Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2025
JANUARY-JUNE 2025

Creation and Consolidation of the Archive at the National Museum of Interventions, in Mexico City

Ir a la versión en español

DOI: 10.30763/Intervencion.313.v1n31.92.2025 • YEAR 16, ISSUE NO. 31: 235-252

Submitted: 06.18.2024 • Accepted: 25.03.2025 • Published:

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ABSTRACT

Following a long and critical path which began in 2018, the Archive at the National Museum of Interventions (MNI) was inaugurated in 2020. This report aims to illustrate the process implemented to achieve this and, at the same time, highlight how important it is for institutions to be involved in the safeguarding their own history. It is believed that this experience, taken as a success story, may serve as an example and push more work centers belonging to the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) or other institutions that wish to put in order their processes to manage and preserve their documentation.

KEYWORDS

document management, conservation, documentary collections, National Museum of Interventions

INTRODUCTION

The archive at the National Museum of Interventions (MNI, for its Spanish acronym) opened in 2020 following efforts on the part of various areas belonging to the Museum as well as the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia). Initially the project was only intended to fulfill the requirements set out in the General

Law on Archives, which had been published a couple of years earlier. This law mandated institutions to administer, organize and conserve their documentary archive in a homogenous manner, thus compelling them to design an institutional system to manage documentation.

However, as will be demonstrated herein, the creation of the Archive not only helped coordinate the process of document management in the MNI, it also fulfilled the Institute's duty to preserve, in this specific case, that related to the site's history.

Currently, the Archive fulfills the three obligations that comprise an institutional documentary archive, from the short-term of the procedure archive and the medium-term of the concentration archive, to the permanent of the historical archive.[1] It also develops activities that support the conservation and dissemination of the Churubusco Convent Fund (FCCH, Fondo Conventual Churubusco) as well as a couple of consignments that were put together after having recovered documentation which was haphazardly scattered throughout the Museum, as can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Boxes located in the Museum's parcel area. (Photograph: Tania Arroyo Ramírez, 2021; courtesy of the author).

[1] We use the term "Procedure archive: for that composed of everyday archival documents that are needed to exercise the attributions and functions of the obligated subjects"; "Concentration archive: for that composed of documents transferred from the producing areas or units [of archival information] whose use and consultation are sporadic and remain therein until disposal", and "Historical archive: for that of public documents for permanent conservation which are relevant for national, regional or local memory" (Ramírez Deleón, 2019, p. 42).

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2025
JANUARY-JUNE 2025

Although several steps to consolidate the area are still pending, it was deemed useful to share this MNI experience as a starting point for other work centers belonging to the INAH or other institutions interested in beginning work on their own documentary management processes.

Therefore, this **report** firstly provides the context of the activities that were carried out in the MNI before and after its documentation was denominated *Archive*, in order to highlight the way in which documentary testimonies have been generated in the complex; secondly, it explains the technical criteria used as baseline for the structure of the archive project. Finally, it describes how a specific space was adapted to house it, applying the above-mentioned criteria to organize, classify, and catalog the information, managing to operate, while always respecting the vital cycle of documentation, the archives and generating areas.

THE MNI AND THE NEED TO SAFEGUARD ITS HISTORY

Although the MNI has a rich history that dates back to prehispanic times, it is the youngest of the INAH national museums. Founded in the former Churubusco convent on September 13, 1981, by the Institute's Director at the time, Gastón García Cantú, it recounts the interventionist episodes in Mexico throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries and, at the same time, the country's process of consolidation as an independent nation.

The site it occupies used to be the "house of Huitzilopochtli", later on and for almost four centuries, Franciscan monks devoted the location to religious callings (Arroyo, 2020). Then, in June 1847, during the United States intervention, it was used as a jail, a barracks and a fortress (Escorza, 2009, pp. 70-71); subsequently, on August 20 of that year, it witnessed the battle in which the National Guard and some Mexican Army pickets faced the American forces (Arroyo, 2020, p. 26). Due to the significance of what occurred there, it would later become the Museum of Foreign Interventions.

