

## Surveying the Survey: Archival Processing, Buildings Archaeology, and Online Outreach

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In this series of presentations, my role is to describe how libraries and archives manage legacy archaeological archives – how we process them and prepare them for digital distribution online – using the example of the Robert Van Nice archive in the [Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives](#) (ICFA) at the [Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection](#) in Washington, DC.

### THE BUILDING

When approaching an archaeological site, the first question that usually comes to mind is – where to start? where to start digging? [Fig. 1]

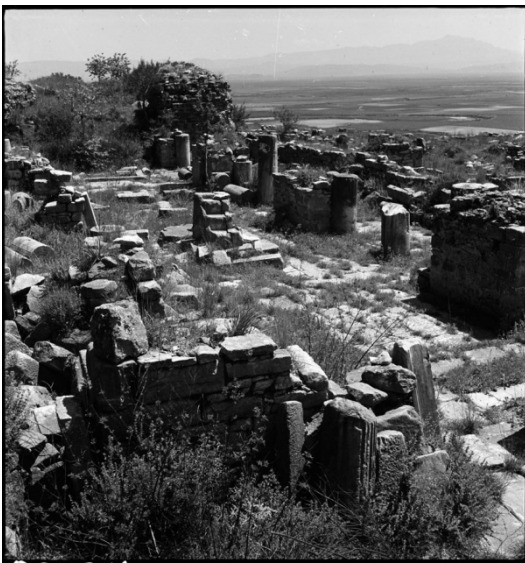


Fig. 1 – [Nicholas Artamonoff](#), Byzantine Basilica, Priene, Turkey ([ICFA.NA.0479](#))

The same applies to buildings archaeology, or the archaeology of standing structures, which follows the same methodological procedures as excavation projects, even if the techniques are different. You ask the same questions when confronted by a massive building like Hagia Sophia in Istanbul – where to start? [Fig. 2]



Fig. 2 – [Nicholas Artamonoff](#), Hagia Sophia, exterior view from southwest, Istanbul, Turkey ([ICFA.NA.0546](#))

Hagia Sophia, or the church of the Holy Wisdom, is the epitome, apex, zenith, etc., of Byzantine architecture. First dedicated in 360, the current building was constructed between 532 and 537 by the order of the Emperor Justinian and designed by Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles. [Fig. 3]



Fig. 3 – Byzantine Institute, Hagia Sophia, exterior view from south, Istanbul, Turkey ([HS.BIA.1611](#))

Converted into a mosque in 1453 and secularized as a museum in 1934, it is topped by a massive dome that rises more than 180 feet from the ground. [Fig. 4]



Fig. 4 – Byzantine Institute, Hagia Sophia, interior view looking east, Istanbul, Turkey ([HS.BIA.1617](#))

It hard to overstate the magnitude of this building and how it dwarfs human scale. With Hagia Sophia, we operate on a different order of magnitude. There is almost too much information to digest. [Fig. 5]



Fig. 5 – Robert Van Nice, Hagia Sophia, exterior view with market in foreground (BF.S.1999.0002)

## THE COLLECTION

ICFA's holdings on Hagia Sophia are proportionally extremely vast. They include the records of the Byzantine Institute, which initiated the conservation and restoration of the mosaics in 1931, and the Robert Van Nice archive. The Van Nice archive consists of more than 70 boxes correspondence and research papers, as well as thousands of photographs from Van Nice's four decades of fieldwork at Hagia Sophia. Van Nice conducted an architectural survey of the building from 1937 to 1986, capturing

everyday events like workers on the roof of the massive dome [Fig. 6], as well as minute structural details from every imaginable crevice, including brickwork, masonry, etc. [Fig. 7]



Fig. 6 – Robert Van Nice, brickwork and roofing on the main dome and a semidome, Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey ([VN-HS.00032](#))



Fig. 7 – Robert Van Nice, apse brickwork, Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey ([VN-HS.00043](#))

