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# “Members Helping Members” – The VRA Travel Awards Program

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# “Members Helping Members” – The VRA Travel Awards Program

## **Abstract**

Beginning in 1993, the Visual Resources Association’s Travel Awards program has provided financial support to hundreds of members, enabling them to attend and participate in the Association’s annual conferences. This history follows the program’s growth, from an initial gift by Luraine Tansey through fundraising efforts including the legendary Tansey Dinners/Events and the VRAffle and related skits, with a significant portion of travel awards funding coming from members themselves in support of their peers. The recent creation of the VRA’s Travel Awards Endowment is the most recent development in our cherished tradition of “members helping members.”

## **Keywords**

New professionals, professional development, Visual Resources Association (VRA), history, travel awards, Travel Awards Committee, memorial, Luraine Collins Tansey.

## **Author Bio**

Art historian Allan T. Kohl is Librarian for Visual Resources and Library Instruction at the Minneapolis College of Art & Design, where he also serves as the College Archivist. He did his graduate studies in Library/Information Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and in art history at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. He is former President and Treasurer of the Visual Resources Association and has served for many years on the VRA’s Financial Advisory, Travel Awards, and Intellectual Property Rights Committees, the latter with a particular interest in copyright issues as these affect the educational use of images documenting works of art and visual culture.

While many of our peer organizations have long offered travel awards to one or more individuals for attendance at their national gatherings, the Visual Resources Association (VRA) is exceptional in both the number of awards it annually bestows and in its special emphasis on encouraging and supporting our new members and younger professionals who are often participating in their first professional conference. Because recent years have witnessed the decline of institutional budget support for professional development travel, these individuals in the early years of their careers are especially limited in their opportunities to network, share their project successes, and gain the recognition and confidence of making their first conference presentations. The VRA Travel Awards program is thus a powerful investment in the younger professionals who represent the future of this organization.

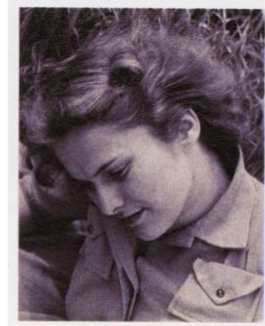
Like so many good ideas, the VRA Travel Awards program began with the visionary generosity of one forward-thinking individual. Luraine Collins Tansey (1918-2014) was a pioneering slide librarian, perhaps best known for her development of the first “universal” slide classification system serving the needs of both catalogers and collection users. Created in collaboration with Wendell Simons at the University of California, Santa Cruz and published in 1969, *A Slide Classification System for the Organization and Automatic Indexing of Interdisciplinary Collections of Slides and Pictures* presciently anticipated not only the possibilities of computer indexing, but also the potential value of images in interdisciplinary research, teaching, and publication – far beyond the departmental “silos” typical of the time.<sup>1</sup>

Within the College Art Association (CAA), Tansey was also an outspoken advocate for the professional recognition of librarians and slide curators. She is esteemed as one of the “Founding Mothers” of both the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) and the Visual Resources Association.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Luraine Tansey Oral History, 1992,” Nancy McCauley, Humanities Commons, 1992, <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:44773/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Luraine Tansey,” last modified December 11, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luraine\\_Tansey](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luraine_Tansey).



Luraine Collins, 1943.  
Working in Red Cross during WWII.



Luraine Collins Tansey

Figure 1: (left): "Saturday Afternoon with Luraine," interview and biography of Luraine Tansey by Susan Jane Williams, published for the VRA's Silver Jubilee celebration in Kansas City (2007); (top right): Luraine Collins serving as a Red Cross volunteer in World War II; (bottom right): Luraine Collins Tansey.

The VRA's Travel Awards program had its genesis in 1993 with initial funding provided by Tansey's donation of her first retirement check. The first five Association travel awards were given for attendance at the 1994 Conference in New York. That same year saw the creation of the standing Travel Awards Committee, charged with evaluating applicants and selecting recipients; the Committee's first chair was Ben Kessler.<sup>3</sup>

Over the following years, the program grew in number of members assisted, thanks to donations large and small from our membership, and also from conference fundraising events, the planning of which was eventually added to the Committee's charge.<sup>4</sup> Even in retirement, Tansey continued to grace our conferences with her warm and caring presence, and it became an informal practice for her to serve as hostess for an off-site dinner with a small number of her former colleagues and admirers each year. In 1995, the first official Luraine Tansey Travel Award fundraising dinner was included in the San Antonio conference schedule as an extra-cost event, with the notice that "a portion of your dinner price will go toward the Travel Award fund."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Visual Resources Association, "Past Conferences," <https://www.vraweb.org/past-conferences>.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Jane Williams, "Saturday Afternoon with Luraine," interview and biography/chronology, published for the Visual Resources Association's Silver Jubilee, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Visual Resources Association, "Policies and Procedures Manual [formerly the Officer's Handbook]," 3rd edition, 2010.

