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# Remaining Resilient: Reflections on the Visual Resources Community

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# Remaining Resilient: Reflections on the Visual Resources Community

## **Abstract**

This article brings together excerpts from an interview conducted by Lael Ensor-Bennett and Sara Schumacher with Allan Kohl, long-time Visual Resources Association member and former president. It offers a dive into the history of the organization as it intertwines with his own half a century of librarianship, reflecting perspectives on the history and value of the profession and the VRA. What brought us together in the past, and what keeps us together today? How might VRA shape a career? How have we handled significant changes, including the momentous shift from analog slides to digital images, and how do we remain resilient in the present?

## **Keywords**

Visual Resources Association, slide libraries

## **Author Bios**

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 study in Library/Information Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and in art history at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. He is a 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.

Lael J. Ensor-Bennett is the Curator of the Visual Resources Collection at Johns Hopkins University.

Sara Schumacher is the Architecture Image Librarian at Texas Tech University.

## Introduction

As political, economic, and technological shifts continue to impact our profession, reflecting on previous inflection points can help us identify the strengths of our community. Who better than Allan Kohl to dive into the history of the organization as it intertwines with his own? Allan has brought his extensive record-keeping and lively writing style to trace topics about the Visual Resources Association's organizational history, notably the Annual Conference (covered in the Spring/Summer 2025 issue) and the Travel Awards (covered in the Fall/Winter 2024 issue).

Yet, anyone who has met Allan and been treated to his wonderful storytelling will guess there is more to be told and more insights to glean. This article brings together excerpts from a Zoom interview conducted by Lael Ensor-Bennett and Sara Schumacher with Allan Kohl, along with items from his personal archive that reflect perspectives on the history and value of the profession and the VRA. What brought us together, and what keeps us together today? How might VRA shape a career? How have we handled change in the past, and how do we remain resilient in the present?

## The Kohl Origin Story

My own story started out in the late 1960s, as a high school English teacher. I wasn't particularly happy in that role. After four years, while I knew that I wanted to stay in education, I had grown really tired of school politics and constantly having to play disciplinarian.

So I made the decision to go to library school at the University of Wisconsin, with the goal of becoming a school media services specialist. Non-print collections and services was one of my two degree tracks; children's literature was the other. Still love both. The job I found after finishing my MALS program turned out to be in upstate Wisconsin, at a small private liberal arts college that always seemed to totter on the brink of financial catastrophe. Many years after I moved on, that school finally went bankrupt and ceased operation. But I spent an interesting decade at Mount Senario, from 1974 to 1984, managing all of their different media collections: sound recordings for the music department, slides for the art department; plus equipment scheduling, booking motion picture film rentals, even videotaping sports events. Teaching the Children's Literature class for the Education Department. It was a small enough school that they needed both my wife, Kathy, and me to act in their theatre productions, sing in the chorus, play in the band and orchestra, drive the bus for student "culture fix" trips to Minneapolis. We often said to each other, "We're so busy! This is really exhausting!" But it was also lots of fun – being a jack-of-all-trades, a mid-sized frog in a very small pond.

At the end of that 10-year's time, Kathy was accepted into the MFA program in theater design at the University of Minnesota, aiming to become a professional costumer for the Twin Cities' vibrant performing arts scene. Since we and our sons had to relocate anyway, I decided to pursue a graduate degree in art history, a subject I'd come to enjoy while developing the slide collection back at the Mount. Nearing the end of my MA program at the U., the department chair took me out to lunch, for what turned out to be a recruiting pitch: "We would like for you to apply to our PhD program, because we think you have a great future as a publishing scholar." (Just what I need as I approach middle age, I thought to myself: having to commit to 4 or 5 years of research and writing a dissertation, all to become an expert in some obscure branch of medieval art.) So I declined: "That's really not where I see myself in 5 years. What I want to do is build the very best small college slide collection in the country, and teach first-year art history students, and help them enjoy ... what I

enjoy.” And, oh, he sighed and said, “such jobs do not exist.” And my response was, “I think they do. And if they don't yet, I'll find a place that will let me grow into that kind of position.” And he sighed again and said, “but it wouldn't lead anywhere” -- meaning towards my carving out a career as a tenured professor and publishing scholar.

Over the years, I've thought many times about that exchange. I've always thought of myself as a generalist rather than a specialist -- trying to know enough about everything so that I can make interesting connections across styles and periods, and between high art and popular visual culture. I made the analogy once, I'm kinda like what's been said of the Missouri River: “a mile wide and a foot deep.” (Still, there are deeper channels here and there. And if you want to tap into mine, you're welcome to share what I have discovered!).

