

Report on the Joint VRA + ARLIS/NA Conference
Minneapolis, MN, March 24-28, 2011

This year, the Art Libraries Society of North America and the Visual Resources Association joined forces and hosted a joint annual conference, "Collaboration: Building bridges in the 21st century," which was held in Minneapolis in March. I was fortunate to be able to attend this conference and would like to thank the ARLIS Northwest Chapter for making it possible. As a first-time conference attendee (and still a student at the time) I tried to pack in as many sessions as possible on a variety of topics. The joint conference perfectly suited my growing interest in digital collections and provided many opportunities to learn more about digital technologies and visual literacy.

I began the conference by attending a selection of Special Interest Group (SIG) meetings: Collection Development, Teaching Librarians, and Cataloging Issues. These informal sessions each centered around two or three topics and allowed attendees to discuss issues, ideas, and projects at their institutions. Regarding collection development, the prevalence of e-books and online scholarly publishing continues to be a priority and problem for many. How can institutional repositories accommodate non-textual documents created in the art and architecture fields? Do e-books work for the way users use and read texts? How do we participate in collaborative/consortial e-collection development? How do we allocate space for the future? The teaching librarians group focused on the use of LibGuides as an instruction tool and emphasized a need for concentrating on instruction to graduate students. The cataloging issues group announced updates including RDA implementation, the Cataloging Cultural Objects website to be launched in July, and Electronic Cataloging In Publication, a project of the Library of Congress.

Some of the most inspiring and informative sessions were the case studies, which offered a glimpse into innovative projects, often conducted by individual librarians or small groups within an institution. Liv Valmestad at the University of Manitoba showed us how an iPhone and QR codes combined with a wiki and a GPS app could inexpensively be put to use to develop an interactive guide to the public art on campus, including links to library materials. Librarians at North Carolina State University shared their experience developing and re-developing Image Discovery Week to promote image resources and visual literacy to design students. Azavea, a geospatial analysis firm, introduced a collaborative photographic history project among libraries, archives and museums in Philadelphia (PhillyHistory.org). Many of the case studies presented methods of engaging students with interactive technologies, an increasingly important role for libraries. The Engaging New Technologies session also contributed to this, presenting new semantic web, social networking, mobile, presentation, and productivity tools. Even as a tech-savvy student, many of these tools were new to me (and it will be interesting to see which ones last).

While some may have cut their conference short, I was glad I stayed through Sunday for two especially inspiring sessions. The first, "Collaborative Ventures, Collaborative Gains," was organized similar to a case study, where three individuals shared innovative ways for collaborating with faculty to support student visual/media literacy skills. Stacy Brinkman at Miami University embeds herself in a research methods course for graduate students in architecture. Through sketch-writing (like free-writing), posters, graffiti boarding (students anonymously write comments on students' posters), and critiques, students improve their abilities to communicate verbally and visually. They also learn to see the librarian as a source of information. And at Yale University and James Madison University, librarians assist faculty with teaching by discussing and instructing how to utilize images and technology in lessons. In academic institutions, faculty often use the library resources for research, but as a librarian at Yale said, "we need to get to the point where faculty say 'I can't *teach* without the library.'"

In my final Sunday session, "Transforming Publishing Practices in the Arts," Petra Chu, founding editor of Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide, shared the successes and challenges of establishing the first open access e-journal in the arts; Christine Kuan from ARTstor addressed the new initiative Images for Academic Publishing (IAP), which provides quality images, free of charge, to scholarly publishers; and Niels Schaumann shared a lawyer's perspective on copyright in the digital world. This session summed up many of the challenges presented with digital resources of all kinds, from cost, to quality, to rights.

In addition to all of the meetings and sessions, which provided a wealth of learning opportunities, there was ample opportunity for networking and fun, even in unseasonably cold Minnesota. The first-time attendees breakfast gave me time to see and meet new faces in the profession and also get to know my conference mentor. Prior to the Founders' Fete I strolled through the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, a favorite destination in my former neighborhood. I dined on delightful desserts and viewed an eclectic mix of contemporary and modern art at the Icebreaker event at the Walker Art Center. And I mixed and mingled with art librarians and visual resource curators across North America and beyond. If I learned one thing at the conference, it is the importance of socializing and informal meetings with peers.