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Author(s): Catherine Larkin

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Looking to the Future While Learning from the Past: Information Seeking in the Visual Arts

Catherine Larkin

At the core of this study is the perception that overall, scholars in the visual arts have unique requirements in their information-seeking behaviors and processes and that there has been an extraordinary deficiency and lack of progress in understanding and addressing their needs. A self-administered questionnaire, adapted from previous studies, was used to query subsets of visual arts humanities scholars from three academic institutions on demographic information, their use of information resources, and their approaches to locating information. Although former studies raised important questions about the idiosyncratic information-seeking behaviors of visual arts humanities scholars and their methodologies, a current understanding of the information-seeking behaviors and processes of the domain is necessary to document persistent and distinctive information requirements within the population, to note changes over time, and to determine the extent to which technology has impacted the information-seeking experience within the domain.

Introduction

More than two decades ago the Art History Information Program of the J. Paul Getty Trust (AHIP) and the Institute for Research and Information Scholarship of Brown University (IRIS) envisioned a collaborative project that would examine the common objective of applying computer technology to research in the arts and humanities.¹ During that investigation, with art historians as subjects, it was discovered that although the quantity and variety of resources needed for art inquiry were especially suited to electronic aids to research, the application of technology intruded upon established practices in the domain (i.e., the field of study, in this case art and art history). Elizabeth Bakewell and her colleagues interviewed eighteen scholars, and after close observation recognized that little was known concerning the way this community engaged in the information-seeking process. This prompted the researchers to revise their project agenda to include monitoring the subjects during their research activities. Soon it was apparent that these scholars had developed their own idiosyncratic research methodologies, and inquiries often began with a confrontational image, rather than a concept or idea, as in other disciplines.² Researchers also observed that these scholars, although highly organized during the information-seeking process, were reluctant to change from paper systems because they needed to have all information visually available in a physical sense.³

Subsequent studies conducted at the Getty by Marcia Bates and her colleagues examined the natural language queries of visiting visual arts humanities scholars with the purpose of developing categories of terminology that could be applied to specific online search systems. Bates determined that in this group of scholars, information seeking was defined by a different combination of terms from a wide variety of distinct categories, and although precise, proved to be inherently more complex than in the sciences.⁴ Bates concluded that "online

searching in the humanities included many unique features that have been given relatively short shrift in theory and practice in library and information science, and consequently certain groups of users have been underserved."⁵ Later when Bates and her colleagues focused on online searching in general, a number of arts and humanities scholars reported being overwhelmed with the amount of information available and concerned with its quality.⁶ These initial observations raised important questions about the idiosyncratic information-seeking behaviors of visual arts humanities scholars and their methodologies. Yet, most subsequent studies moved away from delving further into the application of technology in the research practices of the domain.

Literature Review

The corpus of previous works is extensive and provides a patchwork of studies on information seeking in the visual arts that focuses on identifying critical differences that exist in the research methodologies of the domain.⁷ One of the earliest related articles was published in 1984 in *Art Documentation* by Deirdre Stam, who studied art historians' information sources and noted that the population relied heavily on their personal libraries, most made frequent visits to institutional libraries, and few made use of computerized databases. Stam characterized the art historical information search process as contemplative and relating directly to objects of art.⁸ A decade later, Sara Shatford Layne extended Stam's examination to include artists and art historians and recognized that both had an essential need for visual and textual information. They required ready access to a large number of images to successfully investigate matters of style, composition, motif, iconography and connoisseurship.⁹ Yet to the contrary, Layne speculated that reference librarians could take consolation in the idea that members of the domain may in fact benefit from imprecise retrieval methods and serendipitous discoveries.¹⁰ The notion of serendipitous discoveries in visual arts research was challenged by Susie Cobbledick in

1996; she posited that the preconception that artists are intuitive, self-contained, and create via inspiration has been attributed to the lack of attention given to information needs in the visual arts,¹¹ and that artists have specific needs in mind when beginning the information-search process.¹² Overall, Cobbledick's four subjects considered computer-generated works to be too mechanical and indicated that they needed visual and printed material in hand and portable for further use.¹³ In a later study, Carol Van Zijl and Elizabeth Gericke utilized a self-administered questionnaire to query art lecturers on their information-seeking behaviors for scholarly pursuits.¹⁴ Although several of their findings on the use of library materials were consistent with former studies, their study marked a subtle shift in trends in information seeking in the visual arts. By probing further to considered demographics in their analyses, Van Zijl and Gericke determined that females conducted their own searches, browsed library shelves, and relied on their own collections more often than their male counterparts who were more likely to ask librarians for aid. All participants over forty were more likely to ask for assistance, and participants under forty, especially artists, showed a greater interest in the Internet.

The new millennium brought with it a flurry of new scholarship published in *Art Documentation* on the topic of information seeking in the visual arts. Trish Rose revisited aspects of the research process on which art librarians could have the greatest impact, such as gathering, organizing, and analyzing information. Rose was especially interested in how art historians had adapted to technology at the close of the twentieth century. She also sought to correct a weakness in the research conducted by the Getty Institute and Brown University in 1985 which involved only Eurocentric art history scholars.¹⁵ Thus in her case, Rose's subjects consisted of those involved in both Western and non-Western art historical research. Rose acknowledged that her study, unlike the Getty Project, was greatly limited and exploratory in scope. Nevertheless, she ascertained that the subjects under investigation still considered themselves "low tech"¹⁶ and were still very much involved in traditional methodologies during the first stages of their research.¹⁷ Although they valued "OCLC-type" databases, Internet searches for artist and artworks often ended in frustration and resulted in too much irrelevant information.¹⁸ Furthermore, Rose discovered that non-Western art historians often had different information needs than their Eurocentric colleagues. Also significant, Rose recognized the need for user studies, including Human Computer Interaction (HCI) testing, to identify how art historians respond to particular interfaces and computer-mediated resources.¹⁹ Later, Suzanna Simor published on themes and trends in digital art imaging and related issues on the use of online visual materials, such as perceived quality of images, copyright, and availability.²⁰ Simor pointed out that among those teaching art and involved in scholarship, the use of digital images depends on users' needs and their acceptance of new media. She posited that resistance to digital resources, reliance on old research methodologies, and limited access to technology remained problematic in the domain. Simor acknowledged that a growing number of educators were embracing new technologies that in turn encumbered institutions with the additional burden of supporting and developing their new expertise.²¹ By placing the responsibility of selecting and evaluating "good" electronic materials

on information professionals, librarians, art faculty, and visual arts scholars, Simor believed that their discerning human judgment of e-resources would remain irreplaceable for a long time to come.²² Sandra Cowan's article subsequently focused on the need for real user studies.²³ Cowan interviewed only one artist, as an example of phenomenological interviewing, "intending to uncover the meanings and intentions of the person studied."²⁴ Cowan discovered that in this instance, the artist perceived her work as neither a problem resolution nor a gap-filling activity, but rather a dynamic process of perception and expression where the process is fluid, inter-relational, dynamic, and creative, and reliant on the action of creating understanding rather than finding pre-existing information.²⁵ Although Cowan's study was categorically narrow in scope, she had an understanding not necessarily demonstrated in former art-related library-centered studies where information seeking is approached as "about a problem."²⁶ Cowan pointed to a lack of research pertaining to the information needs of artists in particular and also found fault with previous studies as mostly addressing the needs of art historians and limited to a library-centered template.²⁷ In accord with Cowan's observation, previous examinations appear to be limited by the redundancy of their findings. Yet Cowan's methodology, although interesting, is also limited by her choice of a single interviewee. Her findings, therefore, cannot be generalized.

