

Saskatchewan's Visual Arts: Developing a Contextualized Digital Collection

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Introduction

[Slide 1] Good afternoon. It is a pleasure to speak to you today. Libraries and archives in Saskatchewan are currently working on some interesting digitization projects. My talk will focus on a recent initiative at the University of Regina to build a digital archive of artists' materials. This initiative began with the archival slide collection of artist Joe Fafard and has expanding into an effort to make available excerpts from the archives of a number of different artists. I will trace how this project evolved and then speak to our efforts to present the materials with as much contextual information as possible. It is our hope that creating a fully contextualized collection will allow our research clients to use this digital archive as a research collection. But first, in keeping with the idea of placing things in their context, some background on the University of Regina's connection to the visual arts.

Visual Arts at the University of Regina

[Slide 2] The University of Regina and its predecessor Regina College have a remarkable visual arts legacy. The first courses in art were offered in 1916. Annual workshops for artists were initiated in 1955 at Emma Lake in northern Saskatchewan. The workshops were intensive two-week sessions held in the summer and led each year by

a different prominent artist from outside the province. Jack Shadbolt led the first workshop. Instructors such as New York art critic Clement Greenberg and artists Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski attracted international attention to the workshops. **[Slide 3]** Minoru Yamasaki, who designed the new Campus of the University of Regina in the early 1960s and would go on to design such seminal structures as the World Trade Centre in New York City, remarked that when he got off the plane in Regina “all I saw was the thin straight line of the horizon. That and the color of the sky. Nothing else. Then I met with all these vibrant, audacious people – from ministers to officials to educationalist to artists – who so believed in the creation of a haven of beauty and enlightenment on the flat prairies. I was caught up by their enthusiasm and I wanted to help” (Pitsula). In true western fashion, there was a sense of possibility, of new beginnings, and of exuberance that permeated all aspects of life, including the arts.

[Slide 4] The workshops were, in part, the inspiration of Kenneth Lochhead, who was only 24 years old when he was appointed as Director of the College’s School of Art. His desire was to expose his students to what was going on in the broader visual arts community. The Emma Lake workshops gained an international reputation. Attended by students from across North America and Europe, they had a profound impact on those artists from Saskatchewan who attended.

In addition to the Emma Lake workshops, Lochhead began assembling a faculty at the School of Art that would make a mark on the Canadian and North American art scenes. **[Slide 5]** This included Ron Bloore, Ted Godwin, Arthur McKay, and Doug Morton. Together with Lochhead they would gain national attention when featured in a

1961 National Gallery of Canada exhibition entitled "Five Painters from Regina." At that time, all five were considered to be at the forefront of Canada's modern art movement. When Archives and Special Collections began its visual arts collecting program in 1985 and 1986, the records of the Regina Five were among the first to be acquired.

Digitizing the Joe Fafard Slide Collection

Archives and Special Collections were approached in 2005 about the possibility of digitizing the slide collection of Joe Fafard. The original concept, advanced by freelance writer, consultant, and curator Terrence Heath **[Slide 6]**, proposed that the archives acquire and digitize Fafard's extensive slide collection as a step toward creating an online "research center" of his work. This online research center would allow for serious scholarship and was envisioned as aggregating the material of archives, galleries, and other institutions and individuals. **[Slide 7]** An internationally acclaimed artist and sculptor, Fafard is one of Canada's leading professional visual artists and has exhibited his work in galleries and museums across the country and around the world. Much of his early sculpture used clay, then, in 1985, he shifted to bronze as his chief sculptural medium. **[Slide 8]** Fafard portrays his neighbors, farm animals, and famous artists that he came to respect as he learned his craft.

Fafard had first donated materials to Archives and Special Collections in 1999. Archives and Special Collections now acquired slides documenting nearly his complete body of work from roughly the mid-1980s to 2002. Over 3,700 slides were received and organized chronologically by project. **[Slide 9]** Fafard's staff maintained a series of log books that documented project details such as medium of the

work, size, number of castings, and purchase information. While these log books were not part of the archival donation, the information in them was recorded by archives staff and formed the basis of the finding aid produced for the slides. Archives and Special Collections is a component of the Library at the University of Regina, and at roughly the same time that the slides were being described in Archives another component of the Library, Access and Systems, began the actual digitization of the slides. **[Slide 10]** High quality master images were created of each slide using a high-end slide scanner and scanning software capable of producing high-resolution TIFF format files. Master TIFF files at 4000 dpi were created with smaller derivative JPEG files created for eventual display on the Internet (MacDonald).

[Slide 11] Once the scanning was complete, various staffing and organizational changes at the Library delayed further progress. It would be almost three years before Archives and Special Collections was again in a position to devote time and attention to the Fafard slide project. The project eventually became the nucleus of a broader effort to digitize art archives in Saskatchewan. Funding was provided to Archives and Special Collections by the province and the project expanded to include archival materials from several significant artists that have been active in Saskatchewan since 1950. **[Slide 12]** This theme looks at artists that have raised the profile of visual arts within Saskatchewan, following the creation of the Saskatchewan Arts Board in 1948. The Arts Board's mandate to provide financial support to artists encouraged a new level of artistic growth within Saskatchewan and made way for some of the province's most noteworthy and memorable artists.

Saskatchewan's Visual Arts

The Saskatchewan's Visual Arts project is modeled on the successful projects that the Provincial Library, through the Saskatchewan Digital Alliance (SDA), has offered in the past. Our first exposure to digitization was our participation in the Saskatchewan War Experience Project. That initial project and now Saskatchewan's Visual Arts have dramatically increased our capacity to design and undertake digitization. The provincial objectives set by SDA for multitype digitization projects were adopted by the University of Regina and in addition to developing capacity, we have also developed internal standards and best practices, which I will speak to momentarily, engaged with partners outside the traditional archival and library field, and increased the amount of digital context available about Saskatchewan.

