

VRA Legacy Session

“Save Our Slides”

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MDID: Technology Table/ Old photo Last Supper

This paper is a collaborative effort between James Madison University professor and art historian, Kathleen Arthur; Mary Baldwin College professor and art historian, Sara James, and myself, JMU Visual Resources Curator, Christina Updike. Kay and Sara made the presentation during the recent College Art Association conference at the VRA sponsored session on Legacy Collections and I am the presenter for the VRA conference. The paper describes the issues and rewards related to assisting faculty members' with preserving their personal slide and image collections and sharing these collections with colleagues and other educational institutions. Both faculty members give their perspective on the preservation and sharing issues and I will describe my role in assisting with these two “Save Our Slides” projects. The paper begins with Kay Arthur's thoughts:

For mature art historians, the almost forty years from 1970-2008 has seen dramatic changes in the format of images that are used for teaching and research. Senior scholars/teachers who attended graduate school in the 1970s learned artworks from black & white lantern and color slides. Since the Internet arrived with its explosion of shared digital images, art historians' sources and research techniques have altered forever. Many scholars have hundreds of color slides and photos that have become obsolete, much like manuscripts after the advent of printing in the Renaissance. Since 2003 when Kodak stopped

production of slide projectors, their slides gather dust while they struggle to formulate new systems for storage and retrieval of digital image files.

Before these slides are tossed into “the circular file” though, let’s consider them as late twentieth century archival documents, preserving something that may not be available online in ARTstor, MDID or flickr.com. In some ways the web presents art historians with an amazing variety of visual choices; yet standardized image databases have the potential to homogenize teaching and research. Kay and Sara both advocate that their generation has a special obligation not to lose those old photos of lesser known objects, images before and after restoration, close-up shots taken prior to changes in museum photography policies, and rare images of inaccessible monuments. They propose that art history faculty take a clear, objective look at their slides and photos, bidding a fond farewell to those now widely available on the web, while taking steps to preserve and share the exceptional images for teaching and research.

But how do we preserve these personal slide collections? Judging from responses to an informal survey that Kay and Sara conducted in late fall 2007 amongst their colleagues, few art historians have come to grips with this issue; most are building digital teaching collections. Professors with 4/4 or 3/ 4 teaching loads are reluctant to even think about how they will transform their own research images. Personal slide collections may range anywhere from 1000 to more than 25,000 images. Some senior scholars at smaller colleges still use slides, despite the fact their institutions have begun acquiring digital images. Others at larger

institutions are converting their slides to digital--class by class--with the help of their Visual Resources staff. Most of these personal collections have very little cataloguing. The JMU Visual Resources Center has digitized and catalogued about 700 of Kay Arthur's personal slides to support the classes she teaches. These have been incorporated into the Art and Art History image collection in our MDID. Kay and Sara also found that younger or mid-career scholars who have "gone digital" keep images in desktop folders and rely on visual recognition or abbreviated author/title information. New junior faculty are rapidly building, sharing, and trading their images in PowerPoint. Many are very concerned about maintaining personal possession of their teaching and research images, because they anticipate moving several times during their careers. Some have already experienced the dreaded "software shift," when they moved, they had to convert from PowerPoint, to ARTstor, and then to MDID or Luna Insight, etc. As Kay describes it, "The situation right now resembles a "Texas Wild West Show"--- shoot'em, corral'em, keep'em anyway ya' can!!"

MDID: Screen Shot Wikipage with Shared collections

At James Madison University we have adopted a forward-looking approach, inviting faculty to preserve and share personal images. They can do this locally by uploading their personal images into the "My Images" portion of our Madison Digital Image Database system and marking them shared so other JMU users can view and use these images. We help faculty scan their slides either in the VRC or at the Center for Instructional Technology and upload them to MDID. Kay will be retiring in May and she is the first faculty member to express the

desire to have her images preserved as a collection for future scholars and students to use both at JMU and beyond. Kay and I met with the Director of the CIT and the systems Librarian to solicit funding and support for the project. She estimated that after weeding her slides, she will have at least 700-850 more to digitize. The CIT has promised staff support for scanning and data creation for this summer 2008. The collection will be known as the “Arthur Collection of Italian Art and Architecture.” We also have experience helping outside scholars share digital “legacy collections,” by uploading their image and data files as freely shared collections using our open source MDID software. Several collections by Allan Kohl, who supplied his images with metadata, and now the Sara James English Architecture collection are available to all MDID users as remote collections posted on the software wiki web page. JMU has eight shared collections with over 10,600 images now available. There are 35 MDID institutions are making 124 connections to these remote collections.

