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# Two decades of change in Dutch university art libraries

*Martien Versteeg*

In 1987 Chris Smeenk wrote in this journal about the libraries of the Dutch art historical institutes.<sup>1</sup> In the 22 years that have since passed many changes have occurred, perhaps most notably the merging of the many autonomous institute libraries into larger ones. Has this led to a more professional approach or was it caused by a search for more efficiency? Does this really matter? The fact is that Smeenk, or any other library user familiar with Dutch art history libraries, would hardly recognise the situation at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Maybe he would complain about the disappearance of the traditional academic institute librarian, but on the other hand he might be cheered by many other developments, such as the more central role of services for the public. Let's take a look....

## Introduction

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In the Netherlands, several universities – Leiden University, Utrecht University, the University of Groningen, Radboud University Nijmegen, the University of Amsterdam and VU University Amsterdam – all offer an art history course. In addition to these six universities Delft University of Technology and Eindhoven University of Technology offer courses in architecture. The Royal Library, which co-operates on many levels with the university libraries, can also be considered as an important academic library with a large art historical collection and, since it is the Dutch national library, with a large but still voluntary national deposit system. The other Dutch universities do not offer art history as a subject.<sup>2</sup> The libraries which form part of the Dutch institutes abroad are significant for their support of Dutch art history courses, but are not dealt with in this overview.

## Moving to one central library

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A critical feature of these last 22 years has been the move towards the centralised organisation of

academic libraries. As a result there are now no autonomous institute libraries at all. This development was often initiated by the faculty itself during the 1990s. Now all faculty libraries, in their turn, are or are being incorporated into the organisation of the main library. As a result their management has become the business first of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and subsequently of the directorate of the main library. For reasons of efficiency this new management decided to move libraries, change job specifications, and critically evaluate collection policy. At the same time public services have become more and more important.

### *Locations and buildings*

Where it was possible the previously independent libraries, until then housed in the same building as the academic staff, moved to new and larger locations with other libraries within the faculty. This physical centralisation demands a great deal of the building. Therefore plans have been made in many cases to build a new library (as in the University of Amsterdam), to make existing buildings suitable for housing a faculty library (the Humanities Library in Utrecht will soon be moving to its second shared location) or to transform the main library into a



Artist's impression of the new Humanities Library at Utrecht University. Photo: Website Utrecht University, architects Grosfeld van der Velde.

combined main and faculty library (as at Leiden University). In anticipation of a new campus on the Amsterdam business centre ZuidAs, VU University is planning to centralise all arts and humanities libraries in a new location within the main VU building. The TU Delft was forced to move its architecture library into another building because of a devastating fire on 13 May 2008, which ruined the building but left the library collection almost undamaged.<sup>3</sup>

Since open-access shelving continued to be used in the new or adapted premises, the art history section has remained recognisable; until the present all collections, except those at Utrecht University, are still arranged according to the shelving systems of their original institution's libraries.

### *Jobs*

The management of the faculty and of the main library has certainly had a professional approach to library work. In 1987 it was not uncommon for the institute librarian to combine academic and management tasks. This had to come to an end when libraries merged physically, which meant the streamlining of academic and technical work. Soon the former library staffs were divided into subject, technical (e.g. cataloguing) and public (e.g. lending desk) categories, each organised within their own section. Leiden University was the last to implement this segregation of staff members, in 2009.

Once merged, the university libraries minimised the number of subject librarians working for a particular discipline, for instance by dispensing with the librarian who had worked at the original library. Later on, two or more disciplines became the

responsibility of one single subject librarian. Combinations of art history and archaeology, cultural or heritage studies, and museology are not uncommon. Unfortunately this has often been combined with a reduction in the number of hours assigned to these disciplines.

Merging the collections has also brought a back-office position for the subject librarian, as well as a spatial separation of the academic staff and the library. While the library was part of an institute, the librarian used often to get his information on an informal basis and more or less automatically. In the new structure, it is formal contacts with academic staff that are becoming increasingly important.

Almost all kinds of non-book documentation, such as cuttings collections, have been abolished. This becomes clear when looking at developments in visual resource departments where now in fact only the Radboud

University Nijmegen still plays an active collecting role.<sup>4</sup> At almost all other universities collecting, archiving and describing visual material has become the responsibility of the individual members of the academic staff. In some cases the university helps them by offering software for registering the material, and image databases such as ArtSTOR and Prometheus. The old collections of slides and reproductions are sometimes moved to the closed stacks or are donated to a new owner.

Since the beginning of the century faculty liaison – informing and supporting the staff and pointing them to the services and products of the library in a proactive way – has become an important part of the subject librarian's job. Faculty liaison had been intensively discussed from the mid-1990s onwards and it has since then been implemented in the universities. Academic staff have been involved in library matters, such as the selection of electronic resources, library instruction and sometimes even the preparation of the collection profile needed for an approval plan. Thus the institute librarian has evolved into a mediator for all aspects of the library's content, whether in paper or electronic format. A description of this new job was established at the beginning of this century on a national level, although names for the position may differ, as remuneration clearly does.