President Benito Juárez nationalized the convent complex in 1869 (Diario Oficial, 1869, p. 2); later on, still with friars present, the building served as a military hospital for people suffering infectious diseases. It was abandoned during the Revolution until, on August 20, 1919, Jorge Enciso, inspector general of Historical Monuments, inaugurated the Churubusco Museum. At the time, the site also housed the "*Héroes de Churubusco*" elementary School and the Open-Air Painting School, an institution for middle class "young

ladies" and children from poor families who received Federal Government grants (Escorza, 2009, p. 107).

On February 18, 1935, the building was officially named the *Museo Histórico de Churubusco* (Churubusco Historical Museum) (Archivo Histórico del Museo Nacional de las Intervenciones [AHMNI], Folder. 01.10C.2-1935, Box 5, f. 1). In 1950, a collection of automobiles was shown on the ground floor, hence it was referred to as the *Museo del Transporte* (Transport Museum), a project that was never formally established (Escorza, 2009, p. 114).

From 1965 until the early 80s the Museum contained the INAH's own National School of Restoration and Museography. Therefore, during the decades between 1970 and 1990, the Churubusco complex housed the following INAH institutions: the Museum, the Restoration School, and the directorates of Restoration of Cultural Heritage and Historical Monuments. Finally, the National Museum of Interventions was inaugurated in 1981; since then, the name and social, cultural, and historical functions of the former convent of Churubusco have not changed.

Given the variety of activities that have been carried out in the building, the need for an archive bearing witness to these was foreseen. However, it was not until 2018 that a project was formally launched to establish an area in the Museum for this purpose. Its creation involved a challenge: it had to take into consideration that the type of documentation pertained to diverse historical periods and, therefore, corresponded to different documentary values.

It included the FCCH, a corpus of just under 1 000 files that recount the religious life in the site following the arrival of the Spaniards. The oldest document in the collection is dated 1578, when the monks from the Dieguino branch of the Third Franciscan Order already occupied the site, whereas the most recent corresponds to the year 1906 (AHMNI).

The Collection's "Gobierno" (government) section mainly comprises files with information on cleanliness and customs, although they also included petitions, certifications, reports, inventories, litigation, mandates, rules, and capitular acts. All of these documents concern the convent's functionality, organization, and form of governance. The other section, "Pecuniaria" (pecunary), includes leases, valuations, sales letters, donations, deeds, inheritances, pious works, loans, receipts, wills, and titles (Escorza, 1999, pp. 16-17).

In a different dimension, librarian Luz María Segura Valencia had direct custody of a consignment of documents from seven cardboard archive boxes. These contained files on a wide range of themes, although the majority covered the years 1921 to 2012

and were of an administrative nature. Every time Luz María Segura was transferred to another office, she took the boxes with her, gave them basic care and tried to sort them according to her own criteria.

A second consignment was formed with all the files found in over 70 boxes rescued from different parts of the Museum, including the former convent's belfry, as can be seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Boxes of documentation found in the former convent's belfry (Photograph: Tania Arroyo Ramírez, 2023; courtesy of the author).

Some of these boxes contained extremely varied information concerning the Museum's generating areas, but were in a truly lamentable state of conservation and nobody in the museum took responsibility for them. This documentation formed a third procedure and concentration consignment, with boxes of files placed in the corresponding departments where members of staff considered them "dead files". The boxes held a great number of documents, which were worked on and then incorporated into the institution's Archive during the ordering process.

It is clear that the FCCH corresponded to secondary values which "Are related to the historical, scientific and informative purpose of those documents which [...] are valuable for history, research and/or society in general[2]" (Archivo General de la Nación, 2024, p. 8). However, for the rest of the documentation it was necessary to determine which stage of their vital cycle they were in and, consequently, place them according to their values: primary or secondary, or review whether efforts were required to purge it.

[2] Unless stated otherwise, all textual quotations have been translated by the editorial team.

