

New audiences in art libraries; new skills for professionals?

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Art librarians face many changes in the professional relationship with their users. Technological and cultural evolutions lead us to learn new skills to adapt ourselves to these new audiences. But are these changes really so new to librarians? Librarians have always had to embrace new technological expertise for library catalogues, databases and digital libraries. We know that librarianship is a profession where communication is primordial; communication with library users, and also with the general public – there's not much new here vis-à-vis the traditional missions of librarians. Still, librarians must become more competent than ever at conversing with patrons, to better understand their needs and their ways of expressing those needs, particularly their need to interact with our libraries and collections. Diverse examples from French art libraries illustrate how library professionals tend to use new media, technologies, and cultural trends to enable their institutions to disseminate knowledge and contribute to a more open society that can partake freely of the riches and learning history that art libraries have to offer.

A New Context?

Art libraries are facing as many changes as other libraries, all of them demanding new skills from us, as professionals. Indeed, art librarians constantly need to keep up with technological progress and new research habits of our library users. But do we need brand new skills to face this evolution? Wouldn't we be better off working on 'traditional' competences, such as how to handle time and pedagogy with a public less and less patient with our sophisticated tools of discovery and access?

We do have to adapt to our patrons and their demands, despite changing technologies. We have to integrate these new technologies within the library in order to remain accessible to everyone. But we also need to place things in the bigger picture (as we always have), by explaining the depth of our resources to the public, helping them to find sources of learning, science, and culture.

Today, young readers have mostly given up writing down bibliographic references. Instead, they come to librarians with scraps of digital information picked up on their mobiles, through Google. Pressed for time as always, our users want quick and precise information on their subjects; the social networks seem sometimes the most effective way for users to find the right art book or image they are searching for. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., every art library team is forced to use aspects of social media now.

On the other hand, academic researchers are now so used to digital resources in libraries that they forget that they still have to search through the library catalogues for everything that exists only on paper. To be honest, among our users, who is able to skilfully use all of the online resources offered in art libraries? Who cares (besides us, librarians) to think about the subtleties of choosing between databases or digital libraries or traditional online catalogues? Academics want above all to quickly find what they are searching for, and if they can do it without going into the library, they are all the happier. Fortunately, there are exceptions.

As for the general public, they know and use library collections mostly due to the institution's cultural and pedagogical events. More and more often, library

directors insist upon these events because art institutions now belong to a new era that gives pre-eminence to a contemporary way to highlight heritage: through events taking place everywhere and everyday throughout the city. Currently, for instance, museums are most famous for block-buster exhibitions attracting crowds of visitors.

In addition to the traditional art of exhibiting our art libraries' treasures, art librarians now have to master how to tell stories about our collections that are meant to be accessible to everyone. The art of storytelling, using all types of media, including social media, is now compulsory to retain patrons. Art librarians are learning how to do this, and in so doing, recalling how we used to 'explain' our collections and missions in the past. As an example of how we do this currently, the Forney Bibliotheque is a 'very old lady' with a funny history, and the librarians make the most of it, because it interests the public and attracts them to the institution.¹ In the midst of these changes, art librarians must become experts in many diverse aspects of heritage and art libraries.

Librarians have to engage the public in the process of learning. It is in the best interest of libraries to invite users with a wide variety of hobbies and passions to participate in enriching knowledge of the collections. Crowd sourcing can help to complete our catalogues or to enhance digitized document repositories, for instance. We allow the public to satisfy their contemporary need for interaction in the discovery of our collections. There are hundreds of examples of art libraries posting anonymous postcards or archival collections on their portals inviting the public to identify events, locations, characters, dates, etc. We are even compelled to invite people to complete or correct the library's bibliographical references – and these initiatives are frequently among the most fruitful.

This new way of approaching collections is widespread today, given the wider public using art and heritage collections, but it is not as easy to embrace from a librarian's point of view. Art librarians have to become the best advocates for their institutional treasures, and this has not traditionally been what librarians are best at. Disseminating all the knowledge and information that librarians hold has been a struggle for many librarians but this situation has been improving.

