

ARLIS

UK & Ireland

Art Libraries Society

The Art Libraries Journal – A Bit of History **Erica Foden-Lenahan**

The *Art Libraries Journal (ALJ)* is an international quarterly serving the art library community. It was founded in 1976, 7 years after the establishment of the Art Libraries Society (ARLIS/UK & Ireland). Its forerunner, a typed and mimeographed newsletter, ceased publication in 1975 and was replaced with a new A5 format, quarterly journal “...to develop a forum for more substantial and international material in recognition of strengthening links within the international community of art librarians.”¹ It was the first academic journal devoted to visual arts librarianship. The ambition was and is to carry both scholarly and practical articles, seeking not to lose sight of sharing best practice and tools with the profession and reflecting the diversity of job roles, collections, and library cultures supporting the visual arts. The *ALJ* has also prioritized the publication of selected conference and symposium papers, which demonstrate a commitment to representing the profession as it evolves.

The succession of editors – Philip Pacey, Sonia French, Beth Houghton, Philip Pacey again, Gillian Varley, and now Erica Foden-Lenahan and Gustavo Grandal Montero – have strived to maintain an independent and outward-looking identity for the journal. It “does *not* represent ARLIS/UK addressing art librarians worldwide”, but rather “a forum, facilitated by ARLIS/UK, by which art librarians of all countries may share information and engage in dialogue with colleagues in all other countries. No country is favoured.”² Pacey reminded ARLIS Council back in 1998 that “...it

should not proceed to allow the views of ARLIS/UK members to have a disproportionate influence on the publishing policy of the *ALJ*.”³

Some tedious but vital background

In the early years the *ALJ* was sent to all members, as part of membership. In the late 1990s, it became a perk only for members paying a premium membership price, a decision taken by ARLIS to balance the Society’s rising operating costs with its desire for membership to remain affordable to new librarians, para-professional library staff, and potential members not working in the sector but who harboured aspirations in that direction. It also acknowledged that most art libraries in the UK were institutional members and received the *ALJ* as a part of the institutional membership, so members were able to access the *ALJ* at their workplace. The new pricing structure enabled some members, who wished to make a larger financial contribution to the Society, to pay a higher membership price and still receive the *ALJ*.

ARLIS had a long-standing working relationship with Titus Wilson, a printer in Cumbria. They typeset, printed, and distributed both the *ALJ* and the *ARLIS News-sheet*, a much shorter current awareness newsletter aimed specifically at the art libraries community in the UK & Ireland, which was distributed to all members. The firm understood the *ALJ* editorial and publication processes and were very helpful to editors and the production quality was high. However, costs were high, printing in colour was unaffordable and the journal was unable to take advantage of advances in technology. In addition, escalating postage costs became punishing.

Below is an account of the move of the journal to a publishing partnership with Cambridge University Press (CUP). It reveals that, although independent in spirit, the journal and the Society that publishes it are very much inter-dependent. The interconnectedness of membership and the *ALJ* makes any decision regarding either both complicated and difficult. By 2010 the art library sector was a very different one to that of 1998. In response to increasing demand for online access and to the high costs of both the production and administration of a printed journal, in 2014 ARLIS took the decision, after a publication review and request-to-publish process, to enter a publishing collaboration with Cambridge University Press.

Some home truths

Through its history the *ALJ* editors (including the current team) have worked on the journal in a voluntary capacity - for professional development, to broaden their perspective of international librarianship, from a sense of responsibility to the profession, for sado-masochistic pleasure. At times it is a full-time job, and they do this in addition to their actual jobs.

ARLIS/UK & Ireland, like most sector-specific learned and professional societies, are reliant on the volunteer work of their members for the success of their activities. Occasionally they may have a paid member of staff (the case with ARLIS until 2017). For an independent collective of people (not affiliated to any institution) to employ a person is a huge responsibility, governed by employment law. A small society does not usually have experts in human resources and employment law amongst their members.

Few librarians understand the processes involved in producing a professional and/or academic journal.

Publishing is expensive – the proliferation of blogs, templates, and online-only journals funded by academic departments give the impression that anyone can produce a professional-looking

publication at minimum cost. It is not true. It is not cheap to design, print and distribute a professional publication once a year, let alone 4 times, consistently over 40 years. It is no small undertaking to digitize 40-years of publication output, index it, and host it electronically when technology is rapidly changing. It is expensive, it takes time, and expertise. No one has all of the necessary skills and access to all the required equipment and a fully-functioning and continuously updated, navigable electronic platform.

