



ART LIBRARIES SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

**35<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference**  
**Sheraton Colony Square, Atlanta, Georgia, April 26-May 1**

**Session 17: Not what you imagined? Challenges, Choices, and Realities for the Art Librarian**  
**Sunday, April 29, 2007, 9:00 – 10:30 AM**

**Moderator:** Rebecca K. Friedman, Head, Article Express & Borrow Direct, Princeton University

**Speakers:**

Eugene Downing, Assistant Editor, Bibliography of the History of Art (BHA), Getty Research Institute

Sarah McCleskey, Head, Access Services, Hofstra University

Alessia Zanin-Yost, Reference Librarian/Liaison to the Visual & Performing Arts, Western Carolina University

**Recorder:** Shalimar Fojas White, Public Services Librarian, ARTstor

**Summary:**

*Rebecca Friedman, Introduction*

Friedman gave a brief introduction to the session. She noted that Art Librarians, like other librarians with subject specialties, face the reality of a job market that may lead them to work in an area or department outside of their preferred field. However, these experiences may allow Art Librarians to develop skills that could become useful when relevant openings arise. In fact, landing a job as an Art Librarian is a challenging combination of many variables: timing, persistence, geographic mobility, competition, and luck. Further, even those Art Librarians who are fortunate enough to find an art-related position often find that their job changes over time. Thus, adaptability is a key factor to success in the field.

*Eugene Downing, "A Parallel Universe?: The Art Librarian in the Database World"*

Downing began by describing his educational and professional background. First, he studied metal smithing and jewelry at the Maine College of Art and Design. Then, he moved to New York, working odd jobs that included book

making and binding. During this time, he spent a great deal of time in libraries, which piqued his interest and led him to enroll at Pratt Institute for the dual-degree program in Art History and Library Science. While concentrating on Pre-Columbian Art History, Downing was drawn to reference in the Library Science part of the program. Ironically, he ended up getting a job at the Bibliography of the History of Art (BHA), an art historical database, where he only occasionally provides reference services. But, he reflected that there are many types of art information professionals outside of libraries, and the work that he does is related enough that he considers himself to be a bona fide art information professional.

To illustrate this, Downing decided to do a self-assessment by comparing the knowledge and skills that he has acquired while working at the BHA to the ARLIS/NA Core Competencies for Art Information Professionals (<http://www.arlisna.org/resources/onlinepubs/corecomps.pdf>). He distributed a handout, which excerpted the relevant sections from the Core Competencies, while also highlighting the items that directly related to his duties at BHA. Downing reviewed the sections and discussed particularly relevant items as he went along.

Under "Subject Knowledge and Expertise," all of the items apply. As an assistant editor at BHA, Downing coordinates an international team of contributing editors, while also tracking new books to prevent overlap in their coverage. As a result, he is certainly able to "identify current trends." However, because of the BHA's scope, Western Art from the Early Christian period to the present, Downing is less familiar with "non-western societies and traditionally under-represented groups." But, he feels that his academic background in Pre-Columbian art does address this core competency.

Under "Reference & Information Access" and "Instruction," Downing admits that he does not routinely provide reference services. But, he feels that he does provide BHA users with access to information. Thus, in other ways, he meets the criteria listed in this section. For instance, regarding item 5f, "continuous learning about users, their research goals, and the educational or research environment in which they work," Downing cited the user survey that was developed for the Avery and BHA databases. This survey helped him and his colleagues understand how their users use the records that they compile and how to serve them better in the future. Downing also noted that organizing user group meetings at conferences like ARLIS/NA as another way to learn more about users.

Under "Research and Assessment," Downing's work brings him in daily contact with art historical research, so that he can certainly "assess the validity, currency, and relevance of research conducted by others," as noted in item 7d.

Under "Managerial and Supervisory," Downing notes that while he does not directly supervise the contributing editors, he does coordinate their work. He

does find the organizational and time-management skills mentioned in item 10b to be a challenge, since he must juggle so many different tasks at the same time.

Under "Technology," the very nature of Downing's position at an electronic research makes technology essential to his daily work. The same applies to the next section for "Professional Advocacy." Downing believes that BHA itself is a contribution "to the advancement of the Arts," as stated in item 16.

Once he had completed the review of the Core Competencies, Downing compared his feelings about where he thought he would be in library school, and where he actually is now. He is happy in his work environment, which is filled with good colleagues and rewarding work. But, eventually, he would like to transition back to a library environment, which will allow him to directly assist users with their reference questions.

#### Questions:

One participant asked Downing how he addresses the gaps in the core competencies that are not provided by his work experience. Downing wishes that he had more time to pursue his own research into Pre-Columbian Art, but also finds that attending professional conferences like ARLIS/NA helps him to keep abreast of developments in the field.

Another participant pointed out item 1g, which referred to foreign languages. Downing agreed that his work at BHA helps him meet this competency, since having to proof-read book titles has certainly strengthened his reading knowledge of Dutch, Italian, and German.