### *What about our collections?*

Naturally collection policies are still aligned with the research and education programs of the academic staff. For almost all art historical collections this means that much attention is paid to Western European, especially Dutch and Flemish, painting of

the 17th century, the art of the Italian Renaissance, and modern art and architecture. But currently it is no longer possible to collect exhaustively in specialised subject areas such as applied arts and non-western art at Leiden University, iconography at Utrecht University or the theory of art at the University of Amsterdam. Even the Royal Library has had to focus less broadly: since the year 2000 its collection policy has narrowed to Dutch culture and history and related subjects.



Overview of the reading room of the Royal Library. To attract more visitors, in 2007 the Royal Library opened a large reading room concentrating on Dutch culture and history and related subjects.

Several years ago the project *Literature supply for the humanities* was initiated.<sup>5</sup> Its aim was to improve the national collection through the acquisition of relevant older academic publications that were not available anywhere in the Netherlands. A large part of the funding was spent on electronic collections, such as JSTOR, Project Muse and the journal archives of Proquest.<sup>6</sup> For art history the funds were divided between the Royal Library (Germanic art), Utrecht University (Roman art) and Leiden University (non-western and Asiatic art). This project ended in 2008 but currently, looking at the budgets of the art history libraries, it seems likely that within a few years a similar scheme will be needed.

Problems arising from the shortage of space for the collection of printed material are no longer deferred. At the University of Amsterdam and at Utrecht University projects aiming to reduce the volume of the art historical (and other) collections by more than 30% have been realised by moving less-used, older, vulnerable, rare or duplicate publications to the closed stacks of the main library. The availability of electronic databases and journals has made this task

less difficult. For all collections any increase in the space needed for open-access shelving is out of the question.

More than they did in the 1980s and 1990s, the subject librarians have always to bear in mind the consequences their decisions may have for the scarce manpower within the organisation. Acquiring duplicates as a result of not gearing acquisition to that of other in-house departments such as the Special Collections (for drawing, illumination and printing), or the automatic acceptance of gifts, can no longer be standard practice. At some libraries selection and acquisition rely partly on approval plans, but because art historical publishing is still very much paper-based, it has now been realised that receiving books on approval is not as simple and cheap as managers like to believe. Even within the boundaries of the approval profile too many publications would be sent for too short a time, and Dutch acquisition budgets would run out after a few months. Large international vendors that proved to be cheap and reliable have taken over the work of local suppliers and approval plans.

Photo: OKBN.

Use of the collections in our libraries is still intense, not only by art history, whose student numbers have been constant for several decades, but more and more by students in disciplines like media, heritage and cultural studies, and by language students whose studies have been transformed into language and culture studies. All these students need to use the art historical collections once in a while. And anyone registered as a staff member or student at another university can check out art history books, by contrast with 1987 when only an institution's own students could borrow books. These changes not only mean a great deal of work at the counters, but also raise questions such as: Why are open-access publications not available for lending? Why doesn't this library buy more copies of books?

Collecting is very clearly more Anglo-American than 22 years ago as a result of the international exchange of students, forcing libraries to collect books in English, a language these students share. This raises the question of whether we should buy English-language editions instead of those in their original languages. Titles written in Dutch, French and German continue to be collected, but Italian

titles needed for the curriculum will often be bought in an English translation. And of course the growing variety of publication formats is another challenge. Apart from books and electronic publications, libraries also buy DVDs, CDs and other less traditional media.

#### *Even more changes*

Access to the collections listed earlier is generally provided through the catalogue of each university's library. Because of large projects that started in the 1990s these catalogues also record the earlier material in the collections and all kinds of other materials, such as electronic journals and unique items. From a Web 2.0 point of view, most of the catalogues are rather unattractive, and much thought is being given to improvements. On the other hand the catalogue is becoming less obvious as the starting point in a search for publications because SFX services within databases, on the internet or within combined catalogues are pointing the user to publications or to the full text available at their own libraries.

Separately from the catalogue, at each university, there has been a proliferation of image and other databases, digital repositories and information about archives holding material of interest to art historians.

University libraries and the Royal Library catalogue all the publications they acquire in the Shared Cataloguing System (GGC, the Dutch national central catalogue).<sup>7</sup> Since the mid-1990s new art historical publications have been given shared subject headings and a classification code. For several years Dutch subject librarians have met regularly to share their thoughts about the implementation and the utilisation of this method of subject retrieval. Not all universities use this service of the GGC, but

fortunately many other art history libraries that joined the GGC, such as art academies, do.

