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2011 State of the Visual Resources Association

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2011 State of the Visual Resources Association

Abstract

As part of the business meeting at the VRA + ARLIS/NA 2011 joint conference, the president provided a summary of the accomplishments and challenges facing the field in a state of the association presentation. This article provides the transcript.

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.

It is time for us to consider the state of the Visual Resources Association—our annual reality check. It has been a challenging and rewarding year, with the planning for this conference being the biggest adventure.¹ I naively thought that I wouldn't have to worry about the conference too much since merging the two organizations in one venue seemed to increase the likelihood of this annual event being a financial success as well as being an intellectually engaging and professionally rewarding experience. I'm happy to report, we seem to be well on our way to accomplishing this, but not without a Herculean effort on the part of all the Executive Board members and a truly extraordinary group of local Twin Cities members who worked very hard on this collaboration. Thank you to everyone who contributed, for your flexibility, agility, and diplomacy, and to all of you who made it through sleet and snow to be sitting in this room today. I, for one, think it was well worth the effort and hope that those of you who are here today feel the same way. That was also the first time I'd ever been out in sleet, which was pretty exciting for me as a California native!

Although there is nothing simple about bringing the different cultures of visual resources and art librarianship together, as we learned from our history lesson at the Founders' Fete and the experience of two joint conferences, in the end we are all information professionals trying to make our way in a difficult economy, one that is rocking the foundations of the institutions where we have traditionally worked. Both organizations are struggling to stay relevant. None of us can afford to only look inward or be self-referential. There is much we can learn from each other and this does not mean only visual resources curators and art librarians, but archivists, museums professionals, instructional technologists, and commercial partners too. Also, we can remain true to the arts and humanities, the disciplines we are passionate about that often lead us to this profession, while also taking a broader view of the various academic areas we can support. We have to reframe what visual resources collections are and can be while making informed choices about how new technology might get us where we want to go.

So, here is my take on the big picture. After many decades of primary use, the 35mm slide seems to have become obsolete overnight, relatively speaking. Determining how to handle the responsible disposal of slides, without losing sight of what is important to archive, and transforming physical facilities into functional work and collaborative learning spaces is a practical reality. Virtual space is expanding while physical space is being lost or repurposed. Some visual resources collections have been merged with libraries, instructional technology, or other institutional units. We need to call attention to our presence in Cyberspace.

Although a great deal has been accomplished by VRA members, the work related to the transition from analog image archives serving small departmental user groups to digital image collections made accessible to entire institutions, and even beyond the borders of those institutions, continues. One of the key challenges is communicating this radical change to the highest administrative levels and obtaining the acknowledgement and support for such expanded operations during challenging economic times. Building upon traditional functions, visual resources curators have expanded their institutional

¹ The 2011 annual conference was held in Minneapolis, MN as a joint conference with the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA). Although the conference website is no longer available, a list of past conferences can be found on the VRA website at: <http://vraweb.org/conferences/past.html>

roles and the services provided to their growing clientele. But, since many of these users may never walk in the door of the facility, now preferring to access image collections primarily online and in other places, increasing their awareness of our new services, making sure they take full advantage of the resources we are building, as well as documenting and evaluating the use of these digital collections are big issues.

We have realized the necessity of diversifying our skill sets, but new educational opportunities for ongoing professional development and topping-up existing skill sets are needed. Technology will continue to change the skills required to do our jobs well and the services we will need to provide—it's a moving target.

We have much to be proud of in terms of what this Association has accomplished, but there is little room for complacency in the current world climate. We need to be attentive to both the positive and negative factors that are our reality in 2011.

Our membership base is declining and currently only 553 members have renewed this year compared to 735 at this time last year. The number of individual members is about the same, but the change in the institutional membership fee compelled some institutional members to change to individual or not renew at all. There was some confusion over the changes that we hope to clarify this year. Because of this, the Board voted not to raise membership fees in the coming year, but this may be a possibility that we can't avoid the year after. In general our non-renewal rate is high. *Bulletin* only and Listserv only members have declined as well. There have been retirements, valued colleagues choosing to leave the field, and concerns about layoffs in this struggling economy.

The Association's main sources of operating revenue are membership dues, conference profits, and donations. With membership down and no significant income last year in term of donations, our total assets are down from \$411,000 to \$399,000, but at least we have assets! Expenses are up with a 10-15% rise in administrative costs mostly associated with the cost of publishing the *VRA Bulletin*, about \$10,000 per issue, and the start-up costs of the new electronic journal \$5,000 (one-time set-up fee and annual fee of \$2,500 is a big savings). But, essentially we are spending more than we make. Right now, it appears that this joint conference provides some salvation—we might make \$10,000 or possibly more with a fundraiser still ahead, but generally there is cause for concern. We have a little over 500 people registered here in Minneapolis (when ARLIS alone had over 600 when they met in Boston last year), which makes it pretty clear that conference attendance is down. Next year we meet on our own again and will have to tighten our belts and compact our schedule again. The Treasurer will provide more specifics about our financial situation, but we are experiencing our third consecutive deficit budget. If we don't intervene by increasing our income or reducing our expenses, we may have to draw down operating funds from our savings.

Enough doom and gloom, as my economist at home says, we are living on a knife's edge, even in better economic times. Despite his dismal science, he is optimistic that the economy will continue to rebound. These economic pressures and state budgetary challenges are changing traditional models of education, we must not lose momentum on the progress we have made in recent years and must try to use the budget cuts as an opportunity to focus on our core purpose. Such changes provide opportunities to be creative, to make changes, and take on new challenges.

We have a terrific Strategic Plan, which sets a dynamic and positive course for this Association over the next several years. It envisions an organization offering many new opportunities for involvement and engagement, so I encourage you to draw upon it to consider ways that you can contribute to the future of this organization.²

We are working with ARLIS to revise and update the standards document “Criteria for Hiring and Retention of Visual Resources Professionals” to insure that current information about the value of our profession is made readily available, continuing our advocacy efforts. Cherry-pick from the terrific information in the VRA White Paper to help your clientele and administrators to understand the value of what you do and why you are doing it.³ Contact us on the Board if there is more that we can do to support you.

At this conference, you have surely been learning about the great work of the VRA Committees and you will soon hear more from those who choose to report in today. Many Chapter reports mentioned a newfound focus on developing VRA’s membership base. I call upon each of you to think not about what your professional organization can do for you, but what you can do for your professional organization. This is a participatory endeavor and we welcome your talent, energy, and ideas.

When you are asked to accept a position of leadership or responsibility, know that it will be challenging and time-consuming, but your participation is valued by your peers and crucial to the continuance of our profession. There are three Board positions to fill this year—Vice President for Conference Arrangements, Treasurer, and Public Relations and Communications. The current Board is an amazing group of professionals who are dedicated to this organization, and happen to be a lot of fun to work with too. They are bright and capable as well as ready to ask tough questions and take on new challenges. The joint conference planning overwhelmed all of us a bit this year, but you just have to take a look at their multi-page annual reports to see how hard they are willing to work for this organization. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them—past, present, and future—for their efforts and support.

It is an honor and a privilege to serve with them – and for you – as VRA’s president.

² The 2009 VRA Strategic Plan can be downloaded at:
<http://data.memberclicks.com/site/vra/2009VRAStrategicPlan.pdf>

³ A copy of the white paper *Advocating for Visual Resources Management* (2009) can be downloaded from: http://www.vraweb.org/resources/general/vra_white_paper.pdf