MDID: Slide Types Series

To begin, let’s consider the question of which analog images should be digitized. In this regard Kay speaks from personal experience. She was trained as a specialist in Italian Gothic and Renaissance art at the Institute of Fine Arts, and she followed the advice of her dissertation advisor Marvin Trachtenberg who encouraged his students to shoot their own photographs and build a personal research archive. For most scholars, Ph.D. dissertation research presents the first occasion when original photos may be required. Half the frescoes in the Florentine tomb chapel that Kay studied had been in the restoration lab since the

1950s, so after many permissions, she was able to see and photograph the Nardo di Cione's Paradise fresco at close range in the San Salvi laboratory, as seen here. She was able to photograph all the saints' faces before the fresco was returned to its place inside the tall narrow chapel, making those faces virtually invisible. Many scholars have such "*before-and-after*" restoration images, which should be preserved both for teaching and research. Another type is the "*golden moment detail*" photograph: at some point, as art historians do onsite research, the light is just right to capture details not usually visible. Examples are views of Fra Angelico's frescoes in cells of San Marco, or the "orphan baby grate" usually lost in shadows on the end wall of Brunelleschi's Foundling Hospital loggia. Another type is the onsite, contextual, or "*in situ views*"; since these are not available on ARTstor. Her examples of overviews are of the Sant'Apollinare refectory with Castagno's Last Supper, or the Medici Chapel crypt with Michelangelo's drawings on the walls. Another category is the "*neglected or inaccessible artwork*" type, such as Renaissance women's art. She was able to photograph the sixteenth century Dominican artist Suor Plautilla Nelli's *Last Supper*, now in the refectory of the Dominican friars at Santa Maria Novella, Florence. And lastly, when Kay was Director of JMU's International Programs, she was fortunate to travel widely, for instance, to India and photograph some remote artworks. After a hair-raising three hour ride from Mumbai to the ancient rock-cut cliff Buddhist temple at Karla, she was rewarded by capturing close-up views in natural light that convey a more true-to-life impression of the temple than some commercial photographs.

These examples illustrate the weeding-out process needed to create a logical rationale for the expenditure of time, energy and financial resources on a digitizing project. It is not necessary for all of us to digitize our own images of the Brancacci Chapel! We can define four types of images that should be included in legacy collections as: a) original images personally shot by the donor b) those taken with permission, OR before permission was required c) views that are exceptional or unusual, if not unique, d) images with a specific didactic purpose or comprehensive coverage of a subject. Considering the time that will be invested, it is wise to check commercial collections, databases, as well as constantly growing popular sites (like flickr.com) to determine whether the images are unique and worth saving.

The next problem is how to digitize this mass of material. Some scholars have begun digitizing their own collections using various personal scanners and software.¹ Kay warns her colleagues, “The ads for personal “Slide and Negative to Digital Picture Converter” for \$99 are seductive. Although they may function well for family photos, some are not up to art historical quality.² A professional scanning service or utilizing your institution’s scanners and staff is a far better solution.³” Think in terms of archiving images for future technological development, so select a scan that yields a high resolution large size file. From the scholar’s viewpoint, the advantage of a shared legacy collection is not only that one contributes to collective knowledge and the common good, but also one

¹One method recommended on the web by photographers for photographers, is to re-shoot slides using a tripod and digital camera. This is a labor-intensive process requiring more photo expertise than most art historians have.

² An example would be those advertised by Hammacher Schlemmer.

³ SlidestoDigital.com, Myspecialphotos.com, or Scancafe.com.

could gain university support. Whether in the form of trained students scanning with professional scanners, grants for scanning services, reduced costs from large orders with university discounts, or help cataloging your images, this is a critical piece of the process. Kay and I encourage university libraries to recognize the historical value of these images and invest in their preservation.

