

# *Under-Served or Under-Surveyed: The Information Needs of Studio Art Faculty in the Southwestern United States*

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## **Introduction**

Studio art faculty are unique library patrons, and their information needs are not the same as those of other humanities scholars. Artists see the world in a distinctive way, and the services and information they need from libraries reflect the creative and tangential nature of art. The expectations and information needs of studio art faculty, whether these needs are being met by academic librarians, and suggestions to improve services to studio art faculty and, through them, to their students, are explored below.

## **Literature Review**

Artists use books for two primary reasons: to obtain technical information, and to find inspiration. In the search for inspiration, artists do not limit themselves to books about art.<sup>1</sup> However, using books does not require that they use libraries. Whenever artists—or by extension art faculty—are the subject of a library study, this is the first question that must be answered. Some studio art faculty do use the library, but they also purchase many of their own books. In the best of both worlds, studio art faculty use the university library in conjunction with their personal library.

For a 1999 study, Jacquelyn Challener interviewed sixteen art history faculty and eleven studio art faculty at Kent State University. More than half of each group (nine teaching art history and six teaching studio art) reported that they maintain personal art libraries.<sup>2</sup> In 1996 Susie Cobbledick interviewed four practicing artists about their library needs; this group also confirmed that they purchase many of their own books. At least one respondent said that he prefers to buy new or important publications rather than waiting for the library to purchase them.<sup>3</sup> Maria Downey found that 88 percent of her subjects, all of whom were studio art faculty and graduate students with teaching responsibilities, kept personal libraries. Because of these libraries, Downey pointed out that art faculty can get by without other libraries; therefore, the importance of the university library must be made more apparent to them.<sup>4</sup> It has been nearly a decade since these studies were done. However, the tendency of artists to build personal book collections was established by Deirdre Stam in 1984. Stam, who interviewed art historians in museums and colleges, found that her subjects depended heavily on their personal libraries, purchasing ten to thirty books per year, and subscribing to an average of four periodicals per year.<sup>5</sup>

Art faculty who do use libraries have choices about which library they use; university libraries, public libraries, and museum libraries are all options for them. Also, some universities have specialized fine arts libraries, which present a fourth option for these faculty. Some faculty use more than one of these types, but there may be a correlation between the type of library an individual faculty member prefers and his or her specialty. Stam compared art historians in a museum setting and those teaching in academic settings and found that both groups used their institutional libraries, but that the college faculty were more likely to use small college and public libraries as well, repeatedly, while museum personnel limited their usage to large and well known institutions.<sup>6</sup> Challener found that art history faculty were likely to use the university library, while the studio art faculty she interviewed showed a preference for public and museum libraries.<sup>7</sup> Cobbledick, who interviewed practicing artists, backs up these results. The artists were lukewarm at best about the university library and shared a strong preference for the public library which they felt was more comfortable and friendlier, with helpful staff that were less focused on teaching patrons than their academic counterparts. These artists also found the academic collections overlarge, out-of-date, and lacking a strong collection of art periodicals. They also did not appreciate the separation of oversize and special collections from the main circulating collection.<sup>8</sup>

If studio artists and faculty do, in fact, prefer public libraries, it may be because they have a heavy preference for browsing as a search method. Most public libraries offer smaller, more-frequently-weeded collections that are conducive to browsing. Public libraries also keep dust jackets (unlike many academic libraries), and these catch the interest of artists. Another reason that some art faculty preferred public libraries was the staff. Karen Antell, a librarian at the University of Oklahoma, noticed that students from her university were using the public library instead of the university library. With the permission of the public library staff, Antell approached seventeen college students when they came to the public library and asked them why they chose it over the academic library. Students admitted that they did recognize the difference between public and academic library collections, but they felt less intimidated in the public library, the staff members were more helpful, and they didn't get the same "runaround" as in the university library.<sup>9</sup> Although Antell was studying a general undergraduate library patron group rather than art faculty, her findings reflect the views of many artists who patronize academic libraries.

















