

Lost and Found: New Realities in Art Historical Research

The Digital World of Art History Conference, Index of Christian Art
Gwen David, Senior Library Associate, Thomas J. Watson Library,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The “digital world of art history” that we are currently exploring is really quite exciting. The opportunities provided by these new resources are numerous, and have the potential to benefit the study of art history at all levels. But before we really move forward with these wonderful opportunities, it is important to take a step back and ask ourselves how these resources are being used by today’s undergraduate and graduate students. To those of you who are students, I ask, what resources do you rely on most for your research? Are they electronic or print? And to those of you who work in a teaching capacity, whether as librarians or art history professors, what resources would you most prefer that your students use?

I remind you that the average student beginning college this fall was born in 1994. Tim Berners-Lee wrote the world’s first web browser three years earlier, in 1991. By the time this fall’s freshmen were in kindergarten, they could probably operate a computer and a cell-phone without too much trouble. It has been said that students now in, or soon to be in college are “digital natives” or even “born digital.” Because of the increasing sophistication of the Internet and computer software over the last decade, there has been a strong shift toward using digital resources for research purposes. Students studying art history today do not know a world with slide projectors, card catalogs, and printed indexes. They approach research believing that everything should be available online for free, and easily findable, preferably through Google. As discussed by Kim (2011), undergraduates tend to believe that any information they find on the Internet will be legitimate. I believe most of you would agree when I say that these students are missing something when they don’t go past Google to perform research, and it is important that we teach students the best way to reach all of the information that is out there.

It is with this idea in mind that I am exploring how students approach art historical research. The title of this essay is Lost and Found: New Realities in Art Historical Research. What has been found by the shift to online resources is clear: a wider variety and a greater number of resources are now available electronically. These resources can improve the quality of student research, but of course to do that, the students must be using these resources correctly. On the other hand, what appears to be lost is an understanding and appreciation of the research process; today’s students expect the answers to all of their

questions to be online and immediately available, and consequently, sometimes forget about collections that are not online. The new reality I refer to in my title is this incredible shift to online resources that has been happening in the last few years. But the new reality also includes the fact that art history as a discipline is behind other subjects in making its research materials available electronically. For those of you who have been studying art history for many years, you already know that the primary difference between these new electronic resources and the older print resources most often is a **change in format, not a change in content**. You will see examples of this throughout this essay. Many of us can certainly speak to all of the new research possibilities that have been enabled by the digital revolution, but we would be remiss to press on without considering what we might be losing.

Ultimately, I arrive at this topic with a variety of viewpoints. When I started college in 2004, my professors used slides exclusively; by the time I graduated from college in 2007, and from graduate school in 2008, the number of professors still using slides had drastically decreased because of databases like MDID and ArtSTOR. I finished high school ten years ago and I graduated from college five years ago, so one of the issues I first faced when creating this presentation was a real lack of perspective regarding how students performed research a generation ago. Although I came to art history at the tail end of slides, I wanted to know how students were doing research twenty or thirty before that—and what, if anything, had changed. To better understand the research methods of a generation ago, one of my colleagues at Watson Library suggested I take a look at Gerd Muehsam's *Guide to Basic Information Sources in the Visual Arts*, published in 1978. The research methods discussed in the first chapter of this book are a good place to start to find out how much has changed in the last thirty-five years, but also how much has stayed the same.

Although I cannot speak for all art history students everywhere, I looked back through my old art history papers, and also at the LibGuides at universities with art history programs to see what resources are being used, and how they compared to the resources discussed in Muehsam's book.¹ On the very first page of her book, Muehsam brings up the card catalog, a system that is probably unfamiliar to today's undergraduates. A college freshman beginning school this fall has probably never used a card catalog—and why would they? As far as they know, everything can be found much easier by just looking up the information they need online. I thought about what could be lost by this change

¹ For examples of art history LibGuides, see: <http://libguides.bc.edu/arthistory> and <http://guides.library.duke.edu/arthistory>

in format, and what I realized is that with the catalog now available online, students don't necessarily need to come into the library to see what is available in the collection, or in the case of e-books and online full text databases, they can even access the electronic parts of the collection from home. While accessing resources from home is certainly more convenient, when working from home, the research becomes more self-directed, and less influenced by the "reference interview" that might have occurred if the student had actually come into the library physically. Because of this, the student may miss resources that would be helpful to his or her research, or they may mis-use the resources that they do find.

