Images Have Value: Changing Student Perceptions of Using Images in Art History.

Courtney Baron, *Emory University*
Christopher R Bishop, *Emory University*
Ellen Neufeld, *Emory University*
Jessica Robinson, *Emory University*

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CHAPTER 10*

Images Have Value:
Changing Student Perceptions of Using Images in Art History

Courtney Baron, Christopher Bishop, Ellen Neufeld, and Jessica Robinson

Recognizing images have value is an essential threshold concept for mastering the discipline of art history. Images are an important form of evidence in the history of art, second to viewing original works of art in person, and have transformed the academic study of art history. As digital copies of artworks, images document objects and make their representations readily accessible to anyone, anywhere. The increased accessibility of images in the digital age has made the ability to study art possible for low-income individuals and historically underrepresented populations. This has led to diverse perspectives and fresh interpretations of works of art. Images have become the first step in the research process for an art historian and are used for quick reference on an as-needed basis and for in-depth study. Though in-person evaluation is generally preferred for study at the graduate or professional level, images are accepted and indeed expected for art historical research at all stages. Images provide a service to preserve fragile works of art in an accessible format. However, there are risks involved with using images as the basis of interpretation, since images with inferior quality or dubious authenticity can introduce misconceptions when reading a work. Digital images can be manipulated to enhance size, color, or contrast, which can lead to distorted stylistic and comparative argu-

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Scholars and students alike risk damage to their reputation by using lower quality images or not seeking permission to use images in publications. Therefore, images should be critically sourced, evaluated, and cited to ensure appropriate understanding of a work.

The shift in the library profession and among our teaching librarians from the Information Literacy Competency Standards to the Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education, in conjunction with the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Visual Literacy Competency Standards, provides new opportunities for combining library and visual literacy instruction. Today, we live in a screen-based world where we are surrounded by visual media. However, the frequent exposure to visual content does not necessarily result in competency with visual materials. It has become essential for students to develop the skills needed to find, interpret, evaluate, use, and produce visual materials. Despite the prevalence of images and their importance in studying the history of art, students are not accustomed to treating images as a source of information and may not proceed with the same care they give other resources. The familiarity that comes from students’ exposure to images on a daily basis compounds the widening gap between what they know about the differences between casual use and the critical sourcing of images for scholarly purposes. Librarians can help bridge the gap by showing art history students best practices for finding, evaluating, and citing images to aid the process of interpreting works of art.

Our thoughts on threshold concept theory

The application of threshold concepts in library instruction caused a shift in thinking among our teaching librarian team as we began to revise and reconsider the approaches we used with students. The adoption of threshold concepts was met with varying levels of skepticism by our teaching librarians because of the challenges associated with applying the concepts to one-shot sessions. Prior to the threshold concepts, our go-to exercises for library instruction classes included modeling searches, assisting with citation tools, and locating items in a catalog. We implemented the information literacy threshold concepts in the Framework by adapting our instruction to disciplinary needs, with the understanding that delivering all aspects of the concepts is not possible in a single session. Instead, we view our teaching as a journey that may not lead to a specific destination in a single class period, but provides the tools needed to facilitate mastery of the threshold concepts over time. The Information Literacy Competency Standards hindered our ability to deliver information literacy instruction that transcends traditional understandings of the librarian’s role in the classroom. This change in thinking
has empowered us to see ourselves as integral to the student’s overall ability to grasp the information literacy threshold concepts. The flexibility of the threshold concepts affords us the ability to intentionally plan our instruction and legitimize our roles as teachers.

This change in thinking was especially important as we approached the frame Information Has Value because of the rapid changes taking place in delivery, availability, and attribution of digital images. For example, sharing our expertise and understanding of the components of the Information Has Value concept has led to new opportunities for library instruction that fully involves the major aspects of this frame in our art history classes, made possible by garnering faculty support through discussion in formal and informal settings. Since we teach freshmen and sophomores, we accept that these students probably have never considered images as a commodity or informational product, and may not be aware of the consequences for plagiarizing, misusing, or misinterpreting images. Our challenge is to provide patrons with access to information while simultaneously protecting them as both information creators and consumers. We believe this threshold concept is particularly essential for mastering art history.

