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# The Lantern Slide Collection at the University of Chicago: An Inspired Path to Digitization and Reuse on Chicago's South Side

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# The Lantern Slide Collection at the University of Chicago: An Inspired Path to Digitization and Reuse on Chicago's South Side

## **Abstract**

In 2009, the Visual Resources Center's historic collection of lantern slides at the University of Chicago was digitized and donated to artist Theaster Gates. Since then, a public digital collection has been made available online, the physical slides have been a part of several artist projects, and now the collection is permanently housed in the new Stony Island Arts Bank, a cultural venue for the community on the South Side of Chicago.

## **Keywords**

lantern slides, digitization, artists, archives, artist projects

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

Established in 1902 alongside the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago, the Visual Resources Center began as an extensive collection of about 60,000 glass lantern slides. The collection started with purchased box sets, which were sold thematically by subject to universities, clubs, and other social organizations. The majority of lantern slides were black and white positive images, created by exposing the light sensitive lantern glass to an illuminated negative. Next, slide makers would affix a paper border to the lantern glass, cover it with a clear piece of protective glass and bind the glass sandwich with tape. Lantern slide manufacturers also sold instruction manuals and mass-produced kits intended for amateur photographers, organizations, and educational institutions.<sup>1</sup> It's possible that UChicago professors made some of these slides using the kits, by photographing works of art from books or in person with a medium format camera, then cutting and taping the glass sandwiches themselves. Before slides, students would hover together over a book, or pass matted prints around the room. The lantern slide projector enabled, for the first time, a large class of students or audience to collectively view and discuss an art reproduction.

During the second half of the 20th century, the slide library transitioned from lantern slides into a collection of about 350,000 35mm slides. With advances in photo technology, 35mm film made it easier and cost effective to do copy photography out of books. However, Joel Snyder, Professor of Art History, said that even in the 80s, there were a handful of faculty members still committed to using the lantern slides. They were much larger than 35mm and could provide far more definition for examining details.

## Donating and Moving the Lantern Slides

After transitioning to an all-digital operation in 2005, the Art History department began planning a renovation of the VRC in 2009 to consolidate its space into an imaging lab and offices. This meant moving the 35mm slide collection to the Art Reserve Room in the Regenstein Library on campus, and finding a new home for the lantern slides, which the library did not want. Theaster Gates, an artist and UChicago professor, was placing an order for digital images at the VRC when Megan Macken, the VRC director at the time, mentioned that we were looking to donate the lantern slides. Gates was in the early stages of renovating two adjacent homes on Chicago's South Side, which he would call Dorchester Projects, to become a community art space. He had already acquired large record and book collections and jumped at the opportunity to add the lantern slides. He writes, "By relocating these resources into a restored local space, a diverse audience is encouraged to access and use them for research, contemplation and performance material – enhancing both the edifying and creative function of

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<sup>1</sup>"Special Collections: About Lantern Slides," University of South Florida Libraries, accessed November 19, 2015. <http://www.lib.usf.edu/special-collections/arts/about-lantern-slides/>

a library while enabling an empowered sense of ownership for the community.”<sup>2</sup> Gates and the Art History faculty agreed that they would be moved to the Dorchester Projects.

The slide transfer was not as easy as initially planned. After measuring the cabinets carefully as well as the space where they would be housed on Dorchester Avenue, the movers were scheduled to assess the project. They determined that the Dorchester building was not structurally sound and Gates would have to heavily reinforce the floor to bear the 6ton weight of the collection before they could be moved. With the help of an engineer, the foundation was repaired, 4x4” posts were installed in the basement level under the proposed slide room and ¾” plywood was added on top of the deteriorated flooring.



Figure 1. Coordinating the move of the lantern slides. Photos: Sara Pooley © Theaster Gates

<sup>2</sup> “The Glass Lantern Slide Archive Relocation,” Theaster Gates, accessed November 18, 2015. [http://theastergates.com/section/125485\\_The\\_Glass\\_Lantern\\_Slide\\_Archive.html](http://theastergates.com/section/125485_The_Glass_Lantern_Slide_Archive.html)

## Scanning the Collection

Also in preparation for the move, the VRC called upon faculty to select slides to be digitized, knowing that scanning all 60,000 would be an impossible feat. The majority of slides that were chosen were images of Medieval art and architecture, both because they were often original photography and also seem to have a beautiful richness that other slides lack, especially the black and white reproductions of color two-dimensional work. The VRC then ushered the four thousand selected slides through a rapid scanning project. To conduct the rapid scanning, fifteen lantern slides were laid on an oversize flatbed scanner, and two scans were made; first, a reflective scan to capture the labels for cataloging, and then a transparent scan to capture the actual images. After the scanning and move were complete, the project was put on hold while our own renovation was in progress.



