

June 2012

Visual Resources Curators Affiliate Organization: 24 Years of Active Involvement in SECAC

Christina B. Updike

James Madison University, updikecb@jmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://online.vraweb.org/vrab>

Recommended Citation

Updike, Christina B. (2012) "Visual Resources Curators Affiliate Organization: 24 Years of Active Involvement in SECAC," *VRA Bulletin*: Vol. 38: Iss. 2, Article 1.

Available at: <https://online.vraweb.org/vrab/vol38/iss2/1>

This Feature Articles is brought to you for free and open access by VRA Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in VRA Bulletin by an authorized editor of VRA Online.

Visual Resources Curators Affiliate Organization: 24 Years of Active Involvement in SECAC

Abstract

A version of this article was originally published in *The Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 15/2 (2007), pp. 129-147 under the title "Recollections of SECAC." This article is reprinted here in a revised form by permission of the *Southeastern College Art Conference Review*. A look back on the history, growth, and impact of the VRC involvement in SECAC and the effect collaborative professional activity has had both in the southeastern region and nationally.

A version of this article was originally published in The Southeastern College Art Conference Review 15/2 (2007), pp. 129-147 under the title "Recollections of SECAC." This article is reprinted here in a revised form by permission of the Southeastern College Art Conference Review.

When Bill Levin sent out an e-mail "Call for Papers" for his "Reflections on 60 Years of SECAC" session, I was amazed to learn that SECAC had reached this milestone. Then I calculated the number of years it has been since I founded the Visual Resources Curators Affiliate Organization of SECAC and was equally surprised to realize that it has been in existence for twenty-four. That cliché "Time flies when you are having fun!" is very true in this case. Looking back on the history, growth, and impact of the VRC involvement in SECAC is the story I have to tell, and this reflection paper will also explore the effect this professional activity has had both in the southeastern region and nationally. You all know what a wonderful organization SECAC is, but now you are going to hear the "VRC" rest of the story!

The 1976 SECAC meeting in Charleston was the first one I attended. I had recently been hired at James Madison University as their first full-time slide curator and Martha Caldwell was the senior art historian. She had provided me with literature on the Art Librarians Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) and the Mid-America College Art Association (MACAA) visual resources interest group and encouraged me to join them. Then she said, "And now you are coming with me to SECAC in Charleston. You can hear art history papers, go on tours and meet colleagues." I had already learned that you didn't say "no" to Martha very often, so away we went on the first of many drives to SECAC venues.

Charleston was a charming city, and Martha introduced me to everyone. I was struck by the friendliness I encountered and the format of the meeting with sessions, tours, and evening lectures. On the long drive back to Virginia, I

commented to Martha that I wished there had been another slide curator in attendance. I also mused that a session for visual resources issues might be a good idea, since most slide curators are isolated on their campuses as single practitioners in departments of art or architecture and meeting regionally would be a great way to network. She immediately replied, "You should do it for next year." A-ha! – the seed was planted.

The 1977 SECAC meeting was being held in Blacksburg, Virginia and I contacted the SECAC conference planner to schedule one roundtable session on visual resources issues and then I scheduled a tour of the VPI and SU art department's slide library with their slide curator. I then spent the next year making contacts. I wrote a letter (this was the age before email and FAX) to Nancy DeLaurier, slide librarian at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, who was also the chair of the Mid-America Visual Resources group, regarding my idea of organizing a session at SECAC for slide curators and she enthusiastically encouraged me. Nancy stated, "There are distinct advantages to regional meetings over national ones. They are easier to get to, generally the same people can attend year after year so that it can develop into a much more cohesive and functional group than could ever happen nationally." She also stated, "Don't give up! It usually takes five years for a group to form and have life." She enclosed a copy of her "Report on Professional Status Survey of Slide Curators" with a statistical summary, which I could distribute to the attending curators.

I also contacted the President of ARLIS/NA for membership materials and professional status information from the national perspective. Now I was ready to announce the meeting to colleagues and encourage attendance. I requested the SECAC mailing list of member schools and universities and sent a letter addressed to "Slide Librarian" announcing the SECAC meeting and the visual resources events. I received 27 responses from curators in the region expressing interest in joining a regional group and a few that stated they hoped

to attend the meeting. Two of the curators responding to that first mailing are still in their positions and still attending SECAC, Phyllis Pivorun at Clemson and Joanne Rathman at Vanderbilt. I created a card file (no databases yet) of all the names and addresses for future mailings. Three slide curators attended that first roundtable session where we exchanged ideas and solutions to problems unique to our field, such as cataloging systems, slide library equipment, copy photography techniques, and professional status. I was thrilled at such a great start to a new regional group!