Ultimately, our use of threshold concepts in library instruction is very much dependent on our status as guest instructors. In many instances, we are given a single class period to cover a wide range of information that is often informed by the faculty member who has invited us to present. In this capacity, we can deliver information that assists students in grasping aspects of a concept, but it is unrealistic to fully transform a student’s understanding of even one troublesome threshold concept in a one-shot session. Instead, we are focusing our efforts on working with faculty who see the value in information literacy threshold concepts as integral to student learning, while still serving faculty who prefer skills-based library instruction. We have created a bridge between Information Literacy Competency Standards-based library instruction and the Framework by using a “yes, and” approach to incorporate three key topics through active learning strategies into skills-focused instruction: critically sourcing images, evaluating and interpreting images, and ethical and legal use and citation of images. We continue to deliver skills-based instruction as our foundation but incorporate a scaffolding approach to facilitate understanding of the information literacy threshold concepts in our teaching.

Critically sourcing images

Art historians must critically source images as evidence for forming interpretations. Art history students must first master the skill of finding high-quality images to study a particular work of art. We have observed that students
are often unaware of authoritative sources and instead use easily accessible repositories such as Google Images, a search engine specifically for locating images on the web. They often download the first image from the results, which typically are of poor quality and have minimal or absent metadata. In an age when it is possible to find thousands of images with one click, the difficulty lies not merely in locating images but finding high-quality and accurate representations of artworks.

The movement from procuring images through controlled avenues, such as print sources and cataloged image libraries to less mediated online sources, has eliminated many quality control avenues. This has created a need for librarians to discuss issues related to quality, depth of image description, and authority to students who may be less knowledgeable about the characteristics of an image when formulating and refining search terms. Issues related to image retrieval for lesser known art by well-known artists, contemporary works, less prominent artists, and items related to a work that may have significant meaning, such as documentation, ephemera, and historical items, require the use of varied discovery platforms and search methods, including print sources and physical image repositories. Just as students may need to consult multiple databases to find scholarly articles on a topic, there is no “one-stop shop” for locating images. Librarians may discuss using comparative analysis of image results from multiple image sources and show how the best result will vary depending on the contextual qualities of the work of art.

**Finding images.** Librarians can show a variety of resources for locating images: subscription databases, museum repositories, web search engines, and social media. Artstor Digital Library, a subscription database, offers more than two million high-quality images with extensive image information from authoritative sources. The database offers features such as 360-degree panorama views, performance art footage, zoomable images that showcase fine details, and the ability to compare works. All images have been cleared for educational reuse. Museum and library websites are great alternatives, since they are free and usually offer high-resolution photographs of works or digitized materials along with contextual and difficult to locate information, such as the provenance of the artwork and acquisition date.

Web search engines tend to be the first place students look for images. Student preference for Internet search engines is understandable since it is easy to quickly find content. Rather than direct them away from a resource that has been successful for past searches, librarians should teach students when it is appropriate to use Google to find images and how to use it more effectively. Library subscription resources will not contain all the images a student needs, and librarians can discredit themselves by perpetuating the notion that libraries are gatekeepers of information. Social media sites, such as Flickr and Instagram, focus on visual media and will be familiar to most
students. Librarians can compare the purpose of these sites, which emphasize connecting and engaging with others through visual content, with the use of images in an academic context to help students select the most appropriate resource for art history images. Students should learn the strengths and weaknesses of online image sources and understand methods that will yield high-quality image results.

**Best practices.** When a general search engine such as Google Images is used, the need to critically source images is imperative. The search may return thousands of images but it is difficult to filter results by image resources. Teaching students to utilize Google’s powerful search engine to find authoritative websites will lead to higher quality images. Using the advanced search options in web search engines can eliminate less authoritative sources from discovery and can guide students to content on museum websites that includes controlled metadata and higher quality standards. Emphasis on the use of synonyms, related terms, truncation, and Boolean operators to locate needed images in general search engines is especially important. Google’s reverse image search feature allows students to use a picture to search for related images around the web as opposed to searching through keywords. This helps students find other online sources featuring an image of the work they are studying so they can locate higher quality images from more authoritative sources. Alternatively, if students are unfamiliar with a work but have an image in hand, they can use this search function to learn more about the work.

