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# The *Life Cycle of Visual Assets*: Advocating for the Profession

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# The *Life Cycle of Visual Assets*: Advocating for the Profession

**Abstract**

The VRA Identity Task Force was formed in 2018 in response to the Visual Resources Association Strategic Plan (2018-2022), which recommended that the VRA reflect upon its identity with regard to both its legacy and future. To address this charge, the Task Force engaged in a comprehensive analysis of the Association that ultimately resulted in a set of recommendations related to the VRA's mission, core values, and vision. A key component of the work of the Task Force was the development of the *Life Cycle of Visual Assets* infographic, organized into categories that reflect the complex workflows and diversity of tasks performed by visual asset professionals: conceptualization, capture, description, management, access, preservation, and use. This article focuses on the *Life Cycle*, including the models that inspired it, what it consists of, and how it can be used as a tool to advocate for the importance of the profession.

**Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

Carolyn Lucarelli directed the former Visual Resources Centre (VRC) in Penn State's Department of Art History for many years until it was transformed in 2021 into the Center for Virtual/Material Studies, an initiative she now manages.

Betha Whitlow led the former Visual Resource Center (VRC) at Washington University in Saint Louis until 2021, when it was re-envisioned as the Digital Art History Lab (DAHL). In her current role directing the DAHL, she still dips into the responsibilities described in the *Life Cycle of Visual Assets* regularly while also working to build digital humanities literacies through a range of training and support initiatives.

"What do you do for a living?"

For anyone whose job is the management of visual assets, their response to this question can end up as a word salad of varied responsibilities that leaves their interrogator more mystified than enlightened. And yet, polite attempts to economically encapsulate the professional role of the visual asset manager often end up minimizing the robust skill set required from those practicing it. Is it even possible to concisely describe a field composed of professionals with a broad range of professional training, roles, and responsibilities? This is one question that the Visual Resources Association (VRA) began grappling with in 2018 with the formation of the VRA Identity Task Force.

Charged with reflecting upon the identity of the VRA in regard to both its legacy and future, the VRA Identity Task Force engaged in a comprehensive analysis of the organization that ultimately resulted in a set of recommendations related to the VRA's mission, core values, and vision.[1] The Task Force quickly recognized that it needed a clear understanding of what visual asset management professionals *do* in order to guide and frame its work. Based on its analysis of data collected from surveying both the VRA membership and those associated with affiliated organizations, the Task Force identified the areas in which visual asset professionals are uniquely experts. This resulted in the development of the *Life Cycle of Visual Assets* infographic, organized into categories that reflect the complex workflows and diversity of tasks performed by visual asset professionals. The *Life Cycle* – including the models that inspired it, what it consists of, and how it can be used – is the focus of this article.

To develop the *Life Cycle of Visual Assets* (Fig. 1), the Task Force began by seeking existing models from which they could customize a life cycle focused specifically on the management of visual assets. Since visual asset management bears a strong relationship to the more general fields of digital curation and digital preservation, the Task Force was able to locate two models to serve as inspiration: the Digital Curation Center's *Curation Lifecycle Model*[2] and the National Digital Stewardship Association's *Levels of Digital Preservation Matrix*.[3] The Task Force then fine-tuned the focus of its more specialized model to showcase the steps involved in managing the complete life cycle of visual assets, displaying the range of what visual asset practitioners do in their professional lives. The resulting infographic is intended to cover the gamut of expertise that those in visual asset management roles may have and the varied responsibilities they may encounter, organized in workflow form, including:

- Conceptualization (consultation; project planning; workflow design; system & standards selection; best practices guidelines)
- Capture (acquisition; digitization; photography; creation)
- Description (metadata & cataloging standards; authorities)
- Management (databases/DAMS; collection development; curation; distribution)
- Access (delivery; discovery; instruction; outreach)
- Preservation (data integrity; migration; storage; deaccessioning)
- Use (digital scholarship; visual literacy; intellectual property; transformation)

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[1] For the VRA Identity Task Force's complete charge as well as a link to the *Final Report*, see "Task Forces, Advisory Groups, Working Groups," vraweb.org, accessed April 26, 2023 https://vraweb.org/about/task-forces-advisory-groups-and-working-groups/.

[2] DCC, *Curation Lifecycle Model,* accessed April 26, 2023, https://www.dcc.ac.uk/guidance/curation-lifecycle-model.

[3] National Digital Stewardship Alliance – Digital Library Federation, *Levels of Digital Preservation*, accessed April 26, 2023, https://ndsa.org/publications/levels-of-digital-preservation/.