The SECAC venue provides a rich experience because it combines the opportunity for all professionals to discuss their specific issues within the art and art history-teaching environment. As visual resources professionals, our mission is to facilitate that teaching environment and keeping current in the field is vital to fulfilling that mission. Many attending art historians encouraged me to continue holding sessions at SECAC and promised to take the word back to the slide curators at their schools for the next year. I also began a tradition of writing a report of the SECAC meeting, which included a synopsis of the VRC sessions, for publication in national and regional newsletters to further spread the word of our activities.

So on to 1978... The SECAC venue was at the University of Arkansas in Little Rock and two SECAC members were of great help to me. Lloyd Benjamin was serving as session planner and he helped with the arrangements for the visual resources sessions as well as put me in touch with their slide curator. Virginia Rembert, SECAC President and conference planner at Little Rock, suggested I contact Nancy DeLaurier again, this time to invite her to speak at a slide curator's session. Since Nancy was serving as the MACAA Newsletter editor and had published my SECAC report, she was aware of the success of the first SECAC slide curators' meeting in Blacksburg and accepted the invitation to participate in the second meeting. Nancy brought a wealth of expertise to the session on "Slide Quality", as she was the editor of the *Slide Buyers Guide*, and she taught

the summer workshop “Basic Training for Slide Curators” held each year at her university. She addressed standards in slide quality both commercially and using copy photography and led a discussion evaluating commercial slide sources. Nancy also helped with the afternoon roundtable discussion session where experienced slide curators mentored beginning professionals and Nancy advocated membership in professional organizations. We were able to tour the University of Arkansas slide library and met afterwards for an informal luncheon.

This became the traditional format for visual resources activities at SECAC, which continues today. Another tradition of SECAC is the annual dinner or party event, which usually highlights a unique venue of the host city. In Little Rock it was a riverboat dinner cruise, which the curators attended and sat together as a group—great fun and I’ll have more on this tradition later in this paper. Ten slide curators attended and I was overwhelmed by their enthusiastic response to the format and the information exchanged. My conference report was published in the ARLIS/NA, MACAA and SECAC newsletters. Fame was spreading.

The third year was a banner one for the visual resources curators. In 1979, SECAC met in Atlanta, Georgia and it was a record-breaking attendance for SECAC and the VRC—25 curators attended. My “Call for Papers” drew submissions from outside the region and I was able to schedule four sessions and tours throughout the Atlanta area. Anne Thomas, SECAC Secretary-Treasurer was instrumental in assisting me with SECAC mailing labels, preregistration materials, space in the Newsletter for announcements, and coordinating transportation requests at the conference. We met and toured the slide library at Georgia State University followed by a session on “Professional Standards of VR Curators in the Southeast.” Susan Tamulonis of Northern Illinois University and myself presented papers on the history of visual resources professionalism, concepts of professionalism and continuing education opportunities. At the end of the session there was a unanimous vote taken to formally affiliate the visual resources interest group with SECAC with the

commitment of annually meeting and hosting sessions at the conference. The tour of the Georgia Institute of Technology Architecture Library was also the venue for a discussion of the unique classification of architecture images and a demonstration of the use of a computer in slide library record keeping. Tours at the Atlanta College of Art library and the Emory University art history slide library highlighted the uniqueness of their collections; one with a growing videotape library and the other with its large lantern slide collection. At the SECAC business meeting, I reported to the membership the success of the visual resources program and then presented the VRC's request to be formally recognized as an affiliate interest group of SECAC. This would allow us to send a representative to the SECAC conference planning meetings to coordinate VRC sessions with the main conference program. The Board and the membership enthusiastically approved the request. Antoinette Johnson, slide curator at the University of Alabama in Birmingham, where the next SECAC conference would be hosted volunteered to attend the SECAC planning meetings for the VRC. As the founder of the VRC affiliate group and program chair, I was designated the VRC's representative at the SECAC Board meetings, a non-voting position. As always, I collected the names and addresses of the attending slide curators and distributed the list with my conference report so people could remain in contact during the year. My report was again published in the regional and national newsletters.

