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## 2015 State of the Visual Resources Association

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# 2015 State of the Visual Resources Association

## **Abstract**

During the 2015 Annual Business Meeting of the Visual Resources Association in Denver, Colorado, the president highlighted the accomplishments and challenges of the Association in a state of the association presentation. This article provides the transcript.

## **Keywords**

Visual Resources Association, membership, outreach, VRA Bulletin, international, chapters, International Chapter, Data Standards Committee, IPTC, IPTC/SCREM, Intellectual Property Rights Committee, 2015 Denver VRA conference, emerging professionals, students, VREPS, affiliates, Art Libraries Society of North America, College Art Association, Southeastern College Art Association, 2016 ARLIS/NA-VRA Seattle conference, Professional Status Task Force, Education Committee, Horizon Report, education, museum, library, technology

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

Elaine Paul is the Director of Visual Resources with the University of Colorado Boulder's Department of Art and Art History. She received her graduate degree in Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her experience and interests include metadata coordination and curation of digital collections, image research instruction and outreach, and support for digital scholarship and research data management in the arts and humanities.

The Annual Business Meeting<sup>1</sup> provides the Visual Resources Association with an opportunity to examine our recent accomplishments and current challenges, and look ahead to our goals for the coming year.

After reviewing the annual reports from committees, task forces, appointees, and chapters, I am delighted to report that the VRA has many reasons to feel optimistic in 2015. I urge our members to read these annual reports, which are posted in the members' portion of the Visual Resources Association website<sup>2</sup> shortly after each annual conference, to get a sense of the many activities that the volunteers in this organization perform. Whether outward facing in the form of professional engagement, or focused more internally in equally important areas of Association operations, the dedication with which our members serve the VRA and the profession is inspiring.

Before addressing the main challenges our organization faces and how the Executive Board plans to address them, I would like to highlight the following positive areas of growth and engagement for the Association: membership numbers have been slowly but steadily increasing, our international presence continues to grow, our student and emerging professional members are active and contributing to the vitality of the Association, and we continue to explore engagement with other organizations.

Membership numbers are key to maintenance and growth in our mission to provide leadership in the visual resources field, develop and advocate standards, and offer educational tools and activities, publication programs, and opportunities for the benefit of the community at large. We are an organization that depends on a steady pool of volunteer members to conduct this work, while membership dues are the primary source for funding our operations outside of the annual conferences. The deleterious effects of the 2008 financial crisis lingered through 2011, profoundly impacting our profession at a time of significant technological upheaval, resulting in a corresponding decrease in our membership numbers. In recent years these numbers have been slowly but steadily improving. So far, the Association has many more members than this time last year, with about twice as many new members. These are positive signs that, along with an improving economy, the intensified outreach efforts this year by the Membership Committee and regional chapters appear to be helping our membership numbers. We need to continue these efforts, and these groups plan to explore further expansion of outreach methods in the coming year.

The role of regional chapters<sup>3</sup> in both enhancing our members' sense of community and conducting Association outreach is vital. As a resident of the Mountain West and Plains states comprising the newly formed Wild West Chapter, I am thrilled to report that each state in the USA is now represented in a chapter. My Wild West Chapter colleagues have been enthusiastic and gracious hosts here in Denver, and I look forward to building a stronger regional community with them in the coming months and years.

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<sup>1</sup> The Annual Business Meeting was held March 13, 2015 in Denver, Colorado at the 33rd Annual Conference of the Visual Resources Association. The conference program is archived at [http://vraweb.org/conferences\\_page/past-conferences/](http://vraweb.org/conferences_page/past-conferences/).

<sup>2</sup> <http://vraweb.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://vraweb.org/about/chapters/>



In her State of the Association address last year, Past President Jolene de Verges outlined the various initiatives raising VRA's international profile.<sup>4</sup> This year our global presence has continued to expand.

The Visual Resources Association currently has more than forty members from countries outside the United States. The International Chapter is now entering its second year, ensuring that every Visual Resources Association member can join a chapter that represents its interests and needs. With current members from Australia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Qatar, and the UK, one of the International Chapter's goals for the coming year is to continue promoting its offerings to other potential members across both hemispheres. In October, International Chapter and other VRA members participated in a session at the Arts Libraries Society Australia and New Zealand 2014 Annual Conference<sup>5</sup> in Auckland. The chapter is exploring professional development opportunities at other organizations' conferences in order to gauge the feasibility of a larger program outside of North America.