In 2007 Barbara Elam published a "quick study" in *Collection Building* on the effect of electronic resources on current methods of art-historical inquiry. She concurred with previous findings as to the limited awareness and use of electronic resources in the domain especially in the use of e-journals and periodicals. Elam's participants reported the lack of quality color images in these resources along with their persistent complaint of the perceived challenge of learning new technologies. Although Elam's study had numerous limitations, its recent date and the persistence of its findings gave it some value in this investigation.²⁸

In summary, many past attempts at characterizing patterns of information seeking in the visual arts were centered on library-usage studies. Although there are limitations to every study, many former works were in a sense narrow in scope because they often utilized a small or fragmented body of participants. With the advent of new technologies, past data may not be totally applicable in today's dynamic environment. Nevertheless, former studies should be credited for their role in developing a research framework; they have helped to clarify the techniques that were used to proceed with this investigation. With that in mind and with an eye on the past, a comprehensive and ecological approach was constructed to conduct this study of the information-seeking behaviors and practices of subsets of scholars in the domain of the visual arts.

Research Questions

- Are domain-specific requirements responsible for the differences in the information-seeking behaviors and processes of visual arts humanities scholars?
- Can particular patterns in the information-seeking behaviors and processes of visual arts humanities scholars be identified and characterized?

- Have perceived dynamic changes in the domain of the visual arts and in technology influenced participants' information-seeking behaviors as well as their professional attitudes, values, and beliefs?

Methodology

Operational Definitions

Several terms, such as subsets, ecological, idiosyncratic information-seeking behaviors and domain-specific requirements should be defined at this point. *Subsets* can be described as information seekers from the same domain, in this instance, members of the visual arts humanities community who are believed to have a common understanding of the conceptual issues shared and addressed in this study. The term *ecological* is used to suggest the many interrelationships that people develop between each other to engage with the community of which they are a part. In this case, subsets of visual arts humanities scholars are perceived as a community in natural balance. This study investigates the probability that there are *idiosyncratic information-seeking behaviors* persistent across the domain. For instance, art inquiry can be initiated by a compelling image rather than by a concept or idea, and scholars need information available to them in a physical sense during the research process, whether it is books, periodicals, photographs, or slides. A number of *domain-specific requirements* have emerged from the literature, such as access to primary images and objects, a call for older scholarship usually considered obsolete in other domains, and the crucial need for combined image and text materials to accomplish professional agendas.

Data Collection

The author created a questionnaire (see Appendix) that included a number of queries adapted from former publications (Stam 1984, Bates et al. 1995, Cobbledick 1996, Rose 2002, and Cowan 2004). This procedure is considered valuable because the adapted elements of the newly fashioned instrument were already tested in former investigations.²⁹ However, the questionnaire was pre-tested, and a number of revisions were made before proceeding with the current study. Sixty-five full-time faculty members active in subsets of the domain and listed on art department Web sites were solicited via U.S. mail for this voluntary study. Subjects included eighteen full-time faculty members from Long Island University, C.W. Post Campus, twenty-one from the City University of New York, Queens College, and twenty-six from Princeton University. Coded questionnaires to insure anonymity in reported data were sent to subjects' academic mailboxes in October 2008, with a second mailing following in November 2008. Data collection was terminated in January 2009 with the return of approximately 50 percent of the questionnaires. Faculty at Long Island University, C.W. Post Campus, completed sixteen questionnaires; ten were received from the City University of New York, Queens College, and six from Princeton University. An e-mail questionnaire was not utilized because participants were assumed to have various skills using technology. While the population was limited, user demographics and behavioral data obtained from a limited number of real users can serve as effective tools in defining users' characteristics, needs, and behaviors.³⁰

The instrument gathered basic information and demographic characteristics, allowed for an assessment of participants' use of information resources and their information-seeking behaviors and processes, and included queries on how they located and evaluated the format and quality of information sources. It also served to address the perception that dynamic changes in the domain of the visual arts and in technology may have influenced current participants' information-seeking behaviors as well as their professional attitudes, values, and beliefs. In addition, recent data about the use of information resources such as dependence on personal art libraries, use of digital images, reliance on images and texts as tactile materials, and concerns about the quality of art reproductions helped to determine whether or not there were domain-specific information-seeking requirements unique and persistent over time. Further probing gathered information about participants' perception of the quality and profundity of their choices, such as the importance of the authors' reputation in the field and the extent of the literature review conducted by participants for a particular project. Participants described their research process and evaluated the utility, format, and quality of a variety of information sources. Some demographic analysis was conducted and compared to data reported in the past in relation to participants' preferences, choice behaviors, and processes in information seeking.

Results

Questionnaires were processed and data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 17.0) for Windows. Queries were presented employing a five-point Likert scale designed to measure the strength of attitudes at interval levels. The process was designed to contribute to this project's final results by updating and broadening the scope of information extracted from a number of studies selected from the literature reviewed and to address the research questions.

Demographic Analysis of Subjects

The thirty-two respondents represented a variety of subsets within the domain; eleven art historians, three ceramicists, four members of digital arts and design programs, five painters, and three photographers. Groups of two or less were calculated at 18.8 percent of subjects and included two printmakers, two art therapists, one art educator, and one sculptor. Years spent in the profession were wide-ranging, with seven reporting one to nine years; six, ten to nineteen years; nine, twenty to twenty-nine years, and ten, thirty or more. Age ranges were also diverse with three participants between thirty and thirty-nine years of age; ten, ages forty to forty-nine; eleven, ages fifty to fifty-nine, and eight, sixty plus years. Eighteen males and fourteen females completed the questionnaire. In all, four participants in varied professional subsets were non-Western scholars.

Use of Information Resources

Scholars were asked two general questions designed to measure their computer use for research (Figure 1) and library use for research (Figure 2) before proceeding with a set of fourteen queries to quantify the use of specific information resources. When asked about computer use for research, two participants took the option to use the category *other* with one painter reporting sporadic computer usage and an art historian reporting

computer use at least twice a week. Although an increase in computer use for research was not unexpected, of the remaining thirty subjects, twelve used computers for research every day and eighteen at least once a week. When compared to Van Zijl and Gericke's study of a decade ago, in which it was reported that faculty under forty were most interested in the Internet,³¹ ten users who accessed it every day here ranged in age from forty to over sixty years of age, and two were between thirty and thirty-nine years. In contrast to Stam's earliest report on art historians, when asked about the frequency of library use for research, only two participants used the library every day, and both were art historians over sixty years of age. Seven scholars used the library at least once a week, eleven at least once a month, five every three months, and seven selected *other* with responses ranging from "not often" to "never."

