

# Scruffy Cardboard Mounts

*William W. Robinson*



Photograph cabinets, Fine Arts Library, 1970s. Reproduction. FAL Administrative Files.

SOON AFTER REGISTERING AS A GRADUATE STUDENT IN THE FALL OF 1973, I settled into a carrel in the lower stacks of the Fine Arts Library, barely suspecting that my occupancy would last eleven years.

There was one feature that was conspicuous on every carrel in those days. In addition to rows of books, each desk harbored a stack of brownish-gray cardboard mounts of uniform size which supported documentary photographs of works of art and architecture. The arrangement of the photographs on the desk reflected the personal style of the occupant: some tossed in irregular piles that had evidently remained just so for months or years; others aligned neatly on the desktop or bookshelf and classified according to the student's current research projects.

I learned to mine this vast archive of photographs, which was stored in impressive ranks of file cabinets that occupied most of the square footage in the library's Visual Collections on the mezzanine level above the stacks, and soon constructed piles of my own. One checked out the photographs to one's carrel by removing a small yellow card attached to each mount by a strong, often rusty, and dangerously pointed metal clip, marking one card with your initials, and depositing all your ganged cards in a

box with separate compartments for twenty-four-hour use and long-term borrowing. Library staff would stamp all the cards with the borrower's initials and sort them by call number—each of the hundreds of thousands of photos had one—so other users could track down a photo that had been checked out. One learned to recognize the stamped initials on the yellow cards, which recorded the names of borrowers over two decades or more. They included former students who had graduated to careers as museum directors, curators, or professors, Harvard faculty, such as my advisor Seymour Slive and his mentor Jakob Rosenberg, and long-departed visiting scholars, among them some of the most eminent authorities in my field of seventeenth-century Dutch art. The initials attested to interests shared with previous borrowers, imparting a sense of continuity with one's predecessors and membership in a community of scholars that had left these clues to their past research. To a Harvard student in that period who aspired to become a museum curator, the close study of the visual information embodied in the (black-and-white or sepia) photographs also represented an essential component of the object-based approach to art history fostered by the Fine Arts Department (as it was called then).

For several reasons, ranging from limited space and new methodologies in the discipline to the more recent availability of images online, this formerly essential photographic archive, assembled over many decades, now resides in the Harvard Depository and is comparatively rarely consulted. Piles of images on their scruffy cardboard mounts no longer accumulate on carrels. That said, my point is not to grumble about how we learned better in the good old days, but simply to recollect a magnificent resource, once a ubiquitous sight in the library and consulted daily by dozens of users, and the crucial role it played for generations in teaching and research.

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