

Artists: The Neglected Patrons?

Laurel Littrell

Introduction

In the academic world, historians, theorists and scientists are the traditional scholars in the college and university environment. Only recently have colleges and universities added curricula and degrees in the fine and performing arts. Little has been written about the library needs of these newcomers. It is assumed that libraries, tailored to the needs of historians and scientists, should serve the needs of artists adequately. The working methods of artists, however, are vastly different from those of historians and scientists. Do artists even need to use the library? Many don't, yet continue to be productive in their work. Could libraries enhance their work? Are these artists aware of the benefits of the library?

Background of the Arts in Academia

The historical study of the arts was established early in the higher educational system in the United States. Productions and performances were considered extracurricular activities. Separate art schools and conservatories specialized in these areas. During the Great Depression, many of these schools closed. Some merged with established universities, creating new curriculum areas in the arts beyond history and theory. These additions were often controversial; many traditional academicians (including some within the arts) viewed this as inappropriate academic study. In the 1940s and 50s, the arts gradually gained acceptance as equal mem-

bers of the university community. Music performance and composition became accepted alongside the traditional areas of music history and theory. Programs in the visual arts became more common. Theatre and dance were the slowest to gain wide acceptance and yet today are rapidly growing in the university setting. (Risenhoover and Blackburn 1976, 3-11.)

When artists joined the academic world, was there any effort made to determine their informational needs? The teaching methods, tenure requirements, and the working environment for artists are completely different from those of researchers and historians. How can it be assumed that library needs are the same? What do artists need from libraries?

Review of the Literature

A few studies have been conducted focusing on the needs of visual artists and are listed in the bibliography. These findings may be summarized by stating that information-seeking techniques for artists are indeed different from traditional research. Browsing is highly valued and not viewed as wasted time. Artists, especially those more mature in their craft, look at materials from a wide variety of subjects outside art and place great value in discovery.

These studies focus exclusively on the visual arts, and have strikingly similar results. Do their findings apply to other types of artists, such as musicians, actors, or dancers?

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Writings are scarce about the needs of performing artists and no formalized research was found. In 1994 David Kahn published an article about library resources for theatre artists. Many parallels exist between the information needs of theatre and the visual arts with browsing and the need for ample visual information. Jane Gottlieb (1994) wrote about the library needs of music students outlining practical ideas for how music libraries can facilitate student research. Both of these excellent articles offer the views of experienced librarians on providing services to performing artists and give a solid foundation for this project.

The observations of the literature run parallel to behavior observed with my own clientele at Kansas State University, where I am the subject specialist for music, art, theatre, dance, and apparel design. Many common characteristics exist among all the artistic disciplines; how would the information revealed by the research in the visual arts relate to such areas of study as music composition, apparel design, or choreography?

Procedure

Initially, to serve immediate practical needs, I decided to undertake a qualitative study. As a new librarian, I needed to become acquainted with my patrons, and this provided an opportunity to visit with them about their library habits, their creative pursuits, what is expected of students and faculty, and to promote ways the library could assist them. I took notes recording their impressions of the library prior to my interactions with them and then kept track of changes in behavior following our conversations. This information provided me with immediate feedback about library collections and services, and helped lay groundwork for further research.

Questions regarding library use for creative pursuits were developed for the conversations, slightly varied for students or faculty. The questions could take two tracks—one for regular library users and one for those who rarely or never use the library. Informal and open questions encouraged a conversational tone and often led to varied and unusual topics. The interviews were followed up with journal entries listing subsequent interac-

tions with each person. Table A summarizes these results. All faculty except one dance professor are now regular library users.

Common Themes

Students and faculty approach the library in slightly different ways. Students, learning and exploring their craft, are figuring out the mechanics of artistic expression and generally use the library for specific assignments. Students learn how to craft their chosen art as well as about that art in a historical and stylistic perspective. They tend to limit themselves narrowly to their art. Faculty, having already established a level of ability, use the library more for creative inspiration and new ideas. Most of them look in other arts areas, the natural world, or in historical sources. The focus is outside of their art. One example of this how a set designer uses the library. She only refers to theatre books for her students; she rarely uses them herself. She looks for visual art, music, photographs, and literature relevant to the stage work she is designing for. Although she encourages her students to look at these other areas besides theatre, it is always a challenge for her to get them outside that realm. Now that she herself is an accomplished set designer, the very last thing she wants to see is how others have designed sets for a certain play, while students are naturally curious about other designers' efforts. In her own work, she prefers her own ideas, fresh and new, without influences from other designers.

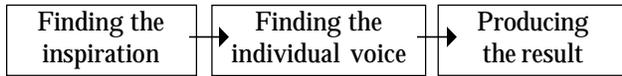
Similar stories are heard from students and faculty in other fields. A composition student studies music of all types, learning about style and technique, but when it is time to compose her own works she desperately seeks to empty her mind of those other sounds and melodies so she can create her own music. This requires several days or weeks of silence, with no listening to other music. The quiet library provides a perfect environment for her contemplation. The music building, with the cacophony of rehearsals and noise

Table A: Summary of data

Discipline	Students, all undergrad. unless noted	Previous Library Users	Faculty	Previous Library Users	New faculty members	Specific faculty area
Art	3 (1 grad)	3	1	1	1	Sculptor
Apparel	4 (2 grad)	0	3	1	2	Designers
Dance	2	0	2	0	1	Studio teachers
Music	16 (3 grad)	7	3	2	0	Composer, conductor, studio teacher
Theatre	2	0	1	1	1	Set designer

from the practice rooms, is impossible for her to inhabit during the initial composition of a new work.

