THE BIG PICTURE:
COMPARING PRACTICES
IN ART LIBRARIES

Patrons, Processes, and the Profession:
Comparing the Academic Art Library
and the Art Museum Library

Kim Collins

SUMMARY. Much has been written about the difference between academic art historians and art museum scholars, but what about the libraries that support these patrons? College and university libraries hold a special position at the heart of their institutions; art museum libraries struggle to stay relevant in more peripheral roles. On the other hand, aca-

Kim Collins is Art History Librarian, Emory University in Atlanta, GA. She also worked for several years as the head librarian at the High Museum of Art Library, Atlanta, GA, and has served as an adjunct faculty member at Clark Atlanta University’s School of Library Science, teaching a class on art librarianship.


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A new study comparing academic art librarians to art museum librarians - though working in an academic art library branch or within the main library, must compete with other research disciplines in a manner unfamiliar to art museum librarians. This article attempts to compare the two types of libraries, focusing on issues of patrons, funding priorities, material budgets, library marketing, technical infrastructure, and professional development.

**KEYWORDS.** Art librarianship, art library, art libraries, art historians, art history, art museum curators, academic art libraries, museum libraries, research methods, budgeting, collection development, marketing, patrons, professional development

**DEFINING THE ART HISTORIAN AND OTHER ART LIBRARY PATRONS**

Art libraries have a myriad of patrons, but their most targeted users are art historians. On the surface, art historians who teach at universities and those who work as museum curators seem very similar. Both have upper level degrees (usually PhDs) in their field and have demonstrated considerable expertise on researching and writing about art. However, in the past decade, much has been written about the contrasting roles of academic art historians and art museum curators. Exploring these differences helps define the research needs of these art historians and illuminates the possible divergent focus of the academic and museum art libraries.

Richard Brilliant argued in 1992 that while both parties begin with the art object their interests diverge with the presentation of information. The academic tends to produce scholarly monographs and the curator exhibition-cum-catalogue. According to Brilliant, the curator must act as a “collector, guarantor of authenticity, conservator, inventory manager, recorder, journalist, exhibitor, and asset protector and enhancer.” How then can curators find time to produce scholarly-critical writing that includes a historical perspective on an artwork? This is especially difficult when they must also strive to educate a public with a very varied knowledge base and facilitate a direct experience with the art for the museum visitor.

Ivan Gaskell writes that academic art historians (mostly teachers in tertiary education) are the critical essayists and theorists, while art museum
scholars are practical critics that put their judgement into predominantly physical, rather than written, form. He equates this comparison to one between a university medical professor and a physician or surgeon. For the museum curator, the research and documentation of visual material (i.e., writing about art) is secondary to presenting the visual.

Museums, often portrayed as money-grubbing and quick to compromise, get criticized for producing crowd-pleasing, blockbuster exhibitions. Yet, these shows do bring people through the doors and further the institution’s educational mission. Of course, this teaching role can also be (and often is) taken to the extreme. While educating the public seems like a very noble cause, James Cuno contends that the image of the ‘museum as social institution’ challenges its scholarly mission even more than the perception that museums are too market driven. Not only are museums mandated to educate the public to appreciate the visual arts, they are encouraged to “help nurture a humane citizenry equipped to make informed choices in a democracy and to address challenges and opportunities in an increasingly global society.” Such a broad focus can only dilute scholarship.

‘New’ art history is interdisciplinary and revisionist, drawing on methods from many fields and questioning the formal canons of the past. While the academic curriculum embraces this more theoretical approach, museums seem to be dragging their feet, perhaps with good reason. The Smithsonian Institution’s 1992 revisionist exhibit, *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, raised eyebrows and incited passions. The curator of the controversial exhibition challenged a mainly non-academic audience to reexamine beloved pictures of the American West, asking them to take into account the negative aspects of western expansion and to question the underlying ideology of the images. While these ideas hardly seem revolutionary in an academic setting, the museum public found them very jarring. *The West as America* was a perfect example of ‘new’ art history applied to the museum arena; it utilized physical art objects, paintings, to address complex issues. The most telling fallout is that the exhibition catalogue, primarily about physical art works and produced by an art museum, was originally catalogued by the Library of Congress under the F class (US geography) rather than the ND class (painting).