Our first meeting as an official affiliate interest group was at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. John Schnorrenburg, the SECAC conference planner was another one of my SECAC mentors. He understood the importance of visual resources curators seeing different visual resources collections and helped facilitate the scheduling of a behind-the-scenes tour at the Birmingham Museum of Art. He also arranged a walking tour of historic sites, which gave curators the opportunity to take slides for their home institutions. Two guest speakers were the highlight of the Birmingham VRC program. The morning session was entitled "Copyright Law and Visual Resources Collections" presented by local Attorney

David Olive, who talked about the history and meaning of copyright law, the 1976 changes to the law, and he offered an explanation of Section 107 on Fair Use. Kathryn McKenney, slide curator at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware presented the afternoon session on "Cataloging Decorative Arts Slides." Since Kathryn came from outside the SECAC region, John funded a small honorarium from discretionary funds for VRC program development. I will always be grateful to John for his support, because it facilitated securing Kathryn as an expert speaker in the field. From then on, Kathryn became a member of SECAC and a regular conference attendee during the 1980's, presenting papers often. At the Birmingham meeting, I tried the workshop format for a final session. It was "Photocopy Methods and Photography in Galleries and Museums" led by Ms. Johnson, UAB's slide curator. Twenty curators attended the meeting and sessions. The SECAC VRC program was establishing itself as an important venue for continuing education and professional development. At the SECAC Board meeting that year, I presented the "Statement of Standards for Hiring Visual Resources Professionals," which had been written and endorsed by the Boards of the College Art Association and ARLIS/NA. The SECAC Board also voted to endorse this standards document and it was printed in the newsletter.

By the fifth year, the VRC affiliate group was firmly established at SECAC. The 1980s was highlighted by many "firsts," including important discussions and speakers. In 1982 when SECAC met at James Madison University, the VRC Topics Session featured a panel on cataloging standards with Diane Mallos from the National Museum of American Art speaking on computerization standards, Elizabeth Alley from the University of Maryland School of Architecture speaking on architecture classification, and Ingeborg Wald from Cornell University on the topic of manuscript classification. Also that year, the international Visual Resources Association was founded and I became the SECAC correspondent for their journal, the *International Bulletin of Photographic Documentation of Visual Art*.

In 1983, a groundbreaking discussion was held at the Chattanooga SECAC meeting regarding shared cataloging. At our “Documenting Multi-Media Art” session, curators suggested that the VRA should coordinate computerized standard cataloging so that an art slide database would be created and all visual resources curators could contribute to and access this database to share the workload of creating slide records. Computerized cataloging would allow for easy cross-referencing so that no slide would ever be “lost” in a drawer. We are still working on this concept in the 21st century. 1983 was also the first year that the abstracts from the VRC sessions were included in the *SECAC Review* by editor Robert Craig and the first year the *VRA Bulletin* editor, Joy Blouin, published selected VRC papers from the SECAC conference.

In 1984, at the Richmond, Virginia meeting, was the birth of the *Southeastern VRC Newsletter* with Sandra Walker of the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, serving as editor. Sandy had presented a paper entitled “Establishing an Information Network for Southeastern Slide Curators” where her membership survey was discussed and the respondents expressed the real need for a regional quarterly newsletter and continued sessions at SECAC where curators could exchange information and mentor new slide curators. Sandy continued to publish this newsletter through the 80’s until e-mail and listserves took over as the preferred form of communication. In 1984, another standards document came out of the CAA and ARLIS/NA Boards entitled “Standards for Art Libraries and Fine Arts Slide Collections” and the visual resources affiliate group sought SECAC Board endorsement. After presenting it at the SECAC Membership meeting, the Board requested that I prepare a statement for the newsletter so that Deans and Department Heads could access this document when seeking staffing and establishing policies on collection development. In 1985 the meeting in New Orleans was outstanding with the largest attendance of visual resources curators—36. The southeastern curators were leading the profession with computerization projects using microcomputers and off the shelf database programs. Projects at Roanoke College, Virginia Commonwealth University,

Georgia Tech, the Tulane University Architecture Library and James Madison University were shared and demonstrated or described. Another first—live music and dancing at the SECAC party. The late Carolyn Kolb, then SECAC conference planner, treated all attendees to a sumptuous dinner of gumbo and jambalaya and entertainment by a Cajun band. Three hours of lively music had everyone's feet moving and on the last bus back to the hotel were a core group of visual resources curators, art historians and artists who became new found dancing friends. Thus began a new tradition for SECAC that has continued today and that core group of "last bus" dancers has not changed all that much through the years—in fact it has grown. In the late 80's still more VRC sessions focussed on computer software, copyright issues, special cataloging schemes, authority file work, disaster planning, new media as visual resources (such as video and video disks), circulation controls, job reclassification and professional issues, slide library equipment, etc.

