**Art Librarians: The bridge between art information and art library users.**

**Jennifer H. Krivickas**
 Assistant Librarian
Yale Center for British Art

| Meeting: | **135 Art Libraries** |
|---|---|
| **Simultaneous Interpretation:** | No |

*Abstract*

Art is that precious and sometimes priceless stuff that expresses and enriches the human condition in profound and inexplicable ways. Artists spend incalculable amounts of hours, days, and years creating it, conservators work relentlessly to preserve it, scholars and educators spend their careers researching, teaching and writing about it, curators work to most meaningfully display it, the well-heeled spend their fortunes acquiring it, and the austere masses value the moments they get to simply appreciate it. Collectively, these individuals constitute the art community. We art librarians have a unique role to play in the art community. In essence, our role is to form the bridge between art information and art users. We do so by:

- Providing the art community easy access to high quality information, in any of its textual and visual formats,
- Being a well-informed resource in the area of the creation of art, the study of art, and the enjoyment of art,
- Collaborating and freely exchanging information and ideas both librarian to librarian and with the art community at large.

When stated so concisely, the art librarian's job sounds rather simple, but the truth is that modern users of art-related information value, utilize, and demand traditional, bricks and mortar places that hold primary and secondary resources as much as off-site, virtual places and digital resources. Furthermore, much of the modern art community is 'wired,' and they, like us, know a thing or two about information (but may still prefer the traditional approach). For these reasons, the art librarian is no longer an information 'ambassador,' 'gatekeeper' or 'interface between information and knowledge,' but is instead, a component of an information-savvy whole.

This paper aims to demonstrate how and why it is the duty of art librarians to be the bridge between the past and future art library, resources and users. To do so effectively, we need to first learn to surf the swell of both traditional and modern information. We then need to become expert in identifying who needs what information, how, why and when and that is done through connecting, communicating, and collaborating with users and colleagues. In doing so, art librarians stand to transcend ordinary 'component' status  and rather become respected members of the art community whom our users come to rely upon for their information needs.

The traditional, bricks and mortar art library has itself always been a special place. In his discussion of libraries as physical places, Steven Bell suggests that physical libraries make a difference in the intellectual, social, and cultural spirit of organizations, universities, and museums. Libraries are frequently centrally located within a building or on a campus. Libraries are places where lectures, book clubs, art exhibits, receptions, and student projects are held. Libraries have the technological equipment, silent space, and tomes necessary for serious study.[1] Our libraries house a variety of print resources such as basic reference works, art journals and magazines, exhibition catalogues and other monographs on individual artists; styles, schools, and groups, and movements. Also in print format one can find art instruction manuals, auction sales results, and auction catalogues. Often times, traditional collections have vertical files and/or artist files filled with smaller publications pertaining to news, exhibits, artists, and specific works of art. The art library of the past has art information and images on slides, photographs, microfilm or microfiche, video, and CD-ROM. Many art libraries also have unique holdings. For instance, the art library in which I work has what is called 'the Jennings Albums', one librarian's extensive collection of newspaper clippings of British Royal ancestry and related individuals. Also, we hold 'the Photo Archive', 200,000+ black-and-white photographs of British art worldwide.

While the art library 'of the past' is still functional and quite valuable to many, the modern, digitally enhanced art library is that and more. To begin, no one is confined to conducting research in the physical library. In 2005, Grazyna Cooper, Oxford's IT Learning Programme Manager, wrote, "At Oxford, we try to instill enthusiasm in students about authoritative and fully evaluated online resources. We show our students how to locate books and full text