Besides online library catalogs, a vital resource used by today's student is the online periodical database. These resources are often found through the library's LibGuide page, which acts as a gateway to many print and electronic resources. The ready availability of these resources, and the ease of accessing them is perhaps one of the biggest boons to researchers. In her book, Muehsam discusses Art Index and Art Bibliographies Modern early on, although of course she is referring to the print format, and not the digital one. The online availability of these resources is an example of what I referenced earlier; a change in format, rather than a change in content. But the ease with which one can search the online versions of print resources, and in many cases, find not just a citation but a full text article, greatly enhances the research process.

Access methods affect ways of finding images as well. Muehsam suggests several different resources for finding images to study, including slide libraries, catalogues raisonné, museum publications, and, of course, the Index of Christian Art. Today's students can still find images in those resources, along with exclusively online resources, such as ArtStor, and the many image databases of museums such as the Metropolitan.² Often, the quality of the images found through these specialized online databases is unmatched, and the high quality of the zoom function on these resources can be highly beneficial. Unfortunately, due to copyright restrictions, some online periodical databases cannot include images; for a discipline that focuses on the study of objects and images, this can make research using online resources significantly more difficult.

Full text capability is perhaps one of the greatest benefits of online databases. While Art Index does provide full text access to some of its holdings, JSTOR is probably the best known database to provide full text access. Thirty years ago, it would have taken countless hours in the library tracking down hard

² See for example: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections>

copies of journal articles required for research, but now, in less than an hour, a student can download a dozen PDF articles. And perhaps most valuable to students of art history, when included, images reproduced in these scanned PDF articles are vastly superior to what would have been made on a copy machine years ago.

This ease of access applies not only to journal articles, but also to books. Online library catalogs allow researchers to check the holdings of their institutional library from the comfort of their own home— some of these catalogs even allow students to go a step farther and request that these books be retrieved for them, so that they will be ready and waiting for the researcher when he or she arrives. If a book isn't held by their university's library, students can now search WorldCat, to access 271 million bibliographic records from libraries in 112 different countries. Advances in technology have eased and sped up the interlibrary loans process when needed materials are elsewhere.

Improved possibilities for collaboration are another potential benefit of the shift to electronic resources. Course Management Systems like Blackboard are becoming increasingly popular and allow students to extend classroom discussions outside the classroom. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter weren't originally created for academic purposes, but many libraries now have their own Facebook page or Twitter feed, allowing researchers to keep up with new resources or purchases, and also to ask their research questions online without actually going into the library.³ If today's libraries and research centers want to continue to be a central part of their undergraduate constituencies' research process, they should consider making their online presence known through websites that are already popular with this generation.

Of course, we cannot consider all these benefits without thinking about what has been lost. Many people would agree, I think, that the information-seeking behavior of undergraduates has changed drastically with the advent of this new digital world. At a recent art librarians' conference, Fred Heath, Director of University of Texas Libraries said that, "students are very self-reliant and increasingly willing to make their own judgments about the utility of information" (2006, p. 8). While independent decision-making is important, it is not always in the students' best interest to conduct research in this manner. The new generation of digital natives often assumes, incorrectly, that everything needed for their research is available online and can be found through Google or Wikipedia. Although Google and Wikipedia can be useful at certain points in the research process, in order to produce high quality research, students need to go

³ See for example: <http://www.facebook.com/ThomasJWatsonLibraryMetMuseum>

far beyond what can be found using these two resources. Students, undergraduates especially, tend not to understand the role the library can play in providing quality information. In that same speech, Heath (2006) indicated that in recent years, printed book circulation had significantly decreased, and that fewer library users were consulting with librarians to find information. This is probably not news to those of you who work in the library field, but it should encourage you to think of new ways to reach out to students and teach them how best to use library resources. Remember that today's library is not just a physical space; new technologies should be thought of as expanding the library, not replacing it. A library's resources include all of the online databases to which it subscribes, and just as with print resources, librarians should be encouraging students how to use these electronic resources most appropriately.

