Evolution of a Profession:  
The Changing Nature of Art Librarianship 
Amy Lucker

SUMMARY. Are we as art librarians truly in a new world? Or are we seeing the evolution of a profession as it learns to use and take advantage of new tools? Are we answering new questions, or the same questions but with new resources? This paper moves from a brief overview of the history of art librarianship up to the present day, and offers thoughts about where we may be headed in the future, as we ponder what is new and what is not in the world of art librarianship. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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In 1998 R. Brooks Jeffery wrote “[o]ur information-saturated society has drastically changed the role of librarians and their collections . . . This

Amy Lucker is Head of Slides and Digital Imaging, Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library, Harvard University. Previously she was Librarian of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, including the School of the MFA; Head Cataloger for the AVIADOR project, Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University; and Head of Cataloging and Technical Services, Brooklyn Museum of Art.

A new paradigm requires a new definition of professional..." Are we as art librarians truly in a new world? Or are we seeing the evolution of a profession as it learns to use and take advantage of new tools? Are we answering new questions, or the same questions but with new resources? 

This paper moves from a brief overview of the history of art librarianship up to the present day, and offers thoughts about where we may be headed in the future, as we ponder what is new and what is not in the world of art librarianship.

Art libraries came into existence because humans seem to have an instinct to collect stuff, in this case art stuff. Private citizens held the earliest collections, although public access to these “great works” was allowed as early as 1683. The birth of art libraries “must therefore be sought in the history of the formation of great art collections and the growth of art history as an academic discipline...” Museum libraries were often formed along with the foundation of the museum itself, as in the case with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, both of which were founded in 1870. Similarly the pursuit of art history as an academic discipline can be traced back to the late 18th century. With the pursuit of knowledge and understanding seems to come documentation, closely followed by the desire to organize and provide access to those materials. And therein lies the job of the librarian who has “traditionally been the interface between knowledge and dissemination.”

This definition of the librarian as “information manager” pertains to all librarians, regardless of specialty or collection type. All librarians are charged with building and maintaining collections, and connecting users with the information they seek. What then makes an Art Librarian different? An answer to this is found, I think, in two places. The documentation of art is found not only in the printed word, but also in text-free visual resources. The study of art is, after all, the study of visual materials. In describing the history of art librarianship Wolfgang Freitag pointed out that as early as 1893 “...the course of art history had become inextricably tied to the progress of the new technology of pictorial reproduction...” Collectors and connoisseurs were dependent on this technology even earlier. Second, and of equal importance in the study of art history is the historiography of the discipline itself. Art history as an academic field is concerned not only with works of art and their creators but also the scholars and critics who have in their turn studied and commented upon them. This means that the content of art historical resources rarely goes out of use. As opposed to a library that supports the study of chemistry, where currency of information is of ut-
most concern, for instance, it is equally crucial for the art library to keep its old books and journals as it is to collect the new. Much primary research is done with the aid of old auction catalogs or early editions of art newspapers. More than in other specialties, the art librarian must keep an eye out for the past as well as the future.

The Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) currently defines an Art Librarian as follows: “Art librarians and visual resources professionals are specialists skilled in organizing and providing access to information on the visual arts. They support research, provide instruction, and promote public awareness of the arts to students, teachers, scholars, curators, artists, and others. The scope of their collections may include the entire field of visual culture or be focused on specialized areas such as art, design, film, indigenous creations, or photography. Art information professionals handle numerous formats including the printed page, slides, film, video, and electronic media.”

Allowing for the obvious expansion in methods of reproduction, what distinguishes the art librarian from other librarians are the types and formats of the materials with which they are concerned. This is as true today as it was in the 19th century.

I noted earlier that perhaps the world we find ourselves in is not really all that different from the world of our predecessors. Certain facets of art librarianship really have not changed.

While contemporary art librarians and visual resource professionals may find themselves in any number of locations, from corporate collections to public libraries, I will be focusing on the three in which I have had experience, art museum libraries, art school libraries, and academic (university) art libraries. Nonetheless my remarks apply more broadly to all types of art libraries.

One such element is the answer to why art librarians do what they do: “[i]t is that commitment to providing access and to interpreting the content of the subject matter of art and art history, which is at the core of all art librarianship . . .”

