Ars Libri and ARLIS/NA: The Future of Collection Development

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The original intent of this article was to address ways in which art librarians can be better educated in art bibliography, thereby enabling them to build stronger collections in art libraries. I wanted to make the point that antiquarian bookdealers are uniquely qualified to address the subject of bibliography, and that, from Ars Libri’s point of view, most art librarians do not participate in the working relationship we offer them when it comes to collection development in their libraries. Unfortunately, the dynamic art librarians with whom we interact on a regular basis, who are concerned with bibliography and are stewards and builders of their collections, are in the minority.

This article “from a vendor’s point of view” has grown out of conversations with many ARLIS/NA librarians over the last few years, who have sometimes been surprised at the way things look from the other side of the exhibitor’s table. As a former librarian, I feel strongly that we are all part of ARLIS/NA, and it is exactly that point which has now turned this article into one of observations endemic to the field of art librarianship, from, yes, a dealer’s point of view.

Ars Libri has always had a scholarly focus and oriented its stock and its business towards academic and research libraries. Our comprehensive stock of out-of-print and rare art books ranges from ancient to contemporary art, and includes books and monographs, periodicals, and exhibition catalogs, as well as rare early printed books and illustrated artists’ books. We are now probably the only dealer offering the range of complete back runs of art journals found in our periodicals catalogs. Ars Libri has always been interested in building long-term relationships with collection development librarians. In short, Ars Libri specializes in building art research libraries. Therefore, successful relationships with art librarians are not only important to the entire definition of our business, but crucial to our continued existence.

Ars Libri has been in business since 1976. During our first ten years, probably close to ninety per cent (certainly the vast majority) of our clients were North American art libraries, i.e., ARLIS/NA members. Because of this, Ars Libri involved itself deeply in ARLIS/NA and its activities. Until the end of the 1980s, a substantial portion, close to half of our business apart from one major institution, still came from ARLIS/NA libraries. We issued an average of ten to fifteen catalogs a year and regularly sold sixty to ninety per cent of each catalog to American art libraries. In sharp contrast, that portion of our business (excluding special projects consisting of selling an entire library to an institution) has shrunk to approximately ten to fifteen per cent over the last ten years.

In addition to the shrinking demand curve, the supply curve, i.e., the number of dealers, also all but disappeared from this marketplace. When Ars Libri started in business, there were dozens of antiquarian art book dealers, especially in Europe. Now there are very few dealers working internationally with comprehensive stocks encompassing the entire range of the history of art and architecture. Ars Libri could not attribute the loss of ARLIS/NA business to competition, as conversations with colleagues quickly confirmed.

The question that begs to be asked from these two developments is: who are art librarians buying out-of-print art books from, if not from us and our colleagues? The business we had developed depended foremost on the active patronage of art libraries, supplemented by purchases made by scholars, art dealers and individuals. If libraries, our former best customers and raison d’être, have now been relegated to such a small percentage of our business, it is obvious that either our focus, or collection development practices, must change. In years where only ten per cent of our sales are to ARLIS/NA libraries, can we continue to justify focusing our business on serving them?

Large inventories of substantial depth and range are very expensive to acquire, catalogue, and maintain. Catalogs are expensive to print and mail. Overhead costs are fixed and prohibitive in conjunction with falling sales to our primary audience. Librarians know that it is just as costly to catalog a small exhibition catalog as a valuable catalogue raisonné. The wide range of art historical material that Ars Libri offers is expensive to maintain, and yet that range is what we are really all about. We are offering a service that no one else is offering because they simply do not find it cost-effective. The fact that we deal in everything offers a level of sophistication not inherent in smaller inventories.

If Ars Libri were not in the picture, it would be false to say that expertise has disappeared from the antiquar-
ian book world; far from it. Even within the field of art and art history, there continue to be numerous specialized dealers around the world who work, with considerable sophistication, in certain closely focused areas: the modern avant-garde, architecture, garden design, the decorative arts, or contemporary artists’ books, for example. But what we want to do, because we believe it is an intrinsically valuable, even essential approach to the field, is to cover the entire history of art in a serious and thorough-going way. The benefits that accrue to our clientele we believe are significant. If you are interested in Byzantine painting and Brice Marden and Roman basilicas and Senufo sculpture and French bronzes and Japanese sculptures of the Heian period — or if, as a university or museum library, your readers are — then there is a place you can go where people can respond to your questions, and you can, very often indeed, find the books you are seeking.

We also believe that it is important to carry a wide variety of inexpensive publications on esoteric subjects, destined for a handful of scholars, which we know very well will cost us more to catalog than we will ever be able to charge for them. What will be the alternatives if we cease to do this? There will probably be three. First, there will be local neighborhood bookstores, on the streets and on the Web, with no particular expertise to offer, and nothing very difficult or in a foreign language, except by mistake. Second, there will be the luxury art book dealers, oriented toward the art trade and the wealthy collector, who carry expensive material without particular regard for the needs of scholarship. And there will be specialists, scattered here and there around the world, open usually by appointment (and often not on the Internet) and focused exclusively in a particular area. You will need several dozen of these at least, if you want to begin to cover the totality of art history.