The national interest with what was happening each year at the SECAC VRC sessions drew in presenters and new SECAC members from all over the region and the country. The quality of the papers improved each year making the SECAC sessions extremely worthwhile. In 1988 at Rollins College, a new VRC session, the "Slide Exchange" offered curators a chance to bring original photography slides or duplicates to the conference and then swap them with other curators. This session was a wonderful networking opportunity and a great way to obtain slides for collections back home. The Slide Exchange session became very popular and continued to be held for about eight years. Also at Rollins, a groundbreaking discussion session was held that focussed on strategies for upgrading professional status. Job descriptions were discussed and job reclassification struggles described. Linda McRae of the University of South Florida shared the results of a survey she had conducted of visual resources collections in Florida including their staffing.

During the discussion, it was stated that our national professional association should be in the forefront in setting professional standards: i.e. the VRA should be encouraged to produce a professional status statement and endorse staffing standards for visual resources collections. As SECAC VRC affiliate chair, I was charged with reporting to the VRA Executive Board, as I was serving in the office of Treasurer at the time, that the curators of SECAC requested the VRA to review and update the professional status statement. It was our hope that it would then be passed by the VRA membership, and presented and distributed as an official policy of the VRA. This request was made and the VRA and ARLIS/NA Boards did appoint a joint Task Force on Visual Resources Professional Issues to study the problems. Out of the Task Force in 1995 came the document "Criteria for the Hiring and Retention of Visual Resources Professionals." Once again, SECAC was the first regional Board to endorse the criteria standards and it was printed in the *SECAC Review* and appears on the SECAC website.

The 1989 meeting saw SECAC back in Little Rock. The highlight of this meeting for the VRC affiliate group was the presentation at the SECAC awards program of a Certificate of Distinction to Kathryn McKenney, retiring slide curator from Winterthur, Delaware, who had been a member of SECAC from 1980-89 and had presented papers at seven of those conferences. In my tribute to Kathryn, I cited her dedication to the profession and her willingness to share her expertise with all her SECAC colleagues.

In the 1990s, SECAC returned to many venues such as Atlanta, Birmingham, New Orleans, Charleston, Chapel Hill and Richmond. New sites to me were Memphis, Washington DC, Miami, Norfolk, and Louisville. The VRC sessions continued to tackle new topics and to provide training for new professionals. Theme sessions on facilities planning, automation projects, cataloging problems, staffing alternatives, implementing new technologies, documentation standards,

digitization, exploring the web and internet teaching, authority files and standards questions. National projects were showcased at SECAC.

In 1992, an introductory workshop on the Art and Architecture Thesaurus developed by the J. Paul Getty Trust's Art History Information Program was held for all SECAC VRC attendees. Cathy Whitehead and Suzanne Warren from the Getty conducted the workshop and once again, John Schnorrenburg provided special funding support to make the workshop happen. Sessions in 1994 focussed on issues of how shrinking resources and new technology was forcing us to fundamentally reinvent how we educate students. Text and image resources online were discussed and shown. Sandy Walker, then VRA President, reported on the fair use conference and public hearings on copyright in the context of the National Information Infrastructure, which were held in Washington DC where she testified on behalf of the VRA.

In 1995, Bonita Billman, visual resources curator at Georgetown University, served as SECAC conference coordinator and the highlights were open houses at the National Gallery of Art, the National Museum of American Art, and the American Institute of Architects Library and Archives. Members of national task forces and committee chairs became regular attendees at SECAC during the 90s. The VRA Data Standards Committee, the VRA Core Categories project, the Museum Educational Site Licensing project and the VISION and REACH projects working towards a National Cultural Heritage Database have all presented reports and findings at SECAC. The SECAC VRC attendees provided feedback and advice to the national groups. VRA, MACAA and ARLIS/NA chapters coordinated meetings to coincide with SECAC venues, thus increasing the networking opportunities, increasing membership and the professional impact. Other important projects coming out of the southeast was Phyllis Pivorun's NOTIS online cataloging project, and digital imaging projects by Nancy Shelton at Old Dominion University, and myself, Christina Updike at James Madison University.

The Madison Digital Image Database teaching and learning system created at JMU was showcased at the 1999 and 2000 SECAC conferences. As a result of these presentations, two regional institutions, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and East Carolina University helped JMU beta test the system and the software has been made available as a free download in October 2001. In 1998, I stepped down as VRC program chair after 21 years of service and Christine Hilker of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and Kathe Albrecht of American University took over. In 2001, John Taormina of Duke University and Jenni Rodda of New York University became program chairs. I remain as VRC representative on the SECAC Board.

