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ArtSTOR, Art Libraries and Access to Images

Max Marmor
Director of Collection development
ArtSTOR

“The number of images of interest to the art historian is simply monstrous [*ungeheuer*]”
- Hans Tietze, *Die Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, Vienna 1913

Abstract:

Art libraries are, among other things, vast corpora of images. The pages of art publications are, of course, replete with images of interest to the scholar, teacher, and student. These images are notoriously poorly indexed, despite the efforts of catalogers and authors and publishers of indexes to the literature of art. This is surely one primary reason great art libraries tend not to be circulating art libraries: the only way for the library user to take advantage of this vast repository of images is if the books and journals are on the shelf!

Teaching institutions, needing to provide photographic slides for classroom use, have always tended to respond to this situation by creating "copystand" slides from printed books and journals. Slide curators then classify and – more rarely – catalog these slides

in ways that make the images made from books more accessible than the original book illustrations were. At many institutions these visual resources activities are performed outside the domain of the library, often under the umbrella of the art history department or some other academic program. But sometimes it is the library itself that provides this key service of making images available for teaching and related scholarly purposes.

With the arrival of digital imaging technologies, these traditional approaches to supporting the use of art images is changing. To be sure, there are many institutions that now simply do with digital images what they previously did with photographic slides: they make digital images from library books on behalf of teachers, scholars and students. And increasingly they seek to take advantage of technology not merely to classify images in browsable ways but to catalogue them in ways that make them even more intellectually accessible than they were previously.

However, simply migrating conventional image services from analog to digital is not enough. For one thing, it leaves in place ultimately unaffordable redundancies, such as hundreds of slide librarians investing notoriously limited resources in making the very same images. It also creates new redundancies, since now slide librarians must also independently catalog these same images. Moreover, the transition to digital imposes its own new burdens in training, technical and user support, software investments, and technology infrastructure. It is not surprising, therefore, that efforts are being made to reduce these redundancies and to leverage digital technologies in ways that both advance the needs of scholars, curators, teachers and students – and the needs of the librarians and visual resources curators who serve them. ARTstor, an initiative of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, now being used at more than 300 campuses and museums in the US and actively exploring the possibilities of international distribution, is designed to help achieve this goal.

The Art Library as Image Corpus

Art libraries are, among other things, vast corpora of images. The pages of art books and art history journals are replete with images of profound interest to the scholar, teacher, and student. We do not always think of art libraries in just this way. That may be because these images are, alas, poorly indexed, despite the admirable efforts of library cataloguers and of authors and publishers of indexes to the literature of art. But this is surely one of several compelling reasons why great art libraries tend not to be circulating libraries: the only way one may take advantage of the vast but elusive corpus of images the art library proffers is if the books and journals are on the shelf when one goes hunting for them!

Teaching institutions, driven by the need to provide art images for classroom use and student study, have tended to respond to the challenge posed by all these unindexed images by making “copystand” slides from the reproductions in the library’s printed books and journals. Slide curators then classify and – much more rarely – catalogue these derivative images in ways that make the images made from books more accessible than the original book illustrations ever were. Typically, these visual resources activities

are performed outside the domain of the library, under the umbrella of the art history department's visual resources collection or some other academic program. Only in a relatively few instances it is the library itself that provides this key service of making images available for teaching and related scholarly purposes. To risk a generalization, art libraries have, by and large, played an essential but relatively passive role in supporting the use of images in teaching.

With the advent of digital imaging technologies, these traditional approaches to supporting the use of art images in teaching and learning are beginning to change. To be sure, there are many institutions that now simply do with digital images what they previously did with slides and photos: they simply scan their copystand slides. However, "simply" migrating conventional image services from analogue to digital has turned out to be a complicated proposition. For one thing, it leaves in place the ultimately insupportable operational redundancies that have characterized slide library services. Just think of the hundreds of slide librarians investing notoriously limited resources in digitizing the very same teaching images! It also creates entirely *new* redundancies, since now slide librarians must also catalogue these same images, implement database systems to manage them, and then maintain the resulting digital archives in an ongoing way. At the same time, the transition to digital imposes its own new burdens in training, technical and user support, software investments, and technology infrastructure. How many slide libraries – indeed how many art libraries or libraries in general – are in a position to make these kinds of investments? And how much sense would it make for libraries everywhere to try to do so?

