

Report: St Louis Conference
ARLIS/ON Chapter Meeting (18 April 2002)
McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa
Submitted by Daniel Payne

When faced with the rather daunting challenge of summarizing the 30th and 20th annual conferences of ARLIS/NA and VRA respectively, I thought of the words of the celebrated British Prime Minister W.E. Gladstone, in his essay *On Public Speaking*, “I absorb the vapour and return it as a flood.”¹ I will try to avoid “deluging” you with all information, ideas, and developments I learned about during this conference. Instead, I will focus on three undercurrents that ran through many of the workshops, seminars, and sessions; then comment on selected speakers who broached these subjects; and, finally, highlight question that arose in my mind concerning these complex issues. I have written up the following commentary based on the notes I took during the conference and hope that, as a result of my illegible handwriting or perhaps the occasional lapse in concentration, I am not misquoting or misconstruing the ideas presented. If there are concerns in this regard, please do not hesitate to contact me for clarification (Daniel Payne <dpayne@spartan.ac.brocku.ca>)

User Needs

Initially, I felt that some sort of technology-based subject heading was required here, but after attending several sessions, I realized that any new technology used to improve the organization of or access to information must, at its core, be stimulated and directed by the needs of the end-user. In short, it seems as if the “paradigm” has shifted: technology must not be a means unto itself nor a self-serving forum for librarians to show how techno-savvy we have become. Such sentiments were emphasized most humorously by Daniel Greenstein’s keynote speech during the Saturday evening banquet, titled “Visual Information in the Next Generation Digital Library.”

One of the most memorable examples of this came from the presentation by Christine Uptide on Madison Digital Image Database [MDID] session “Changing Identities/Changing Environments.” Although much of her talk was dedicated to organizational and institutional preparation for a project of this nature, her use of faculty and student input at all levels of the database creation process was remarkable. Even before the funding and systems development processes were in place, she emphasized the imperative of collaborating with faculty users as stakeholders, who in turn shaped the very foundations of the image database’s scope and content. This partnership guided all aspects of the development process. Later, after initial trials of the nearly completed database, users helped shape changes in the interface by suggesting features such as the capability to archive slide presentations based faculty feedback, or the ability to display images with or without catalogue information as gleaned from student evaluations.

¹ W.E.Gladstone. “On public speaking,” in Lord Riddell *Some Things That Matter* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1927 ed.), p. 69.

The need for a collaborative ethic was certainly emphasized by associate professor Paula Lupkin [Washington U. School of Architecture] in the plenary session “The 3 Vs: Visual Technology, Visual Culture, and Visual Literacy.” At Washington U., the architectural course curriculum is becoming increasingly international in scope and, as a direct result, the number of images required has expanded, as has the ambiguity in architectural styles and the names and schools of those creating them. In short, she commented, “the canon is dead.” Drastic restructuring of the way information is presented, organized, and even visualized was required, through the use of broad thematic-based components and not the chronological/name driven models of the past. Lupkin expressed the need for “dynamic and fluid” image databases to facilitate searching for this new multi-faceted approach to education. Is such a goal possible? **Or are our information resources perceived as impediments to such a dynamic new instructional methodology?**

Such structural inflexibility could be alleviated by new computer language developments as illustrated by Thorton Staples [U. of Virginia] in the “Common Grounds” session. His demonstration of basic XML components made for challenging, yet exciting listening. The extreme flexibility of the databases created, where fields can be arbitrarily repeated or omitted, relational fields are easily linked to outside resources, and either text or image documents incorporated with ease, all seems very promising. As he commented, “the semantics of data structure is embedded in the data itself.” I look forward to learning more about this new development in the quest to organize and provide access to information; yet, will flexibility really enhance accessibility? Or do users just want simplicity above all? How will XML effect cataloguing standards like Dublin Core/CORC (Cooperative Online Resource Catalog)?

