

Unseen Scenes: Buried Moving Image Material in New York & New Jersey

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Access to Moving Image Collections
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Evaluating the access policies and information presentation of Rutgers University Special Collections and University Archives and the Brooklyn Museum: Libraries and Archives reveals a single truth: access to moving image material in mixed collections is flawed. The institutions' respective websites minimize or completely fail to mention availability of onsite viewing, even if the institutions provide finding aids, catalogs, and other digital resources. This deficiency distances the researcher from the moving image material and devalues the institution as a research destination.

It must be noted that both institutions in this case study are not stewards only for moving images. They focus on traditional paper or photographic material that has relatively standardized research methodology. Digital catalogs and finding aids, digitized material, and reading room scenarios are apparent on both institutions' websites regarding these paper- or object-based collections. Film, DVDs, videos, and digital video content exist but are not highlighted, and therefore buried in catalogs and collection descriptions on sub-pages of websites. Surprisingly, both institutions do, in fact, offer some form of onsite viewing for the moving images listed in their catalogs and databases.

I am lucky to have visited both sites. At the Brooklyn Museum there is a requested donation, as the L&A are located within a gallery space and as a visitor, you have a right to view the museum's exhibits. There is no fee for using material or for reference assistance, as noted on the website. I spoke to the main cataloger and an intern at L&A who were very helpful, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic about my research on their institution located off Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, NY. At Rutgers, I was not required to sign in to the Alexander Library – located on the main New Brunswick, NJ campus – but was made to leave my bag in free lockers

outside the reading room. I was well received by an archivist I was visiting who was also interested in my findings on moving image access in diverse institutions.

My approach was simple: think as a researcher. How does one find information on an institution's website? How are the catalogs set up? For whom are they designed? What is the ease of contact? Turn-around period for responses? I kept a small notebook with me and took pictures – with permission from staff. Both the university and the museum were hospitable and unabashedly honest about the flaws of their respective institutions. The full- and part-time staff were extremely receptive and treated researchers with respect in my presence. My findings are essentially nuts-and-bolts: small changes could be made to ease access and make available hidden information. There were no gaping holes aside from the lack of focus on moving images, and overall I was pleasantly surprised to learn the simplicity of physical and virtual access to most material at the Brooklyn Museum and at Rutgers University.

Moving image access information comes directly from a librarian or an archivist at Rutgers and the Brooklyn Museum. An email or phone call is a quick fix to a moving image material query. Yet, in bulk, simple responses take up valuable time and resources from already overburdened staff. It is a time-waster than can be easily avoided with interdepartmental cooperation that provides information to the public via a website. Both institutions need to work with their online content managers to address available onsite access. Simply, viewing procedures need to be listed online.

A wonderful feature on both the Rutgers and Brooklyn Museum websites are the general information pages with a list of collections. There is a short blurb regarding scope and content, with a hyperlink in the title to a more detailed description of each collection on a separate page. As a researcher, this organization is extremely effective – it gives the user the ability to eliminate

unrelated content at a glance. Any relatively Internet savvy user can easily find collection catalogs on both sites, but even a seasoned technical savant is lost looking for onsite viewing descriptions. Similarly, reading room policies are readily available, in addition to reference resources like photocopying fees/information, citation assistance, and FAQs.

Nowadays, many researchers begin their hunt for material online. Rutgers University Special Collections and University Archives [SC/UA] is a veritable destination for researchers. Its collections and digital resources are outstanding – and Rutgers’ website reflects the library’s pedigree. From the University’s main site, a user easily navigates to the Rutgers Libraries page, and then to the Alexander Library page, which details SC/UA. The website is organized for the scholarly-minded. It features academically intuitive drop down menus with clearly titled headings and a plethora of hyperlinks to collections, databases [library and archival], finding aids, and other related material. A red, white, and grey color palate and no-frills/no-image design reveals the website as a student/academic resource. It is not playful or interactive, just informative. The site also gives great access to SC/UA staff with a searchable directory, which becomes essential when investigating moving image material.