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2025
JANUARY-JUNE 2025

TECHNICAL CRITERIA TO ORGANIZE THE MNI ARCHIVE

Ever since the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, the State has manifested concern for the preservation not only of archaeological, historical and paleontological cultural heritage —this was the reason the INAH was created in 1939— but also the content of its document collections, as fraction XII of article 2 of the Institute's organic laws indicates that part of its functions include "To establish, organize, manage, and develop museums, **archives,** and specialized libraries in the fields of its competence" (INAH Organic Law, 1939, p. 2).

This attribution, which has guaranteed the recovery, protection, and conservation of the numerous collections of documents that are now in the Institute's custody, was reinforced by the Law on Monuments and Archaeological, Artistic and Historical Zones, published in 1972. Fraction II of article 36 established that "Documents and files belonging to or having belonged to Federal offices and archives, federated entities, or Municipalities and ecclesiastical houses" were historical documents (1972, p. 9). The subsequent fraction mentions that so were "Original manuscript documents related to Mexican history as well as books, leaflets, and other material printed in Mexico or abroad during the 16th to the 19th centuries whose rarity and importance for Mexican history [merited] conservation in the country" (1972, p. 9).

This of the case of the Museum's FCCH, which was recovered from the former convent's own building that was restored by the Directorate for Restoration of Cultural Heritage in 1974 and returned to the MNI in 1991 (Escorza, 1999, p. 11). Since then, responsibility for its care was assigned to the Research area, to be kept in better conditions in the MNI's collections area. These actions made the conservation of the FCCH possible.

Despite the INAH's original vocation being to safeguard Mexico's cultural and historical heritage (including archives), it is paradoxical that there was no concern for protecting its own history until many years after its foundation. At the same time, Mexico advanced slowly in generating a culture of transparency on matters concerning public life, and it would only be after external pressure and from international organisms that this agenda would be pushed at the federal level.

The first step taken by the Mexican State was to reform article 6 of the Constitution, in 1977, which added a brief but significant statement: "the State will guarantee the right to information" (Centro de Documentación y Análisis, Archivos y Compilación de Leyes, 2017, p. 2). A second step followed almost 25 years later, consist-

ing in the publication of the Federal Law on Transparency and Government Public Information (2002).

According to article 1, the standard's intention was to "guarantee all people access to information in the possession of the Powers of the Union, autonomous constitutional organs or those having legal autonomy, and any other federal entity" (Ley Federal de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información Pública Gubernamental, 2002, p. 1). The problem was that it became difficult to guarantee access because, even though the information could be safeguarded, the institutions did not have standardized criteria that served as guidelines for document organization.

Therefore, the path taken was a long one. In 2007, the above-mentioned constitutional article 6 had fraction v added to it: "Obligated subjects must **preserve** their documents in up-to-date administrative archives and, through the electronic media available, they will publish the complete and updated information on their management indicators and the exercise of public resources" (Centro de Documentación y Análisis, Archivos y Compilación de Leyes, 2017, p. 6).

Subsequent reforms to the article continued to increase the visibility of the need for institutional archives, but in 2014 fraction I of section A stipulated public servants' obligation to **document** any act derived from their faculties, competences or functions (Centro de Documentación y Análisis, Archivos y Compilación de Leyes, 2017, p. 15).

Furthermore, article 73 added fraction XXIX-S, which assigned Congress the faculties to issue general laws on government transparency and access to information. Added to this, fraction XXIX-S instructed it to "issue a general law establishing homogenous organization and management of archives for Federal, federated entities, Municipalities and territorial demarcations of Mexico City and [determine] the organizational bases and functioning of the *Sistema Nacional de Archivos* [SNA, National System of Archives]" (Centro de Documentación y Análisis, Archivos y Compilación de Leyes, 2017, p. 77)

This was the moment when work began in order to implement said System, that is to say, "an organic and articulated set of structures, functional relationships, methods, norms, instances, instruments, procedures and services that lead to the fulfillment of the aim of homogenous organization and management of archives by obligated subjects" (Ley General de Archivo, 2018, p. 22). Legal and operational instruments have been developed since, seeking to streamline the structuring process.

