Indivisibility in the Twenty-First Century, or the Elephant in the Living Room

by Martha Mahard

Perhaps more than any other kind of subject specialist, the art librarian in a fully developed collection has to deal with a disparate assortment of materials and media, the result of his involvement with images and varied substitutes for original artifacts as well as with printed texts.

In 1982, as a result of a heated ongoing debate carried on both within ARLIS/NA and in other related organizations, Wolfgang Freitag and Nancy DeLaurier were each invited to be keynote speakers at the Art Libraries section of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) conference to be held that August in Montreal. The intention seemed to be to present both sides of the issue as to whether there should be two separate professional organizations, one devoted to the interests of “book” librarians and another for visual resources curators (at that time still referred to as slide curators).

Dr. Freitag’s paper was entitled “The Indivisibility of Art Librarianship.” As an advocate for professional unity he expressed the view held by many that art librarians serve users who are most often in need of images, regardless of format. While Dr. Freitag may have been representing a conservative, status quo position, he made some remarkably prescient observations. These observations, along with the success of the 2002 joint ARLIS/NA – VRA conference in St. Louis, were the impetus for this article.

Defining librarianship as “an umbrella term for a number of related service professions which combine to serve a subject discipline, a population group, of an educational objective,” Dr. Freitag went on to predict that “the greatest challenges with which the profession will have to cope during the next decades will arise in the visual collection field.”

Time has shown Dr. Freitag’s forecast to have been accurate, while his pessimism about the viability of a separate organization devoted specifically to visual resources was unfounded. The VRA has indeed flourished and made remarkable contributions to the development of the field of art librarianship. The question of greater unity in the profession remains and Dr. Freitag’s underlying message still resonates for many of us today.

As I mentioned above, several years of vigorous debate had preceded the two IFLA talks of August 1982. The events leading to the formation of the Visual Resources Association (VRA) may be unfamiliar to many, so I take the liberty of reviewing the highlights here. The development of VRA can be traced in the pages of the International Bulletin for Photographic Documentation of the Visual Arts (predecessor to today’s VRA Bulletin) and in the ARLIS/NA Newsletter and Art Documentation of those years.

Considerable activity in a number of different organizations testifies to the vitality of the participants and their interest in both increasing their professional standing and establishing practice standards. A group of slide curators had been meeting as an unofficial section during College Art Association (CAA) conferences since the early 1970s. The Visual Resources Special Interest Group (VR SIG), established in 1974, was, by the early eighties, the largest and most active of such groups within ARLIS/NA. The slide curators group in the Mid-America CAA (MA-CAA) had been publishing a widely-read newsletter (later to become the International Bulletin of Photographic Documentation of the Visual Arts) for almost seven years. Special interest groups also appeared within ARLIS/UK, the International Conference of Art Historians (CIHA), and IFLA.

Remember too that during the 1970s considerable energy was being devoted to the adoption of the MARC format in libraries and that ARLIS/NA members, like their counterparts in other fields, spent much conference time discussing the implications of the new format and automation of cataloging processes. It is hardly surprising that the visual resources curators felt that these issues were not of utmost concern to them at that time. Computer technology was beginning to occupy the thoughts of many and the need to meet with others and share ideas and problems grew with the demands of the new technology.

While art librarians were addressing these questions, the slide curators were still responding to the daily demands of users in need of teaching materials. A large percentage (over 60% in a 1984 survey) of the slide curators who were ultimately to found VRA were operating within departmental collections rather than in libraries, and their resistance to the discussion of the larger, more over-arching concerns of library systems is perhaps understandable. The debate began to form around these lines and soon devolved into an unfortunate “them” and “us” attitude. Many slide curators felt the need to maintain a close affiliation with CAA at a time when ARLIS/NA was beginning to assert its independence and move towards holding a separate conference not connected with the CAA annual conference. The question of qualifications for the field became another: area of controversy as ARLIS/NA developed a document on standards for staffing an art library. Early in the documentary process, a division arose over whether to describe the M.L.S as “mandatory” or even “desirable.” By the third draft the term had been changed to “beneficial.” The curators working in art departments felt that the subject degree in art history was the sine qua non, and described the library degree as not “pertinent.” The
debate very quickly became personal and passionate and lines were drawn. The term “library chauvinism” was hurled about as a term of opprobrium and even applied to B.J. Irvine’s landmark work Slide Libraries.8 Although the debate continued, the outcome was predictable.

In 1981 at the ninth annual ARLIS/NA conference in San Francisco, formation of a separate visual resources organization was discussed at the VR SIG business meeting. A questionnaire was developed and sent out to 915 visual resources curators asking for opinions on the issue. One hundred and forty-two valid responses were received; seventy-seven were in favor of maintaining the status quo by keeping one single organization. Of the eighty-seven respondents who said they would join a separate organization, only sixty-nine said they would be active and only twenty-four were willing to serve as officers.9 Convinced that the respondents had not understood the issues, the group then distributed a second set of more focused questions. Specifically the respondents were asked to indicate a preference for one of four possible scenarios:

a. maintain the status quo;
b. make an existing group the focus for all national VR activities;
c. form an information network to coordinate the VR activities of other organizations;
d. form a separate new VR organization.10

The same 915 curators were solicited again by mail. The spring issue of the International Bulletin and the summer 1982 issue of Art Documentation each carried a report on the first survey and urged readers to respond to the second. The International Bulletin included an editorial by Nancy DeLaurier in favor of the fourth option.11

In his presentation at IFLA in Montreal that August, Dr. Freitag referred to the results of the first survey, noting that while it was not an overwhelming endorsement, it did constitute an encouraging sign. He concluded his remarks urging “a truly unified profession of book and visual resources librarians.”12 Although Dr. Freitag had submitted his paper in advance to Ms. DeLaurier, she did not address his remarks in her paper. Ms. DeLaurier gave a talk entitled “Visual Resources: The State of the Art,” in which she summarized the technical and administrative aspects of slide curatorship. In his first-hand report of the proceedings William Walker wrote:

