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Image Collections at the City College of New York: Collaborative Efforts at a Public Urban College Campus

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Since 1997, when the first digitization project was launched at the City College of the City University of New York (CUNY), four distinct image collections have been created by the Archives and Special Collections, the Chief Librarian's Office, the Art Department, and the School of Architecture, Urban Design and Landscape Architecture (SAUDLA). The administrators of these four projects, which were initiated without any coordination in terms of database development, metadata standards, or image quality, have been collaborating to establish metadata and scanning standards and to develop a single online delivery system accessible to the entire City College Community.

CCNY Art Collection

The database of visual materials at the City College Libraries began with a CUNY-wide insurance inventory project. As part of that inventory, the Chief Librarian requested that a computer data file be created and delivered to the College. But since the inventory contract did not include recent acquisitions, it excluded the estate of Charles Z. Offin, an alumnus of The City College of New York from the Class of 1920, that included art works he collected, which he left to the City College. It became the responsibility of the Chief Librarian to prepare a complete inventory of all the sculptures and paintings. In addition, the Chief Librarian began to capture digital images of those art works with a camera. This effort, begun in 1999, was expanded to document all of the art works that had been acquired by the College over the years since 1852, when a set of plaster casts of the Parthenon sculptures and sections of the frieze was donated to the institution, then known as the Free Academy, by Charles M. Leupp, Esq. This documentation had not been systematically done previously.

Various paintings, sculptures, prints, tapestries, and stained glass pieces began to be located, recorded, and photographed. The metadata and thumbnail JPEG images were incorporated into a FileMaker Pro 5.5 database. No regular funding or staffing for this project has been provided by the College. Any equipment or software utilized was available from the Office of the Chief Librarian, who took on this responsibility without additional support. It was expanded into a comprehensive database stored on a server made available to the public as the CCNY Art Collection, courtesy of the City College Libraries.

Further efforts to digitize images from the City College Archives collection were not undertaken until 2000, when imaging technology was incorporated into the production and presentation of exhibitions at the City College Libraries. The exhibition, The Lost World of CCNY: Architectural Gems of Our Past, recalled structures that no longer exist or had uncertain futures. It utilized digital photography by a member of the library faculty and professional scanning contracted with a commercial vendor. The images selected from the Archives collection were scanned at 300 dpi and saved as TIFF files. The digital images were printed, captioned, and described by a team of staff members of the City College Libraries and mounted for viewing in the Cohen Library Atrium.

This exhibition was subsequently revived as one of a growing set of online exhibitions of the City College Libraries. Following the success of this exhibition, members of the library staff received training in scanning techniques and began scanning materials from the Archives and other portions of the library collection selected by exhibition curators to illustrate subsequent Atrium displays.

This has not been an overall comprehensive effort to digitize all items, or even sampling of items from each collection in the Archives. The images selected by the exhibition curators for scanning are those related to the specific exhibit topics, some of which relate to aspects of the College's history.

Comprehensive metadata has not been systematically collected regarding these images; however, data specific to each picture is presented in the image caption included in each exhibition. Consistently scanned at 300 dpi, the exhibit images have been saved in a variety of digital image formats. Starting in the fall of 2001 the images were saved as Photoshop PSD files due to the preference of the exhibition graphic designer. Several of these exhibitions can also be viewed from the link stated previously, making these historical images available to the world at large.
Visual Resources Libraries

The Art Department and the School of Architecture, Urban Design, and Landscape Architecture have long maintained separate slide collections for teaching art and architecture history. The two slide libraries, renamed the Visual Resources (VR) Libraries in 2003, are not division libraries within the CCNY library system. Rather, they are funded by and located within the School of Architecture and the Department of Art respectively with completely separate administrations.

Since 1996, however, the two VR libraries have been headed by a member of the City College library faculty. Under the supervision of the Chief Librarian, the VR Librarian manages the two VR Libraries with staffing provided by the respective programs. The VR Librarian splits her time between the two libraries and is assisted by the equivalent of one full-time worker in the Art VR Library and two and one-half full-time staff in SAUDLA.

This separation of management and funding support, while hardly an ideal arrangement, does create opportunities for cooperation. Working closely with three administrative units, the VR Librarian is in a unique position to explore possibilities for resource sharing.