James Cuno concludes that money must be allocated for museums to produce and distribute scholarship: “Spending today’s money for tomorrow’s benefit.” Indeed, over the past decade, the general public does seem to have become more accepting of this type of critical approach to producing exhibits. The recent exhibition proposal, *The Spirit*
of America, was lambasted for being too commemorative and not critical enough. Museum art librarians need to promote the connection that a well-maintained museum library will enable curators to conduct in-depth research that will lead to more provocative, scholarly exhibitions. Of course, museums want to fight the stereotype of being elitist and “academic,” but why can’t entertainment be scholarly and the scholarly entertaining?8

We can define the two types of art historians, but how does this process help differentiate the academic art library from its museum counterpart? In the mid-eighties, art librarian Deirdre Stam conducted a groundbreaking empirical study of both academic and museum art historians with hopes to improve library services for these patrons.9 In the simplest terms, both types of scholars interpret an art object in light of existing information and original observation. They make frequent use of libraries (although not necessarily librarians) and often travel for research purposes. Their search for bibliographic material, including accidental discovery associated with the search process, is crucial to their final product. Stam’s study seems to indicate that the two types of patrons are really more similar than dissimilar. At least they are more closely related to each other, than say a typical patron of an art and design school library.10 More recently, Ronald de Leeuw has promoted the mutual dependence of academics and curators.11 The museum benefits from trying to interpret art historical theory and the university art historian profits from an increased interest in contextuality. In any event, both academic art libraries and art museum libraries must provide extensive collections for a very library-savvy audience.

As mentioned above, while art historians are important users of art libraries, they are far from the only patrons. An academic art library caters to students. Of course, the primary student user group is composed of art history undergraduates, graduates, and studio art majors. However, it should not be forgotten that art books and resources are very popular with students from other disciplines and the public at large.

The museum library must also support staff from museum departments other than curatorial, such as education, public relations, development, and administration. To support the museum’s education department, art librarians need ready-reference for training docents, as well as age-specific material for teachers of all grade levels. Development requires resources on foundations, grants, and donors. Administration needs comparative data published on other museums and publications from various museum and art associations. Also, like the academic art library, the art museum library often serves the general
public. Of course, few art museum libraries circulate their material to individuals outside of immediate museum staff members.

**COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT**

While scholarly monographs, important exhibition catalogues, and art journals make up the majority of the collection for both university and museum art libraries, each has some unique material worth mentioning, especially since its inclusion or exclusion in a collection reflects a library’s budget priorities. For example, art museum libraries are much more likely than academic art libraries to collect full-runs of auction catalogues. These lavishly illustrated sale catalogues are viewed by curators (in their role as ‘collector’) before the auctions and then kept by the library for patrons to use while researching provenance, conducting appraisals, or simply locating color images of artists’ works. Academic art historians sometimes need this type of “image-centric” information too but often must travel to the museum library to retrieve it. Many museum art libraries keep vertical artist files. The material found in artist files, such as artist pamphlets and exhibition brochures, is inexpensive (usually sent for free or as part of an exchange program), but the labor cost of maintaining such a resource is very high. Academic art libraries have a harder time getting this type of ephemeral material and do not seem to have the inclination to devote the staff time needed to create and maintain such files. Museum art libraries also collect educational material produced by the museum staff and other resources for the public, such as art books geared for children, which would be inappropriate for an academic art library.

Both libraries purchase the twenty to thirty core art journals, including *Art Bulletin, Art Journal, Art in America, Art Forum, ArtNews, etc.* Yet, generally, university art libraries subscribe to more journals, covering broader subject areas. Their journal lists include titles on popular culture and scholarly writings. Museum libraries tend to focus on pockets of specialized journals mirroring their collection of artwork. Both must also purchase catalogue raisonnés, despite the expense.

Because many museums participate in exchange programs, the art museum library has more exhibition catalogues in their collection than the academic art library. In fact, museum libraries often have very obscure material from around the world that has never been made available for sale.
The academic art library is more likely to collect extensive special collections and expensive microform products. Also, the academic institution usually has more funds than a museum library to purchase electronic art resources, including indexing databases, full-text e-resources, and e-journals. Indeed, most museum libraries are considerably behind their university counterparts when it comes to technology and subscriptions to electronically available information. In the past, researchers relied heavily on finding material through the bibliographies of their colleagues’ published writings. Today, however, many patrons, especially art history curators recently graduated from academic universities, are demanding that priority be given to purchasing electronic databases. Partnerships and consortia are usually the only hope for art museum libraries to gain access to these electronic resources.

