCS. However, John Falconer was identified as the librarian who "cataloged the photographic collections of the Royal Commonwealth Society, London" by David Killingray and Andrew Roberts, "An Outline History of Photography in Africa to ca. 1940," *HA*, 16 (1989), 206n30.

11. The letter is filed in the RCS with the notes for Y3043U (Sir Walter Buchanan-Smith collection on Nigeria, ca. 1909-ca. 1935) plates 40 and 42 labeled as "Ife priests, 1931." John Pemberton wrote the letter in reference to Y3043B (Trousell Southern Nigeria Photographs 1905-1907) plate 42, labeled as "Three men carrying terracotta Benin heads." He showed a copy of this photograph (Y3043B, plate 42) to William Fagg (4 July 1988) and to John Picton (5 July 1988), both of whom agreed with him that the art objects it depicted were clearly not from Benin, but probably from Ife (John Pemberton, personal communication, 27 June 1993). The logic by which this letter was filed, the relationships between Y3043U plates 40 and 42 and Y3043B plate 42, and the relationships between "Benin heads," Ife priests," and Ife artworks are all open to question.

12. According to the RCS notes, the photographs in this set (Y3043II, Girl Guide activities in Nigeria, ca. 1930-1951) were identified and documented on the basis of oral history collected from a person knowledgeable about Girl Guides in Nigeria. It may be noted that the photographs are relatively recent, and Oba Falolu was still survived by a daughter in 1982, who would surely have recognized her father had she been asked. Additional photographs and information about the two Oba and the daughter can be found in Takiu Folami, *A History of Lagos, Nigeria: The Shaping of an African City* (Smithtown, NY, 1982), 41-53, 59-62.

13. RCS, Y3043PP, Derek Holt West African Photographs, plates 4-7, notes.

14. Joanna Cohan Scherer, "Historical Photographs as Anthropological Documents: A Retrospect," *Visual Anthropology*, 3 (1990), 132-33, 136, provides an overview of this literature. Further discussion of these concerns are in Christraud Geary, "Impressions of the African Past: Interpreting Ethnographic Photographs from Cameroon," *Visual Anthropology*, 3 (1990), 289-315.

15. Beatrix Heintze, "In Pursuit of a Chameleon: Early Ethnographic Photography from Angola in Context," *HA*, 17 (1990), 131-56. Also apropos are the earlier critique and methodological discussion of Marsha Peters and Bernhard Mergen, "'Doing the Rest': The Uses of Photographs in American Studies," *American Quarterly*, 29 (1977), 280-303.

16. See Scherer's overview, "Historical Photographs," 136, 141, for later and external written sources as "historical evidence." Examples of the pitfalls of relying on outside or secondary sources are given in Christraud Geary, "Photographs as Materials for African History:

17. Paralleling this example in reverse, Geary, "Photographs," 95, cites a case of one individual identified as two different characters in two photographs.

18. *Ibid.*, 103-04.

19. The conditions in which collections were left by past caretakers have been described in a few cases. Among them: Elizabeth Edwards, "African Photographs in the Archives of the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford" in Roberts, *Photographs as Sources for African History*, 101, observed that materials had previously been rearranged "to break up collections;" Paul Jenkins, "The Photograph Collection in the Basel Mission Archive: Its Scope, Present State, and Plans for the Future" in *ibid.*, 125, described a "decayed" organizational system in which photographs had been misplaced, mislabeled, and in which registration lists were incomplete; and Alessandro Triulzi, "Preliminary Report on Two Photographic Collections in Italy" in *ibid.*, 109, found "a precarious surface order which revealed successive attempts to rearrange an indigestible mass of photographic material." In cases where entropy has taken its toll in the past, even with the best of intentions and most assiduous of labors in the present, one must wonder about the reliability of the results. On the implications for research, see Margaret B. Blackman,

"Visual Ethnohistory: Photographs in the Study of Culture History" in Wiedman, *Ethnohistory*, 137-66, esp. 141-45.

20. Recent reorganization and cataloging projects include the photo collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Basel Mission Archive, the Società Africana Italiana, and the Istituto Italo-Africano. See Edwards, "African Photographs;" Jenkins, "Photo Collection;" and Triulzi, "Preliminary Report."

21. See Andrew Roberts, "Photographs and African History," *JAH*, 29 (1988), 301-311. As Triulzi, "Preliminary Report," 110, has noted regarding questions of method, "unless critical standards of evaluation and judgement are agreed upon" the result is likely to be the "devaluation" of photographs as a historical source.

22. Paul-Marie Duval, "Archéologie antique" in *L'Histoire et ses méthodes*, ed. Charles Samaran [*Encyclopédie de la pléiade*, XI (Paris, 1961)], 266-68.

23. Gilbert Ouy, "Les bibliothèques" in *ibid.*, 1086-89, on the problems of the physical integrity of medieval manuscripts.

24. See Yves Metman, "Sigillographie et marques postales" in *ibid.*, 393-446, esp. 426-28, on the importance of seals attached to their documents.

25. Jan Vansina, personal communication, June 1993; Guido Convents, "Des photos faites en Afrique Centrale: un inventaire des archives et de leurs dépôts en Belgique" in Roberts, *Photographs as Sources for African History*, 116. Organization by "subject" was still being advocated as recently as 1988 at the SOAS workshop, as recorded by Rosemary Seton, "A Note on the Workshop Discussion of Archives" in *ibid.*, 132.

26. As Peters and Mergen, "Doing the Rest," 280, observe, photographs "contain unique information that can only be communicated and analyzed in visual terms."

27. John Pemberton encountered such a situation during his research among photo collections (personal communication, 27 June 1993). Thomason, "The Magic Image Revisited," 86, also noted photograph collections where the researcher was obliged to view negatives, pointing out that this was not in the best interests of preservation.

28. A concern expressed in terms of a need "to prevent users riffling roughshod through unsorted and uncatalogued photographs which could cause further damage," Seton, "Workshop Discussion," 132.

29. This differs from the recommendations of Geary, "Photographs," 92, 115-16.

30. The cataloging system used for textiles at the Museum of Mankind is instructive. Grouped by collection (donor), each entry includes a sketch, and accession data are clearly distinguished from any comments made by the museum staff.