

Introduction

MUSEUMS and libraries share a devotion to furthering a culture's common good. Both are educational in their missions and goals, and both conserve physical objects that are put to the use of the public in the broadest sense. Thus, the incidence and need for libraries as part of art museums have been natural phenomena. Still, while most laypersons understand the functions and usefulness of public and academic libraries, the concept of an art museum library may be elusive to many. The public and, indeed, some museum administrators are unaware of the amount of background research that goes into acquiring and exhibiting each object in a museum. Not a label goes on the wall without the need for verification that the information is accurate—and that is the proverbial “tip of the iceberg.” Several of the writers in this book refer to how “object-oriented” museums are, and it is worth noting that the basic justification for the museum library is to support the documentation of the museum's objects.

As can be imagined, the history of the presence of libraries in early art museums is more complicated than can be dealt with in this brief introduction.¹ Art has inspired writing and documentation since ancient times, and the appreciation of art objects and architecture has always been a feature of human experience. Books (tablets, inscriptions, codices, scrolls, etc.) were collected for centuries as objects alongside art objects, but not necessarily to document the art. Precursors to the establishment of museums (as they are thought of in the Western tradition) were the rise of antiquarianism in Europe, the public ownership of royal collections after the French Revolution, and the tradition of collecting by the Church. The need for libraries to explain collections arose somewhere in the transition from acquiring objects for personal, state, and religious reasons to relating objects to history in the early nineteenth century.

Indeed, the beginning of art museums as stand-alone institutions in the United States was chaotic. Such as they were before that, they were often part of libraries and academic institutions. For instance, the Brooklyn Apprentices Library Association, founded in 1823, has become, through successive institutional permutations, what we know today as the Brooklyn Museum.

To identify the time in the United States when art museums were founded as discrete institutions, we must look to the end of the nineteenth century when they



FIGURE I.1a. Reading Room, Ingalls Library, The Cleveland Museum of Art, October 2006. Rafael Viñoly Architects. Photographer: David Brichford.


were established in New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1870; library in 1880), Boston (Museum of Fine Arts [MFA], 1870; library in 1879), Philadelphia (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1876; library in 1876), and Chicago (Art Institute of Chicago, 1879; library in 1879). Art museums founded in the United States before 1870 were the Wadsworth Atheneum (1842) and the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy (1862), now the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, but neither established art libraries before the twentieth century. An early paradigm for the establishment of a library within an art museum is offered by the Victoria and Albert Museum (the V & A) in London, which was founded in 1836 and had a library by 1852. It was the intent of many civic-oriented U.S. art museums started in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to follow the lead of the V & A to inspire excellence in local industry and craftsmanship by exhibiting exemplary art objects. So it is small wonder that they also followed the V & A's educational bent by including libraries as part of their educational and research facilities.

While the MFA, Boston, and the Metropolitan Museum established internal art libraries within nine and ten years, respectively, of their founding, the Art Institute and the Philadelphia Museum included libraries at the outset. Thereafter, U.S. art museums, most notably in the East and Midwest in the early twentieth century, included libraries as necessary adjuncts to their educational purpose either at their beginning or soon after. Indeed, the art museum libraries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Gallery (in Washington, D.C.), and the Cleveland Museum of Art have grown to be among the largest libraries of art history in the country, ranking on a par with major academic art libraries.

Even when art museums did not include libraries at their founding, the publishing and collecting habits of the art world brought a significant number of publications to their doors. Collectors of art often acquire books and other documentation to support their collections and then pass them on to museums along with donations of art. Museums began publishing programs to publicize their collections and to further their educational missions. Rather than sell their publications to each other, they have instituted publication exchange programs, usually administered through the library, that disseminate published information and research around the country and the world. Curators, of course, cannot

function without their basic reference tools—print and images, online and off. Though online resources are accessible on individual staff desktops and laptops, the cost of many of these essential scholarly indexes, image databases, and auction information sites is prohibitive unless shared—and the museum library is the logical administrator of these resources. Thus are built collections of art historical documentation that eventually require space and specialized art librarians to organize them and make them useful.

