Visual arts libraries in Scotland: the evolving scene

Duncan Chappell
Academic Liaison Librarian
Glasgow School of Art
0141 353 4708
d.chappell@gsa.ac.uk

Introduction

In June 2013 the Scottish Visual Arts Group (SVAG) conducted its first full-scale survey across its member institutions in its twenty-year history. The aim was to take a snapshot of the current landscape in art, design and architecture libraries and information services in Scotland, in order to understand better the external and internal drivers shaping the services we provide to our patrons. SVAG had realised that there was great discussion amongst our members on recurring themes, yet we lacked the baseline data to understand and interpret how our collections and services were strategically changing, and whether or not there were recurring motifs across the different sectors we represent. This short paper outlines the results of this survey, and the implications for the future trajectory of change in visual arts libraries in Scotland.

Scottish visual arts group

SVAG was founded in 1994, so this year we celebrate our twentieth anniversary. The group provides a forum for discussion and action for librarians and information professionals working across the fine arts, design, architecture and media in Scotland. Currently, membership includes higher education institutions, research institutes, national museums, national galleries, the National Library of Scotland, public libraries and data centres. Meetings are hosted biannually on a circulating basis, and care is taken to vary the location of these meetings to ensure that as many members as possible are able to attend at least once per year. Discussions often include copyright and licensing, online resources, collections management, cataloguing and metadata, special collections and research, all with a strong visual arts focus. There is a marked emphasis on networking and the sharing of professional practice, with opportunities to pose questions to peers and to draw on the collective knowledge of the group. Members in attendance are asked to provide an update on developments in their own institution, which can reveal commonalities and collaborative potential. Our meetings usually finish with a tour of the facilities, exhibitions or spaces of the host institution. Successfully delivered SVAG projects to date include the Union Catalogue of Art Books Located in Scotland (UCABLIS) (although this catalogue has now been superseded by other union catalogues such as COPAC).[1] Membership is via our Secretary,[2] and is open to any Scottish information service that deals, whether in whole or in part, with visual arts collections and researchers. We are an affiliated group of the Scottish Confederation of University and Research Libraries (SCURL)[3] and a corresponding member on the National Co-ordination Committee of the Art Libraries Society UK & Ireland (ARLIS).[4] We also maintain a public blog[5] and Twitter feed.[6]

Visual arts libraries in context

One may question the need for a group specialising in visual arts libraries in a Scottish context, and the applicability of our discussions and research across such disparate sectors. Yet evidence does exist for the unique information-seeking behaviours and motivations of arts practitioners and researchers. Whereas other subject disciplines may safely assume certain core competences, this cannot be assumed for artists and designers, who often employ non-linear, hyperbolic modes of thinking. Most of our patrons and researchers exist and operate within visual arenas, and display a propensity towards images rather than text. Cobbledick has written that artists' information needs are interdisciplinary, undefined and circuitous.[7] Cowan and Branigan conclude that the artist's information needs are markedly different from those in many other disciplines.[8] Frank reveals that browsing, as differentiated from search, remains uniquely key to the information-seeking modes of creative practitioners.[9] The very nature of art and design information (in which information is rarely superseded or rendered out of date entirely) is markedly different from that of some other disciplines, and poses particular dilemmas for collection managers when they seek to deaccession. The propensity of our patrons to browse and collect information from many sources whilst they are in the library means