Along with the photographs, there are Van Nice's architectural drawings, which were drafted from measurements recorded in the field. Each painstakingly hand drawn, they are works of art in their own right. [Fig. 8]

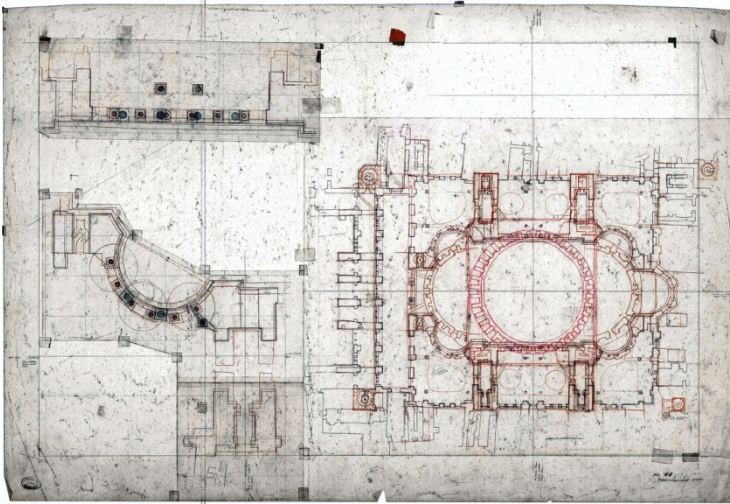


Fig. 8 – Robert Van Nice, Preparatory drawing for Plate 44, Trace plans superimposed, showing relation of elements at successive levels, Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey (BF.F.1993.F1416)

The collection documents Van Nice's entire working process, from fieldwork drawings in pencil [Fig. 9] to preparatory drawings and mockups, as well as the final inked-in plates. [Fig. 10]

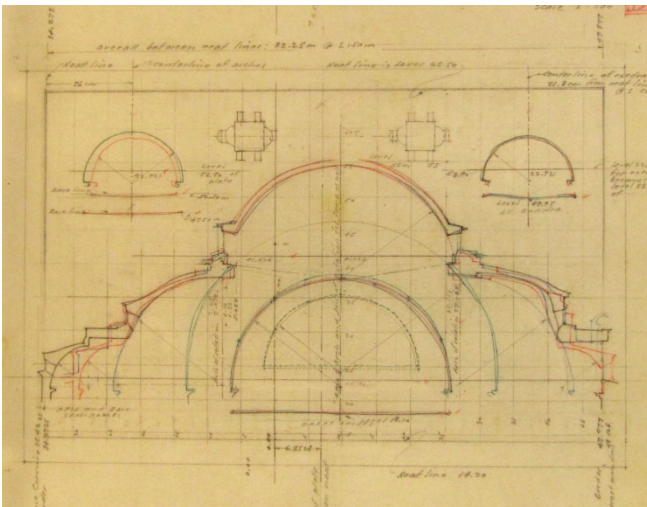


Fig. 9 – Robert Van Nice, fieldwork drawing with measurements of the dome, Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey

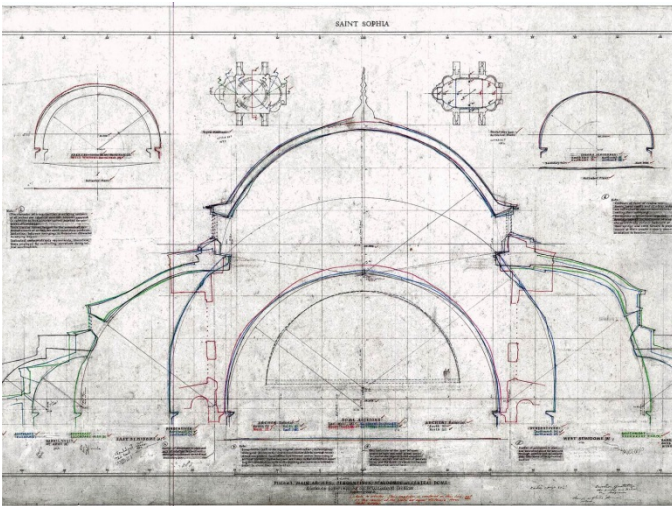


Fig. 10 – Robert Van Nice, preparatory drawing for Plate 43, Main arches, pendentives, semidomes, and central dome, Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey

Van Nice's work culminated in the epic publication, [\*St. Sophia in Istanbul: An Architectural Survey\*](#), a double-elephant portfolio containing two installments of 46 plates, published by Dumbarton Oaks in 1965 and 1986. [Fig. 11]

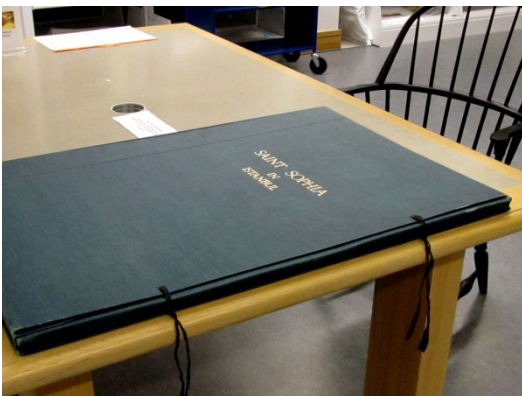


Fig. 11 – Van Nice's *Saint Sophia in Istanbul* portfolio

All told, this publication and the Van Nice archive in ICFA represent a monumental work of buildings archaeology, fitting for a building of the scale of Hagia Sophia. Van Nice began the architectural survey in 1937, as a newly minted architect trained under William Emerson, Dean of the School of Architecture at MIT. He would spend the next 50 years doggedly trying to finish the project, which included years of fieldwork at Hagia Sophia [Fig. 12] and long stretches of drafting work at Dumbarton Oaks. [Fig. 13]



Fig. 12 – Van Nice at work at a drafting table on the gallery level of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey (BF.S.1999.0776)



Fig. 13 – Robert Van Nice at work at a drafting table, Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC

Van Nice measured every inch of the building. And when I say every inch, it is not an exaggeration. [Fig. 14 and Fig. 15]



Fig. 14 - BF.S.1999.0814

Fig. 15 - BF.S.1999.0801

Van Nice's tools were basic, even crude: rulers, measuring tape, plumb and line, ladders, paper, and pencil. Only in 1951, fourteen years into the project, did Van Nice manage to purchase a theodolite to help with measurements. Despite this, over the years, he amassed a body of material that held, as one of Van Nice's former draftsmen once remarked, "enough raw information for 200 Ph.D.s." (see: Paul Richard, Paul, "Dumbarton Oaks: Reaching Out to Washington After 40 Years of Solitude," *The Washington Post* (August 26, 1979): G1-G2). Again, this is not an exaggeration.

For example, Van Nice didn't just photograph the graffiti that he found on the walls. He also made rubbings, tabulated how many distinct languages were represented, and plotted their locations. [Fig. 16] Thus, the archive represents a comprehensive portrait of the building as it evolved over time – its structure, building materials, stratigraphic relationships between elements, construction technology, surface decoration, and evidence of use over time, such as graffiti.



Fig. 16 – Example of rubbings of graffiti from Hagia Sophia

## THE METHOD

So, how to approach such a colossal building and the massive archive that Van Nice created to document it? Where to start? As librarians and archivists, ICFA staff took a page from the archaeologists and structured the archival work very much as one might phase out one's archaeological fieldwork. Indeed, archival processing has a lot in common with archaeology, where one uncovers information in layers and context is the key to understanding everything. Given the size and scope of the project, we approached it in stages, starting with a preliminary assessment, then a detailed inventory and biographical research. This allowed us to draft an arrangement plan and chronology of events, which, in turn, enabled us to rearrange and describe the collection properly. Eventually, we will publish the finding aid online and present the archive through other channels. [Fig. 17]