DeLaurier concluded her presentation with the announcement that a new Visual Resources Association (VRA) is being founded, and will soon be incorporated. The announcement caught all of the North Americans present, including Freitag, by surprise.13

The results of the second survey had been tabulated in mid-July. Forty-two responses were received. Of these, twenty-nine were in favor of a new organization. When these results were received and reviewed, a “clear-cut majority”14 was declared and documents were prepared to formally establish the new organization. Ms. DeLaurier announced in Montreal that as a result of this “plebiscite,” VRA would be officially inaugurated in the fall of 1982.15 The manner in which this announcement was made underscores the breakdown in communications that had led up to it. Although Ms. DeLaurier thought that Freitag, and many others in favor of maintaining a single organization, were unable to see the VR point of view, it seems equally obvious today that there was shortsightedness on both sides.

Twenty Years Later...An Arts Information Community

The fact that both organizations have flourished and found ways in which to collaborate would seem to bear out Philip Pacey’s belief that “the framework is now and indeed has been for some time strong enough to accommodate any amount of diversification and subdivision and to hold the parts together.”16 Pacey continues by expressing his long-held belief that “we have created a framework within which different groups can go their separate ways and yet stay together.” In the title of his talk he refers to the “arts information community,” a particularly apt phrase that may help us make the leap into a more cohesive future.

It is still true today that many visual resources professionals work within art or art history departments rather than within a library. For some of these colleagues the M.L.S. remains a vaguely threatening irrelevancy. Standards are given lip service at best, but the requirements of the purse-string holders are bound to be dominant. Here we see a phenomenon that most book librarians have not experienced. In a typical scenario a new faculty member is hired and announces that the slide collection is impossible to use unless rearranged to his/her specifications. The slides of manuscripts are arranged according to the owning institution’s shelf numbers? Ridiculous. Put them in order by title. But won’t that lead to a log-jam under “b” for Bible? No matter, this is how I want to find them. And so the slides are rearranged. Only to have the process reversed six or seven years later when a new instructor arrives and prefers a chronological arrangement. No book librarian would seriously consider a request to rearrange the classification of a book collection to suit an individual, yet slide curators are all too familiar with this type of request.

For others the need to conform to established practice within an academic or museum library holds both advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, library-based collections, while more likely to require that staff hold an M.L.S. (either in addition to or in preference to a subject degree), are also more likely to recognize visual resources librarians at a professional level. In this setting, visual resources professionals have benefited from aligning themselves with professional librarians in terms of status, recognition, and salary equity. As long as slides continue to be used, those charged with managing them, in whatever setting, will be corresponding to the immediate needs for teaching tools while others are seeking images for reference and research. The M.L.S. degree, while not the perfect answer in any way, does provide grounding in the organization of knowledge and the management of computer technology not found in most art history programs. Several years ago the joint committee on professional standards for visual resources professionals again wrestled with this issue. Compromise again was needed. While having been firmly identified with the ‘library chauvinist’s’ school of thought, I have come to believe that there is no one answer that will serve as a blanket educational solution for all who wish to enter this field. A diverse community must be served by information professionals with diverse backgrounds and expertise.
We must move away from any lingering sense of 'them' and 'us' within our professional community. Librarians and visual resources professionals are not on opposite sides, of anything. If we are to form a true 'arts information community,' then we must embrace practitioners from all areas of this field. A community such as ours can, and does, support many organizations. Consider, for example, the very active Visual Materials group in the Society of American Archivists, the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), the Museum Computer Network (MCN), and Safeguarding European Photographic Images for Access (SEPIA). Rather than worrying about whether ARLIS/NA and VRA should be one organization or two, we would be better served by putting our considerable energies into bringing ourselves into contact with the broader 'image and information science' community in order to better serve our community of users.

**Conclusion**

It is my sincere hope that VR professionals who are part of academic departments will see that there is much to be gained by allying themselves with their library colleagues as well as with other information systems professionals. The replacement of slide collections with digital image collections is no longer a wildly futuristic idea. The Cleveland Museum of Art has already eliminated its slide library in favor of a solely digital collection and more institutions will follow. Visual resources curators, whatever their academic backgrounds, bring enormous subject expertise to the profession. This expertise will be essential to the future access to digital images in the arts information field. Enormous digital image resources such as the Art Museum Image Consortium (AMICO) and ArtSTOR will certainly be beyond the scope of art history department budgets and inevitably it is to libraries that we must turn for this support and for the essential infrastructure that access to such systems will demand.

We recognize that computing technology has led us to the need for standardization of data structures, vocabularies, and technical metadata. Concurrent with the development of ArtSTOR, the ultimate research tool, a Union Catalog of Art Images (UCAI) is being tested. Can we not make the jump and acknowledge an indebtedness to library science and move on in a greater spirit of collaboration?

Providing access to images, regardless of format or intended use, is the business of all who labor in the arts information field, whatever we call ourselves, whatever our educational backgrounds. Perhaps it is time for a new definition of art librarianship. I think that Philip Pacey's notion of an all-encompassing arts information community is one worth striving for. It is also precisely what Wolfgang Freitag had in mind when he described our field as "a number of related service professions which combine to serve a subject discipline, a population group, or an educational objective." If we can keep this umbrella of inclusiveness unfurled and still recognize individual strengths, what an exciting future awaits us all.

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**Notes**

3. Freitag, 33.
4. Ibid., 37.
10. Ibid., 10.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Freitag, 37.
13. _Art Documentation_ 1, no.2 (December 1982): 187.
17. Freitag, 33.