Rutgers’ digital collections suggest that the institution understands the desire for easy access. The site opener notes that, “In our continuing efforts to make material accessible to patrons, Special Collections and University Archives has been digitizing selected collections and items for online use through our RUCore portal”¹. It is obvious Rutgers takes itself very seriously as a scholarly destination. It recognizes its wide reach, boasting that it “expand[ed] from one library to twenty-six separate libraries, centers and reading rooms located on three

¹ "Rutgers University Libraries: Subject Research Guides: Classics: Rutgers Classical Texts Archive." Rutgers University Libraries. July 09, 2010. Accessed November 02, 2011. http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/libs/scua/scua_rucore_portal.shtml.

campuses, and RU-Online, a digital library, the Rutgers University Libraries serve over two million users each year onsite and many more digitally”².

Rutgers’ RUCore is available to the public and you do not need to have login information to search its catalog. This availability translates to the SC/UA reading room, where desktop computers are available for screening and players various tape formats can be made available with advanced notice. A self-acknowledgement of the institution’s responsibility makes the lack of information about available onsite viewing very disturbing.

It is saddening that two large and well-respected institutions have fallen into the same trap. The Brooklyn Museum: Libraries and Archives [L&A] is guilty of withholding information about onsite viewing from its patrons. Upon a physical site visit and speaking with staff, the reason becomes clearer. There are no ready-made viewing corrals. If a visitor wishes to view a DVD, a DVD player must be located in the museum, borrowed, and set up in the reading room. This is the same for videotape of differing formats. There are no screening facilities for film at the L&A. On the main Brooklyn Museum: Libraries & Archives page, there is a short paragraph at the top outlining reading room hours and offers a phone number and informational email address, urging researchers to contact them ahead of time – presumably so the patron will not show up to an empty room with no viewing equipment or be forced to look over documents with someone’s video blaring in the background. None of this information is actually written online. It is disheartening to learn of this policy from a staff member with a sympathetic look on his/her face.

Luckily, L&A has Brookmuse – a bubbly library catalog where users can also search for archival material. It is easy to find on the website, very easy to use, and has straightforward

² "Rutgers University Libraries: About the Libraries: User Services: Visitor's Guide." Rutgers University Libraries. September 21, 2007. Accessed November 01, 2011. http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/lib_servs/visitor.shtml.

controlled vocabulary. Unlike Rutgers' website, the Brooklyn Museum's website is vibrant and structured for public use. L&A does not require accreditation to use its collections and that accessibility angle reverberates through the website. It is interactive and hosts a comment section where users can submit general queries about records and add information to posted content. It is laid out in a user-friendly format with an innocuous color theme including Robin's Egg blue links with colorful thumbnails on a white background. It also has quick links on the left hand side with direct access to finding aids, the online catalog, and many other museum/archive features. Search buckets are easily manipulated and the digital resources are designed for the layman, not a hardened scholar.

Neither institution succeeds in creating an accurate picture of available screening facilities but do offer a robust array of databases and catalogs showcasing their holdings. The Brooklyn Museum: Libraries & Archives is an open doorway to interested parties and serves the public to the best of their ability. There is no call for physical moving image access, so it is not a priority. The L&A website is extremely fun for such an informative resource, with its interactive elements and fluidity with the rest of museum's information. At Rutgers University Special Collection and University Archives, moving image material is available but not emphasized. The bread-and-water design of the SC/UA website reflects collections that are shopped to scholars, academics, and professional researchers. Despite their differences Rutgers and the Brooklyn Museum would benefit from a curt addition on their websites noting the state or existence of onsite viewing options. The public would be better served by adding these necessary features.

Works Consulted

"Brooklyn Museum: Libraries and Archives." Brooklyn Museum: Welcome. Accessed October 15, 2011. <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/archives/>.

"Rutgers University Libraries: Libraries and Centers." Rutgers University Libraries. Accessed November 01, 2011. <http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/libs/libs.shtml>.