## METHOD

RECONNAISSANCE	<i>Assessment</i>
RECORDING	<i>Inventory</i> <i>Biographical Research</i>
ANALYSIS	<i>Arrangement Plan</i> <i>Chronology</i>
INTERPRETATION	<i>Rearrangement</i> <i>Description</i>
PRESENTATION	<i>Finding aid</i> <i>Online outreach</i>

Fig. 17 – Comparison of archaeological versus archival methods

### **RECONNAISSANCE - Preliminary Assessment**

The first phase was the preliminary assessment – or survey, if you will – to get the lay of the land. Our goal was to identify the main record groups in the archive (administrative records versus correspondence versus fieldwork papers) and the main formats (documents, photographs, negatives, oversize drawings, and even some specimens). We also assessed the overall level of preservation and identified priority issues to be addressed, whether rusty paper clips to be removed or negatives to be rehoused for cold storage. [Fig. 18]

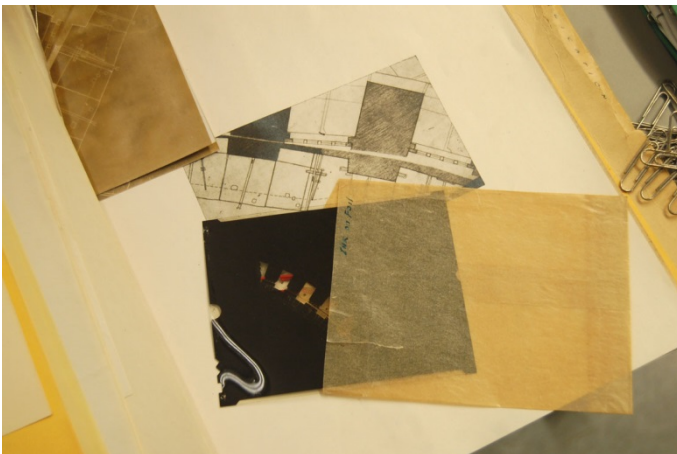


Fig. 18 – Assessing the Van Nice archive: replacing rusty paper clips and identifying negatives in the document folders

The preliminary assessment was also an introduction to the personality of our primary subject, Van Nice, and the nature of his work at Hagia Sophia. For most of the early period, in the 1930s and 1940s, Van Nice worked alone in fairly terrible conditions. Freezing in the winter, exposed to the elements, he worked at an improvised desk built from sawhorses and plywood on the gallery level of the great building. When he wasn't crawling into niches and awkward corners to take measurements, he drafted by the light of a single bulb that hung from the ceiling. All in all, hard and lonely work. Occasionally he had company, such

as [rats, cats, and birds](#), who often stole his drafting tools and ate his erasers. You'll get a sense of the man and the comprehensiveness of his documentation when you see that he even took the time to record how he tried to foil his unwelcome avian visitors. [Fig. 19]

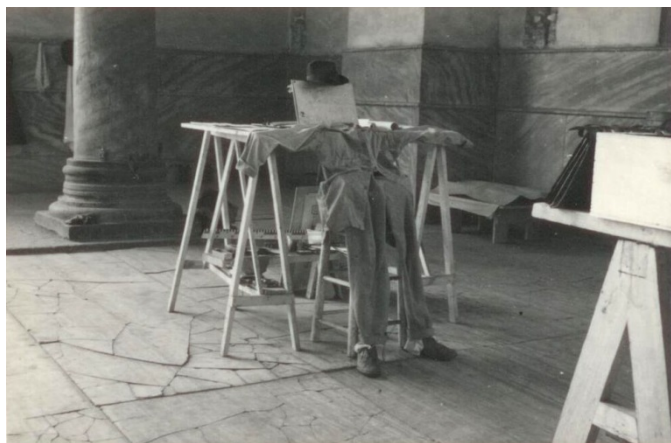


Fig. 19 – Improvised scarecrow leaning against drafting table, gallery level, Hagia Sophia