Professional Knowledge

Part I: Using it

The evaluation process—of collections, services, policies, values—that is the key to successful librarianship, requires the exercise of a body of knowledge that is unique to our field. To use a computer-age metaphor, **there is a core of knowledge that hides behind our services, like meta-data tags on a web page, informing our policies, procedures and actions.**

One of the discussions emphasizing the need for these unique skill sets was Martha Baca’s [Geddy Research Institute] “Enhancing End-User Access to Art History Resources Online,” also from the Common Grounds session. She demonstrated the imperative of standardizing controlled vocabulary for electronic visual arts resources by searching online databases, both commercial and ones with free public access, using artists with variant spellings of their names or who were named after artworks or artistic schools. Accessing images, catalogue information, or biographical details for these artists proved inordinately difficult because of unreliable name authority practices. As librarians, we can explore alternate paths to access records buried deep in these information resources; however, we are well aware of how users, not cognizant of these

alternate access points, might give up after only a few summary searches. Thus, Baca feels that standardizing terminology is essential and should be based firmly, and universally on one (and not idiosyncratic, localized combinations) of the following resources: LCNAF, AAT, LCSH, AACR2. She further recognizes the imperative of accommodating variant terminology or even common misspellings to provide users with comprehensive access to information resources. After all, “Google has been doing it for years,” she commented. One attendee, however, posed the question, “when do we stop and demand that users familiarize themselves with accepted vocabularies/ terms/ name spellings and simply get used to it.” **Are we encouraging information illiteracy by catering too heavily to individual searching processes?**

Professional Knowledge

Part II: Sometimes Disregarding (subtitled: Double Foldian/Nicholson Bakarian Caution)

Although not an overt theme, it provided the foundation for the “Property and Capital in 19th and Early 20th Century Visual Collections” session. All the discussions from this meeting focused around the issue of whether “non-popular” items—with users and even librarians—should be preserved and archived. **Do we disregard popular tastes, current budgetary restraints and space limitations to save these information resources? Are we obliged to do this for future user needs?**

Annemarie van Roessel [Archivist Art Institute of Chicago] provided compelling evidence for a renewed commitment to preservation amongst librarians in “Reviewing a Lost Pedagogical and Architectural Landscape Through Historic Lantern Slides.” She feels that the dismantling of lanternslide collections represents the loss of vital visual information on our cities and landscapes. Each slide contains invaluable information on the late 19th and early 20th century aesthetic and cultural stance and, in the case of the collection from the Art Institute in Chicago, the transformation of this outlook to a modernist one. Additionally, the practice of colorizing slides adds a further element of aesthetic beauty to these slides, elevating them from functional vessels of information to artworks in their own right.

Similarly, Pamela Born [Slide Librarian, Tufts U.] in “The Canon is Cast: Plaster Casts and the American Museum,” commented that these artifacts, after their initial popularity, became symbols of inferior and outmoded approaches to collection management—museums were embarrassed at having participated in this “fad.” Now they are laden with meaning for a host of different academic disciplines. In popular culture studies, for example, one might envision them as testaments to the Victorian era’s colonialist worldview. For social historical research, these collections demonstrate efforts by the nascent American cultural network to immediately assert itself as parallel to those of more established European urban centres. In our contemporary context they prove invaluable for several reasons, perhaps most significantly in their ability to preserve architecture or art that has been lost to war or natural disasters. On a more theoretical level, as the title of the lecture indicates, they embody historic approaches to art education and the “canon” of a former era. For librarians, they provide unique opportunities allowing us to analyze past art museum management practices. Yet how

can we learn from the policies and procedures of our predecessors when no traces of the collections are left, the records and transactions of their assemblage are lost, and even oral testimony of the process forgotten?

Cooperation

Part I: in the Library Sphere

This ethic pervaded all levels of the conference's functions; the very presence of both Art and VR librarians demonstrated the power of solidarity through dialogue.

My appreciation for the potential of such professional alliances was certainly intensified after attending the workshop "More Fundamentals for New VR Curators," led most ably by Karin Whalen [Reed College] and John Taormina [Duke U.]. Although I am not officially a member of this latter professional discipline, my understanding of the challenges facing the VR library was heightened exponentially through the discussion of practical management techniques, circulation concerns, collection development policies, issues in cataloguing and difficulties related to establishing controlled vocabulary. The potential for sharing print and electronic resources, professional knowledge and experience is enormous, yet what is the future of these joint professional initiatives?

How will the interests of both streams of librarianship be negotiated cooperatively when institutional structures often separate the two professional bodies?

