ASSESSING HOW ACADEMIC LIBRARIES SUPPORT VISUAL ARTISTS

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INTRODUCTION

This study focused on how academic libraries support studio practice programs, specifically visual arts. Students in a studio-based program like visual arts do relatively little academic research or writing in comparison to other departments. Considering this, how can a library effectively support student education within these programs? Similarly, how can the library support the development of faculty members who are producing, shipping, and displaying artwork rather than the more familiar academic model of writing, publishing, and disseminating research?

A comprehensive literature review was conducted in order to gain a foundation on the subject. This research involved a range of aspects, such as the information behaviour of visual artists, liaison librarian work, relevant materials collection management, and artists' perception of libraries and librarians. Common trends and themes were isolated to guide project selection and completion.

To explore current academic support, various projects were completed. Select Canadian universities were examined according to three general models: comprehensive universities with visual art programs, comprehensive institutions that are known for their visual arts program, and fine arts specific institutions. Elements of interest included the presence of a fine art library branch, the relevant digital resources available, and the maintenance of fine art theses and dissertations. Other areas studies included professional associations, Canadian copyright law as it applies to artistic practice and instruction, and disciplines that may crossover with other visual arts such as the performing arts departments.

WORKING DEFINITION

Visual artist(s): This term, shortened to "artist" when appropriate, encompasses all practicing creative artists who maintain some form of studio or lab practice. This term includes: all creative artists, whether they work in art, design, or craft; all creative artists regardless of medium; artists of all ages and levels of experience, including art students, art department faculty members, professional artists, and members of the public that create art while maintaining an alternative source of income. It should be noted that the term "visual artists" does not include art historians.

EXPLORING CANADIAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

To examine how academic libraries meet the needs of visual arts users, a sample of institutions were selected: comprehensive universities with visual art programs, Western University and Simon Fraser University; comprehensive institutions that have well-recognized visual arts programs, Concordia University and York University; and fine arts specific institutions, Emily Carr University of Art + Design (Emily Carr) and the Ontario College of Art & Design University (OCAD). Certain factors were isolated to determine how these universities meet the needs of visual arts users.

Aspect of Academic Library Studied	Findings
Presence of visual arts library branches and resource centres on campus.	There were no specialized library branches found, but separate, department-based resource centres provided dedicated spaces for reference serve as well as physical and electronic resources.
Availability of librarians or staff, such as a technical specialist, to support visual arts users.	All libraries had subject specialists that compiled resource guides and research help. Resource centres tended to be managed by a combination of librarians and technical staff.
Physical and digital collections for visual arts users, specifically relevant electronic databases.	Databases were generally uniform with many of the same or equivalent resources available to support research into art, artists, art history, film, design, and the humanities in general.
Archiving of MFA theses documents and exhibitions for future access, an important factor considering that visual art programs tend to emphasize the production of a body of artwork rather than a written paper.	This tended to occur across three organizations: a university gallery archived exhibition ephemera and digital show announcements; the visual art department documented, often informally, the exhibition with pictures of the art and artist; and the university maintained a collection of thesis documents accessible through the institutional repository.

Understandably, Emily Carr and OCAD were found to be more focused on visual art users. The comprehensive academic libraries existed as part of a network of library resources and services, resource centres, student or faculty websites, and gallery archives to offer to support the visual arts department. For these institutions, working with these resource centres and galleries to strengthen existing resources, isolate areas for improvement, and determine ways to develop further may best support visual artists.

LITERATURE REVIEW & THEMES IDENTIFIED

Visual artists engage with information in unique ways. The literature highlights themes and commonalities across subcultures, such as an almost unanimous preference for browsing as a search strategy. Looking beyond the context of the library, artists seek information that is not traditionally associated with libraries and cannot be described as "thing," instead looking to sources like personal experience and their surroundings. These forms of information seeking may be related to the value artists see in the process of discovery and unexpected influences.

Meeting the needs of these users may be a challenge due to the idiosyncratic nature of the creative process that drives them. The information behaviour model provided by Cobbledick (1996) and refined by Hemmig (2009) as well as Frank's (1999) research of visual art students are some of the studies that can help librarians isolating significant information needs and existing methods artists use. Librarians must reach out to artists where they operate and libraries need to maintain an aesthetically pleasing collection, friendly atmosphere, and easy to understand organization of materials.

Information Behaviour
The information model proposed by Cobbledick (1996) is constructed as a general framework to guide future research. It was later refined by Hemmig (2009) to four reasons that visual artists seek information: 1) inspiration, 2) specific visual elements, 3) knowledge of materials and techniques, and 4) marketing and career guidance. There is arguably a fifth point—knowledge of current trends in the art world—that Hemmig found was not entirely distinct from the other four elements.

