

## Positioning the Library as a Strategic Partner to Enrich the Campus Experience Through Art

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# POSITIONING THE LIBRARY AS A STRATEGIC PARTNER TO ENRICH THE CAMPUS EXPERIENCE THROUGH ART

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## **Abstract**

Academic libraries are centres that promote research excellence, offering resources for their communities to help consider the world around us. Artists use their form of creative expression to raise questions about life and to interpret the human condition. Art has the power to enrich the academic environment through new and alternate ways of representing scholarship, helping to make research appealing and more accessible to a variety of audiences. The Library can be a catalyst to propel this goal forward, helping students navigate university life, building a bridge with internal and external communities, and informing faculty research in new and meaningful ways.

The author has over twenty years of experience as an academic librarian engaged in positioning libraries to be active partners in the enrichment of the campus experience through art. This paper briefly explores the emergence of regional and national collaborations among galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAMs) in Canada and around the world while considering the role of the academic library within these partnerships. The paper shares experiences of intentional art-centred space and service design including: relationship building with the campus art gallery and other appropriate academic departments, embracing the flexibility of library space, rethinking traditional library and archival resources to inspire artists in the academic community, and supporting faculty and students with explorations in the area of arts-informed research and scholarship.

## **Keywords**

Collaboration, Partnerships, Academic Libraries, Art, Galleries, Arts-Informed Research

## **Introduction**

The networks, tools, and resources university students use to consume and produce digital media has become second nature. A ubiquitous culture has emerged manifesting in a student body which prefers to absorb and communicate information in visual ways. It is generally understood in academia that for meaningful learning to occur we can no longer solely rely on text-based resources. Teaching and learning centres continually encourage faculty to incorporate new, innovative media-based resources into the classroom. The rise in visual culture has increased the importance of integrating new literacies into the curriculum for students to critically interpret and negotiate media and be equipped with the skills and abilities to function effectively in a visual world [Ervine, 2016].

Academic librarians consistently rise to the challenge to support the needs of the university. At the dawn of the information age, North American librarians developed a set of competencies for information literacy (IL), now generally referred to in the updated *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* adopted in 2016 by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL). In the *Framework*, metaliteracy is the umbrella term used in a “renewed vision” of IL “as an overarching set of abilities in which students are both consumers and creators of information in multiple formats” [p. 8]. These abilities include visual literacy, defined by the ACRL as a skill which “enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media” [Hattwig, et. al, 2011, para. 2]. According to Jones-Kavaliar and Flannigan, visual literacy “emerges from seeing and integrating sensory experiences” and that “Visually literate individuals

have a sense of design – the imaginative ability to create, amend, and reproduce images, digital or not, in a mutable way” [2006, p. 9]. Immersed in an image-rich environment, students seek relatable experiences and university libraries should consider attending to the visual learners in our midst.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines art as “the expression or application of creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as a painting, drawing, or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power” [“Art”, n.d., para. 8]. Research studies conducted in populations around the world show evidence to indicate that there are direct connections between the improvement of health and well-being when individuals engage in cultural activities such as those offered by museums and art galleries [Camic, 2013]. In an artists’ book subtitled ‘Art in the Library’, Vancouver artist, writer, and curator Vanessa Kwan contemplates the library as a venue for art. She wrote “In many ways, the library embodies the kind of open-ended engagement that contemporary art practices work so hard to achieve” and that libraries are “a remarkable venue for art making and viewership” [p. 29]. Ultimately, art is a form of communication in which the creator of the work seeks to impart some form of information or knowledge to the viewer. As Erinn Batykefer, co-founder/manager of the Library as Incubator Project once stated, “Every library, stripped to its barest mission, seeks to connect people with information ... art is information – the product of a creative process and the process itself” and art in libraries “serves as a visible representation of the connection among information and creativity and innovation” [Schwartz, 2016, p. 1]. The establishment of dedicated spaces for art in academic libraries “inspires, delights, renews, and refreshes” and becomes a “powerful resource that educates, enriches, stretches the mind and the senses” [Simor, 1991, p. 139]. Academic libraries are uniquely positioned to take a central role in enhancing the campus experience through art.