Most UK and European librarians are not on an academic pay grade. They are not required to do research and publish articles or books in order to retain their jobs or progress to another position. The *ALJ*'s core readership is not required or incentivized by their employer to generate any of the content that appears in the journal. Additionally, the library profession has suffered budget cuts, staff reduction through retirement, space reduction, collection reduction, merging collections and closure of faculty and public libraries at least since the economic crisis of 2007-2008. There are fewer staff to carry out the increasingly demanding day-to-day work of a library, let alone contribute articles to a professional journal. Contrast this to the time when ARLIS was founded and the *ALJ* was established, when higher education was expanding and there was a demand for professionally qualified librarians. There was a demand for professional literature and art librarianship was no different. It was not easy then either, but there were more people employed and available to share the workload.

The above home truths were lessons learned during the publication review and request to publish processes.

The review and request-to-publish

The publication review was conducted by a task group comprised of the ARLIS Chair Chris Fowler, the *ALJ* Editor and Deputy Editor, Erica Foden-Lenahan and Gustavo Grandal Montero, and Catherine Sheridan, a member of the ARLIS Publications committee. Early advice was generously provided by Steve Ball, a lecturer in the publishing programme at Oxford Brookes University and joint-editor of a small, academic journal. Judy Dyki, editor of *Art Documentation*, the ARLIS/NA journal, also provided useful information, they had fairly recently moved to a publishing collaboration with an academic press.

The task group identified 6 publishers to approach for initial discussions - 3 commercial, 3 academic presses, and the editor spoke with Heidelberg University, as well, about their e-journal hosting option.

The criteria for potential publisher, aside from general stability and reputation, was whether they had similar titles already, their journal designs appealed to members of the task group, a compatible business model and experience with professional societies. On the back of discussions and exchanges of information with all 3 commercial publishers and with 2 of the 3 university presses, the editors asked for request to publish quotes. For a more detailed account of the process of moving to CUP, seek out the minutes of ARLIS Council and Publications committee during this period and the relevant issue of *Quaderno*, published by the CNBA. At their conference in Venice in May 2019, the *ALJ* Editor detailed the potential publishing options, as well as the pressures affecting the decision to move to CUP in "Poacher turned gamekeeper – Survival of a niche librarianship journal in the age of open access – the *Art Libraries Journal (ALJ)*".

Two of the commercial publishers submitted requests-to-publish. The third decided against a submission but provided very helpful feedback. The representative explained in an email to the editor,

“Our primary concern was that we felt in order to cover our overheads and ensure a reasonable return to you, the price of the journal would need to be increased substantially. We strongly feel that substantial price increases are a big risk for journals in today’s market. We would not have felt comfortable nearly doubling the price, but believe it would very likely have been necessary...In my personal opinion, you would benefit from partnering with a publisher who can help you bring your subscription price in line with competitors gradually, over a number of years.”⁴

Both the academic publishers submitted requests to publish. With credible tenders to assess, the editorial team drafted a scenario document for ARLIS Council and gave their recommendation of one publisher.

The editors, who are appointed and approved by ARLIS Council, found it difficult to engage Council members with the decision regarding the future of the *ALJ*. There was a perception of independence on the part of editors yet any decisions they would take required Council approval and a perceived reticence on the part of Council members to consider the complexity of that relationship beyond the annual income from the journal, essential for paying ARLIS’s operating costs, made the process frustrating. The four identified options were to continue as we were with escalating costs; continue to publish ourselves with another printer, thus losing the years of expertise of Titus Wilson; a collaboration with a large publisher; or self-publish an online-only journal in PDF form, with no stable website or plan of how to replace the income from subscriptions.

The editors felt an academic press represented the ‘best fit’ for the *ALJ*. Cambridge UP offered a contract with a reasonable pricing model both for subscriptions and for costs to members; a fair revenue-sharing proposal; and ARLIS would continue to maintain ownership of all aspects of journal. They presented a straight-forward business model that appealed to us ethically (a not-for-profit publisher who re-invests income – they have launched the Cambridge Core platform since the *ALJ* joined and they look for other ways to improve the user experience) and they understand the society publishing market (a number of learned societies were already publishing with CUP). They were willing to invest in developing the journal's base of submissions and readers and provide the necessary copy-editing support for editors; publish online and print in full colour; and their Green Open Access model permits accepted manuscripts to be placed on institutional repositories; and there is no embargo on access to the current issue for direct subscribers and members. They pledged to digitize our back issues in the UK rather than having to send our archive of issues abroad.