In creating the *Life Cycle of Visual Assets*, the Task Force also determined that it should not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they viewed the *Life Cycle* as a practical and valuable tool for communication, advocacy, and education in the field of visual asset management. One significant recommendation from the Task Force was that the infographic be adopted by the VRA for these purposes. While full utilization of the *Life Cycle* is not yet underway, we believe in its broad-ranging potential to be effective in the following areas:

**Communicating and Advocating**

Many people do not understand the complexity of visual asset management and the myriad skill sets required to do this work effectively. The organization of the *Life Cycle* around workflow and the gamut of responsibilities inherent to the field provides a solid foundation for explaining what we do to others; advocating for ourselves in situations where we may be pigeonholed as mere digital technicians; and identifying and illustrating our transferable skills when seeking employment opportunities.

**Training in the Digital Humanities**

Many in the field of visual asset management have been able to parlay the depth of their experiences into new institutional roles, including in digital humanities instruction. While the skills of visual asset management are an excellent point of entry into many digital humanities practices, they are ideally suited for forwarding and supporting archival projects. As an example, in the spring of 2021, Betha Whitlow (one of the authors of this article) worked with a faculty member at Washington University in Saint Louis to design a student final project building an archive of recent activist art, with the goal of embedding multiple literacies into the assignment. To assist the students in understanding the complexity of archival project workflows, a video tutorial was created to break down the *Life Cycle of Visual Assets* in detail, as well as describing how the steps in the *Life Cycle* could easily be generalized and extrapolated to almost any digital humanities project workflow.

**Marketing the VRA**

The primary role the Task Force envisioned for the *Life Cycle of Visual Assets* was for its use as a potent marketing tool for the VRA. In succinctly outlining both the workflow and skill sets required of visual asset managers, the Task Force envisioned the VRA highlighting the

*Life Cycle* as a way to connect with potential members and offer its expertise to those whose professional affiliations lie outside of the traditional VRA boundaries of art-oriented libraries, university departments, and museums.

More significantly, the Task Force identified the VRA's educational programming – particularly its annual conference – as one of its greatest strengths. Therefore, the Task Force felt that both conference content and (potentially) regional programming could be organized into different "tracks," mirroring what is outlined in the *Life Cycle* workflow. The VRA did attempt to adapt the *Life Cycle* and use it for the programming of the 2021 virtual Chicago conference. Leading up to the conference, Sara Schumacher, the VRA Vice President of Conference Program, wrote, "Transcending the differences in our workplaces and position titles, we all engage with materials and people along the visual asset management lifecycle. The *Lifecycle* was identified by the VRA Identity Task Force reflecting key points of practice and professional interest. The VRA 2021 virtual Chicago conference can be filtered according to these lifecycle categories to create programming tracks. You can click on the links below to find events, sessions, and workshops that align with these categories."[4] With the recent merger of the VRA and the Visual Resources Association Foundation (VRAF), the concept of linking the Association's programming with the individual *Life Cycle* categories could be reintroduced for future educational opportunities, including annual conferences and regional workshops.

The timing of the completion of the *Visual Resources Association Identity Task Force Final Report*, which included the *Life Cycle of Visual Assets*, was not ideal since it was submitted to the VRA Executive Board just a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic caused institutions across the country to suspend in-person events, leading to the cancellation of the VRA 2020 Annual Conference that was to be held in Baltimore. The Task Force had planned to lead a VRA Brainstorming Camp during the conference in which the results and recommendations of their work, with a particular emphasis on the *Life Cycle*, would be introduced, but this was never realized. Understandably, there was little opportunity for the Executive Board to implement any of the recommendations at that time, and despite the attempt to embed the *Life Cycle* into the programming for the 2021 conference, the membership was not made aware of the *Life Cycle* in any significant way.

While full adoption of the *Life Cycle* was never achieved, the authors of this article (the co-chairs of the VRA Identity Task Force) believe the comprehensive recommendations contained within the *Final Report* are largely still relevant, particularly following the merger of the VRA with the VRAF. The original intent of the *Life Cycle* – to provide a framework for the VRA's educational initiatives, to aid visual asset professionals in communicating the myriad aspects of their roles, and to advocate for the importance of the field – is still applicable today. It is our hope that the suggestions above will encourage the current Executive Board to revisit the Task Force's *Final Report* and consider more specifically the potential value of adopting and promoting the *Life Cycle of Visual Assets*.

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[4] Sara Schumacher, PR&C Officer, n.d., "VRA 2021: The Lifecycle of Visual Assets," vraweb.org, accessed May 3, 2023, http://vraweb.org/vra-2021-lifecycle-visual-assets/.