

Visual and Performing Arts in Libraries: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights

Visual and performing arts can transform understanding and appreciation of the world in all its cultural diversity. The American Library Association affirms that visual and performing arts can be powerful components of library collections and services. The arts play a vital role in our ability to communicate a broad spectrum of ideas to all people. Developing an understanding and appreciation of visual and performing arts is an aspect of visual literacy. Libraries should offer opportunities for the community to experience art.

Art can serve personal, political, and aesthetic functions, including personal expression, and social, historical, or political messaging. It may enhance day-to-day living, create visual delight, or challenge the status quo. For the purposes of this interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, art is defined as work created or designated by an artist, with the ability to provoke an aesthetic response, or affect the human senses in some way. Ultimately art is a product combining the artist's creativity, the viewer's perception, and a representation of the culture and time in which the work was produced.

Visual art is created with the implication of human manufacture. Visual art includes but is not limited to painting, sculpture, photography, design, digital, fiber, and decorative arts involving a wide variety of visual media. Visual art has visible properties (whether or not it is seen) and there are always some aspects of the formal elements of art – line, shape, color, form, texture, etc. Performance art is defined as physical movement, placement, or theatrical activity involving people in defined space, with the explicit or implicit application of artistic direction, choreography, curatorial planning, or design. Performance art may include aspects or elements of music, dance, mime, and acting, with attributes of professional or amateur stagecraft. As with the visual arts, performance art may either confirm or challenge cultural familiarity, and as stated in Article I of the Library Bill of Rights, contributes to the “interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves.”¹

Libraries may choose to provide both physical and virtual spaces for the community to experience and interact with artistic content and programs or to create their own art. Works of visual and performing art may be temporary exhibits, permanent installations, programs or performances offered in the library, or parts of a library's viewable or archived collections.

In developing library arts exhibits and programs, libraries should present a broad spectrum of opinions and viewpoints as codified in the Library Bill of Rights, Articles I and II. Libraries should not avoid developing exhibits or programs because of controversial content, or because of the beliefs or affiliations of those whose work is represented. Libraries do not endorse the viewpoints of the artists themselves, the artwork owners, or the exhibit organizers, whether or not they are internal or external contributors to library programs and collections.

Libraries that choose to make gallery or performing space available for use by community groups or individuals should formulate a written policy for the use of these areas and may adopt time, place, and manner rules for such use. Libraries may wish to develop such criteria as the size of the artwork to be displayed, space requirements including for an audience, the length of time the work may remain on display or in performance, the frequency with which material may be displayed from the same group, or whether to accept work only from local constituents or stakeholders.

Such policies should also ensure that space is provided on an equitable basis to all who request it and should be stated in inclusive rather than exclusive terms. Policies and publicity should be written to encourage use of library public display, exhibit, and performance spaces by a broad range of organizations and individuals.

However, as with any meeting space, a publicly funded library may instead choose to restrict use of display, exhibit, and performance spaces to “strictly ‘library-related activities’ provided that the limitation is clearly circumscribed and is viewpoint neutral.”²

The library’s policies for arts programming and exhibits should be readily available to the public. Behavior policies should not be used to limit access to art or performances in the library. If users object to a particular work of art or performance there should be a method of recourse, similar to a reconsideration policy, for expressing their concerns.

All art in the library’s permanent or exhibit holdings is an integral part of the library’s collections just the same as literary, film, eBooks, and all other material types. Collection development policies should include the collection of, and access to, art where possible. The library should provide a welcoming and content-rich environment for all users to engage with visual art or to create their own projects. Libraries are encouraged to be intentional in including diverse voices, be it through creative projects, performances, or exhibits from many cultural traditions. When the library plans exhibitions or performances, the selection should consider all of the communities served and should provide diverse points of view.

State and federal law may mandate that libraries use internet filters.³ Such filters may block moving and still images and can be especially problematic when users seek information on the visual arts. Library policy should therefore offer and encourage library users to ask for unfiltered access to websites, and for content to be unrestricted with due respect for user privacy. Libraries should consult the Internet Filtering interpretation³ for more information on CIPA. There should be no barriers to child or teen access to visual and performing arts within the library.

In summary, visual images and performances in the library should not be restricted based on content. Librarians and library staff should be proactive in seeking out a wide variety of representational and abstract artwork and performance art, with limitations or parameters set only with respect to space, installation, fiscal, and technical constraints. The same criteria for access to literature of all kinds for all people are relevant to visual media and performing arts in libraries.

1. [Library Bill of Rights](#), Article I, Adopted June 19, 1939, by the ALA Council; amended October 14, 1944; June 18, 1948; February 2, 1961; June 27, 1967; January 23, 1980; inclusion of “age” reaffirmed January 23, 1996
2. [“Meeting Rooms: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights,”](#) Adopted July 2, 1991, by the ALA Council
3. [“Internet Filtering: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights,”](#) Adopted June 30, 2015, by the ALA Council