So where did my choice lead? Well, it led to becoming president of a national organization. It meant getting published after all: from time to time, I check the Academia tracking service updates and enjoy seeing how many people are reading and citing my articles. And best of all, now as an almost 80-year-old, I can still wake up on a Monday morning, and say to myself, “yay! I get to go to work today, at a place I really like, with students and faculty whom I enjoy working with, and who actually say how much they appreciate me.” That's job satisfaction, level 10 on a scale of 10 for me. So, that's where it's led.

I taught art history at a community college for several years, and then the job as slide librarian at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD) opened up. Three years later, I was asked to take over teaching Foundation Art History to incoming freshmen. In a roundabout way, my ideal scenario had come to fruition.

Teaching art history in an art and design school is really completely different from teaching that subject in a community college or a research university. Because our students are makers, and they want to connect what they see projected on a screen during an art history lecture to what they experience in their studio practice. They're not particularly interested in things like semiotics or theory. What they want to know is, “how did the artist do that? Where did they get that material? How did the tools and methods they used influence the appearance of their work?” The underlying, unstated question often comes down to “How could I apply that information to my work?” That's been hard-earned knowledge for me, because my grad courses tended to focus on the completed work rather than on the processes involved in making it. One of my greatest satisfactions over my years at MCAD has been gathering historic tools and materials to give our students an opportunity to experience first-hand the tactile differences between Egyptian papyrus and a medieval parchment manuscript, for instance, or to help them to discover, through handling vintage specimens, why 19th century tintypes often have their corners clipped.

## **Finding Community at VRA Conferences**

### **Consortia**

I joined VRA in 1993 and went to my first VRA conference the following spring in New York, when we were still meeting as sort of the tail on the annual College Art Association conference. Over time, being interested in history, I started to learn about how our organization had come into being, back in 1982. One portion of the earliest membership was comprised of the slide librarians' group in the Midwest College Art Association, which had a strong track record of mutual support

for folks who were usually solo practitioners. They published their own newsletter (a distant precursor of the VRA Bulletin!), and put together training workshops for people new to the field. Another contingent included disaffected members of the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS-NA) who felt that slide librarians weren't being taken seriously by traditional librarians, most of whom had MALS degrees. Many visual resources people did not enjoy that cachet of having graduate degrees in an ALA-approved program, and felt really marginalized in discussions that were focused on issues such as professional status and unionization. A lot of slide librarians only had BA degrees in art history or studio arts, and did much of their collection management learning on the job. Collection development was totally different for "book people" than it was for "slide people". In the 1970s and early 80s, "book library" people were working with OCLC, cataloging standards like the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, and bibliographic records that were shared among institutions. Slide collections, on the other hand, tended to be very idiosyncratic, organized around the specifics of each institution's curriculum and, in many cases, what tenured professors demanded. Almost all of these collections were departmental collections. They weren't usually considered institutional resources at all, and there was really no way to share them across disciplines, let alone in consortia, because slides were physical objects that couldn't be passed around easily. Also, a lot of our collections included vast quantities of copy stand slides produced in house from publications. Still, most VR folks were not especially concerned about copyright compliance as long as what was produced in house stayed in house and was used primarily for face-to-face teaching.

But by the early 1990s, the VRA membership had begun to consider seriously how the computer revolution had the potential to change our jobs. Many of the sessions at the 1994 VRA conference dealt with possibilities for slide catalog record sharing among institutions, exploring the idea of the computer as a tool for federated searching. Even if we hadn't yet gotten to the point of sharing images themselves, we might be able to share descriptive metadata (a new term for me!), along with image source information, whether it was copy stand photographed from a book illustration, for instance, or purchased from a museum or a vendor.

There was growing interest in different consortia that were trying to work out ways of sharing image information. One impediment was that so many collections used idiosyncratic systems for organizing slides. Some maintained extensive paper records separate from the slides themselves; while others kept little information beyond what was on the slide label itself, and some places didn't even do that. Some copy stand slide records included source information, perhaps with a book title or call number plus a page number or something similar, and others had absolutely nothing. Collection classification systems ran the gamut from the Simons-Tansey system, or the Harvard system, to a variety of home-grown systems. Most of them began with artistic categories, like architecture, sculpture, or painting, etc.; and then some subdivided into West versus East versus Near East/Islamic; then where do you put New World and Oceanic peoples? and where did one file multi-media works that didn't fit into that simplistic schema at all? And then do you organize by chronology? Style periods? Do you next organize by nationality? Each collection ranked those hierarchies somewhat differently. So, how do you build access to records if you don't have a consistent way to arrange and sort them? Of course, a computer program can easily perform multi-factor searching, but for many VR professionals the prospect of converting perhaps hundreds of thousands of paper records into fielded metadata digital records was a daunting prospect.

