

MUSEUM LIBRARIES: FROM HIDDEN TREASURES TO TREASURED INFORMATION CENTRES*

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Abstract: In this paper the author describes the situation of the Dutch libraries specialized in the history of art. At various levels an enormous number of art-historical publications are present. Collective efforts to improve availability are mentioned: the PICA/NCC system linked with the universities and the Royal Library, and the production of a CD-ROM of the museum libraries and other libraries not taking part in PICA. The PICA-libraries own between 450,000 – 600,000 books on art, the non-PICA libraries 1,800,000. When these collections are opened up on Internet and through CD-ROM, an increase in the number of students at the museum libraries is expected. These will have to create facilities for the increasing number of clients, which will have consequences for their organization.

Introduction

The theme of these workshops 'libraries at crossroads' suggests that libraries are at a point where they can change direction dramatically. In my opinion this is not the case at all. I believe that the radical changes we see in digitalisation of information is only a change of form, and that the direction in which we develop has a far greater continuity than we sometimes realize. To go one step further, I believe that one of the functions of a library, at least of a library in the humanities, is to keep the historical perspective in view. A Dutch cartoonist illustrated the tendency to see modern technology as ends rather than means with a drawing showing some elderly gentlemen sitting in a train called Internet. Another man jumps aboard. The caption reads 'We haven't the slightest idea where it is going, but we don't want to miss it'.

Some time before the computer era really got started the first Dutch professor of librarianship Loosjes defined documentary information as 'knowledge in motion', meaning the continuing process of reading and researching, theorising and publishing, cataloguing and making available, reading and researching etc. Despite the fact that a lot of documentary information has lost its documentary aspect, and has become more volatile, and despite the fact that the motion has increased in pace, the underlying thought is valid still. And has been valid for a

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long time: lots of things we consider new were thought of long before the tools to realize them were there. In „Le diverse et artificiose machine del capitano Agostino Ramelli,“ published in Paris in the sixteenth century, we see a renaissance version of Windows, Windows 1558 to be precise. The reader, sitting at the revolving bookmachine, can get simultaneous access to twelve books, not by using a mouse, but, much more efficient, by using footpedals.

The role of the librarian, by whichever name we care to name him, will always be, has to be, that of a pilot steering people towards that bit or byte of information they seek.

Nevertheless, big changes are taking place of course, and in the following speech I will try to give you an impression of the changing field of art historical librarianship in the Netherlands.

Art historical libraries in the Netherlands: some collective projects

For students and researchers there are a number of possible sources for literature. The universities of course have their large university libraries and smaller institutional libraries. Then there is the Royal Library in The Hague, with, in the same building, the Stichting Rijksbureau Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD), the largest art historical research library in the Netherlands with a collection of 400.000 volumes, including 130.000 auction catalogues. The third group consists of the museum libraries. Each of the larger art museums has its own library, ranging from the library of the Van Gogh Museum with a collection of 40.000 volumes to the library of the Rijksmuseum, with 210.000 volumes. Most of the museum libraries are open to the public, though only the library of the Stedelijk Museum was conceived as a public library.

In the beginning of the seventies the university libraries and the Royal Library felt the need to cut down costs of cataloguing and developed a computer system in which shared cataloguing played a central role. PICA is the face of library automation in the Netherlands as far as the universities and the Royal Library are concerned. PICA (Centre for Library Automatization) and the Royal Library are responsible for the NCC, the Dutch Union Catalogue, and the NCC/P, the Dutch Union Catalogue of Periodicals.

Nevertheless there is a large number of libraries, that do not take part in PICA and the NCC. The reason is that for smaller and specialized libraries PICA is often very expensive, and, being a very large system and a big organization, flexibility is not the first word I have in mind when I think of describing its attitude towards everything non-PICA.

The number of volumes of art historical publications of libraries that do partake in PICA is not easily distilled since part of this literature is embedded in larger collections, but an optimistic guess would be between 450,000 and 600,000. The non-PICA-libraries own 1,845,000 volumes between them. In both cases I'm talking volumes, not titles.

The libraries of the RKD, The Rijksmuseum, The Stedelijk Museum and the Museum Boijmans, together good for a million books, all cataloguing with the same, non-PICA system, i.e. TINLIB, wanted to produce a joint database, offering the whole to the NCC, and thus filling a blank space. All four librarians of these institutions had expected that the biggest part of these collections would prove to overlap. To our great surprise 60% of the titles proved to be unique, available at just one of these four libraries. Thus making a joint catalogue more difficult and more interesting at the same time. The idea of an on-line database with possibilities for shared cataloguing proved too expensive, but a CD-ROM listing these four collections is in production. It is the intention that the smaller TINLIB libraries will in the future be included in this project, so that a better overview of the whole of the art historical literature present in the Netherlands will be available within a few years.