Idiosyncratic, Individualized Information Needs
The information needs of visual artists vary, arising from personal, self-motivated incentives (Cobbledick 1996; Frank 1999; Hemmig 2008, 2009). Cobbledick relates this diversity to the creative process and Hemmig found sources of inspiration ranged a great deal depending on various factors such as academic affiliation or community.

Browsing as the Preferred Search Strategy
Visual artists tend to prefer browsing as a searching strategy (Cobbledick 1996; Frank 1999; Hemmig 2008, 2009; Littrell 2001). Browsing is guided by past experiences and encompasses a wide variety of resources such as: art encyclopedias, art history resources, technical manuals, children's books, feminist literature, fiction, and many other materials. The preference toward browsing is not due to a lack of understanding, but rather it reflects a desire to explore and discover previously unconsidered sources of inspiration.

Libraries and Librarians
The factors identified to make the physical library environment more appealing to artists are: easy access to materials, wider aisles between stacks, user-friendly signage, and gathering areas for socialization (Cobbledick 1996; Frank 1999; Hemmig 2008). The most commonly mentioned resources are: art books, art encyclopedias, fiction, children's books, periodicals, audiovisual resources, art history resources, artist interviews, and technical manuals. Artists generally prefer using the public library due to the easily accessible resources, diverse content that is easy to browse, and friendly environment.

Social Networking
Social networks are important for sharing this acquired information. Attending workshops or lectures and attending shows are important events to inform artistic practice (Cobbledick 1999; Frank 1999). These forms of socialization can be a source of inspiration or new techniques, making them important connections. While socializing is a significant factor for sharing information, it should be noted that the creation of the artwork itself is often a solitary undertaking influenced by these social interactions.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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COPYRIGHT AND LICENSING CONSIDERATIONS

Moving from physical resources to digital reproductions has highlighted copyright and licensing issues around image use for galleries, instruction, and art and academic libraries. Digital images can be acquired, reproduced, and used in numerous ways, making educators, researchers, and faculty more aware of licensing, copyright law, and fair dealing. Of course, these issues impact students as well. Studies have shown that some students consider copyright issues a major concern that limits their research, while others did not consideration this a factor when finding and using images. This varied perspective may be due to differences like level of experience.

Now aware of this need, I consulted academic articles and asked educators to share some of their uncertainties in order to compile common questions. There are a lot of resources online, many of which contain part of the desired information. Bringing everything together resulted in a series of pages on my blog, MLISMeg.wordpress.com. These pages, presented as FAQ's, address: an introduction to copyright and fair dealing, relevant words and terms, and possible image or art use. Sample questions include: "can I make a copy of this image and distribute it to the students enrolled in my class" and "what are some good ways to find images I'm permitted to use."

THE PERFORMING ARTS: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN USER GROUPS

The discipline of performing arts includes users in music, theatre, stage, dance, and fine arts. Considering the varying needs, it is interesting that "artist" can encompass all of these creative fields. Due to the larger theme of this study, these disciplines were examined in relation to academic libraries. While this research was not necessarily found to be transferrable, visual arts could benefit from a similarly thorough body of literature. These studies focus on determining what resources users want and value as well as how users can benefit from technology and electronic resources.

Because the area of performing arts includes so many specialties—actors, musicians, costume designers, directors, set painters, and many others—this group of users can also include visual artists. This causes some overlap in the literature. Despite the commonalities, various information behaviour models show unique needs and differences; dance and theatre, for example, prominently emphasize campus and community outreach. Music was the largest body of specific literature found, addressing library as place, reference services, electronic resources, use of technology, and copyright concerns. Of course, restrictive budgets are a factor in various studies.

FURTHER STUDY

There are a lot of opportunities for further study on this topic. Some of the areas of particular interest include the use of technology, considering specialized groups, and activities around browsing.

Technology: A Matter of Perspective?
There is little research on the use of technology by visual artists. One possible reason may be perspective or terminology. When creating a film, for example, an artist will likely use digital cameras, and editing software. These may overlap with what LIS researchers would call technology, but tend to be referred to by artists as equipment or tools. When researching how artists use technology, it will be important to define what that includes.

Defining Our Users
"Artist" may include a huge range of roles such as costume designer, animator, painter, or sculptor. Looking at painters alone, we can divide this group into various subgroups by medium—acrylic, oil, or watercolour—type, stage of career, or style. Dividing by medium, however is not without fault; it will be important to consider the influence of practical concerns like studio space, storage space, financial situation, and sales.

Idiosyncratic Browsing
Artists browse to gather stimulus through diverse sources of information, but what do they do with it? It would be interesting to learn how an experience like a nature walk is collected. A more practical question may be how libraries can meet the needs of a user group that approaches information with this I'll-know-it-when-I-see-it mentality.

CONTACT INFORMATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS