

Collaborative Context: The Role of Art Museum Libraries in Creating an Environment for Understanding Cultural Value on View

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Abstract

This paper argues that work performed by librarians is creative work worthy of recognition as an important cultural contribution within art museums. Instead of focusing on new ways for information professionals to be relevant within art museums, art librarians should make a case for better support of their longstanding work within institutions. One of the ways this can best be accomplished is through efforts to involve art museum librarians more closely in the creation of context for museum exhibitions through the construction of detailed bibliographies, research guides, and through greater visibility of library materials. Creating situations for art museum libraries to become more visible allows them to provide evidence of their worth when increasingly scarce funds for cultural services must be allocated based on proof of value. For museums invested in providing greater context for work on display, relying on the expertise of art museum librarians, professionals trained in the cultivation of resources and guidance toward them, is a relatively easy step toward accomplishing this.

i. Introduction

In 2016 the Art Libraries Society of North America commissioned a report on the state of art museum libraries. The results of a survey conducted as part of this report showed a general trend toward cutting budgets and staff.¹ The changing environment of research in art history adds to what is cited as justification for some of this downsizing.² Research pertaining to these changes often results in suggestions that library professionals adapt to the changing environment through finding new ways to remain relevant in the field by moving away from conventional library work within art institutions.³

This paper argues that work performed by librarians is creative work worthy of recognition as an important cultural contribution within art museums, and suggests opportunities for art museum libraries to demonstrate their essential value within museums through helping to build context for their exhibitions and collections. Instead of focusing on new ways for information professionals to be relevant within art museums, art librarians should make a case for better support of their longstanding work within institutions. One of the ways this can best be accomplished is through efforts to involve art museum librarians more closely in the creation of context for museum exhibitions through the construction of detailed bibliographies, research guides, and through greater visibility of library materials.

¹ Anne Evenhaugen et al., "State of Art Museum Libraries 2016 White Paper - Art Libraries Society of North America" (ARLIS/NA, 2017), <https://www.arlisna.org/publications/arlis-na-research-reports/1144-state-of-art-museum-libraries-2016-white-paper>.

² See: Roger Schonfeld and Matthew Long, "Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Art Historians" (New York: Ithaka S+R, April 30, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.22833>.

³ For example, see: Paul F. Marty, "The Changing Nature of Information Work in Museums," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 58, no. 1 (January 1, 2007): 97–107, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.20443>; Jeonghyun Kim, "Building Rapport Between LIS and Museum Studies," *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 149–61.

ii. Literature Review

In her 2003 paper “Managing the Small Art Museum Library,” Joan Benedetti called attention to the lack of voices from art museum librarians in professional discourse surrounding art librarianship. This lack of voices stands out in contrast to the apparent proliferation of art museum librarians, who make up the second largest division within the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA).⁴ Benedetti attributes the lack of voices speaking to the experience of art museum librarians to the fact that, “art museum librarians have less time than their academic counterparts to devote to extracurricular tasks like professional writing.”⁵ Benedetti notes that art museum librarians often take on many roles, for less pay than similar positions in academic libraries.⁶ With art museum librarians spread so thin in their day-to-day work, advocacy for resources as well as the value of their creative labor are often shelved behind more pressing daily tasks.

Esther Roth-Katz points out in her exploration of art museum library use policies that, “[a]s many cultural institutions fight for survival in the current economic climate, they look to increase awareness of the resources they provide in order to expand their user group beyond those who have traditionally visited their collections.”⁷ In the case of art museum libraries, expanding their user group means opening up research collections to non-staff researchers. This broader public is often surprised that art museum libraries exist. Lisa Harms, Former Assistant Museum Librarian at the Thomas J. Watson Library, notes

⁴ Joan M. Benedetti, “Managing the Small Art Museum Library,” *Journal of Library Administration* 39, no. 1 (June 1, 2003): 23–44, https://doi.org/10.1300/J111v39n01_02, 34.; a check of ARLIS/NA’s current roster reflects greater numbers overall, with art museum librarians continuing to be the second largest interest group. Art Libraries Society of North America, “Member Directory,” accessed March 1, 2019, <https://arlisna.org/mbrsearch.taf>.

⁵ Benedetti, 34.

⁶ Benedetti, 34.

⁷ Esther Roth-Katz, “Access and Availability: A Study of Use Policies on Art Museum Library Websites,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 31, no. 1 (May 1, 2012): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1086/665335>.

that the question, “The Museum has a library?” is among the most asked by museum visitors encountering the reference desk.⁸ Creating situations for art museum libraries to become more visible allows them to provide evidence of their worth when increasingly scarce funds for cultural services must be allocated based on proof of value.

Demonstrating this value is integral, as Benedetti reminds her readers: “no matter how many other functions the library may take on ... the primary justification for the art museum library collection is support of the museum’s object collections and/or its exhibition programs.”⁹ This sentiment is echoed throughout the literature on art museum librarianship, and is well articulated in Ann Abid’s introduction to Joan Benedetti’s 2007 book *Art Museum Libraries and Librarianship*. Abid writes, “Each art museum library, in its support of a particular museum’s collection, becomes a unique resource related to that collection, and the librarian is often recognized as the expert on the documentation of it.”¹⁰ Through the cultivation of a research collection tailored to the institutions they serve, art museum libraries are defined as singular entities of specialized knowledge, whose significance can best be understood in relationship to the exhibitions and object collections developed from the knowledge they contain.

Esther Bierbaum’s *Museum Librarianship*, published in 2000, articulates a distinction between the purpose of museum libraries (to provide data) and the activation of data through exhibitions. Bierbaum explains: “When we speak of information in the museum, we are dealing with something quite specific: accurate and reliable data that can be given

⁸ Lisa Harms, “A Day in the Life of an Art Librarian,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, i.e. The Met Museum, June 15, 2010, <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/features/2010/a-day-in-the-life-of-an-art-librarian>.

⁹ Benedetti, 28.

¹⁰ Ann B. Abid, “Introduction,” in *Art Museum Libraries and Librarianship*, ed. Joan M. Benedetti, Occasional Papers of the Art Libraries Society of North America, no. 16 (Lanham, Md. : [Ottawa]: Scarecrow Press ; Art Libraries Society of North America, 2007), xvi.

context and meaning, and transformed into information.”¹¹ Objects in museum collections rely upon the “accurate and reliable data” contained in research materials—ideally held by art museum libraries—that contextualize objects as cultural information. The value of exhibited objects must be reinforced by cultural data in order to convey meaning; conversely, the context provided by cultural data contained in art museum library research materials is irrelevant without objects to contextualize.

Writing of “The Changing Nature of Information Work in Museums,” Paul Marty argues that, “[t]he past few decades have seen an important shift from the idea of museums as repositories of objects to museums as repositories of knowledge.”¹² This notion underscores the importance of art museum libraries to provide the data that allows museum objects to be synthesized into items conveying cultural knowledge. Marty continues his argument, noting, “[m]useum professionals are increasingly concerned with meeting user needs and ensuring that the right information resources are available at the right time and place, whether users are inside or outside the museum.”¹³ Given that many art museum libraries are designed primarily to serve internal staff researchers, ensuring that the right information resources are available to support the knowledge conveyed through object collections on display means that art museum libraries must find ways of communicating outside the boundaries of their walls. If as Lisa Harms points out, museum visitors are generally surprised to find that art museums contain libraries,¹⁴ and that large portions of the general population increasingly question the “value of physical libraries in the digital era”

¹¹ Esther Green Bierbaum, *Museum Librarianship / Esther Green Bierbaum*, 2nd ed (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2000), 152.

¹² Marty, “The Changing Nature of Information Work in Museums,” 98.

¹³ Marty, 98.