An endorsement of established image databases as superior to general search engines may imply that students should encounter no difficulty when searching in Artstor Digital Library. Advanced search tools and facets (Classification, Date Range, Geography, and Collections) in Artstor are more robust when compared to Google Images. However, Google Images is generally easier to use since the sophisticated search engine allows for flexible and intuitive language. Google’s use of metadata generated from file names and text surrounding an image is problematic, yet so is Artstor’s lack of subject terms in many of the database’s metadata image descriptions. The absence of subject terms in Artstor decreases the ability to search across collections and may hinder students more familiar with entering subject-related search terms. Students should be made aware that there is no perfect “one-stop shop” for image searching.

**Evaluating and interpreting images**

Searching is an iterative process that requires evaluating results and refining the search until the desired image is obtained. Students may skip the process of evaluating images for use in art history research papers and presentations
due to the easy access to a large quantity of images retrieved through search engines. The criteria for evaluating images includes checking the source reliability, accuracy, aesthetics, manipulation, and effectiveness for the research need. Librarians can show the possibilities of the image resources to students and empower them to critically evaluate their findings to select the most accurate result. Just as students should evaluate resources for the purpose of supporting an argument on paper, they need to understand the importance of evaluating images and whether they add value to their research.

The misuse or misattribution of an image could result in unwanted consequences ranging from embarrassment to accusations of plagiarism. One real-world example of the negative consequences of neglecting to evaluate an image came in early 2016 upon the death of Frank Sinatra, Jr. A television news station posted an image of an actor parodying his father, Frank Sinatra, Sr., when reporting his sudden death. Though it may seem like a simple mistake, the context of misreporting by a news station resulted in a loss of credibility, leaving a question about their ability to accurately report news, and possibly could have caused a loss of advertising revenue. This example stresses the importance of carefully selecting and evaluating images.

**Image information.** The key to successfully finding and evaluating high-quality images on the web relies on image information, or metadata. Most web search engines rely on retrieval of images through file names, keywords used to describe the image, and text accompanying an image stating the creator, copyright, date of creation, location, and other sources of description. Keyword searching can be tricky, since a student does not necessarily know if the metadata provided is accurate—if information about the image is present at all. When the image search results for a work contain poor metadata, the student is left to infer image correctness without the necessary subject knowledge. In comparison, museums and libraries consistently use professional description standards, such as the Getty vocabularies and VRA Core, a metadata standard used to describe works of visual culture and images, allowing for the consistent use of title, date, creator, and subject in associated metadata.

**Accuracy.** Evaluating images for accuracy and quality can be challenging for students since the process relies on image characteristics rather than the traditional criteria found in text sources. Librarians can introduce and describe a set of criteria including color, size, format, metadata, hue, saturation, contrast, and brightness. Students should be taught to note the image source and owner of the image, as well as other clues to determine if anything has been done to alter the image, including cropping, recoloring, or contrasting.

**Interpretation.** There has been debate among librarians on how to approach interpreting images in the library classroom. Subject specialists in art may regularly teach the art of interpretation, whereas instruction librarians
may feel uncomfortable assuming this role in the classroom. Generally, faculty are equipped best to teach students how to “read” images since they are the content experts and can relate the meaning of an image to the context of the course. Further, it is difficult for librarians to teach these skills within the limitations of a single class session. Instead, librarians can teach students how to find, evaluate, and understand the legal and ethical use of images and focus sessions on the best practices for searching and evaluating images to begin the process of interpreting a work of art. Students should understand that the use and value of an image lies in its context. Understanding the historical and social contexts of an image, its intended audience, original purpose, and production are essential to helping students learn the value of analyzing and interpreting an image.

**Ethical and legal use and citation of images**

The Information Has Value threshold concept can be translated for students by stressing that images are a source of information and therefore have value. Students should learn that images have value as a commodity and are a form of intellectual property whose owner or creator controls its legal use. Students are accustomed to having immediate access to thousands of “free” images online and may not understand the difference between copyrighted, Creative Commons licensed, fair use, and public domain images. Students must learn how, and why, to give proper attribution and citation to the images they use in their papers and presentations.

