Good afternoon. I’m going to make a point of beginning my discussion of process improvement in descriptive practice, by noting that the talk is part of a session called “More, better, faster, cheaper every day of the week.” This title conveys a prosaic quality I believe we would do well not to confuse with isolated backroom business. Rather, I will argue that for us to achieve more better faster cheaper descriptive practices, we would do well instead to acknowledge that the best descriptive practice is as much a public as a technical service. The Visual Resources department of the Yale Library, the operation I oversee, and about which I will speak today, in fact increased both its productivity and its vitality by showing that process improvement and a focus on stakeholders are the obverse and the reverse of the same coin. By, in essence, putting the horse in front of the cart.

To demonstrate what I mean, I will review briefly the changes we introduced into Visual Resources in the past year, focusing on a key collaboration to digitize a large academic departmental collection and why this collaboration is a potential proof-of-concept for the idea of descriptive practice as public service, and finally, mention what future directions we plan to take to build on our best practices and the knowledge we have gained from them.

In simple and dramatic terms, the Visual Resources 3-member cataloging team managed, in the space of one year, to boost the annual processing statistics (representing “published” images—fully cataloged, quality assured, and available online) from around 6,000 new items to over 28,000. In the spirit of full disclosure, I should mention that we added a third cataloging position in that time, but by the terms of the grant funding that secured it, the position specifically supports the Asian collections. Nor would one additional position account for an almost 5-fold productivity gain. Rather, the most important things we did to achieve that gain was to re-affirm what our primary business is, based on what our stakeholders were telling us, and acting on their concerns. As a corollary proposition, we operated
under the assumption that while we play a major role in providing digital image
information, we do so in an increasingly pluralistic environment we do not control
and should not proceed as if we do. At first blush, such an *a priori* assumption,
which could and probably should guide any library-museum-archive collaboration
as well, would seem to lead to the antithesis of economy, scalability, and best
practice, but I beg to differ.

First, a bit about who we are. The Visual Resources department is a Yale University
Library unit with a collection emphasis on art, architecture, and allied fields. It
began life in the 1920s as the Slide and Photograph Library, affiliated first with the
Yale School of Art, and became part of the Library system in 1958. The collections
today consist of over 370,000 slides, around 100,000 mounted photographs, and a
digital collection of over 70,000 images, the latter begun in the mid-1990s. We
outsource image production to the University's Media Services unit. We also
employ Luna Insight image management and delivery software, and we contribute
all Insight content to the Library's Digital Library or DL, a cross-collection
repository of over 150,000 images, which offers convenient web-based access to
several campus repositories including the Yale University Art Gallery.

We had made significant progress in the last ten years or so in preparing our rich
historical collections for a transition to digital technology. However, the Visual
Resources department still needed to address serious problems and needed very
much to make significant changes in its operational assumptions and priorities
based on three particular triggers:

1) long-standing dissatisfaction with the rates of productivity and turn-around

2) the majority of a large faculty adopting digital image classroom display or
eliciting a strong interest in making that change

3) a change in dependencies—Visual Resources was no longer the only place art
faculty could go for digital image delivery support
We responded first by:

1) **listening to our stakeholders**

The need to increase our cataloging rate had been a long standing desideratum of the faculties of the Department of the History of Art and the Schools of Architecture and Art in particular, because they have historically relied on Visual Resources for their primary teaching materials. Faculty were urging more production because, to them, more timely digital content and more and more and more, was (and still is) a principal pre-condition for the transition to technology in the classroom. The faculty also wanted descriptive practices that were as meaningful to them as to the library, and an institutional repository that they could easily draw from and combine with personal collections. These demands were not new, but with the development of other campus support, such as that provided by the University’s Instructional Technology Group (ITG), particularly in the area of supporting personal teaching collections, we would be the losers if we could no longer collaborate with our stakeholders to help us shape the institutional collections as they had always done. We had to pay closer attention to what they were really trying to tell us and be willing to adapt accordingly. So, we listened, and what we heard was unambiguous: give us more faster. Increase your productivity. Make your access and delivery tools easier to use. In order to rise to the occasion, we needed also to re-examine and re-assess some of our basic practices. That in turn led us to:

2) **clarify what we do and why, and adjust our descriptive practices accordingly**