that traditional measures of use such as loan metrics cannot be adequately relied upon.
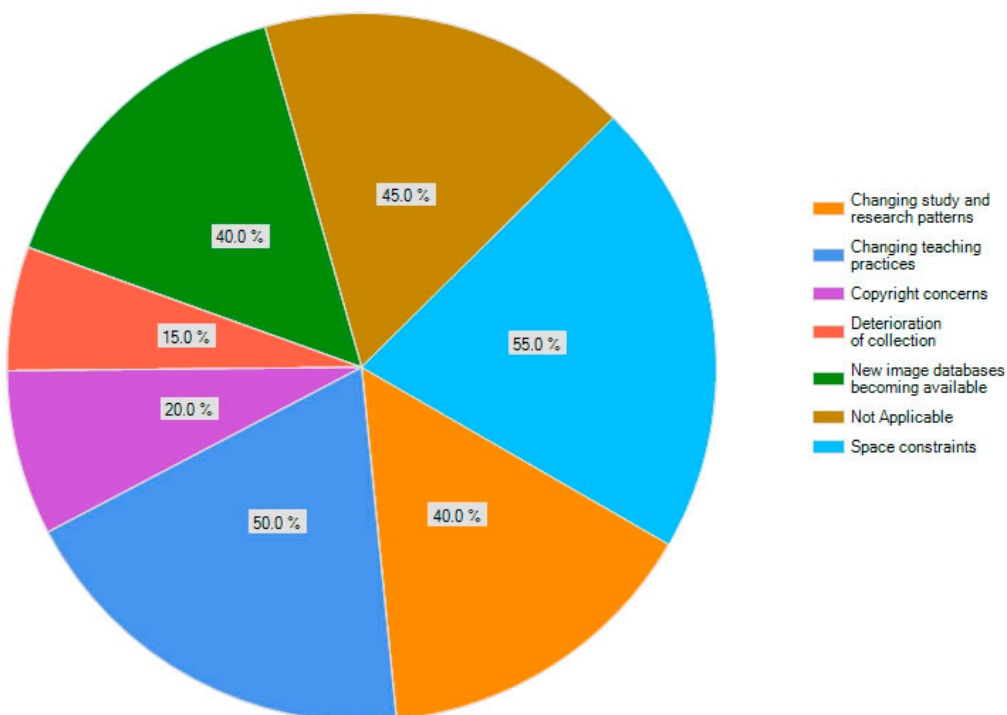
SLIDE COLLECTIONS AND DIGITISATION

One major difference between visual arts libraries and those in many other disciplines is the continued presence of slide collections in the face of prevailing trends towards digitisation. Our survey revealed that a surprising 55% of members retain slide collections, with 20% having collections that contain up to 50,000 slides and 10% with collections numbering up to 100,000 slides. However, all holding institutions reported that the annual use of these collections stood at less than a hundred people – a trend of decreasing usage which has continued unabated and which reflects shifting patterns of image-sourcing amongst our patrons. The slide collection is no longer the primary, or even secondary, source of visual imagery in a world of Google Images and content-rich image banks, and the librarian must make difficult decisions on whether to continue allocating resources to collections with such low usage.

collections – a large percentage in such a relatively short time-span. Those members who reported deaccessioning, or who were considering doing so, were invited to identify the main drivers for this decision. In decreasing order of importance, these were shown to be space constraints, changing teaching practices, changing study and research patterns, and the commercial availability of high-quality image banks. However, given these prevailing winds of digitisation and low patterns of use, it is interesting to note that a quarter of our members had not yet considered deaccessioning their collection, or parts thereof. This may reflect the particular local histories, ethics and modes of teaching of these institutions.

Twenty-five per cent of respondents reported that they were actively developing digitisation strategies for their slide collections. Perhaps of concern, given the extent of the collections and the resource-heavy nature of digitisation, was that these institutions did not receive central or external funding for this activity. Instead, funds

If you have disposed of slides, or considered doing so, what were the primary drivers?

45.0 %
40.0 %
15.0 %
20.0 %
50.0 %
40.0 %
55.0 %

- Changing study and research patterns
- Changing teaching practices
- Copyright concerns
- Deterioration of collection
- New image databases becoming available
- Not Applicable
- Space constraints

Consequently, our survey found that none of our members envisaged their slide collections growing in scale over the next five years, and it is notable that of the 45% of members that do not hold slide collections today, several did in the past. Indeed, in the last five years 50% of our members have deaccessioned slide collections entirely, or selectively deaccessioned from extant

came from either faculty or learning resources budgets. In terms of copyright clearance, the majority of institutions took a pragmatic approach in which slides were mostly pre-cleared prior to digitisation, but slides with untraceable intellectual property rights were also included if they were inherently useful for learning, teaching and

research, backed up by take-down policies and notices.

