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Image and Text: A Review of the Literature Concerning the Information Needs and Research Behaviors of Art Historians

Joan E. Beaudoin
Drexel University, joan.beaudoin@wayne.edu

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Introduction

This article seeks to present a coherent corpus of materials useful to information professionals interested in the research needs of art historians. The information needs and information-seeking behaviors of art historians are addressed through a discussion of this user group's research methodologies, the types of materials they consult, the impact of technology on their scholarship, and the discipline's continuing development and redefinition. As a review of the literature on the topic, this article's core incorporates the ideas expressed by a number of authors.

Characterization of the User Group

Characterizations of any user group are, by their very nature, prone to restricting discussion somewhat unnaturally. However, some distinction needs to be made as to the definition of the term art historian as it is applied in this article. The term describes adult users having or undergoing a graduate-level education within the field of art history. A broad and deep knowledge base within the discipline of art history would be considered typical of this user group, as well as advanced language skills, including at least reading facility with a minimum of two foreign languages. The discipline's dependence on library-oriented research creates a situation in which users are required to become skilled navigators. Therefore, it is presupposed that the art historian user group is comfortable with and adept at seeking information within archetypal library systems.

The standard library-use model must be tempered somewhat by the art historian user group's relatively slow and hesitant adoption of technology. As libraries have provided increasing access to online resources, often at the expense of printed matter such as indexes, art historians have had to learn new skills to perform their research. The scholars working within the discipline currently have a vastly different set of tools with which to access information than they did even a decade ago, so the digital divide among established and emerging scholars must be acknowledged.

Most publications that have addressed this group focus on users working within an academic setting, including art history professors, independent researchers, and graduate students. Museum-based art historians and art gallery personnel also have a place within this discussion. The information needs of these latter users differed only slightly from those of their academic colleagues, the clearest difference being their limited use of visual materials when compared to their academic colleagues.[1]

Scope of the Literature Reviewed

Twelve sources published between 1980 and 2002 were chosen for review as representative of the user group under discussion. These publications address the information needs of art historians and how information systems meet their needs. The sources are therefore useful to the information professional seeking to better understand the art historian user group.

With the exception of a few works written by Deirdre Stam and Trish Rose, little research has been published on the specifics of the information needs and research behaviors of art historians. Due to the dearth of material in this area, several articles by art historian-authors are included here for the insight they provide into the working methods of their user group. Access to images is also explored in this review because of the central role that visual materials play in art historical research.

Information-Seeking Models

Several general statements can be made using the theoretical framework provided by Thomas Mann, Nicholas Belkin, and Marcia Bates concerning the information-seeking models employed by art historians. Since the art historian user group is characterized as having an in-depth knowledge of the discipline and the sources specific to the subject area, these users fit Mann's "Subject or Discipline Model" in their information-seeking behaviors.[2] According to Mann, the model, although valid for the information needs of this user group, creates a situation where potentially useful materials beyond the immediate discipline are often overlooked. Furthermore, users may find themselves consulting out-of-date materials since their discipline-based source lists are often not updated with current publications. The art historian user group, owing to its long-standing use of traditional library resources, also can be seen to fall within Mann's "Library Science Model," albeit to a more limited degree than the primary model discussed above. Shelf browsing, knowledge of vocabulary-controlled cataloging and tracings, and the use of published bibliographies and indexes are typical methods of this group that match the library science model.[3] This model provides more expansive access to materials than does the subject model. Belkin's discussion of Anomalous States of Knowledge (ASK), although more directly focused on the creation of an information system to better address users' needs, can be applied to the art historian user group. Since this user group typically seeks information to rectify gaps or uncertainties in its knowledge (i.e., ASKs) rather than addressing entirely new areas for study, it fits

into Belkin's "High Specifiability" at the cognitive and linguistic levels. According to Belkin, these users typically have a great deal of knowledge about the subject and the information system, but their state of knowledge is inadequate for the task at hand, and so they seek out ways to fulfill their perceived imprecise knowledge state.[4] In Belkin's model there is a high degree of likelihood that art historians will have their information needs satisfied since their well defined problems operate within a system that is designed to address formalized requests.