At last year's annual VRA conference, the Intellectual Property Rights Committee joined forces with the International Chapter to present a session on international copyright compliance. Speakers from all over Europe addressed issues with sharing image resources across institutions, making images available to the general public, international publishing, and collaborating across national borders.

Members of the Data Standards Committee continued their participation in the the IPTC/SCREM project<sup>6</sup>, which is proposing to add new artwork and object fields to the widely used embedded metadata IPTC Extension schema. This project involves collaboration with IPTC, Adobe, and many museums and libraries in Europe.

Now entering its fourth year as an electronic publication, the VRA Bulletin<sup>7</sup> has found a significant audience beyond North America. Accessible to all after an embargo period, our journal of professional practice is able to reach a wider audience than ever before, with 7,000 downloads last year alone. A map on the *Bulletin's* home page showing readership activity reveals recent visitors from multiple countries in every continent except for Antarctica, including China, India, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Uganda, Brazil, Venezuela, Sweden, the Ukraine, Australia, and many more. Consider writing a piece for the *Bulletin* if you would like to reach a truly international audience.

Moving from our international presence to the newest generation of VRA members, our Visual Resources Emerging Professionals and Students, or VREPS<sup>8</sup>, are active and invaluable contributors to the Association. Since 2012 members of this special interest group have been authoring a blog with member profiles, job and internships postings, and other noteworthy

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<sup>4</sup> Jolene M. de Verges, "2014 State of the Visual Resources Association," *VRA Bulletin* 40, no. 2 (2014): 1-2, <http://online.vraweb.org/vrab/vol40/iss2/4>.

<sup>5</sup> [http://arlis.org.au/images/2014\\_ARLIS\\_ANZ\\_Conference\\_Final\\_Programme.pdf](http://arlis.org.au/images/2014_ARLIS_ANZ_Conference_Final_Programme.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://sites.google.com/site/culturalheritagemetadata/home/iptc>

<sup>7</sup> <http://online.vraweb.org/vrab/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://vreps.wordpress.com/>

announcements and news items. In the past couple of years they have begun to share new perspectives through proposing and offering excellent conference content, including a workshop on job searching and career development at this conference. Their goals for the coming year include raising awareness about VRA among graduate students, helping newcomers get the most of their VRA memberships, exploring creative ideas for professional development, and establishing liaisons to all of the Association's committees in an effort to improve integration with the larger VRA community. New and long-term members have much to learn from each other, and VRA is very grateful for the energy and enthusiasm that our emerging professional colleagues bring to the Association.

We have continued to build and reinforce relationships with our affiliate organizations, which are the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA), the College Art Association (CAA), the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), and the Southeastern College Art Association (SECAC).

We look forward to another joint conference with our ARLIS/NA colleagues in 2016 in Seattle. To facilitate smooth planning for this and future joint conferences, the ARLIS/NA and VRA Boards co-wrote a Joint Conference Implementation Plan last fall, which was based on the recommendations of the ARLIS/NA-VRA Joint Conference Task Force. Josh Polansky, the VRA-appointed co-chair of the Joint Conference Implementation Team, has already been working with his colleagues in the Pacific Northwest to move ahead with planning. We are awaiting the final hotel contract, and will announce the dates as soon as the contract is signed.

As VRA's appointed CAA Affiliate Representative Mark Pompelia has been collecting VRA news for CAA's bimonthly *Affiliated Society News*<sup>9</sup>. He helped coordinate communications and publicity for the VRA-sponsored session at CAA's recent 2015 conference, and represented VRA in attending the affiliates meeting for the rollout session of CAA'S new Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for the Visual Arts<sup>10</sup>. CAA has asked VRA to endorse this document, which is currently under review by the Executive Board and the Intellectual Property Rights Committee.

As our representative to SAH, Jackie Spafford has promoted communications between our two organizations relating to conferences and other events. She has also been involved in a recent SAH initiative called the Color Film Emergency Project, which aims to identify and preserve important slide collections focused on the built environment, and ensure their storage, digitization, and online availability. This is an ideal area for partnership, given the VRA Slide and Transitional Media Task Force that Jackie also sits on.

John Taormina serves as our SECAC Affiliate Representative, and also has ensured ongoing communications and awareness between our two organizations. He has submitted a VRA session proposal for the 2015 SECAC annual conference, which he will organize and moderate.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.collegeart.org/affiliated/news>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.collegeart.org/fair-use/best-practices>

The Board is also exploring ways to leverage collaborative potential with other organizations, and I hope to share news about this in the coming months.