In this context, besides the afore-mentioned legal instruments, others were published, derogated and modified. Some of these include the general laws on Protection of Personal Data in the Possession of Obligated Subjects (2017), and on Administrative Responsibilities (2016); federal laws on Archives (2012) and on Administrative Responsibility of Public Servants (2002); along with the Federal Penal Code (1931).

The legal framework created to date, which is mandatory for any governmental instance, has established at all levels (federal, state, and municipal) a homogenous form of archive organization and management. The efforts invested to consolidate the SNA strive to guarantee access to information and transparency when it comes to institutional activities. However, the process necessarily implies documenting acts carried out within the public administration and, therefore, preserving those records. This puts us on a different plane to that of historical archives. Handling documents produced as a result of administrative management requires the specific design of a policy which, as stressed by Carol Couture and Jean-Yves Rousseau,

> its aim must be planning, establishing and maintaining all the means (regulation-structure-program) which would enable rational, effective and cost-effective control over the creation, usage and conservation, be it on shorter or longer terms, of the documents a certain administration produces or receives while exercising its activities (1988, p. 15).

In accordance with this, on the institutional level, the General Archive of the Nation (AGN, *Archivo General de la Nación*) became the leading agency with regard to archivism. As the responsible instance, it preserves, expands and disseminates Mexico's documentary heritage, and also promotes the organization of archives to protect our national memory in the short- (procedure archive), medium- (concentration archive), and long-term (historical archive). At the same time, it contributes to transparency and accountability in the exercise of public power, which is no small feat.

At the following level, each institutional archiving system, understood as "the set of registries, processes, procedures, criteria, structures, tools and functions that each obligated subject develops and which sustains the archivist activities" (2018, p. 10), must include an archival coordination area. From it, a further one will be articulated, of "correspondence", apart from a procedure archive, one for concentration and one for historical.

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2025
JANUARY-JUNE 2025

Therefore, the INAH created the Sub-directorate of Archives, which has been responsible for guiding work related to archiving systems and establishing a model for documentary management. This is, a "set of norms, techniques and knowledge applied to treating documents from their design to their permanent conservation" (Cruz, 2011, p. 18).

The Sub-directorate develops and supports the implementation of a policy as well as programs and measures for the effective handling of safeguarded documents. Furthermore, it works on the application of a management methodology to build a special program, at the national level, to control the Institute's collections. Its policy regarding the archives is covered in the *Manual de Normas, Políticas y Procedimientos de la Gestión Integral de los Documentos y Archivos del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (2009).

Based on this policy and the *Manual* itself, instruments for control and consultation of archives have been set up, which article 13 of the General Law on Archives (2018, p. 9) also indicates as necessary. That is to say, the INAH General Framework for Archival Classification, 2023), the *Catálogo de disposición documental* (CADIDO, Catalogue for Document Disposal, 2023), as well as the necessary formats to create the General Inventory of Files, the Guide to Archives, the Act for Documentary Expunge, among other (Obligaciones en materia de archivos, INAH).

After achieving developments in normative and operational matters, the Sub-directorate of Archives succeeded in various INAH work centers activating their institutional archive projects and striving to systematize their documentary management processes. The creation of the MNI Archive is, precisely, proof of this.

THE MNI ARCHIVE IS BORN

On joining the MNI in 2017 I was assigned the update of the so-called "Form number 5"; in other words, of the inventory that concentrated the dossiers generated in the first phase which, as mentioned above, all archives have (the Museum's procedure archive), with quarterly, half-yearly, and annual reports. To carry out this task, the Sub-Directorate of Archives belonging to the INAH provided me with a brief training.

