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In Memoriam: Nancy Shelby Schuller

John J. Taormina Mr.

Duke University, taormina@duke.edu

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In Memoriam: Nancy Shelby Schuller

Abstract

A memorial tribute and remembrance of Nancy Schuller, a founding member of the Visual Resources Association and distinguished educator, mentor, and author.

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

John J. Taormina has been the director of the Visual Media Center in the Department of Art, Art History & Visual Studies at Duke University since 2000. In a career spanning thirty years, he previously was head of the visual resources facilities at the University of Michigan, The Ohio State University, Oberlin College, and George Washington University. Taormina served as an officer on the VRA Executive Board for seven years and was VRA Bulletin editor from 1996-2005, and again in 2010. In 2005 he was the recipient of both the VRA Distinguished Service Award and the Nancy DeLaurier Award.

In Memoriam: Nancy Shelby Schuller



August 20, 1940 - November 8, 2011

Memorial tributes are by their very nature serious affairs. Gathering *in memoriam* means that we have lost a colleague or, in the case of many here, a friend. Such occasions however do hold broader purpose. They allow those of us of a certain generation to celebrate the life and career of a colleague with whom we have interacted professionally over many years; with whom we have shared ideas, problems, and solutions; and from whom we have learned how to do our jobs better.

For the younger or newer members of the Visual Resources Association, today's memorial provides the opportunity to learn a bit more about one of its founding members, the beginnings of the Association itself, and some interesting history. Most importantly, it is an opportunity to honor the memory and legacy of someone who was a seminal figure in the visual resources profession.

Nancy Shelby Schuller's career was indeed extensive and distinguished. She was a visual resources professional for over thirty years. She was a founding member of the Visual Resources Association. She was a dedicated educator and mentor. She was an author.¹

Visual Resources Curator

¹ The College Art Association, an affiliate society of the Visual Resources Association, posted an obituary to Nancy Schuller on its website: <http://www.collegeart.org/obituaries/nancyshelbyschuller>.



Nancy Schuller in the University of Texas at Austin Visual Resources Collection

Nancy spent thirty-four years as the curator of the Visual Resources Collection at the University of Texas at Austin. She joined the University of Texas staff in 1963 as a teaching assistant; when she retired in December 2001, thirty-eight years later, her title was curator of the Visual Resources Collection and senior lecturer in the Department of Art and Art History. Upon accepting her resignation in 2001, her departmental chair Kenneth J. Hale described Nancy's tenure at the University of Texas as one of "phenomenal accomplishment in the areas of teaching and administration."

VRA Co-Founder



Nancy Schuller

Nancy Shelby Schuller was one of the three official founding members of the Visual Resources Association. The Association's legal Certificate of Incorporation lists Christine Sundt, Nancy Schuller, and Nancy DeLaurier on it, in that order, dated August

1982. During the fall of that year, the Association's temporary officers were Christine Sundt as chairperson, Nancy Schuller as vice chairperson, and Nancy DeLaurier as secretary/treasurer. The Association's first bylaws were drawn up that autumn and the first official meeting was held during the annual College Art Association conference in Philadelphia in February 1983. The Association's first members were those curators who had already subscribed to the *VRA Bulletin*, then known as the *International Bulletin for Photographic Documentation of the Visual Arts*.



VRA Co-Founders Christine Sundt and Nancy DeLaurier, Philadelphia, VRA 1998

In Philadelphia, permanent VRA officers were elected. Christine Sundt was elected president, while Nancy Schuller was elected secretary/treasurer and Nancy DeLaurier was named past president. It should be noted that Nancy Schuller and the other two original officers are also three of the Association's only seven Honorary Life Members.

Fast forwarding to 1996, Nancy Schuller was that year's recipient of the VRA Distinguished Service Award, which "honors an individual who has made an outstanding career contribution to the field of visual resources and image management" and who has "achieved a level of distinction in the field either through leadership, research, or service to the profession." In 2005 the Art Libraries Society of North America presented its own Distinguished Service Award to Nancy. The ARLIS/NA award "honors an individual of any country whose exemplary service in art librarianship, visual resources curatorship, or a related field, has made an outstanding national or international contribution to art information."

Educator



UT Austin Workshop for Art/Architecture Slide Curators

At the University of Texas, Nancy not only ran one of the largest visual resources operations in the country, supporting one of the largest art and art history programs, she also taught graduate seminars in the administration and development of fine arts slide and photograph collections through UT's School of Art and the Graduate School of Library and Information Science.



UT Austin Workshop for Art/Architecture Slide Curators

In addition to the graduate seminars at the University of Texas, Nancy taught or co-taught numerous workshops on visual resources collection management at various

venues over a 15-year period. Today, one of our most visible vehicles for professional development is the Summer Educational Institute for Visual Resources and Image Management.² This successful institute really only exists because of the groundbreaking precedent of the first workshops on visual resources collection management that were developed and co-taught from 1983-1997 by Nancy Schuller with Christine Sundt and Nancy DeLaurier. These were offered first at the University of Missouri at Kansas City (Nancy DeLaurier's home institution), then at the University of Texas at Austin (Nancy Schuller's home institution) and finally at the University of Oregon (Christine Sundt's home institution).



Brochures for the 1988 UT Austin workshops, 1985 and 1988.

The workshops in Kansas City, from 1977-1984, were called “Basic Training for Slide Curators”. In Austin, from 1984-1994 and again in 1996-1997, reflecting rapid changes to the discipline, they developed into Visual Resources Collections Fundamentals, Microcomputer Applications in Visual Resources Collections, and Visual Resources Cataloging and Classification. In Eugene, in 1995, the Visual Resources Collections Fundamentals workshop returned.