**Copyright and fair use.** Copyright is a construct that gives exclusive rights to the owner of a creative work. The concept of fair use was created to allow exceptions and provide flexibility for educational and creative situations. *The Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for the Visual Arts,* published by the College Art Association in 2015, aims to provide best practices for using copyrighted images and other works in creative or scholarly work. The Code offers guidelines for teaching about art and specifically mentions images. Though the Code is a resource on fair use geared toward art professionals, the criteria for teaching art also apply to student image use. The Code states images should accurately portray the work they represent, images should appear in non-pixelated form when projected on screen, and images should be accompanied by attribution to the work of art and augmented with all available metadata. If librarians struggle to obtain faculty buy-in for offering visual literacy instruction in art history classes, this resource makes the case for the importance of critically sourcing and ethically using images in the classroom.
Fair use is crucial for using images in educational settings, since it allows students to incorporate copyrighted materials into their assignments as long as the finished product does not reach an audience beyond the classroom.

**Creative Commons.** The issues surrounding the copyright and fair use of images can be complicated and difficult to understand. Creative Commons was designed to alleviate some of the frustration caused by these issues by offering a way to differentiate images that can be used without violating copyright law.  

Creative Commons is a nonprofit organization whose licensing works alongside copyright to make materials accessible and usable. The licenses assist researchers with the selection of content they know they can legally and ethically use. Creative Commons licensing is especially helpful for art historians, since it empowers artists to make their copyrighted work accessible and freely available for use. Many digital images are marked with one of six Creative Commons licenses, so librarians should show students how to locate Creative Commons licensed content and understand the license options provided to copyright holders. We have found that Creative Commons licensing helps students understand why some images are copyrighted and others are not and how to distinguish between them to become ethical and informed image users.

**Citation.** Librarians are deeply immersed in teaching students about ethically and legally citing information, but additional education is needed for students to fully understand the ethical and legal issues surrounding image use. Presentations in art history rely on images as visual evidence for arguing an interpretation. As teaching librarians, we are often invited to watch student presentations and we frequently observe students using images with no citation information. Students are accustomed to citing print sources in their assignments, but rarely possess the skills to fully cite images. This issue can be alleviated by showing students how to properly cite images and what information is typically included in image citations. In subscription databases, metadata is often embedded and will download along with the image file. Students should be encouraged to store this information for images obtained elsewhere. Most standard citation formats provide formatting guidelines for citing images and other visual media, and librarians can show students the correct formatting for the required citation style. Teaching students that images are informational and require citation and attribution will reinforce the concept that images are valuable and essential resources for mastering the history of art.

**Activities for librarians**

At the Oxford College Library, we primarily teach one-shot information literacy classes. It can be challenging to incorporate activities focused on finding,
evaluating, and ethically and legally using images within a single class period. The goal of the following activities is to encourage students to critically approach images as informational evidence within the discipline of art history. The activities are intentionally arranged to scaffold instruction throughout the students’ degree program in art history.

**Activity one.** Assignment: The object of this activity is to compare the discoverability, accuracy, and provided information for images of a work of art using different resources to demonstrate issues finding images online.

Learning outcome: Students will be able to utilize critical inquiry skills in order to locate and source high-quality images.

1. Ask students to form teams to search for a well-known work of art, such as Vincent Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, using one of four image resources: Google Images, Flickr, museum website where the work is located, and a subscription image database like Artstor Digital Library. Tell students the goal is not simply to find an image of the work, but to describe the features of the image resource.

2. Once students have found the image of the work in the selected resources ask them to report their findings and share their observations with the class. Ask the following questions:
   - “What steps did you take to find the image?” Have students describe the keywords and refinements, if any, they used to locate the image.
   - “Did the image have any metadata or information about the image?” Have students state whether the image was accompanied by descriptive information, including the creator, title, date, medium, repository, image source, or permissions.

   a. Once each group has shared their findings with the class, ask students to describe the pros and cons (image quality, authority, image information, etc.) of using each image resource. Ask students to choose the best resource for finding an image of the selected work of art.

Assessment: Librarians can check for understanding and reinforce the lesson based on student responses to the questions during the discussion portion of the activity. Use exit papers, which require a response before students exit the class, and have students identify which image resource worked best for their search and why they thought it was most effective.

**Activity two.** Assignment: This activity uses the concept of image appropriation, or the act of re-using art objects or images with little alteration, to present real case studies related to image copyright and intellectual property. The goal of the exercise is to demonstrate the value of images to students. We like this activity because it uses real appropriation case studies to make the concept of copyright more approachable to students.
Learning outcome: Students will be able to articulate the ethical, legal, social, and economic issues surrounding the creation and use of images and visual media in order to use images ethically.

