

LIBRARIES AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN ARTIST AND SOCIETY

By Deirdre C. Stam

Abstract: The relationship of artists to art libraries is explored for the purpose of gaining better understanding of artist's needs. Discussed here are use patterns in art libraries, artist's frustrations with these institutions, major tools utilized by artists or on their behalf, accommodations made by staff to serve the unique needs of artists, and suggestions for co-operative action by art librarians that would improve service to this special group. Data were gathered through a survey mailed to selected librarians in art schools and public libraries in the United States, and through inquiry on the Art Libraries Society of North America electronic discussion list, ARLIS-L, in the winter and spring of 1994.

As is true for any group of library patrons, artists' use of libraries is something of an enigma. This paper attempts to investigate artists' use of libraries in order to improve service to this special group. Patterns of use are described, and accommodations made by librarians to serve these users are reviewed in order to provide a deeper understanding than now exists of how artists interact with libraries, and to make better known the solutions to artists' information problems that librarians have found effective.

The obvious way to determine use patterns is to ask artists directly about their needs and activities in libraries. Unfortunately, artists are not easy to get hold of, especially for an exercise of this sort, and even when they are cornered, they, like other users, seldom can provide the kind of reasoned information on their needs and use that translates directly into improved service. A more indirect approach is needed. In this case, the help of art librarians was elicited. Art librarians they are extremely helpful with this kind of inquiry, and their analytical approach is exactly what is needed in order to understand and ultimately improve service to this special clientele. This inquiry used mailed questionnaires addressed to

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selected librarians in public and art school libraries, and the electronic discussion list ARLIS-L, as sources of data. Responses gathered in March and April of 1994 were all from North America, with the preponderance from the United States.

Artists' research

Broadly speaking, artists use visual means to express and communicate ideas about mental, physical and emotional spheres. This characterization assumes that artists begin with abstract ideas - that they have ideas - either self-generated or suggested by clients. It implies too that their interests can be wide, including political, social, psychological concerns, among other topics. Somewhat unkindly but nonetheless convincingly, Derek Toyne describes the artists' realm as made up of "manias, quirks, insecurities, and beliefs which drives the artist to make his art."¹ One might add wit and humor to Toyne's list.

Artists' research, in addition to questions of technique, might include extensive immersion in the realm of ideas gained through reading, popular media, conversation, or contemplation. Artists typically report that their general reading is omniverous and eclectic; they devour books, magazines, advertisements, and ephemera.² By their own admission, chance and accident play a significant role in this process.

Asked how art libraries might satisfy these broader interests, one group of artists replied in 1986 that they cannot. These artists suggested that money would be better spent on books for the local public library than on books addressing general topics for art libraries. One of these, artist Lawrence Weiner, suggests hiring librarians in art libraries who would point the way to general materials in other collections.³ Many artists reportedly develop their own collections of reading material, or do their "research" in bookstores. The need for intellectual stimulation is met, both artists and librarians seem to agree, by a wider culture than the world of art.

That is not to say that art libraries do not play an important part in the lives of artists. But it is not for general reading, or even to a great extent the art press that artists use libraries; rather, it is for very specific information relating to the transformation of their ideas into visual form and material.

Among art librarians there is some speculation that designers and illustrators are particularly assiduous users of libraries. For graphic artists specifically, the library is not only a fount of information, but also an archive of graphic design.⁴ Painters and sculptors, in contrast to designers and illustrators, seem to rely more on their own memories and imagination than on libraries for their sources.

What do artists see?

In many ways, artists' needs are like other patrons of the art library. They, like others, are interested in artists and their work, art movements, art forms, iconography and criticism. Some of their needs, however, are unique.

Most characteristic of artists is the need for images, images, images. "Where can I find an image of ..." is their most common question, in contrast to other patrons who might ask, "Where can I find information about ..." The images sought might be of things in the real world, or events, and not necessarily of art. Color is paramount.

Their needs for images are usually very specific. Examples provided in this survey were: widow's walks in New England seaside villages, '50's diners, a school bus, or Madonna (the rock star, that is). Zoological or cartographic materials are frequently sought. The commonplace images sought by artists often function as cultural icons with strong symbolic potential.

Other typical queries can be eclectic, such as these examples provided by respondents: I want to see works of art in which the artist uses color for emotion, especially red. Who does depictions of women's bodies? Who are some environmental artists? What is Post-Modernism? I want to see figure painting, casting techniques, and art made of cut paper. Where do I find a book on the artist who now has a show at a local gallery (or has been featured in this month's magazines)? Where can I find reviews of contemporary shows and artists? And, I'd like to see something in the same style as this picture in my hand.