In order to make sure that students are doing the best research they can, we must adapt how we offer our resources to patrons in order to stay relevant. We need to ensure that the student body understands that the library is more than just books, but we also need to emphasize the research skills needed to most effectively use online resources. What used to be called "bibliographic instruction" classes are now being called "information literacy" classes; we need to teach students to be literate in all formats, and to teach them skills that will be useful across multiple platforms. Although the resources we promote, such as Oxford Art Online and JSTOR are generally very reliable in terms of their accuracy, students will inevitably find information on their own using less reliable resources, such as Wikipedia. While we don't want to discourage students from doing research on their own, we do want to make sure students know how to evaluate the information they do find. They need to look at who wrote the information, when it was written, and why. Once they understand that there are online resources more appropriate to scholarly pursuits than Wikipedia they are more likely to pursue better suited resources.

Another loss worth mentioning is the serendipity of browsing—by wandering through the stacks, or flipping through a bound volume of a journal, you never quite knew what you might come across. In an article on library technology, Hensley writes that students now expect to be able to find answers quickly and easily using the Internet. They lack an understanding of, and an appreciation for the research process. Anecdotally, I can tell you that many students who come in to use Watson Library today are unfamiliar with basic research skills. They tend to not know where to start their research, and what resources should be used. While they are familiar with computers and the Internet, they often lack information literacy skills. How the loss of serendipity will impact the study of art history is difficult to gauge; but the impact of a lack of

understanding of and appreciation for the research process could be quite damaging to the future of art history.

While reviewing the literature on the subject, and after speaking with my colleagues, I learned that plagiarism is another potential issue to consider when evaluating the impact of electronic resources on study and research. A student could certainly plagiarize using print resources. But as Wang and Artero (2005), librarians who conducted a study on undergraduate research habits determined, the Internet “might aggravate the problem by making it so easy” (p. 79). Whether the student plagiarized material intentionally or not, being able to copy and paste sentences, paragraphs or even entire pages with just a few keystrokes brings yet another issue to consider. As Wang and Artero point out, the Internet is a place for sharing and free information, and students mistakenly interpret that idea to mean that they can copy material without proper citation. Although technology has made it easier to plagiarize, it has also made it easier for professors to catch; software programs such as TurnItIn allow professors to check quickly and easily whether any part of a student paper has been plagiarized.

There is no question that the resources available to students are expanding and improving every year. Since the purpose of these improvements is to make more information more accessible to students and researchers at all levels; one would assume that in consequence, the papers and research performed by students should be improving at a corresponding rate. As a person examining this idea from the student’s perspective, it is hard for me to say whether or not that has been the case.

Anecdotally, I have heard many stories of a strong **decrease** in quality among undergraduate writers, although I was unable to find any published studies to confirm that information. What I did find, was a 2011 study by Connaway, Dickey and Radford, which indicates that convenience is the main factor behind undergraduates’ choice in resources. Supporting their ideas by using theories such as bounded rationality and gratification theory, Connaway et. al (2011) wrote that “the user once built workflows around the library systems and services, but now, increasingly, the library must build its services around user workflows” (p. 179). Additional studies that I found regarding student use of electronic resources were all general, none of them discussed use by students of art history specifically, but a troubling issue brought about by this idea of choosing a resource based on convenience is that many art history resources have not been made available electronically, and are therefore considered inconvenient to access. Art history as a discipline has many excellent electronic resources, but not **everything** is available online. Key art history resources such as catalogues raisonné, exhibition catalogs and collection catalogs are nearly

always available in print form only. Additionally, art history researchers have fewer e-book and e-journal options than other disciplines for a number of reasons. Image copyright and reproduction is one issue, and a perception of electronic publishing as less serious or less scholarly than print publishing persists.