The SECAC VRC has also served as a hotbed of officers for the national association. Three members have served as Treasurer (Chris Hilker, Lynda White and myself). Three members have served as President (Sandy Walker, Jenni Rodda and myself) and now a fourth is the current President, Anne Whiteside of the University of Virginia. Kathryn McKenney served as Secretary, Jenni was also a Program Vice President and Mark Pompelia of Rice University is now serving as Vice President. John Taormina of Duke University is editor of the *VRA Bulletin*, Sandy edited the 7th edition of the *Image Buyers Guide* published by Libraries Unlimited and Chris Hilker serves as VRA listserv moderator. Lynda White, Linda McRae, Kathe Albrecht, Chris Hilker and myself are or have served as national committee chairs. Linda McRae was most recently awarded the VRA's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award at the 2001 conference in Chicago and I was named to that honor in 1997 at the New York City conference. That is a lot of leadership coming from one regional organization!

And not only leadership at the national level, but leadership on the dance floor at SECAC parties. As I described earlier, the late Carolyn Kolb started a new tradition at SECAC and it continued thereafter, with Halloween costume parties in

New Orleans, Miami, and Tuscaloosa, where the late Gulnar Bosch appeared as a very scary witch. Barbecue and blues or jazz bands has been a popular format for the party such as the ones at the Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark Water Tower in Birmingham, at the cultural center in Chapel Hill and the historic Watertower on the Ohio River in Louisville. We have had two dances at train stations, one in Atlanta and one in Tuscaloosa. And a barbecue at the Historic Tredegar Iron works along the James River with wild dancing to the rock band the Ululating Mummies. However, the two most awesome parties have been the 1991 event held at Graceland in Memphis and the 1994 Halloween party at the Conte Wax Museum in New Orleans.

The wax museum party was so unique. Food booths and bars were set up in the maze of the museum, prizes were given for the best costumes and everyone received party favors of Mardi Gras beads and headbands with sparkly antennae. Once again, there was a live Cajun band to complete the festive atmosphere. I understand from Richard Pumphrey that some "SECAC attendees became very creative after a few beers and that the museum staff did not seem to appreciate our redressing the mannequins." Then the ultimate party was at Graceland. As John Myers recalls the tour of Graceland, he writes "I remember the quasi-religious attitude, which exuded from the young guides (high school age I think) who took us through the house and collection. I also remember standing before the wedding costumes of Elvis and Priscilla in the museum and hearing our guide tell us the daughter, Lisa Marie, was born 9 months to the day after they were married. Those of us who heard that nearly doubled over with laughter, as we tried to maintain some semblance of decorum in the sanctuary of the Great One!" Bill Levin's memory of the sock hop held after dinner involves "Brad Collins in a T-shirt with a pack of cigarettes rolled up in one shirt sleeve and sloppily inked-on tattoos further down on his arms." I remember giggling at the tour guide's commentary all the way through the house, but then being absolutely impressed with Elvis's room full of platinum records and his car collection in the museum where the SECAC reception was held. The theater in

the center of the car museum was a replica of a drive-in, complete with car bench seats and window speakers. Film clips of Elvis from his black-and-white movie days were being shown on the screen and as I watched from the front row I suddenly realized what the fanfare was about—"Elvis was hot!" I remember blurting this out rather loudly and my seat partners Larry Ligo and Randy Mack looked at me and burst out laughing at my revelation. I've been an Elvis fan ever since.

To end my reflection, I would like to read some comments by curators that seem to sum up the impact of the SECAC VRC. Phyllis Pivorun at Clemson University stated, "To me, the sessions and what was emphasized over the years are a history of how the profession has changed. I've loved visiting the slide libraries in the region and the best part is getting back together with people who do what I do. I always come back to the office with new ideas." Lynda White at the University of Virginia states "Certainly the sessions or ideas behind the sessions at SECAC seemed to reappear at the national level quite often. That is quite an accomplishment for such a small group. I think the fact that we have pulled in so many curators from outside the southeastern region is a testament to the strength of the programs." And Sherrie Rook from George Mason University said "When I think of VRC at SECAC what comes to mind are the standards that were set from the beginning: the efficient organization, the warm welcome to all, and the encouragement to participate. The result has been many good sessions, always worthwhile. For the small size of the VRC group, the quality of the sessions and papers has been high." ... And now you know the rest of the story!