New York Art Resources Consortium: A Model for Collaboration

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The New York Art Resources Consortium (NYARC) was established by the research libraries of four art museums in New York City: The Brooklyn Museum, The Frick Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The Museum of Modern Art. With funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, NYARC was formed in 2006 to facilitate collaboration that results in enhanced resources for the research communities it serves. NYARC was designed to provide a framework to advance a series of programs with the potential for transforming the environments in which these activities take place and broadening the collective audience served. This article outlines the history of NYARC, how it operates today, and the organizers’ plans for the future.

Introduction

As with other types of libraries, art museum libraries have been providing access to their collections and have collaborated with each other for many years with the goal of sharing information. Art museums themselves have been slowly following a similar path by making their object collections more available to the public in an effort to raise visibility and to enlarge the audience.

With enhanced online tools, museums, libraries, and archives now have a platform for collection sharing. As a result, staff are beginning to provide unprecedented access to the collections as well as links to other institutions. Online systems afford the possibility of closer collaboration between institutions and allow organizations to reexamine their collections and collecting methodologies.

At the same time institutions are looking for ways to eliminate redundancy and to improve efficiency. With the current severe economic crisis, it made sense to capitalize on the fact that New York City has tremendous art research collections held individually and collectively. Discussions concerning the use of such an aggregated collection to support research and to economize led to the birth of the New York Art Resources Consortium (NYARC).

NYARC and Its Origins

NYARC currently refers to the libraries of The Brooklyn Museum, The Frick Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The four libraries collectively hold over one million items, including books, exhibition and auction catalogs, and other research documents spanning the history of art from ancient to contemporary. Each museum library brings deep subject strengths to the collective pool of research resources. For example, the Brooklyn Museum’s Wilbour Library of Egyptology encompasses the entire world of ancient Egypt. The Frick Art Reference Library is a leading center for the history of collecting and provenance research. The Museum of Modern Art library has extensive holdings on Dada and Surrealism. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Watson Library has a rich collection of rare books. These collections are just the tip of the iceberg of a rich treasure trove found within the libraries and archives at each of the institutions.

The primary mission of the museum libraries has been to support the research needs of the respective museum staff members, including curators, conservators, and educators. The libraries also serve an international community of researchers who visit on site or use the resources externally. These researchers include appraisers, artists, art historians, archaeologists, auction house and gallery staff, collectors, conservators, curators, educators, faculty, filmmakers, independent researchers, students, publishers, and marketing representatives as well as the general public. In looking forward, library staff hope to better serve these users by providing more resources and aggregated collections to deliver information in the spirit of one-stop shopping.

The original concept of NYARC was a consortium consisting of New York area libraries that provide coverage of the full art historical landscape. For this reason, two encyclopedic collections (Brooklyn and the Metropolitan) and two specialized collections (Frick and MoMA) were included as the core institutions. Organizers also looked beyond the boundaries of the individual collections to see what aggregate collections in the New York City area could provide in terms of wider subject coverage. As curatorial research has expanded into a larger interdisciplinary playing field, libraries have had to expand their resources to support research on broad topics ranging from teepees to a particular moment in time such as the art of the 1920s.

One could trace the nucleus of NYARC back to the Art Museum Library Consortium established in the 1980s. The libraries of the Brooklyn Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston worked together to convert their respective card catalogs into an online format for better access to the library collections. As a result of this effort, the original consortium members have the majority of their records in online catalogs today, making these research collections available to the public both onsite as well as through interlibrary loan.
Back in 2003, several representatives from institutions who were in the Art Museum Library Consortium gathered to discuss auction catalogs since all held extensive collections that were perhaps duplicated in each of the libraries. This conversation grew to encompass many other issues that the libraries were facing. Don Waters, program officer for scholarly communications at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, invited the group to come to the foundation offices to continue this discussion. He recommended that the participants apply for a planning grant to examine the commonalities and to determine areas of convergence. In 2004 the consortium was awarded a grant to start this evaluative process; this was the first in a series of grants from the Mellon Foundation to support the collaborative work. The scope of the initial Mellon planning grant was to hire a consultant to review current operations and survey best practices in order to formulate a plan for coordinating and perhaps centralizing core activities. The planning grant also included identification of priorities and activities and outlined areas of prospective collaboration.