With the knowledge obtained, I identified that the activities corresponding to the institutional archive were not being carried out in the Museum at any level: procedure, concentration, or historical. The only thing the Museum did was fill in and hand over Form 5;

this requirement, a demand from the Sub-directorate of Archives, was met without considering its meaning or importance, hence it was performed with no care or concern at all. I explained this situation to the Director, Cecilia Genel Velasco M.A., and from then on began to develop a project to consolidate an area that would be in charge of all documentary management and, thus, be able to fulfil the obligations required by the General Law on Archives.

Afterwards, a modest diagnosis of the situation was carried out, which identified that there was no specific area, neither physical nor regarding staff, from which the tasks of an institutional archive system in the Museum could be coordinated. Likewise, almost all the personnel were unaware of the meaning of the process of documentary management and everything related with the vital cycle of documentation; hence, the department managers generated their information and organized it according to their own criteria.

As for the historical memory of the site itself, there was also no awareness about the need to preserve it. The documentation accumulated decades ago had been put in boxes and these had been placed in inadequate spaces for their conservation, and its treatment had been disorganized and careless. To solve these problems, the Directress, with vital aid from the Technical Secretariat and General Director's Office, recovered a space in the Museum which for several years had been occupied by third-party agents not belonging to the Institute. In October 2018, the Sub-Directorate of Archives made a diagnosis and specific recommendations for the adaptation of the space, following the general conditions requested for all INAH archives.

Based on this, the architecture department designed a plan for the alteration, while the Directorate created the conditions for it to be carried out. The space guaranteed adequate conditions of lighting, temperature, and humidity for the preservation of documents. However, the placement of ideal furniture to facilitate the organization and cataloguing of the consignments is pending.

Regarding the staff's preparation, with the help of the Sub-Directorate of Archives a training program was established that included all the generating areas. The objective was to raise awareness in the team on the importance of respecting the criteria for organization, sorting, and classification of the documentation. Figure 3 illustrates one such training process.



Figure 3. Instructing personnel belonging to the Museum Directorate (Photograph: Tania Arroyo Ramírez, 2022; courtesy of the author).

At present, the personnel organizes and classifies the information which is generated within their areas (procedure archive), updates its documentary inventory and reports it to the MNI Archive. This is done based on the *Manual* and CADIDO as well as on other instruments, mentioned above, created by the Sub-Directorate of Archives. Despite the progress, there is still work to be done regarding awareness of the importance of integrating dossiers and maintaining updated inventories.

Once the generating areas began to organize their documentation, consignments containing files in semi-active phase (concentration archive) and inactive (documentary discharge or historical archive) began to emerge almost naturally. Departments such as administration and security have accomplished their first transfers. However, in other cases, although their consignments are organized, classified and ready to be transferred to the concentration archive, either they have difficulty understanding the process or else requirements such as having polypropylene boxes have not been met.

The project of the institutional archive of the Museum developed under my responsibility and with the sole help of librarian Luz María Segura, who collaborated from the very beginning and died in 2023. Figure 4 is included as a small homage to my colleague.

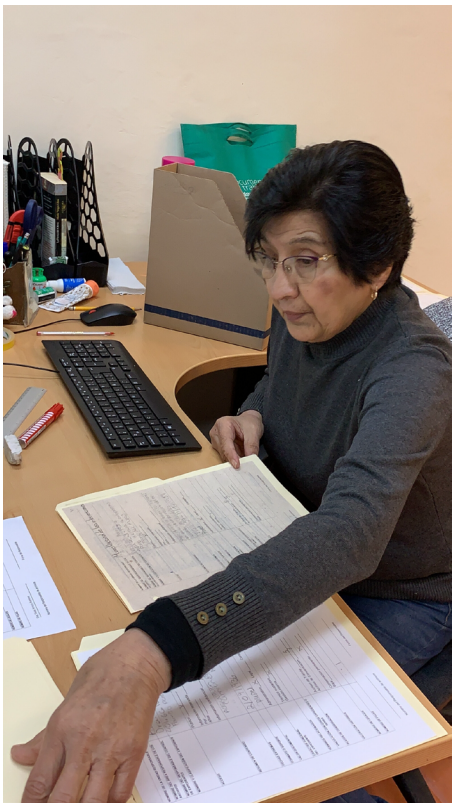


Figure 4. Luz María Segura Valencia, Museum librarian, reviewing documents (Photograph: Tania Arroyo Ramírez, 2023; courtesy of the author).