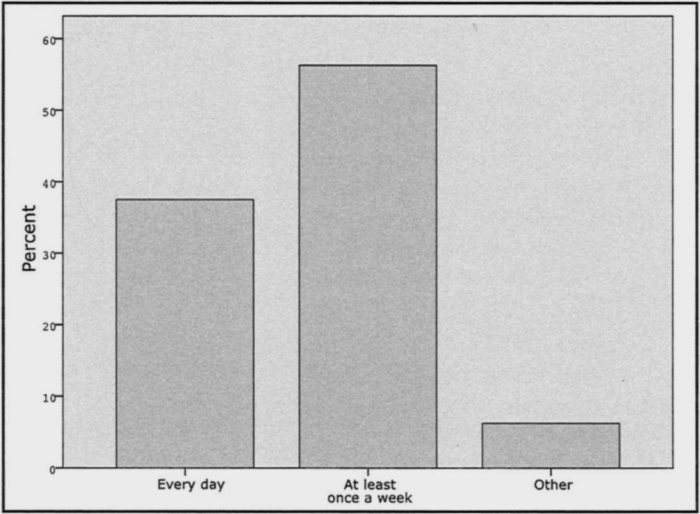


Figure 1: How often do you use a computer for research purposes?

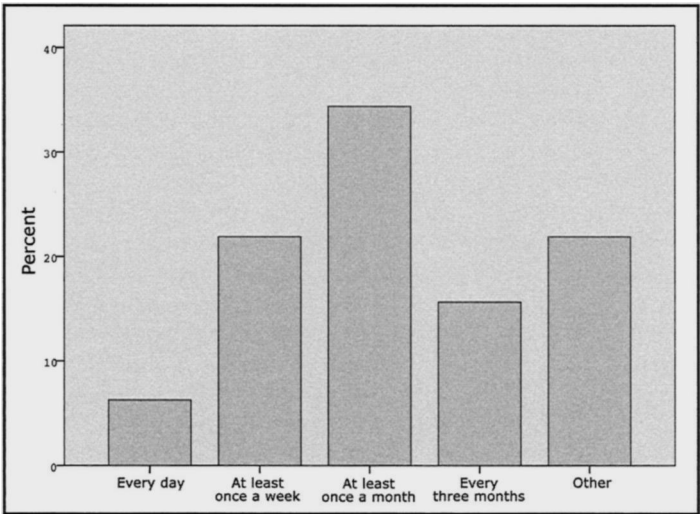


Figure 2: How often do you visit the library for research purposes?

Traditional Text and Image Formats

One's home art library, reported by Stam in 1984 as an essential research tool for art historians,³² emerged here as crucial domain-wide for half of the respondents and important for an

additional one-quarter (Figure 3). When the author conducted a t-test to determine if there were major differences between male and female responses throughout the data, dependence on one's home art library surfaced as the only category that broke from the overall homogenous nature of participants' responses in terms of gender. Probing further into the responses of males and females independently, males were decidedly less dependent on their home library than females. While only six males out of eighteen answered in the affirmative, ten females out of fourteen strongly agreed with the statement "I depend heavily on my home art library." While male responses varied throughout age ranges, the two females ages thirty to thirty-nine and the four females ages sixty and above responded, "strongly agree." Thus the youngest and the oldest females in the study were unquestionably unified, suggesting that age was not a factor in female use of home art libraries. When asked a related question on adding materials to their home art library collection (Figure 4), no discernible difference was detected in male and female responses. Of the thirty-two subjects, fourteen strongly agreed, eleven somewhat agreed, five were neutral, and two somewhat disagreed with the statement presented in Figure 4.

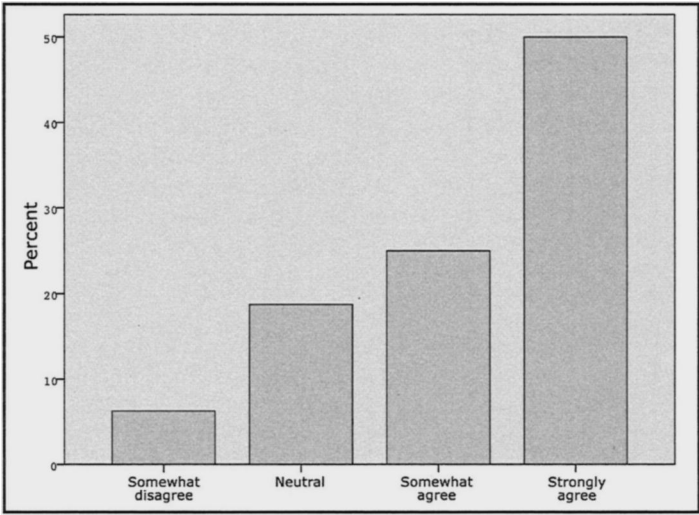


Figure 3: I depend heavily on my home art library.

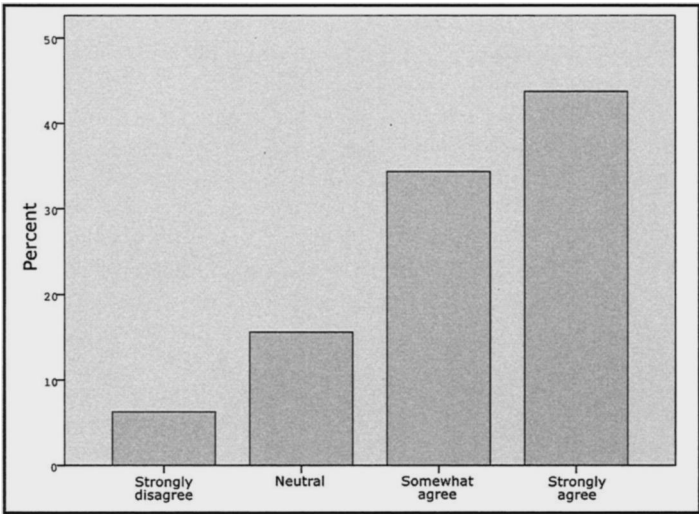


Figure 4: I frequently add materials to my home art library collection.

Analog Versus Digital Images

The author asked about the ownership of image collections in two different formats, analog and digital. When asked about the ownership of images in 35mm slide format (Figure 5), of the thirty-two respondents, fifteen strongly agreed. The remaining subjects' responses were divided, with five agreeing somewhat, three remaining neutral, three responding "somewhat disagree," and six indicating that they strongly disagreed. Unanticipated by the author, when asked about the ownership of images in digital format (Figure 6), of the seventeen that strongly agreed, seven were art historians. In all, there was an overlap of eleven participants from six different subsets who strongly agreed that they relied on both formats for scholarly endeavors. Thus, while traditional image formats were still desirable, a new comfort level with digital images was palpable in this study group.