articles in electronic form and how to access databases, abstracts, indexes, and reference works. But, of course, the most attractive part of this process, as far as students are concerned, is the immediate access to full text resources from the comfort of their own college accommodation, using their own personal computers connected to Oxford University networked datasets."[2] Full text resources come in many forms. Full text monographs are online by way of technologies such as *ebrary* and certain reference works like *The Grove Dictionary of Art*, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists* and *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* are available both full text online and in print format. Other reference works, for example, *Artcyclopedia*, are only available online. Full text articles and even full runs of journals, magazines, chapters, dissertations and theses are examples of what is available via numerous robust databases such as *World Cat*, *The Biography of the History of Art, Art Full Text, Art Index, Art Retrospective*, *ARTbibliographies Modern*, *ARTstor, Arts and Humanities Citation Index, DAAI: Design and Applied Arts, Index Islamicus and Francis.* Art (and rare book) sales catalogues are online via the powerful *SCIPIO* database. Vast amounts of reliable (and anecdotal) information and news about individual artists; styles, schools, groups, movements, and exhibits is available freely via the web. A couple of great sites for art news are *artsjournal.com, absolutearts.com. Wikipedia, Brittanica Online,* and *Artchive* are all sound, albeit limited, sources for free arts information on the web. Also, auction sales results are no longer restricted to the enormous printed versions such as *Mayer* or *Hislop's*. *Artnet, Art-Sales-Index Online, Artfact*, and *Artprice* all offer international auction results, research information, and even images, online.

Finally, what some consider to be the 'heart and soul' of the Art History Department, the legendary slide library, is being slowly edged out by both local digital image resource collections and universal, internationally accessible databases. Internet-based digital image databases are far more flexible than the old, videodisc image collections like *Perseus* or *Art Historian* and besides, digitization of slide collections doubles as a way to preserve physically deteriorating slide collections.[3] Often, academic institutions take part in local initiatives to digitize collections. Yale, like many universities and research libraries, has a few of its own internet-based image collections: *The Beinecke Library Digital Collections, The Arts of the Book Ephemera Collection, The Lewis Walpole Library Digital Collection and The Visual Resources Digital Collection*. Other museums, libraries, and web resources such as *NYPL, The Getty, The Louvre, The National Portrait Gallery* and Wikipedia's *Wikimedia Commons*, to name only a few, have extensive local digital collections, available to all. Also, not-for-profit images databases such as *ARTstor* provide subscription based access to high quality images for scholarly and educational purposes while commercial image databases such as *Bridgeman Art Library* and *d'ART: Internet Art Database* provide access to high quality digital images for a fee.

The steadily increasing number of traditional and modern resources raises important questions: How could we possibly ever know of all the resources that exist, especially since new ones are continually cropping up? Who has the time, the money, or the staff to keep up, not only with all that exists, but use and copyright restrictions and ever changing cataloguing rules? Questions and concerns as such are reasonable and no one can deny the challenges we face. However, the challenges will continue to exist and so what we need to focus on is the positive aspect of steadily increasing resources which is job security. After all, the more resources there are, the more opportunities we have to make ourselves indispensable to the information seeking art community. Art librarians have a leading role to play in forming a bridge for users to take from the traditional places and resources they are used to, to new places and resources they have yet to discover. However, before we can build bridges, we must dispense with the myth of the 'all-knowing' librarian. It's fair to say that none of us will be able to know of every resource that ever was and will be. That said, there are numerous, basic ways to keep up with the ever-escalating quantity of art related resources available. One way to do so is by attending meetings, talks, forums, or conferences where librarians (art and non-art) share their professional experiences as it relates to information, technology, and

resources. Another way is by each day setting aside a bit of time to peruse online and print arts news and publications about current art happenings, art history, and library-related information. To save time, sign up for automatic delivery of daily news from reliable resources like the *New York Times Online, ArtsJournal.com*, *and Library Link of the Day*. Also, skim your print resources regularly. *The Art Newspaper, TLS, The London Review of Books*, and *The Chronicle for Higher Education* are good ones, but of course, there are many others. Be sure to peruse your library association publications. IFLA, SLA, ARLIS, and ALA all publish top quality and highly specific information that pertains to our profession (I just discovered *Alexandria*, a journal that covers international topics pertaining to libraries). It's also a great idea to get on at least one list serve offered by our professional organizations. Lastly, don't be afraid to find a web log (blog) or two to read regularly. Many blogs are related to art, libraries, and academia and they provide useful and reliable information. Personally, I read *Yale and (art or architecture)* for current information about local and international art and art library related news. To find a blog or two that you might like, try *http://www.globeofblogs.com/* , an international list of blogs searchable by title, location, author, or topic.