Librarians have always needed diplomacy with patrons who are in a hurry, who naturally imagine that all the world's knowledge is easily accessible in our libraries, and every image can immediately be obtained (and that libraries digitize all of their collections!). Readers are not really concerned with choice criteria or the costs of digitization, nor with how hard it is to preserve billions of bytes of data. The novelty is that librarians now need to be more knowledgeable and adaptable than ever given the advances in digital technology, especially in the context of the multiplicity of art libraries' physical and remote services.

Explaining things to our patrons takes a lot of time. The landscape of physical and online art collections is so varied and complex and the subject indexing of pictures is so intricate that most of our users do not have the patience to listen to our explanations. Librarians must learn to attract the patron's attention, to be quick and efficient, to stimulate their curiosity, and last but not least, to listen and help them formulate their needs. Google, or even Gallica (in France), is not the only answer to a patron's needs - librarians know that. Sadly enough, few researchers or students are able to recognize that they don't even know how to use these tools efficiently, let alone the resources of the library.

Adapting to new tasks is demanding for librarians. New audiences force art librarians to increase their expertise, both from a pedagogical and a strategic perspective, in order to achieve better visibility and accessibility, which are key concepts for all librarians.

Librarians must adapt to new horizons: the world of learning is not encountered and understood in the same way it was in the past. It is not only our responsibility as art librarians to master a new vocabulary to better engage in dialogue with our users, but also to try to understand how art is now taught in schools and at university. The conversation with teachers and researchers is more and more essential for librarians to build partnerships that are beneficial to everyone, especially to students.

What we do at Forney

Let me take my library, the Bibliothèque Forney, as an example. Forney specializes in decorative and applied arts, craftsmanship and graphic arts, and is part of

1. Joëlle Garcia, Catherine Granger, 'Attention, un monument historique peut cacher une bibliothèque ouverte à tous. Raconter l'histoire de la bibliothèque Forney', *Balisages*, 4, [En ligne \[archive\]](#), 2022, mis en ligne le 09 mai 2022, accessed 25 Octobre 2023.

the City of Paris's public library system. First of all, Forney is housed in a historical monument, the structure of which is familiar to Parisians and tourists, but not as both a classified picturesque site and a heritage and public library. As we don't have the financial means of a museum, especially for communications, we lack visibility. And, even worse, the beauty of the building itself 'scares' the general public, who feel that Forney is 'not for them.' Indeed, such an ancient and beautiful library, with medieval and Renaissance architecture, where register is required (even if for free), is perceived to be for specialists only (fig. 2). We tend to underestimate this phenomenon, still very alive in many parts of the general public, but also, more strangely, amongst educated categories of people, who simply are not used to frequenting libraries, and have never used them in their professional and private life. Unlike most museums — special collections and art libraries have not yet been knocked from their podium. Museums seem more accessible today, thanks to a sort of generalization of art knowledge and large successful exhibitions.

The fact that we organize exhibitions open to everyone, and that we offer a rich cultural program doesn't change the perception of the library, because readers don't come to the events, and event attendees don't visit the library, despite our efforts to make the cultural events known to the readers, and vice versa.

Even worse, we do not have our own website, our own catalogue, or our own digital library. We belong to a network of specialized city libraries (in addition to belonging to the network of the general Parisian public libraries), and we only have a collective portal, with no name (except the generic 'portail des bibliothèques spécialisées de la ville de Paris'). If you try to find Forney on Google, you will probably first spot our Friends' Society website, not always up to date with our current events.

To help with this challenge we have created a blog or mini-website to easily present the Bibliothèque Forney and its riches, and to link websites or web pages relating to it.² For example, Gallica, which contains our digitized documents; our many social network sites; and importantly, our catalogue. Its name is 'Motifs & Vous' (motives/patterns and you, also a pun on the French phrase for 'motivate yourself'), as we are above all a library of pictures and inspiration. Through this portal we invite our readers to tell us about their use of our services, or to help enrich our knowledge of the collections. (fig. 1)

2. [Motifs & Vous, le blog de la bibliothèque Forney – Le blog de la bibliothèque Forney \(wordpress.com\)](#), accessed 25 Octobre 2023.

