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Rethinking Visual Resources Centers in the Digital Age: Case Studies at the University of Georgia and the University of Michigan

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Abstract

Visual Resource Centers are facing many challenges—and opportunities—in the wake of the digital era. Since their beginnings as slide libraries, many VRCs have had missions across college campuses to serve the image needs of faculty in art-related fields. More recently, visual resources professionals have guided faculty and other colleagues into the digital era by providing digitization services and support. But as faculty and other clientele have become more tech-savvy over the years, and as high quality art images have become more readily available than ever before, the fate of VRCs and similar departments is at risk. In order to stay in business, VRCs need to stay relevant. Fortunately, the digital age has also extended itself into countless new opportunities for visual resource professionals, not only in allowing for new means of collaboration, but also in freeing up time for extended outreach and education efforts. This article presents various outreach and collaboration initiatives taken by the Visual Resources Center at the Lamar Dodd School of Art within the University of Georgia, and the Visual Resources Collections within the Department of the History of Art at the University of Michigan.

Keywords
visual resources, outreach, relevance, collaboration, user services

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Courtney Baron is the Director of Visual Resources at the Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia. As a solo curator, she responsible for managing all aspects of the visual resources collection and her long-term goal is to re-purpose the visual resources center into a resource library for teaching and learning in the visual arts. Ms. Baron recently completed her Masters in Library and Information Science from Valdosta State University, focusing on academic librarianship with an emphasis on the arts and humanities.

As Information Resources Specialist, Molly Schoen oversees cataloging and metadata-related aspects of the Visual Resources Collections at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The VRC is a collection of approximately 500,000 digital and analog images, operating within the University's Department of the History of Art. Ms. Schoen has a Masters in Library and Information Science, specializing in fine & performing arts libraries, from Wayne State University.

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Introduction

“*How do we stay relevant?*” is a question on the mind of many visual resources professionals today. By seeking opportunity in the face of change and adversity, VRCs can expand their role beyond providing images. Staying on top of the latest technology trends and advocating for best practices in the use of visual media, we can in fact be more useful than ever before.

This case study highlights initiatives taken at the Visual Resources Centers at the University of Georgia and the University of Michigan to re-design the layout of their physical space, outreach to art faculty and students, assist other departments, collaborate with the libraries, and extend web presence, in order to revitalize our visual resources collections and services in the digital age. As a result, our VRCs have been updated and are more prepared to support arts instruction and research at our universities in the 21ˢᵗ century.

Background Information

University of Georgia

The Visual Resources Center at Lamar Dodd School of Art, which houses the art education, art history, and studio art departments at the University of Georgia formerly functioned as the Slide Library. The slide librarian and staff catered to the art history faculty and created slides and prepared carousels for the classroom. The slide collection eventually grew to a robust and impressive collection of nearly 300,000 slides. Circulation of the slide collection ceased nearly ten years ago, when the space rebranded as the Visual Resources Center. A digital image archive was born using a program created by an imaging and database systems consortium on campus. The shift from slides to digital images was an instrumental one and an enormous accomplishment for the slide librarian. However, the VRC did not receive many updates over the years and gradually became a forgotten and neglected resource in the Lamar Dodd School of Art. When I took over directorship of the space in July 2014, it was clear that, unless drastic changes were made, the role of the VRC and my position would become obsolete. Therefore, I have taken several initiatives to expand services and resources and to re-think the role of the VRC at Lamar Dodd School of Art.

University of Michigan

At the University of Michigan, the Eleanor S. Collins Visual Resources Collections (VRC) has a one-hundred-year history since its founding as a lantern slide and mounted image collection. A fixture in the Department of the History of Art, the collections of the VRC grew rapidly over the following decades. 35mm slides were added for teaching needs, and archives of negatives, prints, slides, and other media were established to preserve the faculty's fieldwork photography. From 1978-2006, the VRC also created and sold slide sets, with subjects primarily in Asian art.

The VRC was an early adopter to the digital transition, offering scanning services and establishing an online image database in the late 1990s. As use of 35mm slides in classrooms declined, faculty demand for digital images spiked, and additional staff was needed to keep up. During these "boom years" of 2005-2007, over 45,000 images were added to the online database.

However, more recently, as more high-resolution art images make their way into online repositories, and as faculty learn to source their own digital images, the demand for the VRC's digitization services by History of Art has faculty slowed considerably. In 2011, we processed 221 image orders, but in 2014 there were just 89.