Will technology change the character of either type of library? Investing in technology does reduce the funds available to purchase print resources, but, so far, it has failed to quench patrons’ desire or need for the art book. If vendors can solve the cost, copyright, quality, and disk-space problems associated with presenting images in their electronic databases, technology might play a greater role in future art history research. Likewise, the emerging cataloging standards for visual images will greatly increase access to digitized artwork and might have an impact on scholarship in the field. Perhaps it is still too early to tell. Of course, technology has already increased the speed of research and made some new comparisons more possible. Paul Greenhalgh cautions in his article, “The Art Library–A Moving Target” (1995), that technology cannot deliver “historical truth or philosophical soundness”; it can just speed up the research process. Now, scholars can produce rubbish at five times the speed.13 Another consequence is that technology reduces the number of patrons who actually walk through the door of art libraries. Statistically this might appear worrisome, but a satisfied patron is a satisfied patron. In fact, patrons who are able to find answers from their own desktop or from simply e-mailing a librarian almost always remain loyal supporters of the library.

**BUDGET PRIORITIES AND FUNDING STRATEGIES**

As mentioned above, the academic library usually has a more central, established position within the parent organization than the museum library. However, now more than ever, both types of art libraries must build a case for continued growth. It seems universal that librarians dis-
like the term, “marketing”—and art librarians are no exception. However, Marylaine Block makes a good case for it in her article, “The Secret of Library Marketing: Make Yourself Indispensable.”14 She writes that librarians must convince the local power structure that they are the “go-to” people for information, ferreting out their patrons’ information needs before they even vocalize them. Librarians should not settle for being good at what they do but must strive to be known to be good at what they do. How does this relate to budgets? Well, the budget process also involves strategic planning (i.e., understanding priorities, values, and commitments). William David Penniman writes that the first step in the budget process is to ask whether issues important to the library are also important to the funding body.15 The museum art librarian must continually justify budget requests and explain funding priorities to an administration that probably does not understand how libraries are run. An academic art librarian is usually proposing budgets to a library administrator. (Of course, the library director must in turn convince the university dean, who may or may not have any in-depth knowledge of library administration.) Suffice to say that the academic art librarian usually has a more educated funding body, although not necessarily a more sympathetic one. As Murray Martin summarizes, “the primary need for a budget is to persuade those responsible for receiving the request that the facts presented are correct, that the conclusions drawn are reasonable, and the goals underlying the budget are acceptable.”16 This advice works for both types of art libraries. However, while it is always wise to avoid library jargon when presenting a budget to a funding body, the art museum librarian will probably have to spend more time defining basic library concepts than the academic art librarian does.

Another key to a successful budget presentation is demonstrating a proven track record. This is especially true for the museum library administrator who must constantly justify expenses. Indeed, the notion of accountability probably comes up more in the museum environment than the academic library. That being said, universities are now also beginning to view their libraries with a more business-like orientation. While in theory the academic art library has a more secure position in the university than the art library has within the museum, the current economic downturn makes the budget process challenging for all types of libraries. And, simply relying on what worked in the past can be treacherous. Douglas Birdsall writes, “any posturing about the library’s special place on campus or its inherent value will not serve the [academic library] director well in today’s economic environment.”17 Instead, the director should make the budget case on programmatic links
to the university’s mission and goals. Likewise, the museum librarian must convince the director that the curatorial, education, development, public relations, and publication departments of the museum will fail to accomplish their mission without the library’s resources and services.

How then can art librarians effect change when it comes to the budget process? Sheila D. Creth does a wonderful job of outlining several assumptions influencing funding allocations that librarians should question and perhaps even challenge. The first is the validity, even sanctity, of statistics and formulas. Academic librarians are much more likely to fall into this trap than museum librarians, partially because of institutional culture and partially because short-staffed museum librarians often don’t have the time, money, or skill to create such complex analyses. Creth warns that statistics can lead to the “bigger is better” syndrome and/or a “protect & defend” mentality. Neither is very helpful in the long-run. Instead, the budget allocations should reflect that the library is “not only being efficient (i.e., costs are contained or reduced as feasible) but that [the library is] also being effective (i.e., that we are doing the right things).” Likewise, both museum and academic libraries should address the access-versus-ownership question. In the past, budget limitations forced many art museum libraries to partner with other institutions to achieve such basic goals as library automation. Now, both types of libraries are reexaming the “just in case” principle and opting for more collaborative and consortial arrangements. Art historians tend to be heavy inter-library loan users anyway and are accustomed to the patience required to utilize this service. However, because many art museum libraries are non-circulating, they have to establish relationships with other institutions or consortiums in order to take advantage of the inter-library loan option for their patrons. This type of arrangement usually does carry some budget repercussions.

