The Information-Seeking Behavior of Artists:
An Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction and Scope

The following bibliography covers the information-seeking behavior of artists. These works range in date from 1982 until the present (an article still in press, to be published later in 2009). I have been forced to reach as far back as the early 1980’s because there is so little substantive research on this subject. The literature comes not only from the United States, but also from France, Norway and South Africa. It covers the topics of what information artists search for, as well as, how they search.

Definition of User Group

The literature makes note of the difference between practicing visual-artists, art students, art historians and art faculty. Although some of the people in the later three groups might also be practicing visual-artists, the literature notes that their use of and access to information resources, especially academic libraries, is vastly great than that of a practicing visual-artist who is not also one of the other three things. For this reason, some of the literature tries to focus its gaze on people who are solely visual-artists (although they might have other jobs for income) in order to determine how they search for information without the heightened access to resources provided by an affiliation with an academic library. Because of the scarcity of research on just visual artists, the user group I am studying here encompasses faculty, historians, students and practicing artists.

Summary of Findings

In 1996, Susie Cobbledick wrote an article entitled “The information-seeking behavior of artists: exploratory interviews” in which she reveals what she learned about artists through four interviews she did with four artists – a painter, a sculptor, a fiber artist
and a metalsmith. I am starting here because the five classes of information that she observes artists need are used and confirmed in almost every study conducted in every article about artists’ information-seeking since 1996. The information needs that she enumerates are: inspirational information; specific visual information; technical information; information about trends and events in the art world; and business information.

Cobbledick is one of the first to make the distinction between the information needs and behavior of practicing artists and art students, historians and faculty. All the research done before hers claimed to be reporting on artists, but instead was focusing on art students or art librarians. Cobbledick points out that the needs of artists are not necessarily those of the other groups. Art students, for example, are in an exploratory point in their development as artists and have a much greater need for art books dealing with the lives and work of successful artists.

One of these earlier articles, which surveyed art librarians because artists “are not easy to get hold of… (and) seldom can provide…reasoned information on their needs (Stam, 1995, p. 275), goes as far as to disparagingly note that as a user group visual-artists “have little patience for reference tools,” have little interest in learning about them, “can’t read well, aren’t particularly verbal,” and “frequently…do not understand the information given them” (Stam, 1995, p. 278). Other articles characterize artists information needs as eclectic and note that books and other library sources are not necessarily the first place they go to find information. All of this could be true. Artists use a wide variety of disparate means to meet their information needs, like everyday life experiences, friends, family, colleges, as well as, personal libraries. The writers who come after Stam, though, take this as the challenge, the excitement, the interesting thing about working with artists as a user group.

One particular artist, Tom Phillips, goes a long way toward disputing the assertion by the librarians in Stam’s survey that artists are not literate and have trouble expressing their needs. In his article, “Artists on libraries 1,” he proves to be a beautiful and eloquent writer. The way he describes the things about libraries that stand out in his mind not only paints a beautiful word picture for us, but it gives perfect insight into the things in a library that are important for an artist: the visual cues; the feel; the smell. We
are allowed into the mind of someone who experiences the library differently than a scholar might. This short article doesn’t stop there. He then makes the keen observation that it would be impossible to expect a librarian to anticipate his needs, because he can’t even anticipate his own needs. For example, he realizes he needs a picture of a toad one second before he needs it.

Despite Phillips letting the library profession off the hook when it comes to predicting artist’s information needs, William Hemmig is making a serious attempt to do just that. In 2008, he wrote a literature review examining most known research having to do with artist information needs and information seeking behavior. He greatly admired CobbleDick’s research and felt that the questions she composed for her interviews with the four artists were a great template for a survey. Hemmig made just such a survey and administered it to a community of artists in Bucks County Pennsylvania.