¹⁴ Harms, “A Day in the Life of an Art Librarian.”

as many ARLIS/NA respondents asserted in survey responses,¹⁵ the utilization of digital platforms to supply context is an opportunity for art museum librarians to reach a wide audience, demonstrating value through utilizing the same platforms that researchers increasingly rely upon.¹⁶

Facilitating research and providing access to research materials is at the heart of what libraries do. Ann Abid emphasizes that this core value of library work is mirrored in museum work. She writes:

Museums and libraries share a devotion to furthering a culture's common good. Both are educational in their missions and goals, and both conserve physical objects that are put to the use of the public in the broadest sense. Thus, the incidence and need for libraries as part of art museums have been natural phenomena. Still ... the concept of an art museum library may be elusive to many. The public and, indeed, some museum administrators are unaware of the amount of background research that goes into acquiring and exhibiting each object in a museum. Not a label goes on the wall without the need for verification that the information is accurate..."¹⁷

Jeonghyun Kim goes so far as to assert that "the shared or similar missions of two institutions (libraries and museums) have made them *ideal partners in collaborative ventures*."¹⁸ Rarely are interdisciplinary collaborative efforts undertaken between contributors with such similar functions, goals and values. For art museum librarians, these collaborations may prove vital to the ongoing practice of their work within art museums.

¹⁵ Evenhaugen et al., "State of Art Museum Libraries 2016 White Paper - Art Libraries Society of North America," 5.

¹⁶ see: Schonfeld and Long, "Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Art Historians." for a more detailed discussion of the shift to relying on digital platforms and methods within art historical research practices.

¹⁷ Abid, "Introduction," xv.

¹⁸ Kim, "Building Rapport Between LIS and Museum Studies," 150. Emphasis by the author of this paper.

iii. Contributions to Context

Benedetti's observation that few voices from the field of art museum libraries exist in the professional literature, both in 2003 and 2007, holds true today. The majority of written materials discussing the discipline of librarianship in art museums advocate for an expanded application of library methods to new positions within museums, particularly those dealing with the collection of data, or in the development of new ways to catalog and present object collections.¹⁹ While there is great value in employing information professionals in such roles, this focus should not overshadow the value of work carried out by information professionals more typically identified as library work. Specifically, the creation and distribution of bibliographies and research guides, and exhibition of library materials, all provide context and thus value for object collections held by parent institutions.

a. Bibliographies & Research Environments for Visitor Engagement

The Seattle Art Museum (SAM) Library has created dozens of bibliographies related to the museum's exhibitions and collections. These provide a starting point to facilitate further research on objects encountered at the museum. Bibliographies are made available online via the SAM library web page, and are listed under general thematic labels such as "American Art," "Decorative Art," and "Native American Art," that provide additional context as access points to general aspects that define the museum's collections and exhibitions.²⁰ Bibliographies range from simple lists referencing a selection of artist monographs for

¹⁹ See: Carolyn English, "Virtually There: An Evaluation of the Usability of American Art Museums' Digital Collections," n.d.; Marty, "The Changing Nature of Information Work in Museums." Anne Gilliland-Swetland and Layna White, "Museum Information Professionals as Providers and Users of Online Resources," *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 30, no. 5 (June 1, 2004): 23–26, <https://doi.org/10.1002/bult.325>.

²⁰ Seattle Art Museum, "Bibliographies - SAM - Seattle Art Museum," accessed March 15, 2019, <http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/programs-and-learning/libraries-and-resources/bibliographies>.

familiar subjects, such as the bibliography for “Edward Hopper’s Women,”²¹ to providing comprehensive selections of resources on several themes that locate an exhibition within complex constellations of cultural production, such as the bibliography for “Jeffrey Gibson: Like A Hammer.”²²

Bibliographies are noted as prepared by SAM’s librarian, Traci Tillman. Most books listed in the bibliographies are available as part of SAM’s library collections. Though the library is noted as being open only by appointment, drawing attention to the resources it holds provides awareness of its existence. More recent bibliographies, including “Jeffrey Gibson: Like A Hammer,” note that books are available for review in the exhibition reading room—an exhibition feature that is becoming more common. The inclusion of these study environments demonstrates an acknowledgement of the contextual value provided by additional research materials.²³

Anja Lollesgaard from the Library of the Danish Museum of Decorative Art has described how the library at her institution is open to the public as an integral component of the museum’s mission. She notes,

[t]he museum library is the natural place for the museum guest to visit in order to throw light on the artefacts [sic] and the exhibition concepts of the museum. It is the ... important centre [sic] for backing up the activities and the purposes of the museum.²⁴

²¹ Tracy Timmons, “Edward Hopper’s Women” (Seattle Art Museum, 2008), http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/Bibliographies/Bib_Hopper.pdf.