What draws a specialist, whether student, scholar, or librarian to any specific field is their interest in, if not passion for that particular field. As the study of art history gained followers it seems inevitable that some of those students would apply their knowledge to the organization of the literature. A passion for the arts is as compelling a reason today for one to become an art librarian as it was in earlier times. Indeed one might argue that what has always made a librarian a great art librarian is their affinity towards the subject.

Another stable element in the world of art librarianship is the relationship between the art library and its parent institution, be it museum or uni-
versity or art school. That relationship between the library and its parent institution remains equally as strong and equally as critical to both as when the institutions were first founded. In the case of the museum library the collection continues to reflect the strengths of the museum and serve the needs of those who interpret and preserve the collection. As has been the case historically, primary users are the museum’s education department or conservation lab as well as its curatorial staff. At the same time the dual nature of the museum, both to collect and preserve examples of great and unique works of art and culture and to make these works available to the public in order to educate, has meant that museum libraries also serve the museum’s visitors. “A desire to educate the community provided major impetus for the establishment of American museums; it is natural, therefore, that the founding fathers envisioned libraries as an important feature of their new institutions.”

In an academic setting, whether a university, college, or art school, the mission of the library today reflects the teaching and research needs of its faculty and graduate students. While those specific needs have changed over time, this driving focus has not. Additionally the art library often serves as inspiration. Artists come into the library not with a particular image or artist in mind, but rather a mood or idea.

In all these examples another matter that remains constant is the variety of kinds of users, and the need to meet the particular needs of each of those users. Our audience has not changed radically; it consists primarily of art historians, artists, collectors, curators, connoisseurs, students of the history of art, and those persons affiliated with the institutions that house or teach art; “… art belongs to us all, to enjoy, and to create; art libraries can provide not only the resources necessary for the study of … art, but inspiration …”

In many ways the job of the art librarian in the 21st century is similar to that of the librarian of the 18th century; we are still charged with building and maintaining our collections, and providing access to them. What then, is new in the world of art librarianship? Much indeed has changed, even in the past 20 years of my experience in the field. The tools with which we do our jobs, the environment in which we work, and the skills required to be successful have all developed and changed radically.

One issue is that of the education of an art librarian. Determining the relative value among the professional library degree, the subject specialty garnered through experience, and an advanced degree in art history remains a constant point of discussion. In the past the subject degree was preferred over the library degree in many situations; this at-
Attitude persists in situations where the visual resource collection is administered by an academic department rather than by the library. But over time the library degree has increased in both visibility and desirability. Some advocate a dual degree in art history and library science. And many agree that current library degree programs should include at least an introduction to the specialty of art librarianship, although only a few graduate programs in library science offer such instruction. Clearly one of the most important factors has been the integration of rapidly changing technologies into our libraries; “a new brand of librarian, a ‘Hybrid Professional,’ is required to combine the traditional knowledge base and research principles of the librarian with competencies and leadership in technology.”

Over the past ten years we have seen the proliferation of non-print resources on formats ranging from videodisk and CD-ROM to online Internet files and services. As more and more information gets published in traditional as well as new formats, our users’ expectations rise; not only do they want access to this expanding universe, but they want mediated access and assistance in manipulating what they find. Part of the job of a librarian today is to be able to communicate and work with the information technology and network staffs of their institutions. Except in some large art libraries, in most cases this technology staff is not part of the library per se, but rather answers to the institution at large. The library director must therefore compete with others for time, expertise, and understanding. While the librarian need not be a hands-on technology professional, it is imperative to have some degree of fluency with the language; “[a] significant new responsibility for the hybrid professional is the ability to work closely with the systems personnel who are responsible for maintaining hardware and networks.”

At the same time library users expect to be able to get technology help while at the library. The library staff needs to understand not only the content of their collections but the mechanics of it as well. One of the downsides to this, of course, is that younger users, having grown up with the Internet and electronic resources of all kinds, often forget about the print sources. Another major challenge for the art librarians is to make sure that users have access to the whole array of relevant resources.

