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# “We Gather Together”: A History of the Visual Resources Association Annual Conferences

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# “We Gather Together”: A History of the Visual Resources Association Annual Conferences

## **Abstract**

The annual conference of the Visual Resources Association has been a key component of the organization’s identity and activity since its founding in 1982. This article traces the history of the VRA Conferences, from their early development as two-day supplemental programs linked to the much larger College Art Association conferences, to fully independent, multi-faceted weeklong schedules of sessions, demonstrations, workshops, and specialized meetings. Recent post-COVID trends toward remote participation and hybrid events offer benefits, and challenges, to both in-person and online conferees.

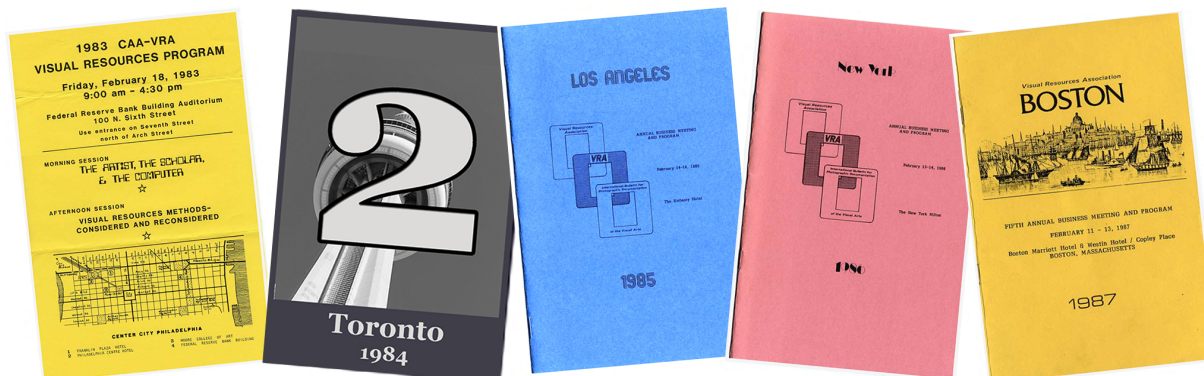
## **Keywords**

Visual Resources Association (VRA), College Art Association (CAA), conferences

## **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.

## The First Five Conferences: 1983-1987



*Philadelphia (1983); Toronto (1984); Los Angeles (1985); New York City (1986); Boston (1987).*

The Visual Resources Association was founded in 1982, and during that very first year held its first annual conference. As would be the case for its next seventeen years, this initial VRA gathering was a two-day supplemental program appended to the much larger and well-established College Art Association Conference. Since at the time the Art Libraries Society of North America also typically met in conjunction with CAA, this arrangement made perfect sense, as many of the earliest VRA members were also CAA or ARLIS/NA members.

For a registration fee of \$10, VRA conferees had the opportunity to attend special interest group and committee meetings, workshops, presentations on new technologies, and reviews of familiar practices, such as an early session titled “Comparison and Evaluation of Slide Films Used in Photographing Works of Art.” Another session on “Slide Library Automation” anticipated the potential impact of the computer revolution on collection management practices. Tours led by local members highlighted the host city’s architecture and cultural institutions.

The VRA Conference schedule also included the Annual Business Meeting (in some years called the “Members’ Meeting”), satisfying a requirement in the organization’s By-Laws that a quorum of the membership needed to be present to conduct official business. This was necessary at a time when email did not yet exist, and online voting was still many years in the future.

Although the CAA Conference had separate registration fees, VRA conferees were usually invited to attend one selected CAA event of shared interest; in turn, CAA conferees were welcome to attend a designated VRA event. A study of the programs of the first five VRA Conferences (available online)<sup>1</sup> reveals a growing interest in the possibilities of information sharing among institutions, at a time when most visual resources collections were comprised primarily of 35mm slides. Many of these stand-alone aggregations were organized and cataloged using home-grown, idiosyncratic systems that had evolved around each institution’s own particular research and pedagogical needs. Actual asset sharing of content would prove to be even farther in the future; but here also, VRA members would assume leading roles over the years to come as the organization grew in numbers and influence.