While image digitization is the primary service offered by our office, this decrease in orders has actually been beneficial because it has allowed us to expand our services, catch up on a backlog of projects, and dedicate more attention to our extensive archives. It should be noted as well that while faculty image orders are down, use of our online image database has increased overall, from 29,616 unique searches in 2011 to 49,239 in 2014.

Physical Layout

While it is rare for any VRC to have total control of their physical location, square footage, or amenities, even small changes to an office can make a noticeable impact.

University of Georgia

The Lamar Dodd School of Art moved to a brand new building in 2008 and the Visual Resources Center was fortunate to receive a sizeable space. The VRC is located on a second floor hallway - a less than ideal location because it's not in a visible or high traffic area, but the physical layout of the space offers a lot of potential. The space has three offices, a walk-in closet, a large open space, and a bonus room. The VRC is the only space in the school that has carpet, which makes the space feel warm and inviting. The two offices and walk-in closet are located to the side of the entrance. The office designed for the Director of Visual Resources is surrounded by a glass enclosure that overlooks the open space. The open space has two floor-to-ceiling windows that allow a lot of natural light to flood the space. The bonus room is relatively hidden, but it's accessible from the open space and shares a wall with the Director's office.

The first major change to the physical layout addressed the two additional offices. The smaller office was used as a workroom for VRC student assistants and the larger office was used to store broken equipment or supplies that were intended to go to surplus. The student office held three computer workstations and was fairly cramped, so it was clear that it needed to be moved into the larger office. A quick phone call to the department's IT professional and maintenance crew resulted in the removal of the equipment to surplus. The larger office was cleaned and the student workstations were transferred. The larger space allowed for one workstation to have a double monitor setup for easier scanning and editing of images.

The smaller office was set up as the "library" space in the VRC. The reference and instruction librarian for the fine arts has a desk and computer in the smaller office. Eventually, five bookshelves were added to the space to make room for course reserves. The office stays locked and is only accessible through VRC staff, making it an ideal space to store course reserves.

The walk-in closet is used to store equipment available for checkout, such as laptops, projectors, iPads, and TV carts. Several flat file storage cabinets with slides fill the shelves. The space is functional as a storage closet and will not undergo any major changes at this time.

The bonus room was used as a lab by an art history faculty member who specializes in ancient polychromy. The bonus room takes up a fair amount of VRC real estate, and since he didn't use the space that often, it was suggested that he move the lab to a vacant office near the art history faculty offices. He was happy to have a lab just a few steps away from his office, and the VRC assisted in the move. The space is currently being used as the "slide headquarters" – the light table is housed here along with deaccessioned slides in boxes. A flat file storage unit was acquired to store an institutional archival collection of posters, flyers, and photographs. The bonus room's purpose has not yet been fully realized, but we are brainstorming ideas – such as adding a lighting studio for photographing student work. We plan to renovate the space in the near future.

The open space is surrounded by card catalogs containing slides. There are four computer workstations equipped with flatbed and slide scanners available for student use. The VRC also has a bookshelf with a small collection of reference materials. Major changes to the layout of the space will not be possible until the slide collection is fully digitized and significantly reduced. However, it was important to incorporate small changes so the space itself is more comfortable and inviting. Love seats and other lounge furniture were added to the space and are used frequently by student groups. The blank white walls were strikingly bare for an art school, so a Drawing and Painting MFA candidate was invited to hang a large painting and eight drawings as the first installation in an ongoing series of student work.

Finally, the Visual Resources Center entrance had a mini facelift. The VRC was previously accessed through a solid wood door, which gave the impression that it was a closed and uninviting space to curious students. The door could not be propped open due to fire regulations, but I discovered that it could easily be swapped with the door to my office, which had a glass panel. We also put a flyer on the door advertising our hours and services. The result is a much more welcoming entrance to the Visual Resources Center.

University of Michigan

In 2011, upper-level management at the College of Literature Science & the Arts, under which we operate, made the decision to repurpose one of the rooms in our VRC, effectively reducing our physical space by about 50%. Their reasoning was sensible: circulation of slides ended in 2009. Since then, with a few exceptions, slides were used only by VRC staff for cataloging and digitizing. The impending loss of room necessitated a slide weeding project, in which around half of our Teaching Collection slides were eventually discarded. Any items meeting one of the following criteria were removed:

· Copy photography: anything photographed from a book in the UM Library system
· Duplicates of UM Distribution slides used for teaching
· Slides purchased from a vendor that did not allow digitization

To make sure the images on these slides could be found again in other formats, all slides were cataloged prior to removal, paying close attention to their source information in particular.