New Paths for Art Librarians

At a recent conference held at the National Institute for Art History in Paris, gathering many art libraries around the theme of our users, we discussed the many ways in which we experiment with new paths leading towards new audiences.

Some choose to create special blogs for their users, such as the Library of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs: their blog is called 'Du beau dans l'utile' ('Finding beauty in use').³ It is addressed to an educated public and it is hosted on an academic platform named Hypotheses.org, with lists of archival collections online – but, in parallel, they also post thematic sets of illustrated documents on Pinterest. And on their portal, you can search by brand or by creator, which

3. [Du beau dans l'utile – Du beau dans l'utile \(hypotheses.org\)](#), accessed 25 Octobre 2023.

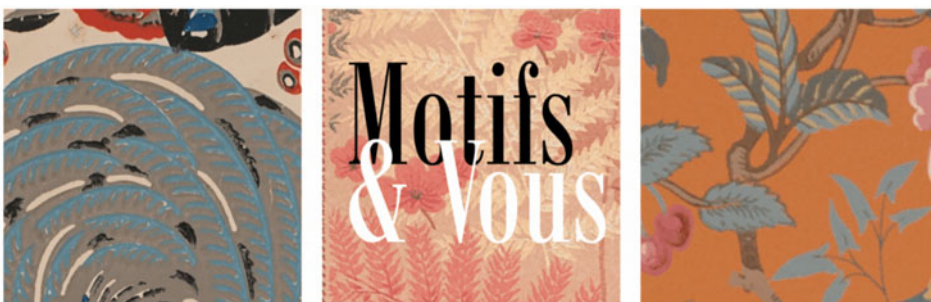


Figure 1. *Motifs & vous*, le blog de la bibliothèque Forney (welcoming banner for Forney's blog). Photo credit: Ville de Paris/Bibliothèque Forney.



Figure 2. The Forney library today. Photo credit: Ville de Paris/Bibliothèque Forney, Yves Lesven.

exposes new ways to research their collections. Their portal also offers open access resources classified by broad themes.

The Literature and Art Department at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France has created a page dedicated to art, with different thematic blogs, such as the very successful ‘Women artists at the Academy’ series, or ‘Follow the fashion,’ etc.⁴ These blogs meet the reader (virtually), and the library continuously enriches their thematic memos and guides (the Salons, Artistic press, Collections for art students, etc.) (fig. 3)

The pandemic period was a source of new ideas, such as a series of podcasts from the University of Toulouse Library, with excerpts read or shown to students in order to connect specific themes to their lives during the pandemic. Colleagues from the Musée d’arts de Nantes created a workshop linking art and writing, inviting students to write the museum labels. Cooperating with teachers remains at the heart of most art libraries’ ‘heritage for all’ policies.

Active participation by new audiences, young or old, seems to be full of potential for art librarians. All of our patrons are happy to be involved in projects like thematic Wikipedia workshops, or in discussions about collections and their constraints (for instance, legal ones, such as to free access to images of contemporary art). Collaborative propositions currently being considered include active mediation by the public itself; collective efforts involving learned societies, researchers, and academics on collections related to their fields of specialization; involvement of special needs groups; and the promotion of heritage collections with a focus on diversity and inclusion.

There are many ways for art librarians to attract and engage audiences but of course, it obliges us to work hard to understand the knowledge of our users and their needs. Although these are not new skills for librarians, they are new and

4. [Femmes artistes | BnF - Site institutionnel](#), accessed 25 Octobre 2023.