<sup>1</sup> “Past Conferences,” Visual Resources Association <https://www.vraweb.org/past-conferences>.

## The Second Five Conferences: 1988-1992



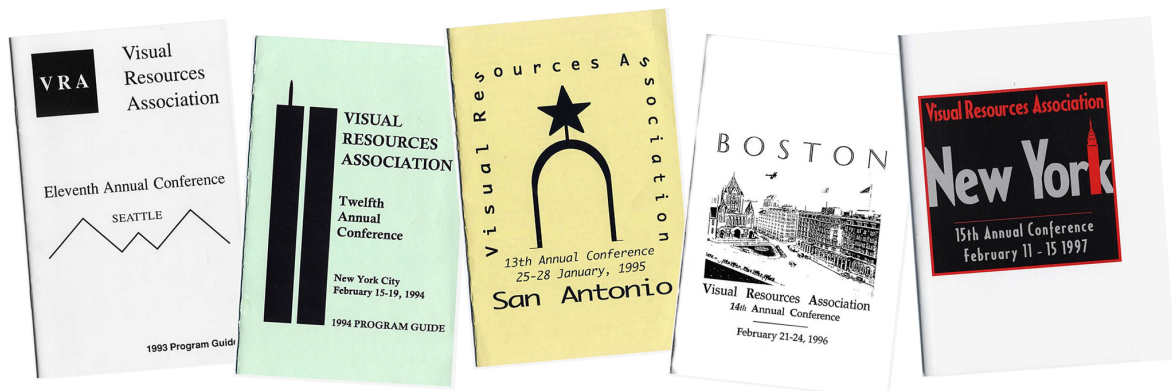
*Houston (1988); San Francisco (1989); New York City (1990); Washington, D.C. (1991); Chicago (1992).*

Conferences 6 through 10 saw the program expand to three full days, sometimes achieved by adding a half day at each end of the original 2-day schedule, with registration fees now rising to \$25. VRA began hosting more of its own social events, rather than simply piggy backing on those held by CAA or ARLIS/NA. An early foray into inter-institutional resource sharing, making its first appearance in 1990, was the Slide Exchange, during which participants could swap duplicate slides and related information.

A joint VRA/ARLIS/NA session in 1990 discussed “Conservation Issues Beyond the Book: Slides, Microforms, Videodiscs and Magnetic Media,” while a joint VRA/CAA session on “Copyright Issues and New Media” documented an interest in intellectual property rights that would in the coming years grow to be a major concern of visual resources professionals.

As the visual resources field became increasingly identified as a professional specialization in its own right within the larger institutional support services environment, the Association was able to reflect upon its own evolution, as evidenced in the concluding plenary “Professional Concerns and Professionalism in the Visual Resources Field” at the 1989 Conference. Led by the organization’s first president, Christine Sundt, this session reviewed the development of the visual resources field from its earliest beginnings in 1974.

## Conferences 1993-1997



*Seattle (1993); New York City (1994); San Antonio (1995); Boston (1996); New York City (1997).*

The early 1990s witnessed the advent of major technological developments that would transform the visual resources environment. The Tagged Image File Format (TIFF), first introduced in 1986 to provide high quality digital images, was enhanced for “deep color” in 1992 – the same year that saw the release of the Joint Photographic Experts Group (JPEG) as a compressed image file format. Forward-thinking visual resources professionals were beginning to familiarize themselves with the post-scan potential of even the earliest versions of Adobe Photoshop.

By the latter 1990s, however, tech-savvy faculty members were acquiring images on their own, especially when presentation software such as PowerPoint 97 allowed users to insert their own digital images into their presentations. As more institutions replaced full-time tenured professors with adjuncts, these “migrant workers of academia” began bypassing departmental collections entirely, compiling their own sets of teaching images to make sure of taking their favorite assets with them to their next short-term gigs. Administrators began to question the necessity of maintaining departmental collections – and their staff.