Moving our office workspace into the former slide library room took place over the summer of 2014. While the reduction in space certainly posed some challenges, it also gave us the opportunity to rebrand the VRC in a sense. Fresh paint, carpet, and a reduction of clutter gave our office a much-needed face-lift, creating a more welcoming atmosphere. Small changes

implemented by the head of the VRC, such as leaving the door open, and occasionally projecting muted art-related movies on the wall, have encouraged more visitors to walk in.

Finally, we were fortunate in that the vacated room of our former office across the hall was converted into a lounge for graduate students in the History of Art program. This has led to greater visibility on our part and has significantly increased communication between VRC staff and History of Art students and faculty.

Outreach Initiatives

Image databases make our collections more accessible, but have resulted in a significant decrease in foot traffic and overall awareness of our visual resources centers. It is important to perform outreach work to encourage faculty and students to use our resources and services.

University of Georgia

Due to its location in an area of the building that does not receive much traffic, many students are not aware that the Visual Resources Center exists. They usually do not discover the VRC until they are upperclassmen. Therefore, it's important to do as much outreach work as possible to introduce students to our resources and services. The first step involved reaching out to faculty to inquire if I could make short presentations to classes at the beginning of the semester. I presented to the incoming art history and MFA graduate student orientations and several art history classes. The presentations served as an introduction to the VRC, but also briefly discussed our digital image archive and Artstor Digital Library. To accompany the presentations, I prepared flyers that stated the VRC hours and location and our collections, services, and resources.

I asked a VRC graduate assistant with design skills to create flyers – one advertising the Visual Resources Center and the other advertising our iPad checkout program and available apps. These flyers can be found consistently throughout our building. The power of the word of mouth cannot be overstated and it has helped immensely to increase traffic and use of the VRC.

The VRC received special attention during the 2014-2015 academic year thanks to Zoe Strauss, the elected Dodd Professorial Chair. This is a distinguished chair position granted to a high profile artist who is granted a residency and full professor rank for one academic year. Zoe's work focused on community and institutional structure. She created a Project Space that essentially acted as a living room, with seating areas, books and magazines, record player, artwork on the walls, and even a slide projector that continually showed slides. The space became wildly popular among faculty and students, but it was designed to be only temporary. Recognizing the potential of the Visual Resources Center, Zoe transferred a collection of reading materials recommended by faculty, staff, and students and several of the items from the Project Space to the VRC. The hope is that faculty and students will see the VRC as an extension of this Project Space and the community center in Lamar Dodd School of Art.

University of Michigan

In the midst of all the changes that have faced the visual resources community over the past two decades, outreach initiatives are of critical importance to inform patrons of policy changes and improvements to services. I have found that a simple way of doing this is providing an "elevator pitch" of VRC services and updates at faculty meetings.

Hosting or co-hosting events has also had a positive effect in promoting our collections. In 2013, the VRC hosted an elegant reception honoring emeriti faculty, with guest speakers, a multimedia exhibition, and of course, free food. Since 2014, we have hosted annual events celebrating Fair Use Week, which have included informative talks on copyright and attribution given by the University's copyright librarian and School of Information graduate students. At our most recent event, hosted in the VRC office, there was standing room only. Planning such events not only promotes an atmosphere of enriching scholarship and research on campus, it also introduces the VRC to those who may not otherwise be aware of what we do.

Staying active within other related groups on campus has also both enriched our workflows and expanded our client base. In particular, the University's Collections Committee (ColCom) has been a significant asset. ColCom is a campus-wide group of colleagues working in cultural heritage, natural science, archival and library collections. The group meets to discuss issues, share resources, and navigate the future of collections management at the University of Michigan. Participating in ColCom has given us insight on the how to advocate for our collections and grow our patron base. Promoting our digitization services to the group has resulted in several large scanning projects from outside departments.

Seeking out grants has also made an impact on the accessibility and preservation of our collections. The VRC has been fortunate to receive funding for several large projects as a result of external funding. Among them, we have digitized a collection of mid-20th century photographs of the collections of the National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan, and an Islamic manuscript record archive of a prominent scholar in the field. Receiving funding for such projects has enabled the VRC to support a larger staff and further justify operation costs to higher administration within the University. Not to mention, they allow us to better maintain our extensive archives.

The best thing about these outreach initiatives is that they are beneficial to all involved. The VRC remains relevant, patrons get the imaging services they need, and collections become digitized, fully cataloged, and accessible online.