Bates's article, although specifically addressing a model of searching called "berrypicking" within the context of developing online systems, is also applicable to typical information-seeking behaviors of art historians.[5] This model has at its foundation the idea that information-seeking is an ever evolving rather than a static process. Footnote chasing, citation searches, browsing journal runs or shelves of materials, author searches, and searches conducted using bibliographies, abstracts, and indexes are all examples of Bates's model of user behaviors. The art historian user group, owing to its entrenched research habits, clearly relies on this model to perform its research.

Research Methodologies

Investigations by information professionals into how art historians perform information-seeking tasks have been undertaken by Stam and Rose,[6] who discovered methodological similarities among art historians performing research. Several key areas came to light in these analyses. The first is the importance placed on the "invisible college." Conversations with colleagues and other subject specialists were found to be the most influential avenues to art historians' information-seeking behaviors.[7] Librarians were consulted by these users for information needs, although the preponderance of these interactions dealt with procedural library functions rather than subject-related assistance.[8] Citation tracking was noted as being an important means of information gathering for art historians by several authors.[9] Browsing in the stacks was found to be most useful to those users beginning research in a previously unknown or underdeveloped knowledge area, or to art historians performing theoretical and cross-disciplinary research.[10] Stam and Brilliant bring into the discussion the importance of serendipitous discoveries.[11] In examining his usual habit of reading all of the articles in a previously unfamiliar journal to become attuned to the editorial policies and its authors' attitudes, Brilliant acknowledges the usefulness of these unplanned forays for increasing his knowledge and adding to possible ideas for future research.[12]

Materials Consulted

Several types of materials are of primary importance to the art historian user group. These include monographs (and their bibliographies), general reference materials, bibliographic databases and indexes, and images (slides, digital images, photographs, and photographic reproductions). Online materials were found to be important to this user group, but they were normally employed only as a means to gain access to printed matter. Rose states that eighty-seven percent of research is conducted with print resources, and she suggests that this may be due in part to the lack of "…in-depth scholarly resources online or online resources that contain poor quality or very few digital images."[13]

Richard Brilliant offers an intriguing view into the working research processes of an art historian in his 1988 article entitled "How an Art Historian Connects Art Objects and Information."[14] At the center of the art historian's research is the object (or the group of objects), and from here he attempts to establish a frame of visual reference and a historical context. Placing objects within a visual framework is done through recalling and discovering objects which are similar or complementary in appearance. This information need is met by objects which reside in his memory, as well as by searches undertaken of existing collections and illustrated publications.[15] Access to comparable objects in illustrated publications is achieved through indexes, catalogs, subject-specific sources, and other fundamental reference sources. According to Brilliant, placing the work within a historical context requires one to return to known bibliographic sources as a starting point, and from there to expand research outwardly to unknown sources obtained through citations and bibliographies. Objects published more recently were accessed through the various large bibliographic databases.[16]

Stam's article entitled "How Art Historians Look for Information" is an abbreviated version of her dissertation completed at Columbia University in 1984. Her observations on the information-seeking behaviors of art historians are remarkably similar to those provided by Brilliant, as can be seen in the following quotation. She believes that "[t]he process of information seeking appears to be a contemplative undertaking involving objects of art, reproductions of those objects and related objects, and written descriptions and observations about works of art."[17] She delves further into the information-gathering process of this user group and states that the typical art historian seeks to find authoritative writing on an object or a subject, then attempts to discover additional relevant information, and finally develops an original interpretation of the object within its many varied contexts (i.e., historical, iconographic, formal, etc.).[18] At the core of this exploration is the art historian's access to photographic reproductions, bibliographies, indexes, monographs, and standard reference sources.[19] As an interesting historical note, Stam found almost no computerized database experience among the art historians she studied in 1982-1983 at Columbia University even though they expressed a unanimous willingness to learn how to use these systems.[20] This finding is in direct contrast to the study conducted by Rose, the basis for her 2002 article. This apparent transformation in the art historians' use of technology in the information-seeking process is the next theme to be addressed.