These years would see visual resources professionals rising, sometimes reluctantly, to these new challenges. A 1993 Conference session titled “Electronic Imaging: Copyright Issues” anticipated two major concerns affecting our members. New standing committees, including Data Standards and Intellectual Property Rights, made their appearances among scheduled meetings in conference programs. Thanks to the generosity of Luraine Tansey, one of the Association’s founders, the first Travel Awards were bestowed at the 1994 Conference. What began as a small, informal gathering of Luraine’s friends evolved into an official conference event as the Tansey Travel Award Fundraising Dinner in 1995 (and there was now a new Travel Awards Committee to oversee distribution of the largesse raised). That same year, the “New Technologies Roundup” made its conference debut, giving vendors and application developers the opportunity to present and demonstrate their products.

Conference registration costs had now risen to \$95, with a program extending over three and a half days. The 1997 Conference in New York City featured workshops on “Digital Imaging Basics” and “Data Migration,” while sessions delved into complex topics such as “Visual Resources, Electronic Media, and the Changing Art History Classroom” and “Copyright and Fair Use Issues for Academic Slide Collections.”

Unfortunately, this same conference resulted in a significant financial loss to the organization, which led VRA to consider a major change to its conference model: de-coupling from meeting concurrently with the College Art Association. As a larger organization needing major meeting and exhibition spaces in its venues, CAA always planned its conferences at major hotels in larger, expensive “Tier 1” cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York City. Hotel contracts typically require set “room-block pickups” to guarantee their rates and provide gratis use of meeting facilities; but VRA members had grown increasingly reluctant to stay in expensive hotels, with many seeking less pricey accommodations elsewhere. By failing to meet its room-block obligations that year, VRA incurred large financial penalties.

## Conferences 1998-2002



*Philadelphia (1998); Los Angeles (1999); San Francisco (2000); Chicago (2001); St. Louis (2002).*

The next five years saw VRA tentatively disengaging from the CAA conferences, meeting separately in alternate years (Philadelphia, 1998, and San Francisco, 2000). These earliest independent forays underscored the additional work that would be required of the Association's leadership in researching and selecting suitable host cities. The 2001 Conference in Chicago would be the last held in conjunction with CAA.

With registration fees now at \$120, the VRA Conference maintained a three-and-a-half-day, Wednesday-through-Saturday schedule of sessions, roundtables, meetings, and tours, along with the Annual Business Meeting and social events. A preliminary front end half-day on Tuesday provided opportunity for limited capacity hands-on workshops. An important addition to the program in 1998 was a New Members Breakfast, expanded the following year to welcome first-time conferees – an expression of inclusiveness designed to integrate newcomers more fully into the life of the organization.

As an alternative to CAA, the 2002 Conference in St. Louis was instead held in partnership with ARLIS/NA: the first of three such joint conferences. As the older and larger organization, ARLIS/NA insisted that its own traditional events – including Convocation, Reception, and a joint Anniversary Party, each held off-site in elegant museum settings – take precedence. VRA's New Technology Roundup gave place to a shared Exhibits Hall, in which nearly 50 vendors displayed their wares over a two-day period. "Seminars" replaced "Roundtables," and a Silent Auction became the major fundraising event. Over one hundred meetings between the two organizations were listed in the conference program, along with sixteen tours. Two rounds of Poster Sessions demonstrated to VRA the validity of this concept that would be introduced into its own future conference planning. While some sessions and seminars at the 2002 Joint Conference were clearly oriented towards one organization or the other, a Plenary Session on "Visual Technology, Visual Culture, and Visual Literacy" explored important common ground that brought the two communities together.

## Conferences 2003-2007



*Houston (2003); Portland (2004); Miami (2005); Baltimore (2006); Kansas City (2007).*

The beginning of the 21st century saw major changes in the Association's conferences. No longer tied to CAA, the VRA could now choose less-expensive "Tier 2" host cities. The majority of the VRA's first seventeen conferences had been held in the Northeast, which, while benefiting the largest concentration of our membership, also disadvantaged those who lived and worked elsewhere. The next seventeen conferences would be held more equitably in six regions throughout the country: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Texas/Southwest, California, and Pacific Northwest. The involvement of local Chapters in helping to plan and implement conferences also helped to strengthen their cohesion.