Two years later, the 1996 conference was quite a different experience for me because I had just launched a personal project called Art Images for College Teaching (AICT), based on my own location photography (so clearly, rights were not an issue because these images were my own

intellectual property!). I published AICT through MCAD, its contents were searchable by style periods and so forth, and I didn't put any restrictions or limits on the download and re-use of its contents. What I envisioned was a prototype free-access public domain service. Several other VRA members who found that approach intriguing asked me to be a panelist at the Boston conference. In my presentation, I proposed that VR curators who were working with scholars who shot on location and were willing to collaborate with us to build descriptive catalog records could point to the open-access AICT model as an example of self-publishing, and that perhaps in time we could federate these separate projects in an inter-institutional way. That seemed to be a novel idea at the time. But the Mellon Foundation did ultimately incorporate some of my ideas into their project called the Academic Image Cooperative (AIC), which in turn served as one of the intermediate steps toward what eventually became ARTSTOR. My AICT images and catalog records were included in ARTSTOR's opening day collection (and now continue to be available in JSTOR).



Figure 1: [L] *Art Images for College Teaching (AICT)*, splash page, 1996; [R] *Academic Image Cooperative (AIC)*, promotional brochure for pilot project by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Digital Library Federation (DLF), 1999, illustrated with AICT photographs.

## Copyright

With the advent of digital file formats like TIFFs (1988) and JPGs (1992), infinite replication without loss of quality was now technically possible. In 1991, the World Wide Web became available for public use, and the internet age was born. By the mid-1990s, a lot of our members were growing increasingly concerned about copyright issues. The big question by then was about the possibility of sharing images themselves, as well as their catalog records.

Museums, publishers, and slide vendors looked ahead with alarm at the growing possibility of unrestrained image copying, sharing, and unauthorized re-use. Beginning in 1996, they invited stakeholders among both content owners and content users (including the VRA) to participate in a series of discussions aimed at crafting standards that everyone would agree to abide by. This Conference on Fair Use (or CONFU) met over the next two years and eventually produced a proposed model agreement that many users found incredibly convoluted and unworkable. A number of us in the VRA felt that the proposed CONFU standards unduly limited the fair use rights

that we believed had already been established by the courts, particularly in the *Campbell v. Acuff-Rose* case of 1994, in which the U.S. Supreme Court had articulated the doctrine of “Transformative Use”; and which would be confirmed in the *Bridgeman v. Corel* case of 1998, underscoring fair use rights in images of underlying visual works that were in the public domain. That’s when I volunteered to serve on VRA’s Intellectual Property Rights Committee (IPR). In any case, 1998 saw the collapse of the CONFU agreement process, as a majority of participating organizations (including VRA) chose not to endorse it.

But clearly, our members sought guidance as they moved forward into the brave new digital world. In retrospect, that time marked the beginning of a more forceful approach by the VRA to articulate what its members could actually live with. And that led the IPR to produce several preliminary projects: the Image Collection Guidelines (2001); the Copy Photography Computator (or CPC), which offered users the novel approach of individual assessment of the rights in a specific image, rather than blanket statements about entire collections; and the Digital Image Rights Computator (or DIRC), an “interactive online decision-tree query program for assessing intellectual property rights in [individual] images.”



Figure 2: [L] Visual Resources Association: *Digital Image Rights Computator (DIRC)*, decision tree results display page, 2006; [C] Visual Resources Association: *Statement on the Fair Use of Images for Teaching, Research, and Study*, cover, 2012; [R] College Art Association: *Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for the Visual Arts*, cover, 2015.

Beginning in 2009, the IPR Committee’s Co-Chair, intellectual property attorney Gretchen Wagner (who as General Counsel for ARTstor had deep connections with the New York IP law community) spearheaded work on the Association’s own guidelines, which were ready for publication in 2012 as the VRA’s *Statement on the Fair Use of Images for Teaching, Research, and Study*. The *Statement* included the forthright declaration that “this is a description of our actual practice and why we believe it is legal.” Our document was cited among a broad survey of actual practice in “*Copyright, Permissions, and Fair Use among Visual Artists and the Academic and Museum Visual Arts Communities: An Issues Report*,” released at the 2014 College Art Association Conference, and became one of the building blocks in CAA’s own *Code of Best Practices in Fair Use in the Visual Arts* in 2015.