Given the lack of staff for the Archive, we resorted to students who needed to carry out their social service and to whom great recognition should be extended for their noble work. With their help we managed to complete the tasks of reviewing, organizing, and classifying all the documentation recovered in the Museum.

Besides the FCCH and the secondary value consignments, it was decided to create two more consignments for the following reasons. The first is related to provenance, in this case, the filing boxes Luz María had been in charge of since before the division was formalized, contained information whose temporality mostly corresponded to that of the Museum's foundation.

On this matter, the Sub-Directorate of Archives pointed out that this documentation could not be part of the institutional archive, as it had been created before the MNI was founded, but it had to be conserved as part of the historical archive; in other words, with the same status as the FCCH. Thus, the consignment was processed with the same instruments used for the institutional archive, given that the CADIDO worked very well to sort out the found information, having been organized for common and substantial activities of the INAH (research, teaching, conservation, and dissemination of cultural heritage).

The consignment included information regarding the building's history, its destination as a National Museum, as well as circulars and official letters that give an account of the dynamics through which the Churubusco History Museum interacted with the INAH General Directorate.

There were also documents that could be used as series in historical research, such as payrolls or monthly reports of the Museum's smaller expenses; others gave an account of the alterations, repairs, and restorations of the former convent, and a few more were anecdotal, recounting the daily life of the site and how it was linked to the community.

On the other hand, consignment number two had documents and photographs corresponding to the adaptations made to the building to transform it into the MNI. Moreover, it contained personnel dossiers, information on cultural dissemination activities, and, among other documentary testimonies, a small collection of photographs of the Museum's cultural life, which can be seen in Figure 5.



Figure 5. The small photography collection that was recovered together with other boxes of files in the Museum's storage area (Photograph: Tania Arroyo Ramírez, 2023; courtesy of the author).

Despite this consignment having been generated with the Museum, it was decided to work on it at the same time as consignment number one, as there was nobody responsible for the documentation and it was unclear which division it corresponded to. Furthermore, the second consignment received special treatment: the restoration department performed a fumigation procedure, after having identified that certain documents were damp, stained, or even had concretions. An example of the state in which these boxes were found can be seen in Figure 6.

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2025
JANUARY-JUNE 2025



Figure 6. State of conservation of the boxes of documents recovered from the so-called baño de placeres (bath and apothecary) in the former convent, before being treated (Photograph: Tania Arroyo Ramírez, 2022; courtesy of the author).

Unfortunately, many of the files were so damaged that it was impossible to rescue them. The remaining documentation was clean and in conditions to begin work on them. Moreover, it is important to note that both consignments mostly comprise copies. It was decided to conserve these as there is no other type of documentary testimony that addresses these details regarding the various activities carried out in the former convent as of the beginning of the 20th century.

The structure of the MNI Archive would eventually enable the integration in one space of both the Institutional and the Historical Archives. This is the beginning of compliance with what is mandated by the Law on Monuments and Archaeological, Artistic and Historical Zones; the INAH's Organic Law; and the General Law on Archives. Thus, a dynamic space was created which is currently responsible for the guardianship and custody of documentation with primary and secondary values, as well as its treatment. The table in Figure 7 shows how the Archive was structured.

Finally, the MNI Institutional Archive was inaugurated on February 5, 2020. Although the opening of the Archive responded to the need to implement the guidelines and requirements of the General Law on Archives, the work goes far beyond setting up an institutional archive (procedure, concentration, and historical archives), by also providing the Museum with its own historical archive, small but rich and substantial regarding the type of documentation it

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2025
JANUARY-JUNE 2025

safeguards and which corresponds to the FCCH and the two consignments described above.

