

MUSEUM LIBRARIES AS PART OF THE SYSTEM OF LIBRARIES IN RUSSIA *

By Ada Kolganova

The importance of including the art museum type of library into a larger system of libraries has become extremely important as librarianship as such is undergoing a new stage of development in Russia. At this time, a large majority of libraries are on the rise. In this situation, the differences between museum libraries and the larger, free-standing libraries are striking. What is lacking in the museum libraries is cooperation and coordination of activities with other libraries.

The general libraries are developing cooperative programs, such as "Libnet," the program for automation of the whole library; the project of cumulative catalogs; the creation of a Russian books in print, etc. The museum libraries, on the other hand, are structural subdivisions of museums. Although they may be absolutely independent library departments consisting of books and printed media, they can't independently define the main directions of their activity. There are several bureaucratic reasons for this: some of the museums are subordinated to the Museum Department of the Ministry of Culture, while others answer to different regional or municipal branches of authority, such as the Ministry of Education.

For these reasons, Russian museum libraries should involve themselves in the professional librarian milieu, as, for instance, in all types of cooperative and international programs and projects. If they don't, the libraries will remain second-rate, with very limited chances of future development because of the financial situation, and the museums' lack of concern for the special character of the libraries' needs.

Definition of the museum library

There is a lack of clarity in how museum libraries are viewed. The first definition regards them strictly as special libraries, providing for the needs of specialists in special literature according to the general purpose of a concrete museum and

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functioning as the museum auxiliary research department; in large museums, the library has the status of a research department. The second purpose, as cited in the Encyclopedia of Libraries of Russia, a museum library is, "a part of the museum collection with an importance of its own." Meanwhile, neither the uniqueness of the libraries, nor the richness of their bookstocks receive any special mention.

Museum libraries should not just refer to rare book departments of museums, but special collections of visual materials as well. For instance, the Russian State art library holds some 30,000 engravings, and thousands of photographs, post cards, stage designs, etc. The State Theater Library in St. Petersburg has a unique collection that includes numerous drafts of theater designs, in particular, those belonging to the Silver Age.

Origins of museum libraries

One might easily trace a genetic connection between museums and museum libraries. Quite a number of them originated as joint collections. The most obvious example here is the Rumyantsev's Museum. One can also remember Peter the Great, under whose decree of 1714 a library and a «Kunstkammer», later a world renowned museum, was opened which later became the library of the Academy of Sciences in 1725.

The histories of these libraries vary. However, in the most famous and old museums, the libraries were planned as an integral part of the whole complex. But later, in some of the museums founded in the Soviet period, libraries were developed as a result of intellectual zeal and organizational pressing of our colleagues.

Book preservation

Since the 1960s, state policies for museum libraries have tried to sort out rare books from the rest of the library collections, in order to treat the rare books as museum objects. A new state program of rare books preservation is entitled, "The Memory of Russia." Museum library collections became involved in the state registration and research. In this connection, a cooperative approach is important, since it provides new possibilities for libraries with limited resources and limited access.

A long-standing problem has been the idiosyncratic subject oriented card catalogs that exist in the museum libraries. Most of these catalogs differ greatly from most universal library catalogs. Their isolation, as well as their lack of technological tools, have become a significant obstacle toward their computerization, which makes their integration into the world information community quite a problem. At

the same time, several larger museums have special museum information systems, even electronic laboratories of their own, at their disposal. The contrast between the advanced technology for the museum collections versus the poor technical support of the libraries is at times striking.

The section of art libraries at the Russian Library Association makes a great effort to attract the attention of those in charge of the supervision of museums and libraries to the immediate importance of involving museum libraries with present day innovative processes. As an example, I will only mention unique card catalogues of research libraries of the State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, the Kremlin Museums, Museums of Vologda Monasteries, the Moscow Art Theatre Museum, the Museums of Pterodvovets, etc.

Book Exhibition

However similar museum libraries and autonomous art libraries might be, what differs most is not so much their official status, but their exhibition work, and how it contributes to the general exhibition activity of the whole museum. Having in their possession a significant quota of cultural heritage of Russia, which partly belongs to book collections, and partly to archival collections, these libraries have structural peculiarities of their own. Since the 1960s, state politics in connection with museums were manifested in introducing absolutely new parameters for differentiation within book collections. In this accordance, the most valuable part of it was treated as museum items, with corresponding requirements for description and preservation, while purely library collections, formatted alongside, were meant for research and other "auxiliary" sort of work. A certain number of decrees issued by the Ministry of culture from 1978 to 1981 were meant for extracting rare books from museum library collections and their further state registration.

The State of Art Libraries

At the conference "Crimea-98" and again at a special seminar held in Moscow in November 1998, the "Programme of analytic investigation of Moscow memorial libraries," librarians had an opportunity to study the history and specific character of certain memorial libraries. The concept "research libraries" also turned to be a very productive approach for the investigation of art libraries in our country. Being applied to museum and other special libraries, it is very helpful for apprehending their peculiar character through the importance of humanitarian research, in the most broad sense of the word. (I might refer to the book "A reader at the research library," issued by the Russian State art library, Moscow, 1998, with librarians

discussing specific features of collections and readers' service at their particular libraries).

However, neither theoretical researches, nor methodological discussions can solve the most painful problems of librarianship in Russia today. Libraries, more than any other institutions, do feel the burden of financial instability. After collapse of old bureaucratic system, any connections between libraries, or interchanges of a different kind and on different levels ceased to exist. This disintegration affected heavily the art libraries. Having closely studied the experience of international library associations, we realised as primary necessity cooperation and professional unions.