Cross-Departmental Initiatives

Although visual resources centers typically service faculty and students in the fine arts, it is important to take advantage of opportunities to collaborate with other departments on campus. Interdisciplinary projects increase awareness of the importance of visual resources on campus and may lead to more support from our institutions.

University of Georgia

The Lamar Dodd School of Art is a single department with area divisions for art education, art history, art X, ceramics, drawing and painting, fabric design, graphic design, interior design, jewelry and metalwork, photography, printmaking, scientific illustration, and sculpture. The Visual Resources Center historically catered to only the art history faculty, who make up a small percentage of the faculty. It was my goal to expand VRC services and resources to all areas in the school, especially studio concentrations, and make the VRC a more student-focused space. One of the first things I did was move the MFA theses and Art Education applied projects from a staff office to the VRC. I also began an archiving project for these works in Athenaeum, UGA's Institutional Repository. I also employed three graduate assistants from

ceramics, drawing and painting, and jewelry and metalwork. This increased awareness of the VRC among studio graduate students, which has also extended to the studio faculty and undergraduates.

The database we use to house our digital image archive was initially created with a joint grant between the art history area at Lamar Dodd School of Art and the department of Classics at UGA. The result was two digital image archives, one for each department, despite the fact that both of our departments are actively building a repository of images related to the ancient world. I reached out to the Classics department head and offered to train student workers on proper slide scanning, photo editing, and metadata. The faculty were pleased to have this task off their hands. The VRC is planning a transfer to a new digital asset management system, so I offered to merge the image databases into a single repository. This suggestion was well received, since no one has been taking care of the Classics digital image archive, and it desperately needs attention.

University of Michigan

At the University of Michigan VRC, a reduction in faculty image orders caused us to shift our focus to many other projects. While still keeping History of Art faculty's needs as a top priority, we were able to extend our services to HART graduate students in 2012. We will also accommodate moderately-sized digitization requests from professors in other departments, and can even assist undergraduates to some extent with special projects. For larger projects outside of the department, the VRC now serves as a digitization service on a for-fee basis. Because we have equipment that can accommodate rare and fragile media types, such as large-format negatives, other departments have utilized the VRC to scan their own archival collections.

Joint efforts with other University collections have also gotten our name and images out there. A recent exhibition at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, *Pearls of Wisdom: The Arts of Islam at the University of Michigan* showcased objects from collections across the University, as well as prints of historic negatives from the VRC's Islamic Art Archives.

Library Collaboration

As more visual resources work is absorbed into the library system, the separation of independent visual resources centers and fine arts or academic libraries is now often seen as an outdated and unnecessary distinction. For those visual resources professionals who still work in VRCs that service art departments, this is an opportunity to collaborate with the libraries to provide more support and resources for instruction and research in the arts.

University of Georgia

One of the long-term goals for the Visual Resources Center is to build a small collection of circulating materials, periodicals, course reserves, and other resources so that the space functions more like a library. This is especially important for the faculty and students in the art school since the University of Georgia does not have a library dedicated to the fine arts and the Main Library, which houses materials relating to the arts and humanities, is located on the other side of campus from the art building. It is important to strengthen our relationship with the UGA Libraries and bridge the gap in distance.

I invited our reference and instruction librarian for the fine arts to hold office hours here in the VRC. I provided her with a small office equipped with a desk and computer for her use.

She holds office hours on Thursday afternoons and it has been much easier for students to meet with her in the VRC rather than trek across campus to her office. This arrangement also means that we see each other once a week and have formed a friendship and good working relationship. We partnered together to host Athens, GA as a satellite location for the 2015 Art + Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thon, an event that was such a success that we have decided to host it annually. I have also been invited to present on using Artstor Digital Library and locating images alongside instructional sessions on library research. The UGA Libraries have also given me permission to create a LibGuide on visual resources and finding images.

We have been working diligently with Access Services and the bibliographer for the arts to develop a long-term plan to transfer select library materials over to the VRC. The first step was to make the VRC a satellite location for course reserves. The VRC purchased additional bookshelves, a book scanner, and a receipt printer; and the UGA Libraries installed the Voyager ILS on a VRC computer and created an account for VRC use. It is certainly more convenient for faculty and students to have course reserves right here in the art building, but accessibility has been a concern. The VRC is not open as late as the UGA Libraries and we are not open on the weekends, but the Voyager system extends the checkout period to reflect VRC hours. For example, a book with a one-day checkout period that is checked out on a Friday will not be due until the following Monday. The course reserves have been a great success and have resulted in a large increase in traffic and use of the VRC.