In 2002, the Association's first Strategic Plan proposed adopting a for-profit conference budget model in which income from registration fees would exceed costs, providing an additional source of operating revenue beyond membership dues. This proved to be an effective strategy in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when both airlines and hotels kept their prices artificially low in order to re-establish their customer bases. As VRA conferences grew in length and complexity to four-and-a-half or five full days of programming, and registration fees grew from \$145 to \$165, and then to \$195, the burden of planning and implementation necessitated the addition of a second Vice President to the Executive Board. In 2005, these officers were formally named Vice President for Conference Arrangements and Vice President for Conference Program.

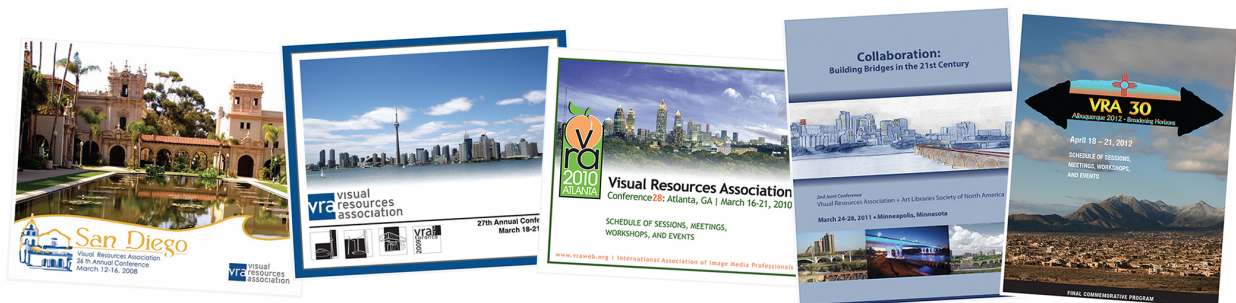
Much of the conference program content during these years reflected the membership's concerns about the momentous transition from departmental analog slide repositories to digital image collections, the latter now increasingly seen as resources meant to serve one's entire institution. Workshops and sessions focused on digitization projects and copyright compliance. Data sharing and image aggregation proposals anticipated increased resource sharing among institutions. Status reports on major projects such as Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO) and VRA Core, and demonstrations of the Getty Vocabularies, attracted considerable interest. The advent of ARTstor as a major subscription image repository in 2004 seemed to mark a watershed in the visual resources world, and new User's Groups for this and other services became regular features in conference programs. "Ask the Experts" meetings provided one-on-one opportunities for conferees to learn from their knowledgeable peers, while "Birds-of-a-Feather" affinity groups provided informal lunchtime gatherings for members to network and share specialized information.

Social events also continued to evolve. In 2006, the Tansey Dinner (no longer graced by the presence of Luraine herself) morphed into an inclusive fundraising evening featuring duckpin bowling, a local Baltimore tradition. The VRAffle grew into a major undertaking complete with costumed skits. The 2007 Silver Jubilee Conference in Kansas City featured a full-fledged musical revue marking the Association's 25th anniversary.



*2007 Silver Jubilee Conference in Kansas City*

## Conferences 2008-2012



*San Diego (2008); Toronto (2009); Atlanta (2010); Minneapolis (2011); Albuquerque (2012).*

VRA was still basking in the glow of our Silver Jubilee when the full force of the Great Recession hit in late 2007. Over the next two years, a number of our long-time members suffered job loss. Many others saw professional development funding vanish from departmental budgets. Skyrocketing fuel prices drove the cost of air travel upwards, while hotels not only raised their room rates, but also demanded that conference contracts include more “F&B” (food and beverage commitments) to keep their kitchen staffs employed. Far from serving as money-makers, VRA conferences were now hard-pressed just to break even, and some would begin to operate at a loss – even as registration fees rose incrementally from \$195, then to \$225, then to \$250 (but with the compassionate provision that Students, Retirees, and the Unemployed would pay only half price).