We re-affirmed, again based on faculty interest and demonstrated need, that at this point in time, course or teaching support still needed to be our primary business. Thus, we aligned our critical policy and process improvement decisions with building a teaching resource rather than a research resource per se. As a result, we reviewed our existing descriptive practices, the most costly and time consuming part
of processing, and gave the highest priority to supporting basic searching and item identification, providing the kind of information an instructor would want an undergraduate to have, for instance. We have learned that pertinent survey data all say “give me google-like searching with library content and that keyword searching is likely to be the preferred strategy. As a result, we concluded that a highly differentiated structure for content tagging was not as critical to our primary objective. We were also willing to forgo comprehensiveness and elaborate subject analysis on the first pass, so to speak. We thought, and still do, that it is economically feasible to touch a record more than once, particularly if we may not always be the ones doing the touching. We envisioned creating a reliable and useful “core” record with the idea of future opportunities for others both to add more depth through authoritative annotation (and even emendation as needed), and breadth through alternative tagging. We haven’t engaged in such activities in practice, but we proceeded with the first stage process improvements with such possibilities in mind.

This clarification of the purpose of our descriptive practices also led us to make several key decisions about how we would improve our own workflow and establish relevant best practices. We did so first and foremost, by seeking strategic technical collaborations and partnerships, the most important with our colleagues in the Library’s Cataloging Department, and the Web, Workstation and Digital Consulting Group. Without their strong support many of our key improvements would not have been made at all, or been as timely. Among these were:

1) moving from a locally customized FileMakerPro database management tool to Luna production software, specifically, Inscribe and Studio
2) simplifying our tagging structure and determining a “core” record with 5 fields of descriptive metadata with the option to add more descriptive information as the cataloger sees fit. We also provide limited administrative
and technical metadata in our cataloging records, almost all of which is available in the public views.

3) becoming an early adopter of the Yale Element Set, or Yale Core cataloging template, an experimental effort spearheaded by the Library to promote campus-wide resource integration, a high priority for digital development at Yale. Furthermore, the Yale Element Set was already cross-walked to Dublin Core, Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA), Visual Resources Association Core, and its organizing guidelines are aligned with those of Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO).

4) creating a departmental cataloging manual for the obvious reasons of facilitating consistency and recording key decisions, but also as a team-building mechanism, as we all contributed to its creation and participate in its upkeep.

5) The transition from FMP to Inscribe also marked a watershed decision in departmental working assumptions. We chose to move to a software application that did not support slide label creation. For a very long time, we had struggled with ways to manage both the analog and the digital collections simultaneously, giving equal prominence to both, and even favoring slides in the sense that the choice of software for digital development still had to accommodate slide production. This was necessary as long as the slide collection was as heavily or more heavily used that the digital collection for classroom teaching. As the need for slides among our core stakeholders was dwindling in the last year at an unprecedented rate, now was time to assert that priorities and resource allocation would be shifted primarily to digital assets, although we continue to make slides (and photographs) available for use as a legacy collection, and for those faculty who prefer to continue to use them to teach.

6) Again, with key collaborations and “down-stream” implications in mind, Media Services also changed its procedures significantly in the last year,
moving to digital photography and server-to-server file delivery, relieving us of much time-consuming and costly “hard-copy” management

**Classics Collection Project**

And so, in July 2005, we took the plunge, with a new cataloging template, new cataloging standards, and a new approach to descriptive practice by establishing it as a public, as much as a technical, service. We built on our process improvement by working with colleagues in ILTS, (ITG), the Arts Library, Media Services, and the Department of the History of Art, to hold a year-long series of “Digital Days,” monthly meetings with staff and faculty at which a diverse range of issues relating to digital technology and its impact on teaching, learning, and research in the arts was explored, and during which descriptive practices and broader stakeholder involvement in helping us develop related tools and services, including feedback and assessment processes, were the topics of lively even impassioned discussion.