The results of his findings are to be published in the upcoming months, but he sent me a copy of the manuscript for use in this bibliography. The results are the most concrete and comprehensive information to date of artist’s information needs and preferences in searching. With regard to “sources of inspiration,” the artists surveyed prefer “forms occurring in nature,” followed by “personal life experience,” and “works of art seen in person” (Hemmig 2009, 40). The top three sources of “specific visual elements” are “the qualities of the medium,” “images generated directly from your imagination,” and “images in photographs, slides, or transparencies taken by you (the artist)” (Hemmig 2009, 41). The top three choices of sources of information about “materials and techniques” are “experimentation,” “artist colleagues” and “classes or demonstrations” (Hemmig 2009, 42). Lastly, the artists surveyed ranked the top three sources of information about “shows, commissions and sales” to be “invitations from arts organizations,” “magazines, journals and/or newspapers” and “artist colleagues” (Hemmig 2009, 43).

These survey results do not make the situation any easier for a librarian trying to meet an artist’s information needs. Only “magazines, journals and/or newspapers” are things that a library, in any practical sense, is set up to deal with. Hemmig also concurs with the past research that artists strongly prefer browsing and social information
gathering to the traditional systematic searching methods of the library. All of this together makes artists a very hard user group for librarians to handle.

Bibliography

http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/bates/scholars/html.

**Abstract:** This article takes a look at the difference between the information needs of scholars and artists. It notes that research on artists’ information seeking is yet quite scarce, but does a small literature review on what there is, noting the idiosyncratic nature of artists’ information seeking behavior.

**Annotation:** This article is cited in Hemmig and other articles. Companion article to five longer articles dealing with in depth studies of humanities searching. Adds a different perspective because of this backround.

**Search Strategy:** I read a literature review by William S. Hemmig that I found in InfoSci [Dialog]. This article was cited as a source in the Hemmig article. I then went to Hagerty Library’s catalog where I found a link to a full-text version of this article.

**Database:** N/A

**Method of Searching:** Citation search

**Search String:** Referenced in:


**Abstract:** Susan Bonners takes the reader through her process of drawing the pastel illustrations for a picture book on the lynx. She provides great insight into the research process for this undertaking and for other information needs that arise along the way.

**Annotation:** Not referenced in the rest of the articles and therefore adds a different perspective on the artists’ information needs and behavior.

**Search Strategy:** I noticed the term “information seeking” was a descriptor in many of the articles that I was finding useful. I went to the ERIC database located under “Resources” then “Databases” on the Hagerty Library homepage, because many of the articles I was finding in Dialogs InfoSci OneSearch were located in ERIC and this would save me from sifting through many useless articles from other databases. I searched descriptors in ERIC and found “Artists” and “Information Seeking” to be the two descriptor terms that fit closest to what I was looking for. I performed the search described below and found this article in the results.

**Database:** ERIC

**Method of Searching:** Descriptor Search

**Search String:** In the Descriptor Field: Artists and Information Seeking


**Abstract:** From published abstract: Investigates the information-seeking behavior of artists by surveying them on their sources for visual, inspirational, and technical information; for current developments in the arts and marketplace; and on their attitudes toward libraries, books, and technology. Artists utilize libraries and print materials unrelated to art and find art scene information through interpersonal sources.

**Annotation:** One of the premier articles on this subject. Survey used as a template for a number of researchers whose work also appears in this bibliography.

**Search Strategy:** I read a literature review by William S. Hemmig that I found in InfoSci [Dialog]. This article was cited as a source in the Hemmig article.
Hagerty Library only had it off-site in microfilm. I used the quick link for WorldCat on the bottom left of the Hagerty Library homepage to find that Van Pelt Library had it in its bound journals. I went there and found the article.

**Database:** N/A

**Method of Searching:** Citation search

**Search String:** Referenced in:


*Art Documentation, 23* (2), 14-20.

**Abstract:** A case study about the role of information in the creative work of artists. The study first looks at why the existing research on the subject is so unsatisfactory and then turns its attention on what an artist’s information needs and sources in relation to his/her work actually are.