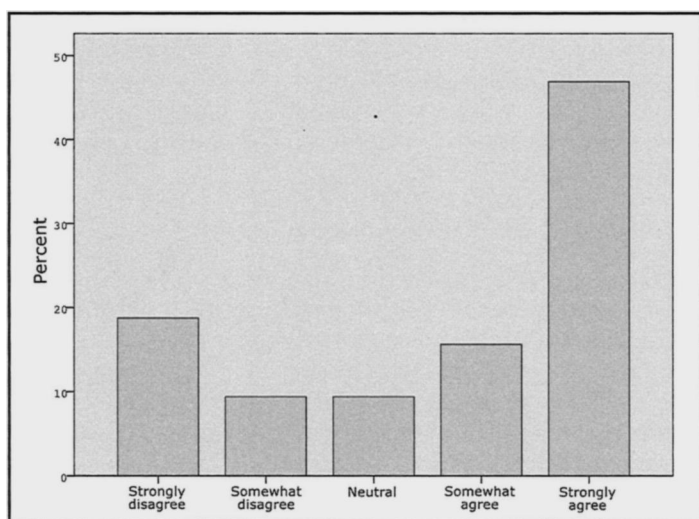


Figure 5: I own an art slide collection for teaching and research purposes.

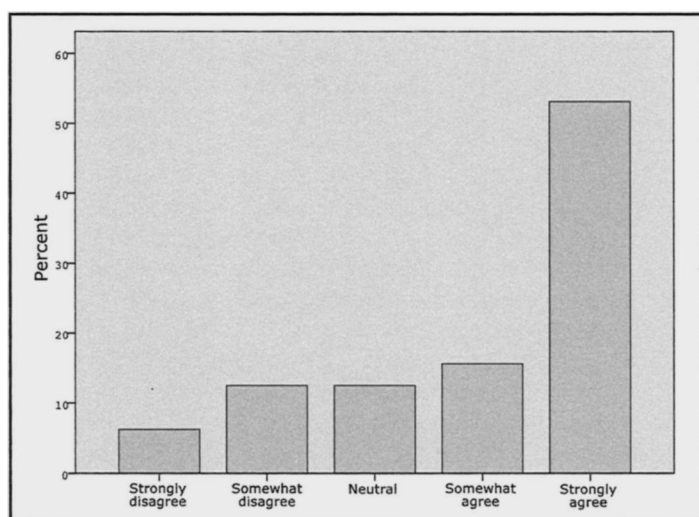


Figure 6: I own a digital art image collection.

Print Media

Although there was a measurable trend toward the use of electronic image formats, subjects' responses to the statement, "I often utilize other image formats such as reproductions in

the literature, photos, and photocopies," revealed a persistent dependence on traditional visual surrogates. Ten respondents (31.2 percent) strongly agreed, thirteen (40.6 percent) somewhat agreed, two were neutral, five somewhat disagreed, and two strongly disagreed. Responses to the query, "My main sources of information are image and text materials," eleven (34.4 percent) strongly agreed, thirteen (40.6 percent) somewhat agreed, three were neutral, four somewhat disagreed, and one strongly disagreed. More than half, eighteen (56.2 percent), strongly agreed that they were concerned with the quality of art reproductions; seven somewhat agreed, four were neutral, one somewhat disagreed, and two strongly disagreed. While many scholars are exploring the potential of digital technologies, many still find comfort in old habits such as using familiar collections of older media.³³

Nineteen (59.4 percent) respondents strongly agreed with the statement, "I often travel to see original works of art and to acquire research materials"; five somewhat agreed, six were neutral, and one somewhat disagreed. One subject did not respond. As consistently reported throughout the literature, reliance on original works and primary documents remains a dominant factor that sets research in the visual arts apart from other disciplines. As reported by Bakewell, depending upon the complexity of the image, research may begin with a reproduction, although above all, hands-on experience is valued in the domain and is considered to be the most essential aspect of knowing an image.³⁴

Electronic Resources

Positive responses were, to some extent, fewer than expected when the author asked participants about their use of computerized databases and library online catalogs. When queried on their use of computerized databases (Figure 7), thirteen strongly agreed; ten somewhat agreed, two remained neutral, six somewhat disagreed, and one strongly disagreed with the statement, "I often use computerized databases." Twelve participants strongly agreed that they frequently used library online catalogs (Figure 8); four somewhat agreed, seven were neutral, eight somewhat disagreed, and one strongly disagreed. Of the twelve in strong agreement, eight were art historians; the others represented a variety of fine arts disciplines.

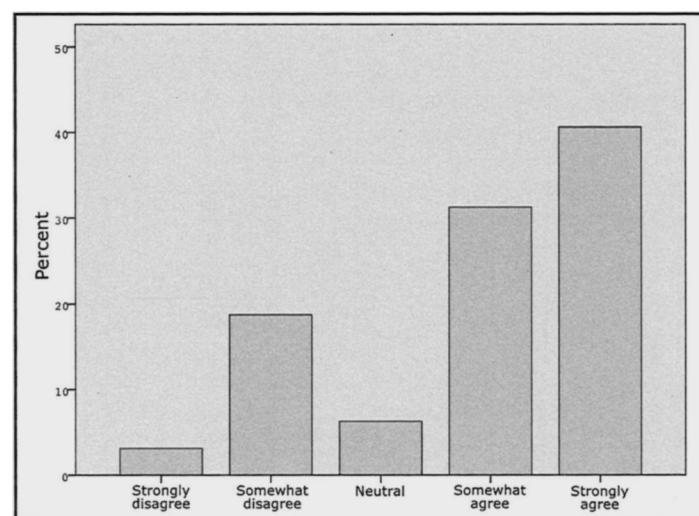


Figure 7: I often use computerized databases.

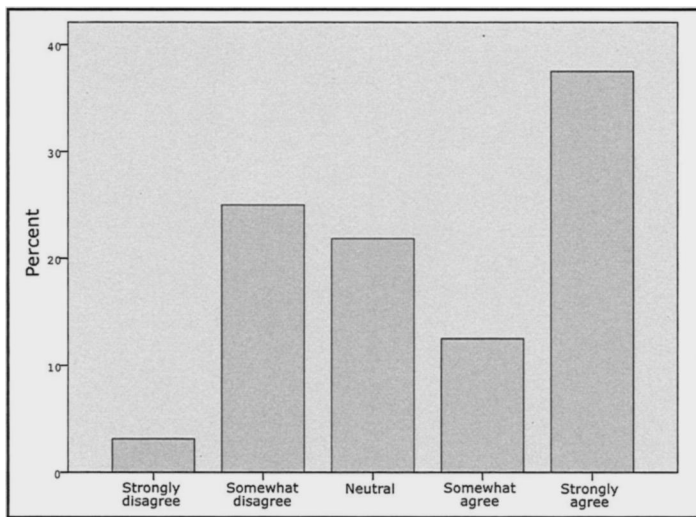


Figure 8: I often use a library online catalog.

