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(Re)Building alliances: advocating for art methodologies in digital collections collaborations

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Advocating for art disciplinary methodologies in collaborations with digital collections librarians, especially in academic libraries, is a vital skill. While art librarians have refined and transformed their relationship to art disciplines in practice and through professional organizations like ARLIS, communicating the importance of art methodologies to their generalist colleagues in digital collections can be challenging. This disciplinary disconnect can result in collaborations and digital projects that fail to meet the needs of the art community because they do not include the necessary information used by art researchers and, thus, thwart discoverability. However, successful collaborations are possible with compromise and negotiation. The Shields Trade Card Collection, housed at Walter Havighurst Special Collections and University Archives at Miami University, serves as a case study, demonstrating both the need for art librarians to advocate for art specific methodologies throughout the lifecycle of a digital collections project while identifying specific areas of compromise key to sustaining future collaborations.

Introduction

Although collaborations between digital collections and visual resources date back to the development of digital libraries in the 1990s, these projects are often presented as successful case studies for interdisciplinary or inter-departmental collaborations. Less attention is paid to professional, organizational or disciplinary differences that challenge collaborations between art librarians and digital collections librarians in academic institutions. Building on the experience of sustaining a 20-year-old collaborative digital collection at Miami University, the authors suggest that there is a fundamental tension between art librarians and digital collections librarians, especially in academic libraries where these positions are often housed in different departments. While art librarians speak from a well-articulated methodological position, supported by professional organizations like ARLIS, digital collection librarians in academic libraries often rely on digital standards, discovery platforms or institutional practices designed for generalist collections and are often limited by technology. In navigating organizational and disciplinary differences, art librarians must advocate for the use of art-specific metadata schemas and vocabularies, like VRA Core, *Cataloging Cultural Objects* (CCO) and the Getty's *Art and Architecture Thesaurus* (AAT) when digital collections are applicable to art users. Moreover, as digital collections extend into their third decade, art librarians must advocate indefinitely over the full lifecycle of the project.

A 20-year intermittent collaboration between the art library and the digital collections services at Miami University serves as a case study in advocating for art methodologies in digital collections over time. Between 1999 and 2019, two art librarians and multiple digital services librarians associated with Miami University Digital Collections helped create and revise robust art historical metadata for the Shields Trade Card Digital Collection. This collection comprises 2,200 chromolithographic advertisement cards from the late 19th and early 20th centuries housed at the Walter Havighurst Special Collections. In addition to

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discussing the importance of placing art methodologies and subject-specific knowledge at the center of collaborative digital projects, this case study will address moments of compromise, technological constraints and the need for digital services librarians to listen and adjust to disciplinary concerns that, if neglected, can lead to failed projects. Through negotiation, advocacy, listening and compromise, art librarians and their peer collaborators in digital collections can improve the accessibility and discoverability of visual materials for art users and in the process forge strong alliances for future collaborations.

Art librarian as advocate

As evidenced by the celebratory conference theme of the 2019 ARLIS UK & Ireland Annual Conference, *50 Years of Art Librarianship,* where this paper was originally presented, art librarianship has a long professional history. Founded in 1969, ARLIS UK & Ireland is the first independent professional association of art librarians. Its sister organization, ARLIS/NA, was born three years later in 1972, '…in a smoke-filled room in the high Victorian ambiance of the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago…'[1] when a group of art librarians decided to break away from the American Library Association (ALA), modelling their organization after ARLIS UK & Ireland. Art librarianship as a profession dates back even further. The first art libraries were private, arising alongside art collections, with publicly accessible collections first recorded in 1683.[2] This history imbues art librarianship with a strong professional identity and rich traditions of disciplinary methodologies for selecting metadata schemas, controlled vocabularies, organization and subject analysis to meet art researcher needs. The standard art thesaurus, which would later become the Getty's AAT, was initially proposed in 1979.[3] VRA Core was developed in 1996 to address standardization needs for surrogate images,[4] while CCO was published in 2003.[5]

While these traditions help shape contemporary art librarianship, they can also complicate partnerships between art librarians and digital collections librarians. Unlike art librarianship, digital collections services is a more recent profession with a looser relationship to academic disciplines. This disciplinary disconnect, if not taken into account and approached with a spirit of compromise, can lead to failed projects where discoverability and access are jeopardized. Moreover, as older digital collections are updated, conversations between art librarians and digital collections librarians also need to occur throughout a collection's multiple iterations to ensure project success. This is especially critical in academic libraries at liberal arts universities, where art librarians and digital collections librarians are frequently housed in different departments.

