Introduction

The Visual Resources Association is a multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to furthering research and education in the field of image management within the educational, cultural heritage, and commercial environments. The Association is committed to providing leadership in the visual resources field, developing and advocating standards, and offering educational tools and opportunities for the benefit of the community at large. The VRA implements these goals through publication programs and educational activities. The Association offers a forum for issues of vital concern to the field, including: preservation of and access to digital and analog images of visual culture; cataloging and classification standards and practices; integration of technology-based instruction and research; intellectual property policy; and other topics of interest to the field. Through collaboration, partnership, and outreach with the broader information management and educational communities, the Association actively supports the primacy of visual information in documenting and understanding humanity's shared cultural experience.

A Brief History of the VRA and the Association Today

From as early as 1968, visual resources curators had been meeting during the annual conferences of the College Art Association (CAA). During these meetings, the curators discussed issues of particular interest to that segment of CAA members whose work involved the management of art slide collections. Given the success of these meetings, during the next several years attempts were made to formalize the relationship of these curators with the larger College Art Association. For several years, the group remained, however, essentially an ad hoc committee.

By the late 1970s, both regional and international activity had begun. The Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art (CIHA) recognized the visual resources subgroup as an important part of that international association. Visual resources sessions were provided during CIHA's conference in Bologna in 1979 and continued for almost 20 years. On a regional level, the Southeastern College Art Conference (SECAC) and the Mid-America College Art Association (MACAA) included visual resources sessions at their annual conferences. Visual resources curators within the MACAA group, led by Nancy DeLaurier of the University of Missouri, Kansas City, met during MACAA's annual conferences. In 1972, this group began to meet independently, creating workshops and sessions on various aspects of visual resources maintenance. For the workshops, members developed several kits for the benefit of attending visual resources managers. These kits included information on slide room management, standards, and other practical aspects of the profession. This group also created a newsletter, *Slides and Photographs Newsletter*, which contained news and information on issues of concern to members. This newsletter was supported by CAA and later by MACAA and eventually

became known as the *International Bulletin for Photographic Documentation of the Visual Arts.*

In 1980, after almost a decade of informal association, visual resources curators active in CAA and the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) began the process of forming an independent organization, which was formalized in the fall of 1982. Temporary officers were Christine Sundt, Chairperson; Nancy Schuller, Vice Chairperson; and Nancy DeLaurier, Secretary/Treasurer. Bylaws were drawn up and the first official meeting was held during the annual CAA meeting in Philadelphia in February 1983. Members were those curators who subscribed to the *Bulletin*. Officers were elected. They included Christine Sundt, President; Suzanne Babineau-Simenauer, Vice President; Helen McGinnis, Secretary; Nancy Schuller, Treasurer; and Nancy DeLaurier, Past-President.

Today the VRA is a firmly established Association with over 800 members. The Association will celebrate 25 years of incorporation in 2007. Our international membership includes: information specialists, digital image specialists; art, architecture, film and video librarians, museum curators, slide, photograph, microfilm and digital archivists, architectural firms, galleries, publishers, image system vendors, rights and reproductions officials, photographers, art historians, artists, and scientists.

To inform the membership and to further research and education in the visual resources profession, VRA supports many initiatives. The Association publishes a scholarly journal *(VRA Bulletin),* an online newsletter (*Image Stuff)*, the annual *Sourcebook and Directory of Members*, and occasional *Special Bulletins*. The *VRA Bulletin* is the flagship publication of the Association and features articles on important professional issues. *Image Stuff* is posted on the public-access VRA website on a bimonthly basis and includes listings of upcoming conferences, workshops or exhibits; reviews of recent meetings; and columns on specific issues ranging from cataloging, copy photography procedures, standardization issues, and collection administration. There are reviews of recent publications and updates on commercial image sources. VRA hosts an active members-only listserv (VRA-L) and a web site (vraweb.org). VRAweb.org is an extensive professional on-line presence, with both public and members-only sections. The public site offers access to resources, position listings, and the *Image Stuff* newsletter, and is a rich resource for the image management community. VRA conducts an annual conference and also sponsors the annual Summer Educational Institute. The annual conference, held in a different city each year, provides workshops, sessions, and seminars on issues of interest, a chance to meet colleagues both formally and informally, and the opportunity to view current commercial products. VRA members and non-members alike attend the VRA annual conference to learn about the profession and network with colleagues in the field. The Summer Educational Institute (SEI) is a joint VRA-ARLIS/NA project. The Institute provides a standardized and sustainable program for training in image collection management, with a focus on issues related to the transition from analog to digital collections. The first and second Institutes were held at Duke University (July 2004, July 2005), the third at Reed College in Portland, Oregon (2006). SEI is held in diverse geographical locations in order to encourage broad participation by professionals seeking standardized training.

The VRA's Emerging Role in the Community

The 1990s brought the development and rapid explosion of the internet and the subsequent expansion of the visual resources field to include managing digital media. During this time, it became clear that the VRA no longer served just its membership, but instead played a new and significant role serving the public and contributing research to the broader field of library and information science and educational technology. The organization led in the effort to develop public understanding of issues on copyright and intellectual property rights, protocols for dissemination of digital materials, standards of cataloging, and the importance of providing a broad public access to cultural information in the digital age. As an organization, VRA was asked to participate in a series of public forums on copyright that were organized by the National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage (NINCH) (see www.ninch.org/copryight/). These Copyright Town Hall Meetings were held in a variety of venues (at universities, in conjunction with conferences) and were open to the public for lively discussion and debate. The meetings were held in locations across the country between 1997 and 2003. In other developments during the 1990s, the VRA annual conferences began attracting a growing number of non-members interested in learning about visual resources; vraweb.org evolved into an important source of information for students, professionals, free-lance photographers, even IPR rights managers; VRA members began to educate the larger community on issues such as copyright, image management, technical digital image issues, data standards, cataloging standards, and other emerging issues of importance; the Cataloging Cultural Objects Project (CCO) gained national recognition as a new project on standardizing the cataloging of visual information; CCO's workshops, web site, and outreach efforts began educating a broad audience. The VRA Education committee began to sponsor conference workshops on important topics of broad interest—and those workshops and sessions were offered at the VRA conference and also at other professional conferences. The *Digital Scene*, a feature of vraweb.org, began to disseminate information on collaborative projects, new standards in imaging and metadata, digital preservation issues, consortial projects, training opportunities, and reports from the field. In 2004, the VRA, in conjunction with ARLIS/NA began offering the Summer Educational Institute to provide in-depth educational opportunities to new professionals in the field.

These initiatives and projects illustrate how the VRA has become more than a simple and efficient member services (501(c)6) organization. VRA educational, literary, and scientific components are now important assets and major resources for the general public and the field-at-large. With these developments rapidly expanding the VRA, it has become clear that a separate 501(c)3 VRA foundation would oversee our educational, literary, and scientific efforts most efficiently. Consequently, VRA is currently (2006) in the process of incorporating a new organization, the VRA Foundation, and will submit an application to IRS for recognition as a 501(c)3 non-profit.

March 2007