

A library is not simply a room where books are brought, and read, then put back on their shelves when finished with. It is also the house to a permanent collection of art objects, that can form and grace a wide range of displays, with their own internal eloquence and point¹.

Nearly all the articles in this issue of the *Art Libraries Journal* touch on the exhibited book in one way or another. Most art libraries have collections of material that are seen as 'special' in comparison with the rest of the daily-use stock. These are sometimes the result of donations or bequests, often the product of 'the library's collecting, butterfly-hunter's net (which) is not set solely to scoop up the monumental, sumptuous big-bang bibliophiles' thrill'². They can have been acquired quite inexpensively and even fortuitously – those early artists' books produced as multiples, the decorative bindings on Victorian publications, examples of children's book illustration, the products of small private presses. They add richness and colour as well as character to an individual library, but often remain hidden treasures because of their fragility or their rarity, or because scarce resources are required to retrieve them for readers and to ensure that their use is properly invigilated.

But why acquire these art objects simply to hold under lock and key? Surely they are there to enlighten the user, to be seen and appreciated. Increasingly art librarians are producing exhibitions of this special material whose planning and organisation are done for the sheer professional pleasure of creating an interesting and unusual display, generally using objects for which they feel a special affection. As well as developing the qualities of flair and enthusiasm, curating has considerable added value for librarians: it gives them invaluable experience and adds another skill to their portfolios. Exhibitions of 'treasures' can help them explain to their institutions the *raison d'être* of their special collections, and demonstrate what the library has and does, why such items are acquired and retained and how the material is used in the education and enlightenment of students or users. Such information-sharing may even deter ideas about selling valuable parts of the collections as a fund-raising exercise.

Many libraries now include in their

written policies the requirement of publicising their collections through display, but while some are fortunate enough to have a gallery at their disposal, or to be able to exhibit material in the galleries of their museum, many suffer from a lack of dedicated space. Surprisingly, in contrast to the superb new galleries at the British Library and the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the National Art Library at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London has no gallery of its own, although until the 1980s it used to have one. This is one of the largest art libraries in the world, with huge collections of exhibitable material, yet it is having to make do with foyers or outer areas, even with simple display cases within the reading room itself.

In the face of such difficulties, it is encouraging that some of the articles in this issue so enthusiastically describe the benefits of exhibiting books and so helpfully give assistance to librarians in getting those special items out of storage in order to provide opportunities for public participation and interaction, even for tactile experience, with the fascinating material held in art libraries throughout the world.

This 25th volume of the *Art Libraries Journal* celebrates the start of a new millennium with a change of cover tone, intensifying Philip Pacey's original colour concept. And it is a particular pleasure to have been offered two of the articles for this issue by their authors – a welcome sign that art librarians round the world are enthusiastic about contributing to making the *Art Libraries Journal* a lively and readable publication. May many more of you follow suit!

References

1. Tószegi, Zsuzsanna. 'Where is the border of Europe? Original works of art on this and that side of the River Lajta'. *Art Libraries Journal* vol.14 no.3 1989, p.21-23.
2. Carol Hogben in *From Manet to Hockney: modern artists' illustrated books*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1985. ISBN 0948107081.