



SLIDE AND TRANSITIONAL MEDIA TASK FORCE CASE STUDY TEMPLATE

The following is a list of suggested categories to provide some uniformity to the case study, but they are optional depending on the context. These descriptions of events do not have to be lengthy, but utilitarian. If more in-depth narratives emerge, it is recommended that the author(s) consider submitting an article on the topic to the VRA Bulletin (see: <http://online.vraweb.org/vrab/submguid.html>).

TITLE

Valuing Lantern Slides at the Worcester Art Museum

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INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES/DEPARTMENTS OR STAFF CONTACTED FOR ASSISTANCE

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TYPE OF COLLECTION/DESCRIPTION

The Worcester Art Museum (WAM) is a mid-sized art museum with over 38,000 works of art, founded in 1896 by Stephen Salisbury III and opened in the spring of 1898. The lantern slide collection at WAM was originally assembled and utilized by the School of the Worcester Art Museum, which was founded in 1919, and the Education Department, which was established in 1927 and formed in collaboration with local public schools. The collection of 16,700 lantern slides dates in production from early 1911

through 1939. In order to support the museum's permanent collection and provide art education to the community, an encyclopedic representation of the history of art and architecture was assembled, including images of the institution along with local landmarks.

CHALLENGE

Presented with a request to tend to the lantern slide collection, museum employees felt that they lacked the institutional knowledge about the collection to formulate an immediate plan for its future. There was also a lack of staff time and resources to dedicate to the project. This was primarily resolved with the creation of an internship position to assess the objects and conduct pertinent research in order to offer suggestions for the resolution of the collection.

METHODS

The project was developed as a series of stages:

1. *Information gathering and research.* This included talking to experts in the field, investigating the history and usage of lantern slides, and understanding the current market.
2. *Data collection.* Under the supervision of the conservation department, the slides were individually viewed and lightly cleaned, and statistics on the collection were obtained.
3. *Evaluation and planning.* Once we understood what exactly was contained in our collection, we could create a prospective plan of action.
4. *Final processing and dispersal.* This consisted of disposing of broken materials, rehousing the slides we were going to keep, and contacting other possible interested parties to acquire the remainder.

NARRATIVE

The lantern slide collection at the Worcester Art Museum was the key pedagogical conduit for extending art education to the community until the items were superseded by 35mm celluloid slides. Though available to the public for loan, the slides sat largely unused until the fall of 2014 when museum administrators questioned their relevance and importance during an evaluation of the museum's storage areas.

Guidelines for examining the lantern slide collection were developed based on the interests of two museum departments – the Registrar's office and the Curatorial department. Registration was invested in a proper archival collection assessment to extract the slides, which pertained directly to the Worcester Art Museum; these slides have strong *archival* value for the institution. Curatorial was looking for items to add *collection* value to the remainder of the museum's art-object holdings. Together, these two departments helped outline the objectives for the assessment of the collection.

RESEARCH AND DATA COLLECTION

The first stage in assessing the lantern slide collection was to gain an understanding of lantern slides' prevalence and importance in the history of visual culture. This included a visit with specialist Terry Borton, who acts as director and performer in The American Magic-Lantern Theater, member of the Magic Lantern Society, and expert on Joseph Boggs Beale, a prominent Magic lantern artist. Terry was a valuable resource not only regarding the history of the lantern slide, but also current market activity.

Taking into consideration the needs of the WAM photographic archive, the potential value to the permanent collection, and secondary market activity, we created a list of criteria for categorizing notable slides. The categories were as follows:

- Images related to WAM
- Images of the city of Worcester and/or its landmarks (aside from WAM)
- Hand-colored or painted slides
- Landscapes/cityscapes/portraits (easily identified subjects were more valuable in the secondary market)
- Collectable slides: mechanical slides, sets of stories (i.e. The Photo Drama of Creation), children's slides, religious themes
- Damaged slides

The results of the investigation proved that the majority of our slides were educational – they were commercially produced and consisted of reproductions of seminal works of art and architecture throughout the history of visual culture. There were no entertainment slides, such as might be used for illustrated lectures, stories, or sing-alongs for the recreation of large audiences. The content was thus not original and in many cases the slide noted the published source of the image.