And this array contains as much image content as it does text. While the automation of the card catalog for print materials occurred in a majority of art libraries in the 1980s and early 1990s, similar developments in the area of visual materials are just now in their early stages. The desire to automate access to image collections presents the art librarian...
today with a variety of new challenges, some that are technical and others more philosophical.

In the world of print resources, the concept of shared cataloging was adopted relatively early on, although not without its attendant struggles. Cataloging of print resources has also had a long history of employing national (and international) standards, from AACR to MARC. The large bibliographic utilities such as the Research Libraries Group’s RLIN or OCLC’s WorldCat are seen today as essential tools in most art libraries.

But in the arena of visual resources this has not been the case. Our users today want to be able to integrate visual materials with print materials; they want to be able to create Web sites and presentations with images as well as text. While analog slides are still an integral part of the teaching of art history, the need for electronic versions of these images is growing quickly.

Scanning technology has become both more affordable and less cumbersome over the past few years. There is a not unreasonable expectation that libraries should be able to provide useable electronic images. Our users have the precedent of being able to borrow (and to have us provide on demand) analog slides and photographs. Their expectations have been transferred to digital materials, but without great understanding of how we get there. Experience with the World Wide Web has led our users to believe that anything they want can and should be digitized. Dealing with these needs and the often competing economic realities of creating digital content are major challenges facing some art librarians today, and many more in the future.

Managing a budget has always been a major part of administering any library. Over the past couple of decades all libraries have seen financial resources shrink as prices rise and we attempt to keep up with advances in technology and publishing. Art library materials are among the more expensive, as they rely on well-printed, heavily-illustrated materials. In the world of museum libraries in particular though, recent economic changes have had a major impact on library budgets.

In earlier times art museums in the United States received a fair amount of government funding, both federal and local. Much of this funding has been disappearing over the past years, and museums find themselves competing for private funding. They are, as well, relying much more on funds raised through admissions and affiliated shops. In many ways, they are competing with other entertainment outlets for an audience. Evidence of this can be seen in the many “blockbuster” shows that have been put on in recent years, as well as in the mounting of more popular culture exhibits (as evidenced, for example, by past exhibits at
the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston like “Dangerous Curves: Art of the Guitar” and “Crowning Glories: Two Centuries of Tiaras”). The effect on libraries has been that, with the tightening of budgets, and the emphasis on the museum “making money,” the library is often in a position of having to justify itself and its costs. While this is familiar territory to librarians in the for-profit world, it has been a rude awakening for many in the museum libraries.

A good example of librarians’ increased concerns about the “bottom line” is what has been happening in museum libraries with publication exchange programs. In this arena electronic publishing is having an impact on what has traditionally been a favorite acquisition tool. Traditionally a museum library would offer a significant number of their museum’s printed publications to numbers of museum libraries worldwide, with the expectation of receiving similar numbers of equivalent publications in return. As publication costs rise and museum libraries (and publishers) become more accountable for their expenses, however, this system has been changing. Many museums are investigating publishing exhibition and collection catalogs in electronic format only, preserving their shrinking print budgets for major publications. Given their increased costs these print publications often cannot be “offered up.” Art librarians must now learn how to collect and provide access to these new non-print resources, and how to value them when considering their exchange programs. While the distribution costs for an electronic publication are low, the development costs are still extremely high, particularly in comparison with developing a print publication. In summarizing the situation in 1999 Margaret Shaw (Chief Librarian of the National Gallery of Australia) stated: “...over the next five years exchange will continue but with increased disruption of the standard patterns. Beyond this, it will either cease to exist or develop a very different pattern by the end of the next decade.”

Budget pressures have been felt keenly in academic art libraries as well. While the advent of technology promises new avenues for the management and retrieval of information, it brings with it additional costs. Not only do networks and workstations cost a lot to establish and maintain they also require additional space. This merely intensifies the already existing challenge of how to maintain an historic collection and add current materials in a finite physical space. New technology does not drive out the old; even as we move towards digitizing image collections we continue to collect analog slides and photographs. Historically there has been a tension in art libraries between acquisitions and access. While librarians have great success in raising funds for acquiring mate-
rials it is much more difficult to get funding for operations such as cataloging or processing those acquisitions. In libraries with access to off-site storage there is often great impetus for digitizing original materials in order to store them remotely. Not only are the digitizing costs significant, but there are also major costs incurred in using such storage. These costs as well are not often seen as fund raising opportunities. While the digitization of a “special collection” is often easily funded, it is much harder to raise funding for the ongoing digitization of general materials, such as study slides.

