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# "Now, Slides, Sail Thou Forth to Seek and Find:" Facilitating a Slide and Photograph Diaspora

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# "Now, Slides, Sail Thou Forth to Seek and Find:" Facilitating a Slide and Photograph Diaspora

## **Abstract**

After serving the entire Brown University community for many decades, the Art Slide Library was officially closed in 2010. Faculty were given four years to access the collection and make selections for digitization. During 2014, the slides were weeded to a bare minimum and the remaining collection was dismantled. The slides, photographs, and reproductions were then given away to a wide variety of artists, educators, and students. This article is a description of that process.

## **Keywords**

visual resources, 35mm slides, slide libraries

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

Karen Bouchard is the Scholarly Resources Librarian for Art and Architecture and Curator of the Instructional Image Collection at Brown University. She has been at Brown since 1985, beginning as a Curatorial Assistant in the Art Department's Slide Room. She would like to thank Carina Cournoyer, Social Sciences Librarian at Brown University, for her invaluable help with this project and Maureen Burns, Consultant with Archivision and IMAGinED Consulting, for her advice in seeking out takers for the slide and photograph collection.

During the summer of 2014, I spent most of my time dismantling a collection of 300,000 slides which I had spent twenty-five years curating and cataloging. Then I gave almost all of them away. This article presents a case study of one slide library's dissolution and my efforts to secure a second home for the little squares of color and light that had been the focus of my career for twenty-seven years.

I first discovered 35mm slides as a senior art history major when I was given a work-study job in my college slide library. Two years later, in 1985, I was hired as the Curatorial Assistant in the Brown University Slide Room, then part of the combined Art Department. Within a year, I had been promoted to Associate Curator, a title I retained until 2010. The Brown Slide Room at that time had four full-time staff members: a Curator, Associate Curator, Curatorial Assistant, and Photographer. Although it belonged to the Art Department, the collection was always open to patrons across the campus and we had regular users from many different departments. Each week we were overrun with faculty and student requests to make new slides, and we shot on three different types of film. Maintaining a strict shooting schedule, we had a turnaround time of just three days. In 1988, the Art Department split into two different programs, and the Slide Room, its name upgraded to Art Slide Library, was reinvented as a branch of the University Library. As the Curator took on more and more library duties, I became the main cataloger of the slide and photograph collection.

Brown faculty were slower than their colleagues at other schools in making the changeover to digital images, but when they finally did succumb, the action took place seemingly overnight. All of our carefully calibrated humidity and temperature controls, our lower wattage projector bulbs that were used to prevent warping, and our yearly shelf readings suddenly did not matter. We had to learn a completely new set of skills in order to make the leap to digital along with our faculty. Within a few short years, the congenial working atmosphere of the Slide Library, with faculty working side by side for many hours each week, consulting the staff for advice about images to include in their lectures, had almost entirely disappeared. Lectures could be put together at home, and the slides, once they had been digitized, were no longer wanted or needed. In 2010, the University Librarian decided to close the Art Slide Library as a cost-cutting move. The photographer's position had long since been eliminated, our Curator decided to take early retirement, and the Curatorial Assistant and I moved over to offices in the main library. At a meeting with the University Librarian and the chairs of the two art departments, it was decided that the collection would remain in the art building for the time being, so that faculty could determine which additional slides would be digitized. By the fall of 2013, the faculty were anxious to take back the space for other uses, but the chair of the History of Art and Architecture (HIAA) department, who had taken a break from teaching during the critical digitization period, still had concerns about certain slides that had not yet been digitized. So began the final weeding and dismantling of the collection.



The Slide Library in mid-dissolution. Photograph by Carina Cournoyer.

During the spring semester of 2014, I was given funds to hire three student workers who began the weeding process. In concert with the HIAA chair, I had determined that we would, for the present, keep all original photography of architecture taken by our faculty and others, as well as Chinese painting, medieval manuscripts, Islamic art, and one or two other small subject areas. I wrote up a list of vendors and faculty whose slides we would keep, and a second list of all the general categories of the collection with explanations of how the students should handle each area. Some drawers would be carefully weeded while others would simply be emptied. Anything readily available in digital form from a vendor would be removed. Although it pained me considerably, I decided to discard all Western painting and sculpture without looking at any of it. This was necessary due to time constraints and was made more acceptable to me by the fact that so many of these works are now or would soon be available from other sources, such as ARTstor and museum sites. I know we lost some wonderful material that will never be recovered, but I had to set limits on what we could reasonably do.

Although my students were diligent and reliable, they were also painfully slow workers, and in May I found myself with a huge job still ahead of me and only a summer to complete it. This was made all the more difficult by some construction work that shut me out of the room for nearly a month. It became my ritual to spend an hour or so at my own desk in the morning, then go over to the art building for the rest of the day. I was fortunate to have a colleague who volunteered to come over whenever she could to help, and I also managed to hire one summer student to work part time. As slides were weeded, those being kept were separated from their shelf list cards (which were recycled), then placed into other cabinets. The rejected slides were organized by broad categories in boxes that I had stacked rather precariously around the room. In addition to the 300,000 slides, I also had about 10,000 photographs and innumerable reproductions, both mounted and unmounted, that had been collected over decades. I did not plan to keep any of these.



Emptied cabinets topped with mounted photographs awaiting mailing. Photograph by Carina Cournoyer.

