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Viewpoint: new strategies for Dutch art libraries

Heleen Homma and Martien Versteeg

At the end of 2007 the Overleg Kunst(historische) Bibliotheken Nederland, or OKBN, published *Kunstbibliotheken in Nederland*: *tien korte schetsen*.[1] This compilation of articles marked the 25th anniversary of the OKBN as well as celebrating its 10th anniversary as an association, and in its preface Roman Koot and Michiel Nijhoff outlined its history: the first meeting was held in the Art History Institute in Utrecht on December 16, 1982 and fifteen years later, in 1997, the status of the OKBN as a society was formally established.

The OKBN has dealt with many issues of importance for Dutch art libraries, such as the co-ordination of collections, national agreements about subject headings and the spread of information to its members. A constant ambition during the years has been the pursuit of a joint catalogue for Dutch museum libraries.[2] The OKBN has given support to working groups and has regularly organised seminars and symposia, whose results are published on the website, in articles and in various reports. The association maintains local, national and international contacts and encourages such contacts among its members.[3]

Dutch art libraries

In his foreword to the publication Michiel Nijhoff, who was president of the OKBN in 2007, wrote that the articles demonstrated how uniquely diverse Dutch art libraries are, from large to small, from general to very specialised. As far as art libraries are concerned, the Netherlands is a blessed country!

Nice! But the first question put by Rudi Ekkart, director of the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History), on the occasion of the launch of the compilation, was whether this unique mixture would lead to internecine competition?[4] He answered the question by citing the libraries of the RKD and the Rijksmuseum, both of which claim to be the largest art library in the Netherlands. Are they for this reason sworn enemies? No, on the contrary: for years they have co-operated on equal terms, and throughout all these years they have been fraternally united in the OKBN.

A more important question put forward by Ekkart was whether this mixture did not lead to a high degree of fragmentation and inefficiency. Would Dutch art historians not be better off with one large art-historical 'Zentralbibliothek'? Ekkart explained that he did not himself believe in this type of super-concentration. Moreover he appeared to be particularly attached to the extremely varied landscape of art libraries in the Netherlands.

Of course one must also ask whether there is a waste of money and energy in the current situation. This answer to this question turned out to be better than expected! When in the 1990s five large art history libraries wanted to publish a joint catalogue on CD-ROM it turned out that the number of unique titles in the individual libraries was surprisingly high. Of course, in the current situation certain publications are held by several libraries. But most of these titles are needed! The user is provided with publications that are close at hand, so does not have to undertake a half-day journey in order to consult them. And to this picture can be added the wealth of unique publications in specialised subject areas. Ekkart pointed out the added value of special libraries such as those of the Museum Meermanno (The Hague: history of the book),[5] the Keramiekmuseum Princessehof (Leeuwarden: Dutch ceramics) and the Audax Textielmuseum (Tilburg: Dutch textiles).[6]

Developments

We can therefore be happy with the diversity of art libraries in the Netherlands. Still this situation will perhaps not last forever. The explosive growth in online access to content and the constant efforts to

achieve efficiency and rationalisation have led to changes within the world of Dutch art libraries. Some of these changes, such as mergers and co-operation, increased orientation towards the public, concentration on the core business of the library's own institution, and the buildings in which they are accommodated, are discussed below.

Mergers and co-operation

The articles in this issue of *Art libraries journal* discuss several forms of merger. In the academic world the libraries of separate institutions have been organisationally and physically merged with faculty libraries. Sometimes this transition has been followed by the transfer of responsibility for the faculty library to the central library, as has recently happened in Leiden. This tendency can also be noticed at the libraries of research institutes, especially when the organisation is part of a government ministry. Such processes of enlargement and fusion also occur at the academies, but it does seem as if their art libraries have been able to preserve their fairly independent position.

In museums internal departments that have similar tasks, such as the library, documentation, the archive, and collection registration, are frequently combined into one or more clusters. A complete integration of the original departments into a support cluster with a single mission can be seen at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag. The museum has one department which aims to register and archive all knowledge concerning the collection and the museum. The computer programme 'Kroniek' has been developed for this purpose, and each event related to the museum is documented. Mergers also occur at smaller, specialised art museums, but they are generally less far-reaching. On the other hand, the largest Dutch museum library, the Research Library of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, is still a thriving independent entity.

There is also talk of more intensive co-operation between libraries, without any organisational and/or physical merging. In this special issue of the *Art libraries journal* several examples are cited, such as the Zeeuwse Bibliotheek, and the local Digitale Bibliotheek Amsterdam (AdamNet).

Orientation towards the public

In the last few years the attitude of the library towards its public has changed greatly. Libraries focus on their users far more than they did in the past, whether they are an institution's own employees or students, or the general public. The library aims to make its knowledge, products and services available to specific user groups, becoming part of a network of such groups, and supplying them with relevant information. For quite some time, for example, subject librarians within university libraries have contributed their knowledge to the education and research carried out by the academic staff.

But of course the concentration on specific groups does not mean that the general public is excluded. How important is has become can be seen in museum libraries, where accessible information centres and study rooms are being created. And it has also become a key factor at research libraries too, while at the universities services for the general public are becoming more and more significant. It does sometimes seem, however, that this is achieved at the expense of the expertise of subject librarians and of the contact they provide between the library and the academic employees.