Figure 2. Reflective and transparent full-bed scans

## Slides Find New Life in Artist Projects

In 2010, Gates completed the 2year design-build undertaking of the Dorchester Projects. This multi-functional space used for artist residencies, exhibitions, collections, and offices allowed people to access and use the lantern slides in an entirely new way. Not only has Gates used the slides for art projects, but several artists-in-residence have as well. For example, in July 2010, the Milwaukee Art Museum installed “To Speculate Darkly: Theaster Gates and Dave the Potter,” an exhibit by Gates featuring the slides in a beautiful ceiling installation at the entry. The show examines the work of a South Carolina slave and potter, Dave Drake. Gates used the slides to illustrate the classic history of ceramics from ancient Greece onward, which excludes black artists. In the main gallery, an original Dave the Potter pot is displayed before video, sound, and ceramic creations by Gates using Dave’s poems in gospel songs.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Brehmer, Debra. “The Art of Entries and Exits,” *Wisconsin Gazette* (2010).  
<http://www.wisconsin Gazette.com/art-gaze/the-art-of-entries-and-exits.html>



Figure 3. Milwaukee Art Museum exhibition Photos © Theaster Gates

### Creating a Public Online Collection

After a few years of little progress on the scanned slides at the VRC, we picked up the project to catalog and edit the images in the summer of 2014. Of the 4,000 slides scanned, we have added over 1,000 to the devoted publicly available Luna collection and continue to add images on a monthly basis.<sup>3</sup> Unlike our normal workflow where cataloging and imaging happen separately and by different people, the lantern slides are cataloged and edited in tandem. After the transparent scan is edited into individual images, the reflective scan of the labels is used to create a complete catalog entry in FileMaker Pro. Old abbreviation and symbol mapping spreadsheets and a lot of research help us flesh out the brief notations on the slide labels. We then load the records into the devoted Lantern Slide Collection in Luna, where they are searchable, zoomable and downloadable.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://lantern-slide-collection.lib.uchicago.edu/>

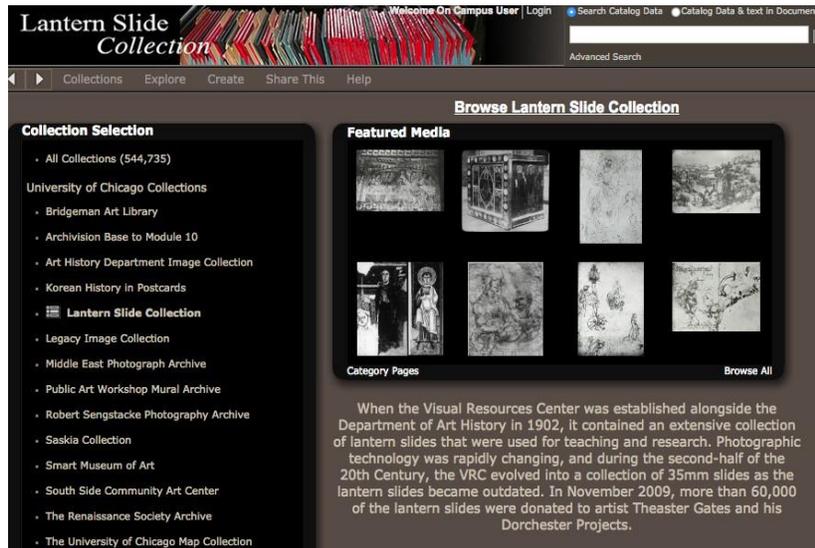


Figure 4. LUNA database: lantern-slide-collection.lib.uchicago.edu

## Stony Island Arts Bank

In October 2015, the Rebuild Foundation, under the direction of Theaster Gates, opened the Stony Island Arts Bank. Furthering Gates’ mission of creating contemporary art and cultural spaces for the local community, this is where all of the foundation’s collections are housed today. The Bank was originally built in 1923, but was closed and abandoned in the 1980s. The building has been restored and reinvented, housing the Johnson Publishing Company Library, the Frankie Knuckles Record Collection, and of course, the University of Chicago Glass Lantern Slide Collection. The Arts Bank now hosts the Lantern Slide Lecture Series, sponsored by the Chicago Architecture Biennial, where guests are invited to “explore and activate” the collection.<sup>4</sup> At the inaugural lecture, which was held during the opening week of the Bank, Kate Toftness, Archival Collections Manager at the Rebuild Foundation, presented Gates’ essay titled “The Artist Corporation and the Collective,” which is available through Duke University Press.<sup>5</sup> I then gave a brief lecture on the history of the archive, after which we asked the 25 guests to select 3-5 slides to leave on the large light table in the study room. These slides would act as an easily viewable selection for daily patrons of the Arts Bank and would be rotated at the following month’s lecture.

<sup>4</sup> “Glass Lantern Slide Lectures,” Rebuild Foundation, accessed November 18, 2015. <http://rebuild-foundation.squarespace.com/upcoming-events/2015/12/10/glass-lantern-slide-lectures>

<sup>5</sup> <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nka/v034/34.gates.html>



Figure 5. Stony Island Arts Bank, Tom Harris © Hedrich Blessing. Courtesy of Rebuild Foundation

## Conclusion

The Art History faculty, who may have thought in 2009 that they would never see the lantern slides again, could not be more pleased that the slides are now available to the public and have taken on such an active life of their own. The VRC is not only thrilled to be able to participate in the Arts Bank events, but also to collaborate with their staff to help broaden the users of the publicly-available online collection, as well as the physical archive. Theaster Gates has truly revitalized the lantern slide collection in ever changing places and we are pleased to create a complimentary online resource that reaches the broader public and documents their legacy at the University of Chicago.

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