FINAL PROCESSING AND DISPERSAL

After careful assessment, more than 1,000 slides were identified as being cracked or broken and we had previously determined that we would discard them. A volunteer was recruited to assist in culling out these slides.

About 1,400 slides were directly associated with WAM (objects, exhibitions, and museum school classes). These were separated from the collection and re-housed in temporary, yet stable boxes, which we stored within the photographic archives. As time and resources become available, the lantern slides will be properly housed in archival safe sleeves and boxes, catalogued into our content management system, and digitized.

The Worcester Art Museum's group of more than 400 colored slides falls primarily into two groups: a collection of mass-produced color slides, available in catalogues from turn-of-the-century companies like C.W. Briggs Company, and hand-

colored photographs that appear to be created by an individual hand or at a smaller scale of production. Hand-colored slides and those that are part of a complete narrative series are worthy of further consideration before disposal due to their value as collection items. While the mass-produced slides still had an individual, often a woman, applying the color, the slides typically present broad strokes of color with less attention to detail. Well respected companies like Briggs used a higher quality varnish producing more vibrant results when later projected on screen. Less than one hundred hand-colored lantern slides have been retained by the curatorial department though further research will need to be done to determine their origins.

Perhaps the most coveted hand-colored slides are travelogue photographs. There is a group of approximately twenty hand-colored photographic slides documenting Japan that have been retained by the museum. The Japanese photographer T. Enami colored his own photographs and his laborious attention to detail served as model for American colorists. Although these slides were not produced by Enami's studio, his influence on these slides makes them deserving of further study and perhaps ultimate inclusion in the collection.

After retaining the hand-colored lantern slides, what remained of significance was a collection of roughly 135 lantern slides which depicted the Worcester Area. This collection was offered to and accepted by the Worcester Historical Society. Out of this grouping, a few of the lantern slides depicted the buildings of the American Antiquarian Society, another local cultural institution. These were offered to and accepted by the Society for their collection.

The remainder of the collection faced some interesting decisions once all significant material was culled. Selling the slides through secondary markets was determined to not be a viable option due to the intensive time required. We decided that receiving payment for the slides was unnecessary, and that dispensing the collection was the highest priority. Thus, we opted to relinquish the slides at no charge provided that the interested parties were able to physically remove the slides once they left the building. A notice was placed in the Magic Lantern Society newsletter to potential interested parties. This proved to be a successful venue; a collector from Ohio obtained the remainder of the collection, including the cabinets holding the slides, and we were able to disperse of the collection in a single opportunity. After over a year of careful research, assessment and culling, the lantern slide collection was finally removed from the Museum.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Guiding principles for dealing with the Worcester Art Museum's collection of lantern slides were borrowed from the process of acquiring other artworks, which is tied to the broader goals of the institution. This process was accomplished with input from various museum departments, external experts, and direction from the museum's mission to collect significant artworks. With this mission in mind, we encourage other

individuals to carefully consider the needs of any and all stakeholders prior to hasty disposals of transitional media. In examining the slides, we wanted to retain the objects that enhanced the collection but were also relevant to the museum's values and mission. Given the reproductive nature of the majority of the slides, it was ill-suited to retain the objects as fine art objects, with the possible exception of hand-colored images (which have yet to be decided upon at the time of this publication).

RESULTS

For WAM, the processing of a previously defunct pedagogical collection of lantern slides has resulted in a more focused, narrower collection of slides for retention. The photographic archive has received over a thousand lantern slides of consequence, and the department of Prints, Drawings and Photographs is considering a possible addition to the art collection. The museum gained roughly 8 cubic feet of space in a non-public area which will address other storage needs.

The external stakeholders of the project have also benefitted from the project. We have capitalized on the value of sharing local resources; the donation of Worcester area slides to the Worcester Historical Museum and the American Antiquarian Society represents a mutually beneficial relationship between area institutions that over time, benefits the community as a whole.

LINKS/REFERENCES

Worcester Art Museum: <http://www.worcesterart.org/>

Worcester Historical Museum: <http://www.worcesterhistory.org/>

American Antiquarian Society: <http://www.americanantiquarian.org/>

Terry Borton: <http://www.magiclanternshows.com/>