Technology and Art History Scholarship

The phenomenon of computer-mediated research among art historians was examined by Rose in her 2002 article entitled "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians." Art historians were found to use computers extensively throughout the research process, especially in the seeking, gathering and writing phases of their research. Access to online catalogs and indexes were considered a boon to their research, with e-mail, CD-ROMs, and other types of applications also showing widespread use.[21] In contrast to the acceptance of the computer in these areas, art historians still tended to utilize other methods in organizing information. Over half the participants in Rose's study continued to use index cards, loose-leaf

binders, notebooks, folders, or other forms of paper-based means of organizing their information.[22] It is believed that these organizational systems are employed more frequently due to their ability to be displayed, arranged, and rearranged with ease. Additional reasons for the continued use of paper-based systems are user comfort factors and concerns about learning another new technology which may not justify the time spent in the process.[23]

Art historians have been slow in their adoption of technology as compared to their colleagues in the science-based disciplines. A reason for this slow adoption is the feeling among art historians that technology merely supplants what was done manually, rather than changing and expanding their research in unique ways.[24] When one adds the time commitment required to learn new technologies, and the lack of scholarly and institutional recognition for their efforts, it is not difficult to understand why art historians have not been early adopters.[25] Rose found that art historians continue to perceive the Internet as lacking in scholarly merit, with the searches they perform there having little value.[26] Nevertheless, when art historians were polled about what they felt would be most beneficial to their research, seven of the ten items to which they responded on Rose's list had an online component to them.[27] Their choices would suggest that they appreciate the access that online resources afford them, but that they want more intellectual content (including images) with more sophisticated search capabilities.

Redefinition of Discipline

The discipline of art history is a relatively young field of study that continues to undergo a great deal of methodological development. While its methodological basis has historically relied heavily on visual components (with comparison and classification at its core), recent reconsideration has introduced theoretical approaches to cultural materials developed within other disciplines. Several examples of these are gender issues, economics, psychoanalysis, materials analysis, and semiotics.[28] As a result of this ever changing theoretical framework, the discipline is continually being defined and redefined. This creates a situation in which such changes need to be accommodated in the systems providing access to art historical materials.[29]

A related idea can be found in what has traditionally been termed the canon of art history. Alan Kohl, in his 2002 article entitled "Loose Canons: Defining Essential Visual Culture in the Art History Survey Textbook," showed that only approximately twenty percent of all images were considered canonical for art historical inquiry.[30] Furthermore, he found that non-Western cultural materials, women artists, the decorative arts, and contemporary works have only recently found their way into art history textbooks.[31] These fundamental changes to the discipline have a direct impact on what type of information is sought by art historians and how they go about accessing these materials.

Summary

In summary, art historians possess well honed library skills due to the dependence of their scholarship on library systems. Their heavy reliance on objects, or images of these objects, is a critical difference between their research methods and that of their colleagues in other humanities-based disciplines. Therefore, a broad and deep collection of visual materials with adequate indexing is needed to support their research. While art historians were found to perform much of their work in an online environment, technology seemed to have a limited impact on their research processes beyond the initial phases of information-seeking and basic writing tasks. One promising area of research for this user group is the development of additional technological tools to aid in art historical research and scholarship. Understanding the particular information needs and research processes of art historians provides an avenue for improving library services to this user group.

Notes

1. Deirdre C. Stam, "How Art Historians Look for Information," *Art Documentation* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 27-28. Although Stam's study group was limited in size, at just under fifty respondents, her research shed light on the discipline's use of library resources. As Stam collected data from art historians working in museum and academic settings, her research provided some hard facts about their differing needs.

2. Thomas Mann, *Library Research Models: A Guide to Classification, Cataloging, and Computers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9.

3. Ibid., 15, 37-38, 45.

4. Nicholas J. Belkin, "Anomalous State of Knowledge as a Basis for Information Retrieval," *Canadian Journal of Information Science* 5 (1980): 134.