A masters-level art student undertook the selection of documents from various University of Regina archival collections. **[Slide 13]** Over 150 documents were scanned or photographed. This included unique archival materials like plans and sketches as well as original artwork such as paintings and prints. Also included were photographs, slides and audio interviews with several artists. In addition the 3,700 digital images of the artwork of Joe Fafard were described and added to the site by other Archives and Special Collections staff.

[Slide 14] The project currently includes the contributions of eight Saskatchewan artists: Ken Lochhead, Art McKay, Ron Bloore, Ted Godwin, Doug Morton, Jack Sures, Vic Cicansky and Joe Fafard. These

artists are noted for their energy and determination in bringing the art world to Saskatchewan. Under their participation and guidance, organizations such as the Mackenzie Art Gallery, the Department of Art at Regina College (and later the University of Regina), and the Emma Lake Artist Workshops flourished. This list is by no means extensive and we hope to add other artists from other parts of the province to the project as time passes.

Building Context in our Digital Collections

Archives have long been concerned with “context” and their very methods of organization, description, and access reflect this. More and more archivists are thinking about ways to apply this key principle to the new task of digitization. In the recent past materials were regularly digitized out of their context and archives routinely failed to refer researchers back to the full body of records. This is beginning to change. Both the Fafard project and Saskatchewan’s Visual Arts understand the importance of the context of the original archival materials and hopefully we have developed them to convey that contextual information accurately in the digital world.

In his initial approach to Archives and Special Collections, Terrence Heath envisioned something significantly more than a web exhibition of Fafard’s slides. A logical way to create digital collections of research value would be to replicate digitally the contextual principles that archives follow with non-digital records. Luckily, all the Fafard slides had been scanned in 2006 and 2007, and the archives staff dutifully recorded the contextual information from the Fafard logbooks. Now the task was to devise a system to attach the

contextual information to the digitized slides and to create a web presentation that would provide further background information on Fafard and the other artists selected for the Saskatchewan Visual Arts project.

[Slide 15] To this end Archives and Special Collections has developed an internal metadata element set for scanned art materials. This set, based on the elements already used in earlier projects, was supplemented and modified using *Dublin Core*, *PREMIS* (a standard for preservation metadata in digital archiving systems), and *Categories for the Description of Works of Art* from the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Our element set combines descriptive elements for the original art object (the sculpture) with descriptive elements for the archival object (the slide) and technical elements about the scanning process and resulting digital files. Specific elements are designed to record contextual information. **[Slide 16]** In addition to obvious elements, such as artwork medium, edition, date and measurement, others provide a short biography of the artist, a brief custodial history, and lists of further readings and related materials. All metadata elements are linked to the digitized image of the slide they describe in the CONTENTdm application utilized by the project **[Slide 17]**. We are working to embed some elements directly into the JPEG file of the slide to ensure that it may be contextualized should it be separated from the CONTENTdm application. **[Slide 18]** Thus, even if a researcher downloads a single slide and over time forgets its origins, certain contextual information will be available simply by viewing the file's properties.

As the project website continues to develop, it will contain a series of essays introducing researchers to Saskatchewan art and to the work of the various artists. **[Slide 19]** Ultimately, essays could be available on societal contexts, governmental policy regarding the arts, art technique and processes, and a whole host of other relevant access points. These essays would help researchers go beyond the materials at hand, to the less visible, yet complex ideas and trends behind them. A researcher could always go directly to the materials and avoid the essays at will, or choose to read some and ignore others. We are currently also considering audio and video essays where artists speak about their work and processes and even react to how their materials have been archived, digitized, and presented.

Future Directions

[Slide 20] The Fafard section of Saskatchewan Visual Artists is comprehensive and will hopefully serve as the nucleus of the digital research collection Heath envisioned. The other sections at this point are presented as a digital exhibition rather than an extensive research collection but the site has been devised to be fully expandable and Archives and Special Collections will continue to build and expand Saskatchewan Visual Arts as time and funding permits. Hopefully in the future we will be able to digitize more materials creating several truly online research collections. Currently we are working on adding images of various public art installations from across the province and soon will be working to add a series of clippings and photographs from the *Leader-Post*. There are a number of finishing touches to yet be made to the website, but I'd invite you to preview the site if you wish. A formal launch is being planned for the fall.

Conclusions

I hope that what I have presented today shows, in some part, the digitizing work that is underway at the University of Regina. And I hope that I have also shown the centrality of the contextual piece to that digitization work. What we are building, we hope, will provide our research clients not only with access to art and artist information, but will also provide the background, or the necessary information to discover the background, of the materials we present. Only in this way will researchers be able to critically think about and engage with what they see on their computer screens and that critical engagement should be a central goal of any project that a University leads. Thank you.

Bibliography

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Biographical Summary

Mark Vajčner is University Archivist at the University of Regina.

As University Archivist, Mark plays the leading role in the acquisition of manuscripts and other primary source materials from individuals and local organizations. This includes the records of artists, a significant collecting focus of the University's Archives and Special Collections. His paper will discuss a provincially-funded initiative to digitize select archival materials relating to Saskatchewan artists since 1950. The project aims to present materials with as much contextual information as possible allowing clients to use the digital archive as a research collection.

Mark has been active in the local and Canadian archival communities for well over a decade. He currently also serves on the Board of Trustees of the MacKenzie Art Gallery and the Publications Board for the Canadian Plains Research Center. Mark has studied history and archival studies at both the University of Manitoba and Edith Cowan University in Australia. He has published several articles and has spoken at archival and library conferences in Canada, the United States, and Australia.