67th IFLA Council and General Conference
August 16-25, 2001

Art libraries and information services network: integrating resources and attaining visibility

Maria Christina Almeida
Library Science and Documentation Department,
University of Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo, Brazil

Abstract:

A description of art information services in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, including libraries, archives, documentation sections in art museums and cultural centers, which identifies their main difficulties in accomplishing their objectives. REDARTE-SP is presented as a network of art libraries and information services in that city, created to promote discussion of theoretical, technical and organizational issues facing art information services and to propose projects aiming at the development of those services as well as their professionals. The paper points out that the available services need to attain greater visibility and proposes the development of three basic programs to divulge existing art library and information services, to develop collaborative relationship with other departments within the parent organizations, and to create new approaches to get better knowledge of art information users. Those programs will help to avoid information dispersion and provide a better use of the available resources, and improve quality in art information services and products.

1. The context

   São Paulo is the largest city in Brazil and an important business center in South America. Its relevance in producing, distributing and consuming goods, made this city also representative as an educational and cultural center. The production, circulation and distribution of culture is intensive and audience

for culture and cultural spaces – museums, galleries, movie theaters, etc - are increasing, as well as the provision of art courses, books and magazines.

In spite of the effervescence of cultural life in São Paulo, art information services – art libraries, art archives, art documentation services - don't keep up with other spheres of our cultural life. Seen as a whole, their main characteristic is heterogeneity and diversity: various kinds of information services and of subject areas covered, different types of documents, different users and different levels of development. We can find very simple information services living alongside sophisticated ones, which involve complex management and high costs.

A general analysis of such an heterogeneous object emphasizes the situation found in the majority of the services and not in individual cases, which constitutes exceptions. However, this approach does not intend to diminish the importance of the most relevant services in the city, but, on the contrary, to make them responsible for improving the whole, both serving as examples of best practices and acting as leaders for better art information services.

2. The situation
Researches developed in the last fifteen years pointed out some common characteristics found in the majority of the studied libraries: insufficient and sometimes inadequate human resources, shortage of financial resources, insufficient or inadequate physical spaces, obsolete holdings, delay in technical processing and in incorporating automation processes and new technologies. Many of those services are still operating traditionally, with a low automation level and few users.

3. The holdings
Art books are expensive – much more expensive in Brazil than in the Northern Hemisphere - as well as video and audio tapes, cds, photos and everything that is necessary for having a good and contemporary art library. In that context, maintaining updated collections is a challenge, especially to our art museums – public or private – and to our public libraries. The university libraries normally have a better situation because they can count on special financial support from foundations aimed at the development of teaching and research.

Many library collections were formed disorderly around the parent organization, without guidelines for their creation and development. Some of them continue to grow that way due to the lack of policies and to the absence of systematic budgets for acquisitions that lead them to incorporate to their holdings all the material they receive as donation or in exchange. The information services in São Paulo do not make their vocation clear , which would imply defining their subjects of excellence and their target publics. As a result, although as a whole their holdings are very rich, the scenery shows dispersion and duplication, as well as great absences, and some of the holdings are nearing obsolescence since they are not systematically updated.

4. Processes and tools
Technical processing still lacks simplification and standardization. Except for the public universities, they work in isolation, forming their own databases (or even card files). The quality of processing, which interferes directly in information retrieval, reflects the absence of adequate vocabulary control, due to the inexistence of tools for vocabulary control in Portuguese - although some efforts have been made in this direction. Quality of processing is also prejudiced by the insufficient art knowledge of the information professional.

The situation is much more delicate when we analyze the conditions of technical processing of non-book materials.

5. The information unit and the parent organization
The art information services in São Paulo generally are not organically integrated to the mission and activities of their parent institutions. Information work within the organization is sometimes fragmented in corporative spaces, raising obstacles to the information flow and to its access by the

institutional users and by the external public. In the museum, the library, the documentation area and the archive should form a unique information system, acting in an integrated and productive way. Even at the university or at the majority of art schools, we do not find the art library integrated either to the teaching programs, or to research projects or to extension activities. In general, the library is very distant from the daily life of its main users, having a responsive attitude, instead of developing a pro-active action. As isolated entities within their parent organizations and with low levels of utilization, the art information services tend to play a marginal role in their organizations.

6. The users
   In this context , it should not be surprising that the majority of our art information services lacks public. The great exceptions are the university libraries and some museum libraries. In any kind of art information service the most frequent users are the students, followed by the researchers. Art journalists, art editors, art dealers, designers and artists in general are eventual users that look for an information service or library only when they cannot get the information they need with friends or on the Internet. General public is a rare presence in art libraries and information services, in spite of the increasing art audiences in the city.

   There are some explanations for the low use of those services. First of all, there is no publicity of them – people simply do not know of their existence. Secondly, in general, the library opening hours are not adequate to working people: libraries open when people are working and close when they have leisure time. Thirdly, services are sometimes inefficient and the access to information and to the documents takes so much time that people give up at the very first difficulty. Besides that, only a few databases are available on the Internet and generally there are no document delivery facilities for the common user, although we live in a city with great traffic problems.

   Within the organizations, the information professionals should be developing user training programs, since our art students and specialists are not familiar with information sources. Many researchers do not even know traditional available services as Art index , for instance – although many libraries subscribe those services. Consequently, finding information represents a long and dull task in the research activity and the results they get are inefficient. The information professional is neglecting his educational role - he should act as mediator, providing the general public with information and knowledge that will help him understand art and stimulate him to art consumption, production or study.

7. Producing knowledge
   We cannot count too much on Brazilian art information sources – there are few encyclopedias and dictionaries and no abstracting and indexing services. Two or three libraries try to index some articles but none produces abstracts.

   Producing Brazilian art information sources should constitute a cooperative project of our art information professionals. It would stimulate research and contribute to the study and research of Brazilian art, both in our country and abroad.

8. The cooperation
   The solution for the weaknesses pointed by our diagnosis will not be found in isolated actions. For that reason, since July 1998, a group of art information professionals – librarians, archivists, museum workers, etc – decided to work together in order to carefully think and develop cooperative projects. Many of our art information professionals had never met before and do not even know the services that were offered in the city. Therefore the first goal of the group was to put those people in contact and make them familiar with art information services in the city. Each meeting took place in a different information unit and a directory of the art libraries was produced so that they could inform their users about other services. Now the group can count on some stable members who are trying to develop some projects together. One of them aims at giving publicity to the group and includes the creation and development of a site on the Internet. The site will offer information about the services,

as well as about information sources, particularly on Brazilian art. The other project intends to organize a Seminar on Copyright, which is a very complex problem faced by the art information services as well as by their parent organizations. In spite of its increasing importance, the group is not formally structured and it still depends on the efforts and on the leadership of some of its members in order to survive. Formalizing the group will give it the necessary visibility and also open some possibilities of getting funding for its projects.

At the national level, our effort is not isolated, since there is already an art librarians group in Rio de Janeiro. We are using the same name –

REDARTE-RJ and REDARTE-SP – and we intend to form a cooperative and productive network and have practical answers to the following questions that I propose be discussed here: (1) how to integrate information services and how to have a strategic role within the parent organization? (2) how to integrate with other services outside the organization? (3) how to increase our public? (4) how to be relevant in cultural life?