Advocating for art in digital collaborations: Shields Trade Card Collection

First digitized in 1999, the Shields Trade Card Collection is Miami University's oldest digital collection. The physical collection was donated to the university by Charles Shields in 1987 and consists of approximately 2,200 advertising trading cards from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Despite being one of Miami University's most popular digital collections, it lapsed into disciplinary disconnect over the years. Throughout its history, the collection has undergone three distinct digital iterations: the first digitization in black and white in 1999, a second reimaging of the cards in colour in 2004, and a third digitization at a higher resolution in 2019. During the initial digitization, the former art and architecture librarian was consulted for her expertise in art history. Consequently, the first project included metadata elements to facilitate art researchers' discovery, like measurements and administrative condition notes. However, the second iteration saw this art subject expertise fall by the wayside. In addition to rescanning the trade cards in colour, this iteration coincided with the university's adoption of CONTENTdm as their digital asset management system. The new project team hid the original art fields of measurements and condition, and refocused the collection according to business students' needs. In one sense, this disciplinary drift is understandable. Trade cards are difficult to classify: are they art objects or media artifacts? As art history has expanded to include design, photography and traditional craft media, the art librarian and digital collections librarian

1. Wolfgang Freitag, "ARLIS/NA at Twenty-five: A Reminiscence," *Art Documentation* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 16.

2. Amy Lucker, "Evolution of a Profession: The Changing Nature of Art Librarianship," *Journal of Library Administration* 39, no. 2-3 (2003): 162.

3. Toni Peterson, "Developing a New Thesaurus for Art and Architecture," *Library Trends* 38, no. 4 (Spring 1990): 644.

4. Ben Kessler, "Encoding Words and Images: The Story Behind VRA Core 4.0," *VRA Bulletin* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 23.

5. Eric Coburn, et al, "The Cataloging Cultural Objects Experience: Codifying Practice for the Cultural Heritage Community," Paper presented at the *World Library and Information Conference: 75th IFLA General Conference and Assembly: Milan, Italy, August 23-27, 2009.*

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approached the trade cards as both records of the history of advertising and media culture and representative of 19th and early 20th-century graphic design.

The third, and current, digital iteration was spurred by the addition of 600 new trade cards to the collection in 2018. The digital collections librarian had already noted the digital collection's insufficient art metadata and, given the collection's applicability to art research, asked the art librarian for her subject expertise in making the collection more accessible for art users. To meet these needs, a new metadata template was created using standards familiar to the art field. VRA Core replaced Qualified Dublin Core as the digital collection's metadata schema. With the switch to VRA Core, the project team created metadata fields for measurements, work type, technique, style/period and cultural context. Likewise, the Library of Congress's AACR content standard was exchanged for Cataloging Cultural Objects, which is the first data content standard designed specifically for cataloging cultural heritage materials. The only case where CCO was not followed was the title field, which uses *Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (Graphics)* or DCRM(G), a decision that will be discussed later in the article.

The Getty's Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) was adopted to identify the art materials, techniques, and cultural context of the trade cards. However, as with the caveat of the title field using DCRM(G), AAT was not used for all of the VRA Core metadata fields. The Library of Congress's Thesaurus for Graphic Materials (TGM) was used for indexing the broad range of subjects illustrated in the cards. A description field was also added to facilitate keyword searching using natural language. Finally, the trade cards were scanned at a much higher resolution, 600 ppi, which allows users to enlarge the cards and explore the rich detail of the chromolithographic prints. Ultimately, these changes have created a more accessible collection for not only art researchers but for generalists as well, who now have more access points for keyword searching.

Digital collections librarian as collaborator

Digital librarianship is a relatively new professional field with a less articulated and evolving identity. Digital collection services in academic libraries emerged in the 1990s from the overlapping contributions of librarians, computer scientists, information technology professionals, digital humanities scholars and archivists. Art librarianship developed its own image management practices with the founding of the Visual Resources Association in 1982. While art librarianship has a close disciplinary relationship to the field of art, digital collections is by necessity a generalist field, working with a diverse range of collections, especially in academic library settings. Furthermore, many of the decisions that digital collections librarians make in collaborations are technology driven and constrained by institutional practices and technical infrastructure.[6] The following section identifies moments of disconnect and compromise between an art librarian and a digital collection librarian during the Shields Trade Card collaboration at Miami University.

6. Aaron D. Purcell, *Digital Library Programs: For Libraries and Archives* (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2016), 15.

Compromises

Focusing on compromises in digital visual resource collaborations draws attention to the places of tension in digital collaborations that are, in part, shaped by the professional and organizational differences between art libraries and digital collections departments in academic libraries. The most recent Shields Trade Card collaboration revised a twenty-year-old digital collection to meet current art research needs and involved the collaboration of the digital collections librarian and the art librarian at Miami University. The project team compromised on three separate occasions over the course of the collaboration: in selecting an older VRA Core standard, choosing controlled vocabularies and adopting a cataloging standard for naming trade cards. Of the three compromises, the first two were driven by technical constraints relating to the libraries' digital content management system and the third was a compromise on cataloging standards according to existing institutional practices.