All art libraries now participate in the OKBN, an acronym standing for Overleg Kunsthistorische Bibliotheken Nederland, the Art Libraries Society. In 1982 eight librarians of art historical libraries began holding informal meetings to exchange ideas and opinions and profit from each others' experience. The style of these meetings is still informal, but for practical reasons, the debating club became a registered association in 1996. Nowadays the meetings are generally attended by some thirty to forty librarians. In 1996 the OKBN produced a valuable guide to art historical and related library collections in the Netherlands, called 'Collections of art-historical documentation in the Netherlands'.

Recent initiatives to create local library networks give access to various collections. Amsterdamnet and Rotterdamnet for instance, create the possibility to search through all Amsterdam or Rotterdam library collections: public, university and special libraries in one system.

Changing role of museum libraries

The museum libraries are confronted with a growing number of users. This has different reasons. Due to the decrease or lack of increase in acquisition budgets, the libraries of the universities have had to cut down the number of acquisitions in the last decades.

A second reason for a growing number of potential clients is the increase in postgraduate research. In the Netherlands there has grown a rather wide cleft between those art historians who work in a museum and those who work at the universities. The latter group has the tendency to do theoretical research, the former is busy with the more practical aspects of the trade. This situation is not, as for instance in France, caused by different educational training, but the result of an extreme low job mobility, so that there are not many people who make the transfer from university to museum and vice versa. This situation was seen to be far from ideal, both by the museums and the universities. This was one of the reasons for establishing the Onderzoekschool Kunstgeschiedenis (Dutch postgraduate School for Art History) in 1994, in which universities and museums collaborate, giving postgraduate students the chance to do research in the museums too.

The library of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen

In 1849 the Museum Boijmans in Rotterdam was founded. Though books were collected from the beginning, a library did not exist. Some of the early directors of the museum brought their own libraries with them when they were appointed, and, alas took them with them when they left. A form of international exchange of publications was already in evidence at the end of the nineteenth century. From 1924 the curator of the print room was also officially responsible for the library, but only in 1962 a professional librarian was appointed. Nowadays the official formation consists of two librarians. For a library with a total of more than 120,000 books and a yearly increase of between 2500 and 3500 titles this is not a comfortable situation, and the motto has always been: work fast and cut corners. Still, not all is gloom.

The collection of the library is varied and contains more than 70,000 exhibition catalogues, 30,000 monographs and 20,000 collection catalogues. There is a small but interesting collection of emblem books and old imprints, but the most special collection is the one on surrealism. Since the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen is the only museum in the Netherlands with a collection of surrealism the library has for twenty years now collected in this area. This includes not only exhibition catalogues and monographs, but also the source materials. The emphasis lies on the books and periodicals published between 1920 and 1950. La révolution surréaliste, Minotaure, Documents, Variétés, London bulletin are just five magazines of the more than hundred that appeared in the interbellum. Of these periodicals almost none is present in Dutch library collections. Checking the NCC Periodicals one finds few of the originals, some reprints, and then mostly scattered over different libraries all over the country. Museum Boijmans can proudly state

that it has a central research collection in this field. Of course much larger collections exist abroad, for instance in Brussels and Paris, and in Chicago. At the moment we are trying to find a special budget for this category of books which can still be found at not too unreasonable prices.

The book collection is not only used in a documentary fashion. Boijmans is a varied museum, with modern and old art and decorative art. The museum tries to make integrated exhibitions: when for instance the Moroccan photographs of the American writer Paul Bowles were shown, the library put together an exhibition of books of artists' travels in Morocco, of old guidebooks and maps, all from the own collection.

This fabulous library deserves much more attention and visitors than it gets at the moment. And our ambition is to make this unknown, hidden treasure known, to change this inwards orientated library to a library that is not so much a public library as a library open to all people who are interested in art and art history. The four pillars on which this programme is founded are: the collection, the building, automation, and staff. Five years ago we had just the collection. No adequate staff, no computer, a reading room with a few rickety chairs, some dusty cellars bursting with books, the collection divided over six locations within the museum.

One by one the problems are being solved. We have managed to obtain a grant of 250,000 guilders to catalogue the whole collection retrospectively. This project is now being undertaken by a firm specialized in this field. The collection is still being expanded in the same way as before, and here we are searching for extra means to extend the special collection on surrealism. The housing problem will be over when the new extension of the museum will open its doors, and the staffing problem? Well, when two out of three major problems prove solvable within five years, this last obstruction to a real new library functioning in a new way will surely be overcome.

Summary

The challenge to the museum libraries is to change from inward-looking institutions to a more open kind of library. This change will have to take place without losing their specialist knowledge and without changing the successful way of collecting: the relatively low overlap of titles between the three large museums and the RKD prove the advantage of the link between museum collection and library collection. Their original function within the museum will not change drastically, and the non-lending policy will remain. Therefore they will have to improve facilities for accommodating the rising number of researchers and students that will undoubtedly be the result of the better access to their collections.

The museum libraries will not change directions at crossroads, but go right on, widening their path from mule track to digital highway, a process that will take time and has to be supervised carefully.

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