The Executive Board worked tirelessly to hold down costs for individual conferees. One strategy was to implement a program that compressed the schedule into 72 hours over portions of four days, while requiring only three nights’ hotel stay. The Association satisfied its F&B obligations by folding into registration fees the costs of the Opening Reception, Members’ Dinner, the New Members/First-time Conferees Breakfast, and full breakfast for attendees of the Annual Business Meeting – saving conferees significant personal meal expenses. The number of Travel Awards rose to as many as 15 in a given year, including new categories earmarked for students.

The Association’s first foray into providing conference content online took place immediately following the 2009 Conference in Toronto. The opening Plenary Session comparing U.S. and Canadian copyright

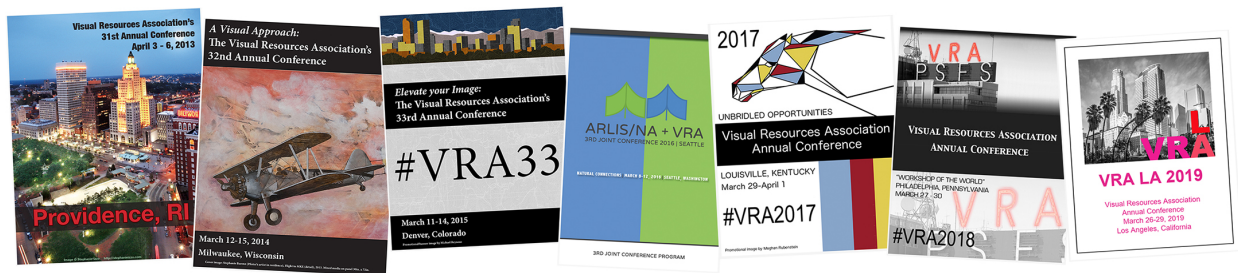
law featured Kenneth Crews presenting the United States' doctrine of Fair Use, which was then contrasted with Canada's doctrine of Fair Dealing by Giuseppina D'Agostino. This event was recorded for post-conference dissemination on the VRA website.

As the number of conferees slowly began to decline year over year, the number of exhibitors fell correspondingly as well. For several conferences, a concentrated "Vendor Slam" event replaced the Exhibits Hall, with mixed results. Poster Sessions became a regular feature of conference programs. The Atlanta Conference in 2010 featured a new event: a Student Members' Luncheon, designed to welcome young people contemplating visual resources careers. This was the seed of an idea that would in time grow into VREPs (Visual Resources Emerging Professionals). Production of the printed conference program had become increasingly expensive and labor-intensive (the 2008 bound publication topped out at 78 pages!). 2010 saw the Association's first use of SCHED as an online tool capable of real-time updates, giving conferees the ability to see which of their colleagues would be joining them at a given event. In the coming years, more conference information would be disseminated through SCHED, with a gradual phasing out of the printed program.

Thanks to a higher degree of shared planning between the two organizations, the 2011 Minneapolis Joint VRA & ARLIS/NA Conference provided a program more evenly balanced than had been the case with the first Joint Conference nearly a decade earlier in 2002. The combined numbers of the two communities made elegant off-site social events financially feasible. The "Founders' Fête," held at an opulent historic mansion, celebrated the early history and shared aspirations of both ARLIS/NA and VRA. A Closing Plenary featuring dynamic St. Paul photographer Wing Young Huie reminded conference planners of the strategic importance of programming strong opening and closing events in every conference schedule.

The opening day's schedule of the 2012 Conference in Albuquerque marked the first appearance of the Legacy Lecture, sponsored by the VRA Foundation. That year's social events with a regional flair included the off-site "Fiesta!" celebration at the nearby Casa Esencia. The Tansey Event featured live music and dance performances by a local Flamenco troupe.

