

ARLIS

UK & Ireland

Art Libraries Society

ARLIS UK & Ireland: The Early Years

Beth Houghton

ARLIS was founded in 1969 following a letter, sent by Trevor Fawcett to the Library Association Record in 1968, inviting art librarians to consider collaboration. An inaugural meeting was held in April 1969 at the Central School of Art and Design in London attended by 37 art librarians, most of them based in recently-established or newly-expanding art and design colleges. Fawcett himself was the only representative from a university, one with a new art history programme, but this was an optimum moment to launch such an organisation. Increased funding for higher education during the next two decades allowed art and design libraries to expand exponentially, (followed by the merging of many art colleges into polytechnics, later converting to university status), and art history teaching to extend further in the university sector. (Tellingly, ca. 40 universities are listed in the most recent Directory of members). Choosing the name ARLIS, the fledgling organisation soon included most of the art, design and architecture librarians working in academic, museum, national, public, private, and special libraries throughout the UK and Ireland, going on to attract those working with archival and visual resources collections as well as students of library and information science. In 1985 the society changed its name to ARLIS/UK & Ireland.

and in 1993 to ARLIS/UK & Ireland but, for the purpose of brevity, ARLIS will be used in this text. The society became a registered charity in 1995.

Early on ARLIS established a choice of personal and institutional membership, soon extending this to a category of overseas members worldwide, in addition to a world-wide range of overseas subscribers to the Art Libraries Journal (qv below). Domestic membership peaked around 370 in the first decade of the 21st century but, since then, more straitened circumstances in higher education and the dwindling fortunes of subject specialisation across the board, combined with the society's organisational and financial difficulties after 2004, has seen membership numbers falling.

Back in 1969, ARLIS quickly established a governing Council, elected its first officers and set to work. From the outset, much has been carried out by working parties (for specific, finite purposes) and committees with longer-standing aims. The first committee to be set up was the Education Committee (1972), reflecting an initial concern about appropriate training for art librarians. This was followed, in quick succession, by a working party on Standards (1972) and working parties on AACR revision and Dewey classification (these latter two being merged in 1980 into the long-running Cataloguing and Classification Committee). In 1978, the importance of co-operation led to the setting up of a Committee for the National Co-ordination of Art Library Resources with representatives from major UK art libraries - another long-running committee. A Visual Resources Committee was established in 1980. Rather surprisingly, it was not until 1995 that a Public Libraries Working Party was set up (perhaps in response to the threat some fine art departments were by then facing). In 1997 a Publications Committee was created to support and oversee the many publications being produced. A Visual Archives Group, emerging first in the 1990s, finally became the Visual Archives Committee in 2002 (later Art Archives Committee). However, within this century ARLIS members have struggled to juggle jobs with professional activities and, after a trial reduction in the number of meetings and a use of Skype, some committees were wound up. At the time of writing, only the Professional Development and Cataloguing and Classification committees and the Conference Working party remain.

The Professional Development Committee (formed by a merger of the Education Committee with the Students and Trainees Committee in 2012) is still going strong. These committees, individually and combined, have provided an unbroken stream of short courses and visits throughout ARLIS's life - a modest but important income source. They have assisted other committees to organise events in their respective fields and, for many years, held a popular annual 'Taking the Plunge' event for new recruits and students. The Cataloguing and Classification Committee continues to represent and promote the ARLIS view wherever cataloguing codes, standards or classification schemes are under revision. Its members have always been very active in liaising with, and dual membership of, the relevant professional groups (e.g. CILIP/CIG), have kept ARLIS abreast of developments in these critical areas (AACR to RDA) and have produced a series of essential guidelines for treating the types of material peculiar to our field. The National Co-ordination Committee (wound up in 2017/18), in addition to providing a forum for the major art libraries to discuss and pursue collaborative and national initiatives since 1978, has been the main channel for

liaison between ARLIS and key bodies in the UK library and information landscape. It covered topics from co-ordinated acquisition and storage, through resource discovery and finding tools, the changing fortunes of serial indexing and art bibliography and copyright to, more recently, Open Access and the monitoring of the impact of funding cuts. The work of the Visual Resources Committee (wound up 2017/18) has followed the fortunes of the slide library over nearly 4 decades as threats of extinction, the impact of digitisation and the hopes and fears of what solutions DACS might offer. Concerning itself broadly with visual resources beyond books and journals, both still and moving images, it provided advice and represented ARLIS interests in relation to intellectual property rights. The Art Archives Committee has done much, through visits, courses and publications, to reveal the wealth and importance of the unpublished material held in collections, and to provide expert advice and guidance on its specialised treatment.