Art museum librarians typically regard their jobs as a calling, and they often feel as connected to their collections as are art museum curators to theirs. There is an excitement in supplying materials and reference to support research on actual works of art, some of which are transcendent examples of their kind in the world. It is in this realm that the work of art museum librarians diverges from that of art librarians in academic and public libraries. Each art museum library, in its support of a particular museum's collection, becomes a unique resource related to that collection, and the librarian is often recognized as the expert on the documentation of it. Building a body of scholarly resources related to specific works of art and collections is a professional pleasure that is at the core of art museum librarianship. The encyclopedic nature of many art museum collections produces the opportunity and need for art museum librarians to become conversant with the documentation of art objects from diverse times and places and in every imaginable media. Thus, the museum librarian's breadth of subject involvement often exceeds that of curators who are usually limited to a narrower range, albeit greater depth, of subject specialization.

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Although smaller art museum libraries may limit themselves to support of the resident art collection, larger libraries maintain this function while including broader support for art history research in general. Art museum libraries are usually categorized as research facilities and function primarily to provide research support for



FIGURE I.1b. Current Periodicals Area, Ingalls Library, The Cleveland Museum of Art, October 2006. Rafael Viñoly Architects. Photographer: Becky Bristol.

museum staff, yet most serve as reference and research resources for visitors to the museum as well. In fact, they are fascinating and special places both for those who make use of them and for those who are employed by them. Library functions and services to museum staff are the same as those offered by all other libraries: collection development and acquisitions; cataloging and processing; reference and readers' services; circulation; management of subscriptions online and in print; automation; conservation and maintenance; storage, retrieval, and reshelving; and so forth. But in art libraries these functions are often applied to publications that are among the most beautiful ever produced from the fifteenth century until the present. Art publications are, and have been, produced in ultraluxurious formats and very large sizes, as well as in very creative, unusual editions.

Art museum libraries collect not only traditional publications such as books and journals but also the tools of art curatorship such as art dealers' catalogs, catalogs of special exhibitions, art auction catalogs, and ephemera. Art museum curators are interested in connoisseurship and authenticity, including the monetary and qualitative evaluation of works of art. Thus, the one-page checklist from a long-ago dealer's offering can fill a gap in an object's provenance as well as the formal *catalogue raisonné* or *oeuvre* catalog. Art auction catalogs document not only histories of the movement of art objects

but also the evolution of taste and relative monetary value. The point to be made is that art museum librarians must collect and describe publications that are out of the ordinary and be prepared to access and disseminate information to support the interests of museum professionals, independent scholars, and more casual researchers. Use of these publications brings one into contact with the household goods of kings, nobles, robber barons, and cultural icons of the past, in aid of collecting in the present.

The role of the art museum librarian in disseminating information runs the gamut from service to curators with highly specific interests to novice researchers who just want information about the old painting, lamp, or carpet, for example, they recently found in their attics. In between are students and teachers, art dealers, appraisers, serious collectors, and devoted museumgoers that want to know more than can be gleaned from a gallery label. To serve all of these interests requires diplomacy, curiosity, intuition, tenacity, generosity, flexibility, authority, and, often, humor, not to mention knowledge of and respect for the art collected and displayed in the museum. As if this wasn't enough, the organizational ability that is part and parcel of being a librarian is often recognized and utilized by museums in areas other than the library. Art museum librarians have been asked to participate as registrars, Web masters, and in some cases administrators

in charge of multiple departments outside their libraries' domains. In fact, art museum librarians must train and see themselves not only as professional librarians but also as museum professionals who are able to give guidance and reference in the functions, methods, and administrative trends of art museums.

A true benefit of being an art museum librarian is the ability to play a part in the continuum of the history of what is usually one of the most prestigious institutions in a given city and in some cases the world. Those who collect art and serve on the boards of art museums are often the city's business, industry, and society leaders. Museum staff members, including librarians, must have the ability to communicate with such individuals and to represent the museum's programs eloquently when the occasion arises. The art museum librarian is usually charged with development and promotion of the library, and even the museum's board members may lack understanding of the library's functions and value to the institution. The librarian must be able to articulate and project the library's value both inside and outside the museum.

The idea that automation can take the place of the collections and space of a library is all too prevalent in the early twenty-first century. About ten years ago, a museum board member stood with me in the new book and serials room, and with a sweeping gesture of his arm, he asked, "How much of this is available online?" At that time, I could honestly say that none of it was available in any form other than print. The question is still lurking there today, and the answer has become more mutable, especially as more and more journals offer part or all of their issues online. Still, it is unlikely that the monographic literature of art history will be automated retrospectively with any speed or that art publications will appear initially online as is commonly the case in the sciences.