²² Tracy Timmons, “Jeffrey Gibson Reading Room” (Seattle Art Museum, 2019), <http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/Documents/jeffrey-gibson-recommended-reading-list.pdf>.

²³ Recent examples noted by the author include *Mickalene Thomas: Do I Look Like A Lady?* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; *Water and Power* at The Underground Museum, Los Angeles; *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* at the Guggenheim in New York. Though the existence of these research environments is a great step in providing context, they do not seem to be important enough to be included in advertisements of the exhibitions they accompany. Attempts to locate more information about these environments on the websites dedicated to the exhibitions described were fruitless.

²⁴ Anja Lollesgaard, “A Danish Museum Art Library: The Danish Museum of Decorative Art Library,” in *Museums in the Libraries, Libraries in the Museum*, vol. 33, 229-235 (Art Library Conference, Moscow-St. Petersburg: INSPEL, 1999), 234.

The Danish Museum of Decorative Art has taken a so-far unique approach to prioritizing visitor experience relying upon the synthesis of display and study to provide context for the cultural knowledge exhibited by the institution. This is achieved through making the space of the museum library more central, accessible and welcoming as opposed to operating on limited hours, by appointment, catering to a small population of insiders.

John C. Dana was apt to point out that, “[i]t would be difficult to find a point in time, in the life of any visitor who has shown a lively interest... when a book would be as useful to him as when he has just been examining the collections which attract him.”²⁵ Though it might not be feasible or even worthwhile for art museum libraries across the board provide services to the general public, the trend for providing reading areas within exhibitions has grown in recent years. These environments, however, are often awkwardly placed within museum galleries, and do little to invite visitors to spend time actually reading. It is generally common knowledge that museum visitors spend just seconds engaged with any one work of art on view in an exhibition, so we should not be fooled into believing that visitors will spend any greater amount of time with reference materials providing context for those same works of art. If museums are invested in providing greater context for work on display, a greater effort to find new ways of providing that context is required. Relying on the expertise of art museum librarians, professionals trained in the cultivation of resources and guidance toward them, is a relatively easy step toward accomplishing this.

b. Research Guides & Portals

Research guides provide expanded context for individual works, artists and ideas expressed in exhibitions, and can also act as guiding principles for collections. Research

²⁵ John C. Dana in “A Plan for a New Museum,” p. 43. Referenced in: Bierbaum, *Museum Librarianship*, 154.

guides provide not just bibliographies, but directions for further research via subject databases, subject terms for consideration, and by providing a level of basic analysis. Created to accompany the Hammer Museum's exhibition *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) library LibGuide helps to locate *Radical Women* within a broader context of feminist art production and artistic practices from Latin America.²⁶ The LibGuide includes: a bibliography of items held by UCLA Libraries on related topics; a list and brief descriptions of themes explored in the exhibition, along with a list of artists from the exhibition whose work is applied to each theme, links to artists' websites and bios when available; links to databases on art and art history, gender studies, film collections, Latin American / Chicano/a studies and LGBTQ studies all promote further investigation of themes included in the exhibition. Links to primary resources related to relevant disciplines further encourage researchers to explore the issues *Radical Women* presents.²⁷

The Hammer Museum itself provides access to a rich research portal through the creation of expanded digital archives for several of their exhibitions and collections. The expanded digital archive for *Radical Women* provides detailed information about the artists and artworks presented in the exhibition; catalog essays; documentation of related programs, installation shots, and promotional material created to accompany the exhibition.²⁸ The expanded digital archive for *Radical Women* is presented in both English and Spanish. This bilingual approach speaks to the desire to engage a broad audience, and serves the objects and artists included through contextualizing their work in the language

²⁶ While the Hammer Museum has no internal institutional library, as an affiliate of UCLA the museum engages in a loose harmonious relationship with UCLA's libraries, particularly the UCLA Arts Library.

²⁷ Jennifer Osorio, "Research Guides: *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*: Home," 2017, [//guides.library.ucla.edu/c.php?g=722848&p=5153828](https://guides.library.ucla.edu/c.php?g=722848&p=5153828).