*Sarah McCleskey, "Keeping it Real... Practical: Migrating your skills to a different environment"*

McCleskey argued that as an Art Librarian, one can develop skills that will make one a valuable employee, both in one's current position and in other environments. She proposed to illustrate her point by using herself as an example, thereby structuring her talk by discussing "what I have done, what I do, and how I got there." McCleskey has been a professional librarian for 10 years, and began working in libraries while in graduate school at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She began her graduate studies with Classical Languages (Greek and Latin), but transitioned to Classical Architecture after realizing that she was more visual than literary-minded. During this time, two graduate assistantships eventually led her to librarianship. With the first assistantship, she worked with slides of architectural sites; for the second, she found a position in a rare book library. After graduating from her program, McCleskey took a job in another specialized collection outside of the main library, the music library. She continued to work there as a paraprofessional while she pursued a second

master's degree in Library Science. In this role, she was placed in charge of circulation and supervised student assistants -- an experience that proved to be very valuable. Equally valuable was the experience of working in a branch library. McCleskey considers the branch library to be a microcosm for the larger main library, with all of the relevant departments and functions. While working in a smaller, more manageable environment, McCleskey was able to familiarize herself with the workings of the library, as well as observe the relationship between the branch library and the main library.

After graduating from library school, McCleskey applied for 50 jobs. This search resulted in 3 interviews, of which 2 were art-related. She accepted the sole job offer that she received from Clemson University, where she stayed for 7 years. Personal reasons necessitated a move to the New York area, so McCleskey started another job search that landed her in Long Island, as head of Access Services at Hofstra University's Axinn Library. During her time at the Art Library in Clemson, McCleskey had been thinking more and more about administration, and possibly moving into the main library. From her days as a graduate student, she had always thought that circulation was essential to the library. As a result, she always made efforts to involve herself in circulation-related activities, such as an RFP to purchase an integrated library system at Clemson. Working in a branch library allowed her to develop skills in a microcosm that proved to be applicable to the larger environment of the main library. To this end, McCleskey presented a handout that she had developed, which outlined pointers for Art Librarians on how to migrate outside the Art Library. According to McCleskey, the Art Librarian has special skills, which, when combined with their practical experience as a branch librarian, will help them to migrate into the larger world of the main library. Her suggestions included:

- *Maintain visibility in the main library. Be an advocate for your branch library and staff, and find opportunities for participation in main library decision making.* McCleskey suggested that Art Librarians make themselves part of the main library's community and not limit themselves to focusing on their own issues, since this leads to a lack of credibility in the broader community. She encouraged Art Librarians to participate in library-wide committees, task forces, search committees, steering committees, even university-wide committees for decision making on an even larger scale. All of these outlets will bring the Art Librarian into the wider community, while at the same time providing valuable leadership skills.

- *Learn how to use the current integrated library system.* McCleskey urged Art Librarians to learn and be familiar with local practice and procedures. In-depth knowledge of any online system will serve one well in the future. She also suggests seeking out colleagues to learn about circulation, cataloging, etc., as a way of making connections beyond the branch library.

- *Expand reference and teaching skills to include general reference or bibliographic instruction.* These skills are directly translatable to the main

library, so McCleskey urged Art Librarians to volunteer time at the reference desk.

- *Manage your budget efficiently and look for ways to expand it.* As a microcosm, the Art Library allows the Art Librarian to gain experience with all aspects of the budgeting process – e.g. student wages, supplies, collection development, etc. – but on a smaller scale. McCleskey noted that one should be able to say at a job interview: “I was responsible for \$\_\_\_, and was able to increase it to \$\_\_\_.” She suggested applying for grants, such as for the digitization of slides or the purchase of a specialized resource.

- *Learn about space planning and library design.* McCleskey recommended getting experience, even if it is a minor renovation.

- *Learn about how human resources works.* McCleskey advised Art Librarians to understand the hiring process for clerical and professional staff, since this knowledge will help when supervising others. When working with unionized staff, she suggested becoming very familiar with the contract. One should also endeavor to learn from clerical staff, both their expertise and their knowledge of local procedures. In addition to supervisory experience, McCleskey noted that assessing performance as an essential skill.

#### Questions:

McCleskey was asked if an Art Librarian must minimize their specialized skills when trying to make a transition into the main library. McCleskey said that one often had to downplay the specialized skills, and emphasize one’s general administrative strengths, so as not to be pigeonholed as simply an Art Librarian.

#### *Alessia Zanin-Yost, "Looking into the Profession"*

Zanin-Yost recounted her background, and her path to her current position as Reference Librarian and Liaison to the Visual & Performing Arts at Western Carolina University. Originally, Zanin-Yost had come to the United States from Italy to pursue a degree in Biology. As part of the program, she had to take a General Education class, so she chose to take an Art History course. This course was a revelation to Zanin-Yost, which prompted her to abandon her Biology studies and complete a MA in Art History. At the time, she thought that teaching was the only option open to an Art Historian. Unfortunately, after 4 years in as an instructor in various adjunct positions, Zanin-Yost was faced with the reality of a job market that offered few opportunities for Art Historians. By chance, a friend mentioned library school. Since Zanin-Yost was not familiar with what librarians did, she decided to take a class to find out. This prompted her to go to library school, where, as part of a practicum, she was able to interview subject specialist librarians, including an Art Librarian. This experience led her to decide on Art Librarianship as a career goal.