Returning to 1969, communication with the wider membership was seen as crucial so, immediately after the inaugural meeting, the first, rather inky, issue of the ARLIS Newsletter was published, typed with four fingers on wax stencils and run off on an old Gestetner machine. This ran until 1975 when it was decided to publish a periodical carrying more substantial articles and the quarterly Art Libraries Journal, with a strong international remit from the outset, was launched in 1976. The newsletter then became the domestic bi-monthly ARLIS News-sheet (later ARLIS/UK & Ireland News-sheet) and continued, with various re-designs along the way, until 2015. The website, Arlis.net, then took over as the vehicle for news and reports of ARLIS activities.

Publications have been the life-blood of the society. The Art Libraries Journal (ALJ 1976 to date) began in a compact A5 format and went through a series of re-designs until moving to A4 in 1986. It was edited initially and later from 1986 to 1997 by Philip Pacey, and subsequently by a series of editors: Sonia French (1978-1981), Beth Houghton (1981-1986) and Gillian Varley (1998-2013) before the present joint editorship of Erica Foden-Lenahan and Gustavo Grandal Montero, and the transfer of publisher from ARLIS to Cambridge University Press in 2016. The first Directory of members was published in 1971, and continued almost annually until 2012/13, listing personal, institutional and overseas members and overseas subscribers to the ALJ, moving briefly to ARLIS.net – institutional members only, after this. In 1993 ARLIS also published Art & design documentation in the UK and Ireland, edited by Gillian Varley and listing nearly 400 collections, not restricted to ARLIS members, and containing access and collection details, an updated version of which was uploaded to ARLIS.net in 2003. ARLIS.net currently carries neither of these listings and there is currently no up-to-date, accessible list of ARLIS members.

The first 'monographic' publication appeared in 1976: The Art Press: two centuries of art magazines, edited by Trevor Fawcett and Clive Phillpot and published by The Art Book Company for ARLIS and the National Art Library (Victoria and Albert Museum), to accompany an exhibition at the V&A, jointly curated with ARLIS. This was closely followed in 1977 by the Art Library Manual: a guide to resources and practice, edited by Philip Pacey, published in association with Bowker. Many other publications have been produced on art documentation and other topics over the years, and a selection of these illustrates the

changing preoccupations of the profession and our members over the decades: User education in art and design (1980), Guidelines for booksellers (1987), Descriptive cataloguing of artists' books; Guidelines on cataloguing exhibition catalogues; Guidelines for art and design libraries: stock, staffing, planning and autonomy (all 1990), Visual resources for design (1995), Art exhibition documentation... cataloguing guidelines; Guidelines on stock disposal (both 2000); First steps in archives; Trade literature: cataloguing and classification guidelines (both 2004), Artists' books: a cataloguer's manual (2006), Displays and exhibitions in art libraries (2009), All this stuff: archiving the artist (2013). And not forgetting the valuable Art researchers' guides... to art libraries and collections in various cities and areas, continuing under the care of a Publications Administrator after the demise of the Publications Committee.

In the early days, resource discovery meant the laborious manual collection of data, resulting in the production of lists. In 1978 the first Union list of art periodicals was published followed in 1989 by the Union list microforms on art, design and related subjects. These were huge tasks, achieved by dogged and heroic individual members rather than committees, but not sustainable in the long run in this way. Attempts to share in-depth access to the broader content of collections never progressed beyond top-level directory descriptions. Over time, technology came to the rescue as, gradually, library and other collections slowly digitised their catalogues and finding aids and put them on-line. In parallel, national and supra-national entities (both commercial and academic) have provided some start/stop periods of progress for serial indexing and many art serial holdings are now included in the (JISC-funded until mid-2019) www.suncat.ac.uk database. From 2014 the <https://artdiscovery.net/>, offering an art-focused research option within the OCLC WorldCat environment, has allowed access to a vast trove of art-related material held in an ever-increasing number of the world's major art libraries.