Often artists' need shift as they become aware of what is available by way of imagery or more general information. They follow paths of association and creativity, with one thing suggesting another. Thoroughness is not characteristic of their approach in the way that it is in other scholarly endeavours. Artists are compulsive browsers.⁵ They need to "paw through" materials.

More practical needs are for information on competition opportunities, grants, fellowships, residencies, and the "business" of art. Advice on art materials, and in some cases on the hazards presented by them, is occasionally sought.

Artists in North America often maintain extensive collections of their own informational materials in studios and homes. Some come to the library only for more obscure or newer materials. One artist reports using the library mainly for foreign or high-priced periodicals dealing with his medium.

Frustrations

Artists expect to be presented with the "perfect" answer to their queries, reports on art librarian. Others observe that artists have little patience for reference tools. They do not know how to use indexes and they have little interest in learning; they don't have the time, they don't come with the skills, and some artists can't even read well, aren't particularly verbal, and might even have reading disabilities. They sometimes can't pronounce or spell or fully remember an artist's name that they may have heard mentioned. Frequently they do not understand the nature of the information given them.

Catalogs are more of a hindrance than help to artists who just do not think of art they way that the Library of Congress does. LC classifications are particularly inappropriate, and this disjuncture is significant in open-stack libraries where artists go directly to shelves if they can, usually bypassing the catalog altogether.

Other catalog problems are the limitations in tracings, lack of item-specific indexing to illustrations in print sources, inadequate treatment of media sources (video is becoming a preferred mode for learning art history), the treatment of "artist" as "author" and not as "subject" in standard catalogs, the elimination of some participating artists' names in cataloguing data for group shows, and lack of indication of artists' personal characteristics such as gender and ethnic origin.

Artists complain of time constraints and deadlines. In any cas, they are not willing to take time to learn how to use the library more effectively.

On the subject of time, artists find the usual dayleight hours of libraries a severe limitation. Much of their studio time is spent at night. If they don't have access to libraries then, they at least want to be able to take material to their studios for prolonged periods of time, including evenings.

Essential library tools

The list of vital reference tools in most art libraries begins with the old stand-by periodical index, *Art Index*, which is used in part by artists to locate reproductions, and the well-known guide to reproductions, *World Painting Index*. Illustrations are sought as well, though less frequently, through the *Illustration Index*, *Sculpture Index*, *Index to Reproductions of American Painting*. Another index that gets occasional use is the *Design & Applied Arts Index*. Other periodical indexes that get very occasional general use are *ArBbibliographies Modern*, *Répertoire international de la littérature de l'art/Bibliography of the History of Art*, and *Arts & Humanties Citation Index*.

Images are sought in the *World Book Encyclopedia*, in various visual dictionaries, and in "clip art" books (collections of reusable graphic images in public domain). The *National Geographic Index* is also used for this purpose. The *Encyclopedia of World Art* is consulted both for illustrations and text, as are textbooks by H.W. Janson and by Helen Gardner and the handbook *Oxford Companion to Art*. Iconographic guides and dictionaries of the type represented by the *Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts* are less frequently consulted.

Occasional use is reported for *Worldwide* catalogue of exhibition catalogues and the series from St. Martin's Press including *Contemporary Artists*, *Contemporary Architects*, *Contemporary Photography*; the comparable *Contemporary Designers* is issued by Gale Research Company. Biographical tools include *Artist Biographies Master Index* and other biographical indexes, *ArtSpeak/Art SPoke*, *Who's Who in American Art*, and other works of the "Who's Who" genre.

Other standard tools include gallery guides, museum directories, registers of grant support and financial aid, career guides, legal advice for artists, and information on health hazards faced by artists. Local newspaper are useful for regional art events.

Special services: material, services, and physical facilities

Among library materials supplied to artists, image banks in all formats including print are of high priority. Art libraries serving artists commonly have picture files, even little special accommodation is made for their artist-clients. These picture files are usually housed in vertical file arrangement, and contain general materials clipped from magazines, books, calendars, advertisements, photo stock books, and ephemera. Some libraries have slides and photographs available, but access is usually restricted to professional in-house staff, such as faculty. This restriction is especially true of media collections. The provision of images in electronic form, though still novel, is described as "absolutely intoxicating" for artists. Access to images in network is still unusual, but described as extremely desirable.

Other special materials might include files containing announcements of shows and other timely events from museums and galleries; these are seldom catalogued or retained permanently. A few libraries maintain vertical files on individual artists. Additional files might contain announcements of grants, awards, competitions, and other financial opportunities.

