

CASE STUDY: THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION'S ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART CAPTURING THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN ART FOR PUBLIC ACCESS

HISTORY

Founded in Detroit in 1954 by Edgar P. Richardson, then Director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, and Lawrence A. Fleischman, a Detroit executive and active young art collector, the initial goal of the Archives was to serve as a microfilm repository of archival papers housed in private hands and other institutions. This mission expanded quickly to include collecting and preserving original material. In 1970, the Archives joined the Smithsonian Institution.

Now housed in Washington, D.C., **Archives of American Art** (AAA) is the world's largest and most widely-used resource dedicated to collecting, preserving and providing access to the primary sources that document the history of visual arts in America.

Nearly 5,000 archival collections contain: diaries and scrapbooks of artists, dealers and collectors; manuscripts of critics and scholars; business and financial records of museums, galleries, schools and associations; photographs of art, world figures and events; sketches and sketchbooks; rare printed material; and film and audio and video recordings. AAA also has the largest collection of oral histories anywhere on the subject of art.¹

CHALLENGE: ACCESS

Providing maximum access to the collections was – and is – key to achieving AAA's goal of becoming the premier resource on art history for researchers, historians and the public. Richardson and Fleischman could never have imagined the advent of the internet and its power to connect people and information across the world. Housing

over 16 million items, as of this study's first print, and with more than 1.5 million available in online collections, AAA has made significant progress toward this goal.*



Photo credit: Ben Shahn, Sketchbook circa 1930s-1960s, Box 28, Folder 44.

Original sketch from American artist Ben Shahn, best known as a social realist. Digitized on a Zeutschel overhead book scanner utilizing PerfectBook curve correcting software.

AAA and The Crowley Company first worked together in the early 1990s when AAA purchased **Mekel Technology microfilm equipment** and, later, two **Zeutschel A1** planetary book scanners to supplement their digitization efforts. Barbara Aikens, Head of Collections Processing at the time of this study's first print, notes that, "At the time, there really was no comparable scanning equipment on the market suitable for large-scale or mass digitization projects where the primary goal was online access. The Zeutschel scanners were a major contributing factor in AAA's highly successful initiative for digitizing archival collections in their entirety."

CHALLENGE: DATA MANAGEMENT

With equipment in place, one of the primary challenges for AAA was to build an interface and workflow system that could hold and easily manage a substantial database. As Aikens notes, "The Mekel and Zeutschel capture software and file management structures proved very compatible with our workflows and infrastructure."

CHALLENGE: VOLUME

As AAA's volume of digitization increased, Crowley and AAA continued their partnership in another manner: contracted **conversion services**. Aikens states, "We needed to expand digitization beyond our in-house capabilities;

particularly for very large collections. For our large-scale efforts, the combination of in-house scanning and contracted services gave us the highest productivity at the best price. Crowley was a logical partner due to their close proximity to the nation’s capital and the fact that they offered competitive pricing.”

In this digital image of a French magazine clipping from the papers of Henry and Rose Pearlman, collectors of Impressionist and post-Impressionist paintings, a black border is left to assure the client that all data has been captured and also allows the scanner to easily determine image boundaries.



Photo credit: Pearlman Papers, Artist: Files, Various, Articles and Clippings, 1930-1952. Box 4, Folder 1

She continues, “I feel that Crowley understands that our large-scale digitization initiative is about volume and access. The goal of this project was – and is – about getting a high quantity of good quality digital images in a timely fashion so that we can make our resources more widely available and accessible on a global level.”

SAMPLE COLLECTIONS

AAA Crowley digitization services projects include:

- An estimated **130,000 images** from the Carnegie Institute Museum of Art collection
- An estimated **130,000 images** from the Ben Shahn collection
- Approximately **6,500 images** from the Pearlman collection
- More than **320,000 images** from the Jacques Seligmann & Co. collection, one of AAA’s largest fully-digitized collections available online

Images have been scanned from multiple media including: letters; manuscripts; bound materials; photographs; fragile/

union skin materials; and some original sketches. Primarily using **Zeutschel overhead scanners**, Crowley Digitization staff were able to produce high-quality images regardless of the condition of the original material.

THE RESULTS

Through capture hardware and conversion services, The Crowley Company played a major role in assisting AAA reach its 2011 milestone of having **1.5 million digital images** available online. AAA’s digitization initiative is now part of its long term mission, which has changed very little since the early vision of Richardson and Fleishman: to share and make available hidden archival treasures regarding American art. Pat Crowley, president of The Crowley Company notes, “We appreciate the initiative of the Archives in managing their collections and have enjoyed being an integral part in their strategy.”

Ultimately, it is the end user who benefits from this partnership. As one example, the availability of the Jacques Seligmann & Co. archives has satisfied the needs of users across the world conducting World War II era art provenance research. The online collection has been referenced in several international-level symposia.

THREE DECADES STRONG

Now entering a third decade of partnership, Crowley and the Smithsonian Institutions still continue to collaborate on digitization projects across their network of collections.

ABOUT THE CROWLEY COMPANY

The Crowley Company is a full-solution imaging partner. From micrographics equipment, production and patron scanners to conversion services, The Crowley Company has aided records managers, archivists, librarians, researchers, students and others throughout the world with archival preservation, records management and digitization solutions for over forty years.

¹Archives of American Art

* First printed in 2013