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Eulogy to a Slide Library

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Abstract

A short history of the birth and death of a library of slides of artworks within a small liberal arts college.

Keywords

35mm slides, lantern slides, slide libraries, digital images

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Mark Mathew Braunstein is the Visual Resources Librarian and Curator of Campus Artworks at Connecticut College, of which many of the artworks are posted at: www.conncoll.edu/visual

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Art is created in the light, while art history is studied in the dark. When the lights dim in lecture halls throughout academia, an apparition of an artwork appears and the class begins. During the late 19th century, that image emanated from the light of a candle inside what was called a *magic lantern*. When Connecticut College began teaching art history, the magic was over, zapped by electricity. Illuminated by an arsenal of cannon-like electric-powered projectors, the college's collection of lantern slides grew annually and in 1960 peaked at 35,000, when the luster of lantern slides had begun to fade.

Fade indeed, as the fragile, large, black and gray lantern slide was upstaged by the durable, compact, and colorful 35mm slide. During the transitional 1950s, the Slide Library accessioned and circulated both formats. In the 1960s, both the clunky lantern slide projector and the cumbersome manual 35mm slide projector stood sentry side-by-side at the rear of the lecture hall. Then in the 1970s, both were retired from active duty by the remote-controlled and sleek Kodak carousel projector. In 1989, the very last lantern slide flashed upon a classroom screen, and Conn College retired its lantern slide projectors forever.

The Slide Library had been sunny and spacious, but as its 35mm collection expanded it no longer was spacious. Though lantern slides had died, they remained in their morgue-like drawers. So in 1997, half of the lantern slides were weeded and sacrificed to science. Conservationists from a large university transported the lantern slides to their labs to conduct experiments upon them, some quite chilling. A year later, the remaining half was further weeded and offered to posterity. A photo archivist from a children's arts museum packed them into his pickup truck, and drove away into the sunset.

For what felt to them like centuries, art history professors everywhere had devoted twice the time as other professors to preparing lectures. First they reviewed their notes, then they pulled their slides, then depending upon what slides they sought but did not find, and what slides they found but did not seek, they revised and reviewed their lecture notes yet again. The 1990s brought digital imaging which held the promise of freeing professors from pulling slides, that is, once the slides were scanned and once the scans were uploaded to their computers. At Connecticut College, the professors jumped immediately onto the bandwidth bandwagon, and they pulled the Slide Librarian onto the bandwagon with them.

In 1996, the Slide Library was renamed the Visual Resources Library, its new name shedding an obsolescent technology. Credit the personal computer. The transition from black-and-white lantern slides to 35mm color slides spanned 30 years—but the transition from 35mm film to digital images occurred virtually overnight. Farewell to the sparkling little gems and jewels called slides. And farewell to slides in the Visual Resources Library. After fifty years of expansion and enhancement and replacement, the slide collection had attained both ample quantity and high quality: now nearly perfect—and—now totally useless.

When a professor requests a digital image, that request often is channeled through e-mail. And when the Visual Resources Librarian provides that image, it too is conveyed through e-mail, even when their two offices abut each other. The Visual Resources Library, which formerly had been a busy haven of Art History Department and Art Department professors, now had become silent and deserted.

From 2005 to 2006, the slide collection was weeded. Farewell to pink slides that never were circulated, and to pink slides that never should have been circulated else their viewers fear they were going blind. Each time a glass-mounted slide hit the trash can, a welcoming clink sounded in the room. The Art History professors all cheered this on. Eventually, half of the collection was trashed, the remaining slides consolidated, and the emptied slide cabinets were sold to several other colleges, and just in time. Barely five years later, one of those very same colleges sought to sell some of those very same cabinets--but too late: no buyers.

During the next several years, only two Classics Department professors from the other end of campus still made pilgrimages to borrow slides. Then one professor died, and the other retired. The remaining slide cabinets still house the surviving slides, but they are used by no one.

In 2010, the part of the room around which the cabinets are clustered was darkened and transformed into a digital photography studio. Copystand and tethered laptop computer, and tripod and light stands, all stand buttressed against slide cabinets. The handles of drawers serve a second life as hooks from which to hang artworks. Should some ghost of the Slide Library's past need access to a drawer to view some slides, that would require much shuffling and rearranging of photo gear, but, in theory, a request could be accommodated. Fortunately such a theory never yet has been proven, because no one has asked to view any slides.

In another few years, the professors born of the digital generation that never pulled slides will want to dump the remaining collection and to cart away the empty cabinets. That inevitable event of the total erasure of the Slide Library will provide a sobering lesson in the ephemerality of all existence. Because a scan stands to a slide, as a slide stands to art, as art stands to life.