**Collection Development Activity Decline**

By the beginning of the 1990s, when Ars Libri found itself one of the few players in the field of antiquarian art book dealers wondering where its market was, ARLIS/NA librarians found themselves dealing with changed jobs and responsibilities. We had conversations with many librarians, trying to find out why they were no longer buying books from us. At the beginning of the 1990s, we used to hear regularly about budgets drastically cut, often to accommodate increased prices for serials subscriptions (particularly relevant in large university settings, where money was taken away from art and humanities libraries and given to the sciences).

Several years later, the issue was not money but time. Librarians told us over and over that they now had money for out-of-print acquisitions, but no time to read our catalogs. They told us that their time was taken up evaluating electronic resources, and with licensing agreements and CD-ROM purchases. Art librarians had become information retrieval specialists.

The complaint that our catalogs were far too long to read and search (no doubt a daunting task if collection development is not a frequent activity) escalated into complaints that we were not automated. The world had changed around us, and librarians now wanted to be able to search an online database for requested titles. All acquisitions and technical services in libraries were automated and networked, and librarians did not want to read printed catalogs. Last year many librarians were expressing opinions on ARLIS-L that librarians should pressure antiquarian dealers to list their stock on Websites such as ABE and Biblio. Ars Libri was late automating because of our large stock and a lack of available software, but when Ars Libri did announce its Website last year, aside from some solicited reactions and opinions from a select group, we heard from practically no ARLIS/NA librarians. We can think of one order for four titles in those first few weeks. [www.arslibri.com](http://www.arslibri.com) and our online database clearly were not going to make the difference in 1998.

If budget and automation were not the problems, then what was? Ars Libri has drastically decreased the number of printed catalogs issued this year. Through e-mail messages and telephone conversations, we have attempted to determine budgetary situations and identify which areas within art history are of particular interest to faculty or curators at individual institutions. We send out dozens of subject-oriented lists from our database, with only moderate success.

Many ARLIS/NA librarians tell us they just do not have the time to look at our Website, catalogs, or lists, and that the only way any acquisitions will be done is if we search the lists ourselves through remote online access to their own catalogs. It is, of course, much slower for us to do so, and yet we manage to search such lists infinitely faster than our clients. Our staff can search about 250 titles a day. A recent example: our staff member searched a 700-item list in a period of ten days or so, by only devoting two to three hours of his morning to the task. Again, after our searched list was given to the relevant faculty member to select from items that were marked as not in the university’s collection, and that faculty member returned the list to the librarian, it took another two months for that librarian to “find the time” to call in the order. When we are told students will search a list, it usually takes months, and often we do not hear at all.

Timeliness matters with out-of-print stock, as it obviously does not make sense for an institution to go through an old list, only to learn that the titles have been sold by the time an order is placed months later. Here again is a radical change from the way we interacted with librarians ten years ago. Librarians used to read, search, and order from our printed catalogs. Now we send tailor-made customized lists from an automated database which only a small percentage of librarians can find time to respond to.

Many art librarians suggest that we travel around the country and make personal visits to their institutions, meeting with faculty and curators directly. This trend puzzles us to some extent: art librarians seem to be willingly saying that they do not want to be actively involved in collection development, leaving book selection to faculty and curators. We wonder if exhibits are redundant at the annual ARLIS/NA conference if serious dealers are expected to travel around the country and make personal visits. We have found that we have indeed received
orders because of "faculty recommendations" despite an alleged lack of an out-of-print budget from institutions that we have visited and had previously not heard from for a substantial period of time. Other times we return with colorful "war stories" instead of orders; librarians sometimes refuse to see us, or are not there after appointments have been made long-distance.

If retrospective selection and acquisitions are only achieved through direct contact with faculty and curators, then has the role of the art librarians become non-existent when it comes to collection development? And in those cases where faculty are too busy with other concerns, and/or disinterested, and the art librarian is not doing any out-of-print buying, what is happening to the collections?

Antiquarian dealers and libraries alike are now facing yet another problem: there is a whole new generation of young librarians who think that what they find on the Web is all that exists, whether it is information in general or out-of-print books. Sometimes the problem is not just generational: one ARLIS/NA librarian refused to meet with us because she "found everything she needed on the Web."

Ars Libri has converted about half of our approximately 60,000-title inventory to our online database. (ARLIS/NA librarians are no doubt familiar with what a large project retrospective conversion is, and as a business we cannot apply for grants or hire part-time students to help us.) What we have found, now that our stock is on sites such as ABE and BiblioFind, is that the major portion of our inventory is unique in its scope and breadth. Most of the 4,000 to 5,000 dealers on the Web offer more standard English-language material. To think that one can do collection development for a decent art historical art research library by relying exclusively on the Web is naïve. We also find that we are not so expensive! When we have made comparisons of prices for titles offered by several dealers at once, we have found, to our own surprise, that we are rarely on the high end. (We do realize that smaller non-specialized dealers will often offer standard material at lower prices.)

