

THE VIEW FROM "DOWN UNDER" : ARLIS/ANZ AND THE WORLD OF ART LIBRARIANSHIP*

By J. Margaret Shaw

Art librarians in Australia and New Zealand do not spend their time constantly thinking about how far away they are from the rest of the world. Like their international colleagues they are too busy getting on with their jobs. Nevertheless, because we work in a very international field it is inevitable that we are aware of, and devise strategies to operate within, the constraints of living "down under".

What I should like to do briefly is to put "down under" in context. To do so I shall compare and contrast the environments of the members of ARLIS/ANZ [Arts Libraries Society / Australia and New Zealand], ARLIS /UK and Ireland and ARLIS / North America.

All three ARLIS organisations under consideration cover more than one country, with separate governmental, educational, and socio-economic systems. In the case of ARLIS/UK and Ireland the situation is becoming increasingly complex both externally with the move into Europe and internally with the changes in Scotland.

ARLIS/ANZ covers Australia and New Zealand: two separate countries separated by some 2,000 kilometres of water. One thing we share is the frequent use of two terms: "down under" and "the antipodes". Terms which, in their origins, reflect a view of us as being somehow removed from the civilised world, the under side of the world or, as "antipodes" is defined in the Oxford dictionary, "diametrically opposite" .

Being underneath is easily fixed.

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In addition, the antipodean definition is becoming increasingly less relevant.

Post-World War II migration and economic reality have caused the focus of thinking in our part of the world to shift from a very Anglo-Celtic position to one which encompasses mainland Europe and increasingly today the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific. Indeed, ARLIS/ANZ has a proposal on the table to expand our coverage into our part of the Pacific. This focus is mirrored in our growing interest in the arts of the region. In 1999 the ARLIS/ANZ annual conference was held in Brisbane in October to coincide with the third Asia-Pacific Triennial.

Nevertheless, distance from the most concentrated centres of art historical scholarship remains an important geographical factor.

Size is also relevant, [Chart 1] since distances within the region are significant for both ARLIS/NA and ARLIS/ANZ members, particularly when considering attendance at an annual conference. The 1999 executive of the New Zealand regional chapter of ARLIS/ANZ faced a two day journey by road and sea between the Secretary and the Treasurer, with the Chairman somewhere in between.

A third factor is population which is, of course, reflected in the respective sizes of our organisations [Chart 2].

The membership chart [Chart 3] shows only those members of each organisation actually resident or located within the official territory of that organisation and, of course, it reflects only those art librarians who chose to join their professional organisation. Not surprisingly, the shape of the charts is fairly similar.

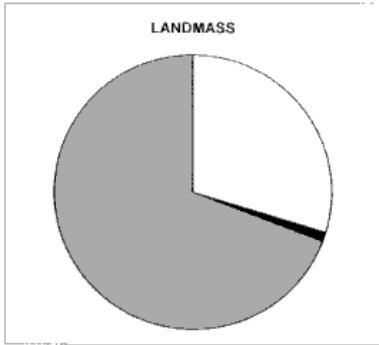


Chart 1

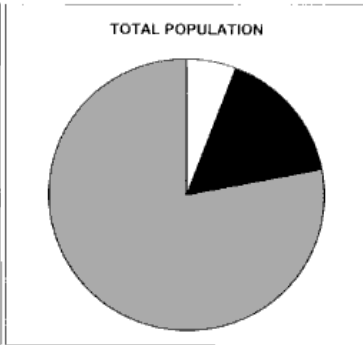


Chart 2

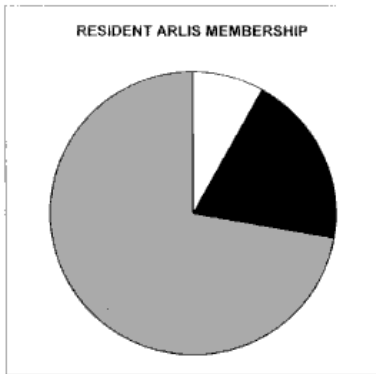


Chart 3

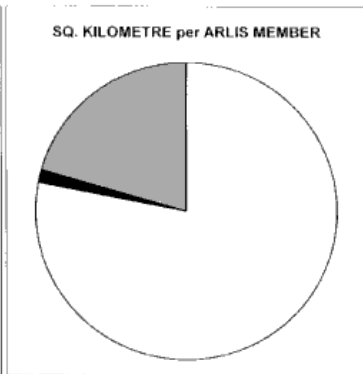
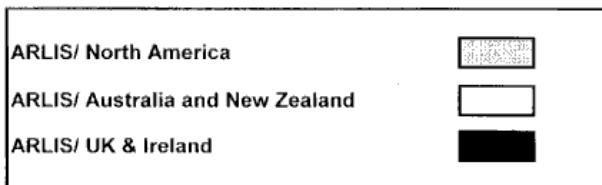


Chart 4



However, if we put charts 1 and 3 together we see a marked difference in which ARLIS/ANZ members and also, I suspect, the more isolated members of ARLIA/NA will recognise an underlying truth.