The purpose of this paper is to consider partnerships with the campus art gallery, explore art-centred (and arts-inspired) opportunities within the internal and external campus community, and encourage university libraries to incorporate art into their spaces as a consistent and purposeful practice. Libraries can build strategic partnerships with various groups to engage and enhance academic experiences. The author shares selected examples and lessons learned with a focus on a learning commons renovation project at the Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) Library which supports a small, primarily undergraduate institution located in Halifax, Nova Scotia on Canada’s east coast. This learning commons initiative provided a unique opportunity to create a dedicated art exhibition space through the Library’s main thoroughfare, a busy passageway connecting two academic buildings, the Seton Academic Centre and the newly constructed Margaret Norrie McCain Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Research (McCain Centre).

### **From Silos to Synergies: The Emergence of GLAMs**

Over a decade ago, the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) released a paper titled *Beyond the Silos of the LAMS* sending ripples through the library, archive, and museum (LAM) communities. Although recognizing them as still largely disparate entities, the report encouraged a move beyond their differences and offered examples of collaboration and pragmatic advice to partner as cultural heritage institutions with a common purpose [Zorich, Waibel, & Erway, 2008].

Since then a growing realization has emerged of the benefits of LAM partnerships. Across Canada a slow but steady convergence is underway. In 2017, the first national summit brought together galleries and LAMS (GLAMs). In his opening speech, Dr. Guy Bertiaume, Librarian and Archivist of Canada, stated that GLAMs “could not be reduced to the simple function of collecting and preserving works” and that memory institutions should be seen as “a source for inspiration at the start of the creative process” [Bertiaume, 2017, p. 7]. The most recent summit was themed ‘Taking it to the People’ and livestreamed across the country. As a broader example, the global network OpenGLAM.org, an initiative of OpenKnowledge, exists as a community of practice endeavoring to extend the reach of GLAM heritage collections around the world. Even Wikipedia is reaching out to GLAM communities, connecting the skills of a Wikipedian-in-Residence with cultural institutions to enhance Wikipedia content in a “mutually beneficial” relationship to disseminate knowledge held by GLAMs around the world [“GLAMs collaborating with Wikipedia”, n.d., para. 4]. These partnerships

break down barriers under the common urgency of collection preservation and to meet the needs of a digital hungry society.

### **Beyond Digital: Partnering for Art in the Library**

Edward Tufte, a professor and pioneering scholar of information visualization and design, wrote in his 1990 landmark book *Envisioning Information* that “the world is...complex, dynamic, multidimensional” [p. 9]. Although “we navigate daily through a perceptual world of three spatial dimensions...the world portrayed on our information displays is caught up in the two-dimensionality of the endless flatlands of paper and video screen” [p. 12]. Our students may lead increasingly digital lives yet the physical realm still plays a major role in shaping their world experience. Institutions invest heavily in campus refurbishment and students flock to our physical spaces. University libraries are no longer seen merely as a repository for books and the popularity of the learning commons model demonstrates the important role our physical spaces still play in contributing to the academic experience. But do we take visual culture into consideration in these spaces, and how do we leverage the GLAM convergence happening on the world stage and carry this momentum to our campuses?

When the MSVU Library received provincial funding to embark on a learning commons renovation, it happened in tandem with the construction of the McCain Centre, a large academic building that houses the departments of business, communication, public relations, tourism, and the university's specialized research centres. Where the upper level Library hallway once ended in a quiet student study area, a link to the McCain Centre was built. On the opposite end is the Seton Academic Centre, a building for education and arts programs and where the MSVU Art Gallery is located. The Library is now a major hub in the centre. Features of the learning commons include: more collaborative areas, additional student meeting rooms, new furniture, and upgraded technology throughout. In addition to a space re-design there was a focus on partnering with other academic support departments, including the writing centre, counselling, accessibility services, and technology and media units to complement the Library's information and research help services to enhance the student experience.

It is common practice for academic libraries to integrate a visual component throughout a space project and much has been written about the benefits of this integration. Deutch and Cirasella conducted a literature review outlining numerous ways in which academic libraries have incorporated art in an effort to engage community [2012]. At the University of Western Australia, a ground floor renovation of its central library had at its core a student-centred approach to engagement. One of the projects included a student-led competition to choose an artist to paint a mural focal point at the library's entrance as “a key way of engaging students” [Benn, Mills, Nicholls, & Sputore, 2017, p. 7]. Something as simple as cover art can make a difference. At MSVU we embrace book jackets and have invested in stands to display titles throughout the stacks (and on stack edges along the McCain link) which has increased circulation.

