Charles Dickens was describing the period known as “the Terror” during the French Revolution, yet his words can just as easily be applied to the current state of our profession of Art Librarianship. In art museums, libraries and librarians see potential threats from many angles, from layoffs and furloughs to reduced hours, smaller staffs, smaller spaces and smaller budgets; truly the worst of times.

All this means that we are in a time of transition. While the physical space and idea of the library may well be threatened and at times even proscribed, the skill sets of the librarian are more important than ever. For the museum at large is becoming in many ways much more like a library. Over the past decades, traditional museum collections registers have been augmented or altogether replaced first by electronic databases and more recently by integrated collections management systems. Does this sound familiar? It should, as we as librarians went through all of this before and understand the problems that accompany it from our conversions from card-files to various online public access catalogues to contemporary integrated library systems with all of their enhancements and inter-operabilities. Notions like authority control and shared cataloguing were virtually unheard of in museum registration twenty years ago; now they are becoming the norm. Systems developed for internal use are being repurposed to allow online access to collections information to broad publics via the web. Let us remember that MaRC itself was originally developed to generate physical catalogue cards, not as a system to facilitate online searching!

Our knowledge as organizers of information, creators of and experts on cataloguing rules and standards position us uniquely to play a key leadership role outside of our libraries and departments and to participate on the highest level on these institution wide projects and initiatives.

When I began my current position at the Menil Collection in Houston in February 2010, I was asked to co-chair (with our Chief Conservator) our institution-wide Collections
Management System Committee and to come up with a plan to migrate our collection information to a state-of-the-art Collection Management System. Our committee’s work is now finished, we wrote an RFP, invited vendors to respond and demonstrate systems and we have developed an implementation budget and timeline and have passed our recommendation on to our Museum’s Management Committee that will act on our recommendations if they can be met within next fiscal year’s budget.

I will not lie to you and say that this process was easy or always enjoyable. Being a co-chair of an institution wide committee that includes the Deputy Director, and heads of all the largest, most important departments (curatorial, conservation, registration) is stressful; particularly when your department is tangential to the final product and you are the person with the lowest rank and least seniority in the room. However, it is well worth the effort, long days and lost sleep; and it has many beneficial by-products. Most importantly, you get to participate in mission-critical discussions that effect all departments. The chance to share our expertise, subject knowledge, enthusiasm, and technological acumen reminds everyone not only of how we can help in new ways but also of what we have been doing well since time immemorial.

While direct involvement in this project ends with the adoption and implementation of a new system, our roles as midwives and advisors for new technological developments and initiatives are recognized and we are able to reintegrate ourselves in important museum-wide discussions and decisions. It is a chance to do more than recoup lost ground; it is a chance to make our profession more critical to the health of our organizations.

And let us not forget that in Paris, where the guillotine once stood, on the old Place de la Revolution, now an obelisk stands and the square was long ago renamed the Place de la Concorde—let us move forward, from Terror to Concorde.

Vive la Republique, Vive le France!