**Annotation:** Cited in many of the works on information needs of artists. Rehashes a lot of what appears other places. Not as comprehensive as other sources.

**Search Strategy:** I read a literature review by William S. Hemmig that I found in InfoSci [Dialog]. This article was cited as a source in the Hemmig article. I then went to Hagerty Library’s catalog where I found a link to a full-text version of this article.

**Database:** N/A

**Method of Searching:** Citation search

**Search String:** Referenced in:


**Abstract:** From published abstract: Information obtained from focus group interviews reveals how student artists use academic libraries to support their artwork, what these students seek, and how they feel about their experiences. Librarians observe behavior and keep statistics, but these mainly provide information about the use of collections. Librarians need to take further steps to learn about student artist’s creative concerns and how these students use collections in general academic libraries to help them develop their art.

**Annotation:** Chosen because in it the information needs of art students were determined based on interviews. Results consistent with other articles. Noteworthy in how it shows that art students are different from practicing artists.

**Search Strategy:** After doing many searches using the term “information needs” I began experimenting with other keywords that might produce some different results. I stumbled upon the term “creative needs” and found this article when combining it with my staple keywords of “artist” or “artists.” I then went to Hagerty Library’s catalog where I found a link to a full-text version of this article.

**Database:** InfoSci [DIALOG]

**Method of Searching:** Keyword searching

**Search String:**

S1 s artist or artists (310214)
S2 s creative(need? (373)
S3 s S1 and S2 (63)
S4 Sort S3/all/py,d
T S4/3,k/all

Abstract: This paper reports the findings of an empirical study of a community of practicing visual artists, and determines whether the model can be applied to such communities. The paper finds that the model may be applied to practicing visual artists. It provides a portrait of the information behavior of a specific community of practice, and suggests how information use may differ, while following the model, among different demographic groups within the community.

Annotation: Great survey. Builds on the work of Cobbledick. Leads future researches down a path toward greater understanding of artists needs and methods for evaluating those needs.

Search Strategy: Read about survey in first article. I Googled the author’s name. I found his facebook page. I wrote the author to ask if survey results had been published. He wrote me back and said they were to be published in a few months. He sent me the manuscript for use in this paper.

Database: N/A

Method of Searching: Google search of author. Contact author.

Search String: Referenced in:


Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the literature on the information behavior of practicing visual artists to determine if a consistent model emerges and what further research is necessary. The results show that a consistent model of artists’ information behavior emerges. However, nearly all of the literature focuses on art students, academic art faculty, or librarians, and so any claim that practicing artists fit the model is largely unsupported by research. There have been no published studies of communities of practicing visual artists. The implications of defining artists as communities of practice are discussed.
**Annotation:** Comprehensive literature review. Evaluates and brings together the ideas of most of the research available on artists’ information seeking and behavior.

**Search Strategy:** I selected InfoSci as a starting point for my search because it has many library and information science resources. After trying different iterations and truncations of the words “artist” and “information need” I settled on the search string below. I found three separate citations for this article. I then went to Hagerty Library’s catalog where I found a link to a full-text version of this article.

**Database:** InfoSci [Dialog]

**Method of Searching:** Keyword Searching

**Search String:**

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s artist or artists (309278)
s information()need? (67382) (547)
s s1 and s2
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**Abstract:** From the published text: This article is a description of client-centered services mandated by the needs of the patron population in a small academic art library.

**Annotation:** May be dated considering the lack of internet in this small isolated school. Shows what challenges are faced by a library if it is the only source of information for an art community.

**Search Strategy:** I read the literature review by Hemmig, W. S. and this article was cited as a source. I then went to Hagerty Library’s catalog where I found a link to a full-text version of this article.