Of course, we are lucky to live at a time when technology is making communication so much easier. It is absolutely impossible to over-emphasise the impact of e-mail and related technologies on our isolated part of the world. Not only do they facilitate much closer contact with large numbers of colleagues around the globe but they are also having an impact on how we work within our region. For example, ARLIS/ANZ has changed from having the executive as a whole located in one place to having an executive with representatives from a variety of locations.

For ARLIS/ANZ members, environmental factors have both negative and positive aspects. On the negative side there are simply fewer people to do the range of tasks necessary both in relation to the documentation of our national art, the provision of information about art world-wide and administratively, the organisation of a professional body and its activities.

There are also economic drawbacks. A small population in a large area does mean an expensive infrastructure. In addition, it can be harder for a small group of relatively small libraries to attract funding for a project so the saying "small is beautiful" is often the pattern. As yet, neither Australia nor New Zealand has developed the tradition of patronage for the arts which exists in North America, nor do we have as good a track record of public funding for the arts as is found in the UK or Europe.

However, there are many positive sides to small populations. One of the greatest impacts is that, in some ways, a small population does simplify matters, particularly in technologically developed economies.

Firstly, it is relatively easy to know the majority of players in the game and to be aware of what they are doing.

Secondly, if you are trying to have a collection which is comprehensive in the art of your country or region, the number of publications is relatively small and, although ephemeral materials always seem overwhelming in any situation, realistically, the number of pieces of paper we have to handle is smaller.

Thirdly, it is, while not simple, certainly simpler to set up national systems in a country with a small population and a proportionally small number of libraries. For art librarians in Australia and New Zealand there is a large part of our work which is linked to national rather than subject specialist systems.

Australia, increasingly in conjunction with New Zealand, is very much the country of the DNC, the Distributed National Collection. In fact this is a principle which has come to underlie much of Australian librarianship in all fields with national and state libraries playing a pivotal role.

One of the key components in this system is the national bibliographic database, *Kinetica*, which is hosted by the National Library of Australia. This database, which is so far only available on subscription, contains the holdings of a large proportion of libraries throughout Australia.

We also have a national Inter-Lending system, originally based on the exchange of vouchers rather than cash, but increasingly becoming an on-line version of the same thing. In conjunction with this there is a directory of all libraries which offer inter-library loan as a service which is now available on-line. New Zealand libraries are also beginning to appear in this directory.

The National Library also hosts the Australian Libraries Gateway which is a directory of all Australian libraries accessible through the world wide web.

The National Library in New Zealand plays a similarly pivotal role to that of its counterpart in Australia.

Other NLA-based projects include:

- the *Register of Australia Archives and Manuscripts* - a relatively new but rapidly growing data-base which gives access to archival materials all over Australia;
- *Pandora* - a project to archive Australian electronic publications, although not yet virtual exhibition catalogues which is a field which I hope will be taken up by ARLIS/ANZ;

and

- *Imagereach* - a pilot project searching image data-bases across a number of institutions.

I am not, of course, suggesting that art libraries in other countries lead a purely ARLIS-based existence. We are all part of other institutions, other libraries and other library networks. However, in a sparsely populated area of the world the ability to set up national systems is not only somewhat simpler, it is also a practical and economic necessity.

This is also not say that ARLIS/ANZ does not act to support and develop projects which are of particular interest to its members. The recent creation of a fund to provide travel and research grants for ARLIS/ANZ members is a major step in

this direction. The first grant has resulted in a free, web-based tool called ARIADNE which is a survey of in-house indexing of the arts in Australia.

In the past, ARLIS/ANZ has also been involved in the production of the AVAD [Australian Visual Arts Data-base] CDROM which contains some 19 separate files, 8 of which were supported or encouraged by ARLIS, and some of which are now being converted to on-line subscription services along with new [ARLIS assisted] data-bases.

What then are the issues which are currently exercising the talents and imaginations of art librarians in Australia and New Zealand?

As we work in an increasingly international environment the similarity of issues facing us all becomes more apparent. We all work in a general environment of down-sizing and economic rationalism but for art librarians there are other issues which are much more integral to our profession and which will effect us long after the economic rationalists have, hopefully, rationalised themselves out of existence. As an art museum librarian I share with colleagues around the world an interest in questions of public access, and a more pro-active approach to it, and the establishment of archival collections within museums.

However, for all of us, and particularly those in far-flung locations, the key issue must be the switch to an international information environment in which on-line access to information is becoming increasingly dominant.

Art history and librarianship have always had an international dimension. However, the rules of the game have changed markedly in a very short time. Where the international dimension was, in the past, something which was sought and welcomed, it is now something which engulfs us whether we wish it or not.

The librarian's role as a collector, documentalist and guide to information resources will become even more essential, if somewhat changed, provided we take the initiative. There are many players in the electronic game who fail to recognise the difference between information technology and information management and who are happy to step in and assume both roles. They will of course have to learn what librarians have been trained to do for generations, regardless of format, but no-one will save our place for us if we leave it vacant.