1. The concept of image appropriation will likely be new to most students and requires explanation. The Lynda.com course on Information Literacy has an excellent video designed to introduce the intricacies of art appropriation. This can be assigned to students prior to the class session as a flipped classroom technique.

2. Divide students into groups and give them real case studies related to image appropriation. Artists such as Shepard Fairey, Sherrie Levine, and Robert Colescott are great examples. Students should review information about the artist and compare the original work to the appropriated work.

3. Tell students to present their artist and case to the class, answering the following questions:
   - “What work did this artist appropriate?”
   - “Why do you think the artist appropriated this work?”
   - “Did any legal or ethical issues arise and, if so, how were they handled?”
   - “What steps would you take if you wanted to appropriate this work?”

Assessment: Polling and quizzes are great assessment strategies that provide real-time results. We recommend creating a quiz through Kahoot, a free online learning game, to assess understanding of copyright and fair use best practices.

Activity three. Assignment: This activity is designed for upper-level undergraduates or graduate students who require permission to legally use images in theses, dissertations, or publications. Art history majors will find the art of obtaining permissions a particularly useful skill if they go on to work in the museum or visual resources fields. The lesson, delivered in workshop format, will explain how to use images that require permission from the copyright owner. The goal is to guide students through the entire process of obtaining permissions.

Learning outcome: Students will be able to interpret need and evaluate criteria in order to acquire permission to legally use images in publications.

1. Have students identify an instance where they want to use an image. Unless stated otherwise, the image is probably protected by copyright, so they will need to seek permission.

2. Tell students to think about their terms and create a list. Where do you want to use the image? Do you want to modify it? Is this a one-time use or do you need to use the image for a particular length of time? Will you profit from use of the image? Who is your target audience?

3. Ask students to locate the image source and the contact information for the copyright owner. Show students where to find this information on most websites.
4. Instruct students to draft a request in writing for permissions for an image need. The request should include a brief introduction, title, and creator of the desired image, purpose of the requested use, terms and conditions of use, and how they plan to acknowledge the copyright owner.

5. Have students create a spreadsheet with image information, including title, date, artist, medium, repository, use, and permissions details. This will help students stay organized since the permissions process can take several weeks.

6. Using the information in the spreadsheet, have students practice citing images and documenting permissions for their research.

Assessment: Ask students to write about what remains unclear from the instruction session. Follow up with students who still have questions and help them seek alternative images if necessary.

Assessment. We believe that successful assessment goes beyond the confines of a one-shot session. As teaching librarians, we strive to be peer-evaluators alongside disciplinary faculty. We regularly observe and provide feedback at student presentations, which affords us the opportunity to emphasize information literacy threshold concepts on an as-needed basis. For example, librarians observing upper-level art history presentations can comment on the quality of images presented on slides and ensure that the proper citation information is included to reinforce the Information Has Value concept. We regularly meet with faculty to discuss the outcomes of research papers and other completed assignments to evaluate student work and assess the impact of information literacy instruction. This information is then used to adjust future instruction sessions.

Conclusion

The Framework and its focus on threshold concepts allows information literacy to be taught through a disciplinary lens. The application of threshold concept theory to information literacy instruction provides new opportunities to scaffold lessons and activities for all course levels. The Information Has Value concept as presented in the Framework is particularly valuable when applied to information and visual literacy instruction in the discipline of art history. When studying art history, students must understand that images are informational and have value since they are used to research and interpret works of art. Students should be prepared to critically engage with images in an academic context. Due to the risks of using digital images, including the prevalence of poor-quality images on the web, incomplete metadata, and copyright restrictions, librarians play a crucial role in introducing students to
library resources for visual material, providing strategies to locate and evaluate high-quality images, and demonstrating the importance of ethically using and citing images.

Notes


7. Laurie Bridges and Tiah Edmunson-Morton, “Image-Seeking Preferences among Undergraduate Novice Researchers,” *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 6, no. 1 (2011): 29-30. doi:10.18438/B82G9M. This study investigated the image-seeking preferences of freshman and supported our observations that students turn to Google as a starting point for their image needs.


14. Ibid.
