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You Can Do It. We Can Help: Building Digital Image Collections Together

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Abstract

At the 2009 College Art Association conference in Los Angeles, the Visual Resources Association organized an affiliate session, called "You Can Do It. We Can Help," focused on building digital image collections together. A distinguished panel of speakers shared information about innovative image projects and presented evidence of the value of such collaborative experiences. This article provides a summary of the session with extended commentary by the moderator, updates on the projects presented, and a discussion of current issues and trends.

Keywords

accessCeramics, ARTstor, College Art Association, Flickr, Islamic architecture, SAHARA, Shared Shelf, Society of Architectural Historians Architecture Resources Archive, University of California Shared Images

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Maureen Burns is an information professional with over 25 years of experience developing and managing teaching resources of analog and digital images at UC Irvine, the Getty Villa, and CSULB. Presently working on a consulting basis, through IMAGinED and the Image Consulting Cooperative, Burns has been handling sales for Archivision, partnering on the Local History Digital Resources Project, and participating in other image-focused work. With a doctorate in Educational Administration from the UCI/UCLA joint Leadership program, Burns provides managerial and research support for UCI's Center for Learning in the Arts, Sciences and Sustainability, which includes production editor work for the electronic Journal for Learning through the Arts. On the professional activities front, she is currently serving as the Past President of the Visual Resources Association.

At the 2009 College Art Association conference in Los Angeles, the Visual Resources Association organized an affiliate session, called "You Can Do It. We Can Help," focused on building digital image collections together. A distinguished panel of speakers shared information about innovative image projects and presented evidence of the value of such collaborative experiences. This article provides a summary of the session with extended commentary by the moderator, updates on the projects presented, and a discussion of current issues and trends.

Margo Ballantyne and Mark Dahl from Lewis and Clark College presented on "accessCeramics.org: Building an Artist-Centered, Browseable Image Collection with *Flickr*." They discussed how a social networking tool is being used by artists to provide broad access to their work and how an institution's art department, library, and visual resources collection can provide the support of information professionals and the necessary resources to sustain such a project. The *accessCeramics* (http://accessceramics.org/) partners have created a searchable database to address the dearth of contemporary digital images available for teaching the ceramic arts. Artists are actively engaged in the process when they upload images of their work into *Flickr* and catalog them in the fields created for this purpose. Image professionals then enhance the metadata to meet current VRA standards thus improving search and retrieval. The project has continued to grow steadily, in part thanks to the financial support of the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE http://www.nitle.org/) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA http://www.nea.gov/). The support of these funding agencies allows the resource to be freely available on the Web for educational purposes, extending the reach globally and providing for project sustainability.[1]

Next, Professor Alka Patel, from the University of California at Irvine, shared the experiences of an art historian who is actively building an extensive image collection from fieldwork photography, primarily focused on Islamic architecture, in a talk entitled, "Digital Fieldwork: The Peril and Promise of Sharing an Archive." The partnership between this faculty member, visual resources curators, and a team of students resulted in the successful cataloguing of 10,000 images from Cuba, India, and Pakistan in about a year's time. The images were integrated into ARTstor's core content (see http://www.artstor.org/what-is-artstor/w-html/col-s-asian-cuban.shtml) and a similar project is currently expanding the resources to include architecture from recent trips to Afghanistan and Iran. The model of actively involving faculty, students, and information professionals in the process has proven to be quite

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[1] For current information about accessCeramics, Stephanie Beene, Visual Resources Coordinator in the Watzek Library, is an excellent contact. Two of her presentations can be found in VRA SlideShare at http://www.slideshare.net/VisResAssoc/vra2010-ac-original-3543766 and http://www.slideshare.net/VisResAssoc/vra-2012-emerging-new-roles-or-how-my-job-has-evolved.

successful, but finding consistent funding to compensate the contributors is more of a challenge.

How a professional organization might involve its members in contributing images to a peer-reviewed image resource was the topic of Ann Whiteside's presentation, "It's the Network: How the Society of Architectural Historians is Building an Image Collaboratory."[2]   The Society of Architectural Historians Architecture Resources Archive project or *SAHARA* (see http://www.sah.org/index.php?src=gendocs&ref=HOME&category= Sahara%20HOME) continues to grow through the innovative planning and support of a team of architectural historians, information professionals, and organization staff who rely on the members of the Society to contribute their field photography and descriptive information. The content is then peer-reviewed, enhanced by information professionals, and, in some cases, graduated to ARTstor's core content, but all the images are available to Society members. In addition to establishing a model partnership and exploring new ways to build image resources, the Society of Architectural Historians continues to expand the experiment with new modes of scholarly communication by tying *SAHARA* in with other electronic projects, such as the Society's journal. This effort has resulted in a dynamic image resource that is currently transitioning to the new tools ARTstor's *Shared Shelf* project (more below).

