

Fowler, C (2015) Viewpoint: the role of passion in art librarianship. *Art Libraries Journal*, 40 (1). pp. 3-4.

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Available on RADAR : February 2015

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## Viewpoint: The role of passion in art librarianship

Chris Fowler

The Keynote speaker at this year's ARLIS/UK & Ireland Conference in Manchester struck a sobering note and used language and concepts depressingly familiar to those of us working in Higher Education. Jan Wilkinson, the University Librarian at the University of Manchester and Director of the world-famous John Rylands Library made two confessions to conference delegates. The first was that the majority of subjects at her University no longer had specialist librarians and the second was that she did not feel a great attachment to the profession. From a marketing background, Jan was perfectly attuned to the idea of HE as a business. Whilst she made valid points about the need for librarians to be more strategic in their approach and for university libraries to be seen as an essential component of the competitive edge of the university I am sure I was not alone in feeling depressed at the lack of value attached to specialist knowledge and collections.

"Reaching New Peaks: Onwards and Upwards" was the title of the Conference and the theme was celebrating what we do well. Jan was celebrating the positioning of the academic library and the development of leadership. Our other speakers celebrated many things; wonderful archives, inspiring architecture and books, developments in digitisation and discovery. However, three things linked them: specialist knowledge, a desire to contribute to the good of the art community and passion. As Conference unfolded I felt my love for the profession soar. Surrounded as I was by colleagues who shared my passion I felt renewed and invigorated.

Vindication came on the last day. Our two wonderful student speakers, Kristin Marshall and Amy Thomas, described how the passion of the librarians and archivists they encountered at Manchester Metropolitan University's Special Collections and Visual Resource Centre was infectious. Inspired by this passion the MA students were led to respond to the materials in unexpected ways. In other words the heightened perceptions of the professional staff enabled the students to see the material in a different light and appreciate the possibilities it presented. And as artist and academic Jacqueline Butler described how she and her colleagues documented the redevelopment of the stacks in Manchester Central Library, again it was the passion of the staff that lingered long after the books had gone. The potential of the books was discoverable because the librarians cared enough to make it evident.

I felt that the whole Conference was an affirmation of our role and purpose as art librarians and archivists. Many of us may have arrived feeling somewhat weary and disheartened having had to make yet another case for the importance of print resources to art and design students or of the value of our collections to academic research and public well-being. Some of us will have been fighting for the continued existence of subject specialists in academic libraries and trying to prevent the

diminution of the role. I hope all left, as I did, feeling validated and refreshed and ready to fight another day. Specialist art librarians contribute to the creative output through collecting, curating and describing relevant material. More importantly, their love of the collections in their care and their understanding of the material in those collections inspires artists to discover new ways of looking at and working with such material.

Subject specialist librarians care as much about their users as they do their collections. Accessibility is key and they are fully aware of the needs of their many dyslexic users and even the library phobic. They are not thrown by the way that art students work and are receptive to the idea of situating site-specific work in the Library.

In a world of metrics and generic services all of this is hard to quantify. Specialist knowledge can be seen as threatening by career managers and passion is, at best, eccentric. Lip service is paid to the student experience whilst the rush to standardisation continues at a pace.

It is not that art librarians are resistant to change. We have digitised our collections, embraced electronic databases, journals and books, social media and mobile technology. Amongst us are bloggers, tweeters and facebookers. Our teaching techniques make use of gaming, avatars and augmented reality. Collections have expanded to include the digital arts.

It is highly likely that in the future things will come full circle and the need for an individual approach mediated by subject specialists will once again come to the fore. In the meantime we are in danger of losing so much knowledge, experience and dedication it is hard to see how new entrants to the profession will be able to provide this. However, I have every confidence that they will. Just as people never forget an inspiring teacher who opened their eyes to poetry, history, art or even mathematics so they will not forget the librarian who introduced them to the wonders of the collections at the university or college they attended. We must keep faith with our core values despite all provocation and be proud to be passionate!

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