Thus the Association of Moscow Art Libraries came to life, lately developed into the Art libraries Section within the Russian Library Association. It's worth mentioning here that our section was the first one that appeared within the reorganised Russian Library Association. It was generally agreed, that a union in practice turned out to be a very helpful sort of affair for all libraries, with common perspectives - not of surviving, but of further development.

Cooperation and coordination of activity is, in the present period of total instability, a matter of utmost importance for all art libraries, irrespective of their subordination or number of personnel. Noteworthy is that the membership of our section is permanently increasing: among "novices" - the Murmansk Regional Universal Research Library, the Institute of the History of Art Research (St.-Petersburg), the Pushkin National Library of the Republic of Mordovia, the Research Library of the Russian Academy of Theatre arts, the Glinka music museum.

The prospective plans for both the section and of the Association at large are directed towards joint projects and programmes. In total, they embrace all aspects of library work: acquisition, informative-bibliographical activity, joint exhibitions, issuing of reference guides compiled by different libraries, etc.

There's one rule, which has become predominant at our section: not to narrow ourselves to problems, typical of art libraries only, but, on the contrary, to involve libraries of different profiles in the work of the section, treating their specific problems as adjoining ones.

It is noteworthy that our Association was among the pioneers in solving the basic problem of adapting libraries to new economic situation. Thus, in September 1994, the first seminar, "Fee for Service at the Art Libraries: Experience and Problems," was held. We agreed on a common approach to fee for service and did our best in working a general price list and other basic documents. It was very important to

compare different ideas of which particular aspects of library service should be executed on commercial grounds.

This is now a subject of everyone's concern; hence seminars turned out to be helpful and quite to the point. Among those who took part in them were librarians representing libraries, different in their status and their subordination.

Introducing a complex of paid services at libraries is a very delicate matter, demanding, first of all, changes in mentality as a whole. Most librarians, up to the latest moment, used to appreciate any attempt at receiving fees for any library service very negatively. Whereas libraries do have in their possession products of their own intellectual labour, bibliographic including, and on this base they can and must earn their own means.

Another example: it is already the second year now, that the project of corporative analytical description of art periodicals has been going on. For this purpose several practical meetings were organized and common principles of subject indices worked out. Among participants of this project are the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature (VGBIL), the Nekrasov Central City Public Library, and the Russian State Art Library. This year we were joined by research libraries of the All-Russian Museum Union "State Tretyakov Gallery," the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, the All-Russian Museum of Applied and Folk Arts.

The library-members of the art section have collected book-aid for our colleagues, working in regions affected by the Chernobyl catastrophe, for prisons, children's homes, etc. All members of the section participate in the programmes, "Acquisition through exchange" and "Books as gifts." They help significantly in acquisition not entirely at the libraries-members, but of regional libraries in Vladimir, Tver, Smolensk, Tyumen' regions as well.

For the purpose of skill improvement for librarians working at art libraries, a teaching seminar, held on the basis of exhibitions shown at the State Tretyakov Gallery, the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, The Museum of Applied and Folk Arts, the State Art Library, and the Ermolova's House-Museum also played a great role. It was decided at the Council of the section to develop its activity in 1999 mainly in the sphere of skill improvement, with increasing probation exchange (for one or two weeks) between the members of the association.

A special attention is to be paid to new forms of reference - informative work, in particular the one connected with electronic means, as well as to excursions about exhibitions, organised specially for children. An urgent need was discussed of involving the section of children's and youth libraries in this project.

There was another initiative, also accepted with great enthusiasm: the first joint exhibition, "Works of Art by the Librarians," organised at the State Art Library in honour of the All-Russian Library Day (May 29 - June 19, 1998). In December 1998, another joint exhibition took place, this time "Moscow outdoor merry-making," from the stocks of Moscow libraries, by members of the art section (also at the State art library).

One of the section sessions took place in Koktebel, at Voloshin's House-Museum. Its main subject was adaptation of museum and memorial libraries to new economic situation. Participants agreed on the vital necessity of assisting museum libraries in their joining the professional community. In the session there the IFLA First Vice-President, Vice-president of Russian Library Association, director general of VGBIL Ekaterina Genieva and Leo Vogt, IFLA General Secretary, took part, which made the whole event much more effective. Its main subject raised a heated discussion. An idea was declared to actively involve memorial and museum libraries in different projects and programmes: both those, that are realised now, and the ones, that might initiated in future.

As a result of this meeting new trends were introduced into 1999 plan: "Libraries in museums and museums in libraries", "Electronic publications at art libraries and art departments". In April this year another conference, dedicated to art CD was held, its subject being dictated by everyday needs of librarians and bibliographers.

Research libraries at museums are very different as far as their history is concerned, all of them possessing unique collections and powerful information potential. But forcedly they remain out of general trend in libraries' development - both professional and social.

The section succeeded in bringing new life to these oldest Russian libraries, involving them in the Library Association membership. Museum libraries eagerly joined all projects realised within the section, participating in book-exchange and assisting each other in the very complex situation of constant lack of acquisition funding.

Professional training of personnel remained another serious problem common for each art library: art scholars in Russia are as a rule not eager to work at libraries.

Ideal demands for library specialists at art libraries or art departments is combination of library and art education - alas, this is a dream, practically unachievable. Thus sometimes it takes ten years to educate such personnel for ourselves. Several years ago the Association held the first seminar, that took decisions of uninterrupted education for art librarians within programmes of the Art Libraries section of IFLA. Since that time this has become one of our constant

trends. The St. Petersburg branch of the section, attached to the Librarian society, held skill-improvement courses in art librarianship for museum personnel.

The Art libraries section of the Russian Library Association aims at joint working out common strategy of development, as well as solving concrete needs of libraries. Substantially, in fulfilling these aims, the section seeks to practically follow recommendations, declared in IFLA projects and programmes.

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