ARTstor's Cara Hirsch then discussed current community efforts to encourage the broader sharing and educational use of images while also respecting copyright in "It Takes a Village: Building Collective Responses to Copyright Challenges." Since her presentation, ARTstor (http://www.artstor.org/index.shtml), the popular digital image library, has started *Shared Shelf* (http://www.artstor.org/shared-shelf/s-html/shared-shelf-home.shtml). Image management tools are provided to allow for shared collections within an institution, or more broadly, with other institutions or open-access Web sites, including ARTstor's own *Shared Shelf Commons* (see http://www.artstor.org/shared-shelf/s-html/commons.shtml). Cara and her ARTstor colleague, Gretchen Wagner, have also generously shared their legal expertise with the community through work on the Visual Resources Association's Intellectual Property Rights Committee, recently resulting in a *Statement on the Fair Use of Images for Teaching, Research, and Study* (http://www.vraweb.org/organization/pdf/VRAFairUseGuidelinesFinal.pdf).

To provide context for the panel, the moderator mentioned her experience working on the University of California Shared Images project (http://www.cdlib.org/services/dsc/ucsi/), a 10-campus collaborative venture in partnership with the California Digital Library (http://www.cdlib.org/) to reduce

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[2] In 2009, Ann Whiteside was the Head of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Roach Library of Architecture and Planning as well as the Project Director for the Society of Architectural Historians' Architecture Resources Archive or SAHARA. She is now Librarian and Assistant Dean for Information Resources at the Loeb Library in the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. See also, Allison Benedetti and Ann Whiteside, "SAHARA: Innovation, Experimentation, and Collaboration for Digital Image Scholarship," *Visual Resources Association Bulletin* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 27-30.

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redundant effort and provide a convenient, single point of access to images University of California faculty need for teaching, via the ARTstor hosting platform. After 10 years of experimentation with merging collections and trying various systems, this project takes advantage of new technological tools to allow for differing levels of contribution from a distributed network of partners— University of California stakeholders such as faculty, students, librarians, and visual resources curators and the extended ARTstor digital library community, who have made this image resource over a million images strong.[3]

As the title of Clay Shirkey's book *Here Comes Everybody* indicates, digital technology provides "everybody" with the opportunity to play a role in building shared image collections. This requires a participatory, rather than passive culture of—academics, archivists, developers, information technologists, intellectual property/copyright specialists, librarians, museum professionals, and visual resources curators—leveraging combined expertise and collaborating on production. The projects described above provide examples of colleagues maneuvering through the complexities of collaborative production (both small and large scale) and experimenting with the technological possibilities provided by the union of digital images and new social networking or cloud computing tools. A great deal of coordination and hard work is necessary to build content collaboratively, but the benefits can make the investment worthwhile. As Shirkey points out, "Collaborative production, where people have to coordinate with one another to get anything done, is considerably harder than simple sharing, but the results can be more profound. . . . new tools give life to new forms of action."[4]

Similarly, David Weinberger indicated in his book *Everything is Miscellaneous,* "Knowledge—its content and its organization—is becoming a social act."[5] When it comes to images, we seem to be past the initial scramble to "go digital" and have survived a radical transition from analog to digital images, but we now find ourselves in an environment of rapid technological development and continual change. This is quite a contrast to the stable days of 35mm slides, a medium that provided reliable, portable, quality images for over 50 years. Perhaps it might be time to re-group and consider better ways to combine spontaneity with the benefits of controlled design to build active and collaborative learning environments where users not only interact with the information, but get involved in the process? The new multi-user applications are innovative in their use of social networking tools and cloud computing while at the same time they reduce redundancy, facilitate resource sharing, increase efficiencies, and minimize costs for users and contributors. As Weinberger suggested, "We'll never be done making sense of these piles of information. We are building an ever-growing pile of smart leaves that we can organize as we need to at any one

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[3] For more information about UC Shared Images, see the Web site and multiple publications at http://www.cdlib.org/services/dsc/publications/.

[4] Clay Shirkey*, Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008).

[5] David Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder* (New York: Times Books, 2007).

moment. But it will be the user who decides what the leaves mean. . . . The world won't ever stay miscellaneous because we are together making it ours." Collaboration across constituencies provides many benefits in the current era of shrinking budgets.

If content and its organization is a social act, as Weinberger posits, it can be suggested that trying to do-it-all-yourself or working in isolation is less than optimal for a variety of reasons. Below a few are itemized:

1) Scanning the same images over and over again is not a good use of anyone's time. Shouldn't we focus on the wide range of material that is not yet in digital form?

2) There are concerns that individuals may not be considering the issues and implications of localized scanning in terms of intellectual property and copyright law.

3) Original images or scans from primary source materials tend to be of better quality, so we should go directly to scholars, photographers, artists, museums, libraries, and photo archives when we can.