To summarize, the academic art library must continually link its material budget to university programs and priorities, while maintaining a general fund for broad coverage and special purchasing opportunities. Electronic resources, especially in fields other than art, continue to consume larger and larger portions of the academic library’s budget. The art museum library will continue to rely on the exchange program to supplement their acquisitions budgets, although art librarians are becoming increasingly frustrated with the additional staff time it takes to maintain these programs. Museum libraries that are non-circulating can have a more focused collecting policy, but rarely does this relieve any budget constraints. Their main priorities must be to collect actively in fields tied to their permanent collection and to collect very wisely on
subjects related to traveling exhibitions. The latter requires great diplo-
macy as the museum curator and educator might not be sympathetic, or
even aware, of the library’s big budget picture.

**ENVIRONMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE**

Museum art libraries usually operate with less manpower and lag be-
hind on technical innovations. The golden lining is that their smaller
size gives the library more flexibility. Also, this lag allows them to by-
pass some technical hurdles, waiting for larger academic libraries to
work out all the kinks in new software and other technical products. Of
course, while a university can be large and cumbersome, it usually has
the funding and adequate technical support to be on the cutting edge.

These two types of libraries also have different work cycles. The aca-
demic art library is busiest during the school year. The beginning and end
of semesters (or quarters) are always stressful. Also, academic librarians
can usually recruit student help during these months and major projects
do get accomplished. The art museum librarian has a more even-keel
year, often experiencing a spike in activity during the summer months.
This is the time when curators can devote more time to their scholarly re-
search. Likewise, the art museum library often gets additional volunteer
help from summer interns and docents (who experience a lull in tour ac-
tivity during the times that the schools are out of session).

While academic librarians prefer to compare their salaries, benefits,
and university standing with faculty, the art museum librarian struggles
to maintain equity with the museum curator. Both kinds of librarians
face frustration and must constantly “market” the professional compari-
son. Many academic art librarians even go through the tenure process.
Museums usually do not have such a formal structure, but it is still very
important that the librarian get involved with the issues of the institution
as a whole. The art library, whether in a museum or an academic envi-
ronment, might be an oasis but it cannot remain an island. Both types of
art librarians must interact frequently and effectively with their parent
organization in order to maintain influence and justify their positions.
This could mean attending meetings, publishing highlights of new li-
brary material, or even providing proactive reference services or acqui-
sitions.
In any field, professional excellence is linked to continued learning. This is especially true for the information specialist. Professional development can entail reading current professional literature, attending conferences, and networking with colleagues. Art librarians in the United States (and the United Kingdom) have their own professional organization, the Art Libraries Society (of North America or United Kingdom, respectively). Many North American art librarians also participate in the American Libraries Association and the Special Libraries Association. For the academic art librarian, the professional organization provides an opportunity to build a resume, publish, demonstrate teamwork, and develop leadership skills. The art museum librarian also benefits from the list above but seems most interested in learning about what other colleagues are doing. To this end, the conference is paramount. Yet, before extolling the many virtues of the professional conference, it seems worth mentioning some of the limitations. Phyllis DiBianco in her article, “The Changing Face of Professional Development,” argues that librarians need to rely more heavily on the Internet to improve their professional practice. The Internet (including listservs, etc.) offers an increasing amount of information for the professional who actively seeks learning experiences, without the frustrations of the conference experience. DiBianco reminisces:

We would check the calendars of our regional, state, and national associations, identify conferences and workshops we want to attend, submit approval forms, hold our breaths while conference budgets were checked—and then off we would go. We would return dazed and exhausted, carrying a new logo’d bag laden with brochures, catalogs, our copious notes, and high expectations of doing things differently. In thinking back, we realize that after using those notes to write required conference reports, our high expectations for change and improvement faded over time. Such was the staff development cycle. What was wrong with this picture? Plenty!: For one thing, our collection of conference bags grew at an exponential rate while our learning curve did not.

