

1997 Annual Conference of ARLIS/UK & Ireland
Art Libraries in the Cyber-Age
University of Kent at Canterbury, 3-6 July 1997

The lush countryside of "the garden of England" and the lovely medieval city of Canterbury provided the backdrop for the 1997 Annual Conference of ARLIS/UK & Ireland. Art Libraries in the Cyber-Age offered a series of informative and stimulating presentations on the current state, future trends and challenges of integrating information technology into the art library world.

Barry Bloomfield, former Head of Collection Development at the British Library, opened the conference with a talk that raised issues such as the need for institutions to respond to the rapid development of information technology and its impact on the world of information through constant review of missions and strategic plans, and the need for librarians to become expert manipulators of people and budgets in the face of steady funding cuts. He also discussed the issue of legal deposit and the need for art libraries to make representation to the British Library regarding the acquisition and retention of materials considered to be "of questionable archival value", since much that is of value to the arts community, including exhibition catalogues, might fall into this category.

The subsequent speakers provided an excellent overview of the steps being taken in the UK to explore the impact and potential of the use of information technology in the humanities, and arts in particular.

Kelly Russell, Development Coordinator of the Electronic Libraries Programme (eLib) gave an overview of this programme, now in its third year. eLib currently has 60 projects running in the following areas: scholarly communications (electronic journals), document-delivery systems, access to network resources (subject-based), customised publishing (teaching and learning materials), digitisation (text and images), training and awareness. The participants in the programme, which is scheduled to end in 1998, are mainly universities and publishers. More information about eLib is available at <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/elib>.

Daniel Greenstein, Director of the Arts and Humanities Data Service, gave a stimulating talk on the AHDS as a response to the need for systemic collection, preservation and integration of scholarly digital resources. He pointed out that the opportunities lie in the proliferation of digital resources and developing systems - the challenges are the integration of distributed mixed-media scholarly collections, software independence and long-term viability. He noted that it is also important to integrate discovery with access. What the AHDS is currently doing: extending the breadth and scale of scholarly evidence through partnerships with fundraising agencies, through data exchange and access agreements and through the development of virtual collections (such as ADAM); AHDS is also identifying and documenting a standards framework; providing guidance to good practice in the creation and use of humanities digital resources; helping to preserve digital cultural heritage. Learn more about AHDS at <http://ahds.ac.uk>.

Specific projects were discussed by the following speakers:

Tony Gill, Programme Leader of the ADAM Project and Visual Arts Data Service, introduced ADAM (Art, Design, Architecture & Media Information Gateway), one of the projects funded as part of the eLib Programme. The aim of ADAM is to provide subject access to useful and quality-assured resources on the Internet. Funding for this specific project ends in 1998, but there will probably be cross-funding opportunities with other subject areas if the scope is extended since government funding in Britain at this point is directed toward the creation of fewer gateways covering broader ranges of subjects. The talk was followed by hands-on demonstrations of the ADAM project. Investigate ADAM at <http://adam.ac.uk/>.

Pat Batley, DIAD Project Leader, and Rob Popper, DIAD project Researcher, introduced and demonstrated the DIAD (Digitisation in Art and Design) project which was designed to provide a digitised record of seminal journals in the design and applied arts field, primarily to students. This project was bound in with user testing: one interesting finding was that students were more interested in the text, preferring to use the primary source for images. The project is due to terminate in September 1998 and exit strategies, including putting the project on the Internet, free to UK users, are being investigated. More information about DIAD is available at <http://tdg.linst.ac.uk/tdg/research/diad/index.htm>

John McKay, Librarian at Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication and Manager of the project, illustrated the ECSTASY (Enhanced Collaboration with Shared Tools for Art and Design Systems) project (with the rather thrilling email address: ecstasy@rave.ac.uk) which was designed to enhance collaboration among art and design students, nationally and internationally, through the use of available network tools such as electronic mail, IRC and web-based chat, videoconferencing and whiteboarding. Many issues have surfaced: the current limitations of processing power and bandwidth, the stifling of creativity through the necessity for process with tools like whiteboarding counterbalanced by the popularity of email, the reality that the new technologies are complimentary and old collaborative tools will never be replaced. Indulge in a little ECSTASY at <http://www.rave.ac.uk/ecstasy/>

Dr. Maggie Wishaupt, Royal Library at The Hague, described the NBW (Dutch classification web) project, designed as a retrieval system for internet resources which are selected and annotated by subject specialists on the basis of quality and academic relevance.

A series of presentations covered other aspects of information management in the Cyber-Age:

Mhairi Handley of Advanced Technology Archiving Ltd. pointed out the vulnerability of documents and images archived onto optical media and suggested alternatives.

Seamus Ross, Director of Humanities Computing and Information Management, University of Glasgow, discussed the role of migration and standards in preserving digital resources in the visual arts, noting that such preservation requires continuous attention and maintenance: decay of the medium can be avoided through refreshing and technological obsolescence through migration; intellectual content can be preserved through validation and authentication and context through the use of metadata standards.

David Ruse, Assistant Director, Leisure and Libraries, City of Westminster, described Project Earl, a national initiative to promote Internet connectivity for public libraries and the development of new resources as a result of this connectivity.

Trish Cashen, Research Officer at Birbeck College, University of London, provided the user's perspective by elaborating on the art historian's use of the Internet, while Alison McNab, Academic Services Manager, Pilkington Library, Longborough University, provided many useful tips for librarians and scholars in her presentation "Keeping Afloat: Netskills for Trainers and Users".

Finally, Katherine Martinez, Member Services Officer for Arts and Visual Culture, Research Libraries Group, brought in the North American and international perspective by describing RLG initiatives for information discovery and delivery.

Apart from the stimulating presentations, the conference offered true delight in the form of social activities shared with our most congenial UK and Ireland colleagues. An excellent evening lecture by Hubert Pragnall on the history of Canterbury Cathedral was complemented the following day by guided visits in Canterbury and a picturebook drive to Penshurst Palace (home of Sir Philip Sidney's family, for the English lit buffs) where we found ourselves in the gardens just as the light was most beautiful and all the birds were singing the arrival of evening. Dinner at Royal Tunbridge Wells provided a delicious ending to this wonderful tour. An excellent Conference Dinner the next day was followed by a most entertaining talk by Rob Edwards about The Centre for Cartoons and Caricature at the University of Kent. The Hofner Band got delegates dancing into the night.

The next ARLIS/UK & Ireland Annual Conference will be held from July 2 to 5, 1998 in Bristol and Bath on the theme Art, architecture and design: the sources and practicalities. I urge all ARLIS/NA colleagues to enjoy the ARLIS/UK & Ireland conference experience if they have the opportunity.

Renata Guttman
5 August 1997