4) High resolution, archival scans provide source images from which new derivatives can be made when computing and projection equipment inevitably improves, whereas low resolution images will have to be re-scanned when the technology changes.

5) Images stored on off-site servers or in digital repositories tend to be preserved for the future, so there is less risk of losses on local hard drives.

6) Detailed descriptive data improves searching, discovery, and image access. Professional catalogers use core data elements, controlled vocabularies, and cataloging guidelines for uniform metadata quality and better migration.

Many of these issues are discussed in more detail in a VRA white paper entitled *Advocating for Visual Resources Management in Educational and Cultural Institutions* (http://www.vraweb.org/resources/general/vra_white_paper.pdf). Obtaining image content from multiple sources is recommended as well as using local production in visual resources collections to respond to spontaneous teaching and research requirements.

Digital libraries, image commons, and even Google image searches, don't provide all of the images needed for educational purposes. As with other information formats, such as books, new areas of knowledge and inquiry create fresh needs for images. The traditional 35mm slide collection may be becoming obsolete, but there is a great deal of important contextual and collateral material contained in such collections that should not be lost in the digital shuffle. For example, consider the famous archaeological site of Pompeii. I found the expected general views of the site along with important details such as an ancient fresco depicting Vesuvius and a grape-covered Bacchus[6], complete with

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[6] The image can be located in ARTstor by using this link:
http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=%2FThWdC8hIywtPygxFTx5RnksX3wreV E%3D&userId=hT1IfDw%3D&zoomparams=

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other symbols of fertility, and an 18th century painting of Vesuvius erupting[7], with grand tour onlookers, in ARTstor, but I had to go to a slide collection to find a map of the area, a model showing the architectural remains of the archaeological site, a ground plan of Pompeii's House of the Centenary in which the wall painting was found, and a view of the house's interior to contextualize what was accessible in ARTstor. In addition, I also found collateral images showing archaeologists at work, food growing in and around the city, interesting artifacts such as the famous plaster casts of people trapped in the city, and a contemporary view of Vesuvius from the ancient city (see examples below). All of these images were photographed in Pompeii or scanned from books for teaching. This example demonstrates the wide range of material needed for educational purposes and how it grows with new research, publications, and the expanding, multi-disciplinary base of academic areas using images in their teaching.

Visual resources collections and new online image commons, like *Flicker*, both demonstrate that large quantities of images tend to serve image users best. But, there is also added value provided by visual resources collections and libraries, which offer a variety of services to support the use of images for teaching, learning, and research. These tend to include help with finding and using images, consultation on a variety of issues (archival practices, copyright, digitizing, metadata, etc.), technical support for new systems, reference assistance, and, most importantly, the ability to build shared collections. The VRA advocacy white paper mentioned above goes into more detail about the specific services provided by visual resources curators. In addition, a 2011 study published by the Association of Research Libraries (http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/nrnt_digital_curation17mar11.pdf), "New Roles for New Times: Digital Curation for Preservation," goes into depth about how information professionals add value and contribute to new research knowledge by providing curatorial guidance and expertise for digital content.[8]

With technological change being a constant, visual resources curators, like other information professionals, continue to actively explore the needs of their major constituents as they look to the future. Diane Zorich's recent report "Transitioning to a Digital World: Art History, Its Research Centers, and Digital Scholarship" (http://www.kressfoundation.org/uploadedFiles/Sponsored_ Research/ahrc_report.pdf) provides an excellent starting point for obtaining a better understanding of where one of the major disciplines that the field of visual resources has traditionally supported stands in 2012.[9] Of course, image content

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[7] The image can be located in ARTstor by using this link: http://library.artstor.org/library/secure/ViewImages?id=%2BSxWZCQ7RDQyLyw6eDx4QnYg&userId=hT1IfDw%3D&zoomparams=

[8] Tyler Walters and Katherine Skinner, "New Roles for New Times: Digital Curation for Preservation," *Association of Research Libraries Report*, March 2011 at http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/nrnt_digital_curation17mar11.pdf

[9] Diane M. Zorich, "Transitioning to a Digital World: Art History, Its Research Centers, and Digital Scholarship," *Report to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the Roy Rosenzweig Center for Art History and New Media at George Mason University*, 2012 at http://www.kressfoundation.org/uploadedFiles/Sponsored_Research/ahrc_report.pdf

that formerly served limited groups of constituents now has added relevance and accessibility for a much larger community of users since visual resources collections serve image content digitally to entire institutions and, in some cases, even beyond institutional borders. The presentations in this CAA session provided information about exemplary projects that demonstrate this expansion in services. The digital collaborations also show that these experimental models were effective enough to continue to evolve and expand. The title of the session and this article was inspired by a home improvement store chain motto. Another one inspired the closing suggestion – "Let's do it together."

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(Sample images below.)

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Examples of Collateral Material Found in Visual Resources Collections
(Photographer Maureen Burns, 1996, Anglo-American Pompeii Project)

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