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## 2018 VRA State of the Association Address

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### **Abstract**

During the 2018 Annual Business Meeting of the Visual Resources Association in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the president highlighted the accomplishments and challenges of the Association in a state of the association presentation. This article provides the transcript.

### **Keywords**

conference models, professional transitions, service, archives, strategic planning, open access

### **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

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## **2018 State of the Visual Resources Association**

Jen Green, President

Last year, we met in Louisville, Kentucky for our annual conference and membership meeting, and we reflected on the accomplishments of the previous year along with the challenges that we face now and into the future. That tradition will continue this year, as it has since 1983, when the Visual Resources Association held its first annual conference in Philadelphia on Friday, February 18<sup>th</sup>: just a 15-minute stroll from this location.

But, before we reflect on the current and future state of the Association, let us take a quick stroll down memory lane. On February 18th, 1983, some of us were meeting at the Federal Bank Building in Philadelphia, taking a deeper dive into issues surrounding visual resource methods. Others of us were still twinkles in our mothers' eyes. On February 18th, 1983, I was celebrating my sixth birthday. That month, my parents were delivering to me a speech similar to the one I delivered to VRA members last year in Louisville: times are tough and something has got to give. Like the VRA, my family had endured major transitions in the years prior. My parents had left their stable teaching jobs in suburban Minneapolis, and we moved to rural Minnesota to establish and run an apple orchard. It was an exciting adventure for all of us, but it came with some instability. I noticed that we started going to Grandma's house for luxury items such as butter, pudding, and carbonated drinks. My parents were stretching their dwindling resources thin in order to make ends meet before the approaching harvest season, and my birthday party was the event that "needed to give" in that year. But still, I loved celebrating my birthday with friends, and despite the hardship, it was important to me. So, much like you all did last year after hearing from the Board about how our dwindling resources may force us to contemplate a biennial conference, I gathered my thoughts and opinions and made a case for moving forward with my birthday party. And, just like the Board said last year, my parents said, "ok, we'll see what we can do, but there will be compromises, we will need your help, things will look different, and we'll revisit where we are next year."

So, like you, I recovered quickly from bad news and saw this as a challenge. We had the party, ate cheap on ketchup, bulk freezer hot dogs, and the tub of artificial vanilla in the freezer, and slid like mad down the stairs in laundry baskets. It was the best and most memorable birthday ever! Birthdays didn't go back to "normal" after that year, but that was OK because I'd discovered a better model. Although the VRA has not yet made drastic changes to our annual event, there is still time to discover a different and perhaps better way to gather at an annual conference. Last year's difficult news about the Association's financial health didn't result in immediate action, but it did result in our members engaging in challenging and important conversations as a group about what is important to us, what we need, and what we are willing to let go. For example, we decided through a vote to continue our annual conference tradition, but through that process we've further opened our minds to new hosting and spending models that

support long-term stability. My admiration and respect for this Association grew as members shared with each other (and directly with the Board) their diverse perspectives, wisdom, experience, values, anxiety, and frustrations about what the VRA and a VRA membership means to us. These conversations have helped us think alongside the Executive Board about our historical patterns in light of current challenges, and I am confident that this momentum will help to ensure a strong and enriched future for the VRA.

Now, almost 35 years to the day, I say to you what my parents said to me, “yes, we can do this if we all accept that it will look different than before and that we must work together to make it happen.” For those of you who were not at my birthday party, but were here in Philadelphia celebrating VRA’s first conference, take a moment to think about how we’ve changed since then, and let that be an indication of the possible directions we can go from here. I am incredibly proud of all of you for the time and thought that you’ve invested this past year in considering the future of the VRA, and I hope that you take pride in this as well. This kind of member engagement gives me the confidence that the state of the Association is stable and evolving in positive ways that will help it grow and flourish into the future.

The thoughtful conversations I’ve just described to you are not the only avenues by which members have engaged in the achievements and progress of the VRA. This year’s annual reports from committees, task forces, affiliates, chapters, and appointees, were as impressive as ever, and I love how this annual meeting gives a chance to “come up for air” and acknowledge our achievements and our ongoing initiatives.

As a first response to some of the Association’s financial challenges, the Board worked hard this year to reduce Board expenses. Treasurer Jeannine will provide you with more details about this in her Treasurer’s report. I will say that although changes in Board spending may seem minor, they are steps in the right direction towards fiscal health, and we hope that these changes can be sustained and improved upon by our future Board colleagues. I would like to thank my fellow Board members for their willingness to explore new, cost-saving approaches, which sometimes came at the expense of their own comfort and convenience. It is not always easy to accept changes like these, but these people approached the challenge with curiosity and a sense of fun, and I really appreciate that.

