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# Thinking outside the drawers: closing the J. Paul Getty Museum's Slide Library

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# Thinking outside the drawers: closing the J. Paul Getty Museum's Slide Library

## **Abstract**

For almost three decades, the Slide Library at the J. Paul Getty Museum served an audience that consisted of curatorial staff, Education Department staff, and local K-12 teachers. Without an active user base or a budget for staff or collection development, the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Research Library at the Getty Research Institute decided to close and dismantle the Slide Library in 2010. The article describes the decision-making process and outcomes.

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

Tracey Schuster is the Head of Permissions and Photo Archive Services at the Getty Research Institute. She has been at the GRI since 1982, when she began work in the Photo Archive in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu and has since held increasingly responsible positions in the provision and management of Special Collections & Photo Archive reference. Tracey also serves on the Board of Directors for the Los Angeles Police Historical Society.

## **Thinking outside the drawers: closing the J. Paul Getty Museum's Slide Library**

The Slide Library at the J. Paul Getty Museum served an audience that consisted of curatorial staff, Education Department staff, and local K-12 teachers. Many of the local teachers used the slides in the classroom in conjunction with early curricula established by the now defunct Getty Art Education Program.

In 2002, the administration of the J. Paul Getty Museum's Slide Library was turned over to the Research Library at the Getty Research Institute. At the time of the transfer, use of the Slide Library was already low. By 2011, the library was not being used regularly and staffing consisted of one part-time assistant. Therefore, the library became virtually inaccessible for K-12 teachers who were only permitted to use the library by appointment, when staff was available.

Researchers, including the Getty Museum's curators, wanted access to digital images, enhanced searching, and desktop image management technology. Both the Museum's Photographic Services and the Getty Research Institute's Visual Media Services were transitioning from analog to digital operations and would no longer be able to produce slides for the library. Commercially-available slide sets were no longer being acquired. During a time of shrinking budgets, the Slide Library became a low priority and administrators could find no justification to continue staffing it. In addition, the new Museum Imaging Services department needed to expand into the space for a high-profile mass-digitization project.

Without an active user base or a budget for staff or collection development, Museum and Research Library managers decided to close and dismantle the Slide Library. Managers wisely agreed to invite stake holders from Museum Curatorial, Institutional Archives, Information Systems, Museum Imaging Services, Getty Research Institute Digital Services, and Getty Trust Intellectual Property Counsel to meet to identify concerns and discuss options for the slides. As the Research Library's visual resources librarian, I was asked to participate on behalf of the Research Library's Research Services department.

Discussions were highly productive and instructional. In one meeting, we proposed a number of options and analyzed each from the perspective of our areas of responsibility. We discussed options ranging from digitizing and disposing of the slides to donating the slides to another institution. The analysis enabled us to rule out some options and keep others on the table. The final strategy included a combination of several complementary solutions.

Purchase agreements with commercial slide vendors prohibited us from digitizing the slides we acquired. Vendors were digitizing their own holdings and wanted to sell digital images and/or the access to them. The quality of slides produced by Museum staff in the course of their research and travel and copy slides produced by Museum Photo Services from published sources was not suitable for digitization. In addition, we agreed that the copy slides presented challenges concerning copyright and artists' rights.

We determined that donating the slides to another institution would create a potential legal risk for the Getty Trust because other institutions would likely want to digitize the slides due to the lack of demand for analog images. Again, we would be violating the original purchase agreements we entered into with the commercial vendors. We also realized that potential recipients of the slides would want to take only the slides they wanted, leaving us with the problem of what to do with the remaining slides. In addition, it was unlikely that any institution would be interested in adopting a collection that did not include transferable, electronic item-level metadata.

Several generations of local cataloguing databases had been created in house for the Slide Library over the years. Unfortunately, the current database was not compatible with the current Digital Asset Management system being used by the programs of the J. Paul Getty Trust. Worse yet, we no longer had access to any staff who knew how to access the password-protected database!

By the end of the meeting, we were in agreement about how to proceed. Anne Blecksmith, my colleague from Digital Services at the Getty Research Institute, and a former slide librarian, and I would survey and inventory the content of the Slide Library. We would generate and distribute the inventory to the working group and the group would decide what to do with individual groups of slides.

Anne and I recorded the number of slide cabinets and drawers, assessed the slides for condition (color shift, etc.), determined the percentage of slides of Getty Museum objects that already existed as digital files (nearly 100%), and surveyed the sources of the slides. We also determined that no standard slide classification system was applied to the Slide Library's physical organization. As we recorded the contents of the drawers, we affixed small colored adhesive dots to several drawers indicating that they contained slides we believed should be transferred to the Institutional Archives.

The working group reviewed our survey and recommended the following actions:

1. The Institutional Archives would take custody of slides documenting Getty events, exhibitions, signage, wall labels, installations, gallery interiors, special projects, and historic images related to the early years of the Getty Villa in Malibu. These slides would be added to the historical record of the institution and eventually digitized for preservation and access.
2. The Museum's curatorial departments could take custody of selected portions of the collection relevant to their work, but individual staff members could not use the slides for personal projects due to the various licensing and copyright issues we had identified. The Museum's Acting Director would set a deadline date by which time departments must claim the slides they want. Departments could also take slide cabinets with approval of the Facilities Department.
3. Slides that were not claimed by the deadline date would be destroyed, rather than offering them to another institution, due to the concerns I discussed earlier in this paper. We would pursue with local authorities the appropriate disposal or recycling method. Unclaimed slide cabinets would be donated to local non-profit organizations.
4. The Getty Research Institute's Information Systems department would archive the Slide Library database and application code to CD or DVD. Fortunately, the Getty Trust's Information Technology Services department was able to retrieve the main database files, in case we needed to reconstruct the database in the future. The legacy computer equipment would be decommissioned.

The Institutional Archivist and I made arrangements to physically transfer the 2,500 historically-significant slides from the Slide Library to the cold storage vault at the Getty Research Institute. Once the transfer was complete, the Museum's Acting Director composed and distributed an email message to the Curatorial staff regarding the status of the Slide Library and offered the staff the opportunity to take the remaining slides for departmental use. Staff was given two weeks to remove slides. A copy of our survey was attached to the email.

Although some staff members were initially reluctant to close the Slide Library, the thoughtful and inclusive approach we took regarding the future of the slides made the transition comfortable for everyone. Rather than mandating that the collection be disposed of in its entirety or boxed and moved into deep storage, we wisely chose to conduct a thorough survey of the Slide Library and make decisions about the slides based on their visual content, quality and sources.