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Collecting to the Core — Visual Arts



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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists will introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

When evaluating what visual arts titles might rank as classics with a secure home in a core collection, the fate of *The Dictionary of Art* comes to mind.¹ When this multivolume encyclopedia appeared fifteen years ago, it received near universal acclaim. Art historian **Richard Brilliant** described the *Dictionary* as "a vast compendium of knowledge" and "the most complete reference work on art in existence."² *Time Magazine* art critic **Robert Hughes** noted: "There's no art publication in existence that gives the reader such richness of detail and coherence of organization."³ When it was published in 1996, the *Dictionary* easily earned shelf space in core collections; today, this epic work is a possible candidate for storage. It isn't that this encyclopedia has lost its value. On the contrary, the print *Dictionary* provides the core content of an even richer electronic resource, the multidimensional *Oxford Art Online*. Describing the evolution of *Oxford Art Online* illuminates its primary importance as a visual arts resource, and it also reveals the challenges of defining a core collection in the digital age.⁴

In the early 1980s, *The Dictionary of Art* began development under the editorship of **Jane Turner**. It was a much-needed alternative and update to a long-standing workhouse, **McGraw-Hill's** seventeen-volume *Encyclopedia of World Art*, a work renowned for its monographic articles and illustrations.⁵ Published by **Grove Dictionaries**, a unit of **MacMillan Publishers**, the *Dictionary* was conceived as a conceptual companion to the iconic *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and hence carried with it the "Grove" and "Dictionary" appellations.⁶ Over the next fifteen years, 6,700 scholars contributed 41,000 articles, enriched with 15,000 illustrations, and packaged into thirty-four volumes of nearly a thousand pages each. The published work garnered numerous awards in 1996 and 1997, and *Art Journal* featured a special collection of reviews of the work. One of those articles, "Dreaming of the Digital Edition," presciently observed that an online version of the encyclopedia could enable continuously added content, high-quality illustrations, and better access to

information than that provided by the alphabetic entries and cumbersome index.⁷

In 1998, the digital version appeared. Entitled the *Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, this first no-frills version of "groveart" demonstrated the power of simple online searching to mine a vast aggregation of knowledge.⁸ The next iteration in 1999 fully exploited the power of the Web, reproducing the resource in its entirety, and augmented with sophisticated search mechanisms and links to external image content. As an *Art Documentation* reviewer noted, the online resource was "in the process of becoming richer and more valuable than its print sibling."⁹ This made acquiring the print version, which cost a whopping \$8,800, an even more difficult decision for librarians.

Seemingly ironic, then, was the commencement in 2000 of a publishing program consisting of titles whose content was derived from the online *Dictionary*. A primary rationale for this program was to create works that were portable and affordable. There was also an intellectual economy at play: the amorphous nature of the online resource begged for information to be clustered in an understandable shape. The initial set of economical, paperback derivatives, published under the **Palgrave MacMillan** imprint of **St. Martin's**, covered popular topics, as evidenced by their titles: *From Expressionism to Post-Modernism: Styles and Movements in 20th-Century Western Art*; *From Renaissance to Impressionism: Styles and Movements in Western Art, 1400-1900*; *From David to Ingres: Early 19th-Century French Artists*; *From Monet to Cezanne: Late 19th-Century French Artists*; *From Rembrandt to Vermeer: 17th-Century Dutch Artists*.¹⁰⁻¹⁴ Reprinted in 2003, these works were assigned one of three series titles: *Grove Art Series*, *Grove Art Series*, or *Grove Dictionary Art Series*.

In 2000, the *Grove Library of World Art Series* also premiered, featuring more expensive, compact, theme-based encyclopedias of exceptional quality utilizing content reshaped from the *Dictionary*. The first two books — *Encyclopedia of American Art before 1914* and *Encyclopedia of Latin American & Caribbean Art* — were unique compendiums, each providing over 1,000 articles in approximately 700 pages with illustrations.¹⁵⁻¹⁶ The third title, *Encyclopedia of Italian Renaissance & Mannerist Art*, moved beyond the compact format and consisted of two volumes containing approximately 1,800 articles and 1,200 illustrations.¹⁷ In 2003, **Oxford University Press** assumed ownership of the "Grove" brand, and in 2006 the two-volume *The Grove Encyclopedia of Decorative Arts*¹⁸ was published. *The Grove Encyclopedia of Classical Art and Architecture*, also in two volumes, followed in 2007.¹⁹ As library users demanded both print and elec-

tronic resources, the **Grove** products provided coverage across both formats, offering near-comprehensive reference content for art studies.

Then, *Oxford Art Online* premiered in 2008. Besides serving as an enhanced gateway to the *Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, this electronic resource incorporated three other highly-regarded Oxford titles: *The Oxford Companion to Western Art*, *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, and *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*.²⁰⁻²² Advanced search features enabled cross-searching of all content or any one title, as well as retrieval according to searches of full text, article titles, bibliographic entries, or images. The image content moved well beyond embedded works and external links to include licensed resources, such as ARTstor, for subscribing institutions. Learning tools were provided in association with the Museum of Modern Art and included historical timelines, lesson plans, and thematic guides on selected art topics. Entries in the bibliographies of articles could be linked to the holdings of local online catalogs. The user experience was further enriched by an interface that enabled one to print, email, or format search results.

With the ever-expanding *Oxford Art Online* as a base, the print publishing program had a greater resource to exploit, and the encyclopedic output continued with "Grove" remaining in the title. In 1996, the original *Dictionary* was highly praised for its substantive inclusion of articles on artistic materials and techniques. Twelve years later, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques in Art* was published, providing over 400 entries on all aspects of materials, including traditional formats as well as textiles, magnetic tape, film, and digital art.²³ *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture* was published in 2009.²⁴ In that year Oxford also published the three-volume *The Grove Encyclopedia of Northern Renaissance Art*.²⁵ Its reviewer in *Choice* observed, "The history of northern Renaissance art pedagogy in the U.S. owes much to **Erwin Panofsky's** *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character* (1953) ... *The Grove Encyclopedia of Northern Renaissance Art* serves as another milestone."²⁶ The 2011 addition to the **Grove** family, *The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art*, was yet another landmark.²⁷ Comprising 2,300 entries published in five volumes, the American art title incorporated content from *Oxford Art Online*, either verbatim or substantially revised, and added new material as well. The new content was later ingested into *Oxford Art Online*.

Undoubtedly, *Oxford Art Online* will continue to add new content, aggregate more **Oxford** titles, enhance access capabilities,

continued on page 77

expand learning tools, and sire more spin-offs. In selecting core titles in the visual arts, one naturally questions the need for listing the parent, siblings, and children publications associated with this electronic resource. However, the genealogy presents some well-credentialed relatives: *The Dictionary of Art*, *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Classical Art and Architecture*, and *The Grove Encyclopedia of Decorative Arts* were all ranked by *Choice* as Outstanding Academic Titles for their respective years, and the other kindred works have been consistently judged to be highly recommended or essential for academic library collections.

In his 1996 review of the *Dictionary*, **Brilliant** theorized that a compilation in print format, as opposed to online, gave the reader a satisfying illusion “that there are boundaries to the worthwhile knowable” and that such boundaries in themselves facilitate comprehension.²⁸ It is likely that while *Oxford Art Online* expands, print publications associated with it will continue to flourish and establish the meaningful boundaries. In any case, *The Dictionary of Art* will be remembered as the progenitor of a publishing ecosystem in which, for a time, the print and online simultaneously thrived and augmented each other. 🌸

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Editor’s note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

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