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Eliza Buffington and the Early Years of the Library at the Rhode Island School of Design, 1878 – 1911

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Abstract:

In the years following the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, there was an explosion of interest in art and design in America which resulted in the founding of many art schools and museums. The Rhode Island School of Design is one of those institutions; from its Archives one can determine the growth of its library, and make assumptions about the state of art school libraries at that time. Eliza Buffington, a graduate of Vassar College with library experience, became the first librarian at the School in 1909. This paper looks at the development of the Library between the founding of the School in 1878 and the hiring of the librarian, and then the impact of that first librarian.

Paper:

In the years following the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, there was a resurgence of interest in art and design in the United States which resulted in the founding of many art schools and museums. The Exposition brought to the forefront the value of excellent design, as shown in the exhibits of European countries. Since the 1851 International Exhibition in London, interest had been raised, and there had been initiatives to improve the quality of trade and manufacturing through education and display of the industrial and fine arts. Such plans in Rhode Island and elsewhere, however, were stalled by the Civil War, and were only revitalized by the inspiration and activities of the Philadelphia fair.

The Rhode Island School of Design was founded soon thereafter by women who had worked together on the Rhode Island Exhibition for the Women's Centennial Committee. In 1877 the charter identified the following mission:

- 1) The instruction of artisans in drawing, painting, modelling and designing that they may successfully apply the principles of Art to the requirements of trade and manufacture;
- 2) The systematic training of students in the practice of Art, in order that they may understand its principles, give instruction to others or become artists;
- 3) The general advancement of public Art Education, by the exhibition of works of Art and Art school studies, and by lectures on Art.¹

The 1888 report on the first ten years of the School does not mention a Library as such, but does describe the equipment of the school as including models, casts, a painting, photographs of paintings, and donated or loaned books, pictures and models. It goes on to relate that “ in 1885 we were so fortunate as to obtain in Germany a fine collection of charts, models, and casts of ornaments similar to those used in the Prussian Art Industrial schools.”²

The first list of gifts to the Museum and Library of the School appeared in the 1891 report, evidence of the development of these two resources together in support of the curriculum of the school. Books accepted at this time covered applied mechanics, Japanese ceramics, wood-engraving, Viollet-le-Duc, Vignola's *Five Orders of Architecture*, floral design and mechanical drawing.

In 1893 the School moved into its own building, with space on the first floor for the Library. Faculty came not only from nearby Worcester and Boston, but also from California and New York and from the Academie Julien and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, the Academies of Munich and Dusseldorf, and the Stockholm Teckniska Skola. The library shared space with the Museum and office, and was overseen by the museum attendant; cases were provided for photographs as well as for books. This corner library was soon crowded as several important donations were accepted in 1896 and the years soon after. In addition to books, gifts included posters, photographs, stereoptican slides, lantern slides and autotypes.

By 1900 the annual report separates Gifts to the Museum and Gifts to the Library; autotypes and photographs of works of art continue to be part of the Museum. In addition to an array of gifts of gallery catalogues and periodicals, purchased material at this time included books on architecture, such as *Skeleton Construction in Building*, and the multi-volume set *The Georgian Period*, as well as *Art Anatomy of Animals*. Purchase decisions were made directly in response to requests from the faculty; most, but not all, were granted. The minutes for 1900 also record the first request for screens to darken windows for lantern lectures, and include a note that the library should be given special attention; Miss Louisa D. Sharpe was asked to take charge of the library.

Miss Sharpe, who was to become Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf, daughter-in-law of the founders of the School, devoted her attention and beneficence on the Library for more than forty years. She took charge of the library, rearranging the space and adding new

¹ Circular of the Rhode Island School of Design, 1878-9

² The Rhode Island School of Design, 1878 - 1888

cases for books and photographs. She helped to purchase a large selection of technical reference books, and from 1909 until her death in 1942, she gave generous annual contributions for buying books.

There was an executive reorganization in 1901 and the first director of the School was appointed. Eleazer B. Homer came from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and one of his priorities was to improve the Library. The Library Committee was established in 1902, and included himself, Miss Sharpe and Henry H. Clark (Faculty of the Department of Decorative Design) from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. By the end of that year, the Director reported the desire of the Library Committee “to have a Librarian to catalogue and look out for the books in the Library.” The response of the Executive Committee was not favorable, and it would take seven years of advocacy on the part of the Library Committee to win this position. In the meantime, however, they did approve hiring someone to keep the catalogue up to date.

