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Heritage Seeds: Preserving a Scholar-Photographer's Legacy Slides in a Digital Environment

Abstract

As thousands of Baby Boomer-era faculty members near retirement, many who have taught in disciplines such as art history and visual studies are considering what to do with their 35mm. slide collections. This case study of a two-year collaboration between an art and architectural history professor and a visual resources curator outlines some of the choices to be made, and potential problems to avoid, in deciding whether to accept the donation of a faculty slide collection. It underscores the crucial importance of the scholar's willingness to provide cataloging information, and, if possible, to participate directly in the cataloging process.

Keywords

35mm. slides, faculty collections

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Art historian **Allan T. Kohl** is the Visual Resources Librarian at the Minneapolis College of Art & Design, and also teaches special topics art and cultural history courses for the College of Continuing Education at the University of Minnesota/Twin Cities. He did his graduate study in Library/Information Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and in art history at the University of Minnesota. He is Past-President and current Treasurer of the Visual Resources Association, and has served for more than a decade on the VRA's Intellectual Property Rights Committee, with a particular interest in copyright issues as these affect the educational use of images documenting works of art and visual culture.

Dr. Philip Larson has recently retired after 37 years teaching art and architectural history at the Minneapolis College of Art & Design, before which he was a curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. He holds his doctorate in Art History from Columbia University. He also maintains an active studio practice, executing commissioned designs and architectural décor in a wide range of media for public and private buildings throughout the Midwest.

Heritage (or heirloom) seeds: a crop variety that has been selected because of a set of desired characteristics and handed down from generation to generation.

Across the country, thousands of academics from the baby boomer generation are nearing retirement age. Those teaching in fields such as art history, cultural studies, and other disciplines that rely significantly on visual information have often compiled personal image collections over the course of their careers. For many older scholars, these image collections are comprised of 35mm. slides. When a professor retires, begins to clean out his faculty office, and contemplates moving everything home, the question inevitably arises: what will happen to my collection? does anyone want it? will anyone continue to use it?

This scenario played out recently at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, when art and architectural historian Philip Larson completed his final year of teaching. The following article is a case study of collaboration between a retiring professor -- who over his career compiled an extensive 35mm. slide collection combining copy stand images with original location photography, the latter including a significant amount of unique content -- and a visual resources curator with expertise in descriptive cataloging and fielded metadata, as well as in digital file creation and management.



Charles Sumner Frost (US, 1856-1931), Milwaukee Road Depot, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1899. View from southwest. This historic railway terminal that once served passenger trains on the competitive Minneapolis-Chicago route was converted into a boutique hotel in 2001. Photograph by Philip Larson.

Throughout his career, Dr. Larson carried out a considerable volume of location photography of significant Midwestern architecture, focusing particularly on early twentieth century buildings. Interested in construction details and architectural décor as much as in each structure as a whole, he had taken many detailed photos documenting historic public structures and private residences with an eye for elucidating aspects useful in his teaching. As his retirement began to loom more closely, he proposed working with me to select and scan the best of his slides, in hopes that these images would be of ongoing value to his faculty successors. I was fortunate that we had two full years to plan and implement a carefully selected acquisition of the portion of his collection with the highest potential for ongoing use.

Looking back on how this project evolved, I thought it might be useful to outline the steps we took, and the decisions we made, for the benefit of other visual resources curators weighing the proposed donation of faculty legacy collections. Following an initial outline, I'll summarize how these steps were reflected in my work with Dr. Larson's collection.