The area in which I believe art librarians face the greatest challenge is in the location, selection, capture and archiving of information in electronic form.

Each aspect has important components.

It is a truism to say that there is a great deal of rubbish available on the World Wide Web. There is also an increasing amount of very useful information beyond the basic contact information which must be seen as one of its greatest riches at present. Predictably, some of the most structured information is increasingly becoming subscription-based which puts it firmly back in the library/ information service sphere.

In spite of the growing technological sophistication of researchers, we find that in many ways the change of medium has not changed their basic behaviour.

- They still want librarians to save them time by helping them find the appropriate material.
- They still want continued access in a medium which is, by its nature, potentially ephemeral even for major papers.

Just as we have selected and organised print materials for generations, so do we need to develop techniques to ensure that we do not leave a gap in the record of art historical activity which can never be retrieved.

Projects are developing in many countries including Australasia, and no doubt, in a few years time it will be a common-place occurrence with automated regular sweeps of the web [or its equivalent] for new materials but there will continue to be a great need for skilled editing and selection. In the meantime, important information is being hidden in the plethora of rubbish and, ultimately, lost. Unlike paper ephemera which people tend to hoard and eventually, to deposit, electronic ephemera takes more effort to collect, is much easier to destroy and exists in very few copies. For art librarians, the capturing of virtual exhibitions must be something we come to terms with very quickly before too much is lost. This has not yet commenced seriously in Australasia. As a first stage, we should at least be keeping a record of our own institution's activities in this sphere.

I mentioned above the Pandora project in Australia. This project is currently limited to electronic journals, perhaps the easiest group to collect. There are many such projects around the world including some which are much more sophisticated, but there is still a need to document and publicise their existence.

Similarly, the digitisation of collections is something which is pre-occupying art librarianship and related professions around the world. It is also an area in which an international approach is increasingly common given the ease of operation across long distances

We are moving rapidly towards the beginning of the 21Century, a century in which the full impact of global automation of information will be felt. While the

electronic environment facilitates the sharing of information globally, as a corollary, so does it pose a threat to cultural diversity, the loss of local culture and the manipulation of the less developed and powerful. The impacts of colonialism have the potential to be just as devastating in our field as in the economic and political sphere.

The 1st January 2001 will also mark the celebration of 100 years of Australian nationhood although some aspects of Australian culture are many, many thousands of years older. For the indigenous people of Australia this is not cause for whole hearted celebration, just as the new millennium may not be for those cultures which, in the coming century, may be increasingly threatened by electronic colonialism.

Acknowledgement

Acknowledgement is given to Universal Press Pty Ltd, Australia, for permission to reproduce the *Down-Under map*.

Appendix

Useful on-line addresses:

ARLIS/ANZ home page

http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/others/arlis_anz

ACN[Australian Cultural Network]

Maps cultural web sites in Australia. Through ACN you can search more than 900 Australian cultural websites, over 410,000 screens of information.

<http://www.acn.net.au/>

AMOL [Australian Museums Online]

http://amol.org.au/guide/guide_one.asp

AVAD [Australian Visual Arts Databases] on disc from Discovery Media see url for AVAD on- line]

AVAD on line [Subscription]

contains:

ARIADNE/Indexing the visual arts in Australia: a survey [free]

ART EX 1990 - [List of Australian art exhibition catalogues][sub]

NATSIVAD [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

Visual Artists Database] [subscription]

AUSTART [Australian Art Journals Index 1987 -] [subscription]

<http://discoverymedia.purescript.com.au/>

MURA

[Catalogue of the collections of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Library]

<http://unicorn.aiatsis.gov.au/start.html>

NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA:

Includes both art collection and Research Library catalogues on-line

<http://www.nga.gov.au>

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

<http://www.nla.gov.au>

includes:

AUSTRALIAN LIBRARIES GATEWAY

<http://www.nla.gov.au/libraries/>

IMAGESEARCH [pilot project to access images across different Institutions]

<http://www.nla.gov.au/imagesearch>

ILRS [Inter-lending Resource Sharing Directory]

<http://www.nla.gov.au/ilrs>

KINETICA [national bibliographic data base] [Subscription]

<http://www.nla.gov.au/kinetica/>

PANDORA [Archive of networked documentary resources]

<http://www.nla.gov.au/pandora/>

RAAM [Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts]

<http://www.nla.gov.au/raam/>

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF NEW ZEALAND

<http://www.natlib.govt.nz/>

Te Puna [includes New Zealand Bibliographic Network]

<http://tepuna.natlib.govt.nz/>

New Zealand Libraries [on-line directory]

<http://www.lincoln.ac.nz/libr/nz/nzlibs.htm>

New Zealand Libraries e-mail directory:

<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/dlis/ssubdl/director/nzlib/>

MUSEUM OF NEW ZEALAND TE PAPA TONGAREWA:

<http://www.tepapa.govt.nz/default.html>

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