

EDITORIAL

It really is not all that long ago that art and design librarians despaired of seeing information technology devoted to the needs of their subject area as productively as it had been in the fields of science and technology. Enviously they watched as professional colleagues manipulated the literature of their disciplines to the evident advantage of their users. But all this has changed. Just what a transformation has taken place is shown by the number, and the geographical spread, of art library conferences held each year which discuss the impact of information technology on art libraries. July 1997 saw ARLIS/UK & Ireland's conference in Canterbury, *Art libraries in the cyber-age*; in October the same topic was high on the agenda for members of ARLIS/ANZ; and in September the French Sous-section des Bibliothèques d'Art celebrated its 30th anniversary around a core meeting entitled *L'avenir du passé: les nouvelles technologies*.

A flavour of these events can be found in this issue of the *Art Libraries Journal*. Maggy Wishaupt introduces the DutchESS retrieval system for selected Internet resources, which is being developed by the Royal Library in The Hague to facilitate academic research in art and other subjects. Odile Blanc describes the development and use of the image database at the Musée des Tissus in Lyon, and the way in which this historic collection is being made more accessible to manufacturers and historians. And these two papers are complemented by Doug Sandle's specially commissioned article on Axis, outlining the progress of this growing database of information on British artists and craftspeople.

Reading about these thriving projects makes reports from other, less well-supported parts of the art library world especially depressing. The librarian at the South African National Gallery, who contributed the lead article in the last issue of the *Art Libraries Journal*, has been instructed to cut all periodical subscriptions due to financial pressures – a most damaging solution to funding problems, which will cause irreparable and long-term harm to the stock of the library and the services it can offer to the Gallery's curators and to the public. News in *ARLIS/NA Update* about downsizing and mergers in academic libraries in the States, from Alaska to California, echoes that from Canada, where most university art librarians who

leave are now not replaced, and where art museum libraries in the West have also been hit hard. The United Kingdom's public library sector is under increasing pressure: for example in Bristol the specialist fine arts library has been closed, while in Wales the post of Arts Librarian at Cardiff Central Library has recently been cut at very short notice. In Scotland supervision of the library run by the single information officer serving the many sites of Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries has been given to a non-professional member of staff. In the last years of the twentieth century the developments in information technology demand more subject specialisation, not less, if the enhanced resources at our disposal are not to languish underused, with their potential unrealised.

The location of IFLA in Amsterdam in August this year will bring an international gathering of art librarians to the Open Forum and Workshop held by the Section of Art Libraries. This *Art Libraries Journal* publishes an array of articles on current Dutch initiatives, a number of which will be explored in more detail during the conference, when there will be a visit to the Royal Library in the Hague to see the DutchESS system, and also a chance to see the digitised visual collections of the Netherlands Institute for Art History, the RKD. The bio-bibliographical database of architects at the Technical University Delft, the Dutch government's ambitious project to connect all Dutch museums – and potentially their libraries too – by means of an intranet, an update on the CADENS nineteenth-century exhibition catalogue project, all these show how information technology is currently being used in the Netherlands by art librarians to help them provide information more quickly and efficiently.

And to bring us back to the world of books and images Freek van Eijk describes 'The Treasury' at the Technical University Delft, giving a glimpse of a special collection of rare books housed in a new and technologically-advanced building, while Mieke Beumer introduces the conference Dutch colleagues are planning in 1999 on the problems which need solution if visual material in art libraries is to be made accessible.