

Reviewing volume 11 of the 'new' *Art Libraries Journal*, Stephanie Sigala wrote that 'Beginning in 1986 . . ., *Art Libraries Journal* underwent a host of changes and deserves reappraisal by art professionals in the United States'<sup>1</sup>.

We are grateful for Stephanie's commendation, so much so that we would graciously overlook her characterisation of the *Art Libraries Journal* as it used to be, which some might feel is neither generous nor just. However, the thrust of Stephanie's review delivers a challenge, not only to the *Art Libraries Journal* but to the professionalism of art librarians too, which demands to be taken notice of. It is articulated in three separate comments: first, in her dismissal of the former *Art Libraries Journal* as a 'nice little "how I run my library" publication'; secondly, in a reference to articles which still 'retain the home-grown approach' and which 'describe the development of specific databases for art information *without much reference to other systems*' (my italics); and finally, in her forecast that '*Art Libraries Journal* won't be a good source for the latest on CD-ROM'.

Of course, this *Journal* would be delighted to publish the latest on CD-ROMs or any other technological or systems development relevant to art librarianship. But as it happens, the latest on CD-ROMs is comprehensively summarised, in an outstanding article written from an art professional's point of view, in a recent issue of *Visual Resources*<sup>2</sup>. *Visual Resources*, like the *Art Libraries Journal*, has undergone a change of editor, and under Helene Roberts' guidance has achieved regular publication, staked out its own intellectual territory (nicely complementing that of the *Art Libraries Journal*), and established itself as vital reading for art librarians as well as visual resources specialists. It is very much to be welcomed.

A notable feature of *Visual Resources* is the Editorial, condensed from a wealth of experience, a command of the history of visual documentation, and a far-ranging vision. The Editorial in the issue referred to above, subtitled 'In Transition: From Slide Room to Visual Literacy'<sup>3</sup>, traces the history of visual collections, in effect from the days when the 'home-grown' approach prevailed (for there was nothing else) and was tailored to the needs of discrete groups of users, into a future in which comprehensive, multi-disciplinary collections, 'of service to the whole community', can be envisaged, given co-operation, understanding of what the latest

technology has to offer, and an acceptance of 'standardization and the use of shared universal methods'.

The *Art Libraries Journal* is for the use of technology and systems and standardization and 'shared universal methods' to achieve desirable ends, especially when there are real benefits 'to the whole community'. But does this mean that there is no longer any scope for the 'home-grown' approach, and that professional art librarianship consists of little more than getting connected to the best available systems?

This is clearly *not* the case in the field of visual resources, where the rapid development of professionalism, and, in particular, the introduction of new technology, proceeds apace and in doing so is demonstrating how innovation necessarily progresses by means of pioneering and experimentation in different institutions. Thus the current literature for visual resources professionals – notably the *International Bulletin for Photographic Documentation of the Visual Arts* – is full of 'how I run my library' articles: or to be more precise, 'how I have automated my slide collection using an ABC microcomputer and XYZ software'. It is of crucial importance that information of this kind, the fruits of experience and the results of experiment, should be widely disseminated, not least (but not exclusively) as a vital preliminary to the design and establishment of universal methods. Conversely, only if we cease to innovate and to develop, will we no longer benefit from reading and learning about what others are doing, how, and *why*.

The *Art Libraries Journal* is not and never has been exclusively concerned with the practical mechanics of running art libraries and collections. It is at least as interested in the whys and wherefores of art librarianship – in encouraging thoughtful and responsible approaches to what art librarians do; in developing a holistic perception of the diversity of art libraries and their users; in fomenting a professional restlessness which will never allow us either to cease innovating, or to innovate without examining our objectives, or to imagine that the *only* worthwhile innovations must necessarily involve the application of advanced technology and on a universal scale.

In this issue we commence publication of papers from the IFLA Section of Art Libraries proceedings devoted to the theme 'Art libraries for the people' – a title borrowed from Clive Phillpot's thought-provoking paper

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delivered to the Section at Chicago two years ago<sup>4</sup>. In that paper, Clive reminded us not only that in many countries neither the availability of advanced technologies and systems nor the resources to benefit from them can be assumed, but also, that in the developed world the adoption of information technology does not necessarily lead to more access to more information for everybody.

The *Art Libraries Journal* will always seek to reflect the realities of contemporary art librarianship; it cannot by itself be expected to keep you abreast of every development in information technology in detail, but it will endeavour to address the issues raised, and to envisage the possibilities which ensue from such developments, from an art library perspective and not least, in terms of their benefits to 'the people'. But at the same time this *Journal* is not prepared to neglect the 'home-grown'. Because we are an *international* journal, it is our duty and our pleasure to report on, and to encourage, initiatives which may be particularly appropriate in smaller or developing countries, which may well be of practical interest to others in comparable situations and in which there may be something from which the most 'advanced' among us may learn or derive inspiration. Because we *believe* that art libraries *are* for people, we will carry on in the expectation that valuable innovations will always arise from interaction between librarian and user, library and locality. If art libraries are to develop, or benefit from, 'systems', for *people*, as distinct from becoming enslaved by systems for systems' sake, then as art librarians we must safeguard our capacity to respond to the users we serve, our freedom to innovate.

While writing the above I sought in vain for a comment by Margaret Shaw which was clear in my mind but the location of which eluded me. How could I have forgotten that it appeared, as an 'aside', in her IFLA paper in the very first issue of the 'new' *Art Libraries Journal*? It is so apposite that I quote it here in full:

'A certain amount of necessity allied to a life-long compulsion to see as much of the world as I can, as often as I can, have led me to visit libraries of all sorts all over the world. I cannot count the number of times I have found a librarian who is embarrassed to show me an indexing tool, a filing system, a

method of storage or some other innovation, because it is 'home-made', hand-written, local in emphasis or in some way does not measure up to the peaks of technological achievement. Believe me, some of the best suggestions and ideas I have gleaned in my travels have come from such schemes which are born of necessity to fill the needs, rather than to enhance the appearance of, librarianship'.<sup>5</sup>

## References

1. *Art Documentation* v.6 no.1 Spring 1987 p.42.
2. Davisson, Darrell. 'A look at some forthcoming resources in optical disc storage'. *Visual Resources* v.III no.4 Winter [1986-]1987, p.287-315.
3. [Roberts, Helene E.] 'Editorial. In transition: from slide room to visual library'. *Visual Resources* vol.III no.4 Winter [1986-]1987, p.v-vi.
4. Phillpot, Clive. 'Art libraries for the people'. *Art Libraries Journal* v.10 no.4 Winter 1985 p.3-11.
5. Shaw, Margaret. 'AARTI: Australian Art Index'. *Art Libraries Journal* v.11 no.1 p.18.