Evaluating the Art Approval Plan:
A Case Study

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How does a library know when its collection development funds are well spent? How does a librarian measure the value of one book in comparison to another? In the world of art, does the conventional wisdom apply about the value of publication date or choice of language? These were the questions asked in the Wichita State University Fine Arts Department when the value of the art approval plan was challenged.1

The evaluation of the art approval plan at Wichita State University was prompted, as so many things are, by financial concerns. The library administration believed too much money was being spent on art books, in particular on exhibition catalogs in foreign languages, which were viewed as too esoteric for Wichita State’s curriculum. Consequently, the author, as Music and Fine Arts Librarian, was assigned the task of evaluating the approval plan. No other approval plans were evaluated at this time, with the result that there was very little comparative data available within the library.

The evaluation of the art approval plan at Wichita State University was conducted in 1993 and 1994 to determine use, cost-effectiveness, and relevance to the curriculum of the library’s art approval titles. The art approval plan had been instituted in 1991 with a profile limited to exhibition catalogs. In 1993, the profile was expanded to include trade publications and allocated $14,000. The total was divided into $8,000 for exhibition catalogs and $6,000 for trade publications; 284 titles were shipped, of which 145 were exhibition catalogs and 139 were trade publications. In the study outlined below, “approval titles” includes both exhibition and trade publications received in fiscal year 1993.

At the time of the study, Wichita State had 285 undergraduate art majors and fifty-one graduate art students, enrolled in BA, BFA, MA, and MFA programs. Four study programs were offered: art education; art history; graphic design, with emphases of illustration, graphic design, digital imagery, and photography; and studio arts, with emphases of drawing-painting, printmaking, ceramics, and sculpture. The largest program was graphic design; the smallest, art history.

Defining a Methodology

No methodology was dictated or suggested when the evaluation project was assigned. It evolved over time, influenced by various administrative colleagues of varied tenure. Initially, other institutions were queried informally about their art approval plans. Then it was decided to do a list-checking project, using Choice. Finally, a circulation analysis was added, and the entire art collection included to provide some comparative data. The complete evaluation took two years. The work was done by the Music and Fine Arts Librarian around other assignments, such as subject bibliographer, departmental liaison, reference librarian, and bibliographic instructor.

The evaluation sought to answer the following questions:

- How do the titles purchased from the art approval plan compare with all art titles available?
- Do art titles purchased from the approval plan, particularly foreign language titles, circulate?
- How does the cost of art approval titles compare with average art title cost?
- How does the art approval plan at WSU compare with art approval plans at other universities?

Why Evaluate the Art Approval Plan?

A review of the literature shows that art approval plans are popular. For instance, as reported by Dole, Pistorius pointed out:

Although many art librarians have traditionally been resistant to using approval plans, within the last five years more and more art librarians have begun experimenting with such plans and found them assets to collection development.2

Likewise, Dole reports that Duchin remarked on “the rapidity with which exhibition catalogs and other museum publications go out of print,” noting that this “requires the art librarian to be constantly on top of the art publishing scene.” Approval plans are one way to accomplish this. Stave and Gold also mention cost, efficiency, and timeliness as reasons for an art approval plan.3
Some studies of approval plans have been done, some in specific subjects. Brunning, for example, used the list-checking method to evaluate an approval plan in mass communication. Brunning portrayed the actual performance of an approval plan in a specific academic subject as "a rather poorly explored, hence poorly understood domain." In the literature search for this project, ten years after Brunning, few studies of approval plan performance in specific subjects were found. It would seem then, that the art approval plan is a popular means of collection development, but its full impact has not been thoroughly evaluated.

**First Phase: List-Checking**

In the first phase of the evaluation project, a list-checking approach was chosen. Library literature makes clear that list-checking is an accepted method of collection evaluation. Among others, Baker and Lancaster entitle a section of their book "Evaluation against Standard Lists and Bibliographies." The literature also provides a precedent for using Choice as a means of generating a standard list. Stebelman, for one, used Choice because "it is a major selection tool used by academic libraries." In the Wichita State study, Choice was used to examine the publication of art titles from March, 1992 through February, 1993. Some might argue against the use of Choice for a specialized subject like art. In fact, Choice was problematic for the project because it reviewed many more trade publications than exhibition catalogs, while the approval plan provided nearly equal numbers of trade and exhibition catalog titles. However, it was chosen for this study because of its broad coverage and timeliness and for the lack of a better alternative. For example, Choice issues for the year contained 336 art titles, fifty-five of which were exhibition catalogs, while *Art Documentation*, the official journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America, reviewed only sixty-eight titles, of which four were exhibition catalogs. Further, the *Art Documentation* title count includes not only monographs, but serials, videos, CD-ROMs and other media as well. No other review source which includes so large a number of art titles as Choice is known to the author.

