

We are not sure whether we have qualified for the job of guest editing this special issue of the *Art Libraries Journal* on the basis of longevity (in ARLIS terms), on previous experience (both being former editors) or as members of the working party which organised the 1994 celebratory conference from which a number of the papers in this issue are taken.

Whatever the reason, we are very privileged to have been entrusted with this task and a fascinating task it has proved to be. The occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Society that started as ARLIS and is now ARLIS/UK & Ireland¹, has quite rightly seen some reminiscing but also provides members with the opportunity and the impetus for taking stock and looking to the future. Both in the conference sessions and in the papers commissioned for this issue of the *Journal* we have tried to record the history of the Society and also to assess its achievements as a basis for setting its future agenda.

This issue therefore contains a number of articles which bring together, for the first time, accounts of the development of the Society seen particularly through the work of its committees and working parties and through its publication programme. These clearly show the transformation of this small, independent, domestic organisation with (as one contributor remarks) perhaps too modest aims, into a nationally and internationally recognised body representing the profession of art librarians in the British Isles. We are very grateful to the authors of the articles commissioned for this issue who have delved long and hard into the ARLIS archive² and the back runs of the *ARLIS Newsletter*, and its successors, to bring our history into such clear perspective.

Certainly there have been achievements, and ARLIS is justified in celebrating these, many of them hard-won through the persistence and voluntary work of dedicated members. However, there is certainly no room for complacency. A reading of the early aims and objectives of the Society can also be a somewhat sobering experience, as problems of co-operation, the bibliographic control of exhibition catalogues, the need for union catalogues, etc. echo down the years.

The conference papers we have selected for this issue are therefore those which take

a cool and objective look at our achievements and measure them both against the original aims and against the challenges of the imminent future. The time is ripe not only for looking back with nostalgia, but for re-assessing our aims. Changes in the library and information scene, political and technological, offer us new opportunities for solving old problems; they may also have rendered some of those problems irrelevant or changed them in significant ways. Some radical re-thinking is required to establish a fresh and even more challenging agenda for a new beginning – the *next* 25 years!

Sonia French
Beth Houghton

Notes

1. Because this entire issue is devoted to ARLIS/UK & Ireland, because for several years it had no other name, and for the sake of brevity, the Society is referred to simply as 'ARLIS' in this Editorial and frequently in the texts that follow.
2. The ARLIS/UK & Ireland archive is held at the Archive of Art and Design, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, 23 Blythe Road, London W14 0QE.

The guest editors of this issue wish to record their gratitude to Gillian Varley for her considerable assistance during the later stages of the production of this issue.

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