University of Michigan

As an academic repository, the VRC has many similarities to the University of Michigan Libraries. However, because the VRC is part of the Department of the History of Art, and not the University library system, research work done in the past by VRC staff was often siloed and externally inaccessible. The VRC's finding aids are a prime example. In the past, these collection-describing documents were often compiled by VRC interns, with little in the way of uniformity or adherence to any sort of descriptive schema. These finding aids were made using Microsoft Word, and saved as PDFs or Word Docs on various folders on our internal server, with little thought given to their longevity as born-digital documents.

Beginning last year, however, our staff worked to revamp and update the finding aids in EAD (Encoded Archival Description) format, a standard recommended by the Society of American Archivists and used by the University of Michigan's Digital Library Production Services. Standardizing the finding aids in this fashion has enabled them to be hosted on the University's collective website for finding aids, as well as on its online library catalog, Mirlyn. Because of this, items in the VRC are now easily discoverable to anyone doing archival research on campus, as opposed to remaining hidden on an internal server.

Another example of collaboration with the UM Libraries is joint presentations on research skills given to undergraduate students, especially those taking History of Art courses. Many professors call on librarians to teach "one-shot" sessions over a class period to provide students with the essentials of research, or information literacy. At the VRC, we also provide similarly styled sessions with an emphasis on visual literacy. But by working with campus librarians to do these types of presentations together, students can observe the parallels between both text-based and visual research. Areas of overlap include finding appropriate sources, Boolean searches, citations, copyright concerns, and more. By presenting information and visual literacy skills into one power-packed session, we can cover more ground in less time.

Extended Web Presence

In order to reach digitally-savvy faculty, staff, and students at our institutions, a strong web presence is more important now than ever before. One way for VRCs to promote themselves across their universities is to develop a greater presence online.

University of Georgia

The Lamar Dodd School of Art website (http://art.uga.edu/) is a visual delight, but not very functional. It can be difficult to navigate the website, and information about the VRC was hidden and nearly impossible to locate. It was clear that a separate website was necessary to optimize the VRC's web presence. The VRC evaluated several free websites, such as Blogger or WordPress, but it was soon discovered that the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences at UGA offered self-service websites for free. The Franklin web team promised a URL of choice and a Franklin theme developed in Drupal. However, we were 100% responsible for building the website, and any major customization would cost money. The process took approximately one month of dedicated work, but the result is a fully operative website (http://vrc.uga.edu) with information on the VRC and our collections, guides and tutorials, and staff bios. The site has been such a big hit that it has inspired discussion on improving the Lamar Dodd School of Art website. The VRC also created a Facebook page that currently has over 140 likes. We use the site to share gallery openings, visiting artist and scholar lectures, museum exhibitions and events, and more. Our extended web presence allows us to act as a repository of information for the school and the VRC benefits from the additional marketing and outreach to faculty and students.

University of Michigan

At the University of Michigan, the VRC's initial debut on the web consisted only of a page nestled under the History of Art departmental website, as well as the online image collections, which were housed under the University Libraries' digital collections.

In 2012, the VRC established its own website (http://www.lsa.umich.edu/histartvrc), hosted within the University's Content Management System. The site serves many purposes:

- Information about our unique collections
- Descriptions of available services
- Links to image-related topics of concern to researchers
- Staff listings, contact information, and job vacancies

While our own office is tucked away in the corner of a basement, our website is easily found from the University of Michigan homepage, from the History of Art website, or even by simply typing "Visual Resources Collections" into Google.

Last year, the website was revamped to include updated information and easier navigation. A large "Search Our Images" button was added on the main page, making a prominent link to our searchable online collections. The news section is now updated more frequently, encouraging return visits to the site, and sections were added with information on image research—from finding visual materials to copyright concerns. We are currently in the process of adding how-to videos on the website, which will demonstrate how to better utilize University resources to find images.

Conclusion

The transition from slides to digital images has had an enormous impact on the visual resources profession and the field continues to evolve. These changes have made former visual resources tasks obsolete, but now offer new opportunities for visual resources centers to serve faculty and students in the fine arts. By re-designing the layout of their physical space, performing outreach services to faculty and students, assisting other departments on campus with visual projects, collaborating with the libraries to offer more resources and services, and expanding presence on the web, VRCs can not only remain relevant, but excel in the digital age.