Each Choice art title was assigned a desirability rating from one to five, based on Wichita State's art programs and on the recommendations of the reviewer. Ratings were defined as follows:

1. Specificity, but would support undergraduate study in other disciplines
2. Would support undergraduate study in art
3. Would support upper-division undergraduate, graduate, and faculty study and research in art
4. Would not support WSU programs (for example, architecture); Poorly reviewed
5. Cross-disciplinary, not specifically art

After the ratings were assigned, all titles were searched in Wichita State's online catalog. If the item was owned by WSU, the source of purchase was examined to determine whether the item was obtained through the art approval plan, through another approval plan (from non-art funds or before the art approval plan began), through direct order, or as a gift.

As shown in Chart 1, of the 180 items most desired (those ranked 1, 2, or 3), WSU held 91, or just over 50%. Of the 140 items not desired (ranked 4), WSU held 32 (23%). For those ranked 5, of the total 16 items, 5 (31%) were held by WSU. In Chart 2, of the 91 desired items held, 55 (60%) were supplied by the art approval plan, 18 (20%) were supplied by the other approval plan, and 18 (20%) came from other sources (gift, direct order, etc.). Of the 32 undesired items held, 16 (50%) were supplied by the art approval plan, 11 (34%) by the other approval plan, and 5 (16%) by other sources. For those ranked 5, 1 title (20%) was supplied by the art plan, 2 (40%) by other plan, and 2 (40%) by other.

The art approval plan thus supplied 21% of all Choice art titles (72 of 336 titles), 31% of all desired items (55 of 180 titles), and 11% of all undesired items (16 of 140 titles). It supplied 60% of desired items, and 50% of undesired items, held by WSU. By way of comparison, Brunning found his approval plan covered, although not necessarily supplied, 66% of his desired items list. In the case of Wichita State, to obtain all desired items from Choice...
would have cost approximately $11,430. It is likely cost considerations ruled out some Choice titles, since the art plan supplied many other titles not listed in Choice, especially in the exhibition catalog plan. A close look at the undesired titles ranked 4 revealed most were architecture. Since there is no architecture program at WSU, at the conclusion of the evaluation, the approval plan was modified to remove most architecture titles.

**Cost Comparison**

A simple calculation showed cost per title for Choice desired art titles to be $63.50, while cost per title of art approval titles purchased was $63.45. Thus, cost per title for approval titles was in line with stated cost per title as seen in Choice. One might expect more difference in costs given the expectation of discounts in approval plans. However, many art exhibition catalogs cannot be discounted and these may have helped increase the average cost per title.

**Second Phase: Circulation Analysis**

Use or circulation studies are also a recognized way to evaluate a collection. Lancaster lists “volume and type of use [the collection] is now receiving or has received in the immediate past” as one of the most frequently used approaches to evaluating library collections. Baker and Lancaster devote a chapter of their book to use-centered evaluation approaches. In fact, some large-scale use studies have been completed, notably the Pittsburgh study of Kent and others, and that of Fussler and Simon at the University of Chicago. Phase two of the evaluation, then, turned to a circulation analysis.

Examining the use of the art approval titles led to studying the use of the whole art collection to enable comparisons. Circulation of direct order art monographs was likewise surveyed for comparative purposes. The circulation of all art approval titles purchased in fiscal year 1993 was noted using dates in the on-line check-out system and on date due slips. Art direct orders for fiscal year 1994 were studied in the same way. Circulation figures for the entire art collection were determined through a sample of 192 titles, selected by choosing every 96th title in call number order. While it would have been better to have the approval and direct order titles from within the same fiscal year, this was not possible.

The total shipment size of art approval books for fiscal year 1993 was 284 titles. Of these, 4 were on loan and could not be fully studied, 2 were reference books, 2 were declared missing and 1 was declared lost. Of the total shipment of 284, 136 (48%) were used in some way, counting reference books, books on loan, and books missing or lost as having been used. Of the completely trackable 275 titles, 127 titles (46%) circulated 261 times, for an average of 2.1 circulations per title.

Art direct orders for fiscal year 1994 numbered 90 titles. Four were declared out of print or were not received for some other reason. Of the remaining 86 titles, 28 (33%) showed no circulation activity. The other 58 titles (67%) circulated a total of 94 times as of October, 1994, an average of 1.6 circulations per title.

Circulation of the existing art collection was studied in 1993 and 1994. Of the 192-title sample, 72 (38%) circulated in the previous two years, an average of 1.7 circulations per title; while 101 (53%) circulated in the previous five years. 149 titles (76%) circulated from 1980 on. Date of publication of each title in the sample was also noted. 50 titles (26%) were published in the decade from 1960-1969, with 12 circulating; 56 (29%) in 1970-1979, with 20 circulating; 51 (27%) in 1980-1989, with 24 circulating. Thirteen titles (7%) were published in 1990-93; of these, 10 circulated. The remainder of the titles (22; 11%) was published prior to 1960; 6 circulated. The newest books obviously circulated most heavily, as all but two titles published between 1990 and 1993 circulated. Beyond that, however, there was no strong pattern. Titles published in the 1980s produced only a few more circulations than titles published in the 70s.

Comparisons of art approval circulation with art direct order and total art circulation shows that while 48% of art approval books were used, 67% of art direct order books circulated. However, the approval books circulated at a rate of 2.1 circulations per title, compared to 1.6 circulations per title for direct order books. In the entire art collection, a rate of 1.7 circulations per title in the previous two years was noted. Thus, approval books circulated fewer titles, more times, than direct order books and the entire art collection; while direct order books and the art collection as a whole circulated at about the same rate.

