Art Libraries Society of North America, 33rd Annual Conference  
Hilton Americas, Houston, Texas, April 1-6, 2005  

Session 13: Monday, April 4, 4:00 to 5:30 PM: Art Museums and Their Libraries: A European Perspective  
Monday, April 4, 2:30 – 4:00 PM

Panelists:  
Dr. Claudio Di Benedetto, Director, Uffizi Library, Florence, Italy  
Dr. Michiel Nijhoff, Head of Library, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands


Moderator: Dr. Annamaria Poma-Swank, Associate Librarian, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters, New York

Recorder: Katherine Staab, Kress Foundation Fellow in Art Librarianship, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters, New York

Summary:

Elizabeth O’Keefe of the Pierpont Morgan Library gave a brief introduction to the session, described the form it would take, a guided panel discussion, and presented the participants. The moderator, Dr. Poma-Swank, described the session’s purpose: to illuminate the differing concepts of art museum librarianship in America and Europe.

During the session, the relationships between art museums and their libraries were discussed in detail, beginning with the nature of the library. This is a topic upon which museum librarians and the administrative and curatorial staff often disagree. The definition of a museum library seems to depend on who is asking. To some, it can be a collection of books, to others, a collection of information organized for use. This causes some tension when definitions differ. The issue of whether a collection without a librarian is still a library was also brought up.

Another topic was the nature of the clients served by museum libraries. They range from museum staff alone, to staff and colleagues from other institutions (plus selected scholars), to the public. The question of who is served and who should be served is frequently raised in museum libraries.

The discussion then turned to funding. The differing levels of funding between museums, as well as the possibility of local, national, and/or supranational funding were discussed. All the panelists noted that their primary source of funding was governmental. The securing of permanent funding and the competition between the library and the gallery for funding are huge issues in museum librarianship. The librarians mentioned that museum rules restricting requests for funds from private donors and other methods of fundraising also affect the library’s ability to create funding for itself.

Collections and collection development were topics of concern as well. The librarians spoke about the nature of their respective collections, which include books, serials, videos, images, archives, slides, etc. They also mentioned the importance of being able to support museum programming, exhibition/publication preparation, new acquisitions, public
programs, etc. The focus for most museum libraries is support for the curators’ research; support for the research of outside scholars is secondary, and support for the research of the general public comes last.

The use of technology in the library and the automation of library catalogs was a fascinating topic. While the libraries of the Uffizi Gallery and the Stedelijk Museum have online catalogs, the National Gallery is not automated, and continues to rely on card catalogs. This fact stirred many queries from the audience.

After the guided discussion, questions were taken from the floor, on topics such as user bibliographic instruction, e-resources, ILL (both intra- and international sharing), ways to increase funding (including opening the libraries to the public), interactions with the curatorial staff, and the library/librarian’s position in the institution as a whole.

At the conclusion, Dr. Poma-Swank thanked the panelists and said that she looks forward to more cooperation internationally in the future.