These observations lead to a simple model of the artistic process. Producing a work of art, especially for the learning artist, takes these basic stages.



The library's role is to help find the inspiration, and perhaps to provide an environment to find the individual voice. An artist can come in and become lost in other worlds, new ideas, new sounds and images—or find refuge from everything except one's own mind.

Finding the Inspiration

As emphasized in Powell (1995), Stam (1995), and Frank (1999), browsing for the visually oriented artists (art, stage design, fashion design) is crucial. Browsing is necessary because traditional search techniques are text oriented and artists are notorious for using discovery as a primary tool.

For performers, there is a need to study repertoire and professional performances, just as art students study plates and slides of art works. Comparisons of various performances are helpful, and are studied in sound and video. Browsing of these formats for performance ideas may also be done in addition to locating specific works. Musicians must study scores, especially authoritative editions. Finding these often requires librarian assistance, as the finding aids are cryptic and obscure.

Finding the Individual Voice

Being an artist involves a delicate and individualized balance between external and internal factors. Creativity involves some external influences; gaining ideas, learning new things, seeing what is in the world that is worthy of exploring and emulating. Combining with this is a powerful internal process that requires time, energy, and concentration. Some artists seamlessly flow from one to the other. Others struggle to find ideas. Still others fight for silence; trying to shut out other works that drown out the artist's own voice. The student artist generally begins his or her career by spending much time learning about the craft of production and about the world he or she is entering; style, history, technique. Generally this is a very concentrated and consuming effort, with little time or inclination for other activity. The curriculum for applied arts, in most institu-

tions, is narrowly focused with relatively few electives. After becoming more accomplished, perhaps not until after making the transition from student to artist or artist/teacher, the artist finds that he or she is not so hampered by needing to learn from a craftsmanship point of view. She or he is free to spend more time in exploration of new ideas and find new sources of inspiration. Many turn to other disciplines they may not have had time or inclination to study previously. The sculpture professor who took part in this study recently "discovered" short stories and poetry. He simply did not have time as a student to explore these areas and has found a new delight.

How Can Libraries Serve Artists? Long Term

With the proliferation of electronic resources and search tools, much work is being done with image databases and digitizing. The future will bring many changes that will assist artists in their searches for images. We must watch these developments and remind those producing these products of the different methods of study in our academic environments. Better cataloging of images and resources that contain images will facilitate more efficient searching. Effective means of browsing digital image banks must be developed. Artists are often impatient with library resources and they may not use them often enough to be comfortable, especially if the interface changes often.

Librarians must remember that for artists browsing is not a waste of time or a sign of laziness or reluctance to use the catalog. It is a valid and necessary process. Browsers are not in a hurry and do not blame the library if inspiration doesn't strike, unless the library layout needlessly hampers their efforts. Art and music books are often large and unwieldy. They should be in deep shelves to keep them safe, with roomy aisles and large tables. Carpeted flooring helps, as many students sit on the floor between the stacks as they pull and look at books. As many resources as possible should be in open shelving, including audio/visual items. Viewing/listening equipment should be available for videos, slides, CDs and other media. Circulation policies should be generous as should library hours. Natural lighting and a pleasant uncrowded environment are a plus. Availability of color copying, scanning, and possibly AV duplication equipment (with clear guidelines about copyright and what is acceptable for educational use) is helpful.

How Can Libraries Serve Artists? Short Term

Artists are attracted to images and sounds. Book jackets, discarded in most academic libraries, can be used for col-

orful displays. Several respondents suggested small signs calling attention to various subject areas within the library to aid in browsing; this was also suggested in Powell and Stam.

Teaching artists general search concepts such as keywords that they could apply to a number of electronic resources such as the catalog and databases is helpful. Explain how search functions are similar across resources, such as Boolean searching (drawing a picture of the “and” and “or” functions is effective) and the necessity to combine and try different terms (for example—costume, dress, fashion, clothing, apparel).

Most importantly, the best way a librarian can assist artists is to be available when needed and stay out of the way when not. Let students know that pulling dozens of books off the shelf and leaving them all over tables and the floor is acceptable. Create a friendly atmosphere. Even small concessions to comfort such as allowing beverages in spill proof containers encourages artists to spend long hours.

How Has Behavior Changed?

The behavior of many individuals has changed through the course of this study. An orchestra conductor was too busy to use the library and couldn't imagine any benefit to be gained. I flagged a couple of new books about conducting for him. He read them and was just amazed at learning new ideas and possibilities for interpretation. He used this information in his next concerts, passing this on to his students and audiences. Now, I regularly flag new things for him, as I do for other faculty members. He is still reluctant to use the catalog himself, but he has begun requesting items for purchase. When he requests things we already have, there is another opportunity to explain our catalog and promote our existing collection.

Future Study

Encouraged by the positive results of talking with people, and the validation of research already done in the visual arts, I wish to continue further study of the library needs of artists. I am especially interested in visiting with more students and faculty who are reluctant to use the library or even hostile to the idea.

Conclusion

It is clear that artists use the library differently from other patrons. These differences must be explored and considered in services, collections, and facilities that libraries offer. The library has much to offer artists, both students and teachers, and must be promoted as an enhancement to the creative process. The library must be viewed as more than a place to do “traditional” research, but a place where ideas are born and brought to fruition.

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