The James English Architecture Digital Image Collection, which Sara has shared, grew out of sheer desperation. In 2000, while she was on sabbatical, her institution, Mary Baldwin College, established a new program: a master's level degree in Renaissance Literature in Performance in conjunction with the American Shakespeare Theatre, located nearby in Staunton. The terms of the grant that funded the program specified that it would be interdisciplinary beyond literature and theatre, so the founding committee added courses in Renaissance music, Tudor-Stuart history and social studies, and English Art. Upon her return from sabbatical, she, as the "Renaissance person" was pressed into teaching the course. Sara holds a doctorate in Italian Renaissance art history and a master's degree in medieval studies, so she had only about 100 slides relevant to the course material. From there, it was new ground. She joined the Historians of British Art and began searching for resources. In the summer of 2002, she went to England funded in part with a small stipend that was part of a larger grant from the Jesse Ball DuPont Foundation. The committee instructed her to see art and architecture and buy slides. Sara had been to Italy in the spring prior, and had found that those nice sets of Scala slides you once could buy for 25,000 lire were extinct. It was an omen of what she was to find in England. She took her own

IBM ThinkPad laptop and a simple digital camera. The National Portrait Gallery in London had a decent amount of slides for sale. At a few of the historic houses and the cathedrals, gift shop clerks dug under the counter to produce ancient slide sets reddened with age, but most had nothing. It was like asking for 33 RPM records at a music store. Some places promised that CDs of digital images would be forthcoming, but for the time being, no luck. She photographed all she could and then downloaded what else she could for the classes. ARTstor was barely in existence, and her institution was not a member. The images Sara photographed of English architecture are beautiful. (show images)

Sara has been photographing art for some 30 years. Her collection of images grew out of love of the object and a desire to photograph things in situ so students could see things more in context. She shoots mainly architecture and sculpture from certain angles, capturing non-traditional shots, including the angle from which the viewer sees it. Other scholars who post images on line often ask for feedback, and Sara has used these in her teaching and wrote notes of gratitude. She states, "I thought if people had shared their images with me and with others, the least I could do was to share with them things that I had and they did not." Sharing is another one way of preserving. Sara does admit that one of the biggest problems with her extensive image collection is the lack of cataloguing, which accounts for considerable duplication in her image folders. An image may be in several different folders, as they fit several categories. Scholars must participate to refine the cataloguing.

MDID: Metadata photos

All three of us want to address the issue of cataloging, whether for personal use or in shared collections. Generally, from responses to Kay's survey, most art historians have the digital equivalent of a personal slide box—desktop folders or CDs with general topic headings. Eventually this will become unwieldy and inefficient; scholars should at least “tag” images so that they have cross-referencing capability. It is important to establish naming conventions and follow them closely, even for personal use. If scholar's wish to maintain a large personal research collection, there are several image database softwares for free download. For the James English Architecture collection of 650 images, Sara provided JMU with CDs of well-organized folders of high resolution tiff files named with a unique identification numbering system, but no metadata beyond the building name, city, and view. Sara had no staff support at her institution, so it fell to JMU to create the metadata. In January 2007 the art history area graduate student on loan from the history department was assigned to the project. I provided an Excel spreadsheet template to use to create a record of seventeen-fields based on the MDID search fields used in the JMU Art and Art History image collection. The fields are: work type, creator, title, date, subject, material, technique, measurements, period, style, culture, country, location, source, notes, permission, and ID#. I provided definitions for populating the fields and the grad student worked on entering basic cataloguing during spring semester 2007. We used Excel for the data entry, because it saved time copying and pasting metadata and the file could be easily shared. When it came time to print the file for editing, the horizontal spreadsheets were cumbersome! In fall 2007, after Kay

had checked the printed spreadsheets, she brought the file to me and asked for VRC staff help in fine tuning the data. Many of the fields had been left blank and we discovered some inaccuracies and inconsistencies. My assistant, Resa Erickson, who was a recent art history graduate, went to work, using online databases and Getty authorities to complete the missing metadata. By November 2007, it was ready for final editing by the scholars, Kay and Sara, a very important step in the process. Resa and I made the final corrections in late December 2007 and then the image files and data were given to the MDID administrator in the CIT to upload to the MDID server as a remote collection for sharing with JMU and other MDID institutions. The metadata creation was a collaborative effort and totalled approximately 250-300 manpower hours. Although it was time-consuming, it was worth the effort. If we as Visual Resources professionals could encourage faculty to enter a minimum core record of metadata for the image collections they are creating now, it would facilitate efficient retrieval and identification of their images and aid in sharing. Helping faculty preserve and share their legacy image collections of old views, golden moments and inaccessible artworks, is a collaborative undertaking well worth the time and resources for the benefit of future scholars and students. In the future, when the MDID API is published, then other systems will be able to access these marvelous remote collections. Thank you.