

# THE "UNION CATALOGUE FLORENCE-MUNICH-ROME"

THE GERMAN ART LIBRARIES NETWORK:  
FROM PILOT PROJECT TO ROUTINE PROCEDURE

Jan Simane – (*Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut*)

Imagine an ordinary everyday situation: somewhere (say, at your PC at home or the OPAC in a library), someone – let's call him 'the user' – sees a sober grey and white screen on which is written *Art Libraries Network Florence-Munich-Rome*, accompanied by a clearly designed 'input mask' in the centre. The user starts his research. He places his cursor into the search fields and types in names, keywords from titles of articles or books, works of art, places, subject headings, dates of exhibitions and auctions, combines these search terms in many different variations, sets time limits regarding the year of the publication or the period treated and gets a wide range of results. Various publications (monographs, exhibition catalogues, articles from periodicals or collected papers, reviews, auction sales catalogues) which are openly or covertly relevant to the search terms are presented in clearly arranged short title lists. He can select from this survey and look at the complete information data concerning the publication, including the collocation number. And in any particular case he can, by means of a simple click, order an electronic copy of the article to be sent to his work station within 24 hours.

There are hardly any limits to the user's inventiveness when it comes to developing his own search strategy. He may combine the name of an author with the name of an artist, or the location of an exhibition with a term from the title and he can limit the whole to a period of ten years. The name of a collector may lead him to a corresponding auction catalogue or he may look for relevant literature using a general term such as "self portrait". Beginning with the "hits" indicated he can click on to further bibliographical data (for example from an architectural object) to find literature that had hitherto been unknown to him. All this can be achieved within seconds by means of a few inputs on the keyboard. When compared to the work involved in searching for bibliographical references in traditional card catalogues he has saved an immense amount of time. He has not been limited by local or temporal access restrictions and in many cases has been able to achieve surprising results thanks to the provision of any number of cross-references to a range of information. All this is standard routine nowadays, something we take for granted. But the road to the stage where everything is taken for granted was wearisome and littered with imponderables.

## Between vision and scepticism

The decision by three German Art Libraries to establish an integrated digital cataloguing system was made at a time when electronic media played only a modest part in fine arts research. Yet, when the foundation stone for the Consortium was laid in 1994, there was a general conviction that data communication technology would provide the future basis for organising research in all areas of knowledge and also in the field of the humanities. An improvement in the quality of the information available and a range of rationalisation measures in the work process had proved their worth in the library world at both national and international level. Nonetheless the vision of combining the libraries of the *Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz* (Florence), the *Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte* (Munich) and the *Bibliotheca Hertziana* (Rome) into a consortium was very much a pilot project.

At the time a German network of catalogues in the field of art history was non-existent and the prospect of concentrating the bibliographical information on the holdings of the three most important German Art Research Libraries seemed tempting. Another important fact was that the project corresponded with a programme of the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft – DFG* (German Research Foundation). In 1972 the DFG had developed the idea of expanding the holdings of seven German art libraries along the lines of a single, decentralised German library for the history of art. The next step was to create a single, united catalogue of all these libraries and to make it swiftly and easily available to scholars. When the Consortium was set up in 1994 only three out of seven partners were ready to participate in the cooperative project. There were various reasons for this, including different local conditions, complications with regard to organisation and, not least, finance. In this context it is worth mentioning that it was only thanks to the support provided by the DFG that the project of setting up a Consortium became reality.

There were early difficulties, some of which were quite substantial. New forms of organising the work process and, above all, a consistent set of rules had to be established, and there were no existing models to provide an easy solution. The decision to set up an independent consortium was also greeted with the greatest possible scepticism, even at times with harsh

criticism, by the representatives of the great German library consortiums. Eccentricity, inexperience and unprofessional conduct were the main accusations put forward. The lack of personal and financial resources available to the three art libraries was seen as an additional problem. The representatives of the three libraries were unwavering in pointing out the particular special areas of their holdings and, consequently, the need for an adequate cataloguing system. They persisted in their intention to bring the project to fruition, with all the required professionalism, even under the prevailing conditions. The result was to justify their optimism even if the internal structuring of prospective co-operation was gruelling and sometimes frustratingly difficult. Even so, after two years preparatory work individual electronic cataloguing was introduced in 1996, and in 1997 full cooperation commenced.