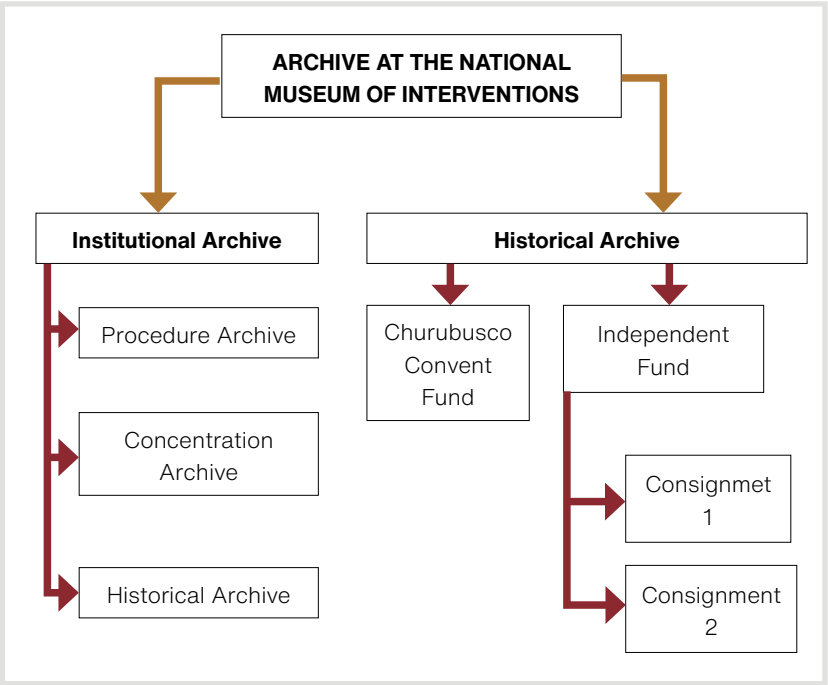


Figure 7. Current structure of the MNI Archive (Table: Tania Arroyo Ramírez).

Moreover, having formalized the archive department, it was possible to start other types of activities. Currently, both the FCCH and the Historical Archive can be consulted by the general public as well as the student and academic community. Paleographic tasks on the FCCH, in addition to the public record of the dossiers in this collection, are also carried out.

CONCLUSIONS

In regards to the INAH, it has made great progress by having a coordination of archives that manages to articulate all the Institute's entities as well as a significant number of tools which enable it to guide the processing of documentation at a national level in a homogenous manner.

This headway is significant when limitations faced both in terms of personnel and budget are considered. A clear example of this is the case of the MNI Archive, where, through a variety of actions articulated within the critical path set by the Sub-directorate of Archives, it was possible to systematize the process of documentation management and, at the same time, make way for other activities that are more related to the care of historical documentation as cultural heritage.

Intervención

ENERO-JUNIO 2025
JANUARY-JUNE 2025

The MNI Archive used the archival control and consultation tools designed by the Sub-directorate of Archives to structure its institutional archive normatively and operationally. However, these same instruments were employed to organize, classify, and catalogue the documentation that, due to its nature, could not be included in the Institutional Archive, despite reflecting activities similar to those essential for the Institute; that is, research, teaching, conservation, and dissemination.

The current state of the MNI Archive is promising —despite always facing issues such as lack of budget or staff or infeasibility of continuous training—. It has managed to synchronize administrative and archival practices; hence, it is worth portraying the MNI Archive as a success story within the Institute. Texts such as this one are important, insofar as they illustrate the manner in which critical paths or projects can be constructed to advance, with few resources and the will of many people, in the consolidation of document management processes.

This experience of the MNI Historical Archive reveals that, while seeking to satisfy the demands for transparency of public exercise required in times of democracy, it is also possible to guarantee access to the documentation that already generates value for research. Moreover, it provides societies with the opportunity to learn about the history of institutions in Mexico.

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Intervención

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