Each university offers its own selection of art historical databases in its digital library. The ongoing development of IT techniques has made it possible to consult more than one catalogue at the same time, and a spinoff from this development is AdamNet. Through AdamNet the catalogues of the Research Library of the Rijksmuseum, the library of the Stedelijk Museum, the Van Gogh Museum and other art historical collections located in Amsterdam, including both universities, can be consulted in a single search.<sup>8</sup>

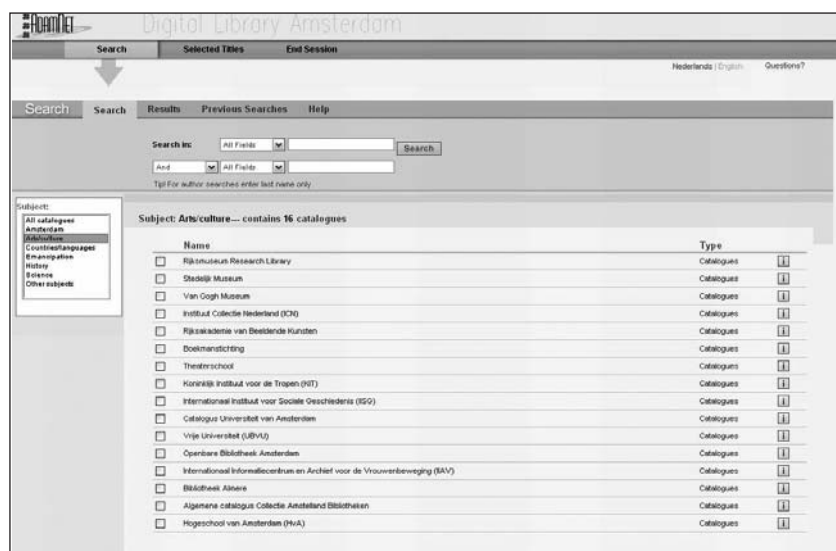
## The future now

Chris Smeenk foresaw a few of these developments but he can't be blamed for missing the most important of them all: the development of the digital world which brought academic library work into a constant state of flux. So, only part of the future can be predicted.

The requirements for academic art libraries at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century differ greatly from those of 22 years ago. To meet these demands subject librarians need constantly to anticipate innovations in electronic services, the digital library and the Web. For monographic publications, art history is still a paper-based discipline. Maybe this will continue to be the case until the information technology available meets the requirements of the discipline: being able to consult and compare various materials at the same time. However, during the last two decades even the art history library has become hybrid, owing to the

growing number of electronic databases and journals. The walls of the library building are no longer boundaries that need to be crossed by someone looking for art historical information. The development of digital libraries will continue to stimulate off-site consultation of the library's treasures. This development is taking place on both a national and an international level and is supported by the concept that library users, given the appropriate tools, are able to find the information they need – even if this means much trial and error.

More than ever subject librarians need to build and maintain a



Screenshot of the AdamNet Digital Library. Overview of the art libraries that are part of AdamNet.

Photo: Website AdamNet.



network of relevant relationships; and they also need to acquire educational and writing skills for teaching, for giving workshops and for serving the public. They have to co-operate in very different projects, to join the boards of organisations in their field, but most of all they need to be professionally educated and to act accordingly. One can imagine how much more difficult it must be for a subject librarian to meet these demands if the discipline(s) are unfamiliar. Therefore the exchange of experience with colleagues is vital. The consultation of subject librarians on a national level, which was initiated this spring after a gap of ten years, will without any doubt be one of the appropriate platforms.

It is very likely that the physical art historical



Information centre of the library of Leiden University. The information centre opened in April 2009. Part of the centre is a consulting room for visitors and subject librarians. Photo: OKBN.

collection will diminish, maybe to the size of a reading room. University library buildings will continue to exist, but in the first place will be a social phenomenon, a meeting point for students and staff with well-designed furniture. But what remains must be both a library and a learning and research centre at the same time. The great challenge for the subject librarian is to make sure that he retains a place in this future library. Marketing his services to both academic staff and students will become even more important. And for the students he needs constantly to adapt the way he communicates, because in 22 years they probably won't be communicating through podcasts, vodcasts, social networks and mobile text services any more!

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## References

1. Chris Smeenk, 'Art libraries of educational and research institutions,' *Art libraries journal* 12, no.1 (1987): 5-7.
2. These universities sometimes maintain a number of specialised collections, for example at Erasmus University Rotterdam, where publications on the commercial aspects of culture including art are being collected.
3. In its new location the library has been organised according to criteria that were formulated shortly before the fire, and which appear to be rather traditional but are strongly advocated by the academic staff in the faculty.
4. This is the Centrum voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie, <http://www.ru.nl/ckd/>.
5. In Dutch this is 'Bibliotheekvoorziening Geesteswetenschappen'. Between 1998 and 2008 seven Dutch academic libraries co-operated to fight the impoverishment of humanities collections. On three separate occasions a financial contribution was received from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (1998-2006) and between 1998 and 2008 the institutions themselves invested heavily in literature for the humanities.
6. An important role was played here by the SURF Licentiebureau, the UKB, the Dutch consortium of university libraries and the Royal Library. See <http://www.kb.nl/bst/bgw/intro-bgw.html>.
7. In Dutch 'Gemeenschappelijk Geautomatiseerd Catalogiseersysteem'.
8. AdamNet libraries hold millions of books, thousands of periodicals, all sorts of multimedia and more. Access to the AdamNet libraries is free; however borrowers, and in some libraries those wishing to have access to reference material, will need a card. See <http://www.adamnet.nl/>.

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