To our incredible surprise, we are selling lots of books to private individuals on the Web, books that nobody else is offering. We sell many obscure titles: books in Russian and Czech on ancient Black Sea inscriptions, German Egyptology, books in Chinese and Japanese, out-of-print exhibition catalogs on contemporary twentieth-century sculptors, etc. The large majority of our Internet sales are now to private individuals who clearly appreciate the quality and depth of our stock. Less than five percent of our total Internet sales have been to ARLIS/NA libraries.

Over the last few years, Ars Libri has been building art research libraries from the ground up for institutions in the Middle East and Southern Asia. Our private clientele has been growing through the Web, but not enough to replace our library business. To go back to the point I made at the beginning of this article, given our academic focus, if the support from ARLIS/NA librarians is no longer there, if we do not have long-term relationships with art librarians working together on collection development, then we fail to see how we can maintain our large specialized stock. I will never forget what the librarian in an art school said to me around 1990 when his out-of-print budget was taken totally away: "I just hope that if and when I am ever able to buy from Ars Libri again, a place like Ars Libri will still exist."

Antiquarian art book dealers can help art librarians with their collection development needs. Collection development should be a collaborative effort. How can we work together to accomplish this goal?

**Education of Art Librarians**

The profession needs to make sure that its new generation knows how to take advantage of the specialized dealers in the field, starting by influencing the curriculum of library schools. New art librarians are not being educated in collection development and are given almost no guidance about the antiquarian book trade. These people have no idea what an out-of-print dealer does, what our stock is like, or what services we provide. Some new art librarians tell us that when they find that a book which has been requested by a curator or faculty member is out-of-print, they simply report that the book is unavailable. When asked if they thought to call an antiquarian dealer, they confess they never thought to do such a thing. The novice librarian who greeted my colleague with "Can I throw this stuff away?" clearly has no idea that our older catalogs are valuable as bibliographic tools, and also as a way of identifying titles that should not circulate because of value and rarity. Ars Libri has had the privilege of handling the personal art libraries of many eminent scholars in the field: Jacob Bean, Hugo Buchtal, Georges Daux, Robert Pincus-Witten, Paul Cummings, et al., and has issued catalogs of those collections, which are important to art bibliography in themselves.

Many librarians also tell us they assume everything we sell is "expensive," never realizing that they are probably paying more for new art books, while many out-of-print titles important to the literature do not get acquired at the $25.00 to $50.00 price range. We list many out-of-print titles under $75.00 in our inventory. We suspect that ARLIS/NA members do not realize that an expenditure of $1,000 annually from each of them would make a huge difference to us and to our colleagues.

Our travels and talks with ARLIS/NA members have convinced us that art librarians, our former mainstay, have across the country been stripped of their budgets and unburdened of the responsibility of the development of their own collections. We suggest what to some may seem radical: reintroduce an entrepreneurial spirit into collection building. Take back a fundamental duty of librarianship: be not just caretakers of collections, but builders of cohesive libraries. The fate of our libraries depends upon the role that today's librarians take in shaping their collections. We fear that with continued acquiescence to budget-cutting administrators, tomorrow's librarians may be viewed as mere custodians and perhaps even superfluous to their institutions.

Not just the younger generation, but the present membership of ARLIS/NA perhaps needs to re-evaluate collection development issues in art libraries. We suggest an important first step might be to start (or continue)
relationships with the dealers in the field. We have tried to address the changes in libraries and the needs of art librarians. We need the dialogue to be two-way. We do not want to be perceived as adversaries or annoying "salesmen," but as members of the ARLIS/NA community. We would welcome annual telephone calls explaining current acquisitions possibilities and priorities. It would be helpful if art librarians in institutions with central acquisitions departments would familiarize their staff with our Website for out-of-print searches; we have discovered that out-of-print art titles are sometimes not ordered simply because the appropriate specialized Websites are not being consulted. We would suggest reviews of individual budgets for collection development. What was your annual budget for out-of-print acquisitions in 1975, 1985, 1995? Has it even kept up with the rate of inflation? Who is the loser if your library fails to increase the depth and breadth of its collection? Will the ARLIS/NA librarians of the future look back to these years as wasted?

In cases where there really is no money (of which we are often not totally convinced), we suggest that the profession begin to awake to the realities that all curators and most professors seem to be aware of: development, fund-raising, donors. All universities and museums have development offices, yet there are few art librarians who think to use these channels for collection development purposes. We know for a fact that the more successful art librarians in this country avail themselves of those possibilities. Annual library budgets may not enable librarians to purchase rare books and expensive journal runs, yet donors are often very happy to write checks for specific purposes that may seem relatively modest next to donations for building or art acquisitions.

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