Members were also asked about their videotape holdings, as they had been about their slide collections. Fifty-five per cent of survey respondents reported that they had disposed of, or had considered disposing of, videotapes in the last five years. In many other sectors the continued existence of videotape in any collection might be viewed as anachronistic, yet many visual arts libraries hold collections of artists' films and video art. These productions are often extremely difficult to acquire once lost (produced as they are in small editions for niche markets), and can be prohibitively expensive. It is perhaps not surprising then that a relatively high percentage of respondents (some 30%) had not deaccessioned their videotapes, or even considered doing so. SVAG has noted with disappointment that, post-Hargreaves, the proposed amendment to UK copyright legislation to allow for format shifting is aconcession available to privatae individuals only,[10] and will not permit institutions to copy their videotape collections onto DVD.
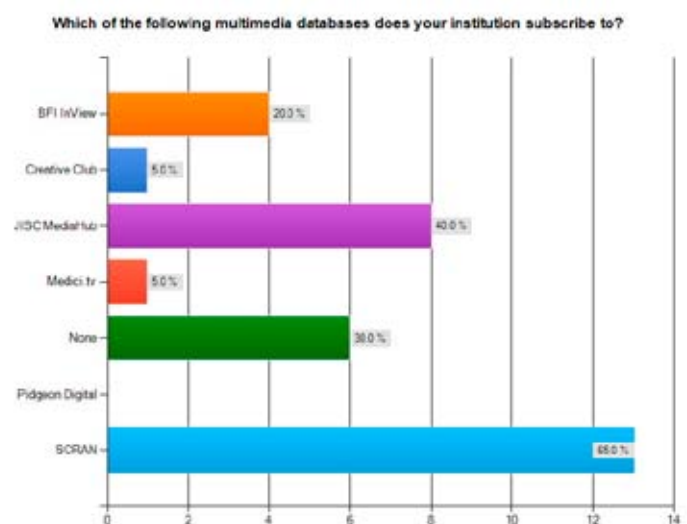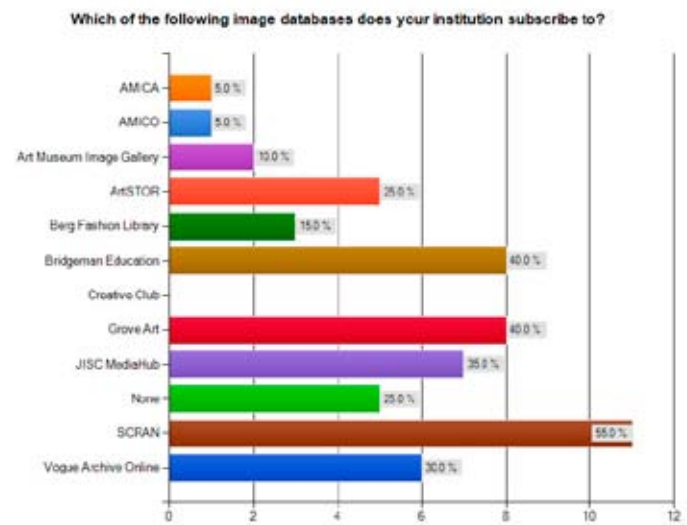
Of those respondents who had disposed of videotapes, or considered doing so, the principal drivers were space constraints (40%), deterioration of collection (40%), changing teaching practices (35%), and changing study and research patterns (35%). These drivers principally mirror those given for the disposal of slide collections, but with the additional driver of collection deterioration. Smaller responses were received for other drivers such as copyright concerns, equipment obsolescence and the availability of multimedia databases.

Of those institutions currently using a digital asset management system to administer both their digital images and multimedia, there was an even split between five platforms, namely DAMsmart,[11] Flickr, Luna Insight,[12] the open source MDID[13] and System Simulation.[14] Five per cent of respondents reported that they use a bespoke system constructed in-house, mostly based

on generic business products from Microsoft or Adobe.

Responding members subscribe to a large variety of image databases to satisfy the learning, teaching and research needs of their patrons. The most subscribed databases were SCRAN (55%), Grove Art and Bridgeman Education (both 40%), JISC Mediahub (35%), Vogue Archive Online (30%) and ARTstor (25%). Smaller responses were received for other resources, such as AMICA, AMICO, Art Museum Image Gallery, Berg Fashion Library, and Creative Club. Twenty-five per cent of institutions did not currently subscribe to any image database. A similar pattern emerged for multimedia platforms and services, with SCRAN and JISC Mediahub again the most subscribed resources, followed by BFI InView (20%). Small responses were received for both Medici.tv and Creative Club. Thirty per cent of members reported having no offering in this area.