ARLIS itself entered the digital age in 1997, with the setting up of its first website and in 1998 the National Art Library (NAL) hosted a web interface for the Union list of art, architecture and design serials (see above). The website was relaunched as ARLIS.net in 2003, to include an updated Directory of art, architecture and design resources (see the 1993 Art & design documentation...above), together with the Union list of... serials. It was re-designed by VADS in 2008 and migrated to a new platform in 2013. By 2014 ARLIS was moving to 'print-on-demand' for its occasional publications, had a Facebook page, a Twitter account and a LinkedIn group, and the on-line Union list of... serials was now hosted on the NAL catalogue. As well as carrying news and announcements, the website <https://www.arlis.net/> currently hosts the blog ARLISmatters (including the 'in conversation with...': chats with art librarians, podcasts, and resources) plus regular columns such as Artists' Book News.

However, it is notable how many of the issues preoccupying ARLIS from the beginning (co-operation, art bibliography, cataloguing tricky materials (exhibition documentation, ephemera, trade literature), slides and other visual materials, that old chestnut copyright and, of course, funding) remain challenging despite the advent of technology, virtual

learning and the digital world - which have brought new challenges without always completely solving all the old ones.

Throughout its history, getting together was always equally important for ARLIS members. After a further 'seminar' held in Leicester in 1970, and the first conference held in 1972 in Aberystwyth, annual conferences have been held almost every year, generally in the summer and always in different parts of the country, though falling membership numbers and reduced funding for delegates has seen numbers attending conference fall in the last decade. Overseas and student attendance has for many years been encouraged by two awards to enable a delegate from abroad and a student from this country to attend. The 1976 conference in Brighton was ARLIS's first international conference, followed by a second in 1987 (as an IFLA pre-conference), a third in Oxford in 1992 and another IFLA pre-conference in Glasgow in 2002.

From the start, and recognising the internationality of art, ARLIS has looked beyond its shores. An American art librarian, Judy Hoffberg, had attended the Aberystwyth Conference and, upon her return to the US, established ARLIS/NA in 1972, to which ARLIS promptly affiliated. Other art library organisations quickly sprang up in different parts of the world, some taking the ARLIS name: ARLIS/ANZ in Australia and New Zealand (1975), ARLIS/NL (aka OKBN) in the Netherlands, ARLIS/Norden for Scandinavian countries, an ARLIScanada chapter of ARLIS/NA, and some not, e.g. JADS: Japan Art and Design Society. Early contact was made with some already existing art library organisations: the art librarians' section of the Association des Bibliothécaires Français and, later, the equivalent German organisation, the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Kunstbibliotheken. Further art library organisations later arose in Europe and South America and continue to emerge. In addition to the series of international conferences mentioned above, ARLIS members also made visits and study tours to a variety of European centres: Paris in 1975, and 1997, Germany in 2000, Stockholm in 2002, and Flanders in 2006. ARLIS hosted visits to London by individual foreign colleagues and groups: German art librarians in 2001, colleagues from Finland, Flanders and the Netherlands in 2006 and from ARLIS/NA to London and Oxford in 2010.

In 1976 ARLIS set up an International Working Party and the following year some of its members of this attended the IFLA Congress in Brussels. Here the setting up of a Round Table of Art Librarians within the Section of Special Libraries was proposed. This eventually became the IFLA Art Libraries Section, ARLIS joined IFLA in 1978 and members have taken an active role on its Standing Committee over the years. A series of 'IFLA' art library conferences held in Europe during the 1980s (on themes such as art periodicals and exhibition catalogues) were also attended, and contributed to, by ARLIS members. The papers delivered at IFLA pre-conferences and satellite meetings have always provided a rich source of material for publication in the Art Libraries Journal.

