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# The Archival Appraisal of Slide Collections at Cornell University

## **Abstract**

This article discusses several case studies of the archival appraisal and acquisition of slides in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell University. It attempts to elucidate the criteria for assessment and describes the outcome in each of these examples. The case studies represent a range of materials in terms of provenance and subject content, including an institutional collection of art and architecture slides, a set of glass slides documenting the northern sky which was used by the Department of Astronomy, and a faculty collection of slides relating to interior design from the College of Human Ecology.

## **Keywords**

slides, archives, appraisal

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

Liz Muller is the Curator of Digital and Media Collections and Head of Archival Technical Services in the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell University. Liz's background includes work in visual resources centers, archives, and libraries. She currently serves on the Editorial Committee for SAHARA (Society of Architectural Historians Architecture Resources Archive) and is a member of the Visual Resources Association and the Society of American Archivists. She holds an AB in history from Princeton University, MA in the history of architecture from Cornell University, and MS in library and information science from the University of Illinois.

Marsha Taichman is the Visual Resources and Public Services Librarian for the College of Architecture, Art and Planning at Cornell University. Marsha has worked in galleries and museums, as well as academic and public libraries, and is a member of the Art Libraries Society of North America and the Education Committee for the Visual Resources Association. She holds a BA in English Literature and Literary Nonfiction from Hampshire College, an MA in Art History from McGill University, and an MLIS from McGill University.

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During the last few years, the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections (RMC) at Cornell University has experienced an unusually large influx of visual materials in the form of 35mm slides and other transparent media. This is a result of several factors: 1) the closure of the visual resources facility that served the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning; 2) the retirement of a generation of artists and faculty in all disciplines who used 35mm slides; and 3) the transition of several libraries on campus into “virtual libraries.” The acquisition of original photography in the form of slides can be very straightforward – as we write, RMC is in the process of acquiring a collection of over 80,000 slides by a prominent photographer of hip hop artists, which is a collecting strength of our special collections. At the same time, the evaluation of collections created for teaching and scholarship in the university is less clear.

Issues of assessment, culling, and preservation of slide collections have been discussed in numerous articles, and some institutions have shared their strategic plans regarding their slide collections –yet little has been written from the perspective of academic special collections.<sup>1</sup> Along these lines, this article presents several case studies of the archival appraisal and acquisition of visual materials at Cornell. It attempts to elucidate the conceptual shifts that are required when a slide collection changes from a teaching collection to an archival one – for example, when value is determined by such concepts as provenance and uniqueness rather than usefulness for teaching. These case studies represent a range of materials in terms of provenance and subject content, including an institutional collection of art and architecture slides, a set of glass slides documenting the northern sky which was of research use to the Department of Astronomy, and a faculty collection of slides relating to interior design from the College of Human Ecology. The authors represent both the archivist’s perspective and that of the discipline-based visual resources librarian in advocating for image collections that have historical value.

### **Institutional Collection of Art and Architecture Slides**

When the Knight Visual Resources Facility closed in 2009, the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning (AAP) was left with hundreds of thousands of 35mm slides, as well as some lantern slides, which had served the teaching needs of the architecture and art communities at Cornell. Initial decisions about how to proceed were made by an advisory board that included faculty, librarians, and an archivist. Eventually, outside consultants were hired in 2011 to make the final appraisal recommendations. Although the authors were not intimately involved in the initial appraisal, we have since become stewards for parts of the collection, and we are responsible for tying up loose ends related to the transfer, digitization, and subsequent reappraisals of various portions of the collection. This section will briefly summarize the early decisions and then discuss two subcollections which are still under evaluation.

Early on, based on criteria including provenance, uniqueness, significance, condition, and need, the advisory group and consultants determined that the bulk of the 35mm slide collection should not be retained. Although the collection had been a rich, invaluable resource for teaching within

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Lesley F. Chapman, “Session 5: After the Transition: Planning for Collections Storage and Workspace Changes in the Digital Environment,” *Visual Resources Association Bulletin* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 81-83 and Christina B. Updike, Kathleen G. Arthur, and Sara Nair James, “Save Our Slides,” *Visual Resources Association Bulletin* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 40-43.