This also brings into sharp focus the extent to which libraries currently rely on cooperative and reciprocal arrangements, for everything from interlibrary loan to consortial pricing for electronic resources. The majority of art libraries, including the academic as well as the museum, can no longer afford to be encyclopedic in their acquisitions. This is due not only to the lack of space for collections but also to massive increases in the past few decades in the numbers of new publications (analog and digital) and concurrently in their costs. We have had to shift our thinking about what constitutes a collection from those materials that the library has on-hand to anything to which the library can provide access. Collection development must be carefully focused. The ease of browsing another institution’s holdings by way of the World Wide Web has helped to facilitate this transition from owning to providing access. Nonetheless it has required an amount of reeducation, not only of the users but of the librarians. It necessitates a new approach to our philosophies of collection development and interpretation of attendant responsibilities.

Aside from these economic pressures, there have been changes in the academic approach to the discipline of art history that have also meant changes for art libraries, particularly those in large academic settings. Art history was for a long time concerned with a particular, and not terribly inclusive, canon of art; “founded in the United States . . . it was grounded in connoisseurship, the practice of making distinctions of quality based on a close scrutiny of artistic styles.”14 This approach was often introduced by the art survey course: from antiquity to modern times in two semesters. Along the way little mention was made of non-Western, nontraditional art or architecture. In the period between the 1960s, and its attendant social changes and the mid-1990s the field changed radically. Art history is now often taught as part of the wider topic of cultural studies, and a multitude of “isms” have been used to interpret the subject, from Marxism and feminism to semiotics. While the pendulum swings have slowed down over the past few years, the field is now much broader than ever before; “. . . the fine arts broadened from
the traditional study of art history and studio arts to include design, photography, crafts, social, economic, and ethnic aspects.” Much that previously was considered ethnography, anthropology, or popular culture is now included in the art history curriculum. This more interdisciplinary approach has meant that the art library has also had to broaden its focus. These multicultural resources have been among the first to take advantage of electronic applications. They lend themselves well to multimedia, interactive presentations. As such, they present new issues for the librarian in determining how and where to provide access as well as technical support. For instance, one must consider whether the resource is to be networked or not, and how much help is needed for users to understand the interface.

The field of art history is one with a long tradition of changing ideologies and methodologies as the discipline reflects the time and culture in which it operates. If we consider all these changes, the historical as well as the recent–technology, interdisciplinary studies, and tighter budgets—what does the job of an art librarian look like today, and in the near future? Traditional duties have not gone away; we still need to manage collections, budgets and personnel, we still acquire and maintain collections of books, periodicals and other materials, and we still must respond to a wide variety of users’ needs.

Clearly it is in the area of technology and all its implications that we are feeling, and are likely to continue to feel, the greatest impact. Technological advances allow us to look at materials in new and interesting ways; we can dynamically integrate text and image and provide access to this information to numerous users at the same time. Sitting in my office at Harvard or at my computer at home I can look at the current exhibit at the Louvre or browse the holdings of the Getty library collections. Art history professors plan their course Web sites along with their lectures.

When one is deep into a digitizing project or surfing the Web it is easy to lose sight of the fact that we are still at the outskirts of a new environment. Certainly this is true in terms of automating the art library’s visual resources. There are two sets of issues surrounding this area with which art librarians must deal: first, the users’ needs and second, the problems we face in trying to implement these new technologies.

New technology implies change; for many professional art librarians, particularly those who have been in the field for a significant amount of time, there is on the one hand some reluctance to abandon the tried and true and on the other hand great anticipation as to what the new world can offer. “The reactions to the use of new technologies for the teaching of art history or art appreciation courses range from total rejec-
tion . . . [to] [t]he other extreme . . . represented by those who swallow the hype of technological promise and expect a dazzling plentitude of information and images with the expectation that ‘the computer will do it all,’ whatever in the world ‘all’ means in this case.”