**Database:** N/A

**Method of Searching:** Citation searching

**Search String:** Referenced in:

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**Abstract:** The Conservateur en Chef of Documentation du Musee National d’Art Moderne/Centre de Creation Contemporaine in Paris presents his on the job observations of artists’ needs.

**Annotation:** Notes how wide ranging artists needs are and how inadequately they can be served by the library.

**Search Strategy:** I read a literature review that cited this work. I went to Hagerty Library’s online catalog, which listed this volume among its bound journals. I went to the library and found the article.

**Database:** N/A

**Method of Searching:** Citation search

**Search String:** Referenced in:


**Abstract:** This is the third of a three article series written by artists giving their first hand account of information seeking behavior and library use. This particular artist is a Norwegian living in Norway. He answers the questions: which libraries do you use; how do you use them; what kind of information do artists need; and what would an ideal library be like.

**Annotation:** Not scholarly, but very informative because it gives a first hand account of an artist’s information seeking behavior. Much of what he says is confirmed in the studies. This work is cited in much of the research.

**Search Strategy:** I had found the first two parts of this three part series in InfoSci [DIALOG]. When I found the hard copy of the first two parts I also found this third part.

**Database:** N/A
Method of Searching: Browsing

Search String: S1 s art in libraries/de (125)

T s1/9/all

I went to the library and looked in *Art Libraries Journal* 11 (3) and found the two articles I was looking for on pages 9-12. I turned to page 13 and saw this article the third one in the series.


Abstract: From the published abstract: A typical morning in a typical art college is described. Ways in which art students use libraries, and the materials they require, are summarized. The fact that art students can get by without using art libraries is noted in discussion of advantages and disadvantages of decentralized art libraries and of the centralization of art library resources in libraries of wider scope.

Annotation: Notes that circulation statistics do not accurately describe artists’ use because of browsing. Has strong feelings about the need for adequate visual resources. Brings fashion and graphic design into the conversation.

Search Strategy: I read the literature review by Hemmig, W. S. and this article was cited as a source. I went to Hagerty Library’s online catalog, which listed this volume among its bound journals. I went to the library and found the article.

Database: N/A

Method of Searching: Citation search

Search String: Referenced in:


Abstract: This is the first of a three article series written by artists giving their first hand account of information seeking behavior and library use. The article gives the artist’s general musings about libraries and then goes into specifics about the unpredictable nature of his needs.

Annotation: Not scholarly but very informative because it gives a first hand account of an artist’s information seeking behavior. Many of the authors in this bibliography cite this work in their research.

Search Strategy: In my DIALOG search results, I noticed the phrase “Art in libraries” in the descriptors field. I decided to try this phrase alone in a descriptor search. The search produced 125 results. I brought up the full citation for all of them and seeing that a lot of them were in foreign languages it was easy to browse through them only looking at the English language citations. I thought that this article looked interesting. I found that it was in Hagerty Library’s bound journals. I went to the library and retrieved it.

Database: InfoSci [DIALOG]

Method of Searching: Descriptor search

Search String: S1 s art in libraries/de (125)
T s1/9/all


Abstract: Discusses that the financial allocations that universities provide for the purchase of library materials have not kept pace with the proliferation of published print and electronic materials. A study is conducted on the information behavior of academic faculty across the fine art in a single institution.

Annotation: Creative activities are included among the faculty’s information uses, but library resources and creative activities are not matched up in a useful way.

Search Strategy: I read a literature review by William S. Hemmig that I found in InfoSci [Dialog]. This article was cited as a source in the Hemmig article. I
then went to Hagerty Library’s catalog where I found a link to a full-text version of this article.

**Database:** N/A

**Method of Searching:** Citation searching

**Search String:** Referenced in:


**Abstract:** From the published abstract: The relationship of artists to art libraries is explored for the purpose of gaining better understanding of artist’s needs. Discussed here are use patterns in art libraries, artist’s frustrations with these institutions, major tools utilized by artists or on their behalf. Data were gathered through a survey mailed to selected librarians in art schools and public libraries in the United States.