By staying current with art and library information, art librarians will be better equipped to unite the art community with the information places and resources they seek. But what if your users aren't complaining about your current holdings and services? Does silence mean they are content with the current programs and services? Perhaps, but it is more likely that they don't have the time or desire to sift through all that is out there. That's precisely where we come in. It's our job to be sure they know what the best information options are so that they can evaluate and then choose the best resources for their own uses. In 2003, *Art Libraries Journal* dedicated an entire issue (2003, Issue 1) to essays and reports about collaboration, co-operation, and co-ordination, with a focus on European initiatives.[4] Each essay in this issue shares experiences, and highlight the challenges and benefits of connection, collaboration and communication with users and colleagues. After reviewing the entire issue, what one comes to understand is that although many challenges lie ahead, through pooling experiences, testing new ideas together, working together to streamline past programs and services, and sharing our expertise with others, we develop a deep understanding of one another's special expertise and skills and therefore, one another's role in the art community. Through connections, communication and collaboration we learn more, quicker, and in a more fun and exciting way, and perhaps most importantly, we stop reinventing the wheel.

Commonly known as "empirical information and data collection/evaluation" or "outreach activities,"[5] connection, communication, and collaboration (CCC) with your users is the best way to get to know them, their information needs, their expectations for the art library as a physical space, and their understanding of the art library's staff, collection and services. Through CCC, we come to understand users as individuals and as a whole and this knowing is crucial to our successful functioning within the art community. Additionally, let's remember that communication is a two-way street and that taking time to share information about the state of your art library, its collections, its staff and its services of the past and the plans for the future enlivens and enriches the professional relationship between the greater art community and art librarians.

Start your CCC program by being proactive. Why wait for your users to wander into your library when you can go to them? Some Brandeis and Harvard librarians are taking laptop computers to academic departments to help students and faculty with research problems. At the University of Florida, librarians are supplementing traditional reference desk time with outdoor, mobile reference kiosks.[6] If you work at a library physically located within a larger organization, like a museum, go to individuals' offices for a brief visit. This way you make the library-face-to-curator-face connection while at the same time gathering information about the needs or questions your community of users may have about library policy, services, and

the collection. What about the staff in the organization that don't typically use the library? They too are a part of the art community so be sure to include them in your CCC campaign.

"One-person librarians" or OPL's do not have such physical flexibility,[7] so what about those librarians tied to the reference desk who do not have the luxury to make 'house calls'? Small art library librarians can utilize the telephone in their CCC program. Make calls to in-house and cross-campus colleagues just to say 'hello.' Also, ask if they have any questions or comments regarding [your] art library, staff, or services. Use the telephone to contact potential users such as certain art community leaders, art history faculty, and prospective PhD candidates in the art history program, local artists, local gallery owners, and staff at local museums. Tell potential users what you, your services and programs, and what your art library is about.

Email and virtual chat are great ways to connect, communicate, and collaborate with students, both undergraduates and graduates, as well as your long-lost art library colleagues. Email updates about your library services and collection and/or any sort of news you may come across that might be of interest to students or your colleagues. It goes without saying how much of a universal impact the Internet has made relative to communication, and so now, in addition to communication and collaboration locally, there are relatively easy ways to get involved with the art community on a global scale. In 'Global Librarianship,' Martin Alan Kesselman remarks, "Each individual library has opportunities to foster better understanding and share its expertise and knowledge with one another through collaborative activities with a library in another part of the world. Often all it takes is the interest of one librarian to foster these new ties."[8] Be that one librarian. Perhaps you will be able to help each other out with something or perhaps you just learn that art librarians in Japan, Indonesia, Iran, and Pakistan face the same problems that we face in the US, in England, or in Canada in which case we might decide to tackle those problems together.