It is not surprising, therefore, that efforts are being made to reduce these redundancies and to leverage digital technologies in ways that advance the needs of scholars, curators, teachers and students – while also reducing the burden on the art librarians and visual resources curators who serve them. ARTstor, an initiative of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, is designed to help achieve this goal, and to offer libraries and the institutions and individuals they serve new choices about how to manage limited resources. In the process, new roles for art libraries and art librarians are emerging.

The genesis of ArtSTOR

ArtSTOR (<http://www.artstor.org>) is a digital library initiative launched in April 2001 by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation;* it became an independent not-for-profit organization in January 2004 and launched a live service in July of that year. It is now being used at more than 360 campuses and museums in the US and Canada and is actively exploring the possibilities of international distribution.

ArtSTOR's name alludes to the project's principal domain – the arts – as well as its sibling relationship with JSTOR, with which most IFLA attendees will be familiar

* The Mellon Foundation (www.mellon.org) is a non-profit philanthropic institution, primarily dedicated to supporting education and the arts; its two primary constituencies are institutions of higher education and cultural institutions, especially museums.

(<http://www.jstor.org>). Like JSTOR, which creates, “stores” and distributes comprehensive digital archives of the backfiles of core journals in the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences, ArtSTOR will create (or assemble), “store” and distribute digital images of visual materials that are central to teaching and learning in art history and the humanities. Again like JSTOR, in performing these services ARTstor seeks to advance and progressively transform the ways in which scholarship, teaching and learning are conducted, and the ways in which library collections and services evolve. The audience of both initiatives is strictly non-commercial and educational and, like JSTOR, ArtSTOR functions as an independent non-profit – and mission-driven – organization. ArtSTOR is a descendant of JSTOR in another key respect: its roots go back to JSTOR’s first exploration into the technical and legal issues posed by digitizing core art history journals, an exploration bearing fruit now as JSTOR assembles its art history collection, which includes, among other Anglophone titles, the *Art Bulletin*, *The Burlington Magazine*, *Gesta*, the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, and the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, as well as such European journals as the *Jahrbuch der berliner Museen*.

ArtSTOR was launched at a significant moment in the development of digital image libraries. Recent years had seen the emergence of such ambitious imaging initiatives as the Visual Arts Data Service in the U.K., the Van Eyck initiative in Europe and, in the U.S., the Art Museum Image Consortium (AMICO). While studying these and other kindred efforts – most of which, alas, have not survived the test of time – the Mellon Foundation was itself supporting directly two pioneering digital projects. One was an effort to digitize the Museum of Modern Art’s rich, but only partially accessible, architecture and design collection. Simultaneously, the Foundation was supporting an important international effort to digitize the treasure trove of cultural materials associated with the hundreds of Buddhist cave shrines at the Dunhuang oasis site, a key node for ten centuries on the cultural crossroads of the Silk Route, in the Gobi Desert. In the first instance, high-resolution digital versions of the interior decoration of the cave shrines are being created, offering visual access to wall paintings and sculptures, many of which are extremely difficult to see and study even *in situ*. These rich forms of digital documentation were then “stitched” together to create “virtual” tours of the cave interiors. The Foundation’s Mellon International Dunhuang Archive unites these images from the caves with a range of other materials – sacred and secular texts, textiles, decorative arts etc. – formerly located at Dunhuang but removed from the site at the beginning of the 20th century and now preserved in the collections of an international group of archives, libraries, and museums, among them the British Library, British Museum, the Musée Guimet and the Bibliothèque Nationale.

ArtSTOR collection development

The MOMA Digital Design Collection and the Dunhuang projects may be regarded as defining one end of the initial ArtSTOR collections spectrum: highly specialized digital collections derived, frequently via direct digital capture at very high resolution, from primary sources, whether found at remote archeological sites or in archives, libraries and museums. At the other pole of the ArtSTOR collections spectrum

is a broad “Image Gallery.” Drawing on multiple sources, this image gallery is meant to be the digital equivalent of a large teaching slide library and, like the latter, it aims to support both a wide range of teaching needs and also research and scholarship. It offers a broad and deep compendium of nearly 200,000 images, crafted around common, undergraduate-level teaching needs in art history and related disciplines. It seeks, in short, to begin to address the widespread need for a large body of core teaching images with which we began our discussion above.

