

# Editorial

The trigger for this special issue on the current state of art libraries and art librarianship in the Netherlands was the appearance of *Kunstabbibliotheken in Nederland: tien korte schetsen* (reviewed by Peter Rogiest on p.42). This publication celebrated the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Dutch art libraries society Overleg Kunst(historische) Bibliotheken Nederland, also known as OKBN\*ARLIS/NL, and the decade since it became a formal association. I have to thank the members of the OKBN Board, and especially Heleen Homma and Martien Versteeg, who planned the Dutch *Art Libraries Journal* and masterminded the contributions of their colleagues on art libraries small and large in higher education and museums, and on the research libraries in our subject field that are now seen to be knowledge centres.

It is clear from the articles that library mergers have become common during the last few years in the Netherlands, and are increasingly resulting in the disappearance of specialist subject librarians into general and technical services activities, the doubling of subject responsibilities and, inevitably, reduced contact with users. Only art academy librarians seem to have kept some degree of autonomy, although they are faced with challengingly small staff numbers and budgets.

The imperilled future of subject specialist staff is particularly highlighted by the report in this *ALJ* of a round-table discussion on art libraries in the Netherlands, outlining possible scenarios for their future. The debate centred largely on art libraries in museums, although higher education was also represented on the panel. There was clearly a huge gulf between the predictions of the 'futurologists' (an ICT specialist and a library administrator/policymaker) and those of the subject-oriented participants (a museum librarian and an art researcher). The former felt that digitisation was the solution to giving users access to all the source material they needed, while those in the latter group argued that mediation by subject-qualified specialists of the available resources, including in-house material such as museum documentation, historical sources, exhibition catalogues and ephemera, would continue to be essential.

However if subject specialist librarians are indeed disappearing it is difficult to see who will seek out

the documentation that will be of particular value to future researchers. In the UK similar developments have meant a reduction in the time that can be spent on identifying and collecting non-mainstream material. And if this documentation is not pinpointed and acquired at the time when it is current, it will have disappeared.

For many years the idea that everything is going to be digitised has been in the air. But who will pay to digitise all the grey literature collected in art libraries? The panel accepted that digitisation of the backlog of source material would probably never be achieved. And will users be able to cope with the volume of information that is already, and will in future be, made available, without the help of qualified specialist librarians, for example in constructing retrieval tools? There is also the issue of conservation, given that digital is not a conservation medium. Will the originals of the digitised items be kept? If not, how is funding to be found for the necessary and continuing migration of an ever-increasing volume of data?

In the digital age these issues become more important, not less, as does the expertise of professionals. The present round of redundancies and layoffs of art librarians and visual resources staff in the United States shows how essential it is for art librarians to be aware of the issues raised by the Dutch panel discussion, and to work to convince their employers that the contributions of subject specialists are vital to maintaining the quality of college and museum library collections.

Mass digitisation is clearly one of the tools for making what art libraries hold accessible, but it cannot on its own be seen as the ultimate panacea. The book as a medium may possibly be on its way out, but for art library users it is only one of a huge range of resources that have been the bread and butter of information provision in art libraries, and original material will always remain of crucial importance to some users for some purposes.