Which of the following image databases does your institution subscribe to?

Database	%
AMICA	5.0 %
AMICO	5.0 %
Art Museum Image Gallery	10.0 %
ArtSTOR	25.0 %
Berg Fashion Library	15.0 %
Bridgeman Education	40.0 %
Creative Club	
Grove Art	40.0 %
JISC MediaHub	35.0 %
None	25.0 %
SCRAN	55.0 %
Vogue Archive Online	30.0 %

Which of the following multimedia databases does your institution subscribe to?

Database	%
BFI InView	20.0 %
Creative Club	5.0 %
JISC MediaHub	40.0 %
Medici.tv	5.0 %
None	30.0 %
Pidgeon Digital	
SCRAN	65.0 %

Over the last 5 years, 60% of members reported having deaccessioned runs of print journals, or considered doing so. The main drivers for this activity were identified as space constraints (50%) and the increasing availability of e-journals (30%). Smaller responses were received for de-duplication, changing learning and teaching needs, and UK Research Reserve[15] participation. These results reflect anecdotal evidence across SVAG that, as with many other disciplines, the visual arts have not been immune to the rise of the e-journal. However, the availability of electronic journals across the arts remains less than for other subjects, and most members envisage having blended collections of both print and electronic journals for several years yet. The print journal can also lend itself better to browsing, which we have noted is key for art and design practitioners. Indeed, 35% of members reported having no plans to deaccession any print journals, despite the growth of the e-journal.

When addressing the issue of the patron-driven acquisition of e-books, which remains live in many libraries across different sectors, 60% of members were at least considering piloting this approach with their users in the short to medium-term.

Conclusion

Our survey has demonstrated that visual arts libraries remain in a state of flux. They are yet to see the wholesale move to electronic content that has already been experienced in some other sectors, yet the new digital world continues to exert a powerful influence over current collections practice and future strategic decisions. Decisions are starting to be taken that will affect the collections our future patrons have access to, and the ways in which this access is mediated. Many institutions continue to hold substantial collections in pre-digital formats such as slide or video, though deaccessioning has occurred in other member libraries. For those that continue to hold this material, focus is shifting to digitisation efforts, driven either by changing patterns of research or more prosaic concerns such as space constraints. Questions remain, however, over the sustainability of these efforts, given a lack of central or external funding, a piecemeal technical landscape and the absence of a strategic sector-wide approach. Against this backdrop, the visual arts librarian must strive to ensure that the unique information-seeking behaviours of creative practitioners continue to be catered for. These are dilemmas that SVAG will continue to debate and discuss in its next twenty years.

NOTES

1   http://copac.ac.uk/ [accessed 14 April 2014]

2   Please apply to the Membership Secretary, Paula Cuccurullo at p.cuccurullo@ed.ac.uk

3   http://scurl.ac.uk/ [accessed 14 April 2014]

4   http://www.arlis.org.uk/ [accessed 14 April 2014]

5   http://scottish-visual-arts-group.blogspot.co.uk/ [accessed 14 April 2014]

6   @scotvisualarts

7   S. Cobbledick. 1996. The information-seeking behaviour of artists: exploratory interviews. *Library quarterly*, 66:4, 343–72

8   S. Cowan & T. Branigan. 2004. Informing visual poetry: information needs and sources of artists. *Art documentation*, 23:2 , 14–20

9   A literature review on the information-seeking behaviours of creative practitioners, compiled by the Glasgow School of Art Library, is available at http://www2.gsa.ac.uk/library/infosmart/index.html [accessed 14 April 2014]

10   Intellectual Property Office briefing on private copying amendments: http://www.ipo.gov.uk/techreview-private-copying.pdf [accessed 14 April 2014]

11   http://www.damsmart.com.au/ [accessed 14 April 2014]

12   http://www.lunaimaging.com/ [accessed 14 April 2014]

13   http://sites.jmu.edu/mdidhelp/ [accessed 14 April 2014]

14   http://www.ssl.co.uk/ [accessed 14 April 2014]

15   https://www.ukrr.ac.uk/ [accessed 14 April 2014]