Cooperation

Part II: Beyond the Library (the private and public spheres)

Likewise, I also subversively attended the Seminar "Me, Myself, and I: the Solo Professional" and was fascinated at how these independent specialists can set up such large cooperative networks. All four presenters described the importance of building a rapport with others. Maryly A. Snow [Arch. Visual Resource Centre, UC Berkeley] provided a surprisingly simple framework for breaking the silent bonds of solo-librarianship based on a model of four concentric spheres of influence: begin with individual connections, then form institutional, regional, and national networks. Working methodically to make connections within each of these separate geographic areas of influence will enhance the culture of one's library by making it a vital and visible member within the cultures of each larger sphere. Judith Thomas [U. of Virginia] echoed these sentiments in the "Changing Identities" session by warning librarians not to "protect our territory," but instead strive to "get involved in institutional planning at all levels." She warned that **isolation can either equal freedom, or, conversely, marginalization depending on our commitment to outreach, cooperation and community building.**

One Plenary Session that summarized the concept of collaboration within these two areas most effectively was the NINCH [National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage] Copyright Town Meeting, subtitled "The Changing Research and Collection Environment: The Information Commons Today." Initially, I confused the term with our own institutional initiative at Brock U. to build an "information commons" that will function as a sort of multi-purpose computer lab and digital library space. I quickly understood that the term was meant in the Magna Carta sense or, in its more

contemporary incarnation, Jürgen Habermas’s conceptualization of the “Public Sphere.” But can there in fact be a virtual agora, where the concept of Public Domain exists? Considering that private interests own and control so many of the building blocks needed to create cyberspace (servers, LANs, telecommunications infrastructure, etc) and the segregated minority (wealthy North Americans and Europeans) who have access to it, one might be skeptical.

Jeff Cohen [Lecturer, Bryn Mawr] does envision such a virtual common ground; however, he commented on the increasing “Copyright Colonialism”—led by powerful legal, governmental and private interests—that threatens the independence of the “online Public Domain,” the latter of which does not have a body of legislation nor an institutional framework supporting it. This is not to denigrate the importance of copyright protection online. Roger Lawson [National Gallery of Art], emphasized the importance of protecting creative and intellectual property in cyberspace by reminding all present that copyright is in the best interest of the public, who receive authoritative information from credible/reputable sources, and of the artist/creator, who are recognized and rewarded for their contributions. Despite this, Mary Case [ARL], in her talk on current licensing trends for digital information, stated the rather obvious, but nonetheless significant fact that if nothing is available publicly online there will “be no public domain.” **How can we negotiate these conflicting needs, so that major initiatives such as NINCH, which are so intimately linked to democratic values, are not disempowered? As participants in the artistic process—through the provision of images, information, and encouragement for visual artists—we are keenly aware of the importance of copyright in preserving and fostering creative expression in general. Yet as librarians, we are “professionally designed” to provide unfettered access to information. How do we solve this dilemma?**

In closing, I might add an additional note on the city itself. I stayed in an old hotel, the Wyndham Mayfair, which was built in the 1920s and located in the old business district. Beside this dignified architectural Grande Dame, stands the old “American Theatre,” a former grand opera house that, judging from the intricate ornamentation of its façade, was at one time a busy center of public entertainment. Unfortunately, the theatre is now empty and adds a sense of nostalgic pathos to the neighborhood. In fact the whole area appears at one time to have been the center of a thriving commercial district, but is now sadly quite deserted. I walked daily to the Hyatt, where the conference took place, trying to take a different route with each trip in an effort to discover new architectural wonders. The grandiose scale of the architecture is truly astounding, and I was fascinated at how the public and private buildings imposed themselves on the streetscape. The sheer monumentality of St Louis’s architectural tradition, due largely to the resounding influence of the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, pervades all edifices regardless of whether built in the Second Empire, Beaux-Arts, Art Deco, or the International style of the famed Arch. Likewise, the Anheuser-Busch Brewery, the new St Louis Cathedral and the Art Gallery, housed in the Palace of Fine Arts from the famed Exposition, all exuded a similar sense of exuberant confidence. The juxtaposition of this artistic self-assurance in the new urban context, however, lends a sadly ironic tenor to the city as a whole.

St Louis is obviously challenged by a number of urban-decay issues and the former golden age of expansion has certainly ended. However, after visiting the re-awakening Soulard district—a quaint old Victorian neighborhood where the old townhouses are being restored and small-scale business are thriving—I feel that the city can once again regain its position as a center culture and commerce.