### **RECORDING – Detailed Inventory**

For the next phase, we were able to bring on an intern to compile a thorough inventory of the folders in the boxes. Clare Moran had recently graduated from Harvard University from the History of Science department and was taking a year off before applying to graduate school. Clare spent two semesters with us in ICFA, completing the inventory and assisting us with biographical research. [Fig. 20]



Fig. 20 – ICFA intern, Clare Moran, conducting the inventory of the Van Nice archive

### **RECORDING - Establishing Context through Biographical Research**

Since you can only learn so much from the letters and documents in the archive itself, additional biographical research enabled us to develop a chronology of Van Nice's life and work, much as you would record datable attributes to develop a sequence of building phases and interventions to a structure. We went to the archives at the [Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery](#), where we found photographs of Van Nice surveying the Djuma Mosque at Isfahan, Iran, his first job after graduating from MIT. No doubt, his experience perching on precarious spots on the dome to complete measured drawings was perfect training for Hagia Sophia. We also went to the [National Archives and Records Administration](#)

to look up his now declassified [OSS personnel file](#). During World War II, Van Nice served in the counter-intelligence branch of the [Office of Strategic Services](#), the forerunner to the CIA. We were amused by Van Nice's OSS performance review, since it noted that he was very effective in "planning broad programs" like the Hagia Sophia survey.

We also wanted to learn more about his working methods in the field, since we found [tantalizing photos from the 1950s and 1960s](#) that indicated that during this later period, Van Nice did not work alone. He often had assistants helping him with measurements, drawings, and occasionally even acrobatics. [Fig. 21]



Fig. 21 – Van Nice's assistants working on the dome of Hagia Sophia (BF.S.1999.0794)

Luck plays a part in archival work; two things happened nearly simultaneously. First, we were able to contact Van Nice's children, Robert, Jr. and Molly. Bob and Molly, in turn, reached out to their father's former Turkish assistants, who they remembered from their childhood in Istanbul. Around the same time, during our inventory, Clare turned up a cache of [35 mm color slides](#), depicting many of these [Turkish assistants](#). We discovered that Van Nice routinely recruited students from the Engineering Department at Robert College, where the Van Nice family usually rented a house when living in Istanbul. These students remembered Van Nice and their time at Hagia Sophia fondly and vividly, since they earned solid training in draftsmanship and formed deep bonds of friendship with each other. [Fig. 22]



Fig. 22 – Van Nice's assistants from Robert College pose on the roof of Hagia Sophia

We created a Google Project Site, so that the Turkish assistants, Bob, and Molly could help us to identify names in the files and faces in photographs. We were fortunate enough to have [Mahmut Otus and Evgeni Vernigora](#) visit us in ICFA to tell us more about how Van Nice recruited his assistants and structured their work. [Fig. 23]



Fig. 23 – Mahmut Otus (left) and Evgeni Vernigora (right), Van Nice’s former assistants, visit ICFA in April 2012

Eventually, we were also able to host [Robert Van Nice, Jr.](#), who examined drawings and photographs in his father’s archive and also shared many Hagia Sophia stories in an oral history. [Fig. 24]



Fig. 24 – Shalimar White (left) interviews Robert Van Nice, Jr. (right) for an oral history in October 2012

## ANALYSIS – Chronology

Through our research and outreach, we fleshed out a comprehensive chronology of Van Nice's time at Hagia Sophia and Dumbarton Oaks, thereby establishing a context for his life's work. The project was initiated and personally funded by his MIT mentor, William Emerson, starting in 1937. There was a hurried departure from Istanbul on the eve of World War II in 1941, followed by Van Nice's wartime service with the OSS in England and Switzerland. He returned to Istanbul in 1947, which led to a sustained stretch of residency in the city with his growing family in the early 1950s. Upon the death of Van Nice's patron Emerson in 1957, the project was taken over by Dumbarton Oaks. Fieldwork became more intermittent as Van Nice devoted an increasing amount of time to preparing the plates for the first installment of *Saint Sophia in Istanbul* in 1965. There follows a long period, mostly at Dumbarton Oaks and assisted a series of draftsmen, when Van Nice prepared the second installment of plates, which was finally published in 1986. During this time, it became clear that despite decades of work, Van Nice's magnum opus would never be truly finished, since the plates were always meant to be accompanied by text – a comprehensive history of the building that was never written. [Fig. 25]