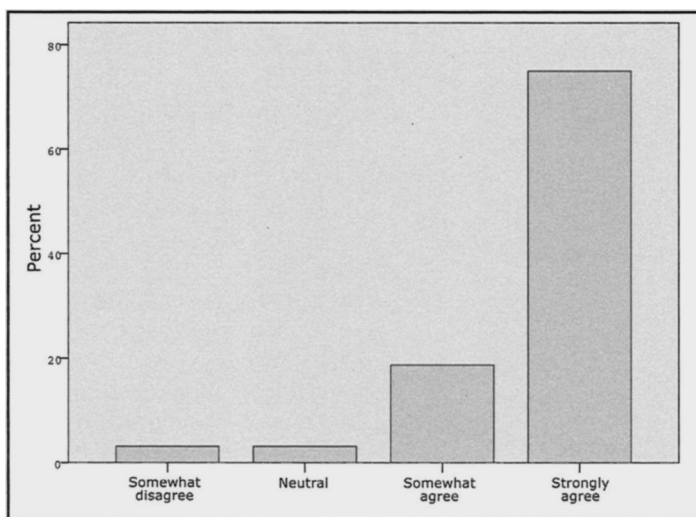


Figure 9: I often use Web-based information retrieval systems (e.g., Google and Yahoo!).

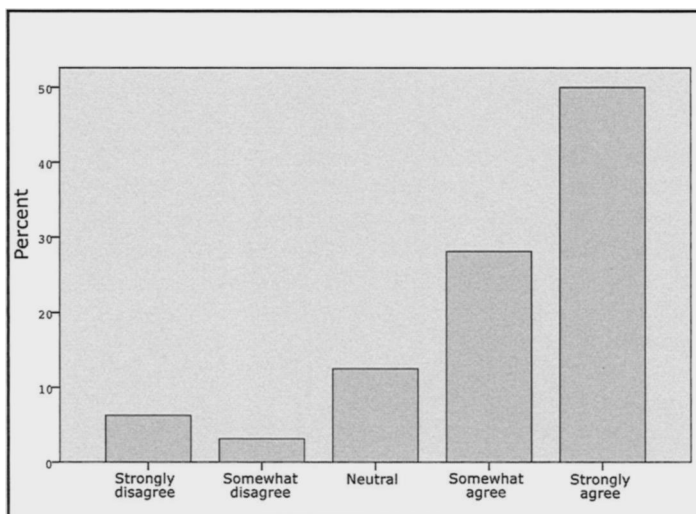


Figure 10: I often utilize images downloaded from the Internet or other electronic sources.

The reported substantial use of Web-based information retrieval systems such as Google and Yahoo! (Figure 9) and downloaded images from electronic sources (Figure 10) was not surprising considering their popularity in today's culture, ease of use, and perceived instant gratification. Twenty-four (75 percent) strongly agreed that they used Web-based information retrieval systems; six somewhat agreed, one remained neutral, and one somewhat disagreed. Sixteen (50 percent) of participants strongly agreed that they downloaded images from the Internet or other electronic sources; nine (28.1 percent) somewhat agreed, four were neutral, one somewhat disagreed and two strongly disagreed.

Subjects expressed an elevated level of confidence when the statement "I often find electronic searching confusing or frustrating" was presented. Somewhat contrary to past observations, thirteen (40.6 percent) strongly disagreed with the statement; six (18.8 percent) somewhat disagreed, six remained neutral, another six somewhat agreed, and just one strongly agreed. Only two (6.2 percent) strongly agreed with the statement "I often request help or training from information professionals"; eight somewhat agreed, six remained neutral, ten somewhat disagreed, and six strongly disagreed.

Approaches to Locating Information Resources

Thirty participants answered this section of the questionnaire; two subjects did not respond here. Although this was disappointing, in quantitative research analysis, the results were coded as data missing. The remaining thirty participants responded to sixteen statements intended to gather information on their perceived information-seeking behaviors and processes concerning the value and complexity of their choices, their research methodology, and what inspired or facilitated their work.

Traditional Research Methods

Though not definitive in all cases, the findings in this section had affinities to past research traditions. Accordingly, eleven participants (34.4 percent) strongly valued an author's reputation in the field when making authority judgments. While eleven somewhat agreed, five were neutral, two somewhat disagreed, and only one strongly disagreed. Similarly, when the author asked if subjects conducted an exhaustive literature search before beginning a research agenda, ten (31.2 percent) strongly agreed and eleven (34.4 percent) somewhat agreed; seven were neutral, one somewhat disagreed, and one strongly disagreed.

Subjects' responses indicated that many still preferred working in isolation as opposed to working in a collaborative environment. When questioned about working in isolation, nine (28.1 percent) indicated a preference for isolation, eight (25 percent) agreed somewhat, six remained neutral, five somewhat disagreed, and two strongly disagreed. In reply to "I consider my research process to be collaborative," eight (25 percent) strongly disagreed, while nine (28.1 percent) somewhat disagreed; five remained neutral, five somewhat agreed, and three strongly agreed.

Participants' responses to the next two queries were relatively similar, prompting the author to probe further into whether subjects considered their research methodology to be intuitive or systematic. Three subjects (9.4 percent), consisting of

two art historians and a printmaker, strongly agreed that their research methodology was intuitive. An additional fourteen (43.8 percent) somewhat agreed, including four art historians, three digital arts and design professors, three painters, two ceramicists, one art therapist, and one printmaker. Of the remaining subjects, eight were neutral, one somewhat disagreed, and four strongly disagreed when questioned about an intuitive methodology. When subjects were asked if they considered their research methodology systematic, again three (one art historian, one photographer, and one painter) strongly agreed. Thirteen (40.6 percent) considered their process somewhat systematic, including six art historians, two digital arts and design professors, two art therapists, one painter, one sculptor, and one ceramicist. Five subjects remained neutral, eight somewhat disagreed, and one strongly disagreed when asked about a systematic methodology. Although subjects' responses varied overall, eight subjects, including four art historians, two digital arts and design professors, one art therapist, and one painter, somewhat agreed that their research methodology was equally intuitive and systematic.

Since serendipitous discovery in visual arts' information-seeking processes has been debated in the literature,³⁵ the author formulated the statement "I consider my research methodology serendipitous" (Figure 11) to address the topic in the present environment. Participants' answers were mixed, although many responded negatively to the statement, with nine (28.1 percent) who strongly disagreed and five (15.6 percent) who somewhat disagreed. Another nine remained neutral and seven (21.9 percent) somewhat agreed.