**Annotation:** Survey of librarians skews the results away from artists. Very interesting perspective of the art community, how they use the library and what their needs are.

**Search Strategy:** I read a literature review by William S. Hemmig that I found in InfoSci [Dialog]. This article was cited as a source in the Hemmig article. There were no electronic or paper copies of this article available at Hagerty Library. There were also no copies at any other libraries in the area. So, I filled out an interlibrary loan request and a downloadable version of the article was sent via email to me within a couple of days.

**Database:** N/A

**Method of Searching:** Citation search

**Search String:** Referenced in:


**Abstract:** Article written by an artist discussing his information seeking behavior.

**Annotation:** One of the most interesting and helpful articles. Gave first person accounting of library use by an artist who is also a librarian.

**Search Strategy:** In my DIALOG search results, I noticed the phrase “Art in libraries” in the descriptors field. I decided to try this phrase alone in a descriptor search. The search produced 125 results. I brought up the full citation for all of them and seeing that a lot of them were in foreign languages it was easy to browse through them only looking at the English language citations. I thought that this article looked interesting. I found that it was in Hagerty Library’s bound journals. I went to the library and retrieved it.

**Database:** InfoSci [DIALOG]

**Method of Searching:** Descriptor search

**Search String:** S1 s art in libraries/de (125)

T s1/9/all


**Abstract:** Presents information on a survey which examined the patterns of information-seeking of artists and art historians. Details on a survey of the full-time lecturers in the Art Department at the Vaal Triangle Technikon; Identification of the preferred information sources; Methodology used to conduct the study; Results of the survey.

**Annotation:** Focus on art faculty. The artist as scholar is discussed. Results of the survey are used in some of the research on artists.

**Search Strategy:** I read a literature review by William S. Hemmig that I found in InfoSci [Dialog]. This article was cited as a source in the Hemmig article. I
then went to Hagerty Library’s catalog where I found a link to a full-text version of this article.

**Database:** N/A

**Method of Searching:** Citation search

**Search String:** Referenced in:


**Abstract:** In this article the information-seeking behaviour of South African visual artists is examined. The research method used is a self administered, cross-sectional survey carried out amongst artists lecturing at universities and technikons as well as secondary school art teachers and members of art societies in South Africa. It was found that artists use a wide array of information-seeking methods, but that preference is given to conducting their own searches, browsing, and getting help from a librarian or a colleague.

**Annotation:** Survey has very interesting. Cited in much of the research.

**Search Strategy:** I read a literature review by William S. Hemmig that I found in InfoSci [Dialog]. This article was cited as a source in the Hemmig article. I then went to Hagerty Library’s catalog where I found a link to a full-text version of this article.

**Database:** N/A

**Method of Searching:** Citation searching

**Search String:** Referenced in:


**Abstract:** This article is based on a cross-sectional survey. The extent to which visual artists use a certain well-known art-related databases that are available either online or on CD-ROM is investigated. Artists also indicate how successful they are at finding the required information on databases. It is found that South African artists have low levels of interest in, and awareness of, these databases.

**Annotation:** Focus on art faculty. Results of the survey are used in some of the research on artists as a user group.

**Search Strategy:** I read a literature review by William S. Hemmig that I found in InfoSci [Dialog]. This article was cited as a source in the Hemmig article. I then went to Hagerty Library’s catalog where I found a link to a full-text version of this article.

**Database:** N/A

**Method of Searching:** Citation searching

**Search String:** Referenced in:


**Recommended Resources**

The following is a list of recommended resources for artists. The literature highlights five classes of information needs that the artist has: inspiration information; specific visual information; technical information; information about trends and events in the art
world; and business information. I have tried to find a source to satisfy each of these needs. Some of the resources might overlap and fulfill two information needs, e.g. inspiration and visual reference.

http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.ezproxy2.library.drexel.edu/hww/advancedsearch/advanced_search.jhtml;hwwilsonid=0FBIMIGNL5NKPA3DIKSFGGADUNGIIIV0?prod=ARTFT.