## Conferences 2013-2019



*Providence (2013); Milwaukee (2014); Denver (2015); Seattle (2016); Louisville (2017); Philadelphia (2018); L.A. (2019).*

With numbers of attendees continuing to decline, more conferences were booked in smaller "Tier 2" host cities with lower hotel costs, such as Albuquerque, Providence, and Louisville. Members had opportunity to explore these unfamiliar venues in free morning walking tours highlighting historic architecture, and late afternoon/early evening visits to museums and local collections. Some host hotels, like the venerable Pfister in Milwaukee, proved fascinating in their own right.

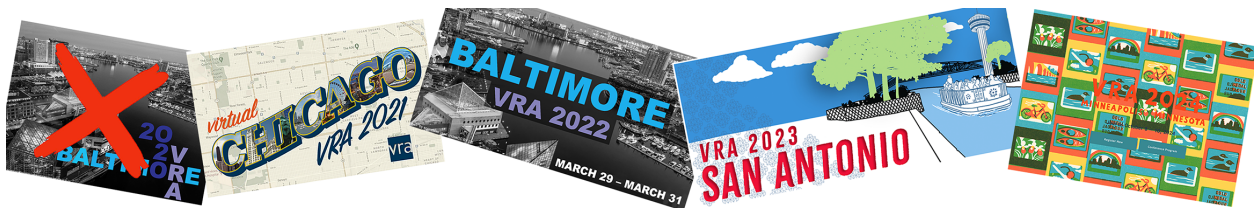
With more institutions now making use of subscription image databases, conference sessions and workshops in the second decade of the current century focused less on departmental collection development. Instead, conferees explored the expansion of VR professionals' duties into new areas of information management -- such as interdisciplinary collaboration, archival digitization, visual literacy, and the digital humanities -- in which they would work more closely with allied library and museum colleagues.

Along these lines, the 2014 Conference in Milwaukee introduced "VRACamp, based on the unconference model of an informal participant-driven workshop that seeks to build community among curators, librarians, archivists, technologists, vendors . . . and provide a forum for spontaneous conversation, the launching of innovative ideas, and the sowing of seeds for future collaboration." Other conference events stressed the importance of outreach to new potential users of visual resources. With colleges and universities now making even greater use of adjunct faculty, visual resources personnel learned how to position themselves as mentors and guides to less experienced younger instructors in the use of new technologies. As slide collections were decommissioned, other sessions explored the re-design of the facilities formerly housing stacks of metal storage cabinets into multi-media teaching spaces.

While familiar social events such as the Opening Reception, New Members and First Time Attendees Breakfast, Members and Awards Dinner, and the Annual Business Meeting Breakfast provided a welcome sense of continuity, other programmed events demonstrated the Association's ability to innovate and adapt. A Sponsors' (Vendors') Meet and Greet combined, with Poster Presentations, offered lively exchanges at the 2015 Conference in Denver. The impending retirement of many long-time members prompted a greater concern for involving newer and younger members in the active life of the organization, as shown by the increasing prominence of VREPs (Visual Resources Emerging Professionals) in the conference program. A special focus of the 2018 Conference was described as "Scope Shift: Moving from Drifting to Driving," providing "Strategies for keeping pace with current trends, mapping trends to local institutional contexts, and recasting the role(s) available within evolving conditions . . . so that participants can return to their home institutions feeling empowered to engage as fully invested change agents in an ever-evolving milieu."

But these events, both the familiar and the innovative, came at a cost, and the second decade of the new century saw conference registration fees increase incrementally from \$265 to \$300.

### Recent Conferences 2020-2024



*Recent VRA Conferences: ~~Baltimore (2020)~~; Chicago (2021, online only); Baltimore (2022); San Antonio (2023); Minneapolis (2024).*

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the remote possibility of having to cancel a future conference had been discussed by VRA leadership, contemplating scenarios such as major disasters, civil unrest, war, etc. But it was a global pandemic that caused the cancellation of the 2020 Conference, with only the Annual Business Meeting conducted as a remote event. The following year's conference, originally planned for Chicago, was redesigned as an entirely online program. "Travel Awards" were repurposed to cover registration fees, plus membership dues for newcomers.

