The Indivisibility of Art Librarianship Revisited

by Wolfgang M. Freitag, Lexington, MA and Martha Mahard, Harvard University

[Editor's note: Wolfgang M. Freitag's seminal article, “The Indivisibility of Art Librarianship,” published in Art Libraries Journal in 1982, occasioned a revisiting of the premises of that article for the historic joint conference of ARLIS/NA and VRA in St. Louis in 2001 to see how his thesis stood the test of time. The two articles that follow, one each by Wolfgang Freitag and Martha Mahard, are reflections on the original article and the course of events in the intervening twenty years. This article will also be published by Art Libraries Journal and will appear in vol. 29, no. 1 (2004).]

Twenty Years of Estrangement, or What's in a Name

by Wolfgang M. Freitag

When I read that the two organizations, ARLIS/NA and VRA, were going to celebrate respectively the thirtieth and twentieth anniversaries of their founding by holding a joint conference—"the first-ever"—I could hardly believe my eyes. The announcement left me dumbfounded, but also very pleased, for I realized immediately the significance that the event would have in the history of organized art information professionals.

It occurred to me then that the St. Louis conference might be a good time to retrace the story of the events that led to the estrangement between art librarians and visual resources curators on the organizational level. Such estrangement had hardly ever existed on a personal level. It seemed that this might best be accomplished by revisiting the controversy that led to the split which, although it had not seemed irrevocable when it occurred, had lasted two decades. I also thought that this visit should be made by a colleague who was not involved in the controversy.

I am therefore sincerely grateful to Martha Mahard for undertaking the arduous journey back in time and for telling here, for the benefit of several new generations of art information specialists that have grown up since then, the story of a period in the history of art information professionals in North America. These ranks now include professionals of even more and different stripes than existed in the 1980s. This story, although it was, because of the strains of acrimony and contentiousness that accompanied it, certainly not our finest hour, did nevertheless accomplish something positive in that it created the enormous momentum that resulted in the vigorous growth of both VRA and ARLIS/NA. In fact, the growth of the two organizations has strengthened the profession as a whole so that it is stronger today than we could have imagined thirty and twenty years ago. It is a consolation that this happened even though, or perhaps because, the two main branches of what to my mind is still an indivisible profession gained their strength by following different paths and by marching to different drummers.

Sometimes I also wonder whether the controversy that led to the organizational schism in 1982 was not simply due to a semantic hang-up on words. On reflection, I am also glad that at the ARLIS/NA Board meeting at which we changed the name of the ARLIS/NA Newsletter to Art Documentation, Clive Phillpot persuaded us to settle for a name that did not contain either the terms Library or Librarian that I had insisted should form part of the name of the new journal. Clive realized what I had not seen, namely that those terms could be offensive to image curators, especially those who do not work in traditional libraries. What's in a name? For me, and those who shared my view and my concern for the unity of what I considered one profession, the term Librarian had an inclusive meaning, while for my opponents it had a negative connotation implying exclusion. Was that the root cause of "all the fuss?"

In the famous scene in Faust's Study, the student asks for advice on how to win an argument in a scholastic debate and the teacher recommends that he use "words." But, "there has to be a thought with the word?" asks the student, to which the teacher replies

All right! But you needn't let that worry you
it's exactly when a thought is lacking
that, just in time, a word shows up instead.

With words you can argue beautifully,
with words you can make up a system,
a word's a beautiful thing to believe in. (Italics mine)


The teacher here is Mephistopheles, the fiendish deceiver, the devil himself hell-bent on corrupting all the good intentions that we humans have. Had we been victims of the stratagems of confusion of the evil one when we engaged in a war about words twenty years ago?

But we also know that Mephisto, although very powerful, is not omnipotent and that in the end he never succeeds in reaching his goal when he attacks those who err, but are of good will. For even "the spirit who always denies" is the agent of a divine plan: "a part of the power that always wills what's evil and yet always does what's good."