The reality, of course, lies in between; that is, some things don’t change because they don’t need to, others change for the better, and yet more is in transition.

As Professor of Art History Kathleen Cohen wrote: “[w]orking over the years at the intersection of art history, education, and the new technologies, I find that I continually sail up to the brink, with visions of what lies just beyond the horizon, wishing for the skills and technology to take me there.”

We envision at warp speed: what we accomplish comes more slowly.

Progress in digital imaging technology has contributed much to this envisioning. The World Wide Web is full of exciting, full color images, free for the taking. Why, many of our users wonder, are we still sitting in libraries with hundreds of thousands of analog slides yet to be digitized? Many managers of these slide collections are pondering the same question, trying to figure out how best to proceed.

For example, at Harvard I manage the Slide Library for the Fine Arts Library, a collection of over 750,000 35mm slides. I also manage our Digital Imaging Lab, where we scan around 500 slides per week, for use in Harvard’s union catalog of visual information as well as on faculty course Web sites. Implementation of a fully digital visual collection is far down the road, with many practical and philosophical issues to deal with along the way.

The first question one might ask is do we want to provide only digital images, only analog images, or a combination of both? The value of an analog slide, like a microform, is that held up to the light it can transmit useful data to the naked eye. While its value is enhanced through projection, in the post-apocalyptic land of no electrical power it is still a useful item. The same cannot be said of the digital asset. Even without considering an impending apocalypse the future viability of digital media is not assured. Computer hardware and software change quickly, and it is a major responsibility for an institution to commit to assuring the continued usability of its digital holdings. Certainly it is not clear when the use of digital images in classrooms will supplant that of projectors and 35mm slides. At Harvard we are collecting analog and digital images in parallel, and are engaged in various projects to retrospectively automate many of our analog slides. I believe that at some point or another the librarians will end up collecting only digital files, and generating analog slides from them upon request. But I could not say if that point is five years away, or
ten, or twenty. And there are many analog slides we will never digitize either because of low use, low quality, or other reasons.

Besides the problems inherent in introducing major changes such as automation of the slide library to our users, there are other obstacles in our way to becoming fully digital. I’d like to touch upon two of them here; one, the idea of shared cataloging standards for visual materials, and two, copyright law.

The concept of shared cataloging and national (or international) standards for the description and dissemination of visual materials is a relatively new one. In reference to the Corporation of London Library the author stated: “At the start of the 1990s we managed the successful move from card on to computer catalogue. This improved public use of our written collections, but rendered even more conspicuous the fact that our visual collections were so relatively inaccessible.” But as we move towards having access to more and more databases of images through the Internet, we can no longer afford to avoid the issue; “… is it necessary for every slide collection … to laboriously catalog an image of the Mona Lisa, or of Michelangelo’s David? But if we are going to share the cataloging we have to agree on whether we are going to say Mona Lisa or Gioconda, or Joconde; Michelangelo or Buonarrotti, or Miguel Angel, etc.”

Art librarians, especially those dealing with visual materials must consider, first, standardization of the content and its expression (cf. AACR2), and second, standardization of the communication of that content in an automated environment (e.g., MARC). In organizations such as the Visual Resource Association (VRA), the Mellon Foundation and ArtSTOR, AMICO, the Getty, and others, people are working in areas like standard vocabulary and cataloging formats, and improved tools for searching and retrieval. Standards are being developed, proposed, and tested both in slide collections and in museum collections. For the time being, however, no set of standards has been widely adopted. As institutions like Harvard commit major resources (financial and time) to the automation of our visual collections we are quite conscious of the need to be consistent in our own use of vocabulary and in how we catalog visual materials, and of the need to document what we do to the extent that we can share what we learn.

Another major issue libraries are dealing with as they digitize their slide collections has to do with copyright law in the United States. The implications of the laws are such that once images start getting disseminated over the Internet institutions become much more vulnerable to lawsuits. Slide collection managers must accept a high level of responsibility for what happens with images, and how they are acquired in a
digital environment even more than they do in an analog one. At the same time, it is not at all clear exactly what all the implications are of our current laws, which seem to be open to a variety of interpretations. In the future (starting now) art librarians will be far more conversant in U.S. copyright law than were their predecessors.