²⁸ "Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985 | *Radical Women* Digital Archive," Hammer Museum, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/radical-women/>.

native to their production. While the expanded digital archive mirrors much of the content of the print exhibition catalog, its navigation and searchability make it a valuable research asset through its accessibility to casual and experienced researchers alike.

c. Collaborative Display: Library Objects as Museum Objects

In addition to incorporating reading rooms into exhibition design, another recent collaborative trend has been the display of library materials in museum exhibitions. Through recontextualizing research objects as art objects, this practice demonstrates the singular value of library items and reinforces the similarities between art curatorship and art librarianship. The process of selecting, caring for and providing access to items in the collections they cultivate are at the heart of the work carried out by both curators and librarians. The proliferation of artists' books, intended for handling through circulation, have complicated the ways that institutions collect and categorize these hybrid objects.

In her essay "Blurring the Boundaries: Collaborative Library and Museum Exhibitions in Los Angeles," Marcia Reed points out perhaps the best-known example of this phenomenon, "the artist's books of Ed Ruscha, the American painter and photographer, are now held and exhibited by both libraries and museums."²⁹ As one of the Getty Research Institute's (GRI) librarians, Reed has worked to make materials from the GRI available in a variety of exhibition contexts. She writes, "the wide range in types of institutions and exhibitions to which we lend items suggests that distinctions between institutional categories and collecting patterns are becoming fuzzier all the time."³⁰ The inclusion of library materials within exhibition structures themselves demonstrates the value that

²⁹ Marcia Reed, "Blurring the Boundaries: Collaborative Library and Museum Exhibitions in Los Angeles | Reed | RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 8, no. 1 (2007): 46, <https://doi.org/10.5860/rbm.8.1.275>.

³⁰ Reed, 46.

curators are placing on the context provided by these materials, and should be harnessed by art museum librarians as proof of the value of their work.

Though art museums are increasingly relying on the contextual value provided by library materials, it is rare that exhibitions are made up entirely of these resources. The Hammer Museum's 2001 exhibition *The World from Here: Treasures of the Great Libraries of Los Angeles*, which presented library materials from thirty-two library collections from the Los Angeles region, did just that. An introduction to the exhibition states, "In promoting an awareness of what L.A.'s libraries have to offer, this exhibition increases its audiences' appreciation of the collections and encourages their public use."³¹ Whereas this paper has primarily discussed the inclusion of library materials to contextualize art museum object exhibitions, the converse, though rare, is just as beneficial to providing support for art museum libraries. Elevating a library's collection to one worthy of aesthetic display is a successful example of collaboration between art museum curators and librarians, one that provides value through visibility for the resources whose instructive nature are generally eclipsed by the aura of the art objects they exist to support.

iv. Conclusion

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) states that

Museums serve society by advancing an understanding and appreciation of the natural and cultural common wealth through exhibitions, research, scholarship, publications and educational activities. These programs further the museum's mission and are responsive to the concerns, interests and needs of society.³²

³¹ "The World from Here," The World from Here - Hammer Museum, 2001, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2001/the-world-from-here/>.

³² American Alliance of Museums, "AAM Code of Ethics for Museums" (American Alliance of Museums, December 12, 2017), <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/code-of-ethics-for-museums/>.

Through the AAM's inclusion of research, scholarship, and educational activities, each grounded in the services provided by information professionals, they necessitate support for the work of librarians within art museums. The AAM further defines museum "collections and information as a benefit for those they were established to serve."³³ The language of "collections and information" used by AAM reinforces Bierbaum's assessment that museums rely upon "accurate and reliable data that can be given context and meaning, and transformed into information."³⁴ Following AAM's guiding mission to serve society through some of the specific roles facilitated by art museum libraries, it stands to reason that art museum libraries should be working toward providing the means with which the public can better understand an institution's value through its collections. Instructive resources such as bibliographies, research guides and expanded research portals can supply intellectual if not physical access to the materials that best support the mission of the museum. These materials, exemplified by projects carried out by the Seattle Art Museum and the Hammer Museum, represent the creative labor produced by librarians. In the best possible circumstances, collaborative efforts between art museums and their libraries result in exhibitions and resources that serve society through creating rich context for understanding art as a conveyance of cultural knowledge.

³³ American Alliance of Museums.

³⁴ Bierbaum, *Museum Librarianship*.

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