Most professional librarians can identify with the frustrations of “company” travel and the information-overload syndrome described above. In response, many art librarians have become very active on listserves, such as ARLIS-L, and have chosen to forgo the annual conference experience. That being said, nothing can serve as a substi-
tute for attending programs and workshops, visiting the exhibit hall to talk with vendors, and chatting with colleagues face-to-face. For the solo museum librarian, a conference or chapter meeting might be the only opportunity to interact with other professionals. (Solo academic art librarians can usually walk across campus to contact other librarians, even if they work with other disciplines.) Something must also be said for the jolt a conference can bring to one’s day-to-day operations. Being inundated with new ideas can be stressful but also exhilarating. No one can retain all the information they receive at a conference, but being exposed to ideas and networking with colleagues should allow one to retrieve the information again when it is needed back at the home institution. Being inspired by a challenge, even an unobtainable one, can spark positive change. When art librarians work on committees or serve as leaders within a professional organization, they are building management skills. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) states that “academic and research librarians have a responsibility to share what they have learned through writing, speaking, mentoring, and modeling, in order to facilitate the learning of their colleagues and the advancement of the profession.” Art librarians, both those from academic institutions and from museums, are very fortunate to have vibrant organizations, such as ARLIS/NA and ARLIS/UK, which can help accomplish this goal.

Funding for professional development varies widely from institution to institution. Academic librarians should have access to more money for travel; however, this is not always the case. Universities must draft reimbursement policies that apply to all professional employees, often limiting amounts to unrealistic caps that force art librarians to contribute personal funds to attend conferences. Smaller museums can be more flexible with funding for travel and continuing education. Of course, having the desire to support the museum’s professional staff does not always translate to having the money available for professional development. If the museum administration is repeatedly convinced of the value of having their librarian(s) attend a professional conference, they can budget for it. Often museums compromise by sending only one representative and relying on that individual to share information with the rest of the library staff. Universities could also adopt this policy in regards to conferences. With other professional development such as classes and workshops, academic librarians seem to get more support than art museum librarians. Because of the culture of their institution, they probably have an easier time justifying money spent on continuing education, such as on-line courses, distance learning opportunities, and local seminars.
CONCLUSION

The patrons of academic art libraries and art museum libraries might have different needs and "products," but they both rely on research conducted in the library. The emphasis of the collections might be different, but the services and technical infrastructure needed to maintain the two libraries are very similar. They differ slightly in their relation to the parent organization. Universities' central mission of research places the academic library in good standing. Art museums also strive to educate and enlighten, but scholarly research has been relegated to a more auxiliary position. The art museum librarian must constantly convince their administration that access to scholarly research is a "must-have" not just a nice benefit. Luckily, most art historians are also strong library advocates. Both types of art librarians are charged with the goal of lifetime learning. Museums and universities need to recognize their role in the continued professional development of their librarians. Lastly, art librarians need to constantly champion the library to patrons and administrators. The profession depends on committed members who can influence funding allocations, create library users and resource needs, and mentor a new generation of art librarians to work in our universities and art museums.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

2. Over the past decade since Brillant’s controversial editorial, exhibition catalogues have continued to evolve into ambitious, weighty tomes, sometimes packed with scholarly research, other times just slick and expensive. Ronald de Leeuw points out in his article, “The History of art between the 20th and 21st century,” Diogenes 47:1 (1999), that because of high print runs, popular focus, and deadline pressures, the museum exhibition catalogue is very useful and inexpensive tool for art historians (both academic and museum scholars) to publish their ideas quickly.
7. Ibid.
8. The museum scholar will need to promote this type of critical writing to the public and to other museum professionals. We all know ‘sleeper’ exhibitions that
failed to excite the museum’s PR department or to secure funds for a flashy catalogue, yet with worthy art and solid curatorial research, won the hearts of the museum-going audience.


10. Philip Pacey provides an accurate and entertaining look at the library needs of the art and design school student in his classic article, “How art students use libraries—if they do” *Art Libraries Journal* 7(Spring 1982) p. 33-38.

11. de Leeuw, p. 78-82.

12. Many academic art libraries only collect a few auction catalogues which they often treat like monographs. Perhaps electronic database projects will eventually make this information more readily available to the academic art historian but digitizing so many color images is costly (and technologically difficult). Likewise, academic libraries are currently unwilling to allocate much money for this type of reference tool.


19. Ibid., p. 135.


22. *ARLIS-L is an electronic forum for the dissemination of information and the discussion of issues of interest to art information professionals. Postings routinely include job vacancy announcements; conference, workshop, and meeting information; announcements of awards, honors, and prizes; news items from groups and individuals in the Society; new publications and web sites; copyright and information policy issues; and more... Anyone may subscribe by sending an e-mail message to listserv@lsv.uky.edu with the subject line blank. In the body of your message, type ONLY the following (no signature): SUBSCRIBE ARLIS-L YOUR NAME (substituting your own name).