This next achievement results from work spanning at least 12 years and two Task Forces comprised of a total eleven VRA members. In September 2017, the VRA archives found a new and permanent home within the Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. The story behind this achievement is long and winding, and you can read about it in the two Task Force reports produce first in 2006 and then in 2016. But, at this time I’d like to acknowledge two members that carried (literally, at points) the burden of archives over these many years. Martine Sherrill was a member of the 2006 Task Force and

subsequently became the VRA Archivist when the archival material was moved from Durham to Wake Forest. Since 2006, Martine has done exceptional work organizing and preserving the Association's archival materials and she deserves a round of applause. Realizing that Wake Forest could not be a permanent location for the materials, and that Martine would soon need to step down as the VRA Archivist, the 2016 Task Force report recommended that the Association identify an institutional archive willing to accession and sustain the materials permanently (regardless of VRA member affiliation to that institution). Thanks to one of our 2016 Task Force members, Brian Shelburne, the Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst agreed to become that permanent home. But, Brian's work did not end there. Although officially discharged from his work on the Task Force in 2016, Brian offered to use a portion of his sabbatical to travel to Wake Forest on behalf of the VRA to empty the storage unit containing the archives and chaperone them safely to Massachusetts. After a few days in Wake Forest compiling and packaging up the archival material, the Board received this message and photo from Brian: "Now I just need to make a 12-hour run in a U-Haul truck and it'll be done." And now, Brian deserves a round of applause. We are extremely grateful to both 2006 and 2016 Archives Task Forces, Brian, Martine, and UMass Amherst for making this happen. While this achievement was an additional expense this past year, it is a long-term solution that will save the Association significant expense in the years moving forward.

The story of the VRA archives is an important example of how the Association relies deeply on the work of our Appointees, Committees, and Task Forces. With that, I'd like to thank the Strategic Plan Task Force for their thoughtful and diligent work in completing the VRA's 2018 Strategic Plan, which will guide the Association for the next five years. Elaine Paul and Jolene de Verges co-chaired the Task Force of members including Sarah Gillis, Beth Wodnick Haas, Billy Kwan, Meghan Musolff, Molly Tighe, and Heidi Eyestone. This group engaged in a rigorous process by which they reviewed the 2016 Strategic Plan, the Professional Status Survey, and many other organizational documents in order to complete a final draft of the VRA's 2018 Strategic Plan. The VRA Executive Board is very excited about where this plan could take the Association over the next five years, and we hope that you will become excited about that too. Elaine Paul will speak more about the Strategic Plan in a moment, and you are invited to join the "Workshopping the VRA Session" today at 12pm for a free lunch, discussion of the Association's future and how the plan can be implemented in support of that. For now, let us give the Strategic Plan Task Force a round of applause for their work.

In other Task Force news, the Association is currently engaged in its standard quinquennial review of the VRA Constitution and Bylaws. This past Fall, the Executive Board appointed the Constitution and Bylaw Review Task Force, which is co-chaired by Allan Kohl and Stephen Patton and includes task force members Lael Ensor-Bennett, Marcia Focht, and Heidi Rempel. Their work to review the Association's Constitution and Bylaws and recommend proposed

amendments to the Executive Board and the VRA members is well underway. The timing of this review along with the final draft of our five-year strategic plan and important VRA member discussions about future directions of the Association is ideal. The Constitution and Bylaw Review Task Force has taken opportunities to consult with both the Strategic Plan Task Force and the Executive Board about the future of Association and how the strategic plan can support pending recommendations and new directions.

There are over 180 people registered for this year's conference and 60 of them are new members. If you are a new member, I'd first like to welcome you to this amazing group of professionals. I hope that you find your conference experience to be enriching and full with networking opportunities. Some of our continuing members may have introduced themselves to you already, but if they haven't, I encourage you to reach your hand out to those sitting near you this morning and let them know that you are a new member. I know from experience that VRA members are some of the most welcoming and supportive professionals you will meet, and they would love to know who you are, where you are coming from, and how they might work with you in the future. Also, I'd like to say that it is never too early to get involved in the work of the VRA. I, for example, dropped into an Intellectual Property Rights Committee meeting during my first conference and ended up joining the group before the end of that conference week. It was the beginning of one of the most important and impactful professional development journeys that I've experienced over the past 10 years. I know that I'm not the only person who has benefitted professionally through volunteering time to the VRA. Last year, one of our newer members, Kendra Werst, approached a Board member in Louisville and expressed her interest in the Social Media Contributor position. The VRA Board and Committee Chairs really appreciate people like Kendra who approach us and offer to help. Kendra has done such an exceptional job in the past year promoting the VRA via a variety of social media channels and her work has really helped increase visibility of this year's conference and the Association overall. And if I had to guess, some of what Kendra has learned in this VRA role has had a positive impact on her work at Williams College.