Twelve subjects (37.5 percent) strongly agreed and nine subjects (28.1 percent) somewhat agreed to the statement "A particular art medium inspires or facilitates my work." Three subjects were neutral, three somewhat disagreed, and three strongly disagreed. When asked about forms occurring in nature as inspiration, eight (25 percent) strongly agreed, four somewhat agreed, seven remained neutral, four somewhat disagreed, and seven (21.9 percent) strongly disagreed. Once again, participants expressed a significant dependence on original works of art as inspiration for their professional agendas (Figure 12). Although three subjects did not respond here, eleven subjects (34.4 percent) strongly agreed that they relied on original works; thirteen (40.6

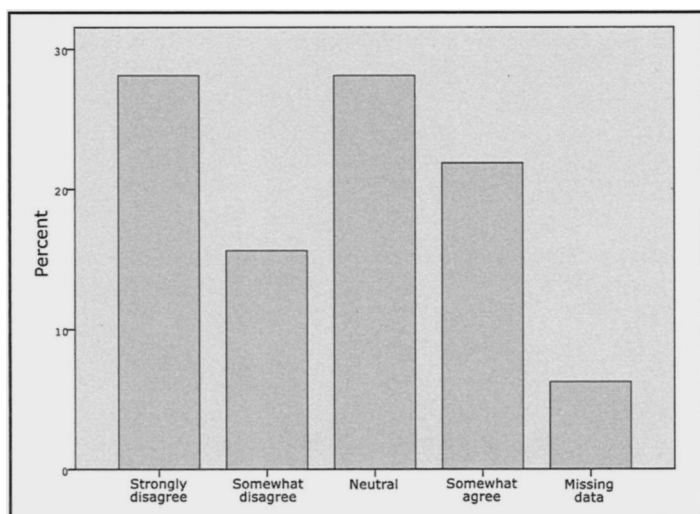


Figure 11: *I consider my research methodology serendipitous.*

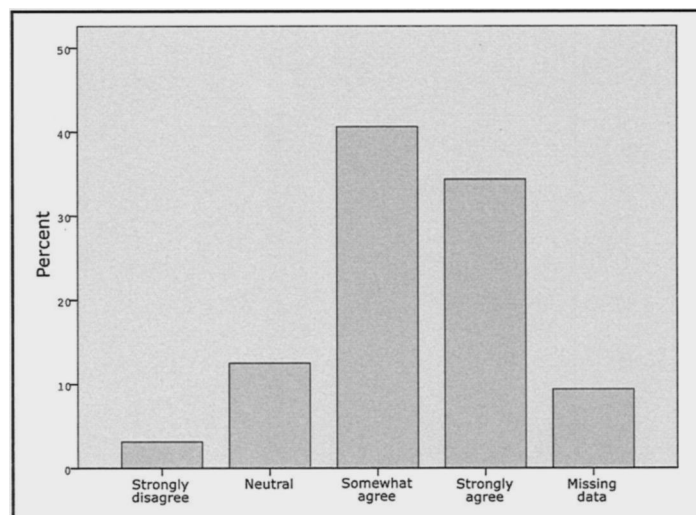


Figure 12: *Original works of art inspire or facilitate my work.*

percent) somewhat agreed, four were neutral, and only one strongly disagreed.

Traditional print media such as books on art continued to be a highly regarded source of inspiration for this user group. Though only five strongly agreed with the statement "Printed text in books on art inspire or facilitate my work," fourteen (43.8 percent) somewhat agreed; five remained neutral, four somewhat disagreed, and two strongly disagreed. When the author queried subjects on images in books on art as a significant source of inspiration (Figure 13), ten (31.2 percent) strongly agreed; fifteen (46.9 percent) somewhat agreed, three were neutral, only one somewhat disagreed, and one strongly disagreed.

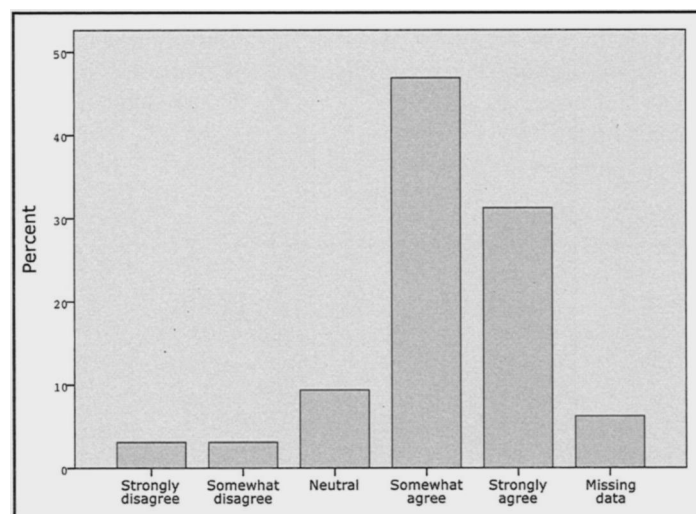


Figure 13: *Images in books on art inspire or facilitate my work.*

When subjects were asked to calculate the value of printed text in other materials such as art journals, periodicals, and auction catalogs as inspiration for their work, six (18.8 percent) strongly agreed, fifteen (46.9 percent) somewhat agreed, seven remained neutral, and two somewhat disagreed. When queried on the value of images in other printed materials such as art journals, periodicals, and auction catalogs (Figure 14), subjects'

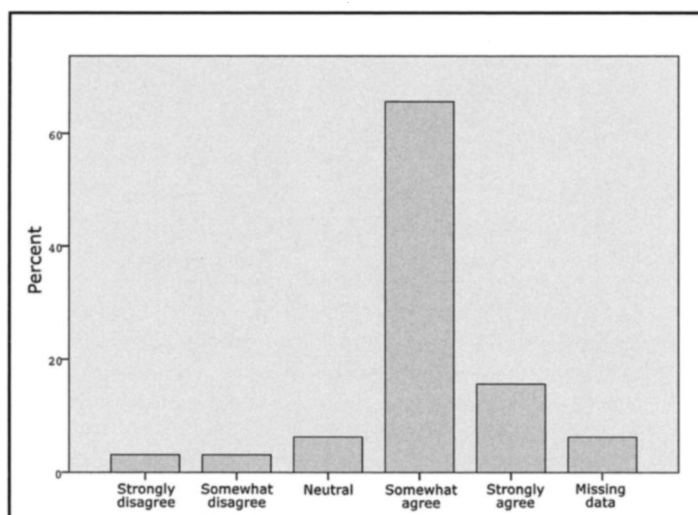


Figure 14: Images in other printed materials such as art journals, periodicals, and auction catalogs inspire or facilitate my work.

responses were also significantly positive; five (15.6 percent) strongly agreed, twenty-one (65.6 percent) somewhat agreed, and two were neutral. Only one somewhat disagreed and one other strongly disagreed.

Electronic Media

The author queried subjects on the importance of electronic text materials in their research process, and in some cases responses were surprisingly similar to the responses regarding the importance of print media. To the statement "Electronic text materials on art subjects inspire or facilitate my work," six subjects (18.8 percent) strongly agreed, thirteen (40.6 percent) somewhat agreed, six were neutral, four somewhat disagreed and one strongly disagreed. When presented with the statement "Electronic art images inspire or facilitate my work" (Figure 15), the findings were also noteworthy. Seven (21.9 percent) strongly agreed; fifteen (46.9 percent) somewhat agreed, one remained neutral, three somewhat disagreed, and four strongly disagreed.