This Image Gallery aspires to do several things. Being shaped around common curricula, it should relieve many academic libraries and visual resources collections of the need to digitize their own slide collections in support of the core image needs of art history teachers. At the same time, the Image Gallery should provide scholars, teachers and students in fields outside the arts – scholars who have typically lacked slide and photograph archives, let alone digital collections – with the beginning of a “campuswide” visual resource. It should significantly support teaching needs all across the academy, supporting the classroom presentation of digital images, the provision of course-based “image reserves”, as well as the educational outreach programs of museums. ARTstor’s software and collections lend themselves to all these applications.

At other points on its collection spectrum, ARTstor offers special strengths in the arts of Asia, thanks to partnerships with the John and Susan Huntington Archive of Buddhist and related art at Ohio State University, and with the American Council for South Asian Art and the University of Michigan. These collaborations will help create a broad and deep context for the more specialized Dun Huang materials. ARTstor is also developing particular strengths in medieval art, through collaborations with the Bodleian Library, which is contributing more than 30,000 digital images of medieval manuscript paintings; with Princeton University; and with the National Gallery of Art photographic archives in Washington, D.C., which is contributing images from the Clarence Ward archive of large format photographs of French Romanesque and Gothic architecture. Through collaborations with the Frick Art Reference Library and (again) the National Gallery of Art, ARTstor is digitizing a range of early 20th century photo archives related to Italian Renaissance painting (the Sansoni and Foto Reali archives respectively). A digital version of *The Illustrated Bartsch*, a monumental 100-volume reference work that offers approximately 55,000 images derived from Old Master European prints from the 15th to the 19th century. ARTstor is, finally, actively pursuing new projects in key areas of “non-western” art, including African and Precolumbian art and the art of Islam, where ARTstor has recently announced a project involving the personal archives of three distinguished Islamicists (Walter Denny, Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom).

ArtSTOR’s efforts to provide for some of the basic image needs of teachers and scholars in the history of art should not be seen as fully defining ArtSTOR’s collection development trajectory. ArtSTOR is actively seeking to texture traditional art historical canons and to respond to evolving methodologies and pedagogies – in art history and throughout the humanities. In some instances, specific collections are already being created or secured to respond to these evolving interests. A case in point is a suite of collections that might be said to deal with “social iconography,” and which document the

roles and representation of social groups in western culture. A key project in this area is a collaboration with Harvard University, the goal of which is to digitize the 30,000 image archive related to “The Image of the Black in Western Art” project – to cite the title of a renowned reference publication based on this archive.

Each of these projects represents a different approach to collection building, and together they represent collaborations with museums, slide libraries, publishers, faculty photographers, teams of scholars, and photo archives. Assessment of these models of collection building and the value of these collections to ArtSTOR’s varied audience will shape ArtSTOR’s ongoing development.

ARTstor services

ArtSTOR aspires not merely to develop and distribute a rich digital image library, but also to develop and deploy a suite of services to the educational and museum communities. Some of these services have been suggested above: enabling art (and other!) libraries to subscribe to digital collections and in so doing to limit their own need to invest – and especially to invest redundantly – in creating and managing local digital image collections; developing a range of software tools that encourage the integration of digital images and digital technologies generally into teaching, learning and scholarship in art history and related fields; creating opportunities and a suitable forum for the evolution of new forms of scholarly communication. Special effort is being made to explore ways in which ArtSTOR can help museums and museum libraries to achieve efficiencies and economies, including economies of scale, comparable to those it promises to help colleges and universities secure.

Perhaps the greatest service ArtSTOR can – and hopes to – provide is the creation of a secure, regulated, networked space, defined by a framework of licensing agreements that embraces content providers, subscribers and service administrators; a precinct in which educational and scholarly activities can flourish in ways that simultaneously respect intellectual property rights and encourage the educational and scholarly use of digital media, and enable the creation and widespread use of increasingly authoritative, sustainable and scaleable digital image collections. In this sense, ARTstor aspires to join the league of art libraries as a new kind of digital art library!