# Introduction

## DEIRDRE C. STAM AND ANGELA GIRAL

REPRESENTING A DEPARTURE from the usual pattern of *Library Trends,* this issue joins the concerns of traditional art librarianship both to topics found in information science—such as the nature and use of information—and to topics found in recent art historical writing, specifically the examination of the fundamental functions of the discipline and the construction of its information base.

Dynamic technological advances in the last decades have caused librarians to rethink the structure of documentation and to reorient the purposes and goals of the institutions known as libraries. They have transformed libraries into scholarly information centers by widely expanding the access to information stored there and in other locations.

While other fields can look to leading institutions to coordinate the linking of different kinds of information—and medicine stands out in this respect (Matheson and Cooper 1982; Goldstein Anderson 1986)—the art field has no National Library of Art to provide guidance in this endeavor. Advances take place in widely separated projects, and the significance of work undertaken in a single institution to solve a local problem is seldom appreciated by the field as a whole due to the lack of recognized channels of communication. While this issue of *Library Trends* cannot aspire to fill this need, it can and does attempt to offer reflections on the present situation by people who have contributed significantly to the conceptual foundations of systems to link art objects and art information.

Unlike most fields now developing integrated databases, the study of art concentrates upon a nonverbal entity—i.e., the work of art itself.

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The vocabulary necessary to describe the work of art evolves as part of the research process; the object itself does not naturally suggest the words that should be used to characterize its aspects. Most information systems, including those used for art, are basically verbal in nature—at least their retrieval methods depend upon the word. This anomaly—the lack of natural connections between words and objects—forms the central difficulty of linking art objects and related information. The problem is a fundamentally conceptual one and one quite different from the merely technical problems of linking sets of databases serving other fields. In order to achieve meaningful links between objects and their information bases—links useful to scholars—one must consider the nature of scholarship in this unusual field of study.

Research in the visual arts typically begins with the art object. That is a truism of the discipline. Following the examination of the work of art itself is seeking information about the object in order to understand its context, and then to interpret the object for a contemporary audience. The articles in this collection focus on the linking of the art object with information considered pertinent to the object. Traditionally in the field of art history, that information has concentrated on persons and things immediately associated with the manufacture and history of the object—i.e., the artist, the patron, the imagery, and the placement of the piece. Recently, many scholars have looked at a wider context—the artist's social setting, the economic conditions of that society, and even the ideology of that society. At the same time that some scholars have begun to take a long view, others have taken a very close view as they consider the physical structure and quantifiable characteristics of objects. The kind of information considered pertinent to objects then can alter and has done so over time, and from one art historical "school" to another. In all cases, a fundamental part of the research is the linking of the object to an information base. The process of making that link is the subject of this issue of *Library Trends*.

Underlying these articles is the assumption that art information in all of its manifestations—from bibliographic index to museum registrations systems—is of interest to scholars of art and by extension to the librarians serving them. This collection of essays addresses the "informational" aspect of these systems rather than the technical level of data-processing considerations one would find in system manuals and documentation. Among the informational issues addressed are concern for the scholar's mode of working, the purpose of systems, the relationship of institutional setting to the shape of the system, the logic implicit in choice and definition of data, and the harmonization of systems through the development of standards. All of these issues are important to art librarians who must find their way through available information systems and must judge the appropriateness and authoritativeness of their contents for the purpose of answering the query at hand.

The articles follow in a logical progression, moving from the user to the functioning system. The first two, written from the point of view of the user (for whom all information systems are created), consist of Brilliant's essay on the research patterns of scholars and students and of Scott's essay contrasting the needs of registrars and curators. In the historical section, three librarians give their perspectives on past efforts at linking object and bibliographic information, Samuels has the broader, historical perspective; Markey provides us with a comparative overview of three image-based information systems; and Allen details the efforts of the Museum Prototype Project in which eight museums attempted to create a shared database of European painting information under the auspices of the J. Paul Getty Trust. These are followed by two articles that are theoretical in approach, pointing toward new directions in the construction of art historical knowledge bases. Barnett discusses issues relating to the building of bibliographic and art object information systems, and Bearman outlines general considerations for the design of scholarly databases relating to art. The last four articles describe recent applications which link various kinds of information to descriptions of objects themselves. Sledge and Reed discuss the learning processes which took place during the course of developing the Smithsonian Institution's automated systems; Giral describes the sources of ideas used in the development of the automated catalog of architectural drawings from the Avery Library, Columbia University; van der Wateren recounts the experiences of linking architectural documentation, bibliographic information, and monuments at the British Architectural Library; and Bower discusses the utility of the Research Library Information Network (RLIN) system as a vehicle for carrying data relating to the Photo Collections of the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities.

This collection of articles suggests areas for needed research and development in a field which is just beginning to explore the nature of its information structures, and to improve thereby the understanding of its paradigms as a discipline.

## REFERENCES

Anderson, Rachael K. Goldstein. 1985-1986. "Columbia's IAIMS [Integrated Academic Information Management Systems] Project." *The Columbia Librarian* 14 (Fall/Winter), pp. 2-5.

Matheson, Nina W., and Cooper, John A.D. 1982. "Academic Information in the Academic Information in the Academic Health Sciences Centers: Roles for the Library in Information Management." *Journal of Medical Education* 57 (10), pp. 1-93.