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‘Out of the box’: the role of professional associations in supporting art libraries and art librarians in Society

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For many of us the demands of the day job can at times seem all-consuming, with local pressures circumscribing our working lives. This can be a particular problem for art and design information professionals many of whom work as solos. What librarians crucially need in giving their professional best to both users and employers is broader awareness, the ability to see the big picture combined with the opportunity to think and work ‘out of the box’. Step forward professional associations such as the IFLA Section of Art Libraries and the many different national ARLISs. The aim of this workshop is to consider the ways in which, through meeting and working together within professional societies, ambitions are sparked, professional competencies developed and advocacy undertaken - all with the overriding aim of promoting and improving information provision within our several communities.

To open the discussion I will take ARLIS/UK & Ireland as a case study and give a brief résumé of its origins and development. The Society was founded in 1969 by a small group of art librarians keen to share solutions to common problems and explore the possibilities of co-operation and co-ordination. The Society now comprises 440 members: 166 individual, 189 institutional and 85 overseas. In addition 260 libraries overseas subscribe to the *Art Libraries Journal*. ARLIS is an educational charity which operates independently of the UK's CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals) whilst working in liaison with it and with other national and international agencies with relevant agendas.

ARLIS includes in its membership most of the major art libraries in the United Kingdom and Ireland. More than half of its members are in educational establishments such as art colleges and universities, but there are also representatives of museum libraries and the art sections of public libraries as well as a few booksellers, publishers and professional practice libraries.

Underpinning all of ARLIS's activities is its infrastructure which for the first 22 years was based solely on voluntary effort. In 1991 ARLIS appointed me as its first paid member of staff, part-time, with the key task of centralising records, simplifying procedures and creating a centre for ARLIS information. Another task was to establish professional guidelines for the many different aspects of ARLIS's work and these are contained in two working documents, the *Administrative Handbook* which includes job descriptions for Officers and Chairs of Committees and forward plans for the Committees, and the Society's *Rules & Regulations*.

In an organisation of this sort, with membership spread over a wide geographical area it is essential to provide regular opportunities for people to meet and get to know and work with one another. Standing committees such as Cataloguing & Classification, visual Resources and Education & Professional Development work together to produce the annual Calendar of Events which includes conferences, courses, workshops and visits. Members talk to each other through arlis-link@jiscmail.ac.uk the voice of the Society and become actively involved by serving on ARLIS committees or Council and by contributing to its publications. The *ARLIS/UK & Ireland News-sheet* and the *Art Libraries Journal* especially are key resources of news, bibliographic information and scholarship for art librarianship internationally.

One of the Society's strengths is its responsiveness to the needs of the membership. In recent years this has led to the establishment of two special interest groups, the Visual Archives Group and the Student & Trainees Group both of which have proved models of professional energy and commitment and are promoting art librarianship to incoming professionals.

Of particular interest in the context of the IFLA Section of Art Libraries is the work of the National Co-ordination Committee which has as its brief national co-operation and resource sharing between art libraries. A major effort was made through the VALIP (Visual Arts Library & Information Plan) initiative to formalise relationships between co-operating libraries. Changes in government strategy towards libraries leading first to the Library & Information Commission and latterly to *Re:source* meant that the VALIP itself was not established but its aims and programme of work continue to flourish through the NCC. The *Union List of Art, Architecture & Design Serials* is a web-based reality and work on the new *Directory of Art, Architecture & Design Resources* is well advanced.

The historical isolation of art librarianship from the mainstream of the profession has encouraged the development of energetic professional societies all over the world, of which ARLIS/UK & Ireland is just one example. What is striking now is to see how globalisation and the new technologies are leading to trans-boundary projects such as Imageline which is working towards an international web gateway providing access to sources of images and which will flourish by depending on the traditional generous spirit of international co-operation, the cornerstone of IFLA.

In order to discuss how best greater individual involvement in art library societies can be encouraged both nationally and internationally, workshop participants are asked to consider the following key experience-based activities:

- Education: teaching and learning
- Professional standards
- Partnerships and solo working
- Research and publications
- Resource sharing

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