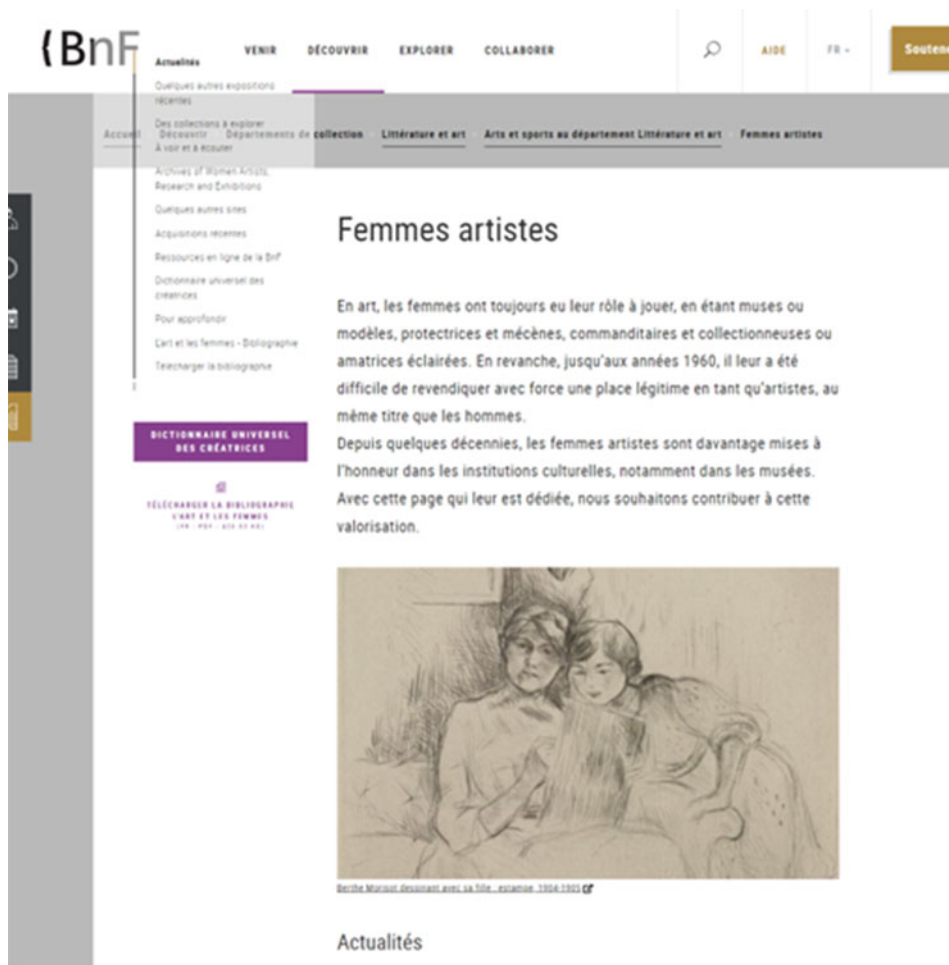


Figure 3. Women Artists blog homepage from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's Department of Literature and Art. Photo credit: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

evolving iterations of the old skills. Skills that build on our enthusiasm for our collections and our mission to transmit of knowledge.

Fortunately, we are observing that the public, immersed in those oceans of virtual images without information, sources or even names, has a real new appetite for approaching (and discovering) physical documents. The most successful events at Forney Library provide interactive encounters with our most treasured documents, from bygone fashion periodicals and nineteenth century textile and wallpaper samples to artists' books; from manufacturers' archives to commercial catalogues of the great historical Parisian stores (fig. 4). These documents appeal to the users' interest and they're invited, in diverse ways, to contribute their own knowledge. It is important to note that the old tradition of letting the readers draw in the reading room (copying textile patterns for example), which dates all the way back to our founding in 1886, is still alive at Forney.

What is more notable, is that the public, in these moments of precious interaction, intently seeks information about our jobs and missions, because preserving the paper-based collections seems so peculiar today, and also so fragile. There is a patent curiosity for backstage at the art library, 'les coulisses,' and this is a solid reason for hope, in relation to our missions for the future.

Digital progress helps us to create and offer science to be shared. It has multiplied our capability to diffuse art knowledge, enabling us, art librarians, to contribute to a more open society which can partake widely of the riches and learning in art and art history that we offer, and with many more diverse points of view. Nevertheless, we are called upon even more to exercise and expand our



Figure 4. *Le Printemps*, commercial catalog, Summer 1920, illustrated by René Lelong. Photo credit: Ville de Paris/Bibliothèque Forney.

traditional skills – sharing knowledge, asking questions, facilitating passions. It is precisely the moment to maintain our traditional standards of excellence.

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