The Art VR Library began digitizing slides in Spring 2003, followed shortly by the Architecture VR Library. Armed with a 1000-page MS Access manual, the VR Librarian designed a relational database based on VRACore 3.0 for cataloging data. Since it is beyond the technical capability of the VR Librarian to network the computers in the separate facilities, the cataloging data for the two collections are not integrated into one database. Rather, separate databases reside on stand-alone computers in Art and Architecture respectively. The images are saved in large (3200 pixels on the long side) TIFF files on gold CDs. There was no convenient online delivery system for either collection. Smaller JPEG files were provided for the handful of professors who used digital images in MS PowerPoint presentations.

Digital Content and Software Options

In 2004, when Kodak announced its plan to discontinue production of slide projectors, most of the Art and Architecture faculty were using slides for lectures. They did not really have a choice; support for teaching with digital images simply was not in place. Art historians did not even have access to a digital projector! Nor could they count on the VR Libraries to produce the bulk of the images that they needed. Kodak’s announcement, which came as a shock to many of the faculty, forced the professors to seriously develop a comprehensive digital image plan.

During the spring and summer of 2004, the Libraries and the Art Department explored separately various options for image content as well as management systems. In spring 2004, the Libraries arranged for representatives from ARTstor and Luna Insight to give campus demonstrations. Both events were well attended by members of the City College community and librarians from other CUNY campuses. For many in the audience, the clear images and sophisticated functionality presented were a stark contrast to the grainy and crude images they associated with digital imaging. Most were favorably impressed and felt that digital technology presented a viable alternative to teaching with slides.

At the same time, the chair of the Art Department initiated several fact-finding trips to neighboring VR libraries. It is fortunate that there are a number of VR facilities in the metropolitan New York area that were early pioneers in the digitization of slides. We visited Columbia University and Princeton University as well as institutions where the level of funding is comparable to ours, the CUNY Graduate Center and Hunter College, our fellow CUNY campuses.

In addition to the chair of the Art Department and the VR Librarian, the Architecture Librarian and three art history professors also joined some of the trips. All four heads of the VR libraries were extremely generous. Some prepared presentations and handouts for us. Their thoughts about the future of digital imaging, projects being planned, obstacles, and possibilities, were especially helpful to us.

The focus of the trips included software for cataloging and delivery, classroom set-up, and, most importantly for art historians, image content and quality. The Graduate Center developed its own program for cataloging and delivery, which is adequate but not as sophisticated as EmbARK Cataloguer and Web Kiosk used by Hunter College, Luna Insight adopted by Columbia, or Almagest developed by Princeton. In terms of classroom set-up, unsurprisingly, we were highly impressed with the facilities and level of support at Columbia and Princeton. In terms of content, the Graduate Center built up its collection by scanning primarily from books. The other three institutions, in addition to in-house production, all subscribed to ARTstor.

The very timely conference organized by the Fashion Institute of Technology, “Beyond the Slide Library: Digital Images in the Classroom,” took place, conveniently for us, in New York in October 2004. In addition to the VR Librarian, a new faculty member from SAUDLA, Professor Marta Gutman, also attended the conference. Open to new ideas and committed to building up SAUDLA’s image collection, Professor Gutman is a VR Librarian’s dream professor. She became the best-informed professor on campus about establishing digital image collections, and advocated effectively for many critical projects. Professor Gutman’s participation at the conference was most fortuitous for developing image collections at the City College.

EmbARK/Archivision

By the spring of 2005, we felt confident enough about our understanding of the digital terrain to begin building up a more ambitious image library. One of the most important lessons that we have learned is to avoid reinventing the wheel. Therefore, we decided to license or subscribe to digital content whenever feasible, not as much due to concerns regarding copyright issues but because of the superior image quality...
and lower costs compared to in-house copy photography production. Secondly, we decided against developing a cataloging/delivery tool in-house. We want a system with sophisticated functionality that is compatible with the current (and evolving) cataloging standards and will be kept up-to-date with rapidly developing computer technology. While none of the products on the market suited our every need, it was the only viable option for our very limited technical support.