Among services provided to artists, the subject specialist is frequently cited as the most important aid. In addition to reference duties, this person provides instruction, at least in the art school library. Other services that artists might encounter

include generous loan periods, and flexibility policies for temporary removal of reference material.

In one setting where the university art library is far from the art studios, the art librarian distributes monthly lists of particularly interesting new materials and "hot topics". He also displays materials relating to visiting artists and events in the studio program.

In a few instances, in-house indexes improve access to materials such as slides videos. In rare instances, the catalog records are enhanced with identification of images, et al., but this practice is unusual in automated catalogs.

A very few libraries report adding supplementary data to their standard cataloging records. A category of material that requires such information are artists books, where type of binding, materials used, and method of printing might interest the library's clientele. Specific headings for clip art, graphic design topics, and logos might be added to cataloging records.

As for physical facilities, open stacks are the norm, and most librarians consider such access an essential part of their service. In a few institutions, books and exhibition catalogues on individual artists are separated from the general stacks, and arranged in alphabetical order, reflecting the way artists approach this material.

The survey reported, predictably, that new book shelves and display areas are common in art libraries. Clear signage indicating the subject areas of book shelves is seen as an important access mechanism. Browsing bins for covers and for material enclosed with audio-visual materials are mentioned. Video displays areas and video monitors are becoming more common. Microform and attendant equipment are very rarely mentioned in these circles.

Almost every art library has a photocopier, and many of these produce color images. Where only black-and-white copies are available, this situation is lamented. Copy stands and even scanners are common. Even large library tables are seen by some art librarians as vital to facilitating the artist's use of the library and its collections, in Toyne's words, "to ensure that the student is at ease."⁶ The space is needed for accumulating material, consulting several works at once, and making notes and sketches. This detail relates to "library as place" as well as source of information.

Cooperative projects for art librarians

Better access to images is the first priority. Image indexes are needed, both for printed and for electronic sources, including those available via networks. Clip art could be distributed this way. Image banks themselves are an obvious need; these should deal not only with art, but also with general subjects, such as people, food, plants and animals - even the Bettman Archive. As for reproductions of art works, image banks based on individual artist's work are most essential. And design sources are greatly desired. In all cases, the ability to copy images - by downloading electronically and/or printing - is essential.

Other primary materials needed include complete, scholarly, full-color catalogs of museums collections, in either print or electronic form. Videos depicting artists' work and artists-at-work would be welcome.

An index to *ArtSpeak* and other well-illustrated journals documenting contemporary art would be useful if it indicated the way in which artists work, such as mentioning rough textures, empty backgrounds, transparent subjects, and so forth.

Another index of great practical value would be a guide to the locations of art works. Such information could be found easily if museum registration data were generally available in electronic form and distributed through the network, a prospect that has been discussed for decades. In this endeavor, librarians could provide moral suasion in the form of encouragement in their institutions to make such data available, and in form of example demonstrated by the traditional sharing of library data. They can also make known to museums considering such issues the Clearinghouse on Art Documentation and Computerization at the Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York city.

Exhibition directories are needed. A database of ephemeral exhibition notices and small catalogs, including scanned images, would be very helpful. It is far too expensive for individual libraries to control these materials, and they are constantly sought.

Artists' practical needs for information about exhibitions, competitions, and instructional opportunities could be met via electronic bulletin boards, as could information about artists and computers. Some of this information is already available through networks, but relatively few artists have convenient access to it. Even where electronic information exists and physical access is possible, additional guidance is needed to aid artists in finding material and in putting it to use. The new electronic Art Source on the Internet may prove a useful index and guidepost for artists.

Information and advice on copyright issues could be cooperatively developed and distributed in convenient form. This topic is particularly important in relation to the copying and adaptive reuse of images in all formats.

The agenda for cooperative action is clear. Many items involve new media. Needed here are primary materials, chiefly imagery; directories to primary material; and learning packages, especially for new electronic media. But collections of printed material - "hard copy" - will not go away soon, especially for visual artists, persons whose reality is most often a manipulation of physical materials to encode abstract ideas and passions.

Notes

1. Derek Toyne, "An art school librarian's philosophy", in Philip Pacey, A Reader in Art Librarianship, IFLA Publications 34 (Munich, New York: Saur, 1985), p. 57.
2. Russell Ferguson, "CAA/ARLIS Joint Session: 'What do artists read?'" Art Documentation 5, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 72.
3. Ferguson: 72.
4. Philip Pacey, "How art students use libraries", in Pacey, p. 54.
5. Pacey, p. 53.
6. Toyne, p. 58.

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