AAP and related disciplines, many parts of the collection did not have significant original archival value. In other words, since the images consisted largely of surrogates of published materials (copy stand work), they had limited potential research use as primary historical documents. Whereas the completeness and local availability of the collection had previously been important for its function as a teaching collection, at this time the collection was evaluated cross-institutionally – which is common practice in special collections and increasingly common in visual resources collections. It was appraised based on the origin of the photographs and the availability of the images online or at other institutions. In addition, any slides recommended for archival retention were considered with respect to their potential research use in future image-based historical scholarship.

Several groups of images were identified by the consultants as candidates for transfer to the archives or retention for future review. These were the subsets of material that were unique to Cornell and its history. Materials that were transferred to RMC in fall of 2011 were original photography of the Cornell campus and Ithaca, documentation of the 1969 Earth Art exhibit organized by the A.D. White Museum of Art (now the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art), images of South and Central American colonial architecture (a relatively undocumented subject), and slides taken by Michael McCarthy, a Cornell alumnus who was a partner at Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill and who already had a large collection of materials in RMC. Materials recommended for retention by the Department of Architecture Archives – a departmental office used to collect accreditation documents – included those related to college history, such as slides of student and faculty work, historical views, and AAP faculty photography. A collection of slides donated by urban planner Arthur Kunz was designated to be sent to the Arthur Kunz Memorial Library. The remainder of the 35mm slides was offered to AAP faculty in fall 2011. As a side note (which merits further treatment elsewhere), the digital component of the Knight collection is still maintained by the Cornell University Library and is growing based on faculty requests for teaching images.

One loose end from the above process was the appraisal of the lantern slides which had been collected by AAP and the Department of the History of Art during the early 20th century. This collection consists of eight cabinets of slides, almost all of which are black and white and three-quarters of which are reproductions copied from photographic prints, architectural drawings, and publications. Given strong interest in the glass slide format and faculty sentiment that the collection is valuable for the documentation of the history of the disciplines, the glass slides were retained by AAP and moved to secure storage in RMC in 2010. At the time, RMC agreed to store the collection for six months and then work with AAP to assess the collection to determine which portions to retain. During 2011, an archivist surveyed the collection, determining that the content of the slides had limited original archival value and that RMC actually holds the original photographs upon which one large group of slides is based. Another consideration is that the collection is in relatively poor condition, with about one tenth of the collection having suffered water damage. After two years, RMC is now prepared to assess the collection, spurred on by a researcher's request for access to the collection, as well as the possible renovation of the area which holds the slides. An archivist will revisit the appraisal with a faculty member in architecture later this year using similar criteria for appraisal of 35mm slides. We anticipate that one of the major challenges will be balancing faculty interest in the glass slide format with the archival value of the content, as well as the condition of the slides.

Another unresolved question relates to the digitization and preservation of the slides of John Reps, Professor Emeritus in the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell, who donated approximately 30,000 slides to the Knight Visual Resources Facility. Professor Reps' research involves American urban iconography, the expansion of cities, and nineteenth century views of the American landscape. The slides in this collection include original photographs of his national and international travel, as well as copy stand photography of aerial views and city plans. The slides document a research career of more than 65 years, and these images could prove useful for future scholarship across multiple disciplines.

In the recommendations from the consultants, these slides were part of the group of designated for the Department of Architecture Archives; however, it is now unclear if the departmental archives have the physical space for this collection. Consequently, the Visual Resources Librarian in the Fine Arts Library has become involved in the discussion of how to best handle these slides. Reps felt that the most important part of the collection would be the series of aerial views, which are mostly copy stand images taken from books. Since AAP has reserved funds to digitize a portion of these images, the next step will be selection for digitization, and the Reps slides are in the process of being assessed by the library's urban planning bibliographer, a faculty member in architectural history, and RMC's Curator of Digital and Media Collections. At the time of publication, the Visual Resources Librarian is in the midst of planning possible digitization scenarios with the library's digital production group. They are investigating which portions of the collection may be online elsewhere, as well as how much of the collection can be digitized within the budget. As of right now, the future location of the physical slides is unknown, but some portions of the collection may be transferred to RMC as an addition to Professor Reps' existing archival collection.