The technical basis is the *Allegro* System of the University Library of Brunswick whose efficiency and flexibility remains most impressive even today. This project was the first occasion on which the *Allegro* system, a fascinating quasi single-handed development, was now to be used in a network of libraries. For the concept to work it was necessary to programme a network mechanism simulating an online status. In actual fact, however, it involves continuously matching the locally operated data bases of the three individual libraries in an off-line mode at a clock frequency of a few seconds. Today, after six years of continuous operation and co-operative development, the technical reliability as well as the consistency of the project, which has long become everyday routine, can be confirmed without reservation. Our efforts are now concentrated on developing the system even further to enable it to respond to new and future challenges.

### **The Consortium – a single mosaic in the network labyrinth of the information society**

The digitalisation of bibliographical information contained in traditional card catalogues was the first stage of the project and included existing measures to transfer the old catalogue material to new electronic databank structures ('retroconversion'). The next stage was to add further relevant sources of information. At the incipient stage of the Consortium cooperation it was not considered feasible to extend the bibliographical information available unless further partners could be brought in. But now that the tool of the virtual catalogue is an established fact the same effect can be attained by combining additional, independent sources to present the user with results derived from a unique and complex structure of invisible links. Consequently, the Consortium has played a substantial part in the development of the *Virtual catalogue of art history* (Virtueller Katalog

Kunstgeschichte – VKK). The VKK combines the data bases of the German Art History libraries supported by the DFG with those of the two specialist libraries responsible for art history (the Heidelberg University Library and the Saxon State Library, Dresden), as well as further national and international libraries covering art history and cultural history. Following the technical model of the Karlsruhe Virtual Catalogue (Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog – KVK), the VKK is on the way to establishing itself as the world's most important bibliographical research instrument for the history of art. The steady extension of the VKK is already well under way.

Using the concept of digitally conveyed bibliographical information the Consortium has laid the foundation for a complex network of relevant resources and services in the area of the history of art. The easy supply of documents is now everyday practice at the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, the Munich partner. The complete digitalisation of selected holdings of the three libraries is being prepared and the amalgamation of bibliographical information and digitalised images of the photo archives in all three institutes is scheduled for the near future. The greatest and probably the most important success of the Consortium is the dynamic boost it has given to the discipline of art history. As mentioned above, scholars and librarians at first viewed its development with curiosity and scepticism. Nonetheless over the course of time it has become an established model for a differentiated, scientifically proficient bibliographical information exchange. Furthermore the VKK – the virtual variant of the idea of the Consortium – is being enriched, both nationally and internationally, by the admission of more and more partners. It is now indisputably recognised as a basic instrument in art history and enjoys international recognition. The visions which existed at the start of the Consortium project have now been considerably surpassed by what is seen today as standard routine.

#### Websites:

Consortium Catalogue: [www.kubikat.org](http://www.kubikat.org)  
 Virtual Catalogue for Art History (VKK):  
[www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/vk\\_kunst.html](http://www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/vk_kunst.html)  
 Karlsruhe Virtual Catalogue (KVK):  
[www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/kvk.html](http://www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/kvk.html)

#### Further information on the Consortium Catalogue:

Records: ca. 250.000 monographs  
 ca. 200.000 articles (out of periodicals  
 and collecting papers)  
 ca. 10.000 auction sales catalogues  
 ca. 7.000 periodicals

*English version: Roy Kift, Kunst und Kultur  
 Übersetzungsdienst, Castrop Rauxel*