The MSVU Library has a good relationship with the MSVU Art Gallery. We share several things in common: we serve the public, steward collections, have preservation concerns, space constraints, digitization needs, and challenging budgets. We also recognize the need to grow and change to remain relevant to our communities. As a recent *University Affairs* article exclaimed, “with administrative budgets getting tighter and funding bodies demanding more inclusive programming, the role of the galleries as mere showcases for art collections is a thing of the past” [Carter, 2016, p. 1]. Although perhaps slower off the mark, art galleries also have to “reinvent themselves” [p. 1].

In the early stages of the learning commons project there was recognition of a profound opportunity. The connecting Library hallway link between the Seton and McCain buildings would have potentially thousands of people walking through every day during a busy academic term. There was agreement that the space would serve as an extension for the Gallery while providing flexibility for the Library and others in the campus community to use for other purposes. Because it hadn't been initially budgeted, the Gallery director applied for additional funding to install museum lighting along the hallway to better showcase art in what is a dimly lit corridor with no natural light.

The Library learning commons was officially completed in the fall of 2014 and the McCain Centre opened the following spring. The amount of foot traffic in the new connection was beyond expectations. The Library hoped to see an art exhibition in the space, but soon realized the Gallery must plan shows months, sometimes years, in advance. In this unique partnership we remained patient, understanding operational constraints and limited staffing resources. However, university galleries steward large permanent collections formed over many years of regular acquisitions and donations [Carter, 2016]. The learning commons provided an opportune venue to give pieces from the permanent collection more exposure with the added security for the works in a busy public space. We also consider requesting art related to timely topics on the university's agenda. In Canada, the Indigenous Heritage Action Plan is underway to help meet the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As libraries take steps to decolonize their collections, they can also help decolonize spaces and support Indigenous students and scholars by installing more Indigenous art. When the Gallery tackled emotional topics such as the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) exhibit 'Walking with our Sisters' the Library was used for complimentary displays. We also partner with our Aboriginal Students Centre to ensure that Indigenous art has a presence.

For over a year the Gallery ensured ever-changing permanent collection works were shown throughout the space. The time came for the first exhibition; from April 22 – July 9, 2017 the Gallery and the Library hosted framed photographic images by Canadian artist Brenda Francis Pelkey. This was the perfect opportunity to try out the exhibition space, cooperate on promotion, and build the relationship with the Gallery by hosting a public show. The Library extension space was given an interesting collection of images showing immigrant owners next to their houses decorated to remind them of their homeland. The exhibition's large and unique photographs along the pathway walls had a tendency to stop people in their tracks. The exhibition mirrored the Gallery's hours and access was necessary on weekends during summer inter-session when the Library is normally closed, a consideration not initially realized. The learning commons renovations had provided installed security cameras, after-hours Library access was solved by hiring a security guard to monitor the space, and Gallery student assistants helped navigate patrons between the two buildings.

Library staff are empowered when they are prepared to answer questions about the art. During the first exhibition, the Library worked with the Gallery to secure documentation about the artist to circulate to staff; a practice that is ongoing. Staff tours of the Gallery and the Library portion of the show were led by the Gallery's program coordinator and concluded with a lunch which provided an opportunity to share thoughts on the exhibit. Staff thrive in an environment where creativity is encouraged. We grow the library-gallery relationship by offering staff extra time to visit Gallery exhibitions throughout the work week. Engaging Library staff to be ambassadors of art-inspired projects has been key to the success of the partnership.

