Report to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation on the IFLA AMBAC Art Section Satellite Meeting in Mexico City, held August 20-21, 2011

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It is with gratitude to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation that I submit this report on my activities during the recent conference in Mexico City hosted by the Art Section of IFLA (The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) and AMBAC (Asociación Mexicana de Bibliotecarios).

The theme of the conference was “Bibliografía y redes de información sobre las artes en América Latina y el Caribe: una perspectiva reciente,” and it took place in the beautiful surroundings of the Franz Mayer Museum and Library, August 20-21, 2011. The program agenda may be accessed at http://www.ambac.org.mx/ifla77/index.php?id=programa. More than 100 people registered for the event. In addition to librarians from Mexico and the United States, there were registrants from other countries in Latin America, Europe, and Australia. Excellent simultaneous translation services in English and Spanish were provided to all attendees, which greatly enhanced the effectiveness of communication and comprehension during the proceedings.

Thanks to financial assistance from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, I was fortunate to be able to attend the conference and, together with colleagues from the New York Art Resources Consortium (NYARC), present a paper on the Latin American resources held collectively at our libraries. Invariably, the process of preparing a paper about the Frick Art Reference Library and NYARC results in my discovering historical facts and circumstances that I was previously unaware of. These discoveries have led not only to new insights for me personally, but documenting them will augment the records of the library’s history and its future interpretation. I learned that Helen Clay Frick had visited Havana as a teenager, and used this as the opening to my paper, providing a link from our founder to the Caribbean region. The Frick Library Archives houses Miss Frick’s album of photographs from her Cuban visit, which I had never seen.

Further research in the Frick’s Archives uncovered frequent past communication by library staff with booksellers, museum directors, and librarians in Latin America, which together illustrate the difficulty of obtaining books, museum publications, and exhibition catalogs about art from Latin American and the Caribbean during the early days of the library. Numerous letters, rolodex entries, and telegraphs document this contact.

In addition to printed materials from Latin American, photographic documentation of Latin American art at the Frick provides an extremely valuable and often unique resource for provenance research. The Frick’s Photoarchive, established as a key element of the Frick Art Reference Library by its founder from the very beginning, today has fourteen linear feet of photographic documentation on Latin American art.
The photographs document a range of styles and formats, including, but hardly limited to colonial ex-votos, European-influenced salon painters, portraits by itinerate artists, baroque church decoration, and famous murals by left-leaning Mexican modernists. In many cases, the works documented have disappeared from view, whether due to ownership transfers, natural disasters, or more ominous circumstances of theft or intentional destruction. Using historical photographs in the Photoarchive, complete mural cycles now destroyed may be virtually re-assembled. In a similar manner, stylistic tendencies may be compared in the many representations of “militant angels” that are documented in the Photoarchive. Now widely dispersed, collections of these distinctive images from all over the world may be viewed together using images from the Photoarchive. The flip sides of the mounted images in the Photoarchive contain extensive descriptions of the artwork’s physical attributes, subject matter, and provenance.

Arcade, the online catalog of NYARC, contains records for photographic files that describe more than 600 Latin American artists. In addition to these collection-level records, the Frick has begun to enter item-level documentation for single artworks into Arcade.

During preparations for my talk, I was able to verify some exciting benefits that have resulted from the combining of three library collections into Arcade. For example, in the combined collections of The Frick, the Museum of Modern Art Library, and the Brooklyn Museum Library and Archives, there are 76 records for the influential Mexican illustrator Jose Guadalupe Posada, ranging from books, print portfolios, photographs, clipping files, scholarly monographs, exhibition catalogs, and even links to archival photographs of a solo exhibition of his work at the Brooklyn Museum in 1944. I was also able to demonstrate how complete runs of several rare journals, held only partially by any of the three NYARC libraries, are now brought together through Arcade.

Current and future challenges in building collections were shared with the audience. NYARC seeks to work collaboratively to build digital collections, not only by scanning older out of copyright materials, but also through the even more challenging format of born-digital resources. The needs with regard to the latter case in Latin America are possibly even more crucial than in the United States, because many smaller galleries, museums, and auction houses now choose to forego print documents altogether in favor of digital presentations.

As the final part of my presentation I discussed how NYARC seeks to raise awareness of our resources to scholars worldwide. Participation in OCLC’s WorldCat and artlibraries.net insures discovery of our materials, where they are aggregated in a central portal. Surely our presentation of this paper, “Latin American Art Resources North of the Border: An Overview of the Collections of the New York Art Resources Consortium,” helps fulfill NYARC’s goal of international outreach to librarians. Many questions and further discussion followed the presentation. There is no substitute for meeting colleagues face-to-face when it comes to creating lasting bonds of cooperation. I believe that the paper will have a future impact not only on the increased use of our collections, but will reactivate the kind of correspondence and exchanges that began decades ago when the Frick Art Reference Library began to actively engage colleagues in Latin America. Handouts describing highlights of the NYARC Collections and of Google Analytics showing use of Arcade in Latin American were provided.
As the Vice-President/President of ARLIS/NA, I intend to work with the Society to maintain and improve communication with many of the outstanding librarians I met at the IFLA/AMBAC conference. As I learned in the presentations by librarians from Mexico, Brazil, and Spain, there is much promise in pursuing joint projects in the area of Latin American bibliographical documentation. My fellow NYARC presenters and I have already been contacted to publish our paper in *Art Libraries Journal* and to participate in an international videoconference entitled “Museum Libraries: New Media and New Audiences,” hosted by the Ministry of Culture of Spain.

In closing, I wish once again to express my thanks to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation for funding my travel to Mexico and for its continued support of international art librarianship through the ARLIS/NA Travel Award. In these times of constricted travel budgets, awards such as this one are critical to maintain communications among colleagues worldwide.