The realization of the degree to which a prosaic, and at times to many a mysterious, even occluded, if not occult, process of describing and organizing specialist information could engender such vehemence among its ultimate consumers, caused us, I think, to be particularly responsive when the opportunity arose to demonstrate the real value of the changes we made by putting them to the test in another situation. This past spring, the Visual Resources department, in partnership with the Library's Digital Production and Integration Program (DPIP), undertook a major project to digitize the slide collections of the Department of Classics at Yale. One of the oldest and most prestigious academic departments in the world in its discipline, the Classics Department maintains a significant teaching library of over 50,000 slides which it was eager to have converted to digital format. In fact, because the Classics Department collection was so strong, the Visual Resources holdings in classical art and archaeology were comparatively weak. The Classics Department agreed to add the department's holdings to the Library's digital image repository, as
a special collection--the Yale Department of Classics Collection, which will be available this fall over the campus network in both Insight and the DL. This was without a doubt a win-win situation for shared institutional collection development, but it also was a successful proof-of-concept for descriptive practice as public service.

Working with DPIP colleagues and consulting with faculty members from the Classics Department, we arranged for the Library, on a cost recovery basis, to supply project management, technology expertise, catalog training and best practices, all with existing staff. The Classics Department funded the work, provided extra staffing for processing, and offered their faculty's expertise for image selection, guidance on cataloging practice, and developmental feedback. One of the Visual Resources department catalogers who fortuitously holds an MA in Classical Archaeology from Yale, was assigned to be the project manager. The Classics project has been a great success. Since May, more than 1,200 items have been added with the remainder of the original selection of 1,800 to be completed this month. We continue to hold regular meetings with faculty as well as keeping them up to date with our progress and seeking their advice as needed by e-mail.

Most pertinent to our discussion today is the close collaboration between the Library and the Classics department on matters of descriptive practice. As part of the training support, the Library project manager, working with Classics faculty, compiled a detailed supplement to the Visual Resources cataloging manual, addressing the specifics for cataloging classical archaeology. This supplement joins another, similar one, prepared by our Asian support specialist for cataloging Chinese and Japanese art, working closely with faculty members in those fields, as well. The Classics Department employed a Ph.D. student in Classical archaeology to create the cataloging records under Visual Resources guidance, and we were delighted to learn just the other day that when this first student cataloger completes
her assignment, the Classics department will hire another to continue to work with us. All the Classics cataloging is done on site in their departmental slide library in Phelps Hall, relieving us of the necessity to make room in Visual Resources, but more importantly, bringing specialized visual resources descriptive practice into propinquity with the relevant materials and subject expertise. The Classics project has been an experiment with developing joint processes for collection building, and also to participate in an expert community's discourse over how best to balance the needs of just-in-case research, versus just-in-time teaching content organization and delivery systems.

Based on the success of the Classics project, we intend where appropriate to adopt the DPIP model for future Library collaborations, including any possible library-museum-archive collaborations, as well as with academic departments and individuals across the Yale community, to add relevant specialist content to our institutional holdings as a pertinent and cost effective way of leveraging expertise and scarce resources on both sides. The Classics project also allows us to contribute our particular knowledge and skills without having to perform all of the work ourselves, and the faculty to gain technical assistance on a scale that it would be very difficult for them to achieve or maintain, and an invaluable asset they are also willing to create as a shared resource that will be comprehensible and relevant to others who are not Classical scholars.

**IDIR**

The work we achieved in the last year in the Visual Resources department to improve and focus our descriptive practices, including the special projects we have undertaken, we hope will only be enriched and strengthened by a more recent development, the Integrated Digital Image Resource Project (IDIR) of which I serve as Director, which was launched last February as an initiative of the Integrated Access Council of Yale University Library, as is DPIP. Sponsored by Meg Bellinger,
Associate University Librarian for Integrated Library Systems and Technical Services, IDIR plans to build on such successes through a collaborative and programmatic effort to combine image collections, services, and technology issues into a coordinated, integrated approach to support digital teaching and research. The next step for Visual Resources will in fact be to leverage the economies of scale we have produced in building a rich teaching resource, and working with Library subject specialist and technologist colleagues, find ways to leverage the productivity gains and creative approaches we have attempted, and adapt them to building the next generation research collections, tools, and services, ones dedicated to the most efficient and meaningful ways of supporting a range of scholarly uses of images. I see such endeavors actively engaging as faculty in many disciplines, our pre-eminent museum and archive partners at Yale, as well as our ITS/ITG partners in areas where we see our service missions converging and potentially complementing one another. We will work to provide integrated and coherent digital image collections that could not be successfully built or made as potentially useful without descriptive practice that represents at once the best of technical and public services philosophies and functions. –Thank you.