Ideally, libraries are encouraged to advocate for a dedicated area for art. Offering this to the gallery as an extension space is mutually beneficial, supporting the library's mission and allowing the gallery to be more nimble with a flexible space that reaches a wide audience. Recognizing that libraries come in all shapes and sizes, if a suitable designated area is not possible then re-imagine the space you have. While working at Acadia University, the gallery on campus was offered a travelling exhibit but their space was already booked. The unique nature of the works on fabric allowed them to hang from the ceiling, rather than be affixed to a wall, providing flexibility for placement. As an engagement librarian at the time I welcomed the opportunity to host the show. The gallery's director was supportive but as the only gallery employee she had limited time to commit. The Library established a relationship with the Toronto-based artist V. Tony Hauser who guided the installation by phone with the help of facilities staff. From November 3-14, 2008 the 'Living with Landmines' exhibit visited the Acadia campus showcasing sixteen life-size portraits displayed throughout the library's main floor. Next to the visually impactful images, interpretive panels told powerful stories of the Cambodian children in the photos injured and affected by landmines. The library saw numerous class visits and even administrators who had barely stepped in to the library before brought university board members and other guests to tour the exhibit.

### **Celebrating Creativity, Connecting Community**

While working at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) University it was common for students to place art across campus and occasionally approach staff to install work in the library. Early in my role, I took a photograph of an obviously intentional stack of conceptual art books found just after closing time. Unable to track down the student artist, the digital photo was added to the Library's Libguide homepage which led to excitement among the student community as to who created it. A young fine arts student soon came forward and was thrilled we took notice of his book sculpture. Celebrating student creativity had a direct effect on requests for more student art collaborations, the most memorable being securing permission from facilities to drill a peep-hole in a library closet and install a light box for a graduate student installation, now a permanent fixture on the second floor of the NSCAD Library.

Even if your institution doesn't have a program in the visual arts, there is creativity in every university community. At MSVU a business student became intrigued by a women's studies elective where he learned about our lesbian pulp fiction (LPF) special collection. We keep the LPF books at one end of the Library link protected in a case but open for viewing the cover art through glass. The experience inspired the student to create a digital representation of the Ann Bannon classic *I Am a Woman* and present it to the Library printed on velum. With the student's permission, the Gallery framed his work which now hangs next to the collection complete with an artist tag.

Library collections can also be a source for inspiration in the artist community. Recently, a retired physician named Christiane Poulin graduated with her Bachelor of Fine Arts at the NSCAD. Poulin spent extensive research time with our Library's archival collection, pouring through architectural drawings of various buildings on campus. This archival research shone through in her solo textile exhibition which was displayed in the Gallery. By leveraging connections with artists in the community, our Library has also partnered on art-based projects with local universities. The most significant to date has been to bring New York artist Warren Lehrer to Halifax and give a multimedia performance of his highly visual book *A Life in Books: The Rise and Fall of Bleu Mobley*. Working with Lehrer throughout, the Library secured funding from other local universities to support the artist's travel and pay for a lighting technician for the performance. We partnered to invite artists, book art enthusiasts, faculty, and their classes to the downtown Halifax Central Library for the performance, which drew a large audience from the public and across four university communities.

### **Supporting the Arts-Informed Researcher**

This final section introduces a research population dedicated to scholarship influenced by the arts and explores ways in which libraries can make a connection. Many examples in the literature indicate there are researchers around the globe who are inspired by artistic inquiry and methods. To illustrate a recent example within the library profession, a group of Australia librarians at Deakin University Library used a "visual, art-based methodological approach" to explore how faculty and library staff perceive an academic librarian [Morey, LeClerc, Minns, Gregory, & Glynn, 2018, p. 833]. Participant focus groups were invited to create "an artifact – a visual representation of the role of a liaison librarian using mixed media, including drawing and collage", and then explain what was created and why in order for the researchers to interpret meaning [p. 834].

At MSVU, the Centre for Arts Informed Research & Teaching was created to bring together a collective of faculty and students interested in this practice. In the past the Library has provided inspiring spaces in its special and rare collections room for faculty to meet and exchange ideas. We have also developed a Libguide to define the practice, link to relevant resources, and connect graduate students with examples of theses with an arts-informed research lens.