SAUDLA took the first step. After considering several purveyors of architecture images, the School decided to work with Archivision, the most comprehensive source of digital architecture images. Purchasing the base collection from Archivision would allow us to jumpstart our collection with 16,000 high-quality architectural images at an affordable price. At that time, Archivision was partnering with Gallery Systems and we had the opportunity to purchase Gallery Systems’ EmbARK Cataloguer and Web Kiosk with the Archivision images loaded.

Before deciding on EmbARK Cataloguer, we seriously considered Luna Insight, which combines cataloging, classroom presentation, and online delivery in a powerful package geared towards surrogate rather than original works of art. In the end, we chose EmbARK because of practical as well as political considerations. EmbARK has been successfully adopted at Hunter College, another CUNY campus, for several years. We felt using the same software would make it easier to share resources and lobby for university-wide support in the future.

In spring 2005, SAUDLA took the leading role in the pilot program utilizing EmbARK Cataloguer for cataloging and Web Kiosk for image delivery. With strong faculty support, the School purchased the Archivision/EmbARK package using the College's technology fee. While funded by SAUDLA alone, the images, produced locally as well as licensed from Archivision, are available to the entire City College community. In addition, the license allows the Art Department the use of the software as well. In spring 2006, the Art VR Library switched to EmbARK software and, for the first time, records from these two programs are in one database and images are delivered through one unified delivery system. Beginning in the summer of 2006, collections from the Archives were also added into the system on a very limited scale.

ARTstor

Concurrent with the pilot project, the Libraries and SAUDLA were also actively working to secure funding for ARTstor. Since the cost for ARTstor seemed prohibitively high, our strategy, at first, was to have The City University of New York, of which the City College is a senior college campus, subscribe to ARTstor for all CUNY campuses. To that end, in February 2005, Prof. Gutman wrote a letter, co-signed by faculty from SAUDLA, the Art Department, and the Libraries, to CUNY University Librarian Curtis Kendrick. The letter requested that CUNY support our effort in creating a digital image database accessible to all faculty and students by licensing ARTstor.

Unfortunately, even though the proposal had the full support of the University Librarian, and was endorsed by the CUNY IT Steering committee, no funding was provided. The reason appeared to be ARTstor's resistance to consortium pricing. Since there is no savings in subscribing as a group, the CUNY IT Steering committee recommended that individual campuses subscribe to the database on their own. A few campuses within CUNY, such as Hunter, La Guardia, and Bronx, did. While unsuccessful in securing funding, we made an issue of the need for a digital image database for the teaching of humanities and the arts and made the central administration aware of ARTstor as an essential teaching and research tool.

Continuing our effort to secure funding, in April 2005 the Libraries and the School of Architecture requested ARTstor separately through the technology fee. Neither request was granted. The price was too steep for any one individual unit within the college.

A year later, we adopted a different strategy and tried again. In April 2006, the deans of the Libraries, SAUDLA, and the Division of Humanities and the Arts joined together in requesting ARTstor through the technology fee. This time we succeeded in obtaining funding for ARTstor. The subscription began in November 2006. It was a gratifying and exciting moment for us.

Subscribing to ARTstor not only gives us a comprehensive digital image library accessible to the entire City College community, it also provides us with a tool to integrate our diverse digital holdings. Through ARTstor’s hosting service, we are able to make available from one database the image collections of the Archives, the Chief Librarian’s office, and the two VR Libraries. Taking advantage of the pilot hosting program, which provides three years of hosting service free of charge, we signed onto the hosting service in spring 2007. At present over 35,000 images from the Art collection, the Architecture VR Library, and the Art VR Library, are available through the ARTstor hosting service.

The Future

The image collections at the City College have evolved rapidly in recent years. New equipment, including two overhead book cradle scanners for the Archives, has been purchased. Procedures for sharing resources are being established. Works of art in the College art collection as well as items in the Archives have begun to be digitally photographed using the equipment in the Architecture VR Library by staffing provided by the Libraries. Metadata and image quality standards are being coordinated. Our goal for the future is to eventually consolidate all images produced by the four City College units with one cataloging utility delivered through the ARTstor hosting service.