In 1904, Mr. Homer recommended to the Executive Committee that a fund of \$5,000 be established for library purposes. This was brought to the Board of Trustees at a special meeting, the result of which was an instruction back to him to prepare a list of books, photographs and drawings specially needed for the library. It does not appear that such a fund was established; however the 1905 annual report lists extensive gifts, particularly from trustees.

Autumn 1907 was a propitious time in the Library. The new book list includes 52 titles, many gifts from Louisa Sharpe. There are illustrated books, including some by Howard Pyle, needlework and textiles, ornament and design, Muybridge’s *Animals in Motion*, and a number of periodicals, including *Architectural Record*, *Printing Art*, and *The Burlington Magazine*. Eighteen of the titles are in German, due primarily to a gift from Julius Lessing of his *Vorbilder-Hefte aus dem Kgl. Kunstgewerbe-Museum*.

This fall was also important for the hiring of the first student worker. From the Executive Committee minutes of October 7, 1907: “A communication was received from the Library Committee ... recommending that a Student of the School, Mr. Raymond Witt, be appointed to receive and replace on the shelves, the books and photographs which have been in use and which are returned by the students and instructors at the end of each school session – and that for this work he be paid \$1.00 a week. It was so voted.”

As the 1908/09 school year began, a new Director, Huger Elliot, arrived from the department of architecture at Harvard. He found an inadequate library with overcrowded shelves in a busy room that served as a passageway to the school’s office. Important and valuable gifts were received that year, including *The Gentlemen and Cabinetmaker’s Director*, by Thomas Chippendale, 1754, Hogarth’s *The Analysis of Beauty* from 1772, and *Gli Edifizj di Roma Antica*, 1848 in four mammoth volumes. Since there was no room to study in the library, books were disappearing into classrooms and studios. Elliot urged that the library be moved to larger quarters, a proposal made again the following June. Action was taken in the summer when a new building was acquired for the School, freeing up space in the original building. By the time school started that fall, the library had been moved into two rooms on the second floor.

The combination of valuable donations and new space meant that the time was right for a librarian. In early September 1909 the request for a librarian was left to a committee

of two, including the Director. Although, as noted above, the Executive Committee minutes record not only the name of the first student worker, but also his salary and job description, there is no mention in this venue of the hiring of the first librarian. We do know, however, that Miss Eliza Buffington was in charge of the newly relocated Library by the time of the Library Committee meeting that October when she took the minutes.

How was she identified? When did she move to Providence? Some things we will never know; however the Archives of the Vassar College Library have yielded some clues about our Miss Buffington. A graduate of Vassar College in 1906, Eliza appears in the yearbook with the following quote: "I am in earnest, I will not equivocate, I will not excuse, I will not retreat a single inch and I will be heard." She reported back to the alumnae newsletter in 1909 that she was "playing library worker, and very strenuous play it is too." Prior to this position, she worked at the New York Public Library and in Brooklyn as well. She attended the Summer Institute at the New York State Library School in Albany that summer before moving to Providence.

The determination apparent in Miss Buffington's yearbook motto was in evidence during her brief two years at the School of Design. By her second library committee meeting that November, she had drawn up a list of missing books to present to the students for their assistance in recovery; decided to post a sign asking whether books had been charged out; requested supplies, desk, desk chair, photograph cases, step ladder, charging case, a typewriter and card attachment as well as someone to typewrite the catalog cards; received permission to order Library of Congress cards where advisable; and recommended 6 new magazines to be added to the subscription list, including *Harper's Monthly*, *Scribner's*, and *Library Journal*. She was given time to study the classification systems of other art libraries in Boston and New York.

At the December 1909 Library Committee meeting, the librarian's recommendations were approved, including the following:

- to abolish the present classification and adopt a modified form of the Dewey³
- to adopt a shelflist for reproductions as well as books, and
- to recatalogue the entire library in order to bring out by analytics and subject cards valuable reproductions and material now lost.

The January 1910 minutes included the notice of the "gift of the executive committee to the library of a typewriter without anything to put it on." Questions of binding, subscriptions, gifts and purchases, as well as summer staffing, supplies, labels, overdue notices and furniture continue to occupy the Library Committee throughout the year.

The Rhode Island School of Design Yearbook for 1910 includes the first separate report from the Library, noting that it contains 1707 volumes and 3756 mounted photographs and reproductions. "It is in charge of a trained librarian, and both the day and evening students of all departments are encouraged to make the most thorough use of its carefully selected contents." After mentioning the periodicals and photographs, the report concludes, "in short, the library is, as it should be, the centre of the intellectual life of the School." The major gift that year included 323 volumes from Mrs. Henry G.