² The Summer Educational Institute for Visual Resources and Image Management (SEI) is a joint project of the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) and the Visual Resources Association Foundation (VRAF). Please see: <http://sei.vrafoundation.org/>

We still collectively and affectionately refer to that span of visual resources education as the “UT Austin workshops” – responsible for training vast numbers of visual resources professionals before most library science programs even thought about anything beyond “the book”. Through her educational leadership and activities with her two co-instructors, Nancy Schuller contributed enormously to the professional development of several generations of slide librarians and visual resources curators and, most importantly, institutionalized and codified that specialized type of training.

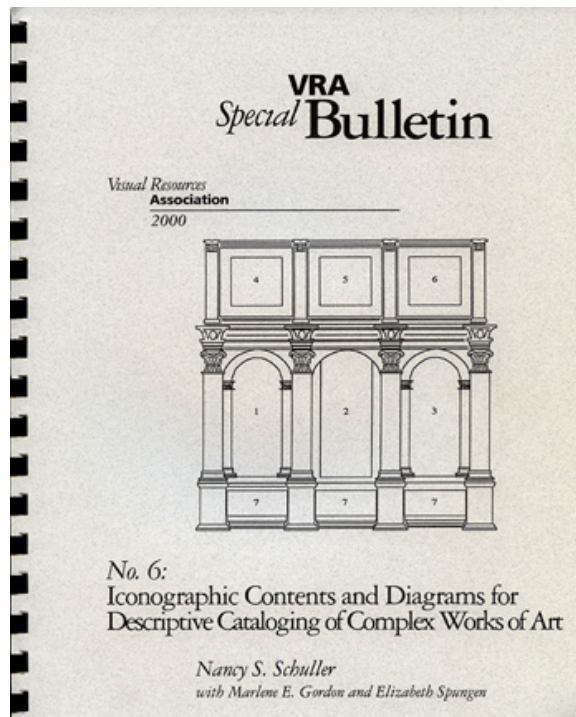
Author



Guide for Management of Visual Resources Collections, 1978;
Management for Visual Resources Collections, 1989.

I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that Nancy Schuller was one of the profession’s most prolific authors. In addition to her many articles for professional journals over the years, as well as numerous presentations at conferences, Nancy wrote the *Guide for Management of Visual Resources Collections*, published in 1978 by the College Art Association’s Visual Resources Committee, one of the predecessors of the Visual Resources Association. This publication later evolved and expanded into the 169-page book, *Management for Visual Resources Collections*, which was published by Libraries Unlimited through 1989 and remained the standard book on the topic until it went out of print.

Nancy also authored two volumes in the VRA Special Bulletin series: No. 2, *Standard Abbreviations for Image Descriptions Used in Visual Resources Collections*, in 1988; and No. 6, *Iconographic Contents and Diagrams for Descriptive Cataloging of Complex Works of Art*, in 2000. Special Bulletin No. 6, known to many of us simply as *Diagrams* was co-authored with Marlene Gordon and Elizabeth Spungen.



VRA Special Bulletin No. 6, *Iconographic Contents and Diagrams for Descriptive Cataloging of Complex Works of Art*, 2000.

I served as *VRA Bulletin* editor when the *Diagrams* Special Bulletin was finalized by the then-Publication Advisory Committee. Before the Executive Board position of Publication and Communication Officer was created in 2005, the *VRA Bulletin* editor was the *de facto* publication officer charged with printing and distributing the Special Bulletins.

Diagrams took many years and the efforts of many people to complete. When I called Nancy in 2001 to tell her the first run was finally printed, and I would be sending author copies to her in Texas, her first response in that distinct Texas accent was, “Well, that’s just wonderful! I am so pleased!” To this day, I think *Diagrams* remains one of our most attractive Special Bulletins and is a model of visual iconographic description – a credit to all who worked on it.

Legacy

I, like many of you in this room, probably last saw Nancy at the 2003 VRA conference in Houston, when she came down from Austin to visit with her longtime colleagues and friends. Looking back on that moment, I thought how wonderful it was to have been able to interact with Nancy again – even after she retired two years earlier.



Nancy Schuller (left) with colleagues.

On November 9, 2011, news of Nancy’s passing was posted on the VRA listserv. Over the next few days, many VRA members contributed their recollections of Nancy.

Here are but a few of those tributes:

- Helen Chillman: “She was always professional but never lost her sense of humor.”
- Eileen Fry: “Nancy was someone I looked up to my entire professional career.”
- Leigh Gates: “She was a model and mentor to all of us in VRA.”
- Mark Pompelia: “There will not be anyone else like her anytime soon.”
- Louise Putnam: “Nancy was a mainstay to many and her legacy is deep and broad.”
- Laura Schwartz: “She was passionate about our field and her passion was infectious!”

Finally, in the classic language we have come to expect of Ben Kessler: “She was practically our *sine qua non* for a long time.”



Nancy Schuller (second from right at bar) with UT Austin colleagues.

VRA Colleague and Friend



Five VRA Treasurers: Nancy Schuller, Christina Updike, Christine Hilker, Lynda White, and Karin Whalen. New York, VRA 1996.

Nancy would probably have been embarrassed by this tribute to her today, but I think she would have loved that we were all gathered here this morning, conducting the regular business of the Visual Resources Association thirty years after its founding, contributing to and evolving the profession, and carrying on what she and others devoted their careers to accomplish.

Still learning from each other – always learning.