The project team first compromised in selecting a new metadata standard for the revised Shields Trade Card Collection. After reviewing contemporary art user needs, the art librarian and digital collections librarian selected VRA Core as the

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best metadata schema to record and structure art information. However, the project team compromised on which VRA Core schema to implement by ultimately choosing the older, flat VRA Core 3.0 schema instead of the current XML-based VRA Core 4.0 schema. Switching metadata schemas from the generalist Dublin Core to the VRA Core was important for describing the trade cards as visual resources rather than printed objects, but it meant using an older metadata template because the digital repository, CONTENTdm, did not support the new VRA Core. The decision to adopt an outdated metadata schema was driven entirely by the technological restrictions of the digital repository.

Technology constraints also influenced the selection of controlled vocabularies in the revised Shields Trade Card Collection, leading to the project team's second compromise. Although the art librarian recommended using the Getty Thesaurus of Geographical Names (TGN) to record geographical metadata for trade cards, the digital collections staff encountered problems using the large TGN data file in CONTENTdm. Furthermore, the digital collections librarian was concerned that the selection of TGN would produce inconsistent metadata across the collections as other digital collections at Miami University used the Library of Congress's FAST headings for geographical names. Browsing the collections by geography would be particularly affected as this would produce duplicate facets of geographical data in FAST and TGN. While TGN would better align the Shields Trade Card Collection with visual resource collections at other institutions, using FAST headings allowed users to search standard geographical information across local collections at Miami University, leading to a better user experience at the institutional level.

Finally, the project team compromised in choosing the most appropriate data content standard to devise titles for the trade cards. Content standards guide cataloging decisions and are usually selected according to disciplinary and institutional practices. While the art librarian suggested using the Cataloging Cultural Objects standard to create descriptive titles for the trade cards based on their visual content, the digital collections librarian advocated for using rare book cataloging standards, such as DCRM(G), to generate trade card titles according to the textual information. Cataloging the trade cards by their advertisement slogan or other textual information kept the metadata consistent with other digital collections at Miami University. Given the importance of text in graphic design, the decision to use DCRM(G) and privilege words over image content has precedence. Stephen J. Eskilson's *Graphic Design: A New History*, a popular survey text, uses a similar format for titles.[7] Although these compromises resulted from the collaborators' different disciplinary and professional contexts, they point to a larger divergence in professional identity and disciplinary affiliation that can impact collaborations.

7. Stephen J. Eskilson, *Graphic Design: A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

Sustaining collaboration

With the earliest digital collections now entering their third decade, librarians are facing new challenges in responding to changing user needs and sustaining collaborations over longer periods of time. As the most recent iteration of the Shields Trade Card project suggests, collaborations between art librarians and digital collections librarians are not necessarily a one-time investment of time and expertise. For digital collections to remain relevant to users and responsive to changing technology, collaborations must be sustained over time, even indefinitely, and periodically reassessed to ensure that they are meeting user needs.

Advocating for art methodologies in digital collections is a continuous process that takes place over the lifecycle of a project. Identifying professional and organizational tensions in academic library collaborations will help ensure successful collaborations between art librarians and their colleagues in digital collections. The Shields Trade Card collaboration helped identify the most likely places of tension that each collaborator might bring to the table. While art librarians are coming from a well-articulated professional identity and disciplinary focus, their colleagues in digital collections may take a more technology-focused or discipline-neutral approach to metadata. For digital collections, technology considerations influence their contributions to the collaboration and often drive decision making. However, as specialized metadata standards and schema are developed and refined, like VRA Core for art disciplines and Darwin Core for the life sciences, digital collections librarians are increasingly attentive to disciplinary

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needs when creating digital collections. Digital collections librarians will need to continuously reach out to art librarians for subject expertise and information on art user needs when collaborating on visual resource collections. For public-facing art librarians, issues of access and art user needs are critical to any collaboration. While advocacy is necessary, art librarians also need to remain flexible when faced with technological constraints and cases where art standards might not be the best fit for a collection. Knowing and anticipating their collaborator's inflection points can help art librarians better advocate for their needs and find places of compromise.

Conclusion

In many ways, art librarians and digital collections librarians have a similar heritage. They both work with images and share a mutual desire to create successful image collections. However, they also come from two different perspectives. While the Shields Trade Card Collection collaboration revealed these fundamental differences it also demonstrates how compromise and advocacy are necessary not only at a project's inception but throughout its lifecycle. When both parties are aware of possible points of tension, they can better understand and anticipate the needs of their colleagues, leading to rewarding projects and building the foundations for future collaborations.

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