

This issue of the *Art Libraries Journal* includes papers on national art library provision presented to the IFLA Section of Art Libraries during the IFLA Conference at Brighton last August. Clive Phillpot exposes the inadequacies of the concept of a 'monolithic' national art library, and proposes instead a confederation, or, as he put it, an 'artel', of libraries, together comprising a national library. Julian Gardner's account of Britain's Standing Committee on Art Documentation provides a case study, if not of a fully developed artel, then of a dynamic developing situation involving a number of major libraries (and potentially, all art libraries and visual resource collections in the UK) in the provision of a national service.

In his presentation, Professor Gardner referred to the RLG Conspectus as 'a somewhat blunt instrument', but also as a 'very valuable means of bibliographic communication' – a means, that is, of enabling different libraries to assess and compare their strengths and weaknesses using the same yardstick. As such, the Conspectus obviously has a contribution to make to the developing of co-operative acquisitions policies in which the participating libraries complement each other most effectively. Heaven forbid that art libraries should be tempted to use it instead to vie with one another in the same areas, or to justify universal neglect of particular subjects on the grounds that if other libraries do not cover them they cannot be worthy of attention. A co-ordinated and comprehensive coverage depends, on the contrary, precisely on different, and local, emphases.

But – remembering not least the challenge of 'Art libraries for the people' which was the theme of the Art Libraries Pre-conference at Brighton – how well can the Conspectus represent art as a whole, and is there any danger that its dependence on an existing classification scheme will mirror the weaknesses, omissions, and bias embodied in the classification, and that these same inadequacies and distortions will tend to confirm, and to be confirmed by, corresponding vagaries in library collections and collection development strategies? In short, could Conspectus reinforce established views and perpetuate unbalanced collections? And if so, how can it be refined, and do we perhaps need an 'Alternative Conspectus', a means of measuring the hospitality of our art library collections to such areas as women's art, folk and popular art, non-Western art, the art of minority groups and oppressed peoples, regional

and national traditions of art (especially outside the USA/Western Europe axis) which tend to be overlooked, community arts and art in the community, design (particularly seen from a broader view than the cult of individual designers), crafts, and so on? 'A marked US/Western bias is discernible in some divisions', writes one observer of the RLG Conspectus in practice, and he cites Art and Architecture as a case in point.¹ The *Art Library Journal* invites your views, and hopes to publish one or more contributions on the Conspectus in a forthcoming issue.

References

1. Hanger, Stephen. 'Collection development in the British Library: the role of the RLG Conspectus'. *Journal of Librarianship* vol.19 no.2 April 1987 p.89-107.