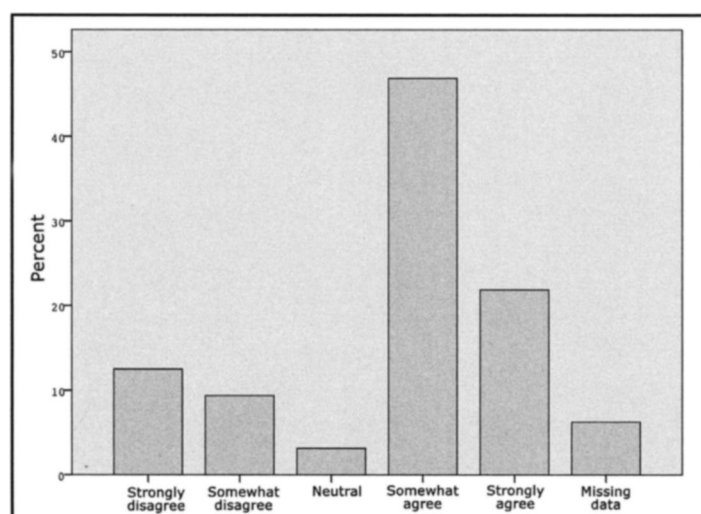


Figure 15: Electronic art images inspire or facilitate my work.

Other Sources for Acquiring Information

The author formulated the following statements to extract data on both traditional and non-traditional means of information seeking by social contact and networking in the field. In response to "I often attend conferences" three strongly agreed, fourteen (43.8 percent) somewhat agreed, four were neutral, nine (28.1 percent) somewhat disagreed, and two strongly disagreed. When asked to comment on their participation in conferences, five strongly agreed; seven somewhat agreed, six remained neutral, ten (31.2 percent) somewhat disagreed, and four strongly disagreed. One possible explanation for the negative responses here could be the lack of institutional support for conference attendance during this major economic downturn.

Seventeen (53.1 percent) strongly agreed with the statement "I often attend art exhibitions"; nine (28.1 percent) somewhat agreed, five were neutral, and one somewhat disagreed. Eleven (34.4 percent) responded, "strongly agree" to the statement "I often participate in art exhibits," while four somewhat agreed, six were neutral, six somewhat disagreed, four strongly disagreed, and one subject did not respond. When responding to the statement "I often visit art exhibits and/or museum sites on the Internet," fourteen (43.8 percent) strongly agreed and fourteen somewhat agreed; only one remained neutral, and three somewhat disagreed. Generally, the concept of participating in virtual art exhibits was not embraced by this group; eight (25 percent) were in strong disagreement with the statement, another eight somewhat disagreed, eight remained neutral, four strongly agreed, and four somewhat agreed.

Conclusion

The author decided to examine subsets of visual arts scholars as an ecological domain united by the specific components necessary to execute their research goals. Thus perceived as a community in natural balance, professional groups were not examined independently as was often past practice. Based on the data collected from the questionnaires, subjects perceived that they followed a precise method of information seeking based on their personal experience and expertise. The data confirmed that traditional methodological tools and idiosyncratic practices have remained persistent over time; among them, dependence on one's home art library, adding materials to a home art library collection, owning an art slide collection, dependence on print media for image and text materials, concerns with the quality of art reproductions, and reliance on original works of art. Fundamentally, visual arts humanities scholars are still attached to tactile media and original objects and prefer to work alone in pursuit of their professional agendas.

Nevertheless, dynamic changes in the domain and in technology have influenced participants' information-seeking behaviors as well as their professional attitudes, values, and beliefs. While visits to the library have declined considerably, computer use for research has increased in the domain. More than half of the respondents own a digital image collection, over forty percent frequently use computerized databases, and a similar percentage regularly use online library catalogs. A staggering amount, seventy-five percent, routinely use commercial Web-based information retrieval systems; one half commonly download images, and close to 90 percent visit art exhibitions

and museum sites on the Internet. But what do these statistics really tell us? Why would it seem that in this user group, scholars are more comfortable with Web-based information retrieval systems than academic electronic resources such as computerized databases and online library catalogs? Current research on the concept of trust in digital information may provide some insight as to why these scholars have developed an elevated comfort level with Web-based information retrieval systems such as Google and Yahoo!

A number of predictors emerging from the literature are relevant to the visual arts. Kari Kelton and her colleagues recently reported that features evoking emotional responses, such as graphic design, aesthetics, and reputation, followed by frequency of use, are most likely to increase levels of trust in information retrieval systems.³⁶ These predictors, coupled with scholars' reported reluctance to request training from information specialists, may have contributed to an elevated level of confidence in commercial systems within this user group.

The main findings of this study are about information seeking in the context of an information need. As a result, concerns persist in the domain for users of print media as well as electronic media. For example, while 35mm slides will eventually be phased out and replaced with digital images, portions of these collections will be invaluable for research purposes. Visual resources professionals and art librarians should collaborate with art faculty on making informed decisions about scanning, preserving, storing, and providing access to selected content.³⁷ Moreover, supporting art professionals' continued requirement for print media in library collections is essential.

For electronic media, information professionals working closely with faculty and providing instruction on utilizing electronic institutional resources relevant to their research and academic course loads has proven to be very effective. This can be accomplished by developing workshops on the use of electronic resources, by demonstrating presentation and image manipulation software, and by scheduling onsite training sessions that are offered to institutional subscribers of digital image libraries such as *ARTstor*. Equally important, information professionals can expand twenty-first century literacy skills in the visual arts by staying current with issues and trends in technologies and in the use of image resources, establishing relationships with users, and by collaborating with fellow librarians, image professionals, and information technologists to afford consistent assistance and outreach to the community.

Notes

1. A nine-month-long collaborative study between the Getty Art History Information Program (AHIP) and the Institute for Research in Information and Scholarship (IRIS) Brown University was conducted in January 1986. For a comprehensive report on this study see Elizabeth Bakewell, William O. Beeman, and Carol McMichael Reese, edited by Marilyn Schmitt, *Object, Image, Inquiry: The Art Historian at Work* (California: Getty Art History Information Program, 1988).

2. *Ibid.*, 7. See, for example, "For most of the scholars interviewed, original works of art are the starting point of art-historical research."

3. *Ibid.*, see 44-50, under *Organization of Information*.

4. Marcia Bates, Deborah Wilde, and Susan Siegfried, "An Analysis of Search Terminology Used by Humanities Scholars: The Getty Online Searching Report Number 1," *Library Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (1993): 36.

5. *Ibid.*, 37.

6. Marcia Bates, Deborah Wilde, and Susan Siegfried, "Research Practices of Humanities Scholars in an Online Environment: The Getty Online Search Project #3," *Library and Information Science Research* 17, no. 1 (1995): 30-32.

7. For two recent literature reviews, see Joan Beaudoin, "Image and Text: A Review of the Literature Concerning the Information Needs and Research Behaviors of Art Historians," *Art Documentation* 24, no.2 (2005): 34-37, where Beaudoin introduced the possibility of applying already established information-seeking models to the domain in an attempt to establish a theoretical framework for the information needs and research behaviors of art historians, 34-35. Most recently, also see William S. Hemmig, "The Information Seeking Behavior of Visual Artists: A Literature Review," *Journal of Documentation* 64, no.3 (2008): 343-62. Contrary to the overriding academic library theme of the works reviewed, Hemmig's article also included a new concept, defining practicing visual artists unaffiliated with academic institutions as a community of practice.