Yet more opportunities await our profession. While the online integration of text and still images may feel like old news, work is now ongoing on integrating other formats, such as sound and moving images. Museums and others are experimenting with ways to tour the virtual exhibit, showing artwork in situ, and allowing viewers to “walk around” a 3-D work such as sculpture. Various online exhibits use animated models and reconstructions to bring ancient times to life.

Technology may bring librarians even more new challenges. One interesting concept, already being tested in some places, is that of using geospatial (GIS) data to relate to images and text. For example, if one linked the geographic identification of a place on a map to its name(s) in the Getty Thesaurus of Geographical Names (http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabulary/tgn), and linked those name(s) to text describing an image, it would be possible to link to a map graphically pinpointing the place. If applied to images of ancient sites, for example, one could visually connect the Parthenon to its location in current-day Athens. To take advantage of such developments, of course, requires the librarian to envision not only how the users will benefit, but also how to incorporate this technology into existing workflows and systems.

Another interesting development concerns how to make it easy for users to search multiple files and databases without having to know which particular vocabulary or metadata system each one uses. This is especially compelling when one considers the number of image databases currently or soon to be available online. There is considerable interest in the art library community in applying consistent standards for description of images. But many of these image resources are created by organizations other than libraries. It is unrealistic to imagine a time when all Internet resources will comply with a single set of standards. Thus we face the challenge of creating an artificial intelligence type of layer between the user and the various resources that can interpret one request for multiple suppliers. This model was well described by Deirdre Stam in 1997 in an article where she describes how “. . . one could interpose expert systems already existing but designed for other purposes, and add archival-type descriptions of collections/institutions/projects against which these enhanced Web retrieval/discovery tools could operate.” 20 While the article describes this model in terms of
collocating information from museums, one could easily extrapolate the concept to apply to other, non-museum online databases. While those with technical expertise will do much of the work required to realize this type of system, the art library community should be involved in conceptualizing these systems. We have a unique understanding of the resources, their descriptions, and how people use them that should inform the development of new technologies in this area.

The skills required for success as an art librarian today go well beyond a grasp of library management and a passion for the subject area. Technical skills need not only to be learned but also to be constantly updated. It is not enough to understand what technology is doing for us today, rather we must participate in discussions about what it could do for us tomorrow. We need to be actively involved with the technology departments of our institutions, as well as with our traditional partners. Art librarians must be willing to allow a greater degree of cross training among their staffs. The reference librarian needs to understand how to export images from the Internet onto a course Web site, and those engaging in collection development need to be able to look beyond print or film. As our users find more resources online, we must learn how best to serve virtual visitors. We need to develop our resources to be useful to a long distance audience; we will need to learn how to communicate better with users when we aren’t face to face with them. We need to continue to educate our parent administrations to better understand how much more we provide to our users in this evolving environment, so they can validate our needs for more space and money, not less. And amidst all these changes we still have to deal with our traditional duties: manage an ever-decreasing budget, keep up with publishing, and keep up with trends in art history and in art itself. As managers we need an increased ability to manage time, others’ as well as our own.

In my opening I asked three questions: Are we as art librarians truly in a new world? Or are we seeing the evolution of a profession as it learns to use and take advantage of new tools? Are we answering new questions, or the same questions but with new resources? We are without doubt in a world that continues to change rapidly. Many of the needs we fill and questions we answer remain consistent in content as well as in approach, and our passion for the subject remains part of our commitment to the field of art librarianship. As professional librarians, however, it is incumbent upon us to learn as much about new technologies, resources, and tools as we can, and to incorporate what we learn into how we provide services to our users. Our profession must evolve if we are to remain viable and important participants in the world of art information management and scholarship.
In a piece such as this one it seems almost *de rigueur* to conclude with a statement that “it is certainly an exciting time to be a [your title here].” These are undeniably interesting times in the world of art librarianship. To quote again from Kathleen Cohen: “We are not quite sure what adventures we will have or what we will find, but there will undoubtedly be times of frustration as well as of great excitement.”

NOTES

3. Ibid.
7. Freitag, op. cit. (see note 5).
19. Angela Giral, op cit. (see note 16).