### **Palomar Sky Survey (POSS1) from the Physical Sciences Library**

During 2010, the Physical Sciences Library at Cornell transitioned to a "virtual library."<sup>2</sup> The physical collection was sent to off-site storage, while the Chemistry Librarian and the Physics and Astronomy Librarian remained on-site to provide library services. By the fall of 2011, the only lingering artifacts of the physical library were two sets of astronomical slides – the European Southern Observatory's Southern Sky Survey film slides (1970s) and the Palomar Observatory Sky Survey (POSS1) glass slides of the northern sky (1948-58). When adjacent academic departments required that the library clear the space for use as a study area, the librarians needed to find a new home for the slides. The librarians decided to move the Southern Sky Survey slides to the nearby Mathematics Library where they could be referenced for research relating to the Cornell-Caltech observatory project in Chile, but they were unsure where to retain the glass slides of the POSS1 northern sky survey.

Faculty in the Department of Astronomy were strong advocates for keeping the POSS1 collection on the basis of its importance in documenting the sky at a particular moment in time (which could be contrasted to new sky surveys), as well as its significance to the history of the discipline. This slide set, created at the Palomar Observatory in southern California, consists of

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<sup>2</sup> *Clark Physical Sciences Library*, Cornell University Library, accessed August 29, 2012, <http://physicalsciences.library.cornell.edu/>.

937 fields of the sky, each documented on two 14 x 14 inch glass plates. The master set of slides was created by the California Institute of Technology, but copies of the Palomar sky survey were distributed to many astronomical research centers, and they played an important role in the development of astronomy as a discipline. At Cornell, these slides were used for teaching and research, and they were housed in two large metal cabinets in the Physical Sciences Library. The entire set was digitized by another institution beginning in the 1980s, and it was available beginning in the 1990s on CD-ROMs and online.<sup>3</sup>

This scenario probably sounds familiar to anyone who has assessed an art and architecture slide collection, and lantern slides in particular. For the librarians in the Physical Sciences Library, the decision-making process was driven by both faculty and space needs. They felt that the slides should be retained at Cornell, but to a certain extent, it did not matter to the physical sciences librarians where the slides were retained and stored. When the Cornell library's off-site storage facility could not accept the heavy cabinet of glass plates, the librarians approached archivists in RMC to see if the archives would be interested in retaining the slides.

In the communication between the physical sciences librarians and the archivists in RMC, it was clear that we were using different definitions of a "unique" collection. To the physical sciences librarians, the collection was unique at Cornell and thus should be retained. To the archivists in RMC, "uniqueness" was defined cross-institutionally. It was not so much a question of whether the slides should be kept, but rather *who* (i.e. which institution) should keep them. If the master slides were potentially at Caltech and the slides were digitized and available online, then how many other sets (if any) should be retained at other institutions? Overcoming this communication barrier between librarians and archivists was a very important aspect of the decision-making process.

In the case of the POSS1 slides, it was clear that the slides were not unique to Cornell. At the same time, the archivists agreed that the slides were significant for their role in astronomical research, as well as their demonstration of the use of visual media in the discipline. In addition, they had become relatively rare, with holdings at perhaps 10 other institutions, and would probably be best-served from a preservation perspective by housing them in special collections. Given the strong faculty arguments for their research use and the fact that the history of science is a major collecting area for RMC, the archives decided to accept the slides. Since the Cornell astronomy department at Cornell does have a connection to Palomar – they are a research partner onsite with Caltech, who operates the observatory – that provided another reason to retain the slides. Any reappraisal at a later date will take into account the above factors.

