

# Letter

*To the Editor of the Art Libraries Journal*

As a member of the British Library Working Party on the Provision of Materials for the Study of Art, I can only support Sonia French's plea ('Viewpoint', *Art Libraries Journal*, vol. 9 no. 2, Summer 1984) for recognition of the important collections in some public libraries in the United Kingdom – after all, the Working Party both acknowledged the existence and the significance of these collections, *and* acknowledged, regretfully and honourably, its inability to give them their due.

Sonia points out that 'for the majority of people . . . the public library is their first and often only resource', and she calls for a 'full-scale evaluation of the role of the specialist art library collections supported only by local authority funding'. I would go further. A full-scale evaluation of the availability to the public, of materials for the study of art in the United Kingdom as a whole should recognise the following:

1. That the 'great reference libraries' are relatively few and far between, and that for many they may be too remote and quite possibly, too forbidding. (However, some major public collections, such as Birmingham's Fine Art Department, *do* service outlying branch libraries, schools, etc).
2. The valuable service which can be provided by public libraries which are not lucky enough to be serviced by 'great reference libraries' or to be staffed by specialist art librarians. Every public library has a role to perform; some try harder than others, and libraries such as those at Burnley and Oldham which bravely provide loan collections of works of art merit more recognition than they tend to receive, not least from art librarians whose awareness does not always include those services and collections which are *not* administered by art librarians. The smaller, really *local* library has the potential to bring art to people who will be overawed by, or who cannot reach, the 'great reference libraries'. But also, the local public library, even of modest size, may acquire, or be in a position to acquire, documentation on local arts, some of which may not be acquired by any other library, and which, if it is acquired, may well be incorporated, not inappropriately, in a local studies collection. Thus such collections

and archives, although not labelled 'Art', should not be forgotten. There is need for more art librarians' posts in public libraries, and for better art provision *not just* in the 'centres of excellence' in a handful of big cities but in every community, and it may be that we have much to learn from the art departments in public libraries in Denmark<sup>1</sup>, for instance, or in West Germany<sup>2</sup> and Bulgaria<sup>3</sup>.

3. The community role of many college libraries, including those in art colleges and Polytechnics. It is true that college libraries must, as a general rule, serve the needs of their staff and students as a first priority, and may well not lend material to the public or may do so only by special arrangement; on the other hand the public can generally use the library and may be positively welcomed; the expertise of the art specialist is likely to be as available to them as to anyone else; enquiries, and enquirers, may be referred from the public to the college library; not least, the college may well offer courses specifically tailored to meet the needs of 'the public', of a part-time or extra-mural nature, and of course students enrolling on such courses enjoy full library facilities. In a town like Preston, at some distance from the nearest 'centre of excellence', public access to the art collections and services of the Polytechnic Library complements the role of the public library, and I have no doubt that this is true elsewhere to an extent to which Sonia fails to do justice.

In short, while I thoroughly support the concept of 'centres of excellence', I believe it is necessary to take a wider view if whole areas, and very many people, are not to be left out in the cold. So far as possible, 'centres of excellence' should also be centres of far-reaching networks, serving distant outposts (a concept which Sonia has done much to promote), and genuinely local provision and service, which may sometimes be developed through co-operation between public libraries and libraries in further and higher education, and which has its own part to play in documenting local arts, also deserves support.

Both within and beyond the United Kingdom, mutual awareness and co-operation between art librarians responsible for specialist art libraries and art librarians in public libraries, and between art librarians in large public libraries and non-specialised librarians responsible for the provision of art (and other) materials in local public libraries, is not what it ought to be. Should not ARLIS seek to remedy the situation in the U.K., perhaps by forming a public libraries' group charged with the task of surveying art provision and services in public libraries throughout

the U.K., and of making contact with, and offering support to, librarians who are not art specialists who are working in this area?

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### **References**

- 1) See: *Art Libraries Journal*, Winter 1981, vol. 6 no. 3.
- 2) BEHRNDT, Helle. De vesttyske kunstbiblioteker star distancen. *Bibliotek*, 1983, vol. 70 no. 15, pp. 387-388.
- 3) Rabota i problemi v otdelite 'Izkustvo'. *Bibliotekar* (Sofia), 1982, vol. 29 no. 9, pp. 17-24.