Zanin-Yost's first position after graduating from library school was in a Science and Technology library. But, she missed working with Humanities students, so decided to look for an art-related position. This led her to Western Carolina University, where she accepted what seemed to be the perfect job, a combination of reference and instruction duties, with a special liaison role to the Visual and Performing Arts departments. In reality, the job isn't exactly what it appeared to be during the interview process. The liaison role mandates that Zanin-Yost work closely with several academic departments, including Music, Dance, Theater, Communications, Film, Interior Design, etc. This means that she is responsible for a large number of users, 17 faculty and more than 1000 students. How does one librarian provide instruction for so many users? Unfortunately, the liaison position is new to the library, so there is little guidance from the administration on how to structure the position. At the same time that Zanin-Yost is fulfilling her reference and instruction duties, she must keep in mind the other points that will be used to judge her during the tenure process. These include: attending committees, doing outreach in the community, publishing papers, and presenting. With all this, she has come to regard her 10 hours of reference a week as her "down time," a chance to answer simple questions and interact with students.

In fact, the liaison part of her position has turned out to be the most challenging. Because of her MA in Art History, she has been embraced by the Art Department, so that they consider her to be "their" librarian. She often has to remind them that she is not there to support them exclusively, as she is responsible for 8 other departments. Unfortunately, she does not have an academic background in many other the other represented fields. For instance, since she has no background in Music, Zanin-Yost cannot do the same level of work for the faculty in that department, as she does for their colleagues in the Art department. So, she must work on her own to fill these gaps in her knowledge.

The vagueness of the tenure track also adds to the challenges of her position. A tenure candidate must show excellence in 7 points: reference, teaching, collection development, professional development, scholarship, community outreach, and institutional work. While she meets some of these points through her day-to-day work, she must struggle to meet the other criteria while still maintaining a full work load. As a result, she must always be thinking on her feet and prove her competence in everything that she does. As an example, the Music department declined her offers of bibliographic instruction. So, she had to come up with an alternative way to engage the department, which she did by appropriating the library's display cases to showcase student work. She presented this as an idea to the Music faculty, something that they could include in the syllabus as a student assignment. Another challenge is keeping up with the profession in the various fields that she supports. So, while her attendance at ARLIS can be readily justified, Zanin-Yost must struggle to make the same arguments to

attend conferences for Music Librarians, etc. Yet, despite these challenges, Zanin-Yost is keen to pursue tenure. When working in the academic world, one's lack of faculty status leads faculty to consider one as a mere clerk, or support staff.

### Questions:

A participant observed that the liaison position does seem overloaded, and wondered what Zanin-Yost's colleagues thought of the position. Zanin-Yost explained that the liaison position was only given to reference librarians, and some of her colleagues are responsible for far fewer departments, e.g. only the English department, or only Biology and Chemistry. But, the reference librarian has the flexibility to take the liaison role as far as they want, so Zanin-Yost can be more active with the Art Department than with the Music Department. However, she did agree that her job would be much easier if her responsibility was limited to the College of Arts and Sciences.

Another participant asked why the Music Department faculty said that their students did not need library instruction. Zanin-Yost explained that the faculty said that the students don't do research or write papers, since it is a performance program. Another participant from UT Austin said that she had encountered the same attitude with the Music faculty at her institution. She suggested that while the faculty may say that they don't need you, they simply don't know that they need you and you have to prove it to them. For instance, one of the most common reference questions around exam time actually relate to music, e.g. how to find a piece of music or locate sheet music. The participant suggested that Zanin-Yost create a tutorial and give it to the faculty, as proof that students do need library instruction. Zanin-Yost thought that this was a good idea, and mentioned that they are reviewing a string music database which, if purchased, will necessitate faculty training. Another participant from Drexel University agreed, saying that they subscribe to the Naxos database and must do a lot of technical support for the resource around exam time.

A participant from Portland State University asked Zanin-Yost to comment on budgeting and her policy for gifts and donations, such as music scores and art books. Zanin-Yost said that she purchased materials for all her departments with a budget from her collection development librarian. The deadline to spend the budget is in February, so she is constantly sending faculty reminders to submit their lists and requests of monographs. Inevitably, there is a mad dash at the end, so just in case faculty don't submit requests in time, Zanin-Yost keeps a backup list that she compiles from faculty syllabi. Regarding gifts, they go first to the collection development librarian, who directs them to the appropriate subject specialist for evaluation. Typically, Zanin-Yost will check the OPAC and will then decide what to do with the gift items. She thinks that a better policy is needed, since the gifts take up time and space. Also, since books are state property

at her university, Zanin-Yost cannot sell books in book sales, as other libraries tend to do with unwanted gifts.

One participant raised a question for Downing, observing that the 16 points he used for self-assessment were incredibly idealistic. Downing explained that the 16 points were taken from the ARLIS/NA Core Competencies, which were designed as guidelines, and not as mandates that every art professional must meet.