### **Faculty Slide Collection of American Vernacular Architecture and Interiors**

Because the University Archives is part of RMC, we hold the papers of many Cornell faculty members. These materials most often consist of research notes, teaching materials, and correspondence, and at times they include visual materials such as 35mm slides. One recent example of the appraisal of slides was the collection of Jan Jennings, a faculty member who researched and taught interior design and American vernacular architecture in the Department of

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<sup>3</sup> "CASG Sky Survey Overview," MAST Catalogs and Surveys Group, Space Telescope Science Institute, accessed August 29, 2012, <http://gsss.stsci.edu/SkySurveys/SkySurveys.htm>.

Design and Environmental Analysis, which is part of the College of Human Ecology at Cornell. She also compiled an online database of images documenting interior archetypes, called *Intypes*,<sup>4</sup> so the collection of images documenting interiors was central to her work. During spring 2012, when she was cleaning out her office after retirement, the College's Records Manager (who is also our University Records Manager) began working with Professor Jennings and exploring options for the digitization of the collection. Although digitization made sense in terms of access to the images, no party involved had funds for the project, and there were potential copyright restrictions which may have made online access limited. Eventually, since the impulse to digitize originated in a desire to preserve the slides, the physical preservation of the original slides was discussed as an option, and the records manager suggested the possible addition of the slides to Professor Jennings' archival collection in RMC.

As the College-imposed deadline for the office cleanout neared, the appraisal was made by the records manager and the Curator of Digital and Media Collections in RMC. In order to make a decision, we met with Professor Jennings to discuss the collection and the significance of different parts of collection. After this very interesting and productive conversation, we decided to add approximately half of the slides (about 1000) to her collection in the University Archives. Specifically, we retained her slides documenting American vernacular architecture and interiors, the images which Professor Jennings felt were the most important for her work. Although the images were mostly copy stand works, they constituted Professor Jennings' research collection and were directly related to her writings. Some were images of printed works that Professor Jennings had taken while doing research in various archives; many were from Professor Jennings' personal collection of trade catalogs and postcards, which is not available in a public repository. Our rationale in adding these slides to her collection was that we could consider this a curated collection of non-unique materials and that Professor Jennings' selection as a subject expert was significant.

It is important to note that we did not retain several other subsets of material in Professor Jennings' collection. First, she had several slide cabinet drawers full of images documenting events in the College of Human Ecology. These were set aside for consideration by the College or possible appraisal for the College's collection in the University Archives. Second, we did not retain her lecture slides, which consisted of works by well-known designers and documented design theory. These were images of well-documented canonical sites, and these or similar images are widely available online (in other visual resources collections, for example) and in print. We recommended to the College that they offer these slides to other Human Ecology faculty before disposing of any slides.

## **Conclusions**

During the writing of this paper, RMC has been corresponding with faculty in the Department of Plant Biology about the acquisition of a collection of 35mm and glass slides from a faculty office. The primary goal in making these appraisal decisions is to preserve historically significant materials for use in future image-based scholarship, a goal to which we are committed. As always, the challenge lies in balancing this aim with and practical considerations such as space limitations and staff time for archival description. A colleague who is a music

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<sup>4</sup> *Intypes*, College of Human Ecology, Cornell University, accessed August 29, 2012, <http://intypes.cornell.edu/>.

librarian recently commented that the abundance of slide collections being offered to libraries reminded her of LPs received from faculty in previous decades, and this analogy holds true in terms of both the richness of material and the challenges presented.

It seems that librarians, archivists, and faculty often have one of two somewhat opposing tendencies when collections are being deaccessioned from institutional or faculty collections. First, there is often an impulse to digitize the slides – even entire collections – without appraisal. In some instances, slides could be moved to the archives of their institutions because of their potential historical value, if space allows. In other cases, there is a strong desire from involved parties to move physical image collections to the archives for safekeeping. While this makes sense from a preservation standpoint, the slides may not have the research value that one might anticipate in this context.

Each of the above case studies provided an opportunity to consider the ways in which images might be used for future scholarly research, and each scenario was different. There is no single guideline which applies in all instances, so appraisal decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis. It is apparent that clear communication is needed between faculty, librarians, and archivists during the appraisal process. Archivists and visual resources librarians must understand each other so that they can articulate decision-making processes to faculty. Together, both parties can advocate for image collections that have archival value.