A recent partnership between the psychology and sociology departments, along with the Gallery and the Library, is a perfect example of an arts-informed research project that benefits the campus community. "It just brings me closer: Reflections on memorial tattoos" is a travelling exhibition of photographs giving visual representation to a research study investigating the purpose and meaning of commemorative tattoos. The two psychology professors and curators, Jennifer Buckle and Sonya Corbin Dwyer at Memorial University in the Canadian province of Newfoundland, studied

participants with these tattoos in an effort to increase the limited research in this area, “particularly from a psychological perspective” [“It just brings me closer, 2018, para. 2]. Results “suggest they are a way that people can express and process their loss and make this experience visible not only to themselves but also to the public” [para. 2]. Centrally located in the Library’s high traffic exhibition space, the objects allowed students to absorb research information in visual form. Members of the campus community had the ability to stop and read interpretive panels and quotes from the interviews at their own pace in a comfortable, multi-purpose space.

The central exposure of the tattoo exhibit had an effect we did not expect. It inspired a faculty member in another discipline to incorporate the show into their classes. An English professor teaching a first year ‘Intro to Literature: Reading Literary Forms’ class arranged for her students to visit the tattoo exhibit. The Library provided an introduction to our special collections, gave students time to browse various storytelling texts, and the students were asked to choose a quotation they found which might be chosen as the subject of a commemorative tattoo by a character in one of the short stories they were covering in class. The assignment introduced the Library as a welcoming space, our special collections as accessible and unique, the “value of the physical text”, and allowed students to connect with the tattoo research in different contexts [R. Green, personal communication, August 30, 2018].

Over the past few years several of our more active arts-informed faculty members have retired and some of those remaining lament this waning cohesiveness and momentum. While researching for this paper I came across an article describing the evolution of the ‘information commons’ to the ‘learning commons’ model that made me contemplate how to engage and revive the connections of this specialized research community. A 2012 review of trends in academic spaces made the distinction between the two: that ‘information commons’, the previously used term in academic libraries, focused on spaces where students seek out knowledge, whereas a ‘learning commons’ shifts the focus to supporting learning and “knowledge creation” [Turner, Welch, & Reynolds, 2013, p. 299]. Despite libraries’ ongoing efforts to create a learning commons concept that follows this ethos, Bieraugel and Neill noted in a recent *College and Research Libraries* article that while a great deal of literature has been published on the perceived “value of an academic library as a physical space for studying and learning”, less attention has been focused on libraries and their role as “fostering creative and innovative thinking” [2017, p. 37].

Inspired by this role for academic libraries, a project is now underway to organize a visual research exchange to connect the MSVU campus community with research in progress and share knowledge across disciplines. Open to students, faculty, and staff, the event will occur in the spring to coincide with the annual research symposium organized by the Research Office, the university academic awards event organized by the Vice President Academic and Provost, and convocation ceremonies to ensure a wide audience. While still in the early stages, the plan is to develop a call for submissions requesting a representation of research in any medium or creative visual expression of choice to be showcased in the Library’s exhibition space.

The Library project team includes myself and our scholarly communications librarian. Other stakeholders are the new Gallery Director who is keen to establish strategic partnerships. Recognizing their busy exhibition schedule and limited staffing resources, we have given a year’s notice so that the initiative is on their calendar for next year. Initial talks with the Gallery have been positive in regards to lending their expertise on the curation of material and providing advice on the aesthetics of the space. Other central players are the Research Office staff who look forward to enhancing their annual research symposium with the project. They have provided advice on external funding sources, such as the Federal Government of Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant to support research exchange initiatives or the SSHRC partnership options. Funds will invariably be necessary for exhibitor supplies, promotion, and to organize a celebratory event designed to bring together the research community to share their work and hopefully inspire current and future arts-informed researchers.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has been a reflection and exploration into the possibilities of an active and engaged

practice of integrating art in the university library. The intention has been to encourage others in the profession to do the same and to see art as more than merely an addition to a library building's aesthetic design, but as a way to engage the campus community in a meaningful academic experience. Many ideas in this paper can only be achieved through partnerships, in particular with the campus art gallery. While these connections don't happen overnight, libraries can learn from the positive GLAM synergies happening around the world and be more purposeful in seeking opportunities and partners which support similar teaching, learning, and research goals. With considerations for location and context, art in the library can offer a visual information experience to share knowledge, construct meaning, and bring inspiration to campus. In researching this paper, and connecting my own experiences over the years working with art in academic libraries, I am convinced of its positive power within the university environment. For libraries that are considering the possibilities, or for those already well immersed in an integration, it is important to be creative, consistent, seek partners, and be intentional with your practice for all to benefit.

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