Beginning in 1996, travel awards funding was also sought by the VRA Development Committee from corporate sponsors, several of whom contributed significant donations to establish named awards. At the same time, the "Tansey Dinner" was promoted in the conference schedule as a "popular annual event" which often sold out early. Typically held off-site in an ethnic or locally themed restaurant, these events were described in pre-conference publicity as both fundraiser and tribute: "As always, the evening would not be complete without the wit and wisdom of Luraine Tansey herself" (Philadelphia, 1998). Alas for tradition, the following year's Dinner (Los Angeles, 1999) would be the last that Tansey, now in her eighties, would be able to attend in person.



*Figure 2: Luraine Tansey (third from left) with VRA Travel Award recipients, Philadelphia (1998).*

Even without Luraine's personal presence, the Tansey Dinner would continue as an annual event in her honor for a number of years. Especially memorable at the 2004 (Portland, Oregon) conference was the "fund-raising event to benefit the Luraine Tansey Education Fund" held in the Minoan Room of the Greek Cusina Restaurant, cherished in participants' memories for its evening of "interactive entertainment" complete with traditional dancing and plate smashing.

However, with the onset of the Great Recession, restaurant price increases began to make it difficult for conference attendees to assume the costs of an off-site meal plus transportation, plus a significant fundraising component. Over the following decade, several different models were proposed to maintain the tradition. In some years, the Dinners were replaced by restyled Tansey Events: the first of these was an evening of duckpin bowling, a local tradition (Baltimore, 2006). The 2009 conference featured a performance by Toronto's Second City sketch comedy company. As late as 2012, the Albuquerque conference presented as the Tansey Event a performance by a local flamenco ensemble of dancers and musicians. Unfortunately, these memorable efforts barely covered expenses, with little extra realized for funding travel awards.

In 2005, the first International Travel Award was announced, part of a concerted effort, along with the creation of an International Chapter, to extend the VRA's reach to Europe, Latin America, and beyond. Each year, the number of travel awards given out rose, eventually assisting as many as 26 members in a single year. 2008 saw the first named award donated by an individual member: the Kathe Hicks Albrecht award, earmarked for a first-time conference attendee. Other donations by individuals helped – there was an even an option for Travel Award gifts on the membership renewal form.

At the same time, the Travel Awards Committee began to explore a new potential income source: an annual raffle. Organized and presided over by "Empress" Patti McRae and assisted by a troupe of volunteer "Raffle Rousers," the VRAffle solicited bids on items and services donated by corporate sponsors, individual members, and VRA regional chapters (including "chapter baskets" intended to feature regional products).

The Raffle Rousers soon morphed into a performing troupe whose skits were themed based on each conference's host city. "The Mermaids of Miami" (2005) were followed by Edgar Allan Poe, the Lost Lenore, and a bevy of deceased ladies the following year in Baltimore. The VRA's Silver Jubilee conference (Kansas City, 2007) featured a complete musical revue, while Toronto (2009) witnessed "The Call of the Frozen North," an old-time melodrama in which Little Nell and her brave Mountie captured a villainous copyright infringer. The following year, in what proved to be the Raffle Rousers' swan song, "Gone with the Slides" (Atlanta, 2010) seemed tinged with melancholy, marking changes not only in the visual resources landscape overall, but also in the Association's annual conference program.



*Figure 3: clockwise from top left: Neptune and Amphitrite in “Mermaids of Miami” (2005); Edgar Allan Poe and the Lost Lenore, Baltimore (2006); “The Call of the Frozen North,” Toronto (2009); “Gone with the Slides,” Atlanta (2010).*

By then, though the number of travel awards remained high each year, both the VRAffle and the Tansey Dinner had become less successful at raising the bulk of travel award funding, which was now increasingly drawn from the Association’s operating budget. To continue the link between Luraine Tansey and the travel awards program she had fostered, awards funded from the operating budget were named “Tansey Awards” in her honor following her death in 2014. To maintain the total number of available awards, a new category of “Tansey Top-Up Awards” was created to provide partial support to those attendees who were able to cover some of their own expenses.

In recent years, the Travel Awards program has placed special emphasis on helping students attend what – for many – will be their first professional conference. Supporting this effort, in 2019 John Taormina established the Garneta E. Taormina Memorial Graduate Student Travel Award in honor of his late mother, available each year to “a current full-time graduate student enrolled in an accredited degree program and considering a career in visual resources and/or digital humanities.”

Kohl: “Members Helping Members”

The Covid pandemic brought about major changes in the VRA conference structure. Following the cancellation of the 2020 conference and the hosting of the 2021 conference as an online-only experience, the 2022 conference in Baltimore was re-imagined as a hybrid gathering, with attendees divided between in-person and remote participants. 2023 saw a calendar shift to our first fall conference following the merger of the Association with the Visual Resources Association Foundation. With travel award donations now eligible as tax deductions, gifts to the newly established Travel Awards Endowment quickly exceeded \$15,000; in the future, annual drawdowns from the Endowment will help to relieve pressure on the VRA’s annual operating budget while providing continuation of one of our most cherished traditions: “Members helping Members.”