Efforts made toward CCC with the information-seeking art community are essentially what Esther Bierbaum calls 'extended services' and extended services or otherwise, connection, communication, and collaboration with users and colleagues is valued because as Bierbaum argues, specialized, extended information services increase the knowledge base of museum staff, and therefore, extends their research reach and in conclusion widens and deepens the visual and learning experience of the museum visitor."[9] Author Jenny Godfrey also writes about the importance of CCC in *A digital future for slide libraries.* Godfrey contends that CCC is a healthy sign for the future of slide libraries and that the way the future unfolds in the UK will depend on the ability of UK slide librarians to communicate with one another, with related professionals on a national and global level and with experts within their own local institutions who are working in the field of digital platforms for instruction and learning new ways in which we might collaborate with each other, share not only knowledge, but costs.[10]

To conclude, the information-seeking art community looks something like this: The general public is now "wired" and while interested in the conventional consumption of the arts, they also crave immediate, streamlined information about it so as to gain a greater understanding of it. In academia, more and more educators are approaching instruction from both traditional and progressive perspectives. The use of digital resources and images are the norm in both actual and virtual classrooms. Students are now 'born with a chip'[11] and want to do as much web-based, academic research as possible. That said, the moment they step into an art library they need research assistance, and how. In the contemporary art world, artists seek bigger and better ways to use art museums and libraries, as well as the Internet as places for researching, creating, and sharing, not to mention, advertising their work and ideas, globally. One might say that for an artist, simply knowing what has been and still is being created prompts not only the creation of more and more diverse art, but also sales. In the publishing industry, everything from the way those sales are documented, to the way art historical research and

news is published, is constantly being modified to meet the requirements of the art community.

By being the bridge from the art library and resources of past to the art library and resources of the future, we position ourselves to play a vital role in the information-seeking art community.
We must be conscientious of users whose research needs require conventional, traditional approaches to art and the study of it and on the other hand, be a useful resource for our users who require brisk, often digital and modern approaches to art and the study of it. The art community, being the combination of tradition and avant-garde that it has always been, will forever make dynamic and therefore challenging work for art librarians. Work that starts and ends with our being sure that art places, information, and resources are traversable for all our various users.

[1] Bell, Steven J., "Electronic Libraries Can't Be Academic" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 30, 2005): p. 14.

[2] Cooper, Grazyna, "It is out there…but where? The road to online research in art history (the Oxford experience)." in *Art Libraries Journal* (Number 2, 2005): p. 22.

[3] Pitt, Sharon P. et al, "Integrating Digital Images into the Art and Art History Curriculum," in *Digital Images and Art Libraries in the Twenty-First Century* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Information Press, 2003): p. 30.

[4] *Art Libraries Journal* (Number 1, 2003).

[5] Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) Website. http://www.arlisna.org/
Object name *ARLIS/NA Core Competencies for Art Information Professionals*; accessed April, 2006).

[6] Hisle, W. Lee, "Reference Questions in the Library of the Future" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 30, 2005): p. 6.

[7] Benedetti, Joan M., "Managing the Small Art Museum Library," in *The Twenty-First Century Art Librarian* (Binghampton, NY: Haworth Information Press, 2003): p. 24.

[8] Kesselman, Martin Alan, "Library Collaborations," in *Global Librarianship* (New York, NY: Marcel Dekker, 2004): p. 89.

[9] Bierbaum, Esther Green, *Museum Librarianship* [second edition] (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2000): p. 115.

[10] Godfrey, Jenny, "A digital future for slide libraries?" in *Art Libraries Journal* (Number 1, 2004): p 20.

[11] Abram, Stephen & Luther, Judy, "Born with the Chip" in *Library Journal* (May 1, 2004).