## Raffle Rousing & Leadership

VRA conferences have always contributed to forward momentum in the field, but have also provided a venue for VR professionals to socialize and have fun. I would have to say, in terms of sheer enjoyment, the fundraising productions I used to do with Empress Patti [long time VRA member Patricia Baley] are among my fondest memories. It started out during the Miami conference in 2005, when our skit theme was “Mermaids of Miami”. Kathy made me a King Neptune costume and crown, and I made a trident that could actually collapse and fit into my carry-on for the plane. Empress Patti was Amphitrite, and the Raffle Rousers, who were her attendants, dressed as the Mermaids of Miami.



Figure 3: Allan Kohl and Patti McRae Baley in Travel Awards RaffleRouser skits: [L-R] Neptune and Amphitrite in “Mermaids of Miami,” 2005; Edgar Allan Poe and the Lost Lenore, Baltimore, 2006; VRA Silver Jubilee Musical Revue promotional poster, Kansas City, 202007; Little Nell and Sgt. Preston in “Call of the Frozen North,” Toronto, 2009; Scarlett and Rhett in “Gone with the Slides,” Atlanta, 2010.

In 2006 in Baltimore, of course, we were Edgar Allan Poe and his bevy of dead ladies. For the occasion, I wrote several parodies of Poe's poems that had to do with the demise of slide collections, and their replacement with digital ghosts and so forth. (See Appendix A)

In Kansas City (2007), to mark VRA’s Silver Jubilee, a cast of eight vocalists presented the Association’s one and only musical revue. I wrote for the occasion a set of parody songs, most on the theme of coping with change. Who knew that silliness could be so contagious! In Toronto, of course, it was plucky Little Nell and the dashing Sgt. Preston, RCMP, foiling the evil schemes of a dastardly copyright pirate (2009).

And then the last performance we gave was for the Atlanta Conference in 2010, featuring Scarlett and Rhett, with the Raffle-Rousers as Southern Belles, in “Gone with the Slides.” But while these Raffle skits were aimed at raising funds for travel awards while encouraging conferees to enjoy a few moments of levity, there was also an underlying goal of sharing that sort of coping humor that offers people under stress a collective way to “grin and bear it” during challenging times of disruptive changes and job losses.

In 2006, I received an unexpected message from the VRA Nominating Committee saying that they'd like me to run for president. Wow, blindsided: I did not see that coming. In fact, my initial reaction was: Who, me? Really? Because at that time, most of the people in VRA leadership positions were from high-profile Northeast colleges and research universities. I asked, “Do you really want a guy from a small school in flyover country, who wears goofy costumes to entertain people at conferences, to be your president?” One of the NOMCOM members wrote back and said

something along the lines of, “that's what we find intriguing: that you can be absolutely serious and well-informed when it's time for that, and you can show us all how to have fun when it's time for that.” Okay, if that's what you want, I'll do my best to give it to you – beginning what turned out to be eight years on the Executive Board, as President-Elect, President, then followed by two terms as Treasurer.

## **Resiliency & What We Learn from Change**

I became VRA president when the nation was in the throes of the Great Recession, which caused further budget reductions and job losses for many of our members. In my “Notes from the President” for October 2009, I wrote the following: “Change is a daunting prospect in the best of times. And it’s all the harder to face when we’re worried about our budgets, our staffs, the security of our own positions, and sometimes even the continued viability of the institutions to which we have devoted our professional lives. The central challenge we face (though, let’s be honest, all of our predecessors also had to face in their own times) is this: how can we manage effectively the inevitability of change without being overcome by anxiety, frustration, or disappointment in the process?”

During my farewell address as president the following year, I warned, “as I look ahead into the uncertain future, given our declining membership and increasing expenses, I fear that this organization may not survive the coming decade.” Today, 16 years later, I'm really gratified that it's lasted longer than that. But when [former Executive Board colleague] Marcia Focht retired during the COVID shutdown, and we got to reminiscing about the organization's history, I told her, “even if it goes under at some point, or merges with some other group, it's been there when we’ve needed it.”

These days, I'm no longer doing that much actual VR work at MCAD. My days are spent in research instruction, answering reference questions, and giving class presentations on items from our materials collection. Plus teaching a unit on copyright and fair use for our upper division Professional Practice courses. But also, on a voluntary basis, I organize a lot of student activities, such as trips to off-campus cultural events.

Several years ago, I was asked to add management of MCAD’s Archives to my job description. While delving into historical records, I discovered multiple inflection points in time when my school had almost failed financially. We came through each crisis different, but stronger, finding ways to adapt to changing conditions while being true to our core values. I see a similar dynamic at work in VRA. One vital responsibility of a professional organization is helping its members deal with change, and I think that's what we did rather effectively in the transition from slides to digital images. And in moving away from siloed departmental collections to resources like ARTSTOR[/JSTOR], or the SAHARA Project, and even more expansively towards the idea that maybe people throughout the world should have access to these resources, even if they don't belong to an institution.