Since the ARTstor hosting service will be the delivery tool for all of our images, its guidelines in both image capture and metadata standards will be followed. The images produced by the two VR Libraries already conform to the standard
recommended by ARTstor—they are either 3200 pixels on the long side if scanned from a scanner or a bit smaller if captured with a digital camera. Material from the Archives will be scanned at 300 to 600 dpi and saved as TIFF files. Original works of art will be photographed with the same Nikon D200 that has been in use in the Architecture VR Library.

Working out a set of metadata standards for all four collections, on the other hand, involves a lot more consideration than simply following a standard. Original works of art and surrogates demand different cataloging information. In addition, we have to strike the right balance between the ideal and the practical—the complexity of data that can be recorded is limited by the staffing available. For now, we are incorporating most of ARTstor's core into our metadata with the understanding that not all relevant fields will be filled. This is a work in progress and we will review and revise our standards periodically.

The issue of a unified cataloging utility is still under discussion. EmbARK Cataloguer, which has been used at the two VR Libraries for more than two years, is an obvious option. However, our license allows only two concurrent users. Additional funding has to be committed if all four units are to use it. Furthermore, EmbARK software requires a higher level of technical support than our over-extended IT staff can provide. It has been a struggle to make full use of this sophisticated program. Two additional simultaneous users will only exacerbate the situation.

Another option that we are paying close attention to is ARTstor's cataloging tool, which will become available in 2008. As Web-based, intuitive software, it presents a promising possibility for us. Most attractive is that all the technical aspects of the program will be handled by ARTstor, leaving us solely responsible for entering the data.

**Lessons Learned**

During this process, we have learned the crucial importance of engaging the teaching faculty. The support and input from Architecture faculty, for instance, provided the impetus for the purchase of Archivision/EmbARK, and subsequent subscription to ARTstor. As librarians, it is our responsibility to educate the teaching faculty about new tools and products. Once the teaching faculty recognizes the critical effect of emerging visual resources technology on the curriculum, they are far more effective than librarians in lobbying for funding. It is the support and enthusiasm of the teaching faculty that help to sway the administration and bring important projects to fruition.

We have also learned the power of collaboration among traditionally separate units. It was impossible to secure funding, for example, for ARTstor, without the combined efforts of the Libraries, SAUDLA, and the Division of Humanities and the Arts. Communication among units with similar needs conserves limited financial resources and prevents duplication of effort across the campus. By pooling resources and talents together, we are able to launch projects that are beyond the reach of individual units.

Software has to be carefully evaluated, not only for cost and functionality, but equally important, for the level of technical support required. The limited technical support staff of the City College Libraries is not equipped to provide extensive customization of any vendor product. Experiences with different software have taught us the importance of striking the balance between functionality and sustainability.

Digital images have been captured and distributed for different purposes and for different audiences in the City College community. Two of the academic programs, the Art Department and the School of Architecture, Urban Design, and Landscape Architecture, need reliable delivery of visual images with maximum visual clarity for teaching purposes. The CCNY Art Collection and the Archives, on the other hand, seek to make available to the public images and documentation of items in their respective collections. Advances in imaging technology offer the opportunity for the four units to work together. Through these collaborative efforts, we expand our understanding of emerging technologies and standards, enhance the design of our systems, and deliver sophisticated services more effectively.

**Notes**

1 The data was organized into the following categories: artist, artist dates, title, medium, type, dimensions of work, edition/date, signature, exhibition notes, artist relationship, donor relationship, source, current location.

2 At http://134.74.21.91/CCNYArtProperties.html.

3 Data regarding these images according to these categories was captured: title, date of source image, record number, personal names, corporate names, subjects, genre/category.

4 At http://www.ccny.cuny.edu/library/Divisions/Archives/historical_photographs.html.

5 At http://www1.ccny.cuny.edu/library/digitalcollections.cfml. As a matter of fact this online exhibition has been noted as a link to the Wikipedia entry for The City College of New York, utilizing two of the images as illustrations at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City_College_of_New_York without acknowledgement to the exhibit curators, gaining an even wider audience for this material.

6 There are over 1,500 images in the 5,000 linear foot collection. Approximately a quarter have been selected for scanning.

7 The Art Department did own a few projectors, but those belonged to the program of Electronic Design and Multimedia and were not available to the art history professors.

8 A fee collected of all students to fund technology-related projects. Proposals are evaluated by a committee chaired by the Assistant Vice President for Information Technology.