5. Marcia J. Bates, "The Design of Browsing and Berrypicking Techniques for the Online Search Interface," *Online Review* 13 (October 1989): 409. It should be noted that for the scholarly community in general, these "berrypicking" behaviors are typical research methods.

6. Stam, "How Art Historians Look for Information"; Trish Rose, "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians," *Art Documentation* 21, no. 2 (Winter 2002).

7. Stam, "How Art Historians Look for Information," 29; Rose, "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians," 36.

8. Stam, "How Art Historians Look for Information," 29; Richard Brilliant, "How an Art Historian Connects Art Objects and Information," *Library Trends* 37, no. 2 (Fall 1988): 126; Rose, "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians," 37.

9. Stam, "How Art Historians Look for Information," 29; Brilliant, "How an Art Historian Connects Art Objects and Information," 126; Rose, "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians," 37.

10. Rose, "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians," 37.

11. Stam, "How Art Historians Look for Information," 30.

12. Brilliant, "How an Art Historian Connects Art Objects and Information," 126. Brilliant, a scholar of Roman art, clearly discusses his (and his colleagues') working methods and information needs in this article. Although the article was published nearly fifteen years ago, his treatment of the fundamental information requirements of scholars in his discipline remains valid today.

13. Rose, "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians," 39. Rose presents a systematic

overview of the information needs of art historians in this article. Although a growing need for access to digital images is acknowledged, the role of the image in art historical research is not discussed in this article.

14. Brilliant, "How an Art Historian Connects Art Objects and Information," 122.

15. For a discussion of intellectual access to visual information see Sara Shatford Layne, "Artists, Art Historians, and Visual Art Information," *The Reference Librarian* 47 (1994): 23-36.

16. Brilliant, "How an Art Historian Connects Art Objects and Information," 126.

17. Stam, "How Art Historians Look for Information," 30.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 28.

20. Ibid.

21. Rose, "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians," 37.

22. Ibid., 37-38.

23. Ibid., 38; for an interesting study into why paper-based systems continue to be employed, see Wendy E. MacKay, "Is Paper Safer? The Role of Paper Flight Strips in Air Traffic Control," *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* (TOCHI) 6, no. 4 (December 1999): 311-40. http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=331490.331491.

24. Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, "Making Computers Work for the History of Art," *Art Bulletin* 79, no. 2 (June 1997): 199. In this article Lavin, an art historian, discusses her use of computer technology to further her research and teaching methods.

25. Jennifer Durran, "Art History, Scholarship and Image Libraries: Realising the Potential of the Digital Age," 1997. http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/visual_culture/about/staff/jdurran/arnot.html (accessed August 3, 2004). The focus of this article is the art historical scholarly communication system, the reliance of art historical research on images, and the group's historically slow adoption of technology.

26. Rose, "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians," 38-39.

27. Ibid., 39.

28. Rose, "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians," 36; Christopher Bailey and Margaret E. Graham, "The Corpus and the Art Historian," (paper presented at the Congress of the History of Art, London 2000), Section 23. Digital Art History Time. http://www.unites.uqam.ca/AHWA/Meetings/2000.CIHA/Bailey.html (accessed August 1, 2004). The authors collected survey responses regarding the information needs and research methodologies of 121 practicing art historians.

29. Helene E. Roberts, "A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Art Indexing in Electronic Databases," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 52, no. 11 (September 2001): 916. Roberts's article discusses the importance of thorough indexing in image databases used by art historians.

30. Alan T. Kohl, "Loose Canons: Defining Essential Visual Culture in the Art History Survey Textbook," *Visual Resources Association Bulletin* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 27. In this article Kohl suggests that the term "canon," when applied to discussions of a work's relative worth to the field of art history, is essentially a misnomer.

31. Ibid., 27-28.

Joan Beaudoin, IMLS Fellow, College of Information Science and Technology, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA, jeb56@drexel.edu