Workshops/Seminars/Sessions attended:

Friday:

Workshop VII: More Fundamentals for New Visual Resources Curators/Librarians

✍️ Workshop Leaders: Karin Whalen, Visual Resources Curator, Reed College, and John Taormina, Curator of Visual Resources, Duke University

Session II: Common Ground: Standards for Cataloging Images and Objects

✍️ Moderators: Linda McRae, University of South Florida, and Lynda White, University of Virginia

✍️ Martha Baca, Head, Standards Program, Getty Research Institute, "Enhancing End-User Access to On-line Art Historical Resources"

✍️ Elizabeth O'Keefe, Director of Collection Information Systems, The Pierpont Morgan Library, "Sharing the Wealth: Controlled Vocabularies for Libraries, Visual Resource Collections, and Museums"

✍️ Sherman Clarke, Head of Original Cataloging, New York University Libraries, "Are You Content with Your Data Content?"

✍️ Thornton Staples, Director, Digital Library Research and Development, Alderman Library, University of Virginia, "A Hierarchical Metadata System for Images Collections"

Saturday:

Plenary Session I: NINCH Copyright Town Meeting: "The Changing Research and Collections Environment: The Information Commons Today"

✍️ Kathe Albrecht, Visual Resources Curator, American University and Roger Lawson, Administrative Librarian, National Gallery of Art, "Welcome & Introductions" David Green, Executive Director, NINCH, "This Meeting in Context"

✍️ Moderator: Kathe Albrecht, American University

✍️ Michael Shapiro, Partner, International Intellectual Property Institute, "Imagining the Public Domain"

✍️ Jeffrey Cohen, Lecturer, Bryn Mawr College, "Implementing Public Domain Collections Online"

✍️ Mary Case, Director, Office of Scholarly Communication of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), "trends in Licensing Models"

✍️ Robert Clarida, Partner, Cowan, Liebowitz and Latman, "The Approach of the Mellon Foundation's ArtSTOR to the Public Domain, Fair Use and Licensing"

✍️ Tony Gill, Program Officer for Member Initiatives, Research Libraries Group, "The Licensing of RLG's Cultural Materials Initiative"

Seminar I: Me, Myself and I: the Solo Professional

- /// Moderators: Eumie Imm-Stroukoff, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, and Paul Glassman, New York School of Interior Design
- /// Susan Baerwald, Library Director, Hellmuth, Obata + Kassabaum
- /// Joan M. Benedetti, Librarian Cataloger, Los Angeles County Museum of Art
- /// Maryly A. Snow, Librarian, Architecture Visual Resources Library, University of California, Berkeley
- /// Pat Wagner, Library Management Consultant, Pattern Research

Conference Banquet Keynote Speaker

- /// Daniel Greenstein, the Director of the Digital Library Federation, "Visual Information in the Next Generation Digital Library."

Sunday:

Session V: Property and Capital in 19th and Early 20th Century Visual Collections: Tales in Search of the History of the Visual Copy as a Gateway to the Future

- /// Moderators: Maryly Snow, University of California, Berkeley, and Maureen Burns, University of California, Irvine
- /// Anne Blecksmith, Visual Resources Curator, University of California, Irvine, "Virtual Volumes: Early 20th Century Architects Books"
- /// Pamela Born, Slide Librarian, Tufts University, "The Canon is Cast: Plaster Casts and the American Museum"
- /// Martha Mahard, Curator of Historic Photographs, Harvard University, "Berenson Was Right: the Formation and Development of the Photographic Collections for the Study and Teaching of the History of Art"
- /// Annemarie van Roessel, Lead Project Archivist, Art Institute of Chicago, "Through a Glass, Brightly: Re-Viewing a Lost Pedagogical and Architectural Landscape Through Historic Lantern Slides"

Monday:

Session VII: Changing Identities/Changing Environments

- /// Moderator: Elisa Lanzi, Smith College
- /// Cate Cooney, Marquand Library of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, "Changing Environments: What if there is no box?"
- /// Christina B. Updike, Visual Resources Specialist, James Madison University
- /// Carole Ann Fabian, Applied Arts Librarian, University at Buffalo, "Architects of Change: Building Bridges not Silos"
- /// Judy Thomas, Director of Library Digital Media Center, University of Virginia

Plenary Session II: The Three V's: Visual Technology, Visual Culture, and Visual Literacy

- /// Moderator: Katharine Martinez, Herman and Joan Suit Librarian, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University
- /// Jennifer Trant, Executive Director, AMICO (Art Museum Image Consortium)

~~///~~Max Marmor, Director of Collection Development, ArtSTOR, The Andrew W.
Mellon Foundation

~~///~~Susan Jane Williams, Visual Resources Curator, Art Library, Yale University

~~///~~Paula Lupkin, Assistant Professor of Architectural History, Washington University
School of Architecture