As the boxes filled up, I tried to figure out what to do with the slides and photos. I could not bear to throw them into a dumpster. I had visions of the Visual Art faculty creating assignments in all of their classes that involved slides, as a fitting tribute to the lost library, but they exhibited no interest. From time to time, a professor would wander down the hall and utter a variation on, "Oh, this is so sad, but I don't want them." I found my first taker in a Visual Art concentrator who used the slides in his senior thesis exhibition. (I happily did not go to see the exhibition which, I later learned, involved destroying the slides during projection!) My next taker was a colleague of an HIAA professor who asked for thousands of slides to use in installation pieces. I sent out notices to the listservs and websites of the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Society of Architectural Historians, ARLIS/NE, and VRA New England.

In July, I began letting interested people come by to pore through the collections. As all slides had a copyright notice on them, I did not take any other precautions but let the taker assume any risks. All of these people were teachers, students, or artists who were interested in the slides solely for educational or artistic reasons. Among my visitors were two women who lectured with slides at senior citizens' centers and nursing homes and were thrilled to be able to add to their collections. A Jewish community center in California asked for all of our slides relating to ancient and medieval Jewish art. The Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission took anything they could get relating to the state. A professor from a college in New York took all of our French and English medieval architecture photographs. I became a regular borrower of our mailroom's handcart as I hauled boxes and boxes of material to the local post office. All I asked for in return was reimbursement for the postage. A couple of professors from nearby colleges also visited and took away thousands of slides, photographs, and reproductions. One of these was still teaching with slides and could not believe his good fortune; he probably took away more slides than any other single person. (He brought his own handcart!) Another professor particularly wanted the oversized architectural photographs to use in classroom discussion sections. Several public school art teachers spent time going through the boxes, and I brought about 20,000 slides to the Resources for Rhode Island Education center, gave the Membership Chair of the Rhode Island Art Education Association all of our unmounted reproductions for collages and other projects (after our Visual Art department had rejected them), and also helped her sort through American art slides to give away as door prizes at their upcoming meeting.

Despite all of these takers, I still found myself with thousands of slides. A colleague at another institution suggested contacting other departments on the Brown campus. After the lack of interest shown by both art departments, it had not occurred to me that any Brown faculty would want these objects, but the idea turned out to be an unqualified success. I sent a message to the office managers of most of the humanities and social sciences departments at Brown and asked them to forward it to their faculty and grad students. I was immediately inundated with requests from fifteen departments. A recent Brown alumna of the graduate program took architecture slides to use in teaching at DownCity Design, a local design education group for young people. The Brown Language Resource Center took reproductions for use as conversation starters in English as a second language classes. The Brown Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice took all slides relating to slavery and Reconstruction, with the intention of putting on an exhibition later in the year. Several new faculty members took reproductions and photographs to decorate their offices and homes, and many graduate students and faculty took slides relating to their fields of study. Among the departments impacted by this giveaway were Egyptology, Slavic Studies, English, Literary Arts, History, Classics, Anthropology, American Studies, Archaeology, Modern Culture and Media, Music, Portuguese and Brazilian Studies, Religious Studies, and Comparative Literature. A library coworker and incurable collector of interesting objects took the remaining boxes of slides and has since made them available to his artist friends and others.



The last drawer is emptied. Photograph by Carina Cournoyer.

My final project was to give away the remaining several thousand photographs and reproductions. I lugged all of them back to my office, and when the new semester began, I sent out an announcement to all undergraduates offering them for free. My office mates and I were astounded by the response we received. I had listed three different times when the photos would be available for taking, but almost everything was gone within the first couple of hours. Our office was packed with students and nearly everything was taken. (In fact, they even took some photographs I had marked as reserved, leaving me to come up with an explanation for a disappointed Classics professor.) I had not suspected that students of today, with their easy access to images anywhere and anytime, would be so fascinated by the prospect of owning old, crumbling, black and white photographs! Certainly the timing must have helped, as students were just moving into their dorm rooms and were looking for wall decorations, but when I found another cache of photos later in the semester, I was met with almost the

same level of enthusiasm. Clearly the idea of owning something tangible still resonates with the current college generation.



The great undergraduate photo giveaway. Photograph by Carina Cournoyer.

The Slide Room is now a multipurpose space used by the HIAA department, but it still contains seven cabinets holding slides (with which I will probably be working for the rest of my career) and one holding photographs of Italian art and architecture which an HIAA professor had insisted on keeping. Everything else has been given away, recycled, or discarded. I made many library staff members happy by giving away sturdy slide boxes, used Hollinger photo boxes, and archival dividers, and a secretary in the HIAA department has been busily crafting magnets from the one-eighth of an inch thick drawer spacers (two of them adorn my desk). I also was able to make new contacts with faculty and students on the Brown campus through the giveaway. The atmosphere of the old Art Slide Library is deeply missed by many people, but I am happy that the carefully curated objects in our collection were able to avoid the ignominy of disposal and find sometimes surprising second lives as teaching tools and art projects (and someday I will do something with all the slides I kept for myself).

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Brown University Language Resource Center

<http://www.brown.edu/Departments/LRC/>

Brown University Library

<http://library.brown.edu/>

Brown University Visual Art Department

<http://www.brown.edu/academics/visual-art/>

DownCity Design

<http://www.downcitydesign.org/>

Massachusetts Cultural Council

<http://www.massculturalcouncil.org/>

Resources for Rhode Island Education

<http://www.rrie.org/>

Rhode Island Art Education Association

<http://www.ri.net/RIAEA/>

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