



“SWIMMING WITH ELK”: REPORT ON THE 34TH ANNUAL ARLIS/NA CONFERENCE IN BANFF, 4-9 May 2006

by **Randall Speller**

First of all may I personally thank all the members and friends of ARLIS/Ontario for this year's generous travel award. It is a thrill and an honour to receive this award as it opens up a whole range of opportunities and experiences for those of us who rarely attend the ARLIS/NA annual conferences. I know how hard many of you work to fundraise for these awards (and how much more we shall have to raise for next year), and may I take this opportunity to assure you how worthwhile they are and what opportunities they open up for Ontario librarians. And may I also urge all of you to try to go to one ARLIS/NA conference meeting at some point in your career. They are an experience you will not soon forget.

Everyone who attended the 34th ARLIS/NA conference in Banff talked about the scenery. It was (and is) extraordinary. The snow-capped mountains bathed in light one minute and in snowstorms the next, were an ever-changing performance that stopped us all in our tracks whenever we glanced out the window or ventured outside. At least this was true for me. It was a marvel.

The Banff Springs hotel was lovely as well – and everything you've ever heard about how expensive it is, is true. The prices caused many an attendee to gasp in wonder: a sound similar to that caused by the scenery. There were, nonetheless, many magical moments: the views from Sulphur Mountain; the views of the hotel at all times of day, and from the hotel out over the Bow valley; afternoon tea in the Rundle Lounge; drinks in the evening to catch up on conference gossip; and a morning swim in the hot-springs heated outdoor pool. In fact one morning, with snow on the lawn chairs and frost on the rooftops, Lynda Barnett and I swam in the pool while a female elk nibbled grass alongside. Thankfully the elk politely ignored us throughout.

This is my second ARLIS conference; the first was in Montreal in 1995. ARLIS provides a North American perspective on many issues important to librarianship. Some issues are timeless: library funding, dealing with and responding to various communities and their needs, and the sheer richness and variety of our library collections. Other things are changing rapidly: controlling digital images, managing electronic collection resources, and linking diverse collection areas using digital technology were of primary concern at the 2006 conference. And how was it that everywhere I went they were talking about artists' files?

The sessions and events I attended were interesting and varied, and a sensible (I assure you) mixture of business and pleasure. Among these were:

Speaking Out: Contemporary First Nations Artists and Collaborations with Museums, Universities and Libraries

The National Gallery of Canada and ARLIS/Canada's poster session launch of HAL: the History of Art Libraries in Canada (to which I am a contributor).

The Canadian Pacific Railway, National Parks and the Great Lodges of the Rockies with talks by David Jones and C. James Taylor. This presentation was a visual cornucopia of images of posters and graphic art by some of Canada's great illustrators and commercial artists. One speaker actually stated that professional artists were not involved with commercial art. What rot! I almost presented my paper on the spot.

Promise and Constraints: What Case Studies tell us about National Libraries with talks by Jonathan Franklin (NGC), Linda Groom (National Library of Australia) and Susan M. Allen (Getty). Interestingly there were several references to the importance of artist's files and the role of libraries in creating them.

Poster Session: Making the Academic Curriculum Information Literate: LS One at the Ontario College of Art & Design (presented by Daniel Payne). When I was there the crowd was so thick you could hardly read the panels.

Arlis/Canada Meeting (at 7:30 am on Monday morning – please note)

Art in Books: How to Identify Works of Art on Paper, and interesting hands-on session presented by Julie Mellby of Princeton University.

Word on the Street: Graphic Novel and Comics Collections in Academic and Art and Design School Libraries.

I also attended the Opening reception dinner and speeches, as well as the rather elegant Convocation Ceremony and Dinner. And finally I went on two tours, the first to the Sulphur Mountain lookout above Banff (stunning views), as well as an historic tour of the Banff Springs Hotel (stunningly pompous).

Digital talk (and copyright) was everywhere. The ability to link book records to actual digitized documents and objects in the archives, digitized exhibition catalogues and hanging lists, as well as collection database records with images attached was demonstrated in the Session "Online Access to Exhibition Histories: the Role of the Art Museum Library". The Brooklyn Museum and the Pierpont Morgan Library, heavily financed with money from the Mellon Foundation, explained how their catalogues are now the vehicles to find exhibition histories as well as books. Opportunities abound, but as one cynic observed it's an unrealizable fantasy for most libraries.

New Voices in the Profession: Student papers on Art & Visual Resources Librarianship was a fascinating glimpse into current research trends. The Canadian papers by Heather Saunders (UofT) and Felicity Taylor (Artetexte) especially as they raised significant questions about how libraries are to capture the output of "artists-run centers" and the internet. In fact I got into trouble by stating (in the question period) that the centers were part of the problem in that they ignored requests for information from institutions such as the AGO, or demanded such outrageous sums for "memberships" for unspecified "benefits" that they guaranteed that established libraries would ignore them. The speaker was gracious



enough to agree with me. I had to take Felicity and Heather out for coffee as a way of apologizing.

The Section and Round Table interest groups do not seem as vital as they were in 1995; they are uncertain as to their role within ARLIS, and some have lost their way. The **Serials Interest Group** appears to have vanished; their meeting was cancelled. The **Reference and Information Services Section** was lively and interesting but left those who were not regular ARLIS conference attendees feeling a little adrift. The discussions centered on recording recent activities and planning for the next ARLIS meeting in Atlanta; while resource guides for African, Asian and Islamic art were priorities for the librarians in attendance. One project initiated here was to research how thoroughly the GK Hall Library catalogues have been made available online. Can libraries really discard them? Some reference librarians are reluctant to do so. We were also encouraged to start digitizing artist's files. The **Artists Files Interest Group** was the most vital of those I attended; US Libraries are attempting to create a union list of artist's files, in the same spirit as the NGC's *Artists In Canada* database. The discussion left the Canadian delegates with the "been-there-done-that" feeling, but it was interesting nonetheless to witness their attempts to represent US file collections. Rejecting the centralized NGC model the US libraries are creating a directory that will provide summary statements of institutional holdings from across North America¹. The preliminary steps and preparations of standards are underway. What was apparent to the Canadians was that the US libraries were very interested in our files on American artists, and they eagerly encouraged our participation in their project.

Lastly, my talk on "Canadian Books and Artists" for the session "Art Books, Book Arts, Books in Art : the Canadian Chronicle" went very well. The other speakers for this session were Jo Beglo from the National Gallery of Canada, and Carole Gerson of Simon Fraser University. All of us are involved with Vol. 3 of the History of the Book in Canada project, and Carol is the editor of the English language edition. My half-hour talk presented an outline of how artists were involved with English-Canadian trade publishers from 1880 to the present day, from illustrators to books designers and digital typographers. Thank you for the opportunity to provide a Canadian perspective on the book arts for a largely American audience.

Swimming with an elk beside the pool is not something I do every day, but when you do, the memories last.

¹ The Artist Files Working Group has actively been working over the past year to put together a site that will provide a centralized resource for locating institutions with artist files. As part of this endeavor, we intend to create a directory that provides summary statements of institutional holdings from across North America. This directory will go live in the fall of 2006 and will allow the institutions to supply relevant documentation about their holdings of artist files. Further, we intend to provide documentation for loading minimal level cataloging records into the major union catalogs to enhance access to individual records. < <http://www.arlis-txmx.org/node/19>>

