

ARLIS International Relations Study Tour
October 19 – 23, 2009
Trip Report

To begin, we would like to acknowledge how grateful we are to the Checkpoint Charlie Foundation and the Initiative Fortbildung for their very generous financial support of this program. The trip, although only five days long, was particularly rich and rewarding for our group and an overwhelming success, which can be credited to precise planning by our Berlin coordinator Evelin Morgenstern and by Linda Seckelson, our ARLIS/NA contact. Thanks to Ms. Morgenstern's contacts with the librarians, curators, academics, diplomats, and politicians who contribute to Germany's diverse cultural milieu, we received warm welcomes and substantial presentations at each stop on the busy schedule. Not only did we see the largest and most important art libraries in Germany, but there were some smaller jewels in the mix that were equally fascinating and illuminating. In five days' time, we heard much about the history and new directions of online catalogs, art databases, special collections management and curation, international collaborations, digital programs, and archives in German libraries. While there is much commonality with American libraries, certain advantages in German funding and staffing models appear to sustain a forward momentum that perhaps exceeds the current pace of library development in the U.S.

The program consisted of a nice range and combination of site visits, and meeting with colleagues in museum, state and academic art libraries was most valuable. The locations that were object based—the Bauhaus archive and the Werkbund—rounded out the trip and we were all glad these were included. Our busy itinerary also allowed time for both formal and informal discussion amongst ourselves and with our German colleagues. Everyone noted how incredibly generous the German librarians were with their time.

It was astounding to observe at almost all the libraries we visited—certainly for those open to the public—reading rooms full to capacity, mostly of young people. We were also surprised that the global recession was not having much of an impact on library funding, unlike the situation in the U.S. It strikes one participant that the public and the politicians in Germany have a respect for the inherent value of libraries in their society, and back that up with appropriate levels of funding. American libraries continue to flourish, but those worn out by fundraising duties and nervous about declining readership levels could take heart in the robustness we witnessed in Germany.

We were extremely honored to be welcomed on the first day by Mr. Hermann Parzinger, the President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation. His overview set the stage for our site visits in Berlin.

German libraries, like all libraries in Europe and the US, have been building digital collections, and in Europe, as in the U.S., the transition to digital collections is slow and hampered by lack of staff and copyright constraints. That said, one participant noted that in Germany there seemed to be less of a generalized frenzy about the “death of the book.” That is, the reved-up digital efforts seem to exist rather nicely with hard copy and paper. It also appeared that the Germans had a more practical approach to the understanding that this is a work in progress and that not everything will be digitized in the next ten years, if ever. Still, it remains only possible to fully learn about the deep and rich German collections by seeing them in context, presented by the experts who care for them. The most impressive work in this area is that at the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. It was especially interesting to learn from

Dr. Claudia Fabian about their collections and recent digital efforts, especially the “books2ebooks” digitize on demand program they offer to users of the library catalog.

Everyone appreciated the Kunstbibliothek combination of guided tour and time for discussion. Some felt that instead of lengthy demonstrations of the two image databases Prometheus and Foto Marburg, they would have preferred a broader discussion about not only these resources but other digitization efforts in Germany—perhaps a list of urls or a much shorter demonstration would have sufficed. On the whole, it became apparent during our discussion with Dr. Steiß that these efforts were further ahead than those in the US in terms of making large amounts of images available online and sharing personal collections across institutions.

Some would have liked a tour of the Bavarian National Museum’s art collections in addition to the library visit. Perhaps a balance between informal conversation and a visit/tour to a portion of the museum would have been better—much like our time at the Design Sammlung. That said, everyone appreciated how much time our colleagues in Munich took to sit down and have lunch and dinner with us. We would have liked more informal opportunities to sit down with colleagues in Berlin as was possible in Munich; but all appreciated the effort of dinner at Evelin Morgenstern’s house.

It would have been better to have a more balanced schedule at The Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte. It was a great place to visit and our hosts were gracious, and perhaps it was that we were tired after the flight and luxurious lunch, but many felt that the tour was too long. One person felt Dr. Lauterbach’s presentation too short and rushed, several participants wanted to know more about the other institutions and collections which are located in the building, and one participant greatly appreciated the opportunity to speak informally with Dr. Hoyer after our meeting.

The overall impression taken from our visits to these various libraries was that we share similar concerns about the future of art libraries. One participant noted that as in the States, there was no discussion of preserving more ephemeral products of twentieth century art making—video, audio and Internet media.

The outcome of this trip is already tangible as many participants have been in touch with their new German contacts to learn more about their work and are developing ongoing relationships.