There are many other positive developments occurring in areas relating to standards, intellectual property rights, education, and more. Again, I urge members to peruse the annual reports from appointees, committees, and task forces to learn about these activities.

We also face challenges as an organization. We must persist in addressing a financial model that will ensure the Association's long-term viability. Ongoing transition in our profession continues to affect many of our members. And concerns about member engagement and leadership recruitment endure. To meet these challenges, we need to address the interrelated issues of Association income, the status of the profession, and membership numbers.

As for finances, our main sources of income are membership dues, conference income, and targeted donations. We will hear more about finances from Treasurer Kohl, but in short, it is primarily our membership dues that cover our year-round operating costs. Therefore, membership numbers are key to our financial health. As I mentioned earlier, our membership numbers have slowly been improving. Maintaining this trend will require ongoing outreach in order to communicate our value, but we also need to understand who our current and potential members are, and how we can support their evolving needs. In order to accomplish this we need current data about the profession.

The Professional Status Task Force, co-chaired by Jen Green and Virginia (Macie) Hall, will gather and analyze information to assist VRA in understanding recent shifts in the profession, improving membership benefits to serve current members and attract new ones, and advocating for the profession. It will thus provide critical information to which the Association can respond in our next strategic plan. The task force is examining the demographics of VRA membership and others working in image and media management, including their work in academic environments, museums, government agencies, the commercial sector, non-profit agencies, or as students. It is considering the range of professional responsibilities associated with our field, including imaging, cataloging and metadata, instruction, reference, outreach, digital asset management, digital scholarship, rights management, and other areas of work or study.

Of course, membership numbers correlate directly with member engagement and leadership. As a volunteer organization, we need a sufficient number of members willing to serve and eventually step into leadership roles in order to pursue VRA's various initiatives and ongoing activities. In recent years, recruiting Association members to serve in various leadership roles has at times been difficult. Members are busy in their jobs, and those who are willing and able to serve can find themselves approached to serve in multiple roles simultaneously and over time. Again, building our membership numbers is key.

To attract members, we need to consider the membership benefits we provide. Based on recent conversations on the VRA Listserv, there is an apparent desire among our members for expanded educational opportunities. The Executive Board, Education Committee, and the Professional Status Task Force have discussed this in recent months, and will continue exploring the topic

with Association leadership in the months to come. We look forward to the data expected later this year from the Professional Status Task Force, which will help us understand where the greatest needs lie.

In the meantime, we can monitor trends in order to address current and future professional demands of our members. As most of us know, the higher education<sup>11</sup>, museum<sup>12</sup>, and library<sup>13</sup> editions of the *Horizon Report* predict the technology trends that most of us will encounter in the coming years. Many of these are relevant to all of us, regardless of the sector in which we work. How can VRA help our members prepare for an array of imminent and long-range trends, such as increasing cross-institution collaboration, redesigning learning spaces, crowdsourcing, the Semantic Web and linked data, the flipped classroom, the increasing accessibility of research content, the Internet of Things, open content, makerspaces, and new forms of multidisciplinary research, to name but a few? How can our members help with the challenges facing our institutions, such as improving digital literacy, blending formal and informal learning, capturing and archiving the digital outputs of research as collection material, addressing competition from alternative avenues of discovery, and embedding the work of information professionals in the curriculum? As institutions adapt to the ways that technology is redefining staff roles and organizational structures, how can we shape that process, rather than letting that process shape us?

These are not insurmountable challenges, and I invite each of you to join the Association in helping to shape our future as an organization. Please don't hesitate to [contact me](#) with your ideas.

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<sup>11</sup> Larry Johnson et al., *NMC Horizon Report: 2014 Higher Education Edition* (Austin, Texas: The New Media Consortium, 2014), <http://cdn.nmc.org/media/2014-nmc-horizon-report-he-EN-SC.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Larry Johnson, Samantha Adams Becker, and Alex Freeman, *NMC Horizon Report: 2013 Museum Edition* (Austin, Texas: The New Media Consortium, 2013), <http://www.nmc.org/pdf/2013-horizon-report-museum-EN.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Larry Johnson, et al., *NMC Horizon Report: 2014 Library Edition* (Austin, Texas: The New Media Consortium, 2014), <http://cdn.nmc.org/media/2014-nmc-horizon-report-library-EN.pdf>.