Art Full Text is a bibliographic database that indexes and abstracts articles from art periodicals, yearbooks, and museum bulletins published throughout the world. I found it linked to Hagerty Library’s webpage under “Resources” then “Databases.”


ARTstor is a digital library of nearly one million images in the areas of art, architecture, the humanities, and social sciences with a set of tools to view, present, and manage images for research and pedagogical purposes. The ARTstor Digital Library is used by educators, scholars, and students at a variety of institutions including universities, colleges, museums, public libraries, and K-12 schools. I accessed it through the link under “Resources” and “Databases” on Hagerty Library’s webpage. In Pennsylvania, if you are not enrolled in one of the affiliated educational institutions you can gain access with a membership to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

JSTOR is an interdisciplinary collection of journals in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. I found it linked to Hagerty Library’s webpage under “Resources” then “Databases.”


This book is a comprehensive exploration of the materials and techniques used in many forms of painting, e.g. oil, watercolor, pastel, tempera, etc. It was first published in 1940 but has been updated and revised numerous times in order to keep pace with advances in the medium. It also addresses issues such as manual printing and conservation of pictures. There is also an exhaustive list of reference materials for everything from calligraphy to anatomy. Its detail and comprehensiveness are its strengths. It however is only found in book form and is therefore not as easily accessible or versatile as a web based resource.


This is a comprehensive guide of where and how to sell your illustrations, fine art and cartoons. There are over 1,500 listings for art galleries, greeting card companies, print publishers and more. There are also stories from current artists working in each facet of the industry. In these stories the artists impart hard won insights on how to be successful marketing your work. A new edition of the book is published every year with updated listings. The listings are most likely good for a certain period of time, but it is wise to check an edition from the last few years. Libraries always have at least one copy of this book, but some of them can be from five years ago or more. Barnes and Noble will always have the most recent edition on its shelves in the art section of its stores. It is the type of book that you can sit
down with for an hour with a pad and pencil and really get a lot of useful information when you are just beginning. As you become more involved in marketing your work it is well worth the $25 investment to have your own copy of the book at your fingertips.

**Conclusion and Personal Statement**

Much of what has been learned about artists’ information needs and behavior places artists further outside of the purview of librarianship. Many of the their information needs are better satisfied by socialization amongst artist colleagues and the artists prefer it this way. Also, artists feel more comfortable searching for information by browsing. This method of searching is almost directly counter to the services set up in libraries to help patrons. Libraries have a rigid system that works well when a well-defined query is plugged into it. Artists seem to come to the information seeking process with vague notions that they need to have illuminated for them by seeing a compatible and complimentary piece of information. Browsing might be the only “system” that fits that bill.

I don’t, however, think that librarians helping artists is a lost cause. In Stam’s article, it is noted that artists want the “perfect” answer right away from librarians (Stam 278). I am not willing, without further study, to concede that this notion is not colored by the mind of the librarian. It seems clear that artists and librarians come at this problem solving matter from separate directions. This is most definitely a tricky social interaction to maneuver. But, I feel that this is the crux of the matter. It is in the bridging of this communication divide that assistance can be given by the library to the artist.

I do not think artists want an answer “right away.” If this was the case, why would they be satisfied with browsing as their main mode of information seeking? They might feel more comfortable browsing on their own, but I don’t feel that “assistance in browsing” would be dismissed without question by artists. It might be rather that
librarians feel more comfortable in their structured system of information searching and retrieval. While there may be empirical evidence that it is a more effective means of information acquisition, the comfort level of the patron is tantamount in all library interactions. Without the participation of the patron there is no one to help. So, if the library patron is an artist, I feel it will be a successful tactic for the librarian to meet them at their comfort level and “assist them with browsing.”