Another issue of automation was alluded to earlier in this essay: the amount of money that is required for subscriptions to licensed online databases. Art museum libraries in the past could purchase or be given the same books and journals that any larger academic or public library could acquire. But the transference of some standard art reference works to online formats (where they can be searched globally and continuously updated) has resulted in much higher costs to acquire the most current information. Larger academic and public libraries now often have a financial advantage in the acquisition of bundled databases on diverse subjects that may be of little use

to the art museum. While an older book still has relevance and can be welcomed as a donation into a collection, an older database does not have the same relevance and is nearly impossible to expect as a donation. These situations and other realities of life in the automated twenty-first century will require art museum librarians to rethink their priorities and work even more closely with colleagues and administrators to assist in setting them.

Most art museum libraries have now automated their public catalogs, making multiple card files and traditional card catalogs virtually a thing of the past.² In many cases, automation entered the experience of art museums first through the library, since libraries in general have been far ahead of museums in harnessing the functionality of computers to organize and disseminate large bodies of data. Putting the art museum library's holdings online via the art museum's website enables the public, as well as museum staff to have more general awareness of the library and to use it more. It's a terrific advertisement for the library if it's easy to find on the website. Librarians must work with their museum's information technology staff to make navigation from the museum's home page to the library Web pages user-friendly. Now that library catalogs are online, librarians are beginning to automate the many local files (of artists, art galleries, ephemera files, and local indexes) that have been painstakingly created over the years in card form and share them via museum websites as well.

An encouraging phenomenon of the last twenty years or so has been the emergence of resource sharing on the part of art museum libraries, which in the past had closely guarded their beautiful, large, and valuable books, rarely participating in interlibrary lending (ILL). The emergence of OCLC and RLIN as large cooperative cataloging databases has also facilitated ILL among their members and art museum libraries have joined in. In particular, the richness of the collections of the art museum libraries that belong to the Research Libraries Group (parent of RLIN) has enhanced the ability of individual libraries to deliver to museum staff rare materials not owned by their in-house libraries. Even these cooperative arrangements, however, are not without cost. Although all RLIN "Shares" members and some OCLC libraries continue to provide ILL services free, many now charge fees, some quite hefty, as well as mailing costs. Of course, ILL costs are in any case a good deal less than purchase costs, especially for rare materials, which may be unavailable for sale at any price.

Art museum libraries often encompass much more than printed materials and many include collections of visual resources such as slides and photographs, both of which are now giving way to digitization. Museum slide libraries are morphing into “image libraries,” digitizing their own images, and subscribing to rapidly developing licensed databases of digital images. Thus, the changes wrought by the conversion from both print and film to digital formats have often occurred simultaneously, representing a sea change in the methods and functionalities encountered by art museum librarians in all areas of their collections.

Another positive development has been a rise in the number of institutional archives in art museums. As institutions age, they discover a critical mass of records has been accumulating over their first fifty to one hundred years that need to be conserved and organized. The art museum librarian is often asked to be involved with the establishment of the museum archives and even to supervise it. This is a natural outcome since the librarian is already on the scene and doing what seems to be a similar sort of job. Knowing that archival practice is different from librarianship enables the art museum librarian to advise administrators on the necessity for hiring a professionally trained archivist and to proceed with appropriate methods to assure the preservation of the museum’s historic records.

The essays in this book describe the intricacies involved in managing the day-to-day operations of typ-

ical art museum libraries of varying sizes. Much of the work done in libraries is behind-the-scenes, and even sophisticated library patrons rarely know (or need to know) what goes on to enable the delivery of a book or a specific bit of factual information. These essays lay bare many of these background procedures and also convey the enthusiasm of the authors for solving the challenges inherent in providing seamless access for both museum and public users. The enthusiasm and adaptability of art museum librarians in the past and now in the digital arena have often been tried but not found wanting, traits that will serve museums well as the twenty-first century unfolds.

Ann B. Abid

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Notes

1. Robert W. Berger, *Public Access to Art in Paris: A Documentary History from the Middle Ages to 1800* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999); Barbara J. Black, *On Exhibit, Victorians and Their Museums* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Udo Kultermann, *The History of Art History* (New York: Abaris Books, 1993); and Martin Myrone and Lucy Peltz, *Producing the Past, Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice, 1700–1850* (Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate, 1999).

2. Joan M. Benedetti, “A Survey of Small Art Museum Libraries,” *Art Documentation* 22, no. 2 (2003): 36.