Checklist for assessing the proposed gift of a faculty legacy image collection:

1. Of what information forms does this collection consist? (*35mm. slides? photographic prints? negatives? digital files (what formats)? other materials?*)
2. What size is the collection? (*number of items included*)
3. What is the physical condition of the collection? How is it housed?
4. Are the contents original materials (such as the scholar's own location photographs), copy materials, or a combination of both?
5. How are the materials identified? (*handwritten keywords on slide mounts? paper lists? photographer's log sheets? electronic spreadsheets? database?*)
6. What discretion would the recipient of this donated collection have to retain only the most useful portion, and discard or recycle the remainder?
7. Along with the collection as physical property, what (if any) use rights would be conveyed to the recipient in regard to original materials? (*Is the donor willing to convey open-ended use rights to allow the recipient to publish images on the open web, or share them through projects such as ARTstor's Open Shelf, MDID, Luna Imaging Commons, SAHARA, etc.?*)
8. To what extent is the contributing scholar-photographer willing to provide additional time and expertise to facilitate the level of descriptive cataloging necessary to make these donated resources fully useful and accessible to others?



Louis H. Sullivan (US, 1856-1924), Merchants National Bank (Brenton National Bank of Poweshiek County), Grinnell, Iowa, 1899. [L] View of main (south) entrance; [TR] South wall clock above main entrance showing glazed brick and glass mosaic; [BR] Detail of glazed terracotta cartouche surrounding the oculus above the main entrance. Among the finest of Sullivan's "jewel-box" Midwestern bank buildings, the Merchants National Bank was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1976. Photographs by Philip Larson.

Here's how our particular project evolved over a two-year period:

1. *Of what information forms does this collection consist?*

Dr. Larson's collection consisted of 35mm. slides -- primarily Ektachrome, but with some examples of Kodachrome as well.

2. *What size is the collection?*

From Dr. Larson's collection of some 20,000 slides we chose several hundred *crème de la crème* originals for scanning and cataloging.

3. *What is the physical condition of the collection? How is it housed?*

Dr. Larson's collection had been housed in four Neumade 5-drawer slide cabinets. Slides selected for scanning were placed in archival plastic sleeves, grouped by architect and building. These slides were removed one at a time and scanned as master TIFF files

using our Nikon Super Coolscan 5000 dedicated slide scanner. The resulting raw TIFF files were managed in Photoshop, with subsequent cropping, perspective correction, and compensation for color shifts and tonal loss frequently performed under Dr. Larson's direction.

4. Are the contents original materials (such as the scholar's own location photographs), copy materials, or a combination of both?

Only a portion of Dr. Larson's collection was comprised of original material. The larger part consisted of copy stand slides of art in his areas of specialization, such as German Expressionist prints and the mixed media works of Paul Klee. These he had photographed mostly from publications in the MCAD Library collection, and many of these slides were well-documented with call numbers and page references. Slides such as these were useful as collection development pointers to the publications and illustrations that he had used as scanning sources, but did not need to be retained once this information had been recorded.

5. How are the materials identified?

As each group of slides was scanned, I then began to build catalog records for these images, bringing together information from a variety of sources in what proved sometimes to be a challenging process. While a professor often includes only the briefest of hand-written information on a slide mount to relate that image to his lecture notes, a cataloger may not always have the knowledge in depth that will allow him to translate such information snippets into a meaningful record.

As is typical of most personal collections, Dr. Larson's slides were usually identified only with the architect's last name, or sometimes a keyword representing the name of the building depicted.

In the process of compiling complete catalog records for each building, I often needed to research the full name of the architect or firm, many of which were not previously represented in our name authority database. I frequently consulted published information sources, including Larry Millett's *AIA Guide to the Twin Cities* (2007), as well as the older but still useful book *A Guide to the Architecture of Minnesota* (1977) by Gebhard and Martinson. The Northwest Architectural Archives at the University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis <<https://www.lib.umn.edu/scrbm/naa>> provided information on names not included in standard sources such as *Contemporary Architects* and the Getty's Union List of Artist Names (ULAN), and proved particularly valuable for specifics on late nineteenth and early twentieth century architects and architectural firms of local significance. Other online resources such as the Emporis GMBH site <<http://www.emporis.com/>> supplied additional information on building heights, dates of original construction and subsequent modifications, as well as the alternate names by which a structure may currently be known as a result of corporate mergers and re-branding.



Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, 225 South Sixth Building (First Bank Place; US Bankcorp Building) Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1992. [L] View from southeast; [R] Detail of main entrance. One of the most distinctive buildings on the Minneapolis skyline with its illuminated “broken halo” crown, the “225” was acquired by Capella University in 2008 and is now known as Capella Tower. Photographs by Philip Larson.

MCAD uses V-Cat as its image cataloging utility, so after compiling a work record for each building we also needed to create separate linked image records for each view or detail thereof. Here I often found it essential to schedule time with Dr. Larson to work with me at the cataloging station, so that I had the opportunity to ask questions about orientation, angle of view, the relationship of parts to the whole, and the significance of what he had chosen to photograph. To elicit specific information, I asked questions such as these:

What is the historical context for this building? (*date, culture, style period*)

Why is this building significant? (*the kind of one-sentence summary an instructor might give a class to add to their notes*)

Why did you take this photograph? (“*to show students the . . .*”)

What were the circumstances in which you took this photograph (*year, relation to research project or publication; e.g. “in 1992, just after the building was cleaned/restored”*)

6. *What discretion would the recipient of this donated collection have to retain only the most useful portion, and discard or recycle the remainder?*

Our selection process was careful and rigorous: from half a dozen similar photographs, we would together identify the best one, with from one or two to a dozen or more details.

7. Along with the physical property, what (if any) use rights would be conveyed to the recipient in regard to original materials?

As our working relationship has grown, I have urged Dr. Larson to think expansively about making his work more widely available, beyond the MCAD campus. While younger scholars at earlier stages of their careers may feel the need to be more protective of their original photographs, especially if these relate to their future research and publication goals, scholars facing retirement are typically more concerned about their legacies, and are willing to think more expansively about how their work can continue to advance the broader goals of their colleagues, their departments, their institutions, or even their disciplines as a whole.

It is much easier to provide for future flexibility of use by securing a written conveyance of use rights directly from the scholar-photographer while a legacy project is in the process of being planned or carried out, rather than having to seek rights clearance from an estate years afterwards. It was to facilitate this level of forward thinking in regard to legacy collections that the Visual Resources Association's Intellectual Property Rights Committee developed the *Model Agreements for the Use of Donated Images and Image Collections by Educational and Cultural Organizations*, available on the VRA web site at http://vraweb.org/resources/ipr/model_agreements/index.html. As part of this process, it is also important to discuss with the donor the form of credit line that will be appended to each image in order to identify the scholar-photographer and help preserve his legacy.



Long & Kees (American architectural firm, 1885-1897), Masonic Temple (Hennepin Center for the Arts) Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1888-1890. [L] View from southeast; [TR] Detail of main (east) entrance portal; [BR] Detail of sculpted relief décor above main (east) entrance portal. This Richardsonian Romanesque

structure was renovated in 1979 for use by a variety of visual and performing arts companies; its spacious eighth floor hall is now a venue for the Illusion Theatre. Photographs by Philip Larson.

8. *To what extent is the contributing scholar-photographer willing to provide additional time and expertise to facilitate the level of descriptive cataloging necessary to make these donated resources fully useful and accessible to others?*

Over the years, I have heard too many anecdotal accounts of retiring professors who seek to donate their entire collections to their institutions, often with minimal cataloging or even notes as to what each slide represents, in hopes that the visual resources curator, or some graduate student assistant, will someday be able to identify each subject work, gather all the missing information necessary to build a catalog record, and figure out exactly what portion or view of the subject work is represented in each slide. Alas, I feel fortunate that Dr. Larson was willing to work with me to choose the “best of the best” among his original slides, and to let the rest go. Moreover, he understood that his input in the cataloging process was essential to building complete and accurate records – especially in regard to details.

So to all of those “baby boomer” faculty members on the cusp of retirement who are beginning to inquire about donating their collections, I would like to make the following request: don’t just give us your slides – give us your expertise, your insights, the experience you have accumulated in years of presenting this material to your students.

Work with us to secure your legacy for the teachers and students of the next generation.

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