Core business

A constant theme in this issue of the *Art libraries journal* is the attention given to the core business of the library's own institution. In the first place the library supports its institution's mission by means of a well-defined collection profile. But another feature of the focus on core business is the contribution the library makes in describing the unique documentary material that its institution holds.

The establishment of a collection profile that concentrates on the mission of the institution is essential, because funds have not risen substantially since the 1980s. Libraries in museums have to focus their collection development on the documentation of the museum's art collection, while the libraries of universities and academies aim to support the research and education of their own staff and students. The subject areas being investigated by the research institutions are clear but, because they can change, the acquisition policy of their libraries needs to be particularly dynamic. nevitably close adherence to these policies means that collecting in areas which are not supported by the profile – something that was common in the 1960s and 1970s – has had to be abandoned.

Besides acquisition by purchase these libraries are looking critically at other forms of growth, such as the exchange of publications in museum libraries, and the acceptance of gifts, legacies and loans in all types of library. But because of the shortage of space the existing stock is being tailored to fit the library's mission through a process of weeding based on the collection profile. Large open-access collections in the universities have been reorganised and are being

constantly adapted to match the acquisition policy. With guaranteed access to electronic journals at a national level, the withdrawal of all print versions except one is inevitable.

The library also plays an important role in its description of the unique documentary material held by the institution. After all, from way back the library has had the knowledge to describe and enrich this unique material and make it digitally available, a task which at the universities is frequently carried out by Special Collections staff. Museum libraries have a further important task: the documentation of the activities of their own institutions, such as the exhibitions they hold.

The buildings

Naturally all this has consequences for the physical surroundings in libraries, and there are many new buildings and adaptations of existing locations. As well as all the changes mentioned earlier, the role of space in the library has become more important than ever before. Libraries of universities and research institutions have become study- or learning-centres, the most recent example being the brand new library of the Cultural Heritage Agency at Amersfoort. Art museums position their information centres and reading rooms in easily accessible locations within the museum. Moreover, the library space also develops a social function, because more than ever the library is considered to be a meeting point and a location for debate. The space in many newly- built libraries, not only art libraries, is designed by the architect not only to show some, but also to underline the idea of a meeting-place. This is a development to which academy libraries are already accustomed. They, more than other libraries, are part of the creative process of artists, as Dirker outlines in her contribution to this issue. Perhaps it is for this reason that during the last 20 years new libraries for academies have noticeably often been built or converted by well-known architects!

Strategies

So, there is more that can be said about Dutch art libraries than simply highlighting their large number and their diversity. Firstly it is certain that the future of these libraries cannot be seen separately from their own institutions, from similar institutions elsewhere, from the way user groups are approached, and from the infrastructure for art-related information and its rapid change into a digital (research) environment.

Traditional tasks, such as preservation and conservation, the opening up of collections with unique material, and teaching researchers and students information skills, will change greatly. Alongside these familiar tasks, the art library must enter new areas. Below we identify four such areas, with which these libraries might have to become involved in future in order to guarantee their continued existence and a permanent appreciation of their value.

- *Choose*. Smaller museum libraries, in particular, must make a choice between serving the public or concentrating on one or more specific user groups. Each library's choice must of course depend on the mission of its own institution. To choose both will only be possible for some large museum libraries, for university libraries and for the libraries of research centres. To gamble on both horses seems extremely risky for smaller museum libraries because in most of them money and staff are very limited.
- *Join*. The library must become part of a network of its user group(s). To function within such a network, the library must have in-depth knowledge of current research and of the use of (research) data. Above all, it must provide these networks with contributions that support the work of their users. And of course, conditions have to be created that allow the library to function within such a network. For example, the library has to have the authority to maintain contacts with institutions in other areas. In the near future this network will be a virtual research environment. And something that is currently being largely neglected is the marketing of the library. In this area much can still be learned.
- *Profile yourself*. Each library must distinguish itself from others by making available the unique material present in, or produced by, its own institution. The material that will distinguish the library from others is already available within its own parent body. The description, enrichment and digitisation of this material will become an important task for every art library. During this process, the library can also play an important role in the preservation of the material, making sure that quality standards are implemented.
- *Improve, buy or hire*. The expertise of the available staff must be adapted to these new attitudes and to future demands. Of course, the library staff can be given further training, but knowledge that is missing can also be acquired by hiring non-library employees who are specialists in other fields. In addition, co-operation with libraries

which do have the desired knowledge will become standard practice, as will deploying staff in cross-institutional projects.

To survive the coming decades the art library has to do more than to adapt the traditional tasks. Art libraries, just like other living beings, have to be prepared to experiment and to take calculated risks. In short, libraries must dare to live!

References

1. Roman Koot, Michiel Nijhoff and Saskia Scheltjens, eds. *Kunstbibliotheken in Nederland*: *tien korte schetsen* (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2007).
2. According to the website of the OKBN, the catalogues of more than half the member libraries are available online. That number will expand over the coming years.
3. For further reading about OKBN or on Dutch art libraries, see the bibliography on the OKBN-website: http://www.okbn.nl/activiteiten/bijzondereactiviteiten/bibliografie.htm.
4. Part of this article is based on the unpublished text of Rudi Ekkart's lecture at the 10th anniversary of the OKBN on December 14, 2007, which has been made available for this article.
5. See Tanja de Boer, 'The Museum of the Book in the Hague,' *Art libraries journal* 25, no.1 (2000): 19-24.
6. See the article by Jantiene van Elk in this issue.

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