Fig. 25 – Van Nice at work in Dumbarton Oaks, 1980s

### **ANALYSIS – Arrangement**

Using this chronology as a framework, we created a draft arrangement plan. [Fig. 26]

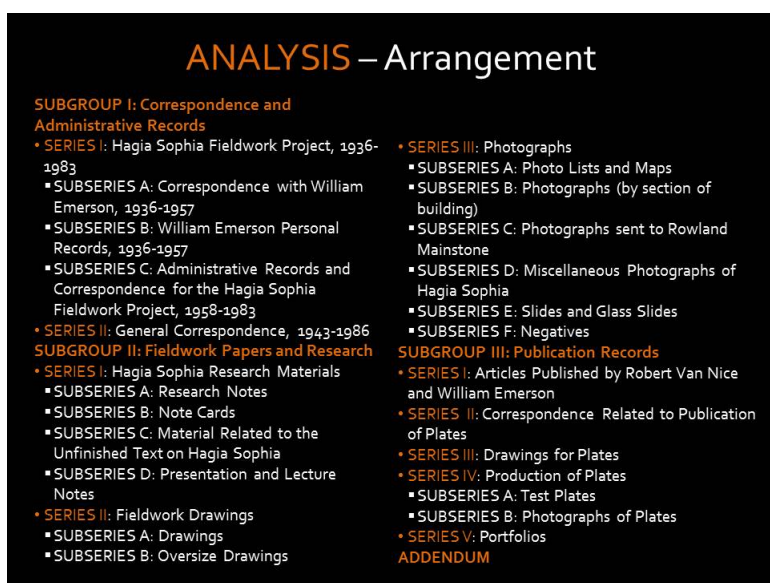


Fig. 26 – Draft arrangement plan for the Van Nice archive

While original order is the primary principle of archival work, our investigations had uncovered that the files in the boxes did not represent Van Nice’s primary method of organization by building section. Working from Clare’s excellent inventory, we virtually re-shuffled files and boxes in the Word document before we actually began to physically rearrange and rehouse the files into new archival folders. [Fig. 27]



Fig. 27 – Rearranging the folders and boxes of the Van Nice archive

### INTERPRETATION – Rearrangement and Rehousing

This step comes at the end because we needed to gather all of the information during the assessment, inventory, and research phases, so that we only re-organized the files once, rather than constantly shifting them as new information was gathered. This is because, as is the case in most archives, some collections never really end. In the final weeks of Clare’s internship, a former Dumbarton Oaks fellow, [George Majeska](#), delivered some office files he had received from Van Nice’s widow, Betty. [Fig. 28] Having the arrangement plan allows you to slot new content where it belongs, or add it to an appendix, as needed.



Fig. 28 – Box of loose folders, off-prints, and photographs belonging to Van Nice delivered by George Majeska

### INTERPRETATION – Description

All of the contextual information compiled during the earlier stages of archival work is necessary to interpret and accurately describe the collection for researchers. Thus, the inventory and arrangement plan form the backbone of the finding aid, which will also include a biographical note and bibliography. All of the information gathered in the reconnaissance, recording, and analysis phases will inform this document, much like all the raw archaeological data compiled during fieldwork is synthesized into the published reports. [Fig. 29]