ARLIS Council accepted the recommendation and appointed CUP in November 2014, with contract and re-design agreed by September 2015, ready to publish the first issue in early 2016. It took just under 3 years from initial process to publication.

The great leap forward

The digitized back issues were launched at the Arlis conference in Dublin in July 2017 – a tremendous achievement that sees all of the *ALJ* available through the Cambridge Core interface. The archive covers 1976 – 2014, while 2015 to the present is current.

In 2017 there was a 4% drop in direct institutional memberships/subscription, however, the journal's inclusion in Cambridge's consortia programme ensures a significant increase in the number of institutions with access to the *ALJ*. This appears to be the subscription trend for larger, multi-discipline institutions. The *ALJ*'s traditional direct subscription strongholds remain the US and western Europe, but it is also accessible to users in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Australasia and South America. This, it is hoped, will also eventually result in contributions from a more diverse range of practice.

The Society receives royalties from both subscription and article download. Income has remained consistent with the years preceding the CUP publishing agreement, but with none of the print, distribution and storage costs. There is a potential for a profit increase in the medium to long term through increased circulation, however, art librarianship is a small world so it is important not to count on too much subscription growth. Individual article sales may increase though through consortial access in non art-specific libraries and institutions. This income provides a solid base to help fund ARLIS's activities and provides extra support for editors to attend conferences, such as IFLA World Library and Information Congress, to help maintain and further develop the international outlook.

From the perspective of the editors, the move to CUP has been a positive one. A tweaked design is fresher, colour images look great online and in print, and with a bit less administration to oversee, we are freer to explore and expand the range of content. We have developed some key themes through special issues and reached out to conferences such as Turning the Page, to feature voices from beyond the art library world, but of great interest to it. Our sector is adapting to big changes in art institutions, be they structural, pedagogical or technological, and the *ALJ* is reflecting these changes.

Two Associate Editors were welcomed in 2018 to bring in other perspectives, interests, expertise and contacts and to help spread the editorial load. Editor Erica Foden-Lenahan is based in Germany, Deputy Editor Gustavo Grandal is in the UK, and Associate Editors Kraig Binkowski in the US and Michael Wirtz in Qatar.

Faced with years of declining personal memberships, in 2018 ARLIS/UK & Ireland did finally agree a stream-lined model which separated the *ALJ* from membership, effective in 2019. Thus the *ALJ*'s survival is now wholly reliant on subscription income. Personal members receive a generous discount on the subscription price.

Administration sometimes has been challenging over the past 3 years, partly due to the loss of the ARLIS Business Manager. There have been further challenges due to some staff changes at CUP and as there are now 4 *ALJ* editors – on different continents - communication can be difficult. There is usually only one meeting a year with the CUP Liaison Editor, but the rest of the communication is via email and that is an imperfect medium.

The distribution of hard copy issues (especially to editors) is slow and, sometimes, chaotic. Gratis and contributors' copies often must be chased. This has sometimes felt deliberate to push the *ALJ* in the direction of becoming an online-only publication. But the journal's audience serves a group of users who produce material culture and are haptic by nature, so online only will be resisted for as long as is feasible.

There has not been as much assistance with copy-editing as we had hoped and with so many people involved in the editing process it is difficult to maintain our house-style. To some extent these teething problems have abated and it will get easier over time.

Overall, it is more important that the *ALJ* continues to be a readable journal, that informs subscribers and members and is interesting to them, that reflects the topics they deal with in their professional practice. It is also vital that the journal remains a place where staff in art libraries with the urge to write about their projects and collections, no matter where they are in the world, can publish. On the whole the partnership allows the editors to concentrate on content, while CUP helps us to strengthen the reputation and visibility of the *Art Libraries Journal*.

We serve a public or readership but also contribute to funding ARLIS activities, this symbiotic relationship needs to be better understood and considered whenever important decisions are taken.

References

1. Beth Houghton, "Preface" in: *Art Libraries Journal and ARLIS/UK & Eire News-sheet Ten Year Index*. Compiled by John Bowman (London: ARLIS/UK & Eire, 1993)
2. Philip Pacey, 'Art Libraries Journal: a response to the discussion at the 1998 ARLIS', internal document dated May 1998.
3. Pacey, May 1998.
4. Email to author, 18 August 2014.

Note: an earlier version of this document omitted Sonia French's tenure as ALJ Editor in paragraph 2. I apologize for this careless oversight.