Comparisons between the art collection and the general collection were made to the extent that data on the general collection were available. In Chart 3, for the entire library, 61.8% of the total collection circulated at least once between 1978 and July, 1994. This compares to 76% of the art collection circulating at least once between 1980 and 1994. Chart 4 shows 67% of art titles direct-ordered in fiscal year 1994 circulated, compared to 40% of all titles added to the collection in that year. As seen in Chart 5, in approval art titles for fiscal year 1993, 48% were used, compared to 50% for all titles added in the same year. Thus, use of the existing art collection and titles newly added in art compared favorably with the entire library collection.

**Chart 3. Circulation of Art Books**

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<th>Total Collection</th>
<th>Art Collection</th>
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<td>61.8%</td>
<td>76%</td>
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Art collection circulated between 1980-1994

Total collection circulated between 1978-1994
Non-English Language Title Circulation

On the subject of language, Baker and Lancaster write, "Even in academic settings, patrons check out or borrow on interlibrary loan many more items written in their native tongue than they do materials written in other languages." However, the evidence to back up this assertion is research done in seminary libraries, and interlibrary loans in academic libraries, social sciences, and health professions. Research specifically in the arts is absent.

Language of publication had been an issue of some contention between the subject bibliographer and the library administration. Therefore, language of art approval books was noted to see if it correlated with circulation. Chart 6 shows that English-language items accounted for the highest percentage of use, but also made up the largest percentage of non-circulated titles. Spanish titles were 3% of check-outs, and 1% of non-check-outs. Bi-lingual items, in English and another language, accounted for 2% of check-outs, but 1% of non-check-outs. Italian titles were even, at 3% of check-outs and 3% of non-check-outs. German and French titles had a higher per cent of non-check-outs than check-outs. Foreign language thus did not correlate with use on a language-by-language basis but did produce a larger percentage of non-check-outs (18%) than check-outs (13%).

It is possible that the quality of each title—in particular, its number and kind of illustrations and plates—is more likely than language to determine its use. It is also possible Spanish and Italian languages are preferred by WSU users over French and German. At the time of the study, the senior art historian on the faculty was a specialist in Italian Renaissance and Baroque. Undoubtedly, her presence created some demand for Italian titles. The curriculum at the time did not create a particular need for foreign language titles. This part of the study also made obvious the very small number of foreign language books received, compared to total number of approval titles.

Approval Plan Comparison

Comparison of the approval plan at WSU with that at other universities was begun but not pursued. A query was posted on ARLIS-L, the electronic listserv of the Art Libraries Society of North America. The respondents represented a variety of libraries and were, of course, self-selected. It was interesting to see, however, the range of approval plans reported. One invested as much as $16,700 in a broad approval plan, while another had only $1,500 in an architecture plan. It should be noted, also, that the query sought only libraries with an art approval plan with the same vendor as Wichita State’s. Based on the information received regarding enrollment, programs, and budgets, Wichita State’s approval plan could fit in reasonably with other institutions of similar degrees and enrollments.
Unanswered Questions

In conclusion, this project evaluated the art approval plan, using the list-checking and use-study methods. The study yielded two interesting results in particular. First, the quantity of use of the art collection seemed to follow expected patterns as reported in the literature. Of the use studies cited in the literature review, the one with which it was possible to make the most direct comparison in terms of statistics over a certain time period was the Pittsburgh study, which found 51.63% of the collection circulated in a seven-year period. This compares with 53% of the WSU art collection circulated in a five-year period.

Second, while research cites the link between age and language of publication and use, the present study did not strongly demonstrate this correlation. As mentioned earlier, the research found did not specifically identify patterns in art. Is it possible that age and language do not have the same effect on use in art books as in other areas? In regard to age of publication, it is possible that the present study was not rigorous enough, and would show a correlation with use if it had been differently constructed. However, it might be possible that the language of publication has less effect on art book use than that of other subjects because much of the use is centered on the illustrations. A catalogue raisonné will probably receive heavy use regardless of the language of the text, simply as a result of its comprehensiveness.

The present study was flawed. It would have been preferable to use direct orders and approval titles from the same fiscal year. Further examination of the curriculum, and the type of books checked out most often would have been useful. Questions remain unanswered. What would the results have been if the approval exhibition catalogs had been studied as a separate group from the trade publications? What types of titles are direct ordered and how might the type affect circulation?

In the end, the evaluation of the approval plan at Wichita State proved futile in terms of addressing the concerns which sparked it. Cuts in the approval plan began before the evaluation was complete. Despite these problems, the study does have merit. It presents data where none could previously be found. While the situation at Wichita State University is unique, as it is at each library, it is hoped that through presenting the project something may be contributed to an under-researched field.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Mountain-Plains Library Association Academic Section Research Forum, May, 1997. The author wishes to acknowledge Gary Wolf, who prepared the charts for both versions.


3. Dole, 50.


Other Sources Consulted


