Art libraries are currently experiencing a sea change that is being driven by new technology, especially digitisation, as well as the flourishing of artistic practice and art appreciation by ever-growing numbers of people.

Leeds City Council's Art Library recently marked the 50th anniversary of its opening. The Print Room and Art Library in the city's art gallery were unveiled by art historian Kenneth Clark in December 1959. Until then, its 12,000 volumes had been housed within the central library.

The Leeds collection, now standing at 20,000 items (15,000 for loan), is one of the biggest outside London. There is also Manchester Art Library, which has 10,000 lending books, and 80,000 reference books. In addition to long opening hours on weekdays, Leeds welcomes readers at weekends, and staff work closely with other nearby institutions, sharing information through Leeds Art Libraries in Cooperation.

Art libraries were well established in the UK long before Leeds opened its doors to the public, although until fairly recently many could only be enjoyed by a small elite. The first one to be attached to a fine arts institution was founded at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768. Like many of its successors, its raison d'etre was as a resource for painters, sculptors and architects. This is still the primary role of the academy's three libraries, but the organisation is increasing access to them through initiatives such as putting some of its collection online.

"We have our own picture library on our website," says the academy's head of library services, Adam Waterton. "And, as database standards become more accepted, museums will be able to share through non-profit digital image libraries like ARTstor."

The idea that providing Britain's skilled industrial workers with design models would improve the quality of their products led to what eventually became the UK's National Art Library, based at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). The library, which now holds a million items, is run by the museum's Word and Image department, which also cares for the museum's collections of western prints, drawings, paintings, photographs and book art.

At one time, the National Art Library, like many similar libraries in the UK, was the preserve of a privileged few. To enter its hallowed spaces you had to prove that no other collection held what you were after - it was a "library of last resort". 
National Art Library

The National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) is a public reference library that specialises in information about the fine and decorative arts of many countries and periods. It is open to all for reference purposes (material is not lent out). There is no charge for entering the library or registering as a reader. The library also acts as the museum’s curatorial department for the art, craft and design of the book.

The library has material on subjects that are central to the work of the V&A and its collection. These include prints, drawings and paintings; furniture and woodwork; textiles; dress and fashion; ceramics and glass; metalwork; sculpture; art and design of the Far East, India and South East Asia; and the history of the art, craft and design of the book. The library also has information about artists.

Most of the National Art Library’s collections are online – https://catalogue.nal.vam.ac.uk

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From the National Art Library: a plate from a decorative flower book, published in Nuremberg in 1613 (top left). Wallpaper designed for the Festival of Britain in 1951 (above left). Cover of a wallpaper brochure that was drawn by Walter Crane in about 1887 (above)
Today, with some exceptions, the pendulum has swung the other way. The V&A's library is "now open to all and no one is turned away," says Martin Flynn, the head of access at the library.

**Digital publishing**

Digitisation, as well as the development of library catalogues such as COPAC (a merged online catalogue of university, specialist, and national libraries in the UK and Ireland), have provided new opportunities to increase access. Also, online information providers and specialist digital publishers have started to create digital libraries. Flynn says that the big corporations have gone for standard book formats, but large items in art libraries present a different challenge.

"Handling and photographing fragile and unusually formatted objects is a specialised, labour-intensive task which requires security and does not lend itself to easy digitisation," he says. "But on an in-house basis, we have digitised 100 artists' books as a taster and there is a lot on our open website. We have found that making a selection available this way actually increases demand because people become aware of what there is. But they still want to come in and enjoy the serendipity of being in a library where they can stumble across unexpected things."

John Meriton, the Word and Image deputy keeper at the V&A, believes that partnership with print and digital publishers is a good way forward.

"Digitising in-house is very expensive," says Meriton. "With e-research and educational publishers like Thomson Gale, complex copyright issues can be put on to a commercial provider. Licensing agreements run for 10-15 years and then the rights return to the institution. These services can't be free, as they cost a lot to supply. They are free to students through their universities, but individuals have to pay for the chance to see them at home on their PCs. On balance, people are getting better access."

At the other end of the scale are the small but innovative spaces that have opened recently. These include the Foyle Reading Room, which was unveiled last year as part of the £13m redevelopment of the Whitechapel Gallery in East London. All the past catalogues are available in the reading room, although an appointment has to be made to consult the archive.

The archive features materials produced by those working at the Whitechapel during the past 100 years, including publications, rare documents, artists' letters, photographs, graphic works, press records, exhibition plans and installations, recordings on tape and videos of artists, critics and curators.

Another smaller facility is the New Art Gallery Walsall's art library. "It was created from books belonging to curators," says library and collections supervisor Cheryl Jones. The library, which is open to anyone, focuses on the Garman-Ryan collection (collected by Kathleen Garman, lover and later wife of artist Jacob Epstein, and her lifelong friend, the sculptor Sally Ryan) and issues related to exhibitions. It contains magazines and journals as well.

Jones also works in the collection department on projects related to the library's archives. "We have a small collection of artists' books which Walsall College is very interested in, as they are running a module associated with it," she says. "The gallery is also employing artist Bob and Roberta Smith to make an artwork about the archive."

**Research resource**

As well as museum and galleries, many other art libraries are part of art colleges such as the University for the Creative Arts, which has
five campuses spread across Surrey and Kent. Nicholas Ross, the university's librarian, is based at the Maidstone site.

"Libraries, like galleries, are part of the colleges and their degree shows," Ross says. "They serve the students and staff but are also open to the public and are part of local communities. Each library has a different remit and specialisation, such as on video, photography, fine art courses or artists' books."

Ross says that the concept of what a library is and how students use it is changing dramatically. In some places, such as Imperial College, bookshelves are being cleared out and replaced by social spaces. "But art libraries are different because they deal with physical objects and artists like browsing books and images in a less specific way than scientists, for example," Ross says.

Collection of last resort
Six of London's art and design colleges were merged into one body over the past decade to form the University of the Arts London. Gustavo Grandal Montero, who trained as an art historian, is responsible for collection development for Chelsea and Camberwell art libraries.

He combines the roles of curator, librarian, archivist and historian, looking after unique holdings of contemporary art, including artists' books, audiovisual and digital media, and more than 3,000 artists' films, videos and documentaries.

"You become a curator - it's the nature of the beast," Montero says. "We are unique in the UK in having a collection of 500 multiples and 3,000 artists' books which are amongst the best in Europe, including some by Marcel Duchamp and YBAs like Damien Hirst. We buy new works, regardless of the canon, because it reflects what is being done. The collection is well-used."

But some institutions are still constrained by limited finances and afflicted by old attitudes. The Courtauld Institute of Art's website sternly warns prospective book library users, that "it is a last-resort reference library for research in the field of art history". The 3 million-strong collection of photographs of artworks in its Conway and Witt libraries and the Photographic Survey suffered last year after the institute's funding was cut by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The libraries are still open, but six posts were made redundant.

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