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Being a Copyright Professional in Museum and Library Land

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Abstract

A big lesson I've learned in my career as a copyright specialist is that copyright is an inevitable and essential factor for collecting institutions, but is often overlooked. I attended the Pratt Institute in New York for an MLIS with the intention of working as a librarian in a museum or public library, but as I neared graduation I found the job market and my focus wavering. An internship at Exit Art Gallery digitizing their archives showed me the growing importance of digitization for preservation and access. This internship led me to a job at The Whitney Museum in their Rights and Reproductions department: licensing images and contacting rights holders for permission to use their work. I was finding a unique pathway to archives and collections through copyright research, and the desire of cultural institutions to make these collections more accessible was one I believed in. These skills coalesced when I started at The New York Public Library as a Rights Coordinator, and later as a Manager leading a team to facilitate digitization. The library offered vast collections with copyright webs to untangle, and gave me the chance to utilize my degree as a library specialist in copyright.

Keywords: Careers, copyright librarianship



Being a Copyright Professional in Museum and Library Land

Copyright is an important but at times overlooked factor for collecting institutions such as libraries and museums. However, as institutions grow their collections, as media formats evolve into born digital and expanded access to audio/visual materials, and as the drive for making collections available online becomes more paramount; copyright has become an essential aspect of collection policies and access. Therefore, the role of a copyright specialist within museums and libraries has become vital for offering guidance on copyright laws and policies. A copyright specialist has the unique role of researching the provenance of intellectual property rights of creative works in a collection while also assessing their copyright status. A copyright specialist may come from many different sections of a given institution. They may be part of a legal counsel weighing in on policy and institutional risk. Perhaps they work in a rights clearance and permissions department helping authors and publishers acquire images of collection materials for publications. They could be a scholarly communication librarian helping students and faculty navigate the thorny bramble of academic publishing and open educational resources. Or they may be a part of a team dedicated to expanding patron access to collection materials through digitization initiatives. So how did I start this career path?

I attended the Pratt Institute in New York for a Master of Library and Information Science degree (“MLIS”) with the intention of working as a librarian in a museum or public library, but as I neared graduation I found the job market and my focus wavering. An internship at Exit Art Gallery scanning and processing images of their archives introduced me to digitization as a means of preservation and access. I was also learning about this through my archives and metadata classes; but through my internship I was exposed directly on how important this endeavor was. Although the archives were processed, access was limited to researchers who could visit in person. To my eyes this physical archive was a vital part of the downtown New York art world of the latter half of the 20th Century, and the broadening of access online could serve new generations of researchers outside of the limitations of the physical location. At this point I was hooked on the premise of digitization, but still was unsure how I could contribute to it as a librarian.

This internship led me to a job at the Whitney Museum of American Art in their Rights and Reproductions department, licensing images and contacting rights holders for permission to reproduce their work. By this time I had graduated Pratt with my MLIS, and had been fortunate enough to take one of the only classes dedicated to intellectual property policies in the program. The class piqued my interest, and although my position in the Whitney was primarily a retail shop for digital assets, the emphasis on licensing and rights clearance was drawing me into

something new. The Whitney prided itself on both introducing the public to important art, as well as respecting the artists themselves and their legacies. The Rights and Reproductions department served as a focal point for representing both sides by photographing and making available images for collections and exhibitions, and also making sure that the necessary permissions were secured by publishers and researchers. Furthermore, the department served the internal needs of the museum by offering guidance to the Communications, Marketing, and Publication teams on how to clear and credit works used to promote the collection. At the Whitney I was finding a unique pathway to archives and collections through copyright research. I also believed in the ethos of broadening public access while protecting artists' rights, as well as enjoying the research and detective work that came with the job.

My growing passion for copyright coalesced when I started at The New York Public Library as a Rights Coordinator, and later as a manager leading a team to facilitate digitization. As a coordinator, my main duties involved researching the library's collections to determine the copyright status and subsequent steps for clearances to broaden patron access and digitization for our [Digital Collections](#) website. The library offered vast collections with innumerable copyright webs to untangle and offered the chance to utilize my degree as a library specialist in copyright for our librarians and communications teams. I also learned firsthand about the many programs, publications, blogs, oral history projects, and other intellectual property generated by a library and the importance of both protecting and making this material available to the public. In my current role I now manage a team of Digitization Coordinators dedicated to facilitating librarian and curator driven digitization projects with a scholarly focused purpose. Digitizing collection materials involves contributions from several teams: from the catalogers and librarians that process and make accessible the physical collections, to the photographers and metadata specialists that digitize and make these assets available online. It has been a joy to contribute what I've learned about copyright to these projects to help bring them to fruition.

It would be unfair and unrealistic to say that working for a not-for-profit cultural institution is all roses; and I worry that my words may come across as selling the snake oil for getting a specialized degree. As with any place of business or cathedral of knowledge, libraries and museums can suffer from internal bureaucracies, misguided endeavors, and cutting corners or losing sight of their mission. A part of the core mission for libraries and museums is providing access to our patrons while protecting the collections themselves; which includes intellectual property rights. Bringing a knowledge of copyright to institutional discussions about the acquisition and level of access to collection materials offers a seat at the table



where much of this balance plays out to its resolutions. And I take pride in being a part of that process. Also, it's fun to play the copyright detective once in a while...