The group has been very fortunate to have Jim Neal, university librarian at Columbia University, as the chief consultant since 2005. After extensive conversations with staff from each museum, Neal wrote a comprehensive planning document in July 2005 that outlined all of the areas in which the institutions could collaborate; this plan has served as a roadmap since then.

Here is a brief overview of the NYARC objectives that Neal outlined in his report that have become the NYARC mission:

- Coordinate cost-efficient and sustainable programs
- Improve access to vastly expanded and enriched resources through technology
- Expedite and enhance resource sharing services
- Advance the scholarly, educational and cultural enrichment missions of the four museums
- Develop cooperative relationships with leading research institutions to support information content and the needs of the broader cultural community
- Provide leadership in the development of innovative and model information service programs

To implement these objectives, the group brought in other consultants to focus on specific areas such as sharing resources through interlibrary loan. Participants are also working in an expanded configuration known as NYC-7 which includes the art libraries at Columbia University, New York University, and the New York Public Library. This larger group is working together to determine overlap and identify possible collaborative projects.

**Analysis of the Collections and Future Projects**

In 2007, Brian Lavoie and Günter Waibel from the OCLC Programs and Research staff initiated a study focusing on the collections held by NYARC to determine uniqueness and overlaps as a first step in supporting collaborative projects. The resulting study and reports are available on the OCLC Website.1 In a blog entry entitled “NYARC: One for All, and All for One?” posted August 22, 2007, Waibel wrote:

> The analysis determines the size of the collective NYARC collection, the extent of holdings overlap as well as uniquely held materials. The project also compiles statistics about specific types of materials the consortium holds a special interest in, such as auction catalogs, exhibition catalogs and serials. A comparison of the NYARC holdings to a set of three local research libraries (New York Public Library, New York University and Columbia University), as well as a west-coast peer institution (Getty Research Institute) provides additional context for the findings.2

One major surprise that came out of the study is the number of unique materials held by NYARC in comparison to other libraries: 39 percent of the NYARC collection is unique compared to OCLC WorldCat, and 66 percent of the NYARC collection is unique compared to New York Public Library, New York University, and Columbia University.

With the data from these reports in hand, NYARC participants are examining specific parts of their respective collections, such as periodicals and auction catalogs, to determine how to share these collections and eliminate duplication when possible. The group now has an agenda that will unfold in phases over the coming years.

The Frick, with strong support from director Anne Poulet and all of the staff, has been providing an excellent home base to support NYARC’s programs and hosting Arcade, the combined online catalog of the Frick, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art. Likewise, staff at MoMA, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum continue to contribute to this collaborative effort.

The accomplishments of NYARC to date are many. The group recruited and appointed a project coordinator/systems manager, Lily Pregill, and project assistant, Kate Adler, to provide administrative and professional support for programs and projects. Key members from the respective institutions gathered together to address common issues such as cataloging, reference, and shared resources. The consortium launched Arcade, the shared online catalog for the Brooklyn Museum, the Frick Art Reference Library, and the Museum of Modern Art libraries and archives. Finally, NYARC members began to digitize parts of the collections in collaboration with organizations such as JSTOR. Currently the group is working with JSTOR to digitize nineteenth-century periodicals and auction catalogs. Catalogs from major galleries such as the Macbeth and Knoedler Galleries will also be digitized.

NYARC member institutions have ambitious goals for the near future, including:

- Expansion of Arcade to include links to other libraries such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art
- Launch of a NYARC Website that will announce activities, post progress reports on current projects, and list plans for the future
- Expedited access to the collections via expanded interlibrary loan and digital resources
- Review of the combined periodical holdings to reduce duplication as a cost saving measure
- Discounted access to electronic resources and electronic resource management
- Enhancement and creation of online records to provide access points to all of the research collections
- Cataloging of hidden collections within the institutions to provide better access to archives, ephemeral collections, and special collections
- Training of interns to work on NYARC initiatives in the libraries as a way to accomplish the work and to recruit for the future
- Establishment of cooperative relationships and links to other art libraries, archives, and information service providers to engage in projects that benefit the research community
- Development of a business plan to sustain NYARC beyond the grant funding
- One-stop shopping in aggregated collections
- Cost sharing for expensive systems and electronic resources
- Shared cataloging and collection development

NYARC participants hope the consortium will serve as a successful model for other art libraries as collaborative projects are a vital part of the future of libraries. Working together will allow all libraries to face the challenges of difficult economic times and to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the Internet.

Notes

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