Much of the program content was based on a "Lifecycle of Digital Assets" model reflecting key points of practice and professional interest. Online attendees of the Virtual Chicago Conference could select their own programming tracks by clicking on links to access events, sessions, and workshops that aligned with these categories. Social events were facilitated through a web app called Wonder, setting up a virtual "VRA Lounge" that allowed conferees to move their avatars into live conversation spaces with colleagues old and new.



When the Association was finally able to resume in-person conferences in 2022, a growing number of members wished to continue remote participation. The postponed Baltimore conference was recast as hybrid, with an entirely online two-day Pre-Conference continued the following week with a more traditional in-person three-day schedule. Since many members working in academia had gained experience supporting hybrid classes during the COVID shutdowns on their campuses, they now expected VRA to offer similar access flexibility in its conference planning.

However, that flexibility had come at a high price, as hybrid classes – and conferences – require significantly more extensive, and expensive, tech support. This has proved to be a challenge for an organization that has long relied on voluntary work by its individual members to hold down costs. In 2022, the VRA underwent major structural and leadership transformation in its merger with the VRA Foundation, and at the same time put into effect the long-discussed proposal to move its conferences to early fall rather than late winter/early spring (which had been “traditional” since the early years of piggy-backing on CAA conferences). In the midst of all of these changes, it was deemed prudent to continue the hybrid model for the 2023 Conference in San Antonio and the 2024 Conference in Minneapolis. The latter was promoted as a single-track program, meaning that all events occupied unique spots in each day's schedule, with no overlap forcing attendees to choose between two concurrent options. Online attendees paid a reduced registration fee, as workshops, tours, many meetings, and social events such as the Welcome Reception, Members' Breakfast, and Community Happy Hour were only available

to in-person conferees, who paid a registration fee of \$350. But even so, the cost of making sessions, the Annual Business Meeting, and the Keynote Address fully accessible online, including Q&A and voting, exceeded the registration income paid by both live and remote attendees.

### **. . . and the future?**

Today, the goals of the VRA conferences remain, as they have been from the earliest years of the Association: to share current information about trends, problems and their potential solutions; to focus the strength of numbers in articulating and advocating for standards of community practice; to give our members opportunities to network and participate in resume-building activities. Still, some question the necessity of holding in-person gatherings, given our access to various communication tools that were not available to our predecessors in 1982.

The description of the upcoming 2025 Conference in Portland, found on the VRA website, says in part:

*Five years since the onset of the pandemic, the landscape of large-scale conferences has profoundly transformed. Priorities have shifted, placing greater emphasis on health and safety, accessibility, affordability, and environmental sustainability. These changing expectations have inspired us to reimagine how we structure our conferences to better serve our community. In 2025, we are embarking on a new approach to enhance the experience for all participants, [featuring] two distinct components: virtual pre-conference programming held a week prior to the main event, followed by three days of on-site conference programming . . . in Portland, OR. On-site conference attendees will automatically be registered for the virtual pre-conference, and folks unable to attend on-site will have the option to register for the virtual pre-conference programming separately. This change is designed to ensure flexibility and accessibility while creating a more engaging experience. It will also lessen the burden on both our organization's finances and the volunteers who make this event possible. Furthermore, by separating virtual and on-site programming, we aim to avoid the challenges posed by the hybrid model, which often leads to a fragmented experience for both in-person and virtual participants.*

In May 2023 former Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued an advisory report on our country's post-pandemic "Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," emphasizing the healing effects of social connection and community in our neighborhoods, workplaces, and organizations.<sup>2</sup> The social dynamics of our gathering together in real time and space remain as vital today as was the case more than forty years ago. Even in a time of economic uncertainty, sharing our experiences, values, and aspirations with our professional colleagues can represent a justifiable investment in our personal and collective emotional health. I've already booked my travel for Portland this October. I look forward to seeing you there too!

### **References**

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

Murthy, Vivek H. "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation." Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.

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<sup>2</sup> Vivek H Murthy, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023 <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>