Before this winter, a thorough reference evaluation project had not been undertaken from start to finish in the Stanford University Art & Architecture Library in recent memory. Our 350 linear feet of reference shelving were filled to overflowing, with volumes stacked on top and, in some places, squeezed sideways in open spaces—well over 4,000 volumes total.
We, unfortunately, had a reference collection that was both overflowing and underused—and, as with most reference sections, it was occupying prime real estate in the center of our reading room.
[the same view, after the completion of the project]
Our collection, as it stood at the beginning of this year, reflected an older, arguably outdated model of reference in an academic art library. Guides to the marks of metalsmiths, for example, took up whole shelves, as did museum and academy exhibition histories, price guides, and small encyclopedias on arcane topics (such as wax modelers or marine painters). Volumes that had newer editions or had been fully digitized still sat on the shelves. In short, our reference collection wasn’t doing a particularly good job of reflecting current Stanford scholarship and teaching, nor current academic art publishing models—nor, for that matter, the current style of librarianship at the Stanford Art & Architecture Library.
In this project we decided to take a more holistic view. Of course we performed some of the tasks you would expect, such as weeding, finding newer editions, moving materials available in digital formats to offsite storage, dusting, etc. But our goals were beyond currency and compactness. First and foremost, we were hoping to design a reference collection that was of increased relevance to our patrons. For this we needed to think about who could or should be using the reference collection and, even more importantly, why? We were also interested in creating increased visibility. Finally, we were hoping to could redesign the collection for increased cohesiveness. What would make this reference collection a true collection? And how could we apply uniformity to our current and future bibliographic decisions?

A couple of concessions regarding our working methods: First, we did not analyze usage statistics before getting started. This is because, through several years of observation, we were pretty certain that usage was low enough to make such an exercise really just that—an exercise—and not much more. And second, we have not kept a precise count of the number of volumes we started with (though we know it was in the 4,000-4,500 range), nor the number of volumes we’ve added, nor the number of volumes we’ve moved to the stacks and to offsite storage. Some of these numbers will be recorded through other means, and the ones that will not be are not of the utmost importance to us at this time. These concessions follow from the spirit with which we undertook this project: as a sort-of experiment, steps toward developing a firm theoretical understanding of where our reference section is headed.
Still, much of my working process throughout the project was fairly systematized: as I looked at each title on the shelf, I made a decision about it. If I thought it should stay in the section, I simply placed it back on the shelf. If a new edition existed and either needed to be ordered or needed to be moved up from the stacks, I put a flag in the book that noted this. If I was undecided or wanted to learn more about a title, I wrote my questions on a blank flag. If I thought a book could live just as happily in our general stacks, I flagged it with “Stacks;” if I thought it should be moved to offsite storage, I flagged it with “SAL3” (SAL stands for Stanford Auxiliary Library, of which we are now in the third module; the *Grove Dictionary of Art* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, both easily accessible digitally, were obvious candidates.).
[SAL3 staging area, with *Grove Dictionary of Art* waiting for transfer]
But it was when I wasn’t reviewing the collection book-by-book, but rather thinking about what wasn’t there that could or should be, that the project switched from one of maintenance and general catch-up to one of revitalized curatorship. Not only did this thinking lead me to add new titles; it also gave me solidified arguments for what I had already decided to keep and remove.

I decided I wanted to move the ready reference collection out from behind the reference desk and integrate it with the rest of the reference books. My first reason for doing this is that these were some of our most frequently accessed books: introductory art history surveys and books about the collections of the Cantor Arts Center (Stanford’s art museum). If the goal was increase the collection’s use, then the separation between regular and ready reference seemed a hindrance. My second reason is related to this: if we wanted to increase the collection’s use, then we as reference librarians could be the models. If we needed to access a ready reference-type title, we would now be forced to leave the reference desk and bring our patrons with us to the reference section.
I decided to add a fair number of introductory texts from the stacks—more than what was represented in the ready reference section—especially those that were part of comprehensive and editorially predictable series. The Very Short Introduction titles (Oxford) were obvious candidates, as were some of the World of Art titles (Thames and Hudson).
I also decided to include compilations of primary sources such as the *Art in Theory* compendia.
Another highlight of this new approach was that the historical titles I had decided to keep began (Mary Chamberlain’s *Guide to Art Reference Books* (1959) helped me in my decision-making) to take on multiple purposes. Not only were they, as they had been before, classic, unrivaled resources; they were now also, in this context, historiographic, intentionally representative of the span of art historical literature.

The picture that developed out of all of this—my item-by-item editing as well as my targeted additions—was of a multipurpose collection that worked together as a whole. The intended audience became less the independent connoisseur or object-focused art historian, analyzing auction results and verifying artworks’ authenticity through printers’ marks, and more the undergraduate approaching the discipline for the first time, or the graduate student accessing biographical data or artists’ writings or biblical texts. One could say that the mode became a hybrid of traditional reference and permanent reserve.

The three librarians in the Art & Architecture Library are focused upon instruction and discovery, with a heavy investment in the current departmental curriculum. I think that our revitalized reference collection reflects the pedagogical approach that we bring to the classroom as well as to our Web site and exhibitions. This is what I meant when I described myself earlier as taking a “holistic view.” As in those areas, the reference section presents the art literature as composed of various literature *types*, each type playing a different role in one’s research. In this way the collection is itself a teaching tool.
Our reference section is a work in progress. We think that, based on our work, we can argue for its increased relevance and cohesiveness. Its visibility is growing—partly because of the move of the ready reference collection, and partly because we’ve added signage that makes the collection more browseable. And we are planning on revising our circulation policy so that, rather than not circulating at all, reference books can circulate for a week.
Looking back at the goals we laid out for the project: increased relevance, increased visibility, and increased cohesiveness. While I’ve left out “increased use” as an initial goal, I think that this is something that will develop as we continue to reenvision the collection.
One thing I’m sure of is that, by the time I started this project, the traditional definition of a reference collection—and a reference book—had become less and less relevant in our library. And in fact, if patrons start wanting to do the opposite of this definition—to browse and explore and, as *Webster’s* puts it, read our reference books consecutively, and if they start asking to bring the books home with them—then I think our project will have been a success.