We've announced on the VRA listserv a number of new appointees this year, and we depend on each and every one of them to keep us moving forward. I won't list them all for you now, but I encourage you to visit [vraweb.org](http://vraweb.org) to learn more about who they are and what they contribute to the success of the VRA. We've also announced new directions and initiatives that have put added responsibilities on some of our members and appointees, and their willingness to step up to these tasks has been admirable. In October 2017, the Executive Board announced the Association's decision to transition the *VRA Bulletin* (the Association's publication) from a subscription model to an open access model. This is an exciting initiative that will result in broadening the reach and impact of our members' work and the VRA at-large, however, this effort would not be successful without significant support from our *Bulletin* Editors, Maureen Burns and Hannah Marshall, as well as our Membership Services Coordinator, Lise Hawkos. In

the coming months, Maureen, Hannah, and Lise will be working closely with our support specialists at bepress Digital Commons (the Bulletin's publishing platform) to ensure a smooth transition to "Open" for our members and others who will have an interest in publishing their work in the VRA Bulletin. Scholarly communication and open access are emerging areas within the work of visual resource members, and we hope that the *Bulletin's* move to open access will help the VRA become a leader in support of this work.

The VRA Board continues to work with the VRA Foundation Board of Directors on our shared goals to support the advancement of knowledge in the field of visual resources and image management. While the VRA Board serves the VRA members, the work of the VRAF stretches beyond our membership to support education and training for all professionals working in the areas of digital content management. One recent collaboration with the VRAF concerns the location and oversight of the data standard, Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO). Following the recommendations of the 2016 VRAF Task Force for CCO, the VRAF and the VRA agreed that CCO should move back to the VRA where it will be maintained by newly-formed VRA Cataloging and Metadata Standards Committee, which was formerly the Data Standards Committee and the VRA Core Oversight Committee. The VRAF has already expressed a strong interest and commitment in making the CCO transition smooth and would like to work with the Cataloging and Metadata Standards committee in the coming year to identify potential funding sources to help the VRA support, preserve, and maintain CCO in the long-term. This collaboration would be of huge benefit to VRA members, but also to colleagues beyond the VRA who rely on CCO as a standard in their work. On behalf of the VRA Executive Board, I'd like to extend sincere thanks to the Visual Resources Association Foundation Board of Directors for their collegiality. Momentarily, VRAF Chair, Margaret Webster, will report on the work of the VRAF and will likely announce the four new VRAF Board of Director appointees who have assumed these positions at the conference this week and thank the VRAF Board of Directors who are stepping down. But, in case she doesn't mention it, you should know that Margaret is one of those Directors stepping down. I'd like to take this time to thank Margaret for her four years of service as the VRAF Board of Directors Chair. Margaret, we truly appreciate your dedication and your strong leadership. I know that your voice on the VRAF Board will be missed.

If you read every annual report from the VRA Committees, Task Forces, Chapters, and Appointees, you will know, as the Board does, that our members do incredible work each year to ensure the VRA's health and growth. What I've shared with you today is a fraction of what we've accomplished together this year, and I think that collectively we have learned so much about each other and our futures through direct and honest communication with one another. This communication was not always comfortable, but it was worthwhile, and what I hope we've all learned from it is that our members care deeply about the VRA and its future. Although we are all working in similar professions, our experiences at our institutions can be vastly different.

But, despite that, the conversations and perspectives that unfolded this year amongst our members convinced me that we have the passion and the vision to support all types of diversity, professional transitions, and evolving content management landscapes. There is a deep understanding across our membership that we can't keep everything the same, and we need to use our history to propel us in positive future directions. We all have a lot on our plates, but the VRA is composed of a unique population of "do-ers" who will make the future happen.

Finally, I want to thank the membership for the opportunity to serve as the Association's President. I have experienced such tremendous professional and personal growth through service to the VRA. Working with all of you and thinking creatively about how to approach the VRA's challenges and the opportunities has been an amazingly fulfilling experience. Thank you.