Meanwhile, closer to home, but perhaps more slowly, ARLIS forged links with the library community in the UK. In 1983, 10 years after affiliating with ARLIS/NA, it became 'an organisation in affiliation with the [then] Library Association' which had been rather resistant to the idea of setting up a specialist group itself. The British Library (BL) was more supportive and in 1982 set up the British Library Working Group on Art Documentation

which produced a report leading to the setting up of the British Library Standing Committee on Art Documentation (SCOAD). This body finally drew the National Art Library into discussions on co-operation with other major art libraries. SCOAD ran until 1996 and organised a seminar on 'The problems of art documentation' in 1990. The British Library also provided important support to other initiatives. Towards the end of the 1980s the British Library R&D Department funded a project to investigate the feasibility of a national collection network for art exhibition catalogues based at Manchester Polytechnic which reported in 1990. Sadly, funding was unavailable to maintain the infrastructure for continuation of such a network. In addition, in 2002 the BL provided financial support through the RSLP for the Union List... of Serials.

ARLIS also became a player on the national library co-operation scene, becoming a founder, affiliated member of LINC: the Library and Information Co-operation Council in 1989. This led to the decision to produce a national Visual Arts Library and Information Plan (VALIP), published in 1993 in parallel with other such plans being produced at the time. However, again, funding to support implementation of elements of the plan was not forthcoming and VALIP was wound up in 1997. In the 1980s and 1990s, while there was funding aplenty for research, frustratingly, it was not available to support the establishment of initiatives arising from these projects.

Within ARLIS itself some art librarians in specific areas felt the need to organise their own local groups: AVAIL: the Association for Visual Arts in Ireland (1992), SVAG: the Scottish Visual Arts Group and LALIC: Leeds Art Librarians in Cooperation. These groups at various points were represented on the National Co-ordination Committee and ARLIS also maintained active links throughout the later decades of the 20th century with a large range of related organisations in the UK, such as art historians through CHArt and the AAH and sister organisations such as ACADI, ARCLIB, the Museum Librarians and Archivists Group (MLAG) and (overseas) the Visual Resources Association.

How was all this managed? In the early decades, the officers' roles were undertaken by volunteers - working members, in their 'spare' time. In 1987 an archive policy for the society's papers was drawn up and it was arranged these would be deposited at the Archive of Art and Design at the NAL. Only in 1990 was an Administrator appointed. Working, theoretically part-time, from home, on a modest salary, Sonia French ably managed a range of the duties formerly carried out by various officers until 2004. Following this, a series of full-time administrators took this on, in a fairly rapid succession, in an office first hosted at the Courtauld Institute and then relocated to the NAL in 2007, until a paid administrator post became no longer affordable in 2016. So, as it began, ARLIS has now returned - to a reliance on the goodwill and 'spare time' of hard-pressed members to run its affairs.

ARLIS has traditionally relied on membership subscriptions for less than 50% of its income, augmented by modest profits from courses, conferences and publications. It has also benefitted over its history from generous support from sponsors and loyal advertisers. They have helped make the extensive publication programme possible and supported conferences and courses. The long-running Design & Applied Arts Travel and Study fund has for many years (until 2014) supported travel, professional development and, latterly,

research into digital resources. Mention should also be made of the long-standing relationship with the printer Titus Wilson, very much a part of ARLIS history. This company provided sterling service for many decades, printing and distributing the ALJ until its move to CUP, as well as other publications, and generous sponsorship on occasion.

ARLIS celebrated its 25th Anniversary in 1994 at a London conference, with a Members' Day and a special issue of the ALJ (v.19, n.3 1994). It held its 40th Anniversary Conference in Cambridge in 2009, plus a party at the newly-reopened Whitechapel Art Gallery, and produced a book, *ARLIS at 40*, edited by Penny Dade. Both these publications contain useful chronologies and reviews of ARLIS history which have greatly helped with the production of this account.

And now, in April 2019, Congratulations on your 50th Anniversary, ARLIS/UK & Ireland!
Keep on keeping on...