MCAD has a new president as of this past June, and she asked me what I thought our students, staff, and faculty would need most over the next few years. My response was: “resilience”. Because we're all going to be tested by developments like Artificial Intelligence. We're going to have a lot of changes thrown our way. We'll have to learn to roll with the punches and perhaps end up doing

things that we never thought we were going to do. Or doing things in a different way than we thought we would be doing them.

I would counsel something similar for new folks coming into the VR profession these days. Be prepared to grow and change. You might need to acquire a different skill set from what you put on your resume to get hired. Don't get too comfortable with set routines, because those routines might disappear. Anticipate what changes will be needed and be active participants in shaping the transitions. Some people are comfortable with that kind of forward thinking, while others are not. So those of us who are more comfortable with it can perhaps help ease the path for those who will need to be dragged kicking and screaming into the future.

Just a week after the start of our current semester, Alex Pretti was shot and killed by federal agents during protests that took place just two blocks away from the MCAD campus. We were ordered into shelter-in-place lockdown as flash-bangs exploded in the street and tear gas seeped into residence hall ventilation systems. Classes were suspended for the ensuing week. Some students left for home; a few have never come back. But most stayed on campus, and during the days that followed, many of them used our Library as a gathering place for social connection.



Figure 4: [L] “Minneapolis on strike!” drawing by MCAD student Gabriella Heath; [C] “Soup and Stories” Library event poster; [R] Allan reads Maurice Sendak’s “Where the Wild Things Are” to students.

On the Friday after the shooting, I organized a social event in the Library: “Soup and Stories.” Kathy and I served homemade soup to the students, and then I read them some of my favorite children’s stories about friendship and getting through trying times. My concluding story was Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*. The central character is a rambunctious little boy named Max, who’s punished for bad behavior by being sent to his room without supper. There he falls asleep and has a dream about sailing to a faraway island filled with big, scary creatures; but he figures out how to cope with them, and ends up becoming king of all the wild things. And at first, he lets them run wild: “Now, let the wild rumpus start!” But after they roar and run amok for a while, Max orders them to stop, and sends them all to bed without any supper. I handed out noisemakers and whistles to all of the students who’d assembled, and told them that when we reached the wild rumpus part of the story: “You can just let it all out: all of your anger about ICE, all of your frustration at having your education interrupted – go ahead, yell and scream in the library!” And they sure did! Then when they were told to be quiet, they did that too. And the ending of the story is so appropriate, because Max wakes up from his dream to find himself back in his room, and his mom

has kept his supper warm for him, and it's on his bedside. So, I reminded them: together, we will get through this trying time. And we'll be stronger for it, because we've been tested. And then we formed a circle and joined hands and talked about how we could all support each other.

Well, that's my story, in a (large and discursive) nutshell: over fifty years of librarianship; nearly 40 years at MCAD; and a grand total of 32 VRA conferences – many of which I helped plan and implement – under my belt. It's been an interesting ride; one I hope to continue as long as I am physically and cognitively able!

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## Appendix A:

Analog Slide (cf. "Annabel Lee")

It was many and many a year ago,  
in a narrow room to abide,  
I became a visual resourcerer,  
                    and I cared for the Analog Slide.  
Now I mourn for her passing: abandon'd, forlorn –  
                    'neath a digital tempest she died.

I garnered a wide world of JPEG delights  
                    at the cost of my Ektachrome soul,  
Running faster each day just to not fall behind  
                    in pursuit of the oft-changing goal:  
Will I likewise be found obsolete and unwanted?  
                    For me are those tocsins that toll?

When the network goes crash, and my teeth start to gnash,  
                    how I long for my Analog Slide.  
In her cold Neumade sepulchre sleeping away,

where from hard modern eyes she must hide,  
‘Till the day of Coolscan resurrection  
shall restore her once more to my side.

The Slides (cf. “The Bells”)

Hear the tinkling of the slides:  
broken slides.

What a realm of extra work  
their sorry state betides;

How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle  
as their shards fall to the floor,

While with merry dint unstoppping  
all their labels off are popping,  
ere they scarce have left my door.

How I curse, curse, curse,  
when from pocket or from purse,  
Some professor-demon pours them forth  
and from my chamber glides:

Ah, the slides, slides, slides, slides,  
slides, slides, slides,

Oh, the cracking and the crunching of the slides.

Edgar Allan