In a 2010 article, Boudewyns refers to *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Visual Culture* as a leader in the field of art history.⁴ NCAW can be read for free by anybody with an Internet connection—no subscription is required. The editors of this journal are leaders in their field, and they solicit articles, book and exhibition reviews from their fellow scholars. NCAW is an excellent resource, and there are other scholarly journals that are available for free online; of particular interest to this audience may be *The Medieval Review*, and *Digital Medievalist*.⁵ Other free online scholarly journals can be found through the Directory of Open Access Journals.⁶ Presently, if you go to that site, you will find 134 different journals related to the study of art and art history; you will also find just over 250 history journals, 500 language and literature journals, and 1500 social science journals, which can also be used to aid the study of art history. While it is heartening to see so many open access journals in related fields, it is my hope that the future brings additional open access art history journals.

Perhaps the best way to ensure that the quality of research is improving is to make sure that students know which resources to use and when. More resources are being made available electronically every year, but it is unlikely that **everything** will ever be available online. For this reason, students need to be aware of the valuable print resources held by the library, and they need to know how to find and use them effectively. Professors who are unfamiliar with newer electronic resources should also take time to learn about them. It will help to broaden their knowledge, and also make them more effective at guiding students in their own research.

In my conclusion, I will make suggestions on ways that we can further incorporate technology into the art history curriculum. As I said before, we need to explore online resources and incorporate them not just into information literacy classes, but also into classroom instruction. Resources like Art Index Online, JSTOR and ArtSTOR are all excellent, but there are additional, more specialized resources that go beyond these, and really make excellent use of digital

⁴ See: <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/>

⁵ See: <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/3631>, and <http://www.digitalmedievalist.org/journal/>

⁶ See: <http://www.doaj.org/>

capabilities. A few examples are Mapping Gothic France based at Columbia, and the work being done by the Experiential Technologies Center at UCLA, which includes a virtual reality tour of the pilgrimage church at Santiago de Compostela.⁷ The Medici Archive Project, based at the State Archive in Florence is an excellent example of how digital technology can be used to share archival materials.⁸ By using these resources, we can show rather than tell students how a building was constructed, illustrate the provenance of an object, and really capture their interest in the discipline of art history. Another application of new technology that could help students in their research are the many institutional digitization initiatives now gaining momentum, including the Getty Research Portal.⁹ Many museum and university libraries have rich and often unique holdings in their special collections departments that include letters between artists and dealers, exhibition and auction catalogs, and rare books, among other items. Some libraries are digitizing these collections and making them accessible to Internet users. Two main benefits of digitization are preservation of original materials, and potential access to a wider audience. Materials that are rare and fragile can be viewed repeatedly online by any number of users without any risk of damage to the original object. The original will of course be kept and can be viewed when appropriate. Additionally, by making these rare items available online, especially if they are not password protected, these materials can be viewed by a far greater number of people. For the last two years, I have been involved with such a digitization project at Watson Library.¹⁰ So far, we have digitized over fifty-two hundred items in our collection, and by making most of these resources available without password restriction, we are supporting our library's mission to "serve an international community of scholars." Whenever possible we should try to incorporate these resources into the art history curriculum. It will benefit both the students by broadening their knowledge and increasing their familiarity with high quality resources, and it will also benefit the libraries by ensuring that they continue to be relevant to student researchers.

I come to this conference not only as a student of art history, but also as a future librarian, and it is for that reason that I cannot stress enough the importance of the role of the library in the art history curriculum. By combining art history classes directly with library instruction, we can strengthen students' research and information literacy skills. With these new resources, we have the possibility to **find** information faster and easier than ever. In order to avoid **losing** an appreciation for and understanding of the research process, I implore

⁷ See: <http://mappinggothic.org/> and <http://etc.ucla.edu/>

⁸ See: <http://www.medici.org/>

⁹ See: <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/portal/>

¹⁰ See: <http://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/>

those of you who are art history professors and librarians to collaborate with each other whenever possible. As we know, these new technologies are a great resource, but an even greater resource is us, as scholars and information professionals, and we need to do our best to make sure that the students are aware of all the resources we can help them access.

Gwen David
Senior Library Associate
Thomas J. Watson Library
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Gwen.David@metmuseum.org

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