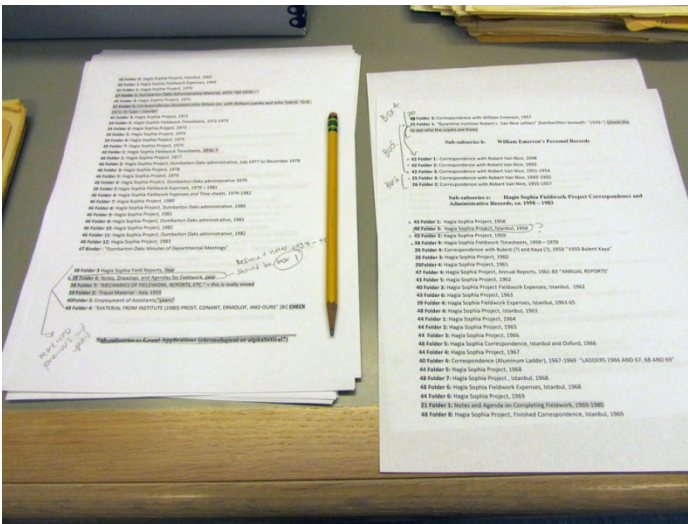


Fig. 29 – Draft of the finding aid for the Van Nice archive

### PRESENTATION – Finding Aid

Once complete, we will publish the finding aid on our website, along with the other finding aids for our [archival collections](#). We are also working to develop a collection management system for ICFA using an open-source software, [ICA-AtoM](#) (International Council on Archives Access to Memory), which presents the hierarchical description of archival finding aids in a modular fashion. [Fig. 30] Our ultimate goal is to re-aggregate the two parts of our holdings (image collections *and* fieldwork archives) into one database for the first time in the 80 year history of the collection.

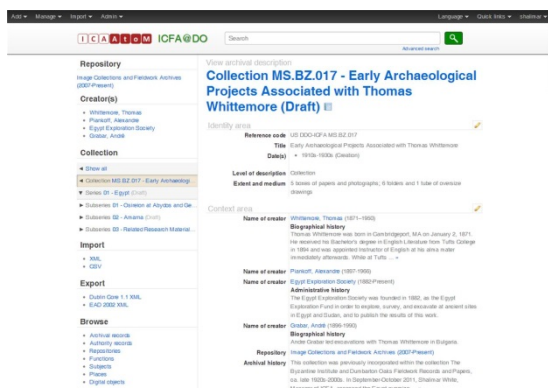


Fig. 30 – Screenshot of a sample finding aid in the ICA-AtoM CMS

## PRESENTATION – Processing Blog

Typically, a large processing project like the Van Nice archive can take years to complete. Knowing this, we took advantage of the fact that Clare was a phenomenal writer to create a [processing blog](#) for the project. From [start](#) to [finish](#), Clare recorded the steps that she took during our phased approach. This allowed us to begin cultivating an audience of potential users, even before the processing was complete. The blog also provided a vehicle to increase awareness of Van Nice's contributions to the field and educate our users about the archival process. More serendipitously, it gave Clare the opportunity to share interesting discoveries from the files that might have less scholarly significance and would not likely be included in the formal finding aid. These included ephemera like [party invitations](#) or [holiday cards](#), as well as more personal items, such as [Bob Jr.'s childhood sketch](#) of the great building, [Fig. 31] or a slip of paper where Van Nice enumerated the [personal rewards](#) of his work. [Fig. 32]



Fig. 31 – Screenshot of the ICFA blog, featuring Clare Moran's post about a childhood drawing of Hagia Sophia by Robert Van Nice, Jr., found among his father's papers

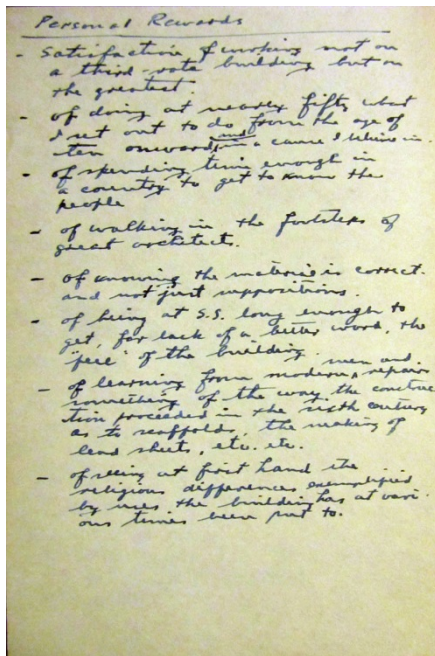


Fig. 32 – Memo entitled “Personal Rewards” from the Van Nice archive

Did Van Nice jot down these thoughts during a particularly low moment, when he was alone at Hagia Sophia and the rats had eaten yet another eraser? We can never know, but what he lists is telling:

- Satisfaction of working not on a third-rate building, but the greatest.
- of doing at nearly fifty what I set out to do from the age of ten onward—and in a cause I believe in
- of knowing the material is correct, and not just approximations
- of being at S.S. [Santa Sophia] long enough to get, for lack of a better word, the “feel” of the building.

We like to think that by blogging about the collection and processing it for researchers that they too, will get a “feel” for the building and for the man who devoted so much time to its study. We also get satisfaction from “knowing that the material is correct” and working through the process in a careful and methodical way. The early results indicate that we’re on the right track. Shortly before the end of Clare’s internship, we received a request from a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, who had discovered Clare’s blog and asked us to participate in her course on Hagia Sophia via Skype. The students peppered us with questions, both about the building and Van Nice, but also the archival process itself. It became clear that they had read every single post, which thrilled Clare and was a fitting capstone to a successful internship. Clare is now a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, but even from afar, she got to meet Bob Jr., also via Skype, when he visited ICFA last fall. [Fig. 33]



Fig. 33 – Robert Van Nice, Jr., Dee Van Nice, and Shalimar White speaking to Clare Moran via Skype, October 2012

### RE-ESTABLISHING CONTEXT

The Van Nice blog has also led to some interesting collaborations internally at Dumbarton Oaks. Our Museum Registrar contacted ICFA to let us know that there were specimens from Hagia Sophia collected by Van Nice in museum storage. Luckily, Clare was able to find Van Nice's original inventory in the archive. Together, our two departments collaborated to photograph and inventory the specimens, so that they could be added to the museum's collection management system. It is a small effort that goes some way towards addressing the perennial problem of archaeological archives, which tend to get dispersed – with paper records going to archives, specimens and artifacts entering museum collections, drawings and photographs moving into library special collections, and slides flowing into visual resources collections – thereby losing valuable context. Now, the museum specimens can be related directly to the archive in ICFA. Van Nice's specimens include everything from mosaic tesserae to samples of brick, plaster, mortar, and timber, as well as plaster squeezes of mason's marks and graffiti. [Fig. 34] There is even an ancient bullet, no doubt found somewhere in the dark recesses of the massive building. They are all carefully labeled with their find spots and dates in Van Nice's meticulous handwriting – in short, another treasure trove of documentation assembled by Robert Van Nice.



Fig. 34 – Plaster squeeze of graffiti from Hagia Sophia in the Dumbarton Oaks Museum collection

As with all projects, whether archival or archaeological, there is a team behind all the work. While the field director's name appears on the cover of the final publication, and the archives manager presents at

conferences, many, many wonderful people helped along the way. In this case, nothing would have been possible without ICFA's intern extraordinaire, Clare Moran, who did most of the heavy lifting. Van Nice's family, friends, and assistants helped us to better understand the material in the archive and the man behind it. And there is a long list of colleagues and former fellows, who provided their assistance and recollections of Van Nice's time at Dumbarton Oaks. [Fig. 35]



Fig. 35 – List of acknowledgements for the Van Nice project

Finally, there is the new and expanding audience of people who have visited the processing blog and who are helping us prepare the ground for the final finding aid. More importantly, they are also giving Van Nice the legacy that he deserves alongside the monumental building that was his life's work, [Santa Sophia](#). [Fig. 36]



Fig. 36 – Byzantine Institute, Study of light at Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey ([HS.BIA.1734](#))