³ This modified Dewey system remained in use until the change was made to the Library of Congress classification system in 1991; reclassification is ongoing.

Russell, including such valuable works as *The Bible Illustrated*, by Gustave Doré; *Civil Costume of England*, by Leopold Martin; *Essays on physiognomy : designed to promote the knowledge and the love of mankind* /by Johann Lavatar, 1850 and *Sepulchral monuments in Great Britain*, by Richard Gough, 1786-1796.

During Eliza Buffington's second year, she was responsible for establishing the library budget, as she was requested to "make an estimate as nearly accurate as possible of the amount necessary for the running of the library." She was given authority to dispose of old magazines as long as valuable illustrations were removed, surely the beginning of our Clipping File. The question of museum and gallery catalogues was much discussed; *Library Journal* was dropped, and other new magazines added; bindery and the mounting of reproductions needed regular attention. Acquisitions of each title requested by faculty continued to require Library Committee discussion and approval; for example, in February 1911, books approved included *Letters and Letter Construction*; Meheut's *Etudes d'Animaux*, and *The Design of Highway Bridges*. At that same meeting it was decided to fine the student board \$10 for the books missing in inventory the previous year.

Eliza Buffington departed by the end of May 1911; her successor, Mary Shakespeare Puech, had already been hired. The two brief years under Miss Buffington were important for the future of the Library: She introduced the latest technology, including both the typewriter and catalogue cards from the Library of Congress. Books were accessioned and catalogued, using a modified form of the Dewey Decimal Classification System; photographs were mounted and arranged; the library was moved into larger quarters, and it was advertised as open to the public. Budget, staffing, bindery and proper care of various kinds of collections were addressed.

Eliza Buffington left RISD to attend the New York School of Applied Design, and then the Museum School in Boston. She became an exhibiting artist and art teacher, travelling to Japan, India and Europe. In 1938, she wrote to her alma mater, "I have tried to bring the work of the Orient and Occident together in Art & Yoga, specializing in the rhythmical brush stroke." She exhibited her work, along with that of her students, in New York. We will never know what impact her two years at the Rhode Island School of Design had on her decision to become an artist. We do know that art librarians with an affinity for the practice of art are invaluable in understanding the needs of art students, and that the collections of the Library have the ability to inspire and inform staff as well as patrons

In 1916, the Director of the School, L. Earl Rowe described the School of Design Library for the *Providence Magazine*, calling it a "very important part of the school's equipment." He remarked that its collection of three thousand volumes was "neither large nor exhaustive," having been "acquired slowly and carefully to meet the demands of the different departments, with the result that most of the books will be of permanent value in an art library." He went on to note that in addition to books, the Library held periodicals, 15,000 mounted reproductions and photographs, 1500 lantern slides and about 1200 postcards. There was also already by this time a clipping file with subjects alphabetically filed.

The legacy of the Eliza Buffington years include collections of permanent value, cataloging and accession records for materials in many formats, and the notion of the library as a special place. Her time coincides with the first quarter century of formal training for librarians and the development of college libraries in this country. Implications for today's libraries dwell in the way in which the core mission of the library has remained: to serve the research and information needs of the library users with collections and services geared to those needs, and to provide a place that is the intellectual center of the organization.

Collections developed over time represent part of the history of the institution; although costly to catalog, preserve and maintain, they help us to know who we are. In our field especially, they continue to inform and inspire. Students at RISD are regularly taught classes using these special collections of flat folios; they stimulate students in textile and jewelry design, in apparel design and illustration, in landscape architecture and sculpture. Foundation studies is particularly interested in the anatomy and lettering books. New materials are added not only for the students and researchers of today, but for those who will come in the future.

The value-added work of classification, cataloguing and authority control remains critical; this is a fundamental service of libraries. Our staff organize materials through shelf arrangements and catalog records that add value and meaning, providing access to information and knowledge not apparent in the object by itself. Eliza Buffington recognized that when she came to RISD and made the effort at that early stage in the development of the library to make the contents of the library accessible to the students and other patrons.

Different formats have always been with us; usually they are additive, but not always. Not very many libraries are still collecting lantern and stereoptican slides, but much of the rest is still with us, including our clipping file. We embrace the digital, but the pictures in analog form still have a place in our pedagogy. The tactile and browsable aspects of books and pictures are important to visual arts students as they respond to assignments and develop their own vision and style.

Librarians are leaders. I think of a young Eliza Buffington sitting in that Library Committee meeting in October 1909. She was almost 26 years old. She had studied at Melvil Dewey's library school. She seemed quite clear about her role and responsibilities. She was in earnest and she was heard.