8. Deirdre Stam, "How Art Historians Look for Information," *Art Documentation* 3, no.4 (Winter 1984): 117-119.

9. Sara Shatford Layne, "Artists, Art Historians and Visual Art Information," *The Reference Librarian* 47 (1994): 23-36, especially 23-25.

10. *Ibid.*, 34.

11. Susie Cobbledick, "The Information Seeking Behavior of Artists: Exploratory Interviews," *The Library Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (1996): 344.

12. *Ibid.*, 362.

13. *Ibid.*, 363.

14. Carol Van Zijl and Elizabeth Gericke, "Information Seeking Patterns of Artists and Art Scholars at the Vaal Triangle Technikon," *South African Journal of Library and Information Science* 66, Issue 1 (1998): 23-33.

15. Trish Rose, "Technology's Impact on the Information-Seeking Behavior of Art Historians," *Art Documentation* 21, no.2 (2001): 35-42.

16. *Ibid.*, 37.

17. *Ibid.*, 39.

18. *Ibid.*, 38.

19. *Ibid.*, 41.

20. Suzanna Simor, "Visual Art Resources Online: Issues, Trends and Challenges," *Art Documentation* 22, no.1 (2003): 33-40.

21. *Ibid.*, 36.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Sandra Cowan, "Informing Visual Poetry: Information Needs and Sources of Artists," *Art Documentation* 23, no.2 (2004): 14-20.

24. Donald O. Case, *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information-Seeking, Needs, and Behavior* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2002), 200. Case defined the interviewing technique later used by Cowan in relation to an unrelated four-month, two-phase study on magazine advertising.

25. Cowan, "Informing Visual Poetry," 18-19.

26. Case, *Looking for Information*, 290. Cowan cited Case who posited, "some information related behavior is truly creative in its origin—it is not driven by the need to provide a response to a situation."

27. Cowan, "Informing Visual Poetry," 15.

28. Barbara Elam, "Readiness or Avoidance: E-Resources and the Art Historian," *Collection Building* 26, no. 1 (2007): 4-6.

29. Natalie Sproull, *Handbook of Research Methods: A Guide for Practitioners and Students in the Social Sciences* (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1995), 192.

30. Plinio Aquino and Lucia Filgueiras, "User Modeling with Personas," in *Proceedings of the 2005 Latin American Conference on Human-Computer Interaction, Cuernavaca, Mexico, October 23-26, 2005* (New York: ACM Press, 2005): 277.

31. Van Zijl and Gericke, "Information Seeking Patterns of Artists and Art Scholars," 23.

32. Stam, "How Art Historians Look for Information," 117.

33. Simor, "Visual Art Resources Online," 36. Current use of print media is consistent with Simor's observations published in 2003.

34. Bakewell, Beeman, and Reese, *Object, Image, Inquiry*, 7.

35. See for example Shatford Layne, 1994, and Cobbledick, 1996.

36. Kari Kelton, Kenneth R. Fleishmann, and William Wallace, "Trust in Digital Information," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 59, no. 3 (2008): 369.

37. Visual Resources Association, *Advocating for Visual Resources Management in Education and Cultural Institutions*, (October 2009): 5, http://www.vraweb.org/resources/general/vra_white_paper.pdf.

C. Age (Please check one)

- ☐ 20-29
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60 & above

D. Gender (Please check one)

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

E. How often do you use a computer for research purposes? (Please check one)

- ☐ Every day
- ☐ At least once a week
- ☐ At least once a month
- ☐ Every three months
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

F. How often do you visit the library for research purposes? (Please check one)

- ☐ Every day
- ☐ At least once a week
- ☐ At least once a month
- ☐ Every three months
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

Appendix — Questionnaire: Information Retrieval in the Visual Arts

Part I: Basic Information

A. Academic Department (Please check one)

- ☐ Art History
- ☐ Ceramics
- ☐ Digital Arts and Design
- ☐ Multimedia
- ☐ Painting
- ☐ Printmaking
- ☐ Sculpture
- ☐ Other (please specify) _____

B. Number of years in the profession (Please check one)

- ☐ 1-9
- ☐ 10-19
- ☐ 20-29
- ☐ 30 or more

Part 2: Your Use of Information Resources

Please check the box that best describes your opinion of each statement. NOTE: The distance between every two adjacent points on the scale is equal.		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
		1	2	3	4	5
1	I depend heavily on my home art library.					
2	I frequently add materials to my home art library collection.					
3	I own an art slide collection for teaching and research purposes.					
4	I own a digital art image collection.					
5	I often utilize other image formats such as reproductions in the literature, photos and photocopies.					
6	My main sources of information are images and text materials.					
7	I am concerned with the quality of art reproductions.					
8	I often travel to see original works of art and to acquire research materials.					
9	I often use computerized databases.					
10	I often use a library online catalog.					
11	I often use Web-based information retrieval systems (e.g., Google, Yahoo!).					
12	I often utilize images downloaded from the Internet or other electronic sources.					
13	I often find electronic searching confusing or frustrating.					
14	I often request help or training from information professionals.					

Part 3: Approaches to Locating Information Resources

Please check the box that best describes your opinion of each statement. NOTE: The distance between every two adjacent points on the scale is equal.		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
		1	2	3	4	5
1	I often consider the authors' reputation in the field when I make authority judgments.					
2	I often conduct an exhaustive search of the literature when beginning a research agenda.					
3	I consider my research process to be collaborative.					
4	I consider my research process to be isolated.					
5	I consider my research methodology intuitive.					
6	I consider my research methodology systematic.					

7	I consider my research methodology serendipitous.					
8	A particular art medium inspires or facilitates my work.					
9	Forms occurring in nature inspire or facilitate my work.					
10	Original works of art inspire or facilitate my work.					
11	Printed texts in books on art inspire or facilitate my work.					
12	Images in books on art inspire or facilitate my work.					
13	Printed text in other materials such as art journals, periodicals, and auction catalogs inspire or facilitate my work.					
14	Images in other printed materials such as art journals, periodicals, and auction catalogs inspire or facilitate my work.					
15	Electronic text materials on art subjects inspire or facilitate my work.					
16	Electronic art images inspire or facilitate my work.					

Part 4: Other Sources for Acquiring Information

Please check the box that best describes your opinion of each statement. NOTE: The distance between every two adjacent points on the scale is equal.		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
		1	2	3	4	5
1	I often attend conferences.					
2	I often participate in conferences.					
3	I often attend art exhibitions.					
4	I often participate in art exhibitions.					
5	I often visit art exhibits and/or museum sites on the Internet.					
6	I often participate in art exhibits and/or museum sites on the Internet.					

Catherine Larkin,
Assistant Professor,
Digital Initiatives and Art Image Library,
Department Head,
B. Davis Schwartz Memorial Library,
Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus,
Brookville, New York,
Cathy.Larkin@liu.edu