

THE SAD HISTORY OF THE ART LIBRARY AT THE NATIONALMUSEUM: A CASE STUDY

by Magdalena Gram

30 % of the 40 Swedish members of ARLIS/Norden are museum libraries. Half of these are dedicated art libraries situated in the two major cities of Stockholm and Gothenburg. Most of them serve their parent organization as well as external users. Foremost amongst them is the Art Library at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, a somewhat tarnished crown jewel among Swedish art libraries, whose ability to serve this dual public has had a fluctuating history.

1792-1866: establishing the Art Library at the Nationalmuseum

The Art Library's fame can be ascribed to the importance of its parent organization, founded in 1792 to fulfil the plans of the recently-murdered King Gustaf III to create a home for the royal art collections. Until the 1860s the Royal Museum shared accommodation with the Royal Library in the Royal Palace, and there was no separate art library, but 1866 saw the start of a new museum building and the foundation of a library for the Museum, with a very small core collection of reference books. At first little material was acquired, and the Museum staff had to use the art material in the Royal Library's collections for their research. Acquisition there was based on a memorandum signed in 1798 by the royal librarian, Pehr Malmström, who recommended that the library within 'the

Faculty of Arts' should collect everything relevant to the humanities represented in institutions in Stockholm.

By the time the Nationalmuseum opened in 1866 there had been a dramatic increase in publishing, including art books, and in London the South Kensington Museum made an attempt to survey the extent of this growth by involving art museums abroad in their *Universal Catalogue of Books on Art*. When in 1867 the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm was asked about Swedish literature published in this subject area, the head of the Museum asked the Royal Library for a list of the Swedish art books held. This underlines the extent to which the Nationalmuseum was still at this point reliant on the resources of the Royal Library.

The first statutes of the Nationalmuseum (1868) laid down that the chief assistant in the Department of Painting should be responsible for the department's book collection, which was still used almost exclusively by Museum staff. The situation gradually changed however when, at the turn of the century, history of art became an independent discipline with its own scholars. Already, in 1887, in the second volume of the official union catalogue of Swedish research libraries, the Nationalmuseum reported on its acquisitions of foreign art literature. From then on external users increasingly applied for admission to the book collection at the Museum, which continued to grow steadily.

At the same time a number of theories about art education began to be put into practice. In Sweden German influence was paramount, especially the ideas of the pioneer Alfred Lichtwark, head of the Hamburger Kunsthalle. Lichtwark's pedagogic approach also included a number of current ideas about the importance of libraries, and in Berlin the librarian at the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Peter Jessen, broke new ground by organizing the collections of books and prints into an art library which was open to the public.

1900-1920: development of the Library

In Sweden the artist Richard Bergh, in his role as head of the Nationalmuseum, became one of the most successful spokesman for education through art. He started his career at the Nationalmuseum in 1915, and immediately began to carry out a reform program which included almost every aspect of the Museum's work. Bergh regarded the art collections as belonging to the whole population, and believed that the Museum should make looking at art more fruitful for all groups of visitors. These visionary ideas were balanced by the realism of Karl Wåhlin, Bergh's reliable collaborator. Wåhlin, who shared his time between the Museum and his role as editor of the cultural periodical *Ord och Bild* (Word and Image), had already by 1908 published a proposal for the reorganization of the Nationalmuseum, which included an extension for the collections of crafts and the collections of modern art, as well as rooms for lectures and a library. The far-sightedness of these ideas made Wåhlin an ideal partner in discussions about the Museum, and he was very soon appointed as secretary of the Museum's board. In 1916 Wåhlin gradually retired from this arduous task, taking over the task of curating the book collection, which had since 1875 been one of the many responsibilities of Georg Göthe, head of the Department of Painting and Sculpture. With Göthe due to retire, the opportunity was taken for a re-think. For the next two years the Library's function was discussed actively, and Wåhlin drafted several reports and official letters which went out under Bergh's signature. In the official Museum report of 1916, Bergh called attention to the smallness of the book collection, compared to the 'other works of art' collected by the Museum and also to the quantity of literature being published. Next year he wrote in an official letter that the Library should not be the responsibility of a member of curatorial staff, and he accepted the consequences of expressing this opinion when Wåhlin, in the same year, was commissioned to take charge of the

book collections, the volumes of prints and photographs, and also supervision of the new cuttings collection.

At the Nationalmuseum a parallel process was going on. In 1916 Gregor Paulsson, a young member of staff who had studied at the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin, met Peter Jessen again in Stockholm. This contact resulted in a decision by the Museum's board in 1918 that all current issues of art journals should be made available to visitors in the collection of prints and drawings. The same year Paulsson reported on the organization of the collection of engravings, and referred to Peter Jessen's example, recommending closer co-ordination between the Museum library and the Department of Prints and Drawings. He completed his report with a rhetorical question about the Library: 'Should it be simply and solely a museum library which is also open to the public, or should it be a central resource for the history of art?' Paulsson himself felt no hesitation about the desirability of the latter alternative but his question, which illustrated very clearly the underlying conflict between two conceptions of the role of a museum library, was never answered by the Museum board.

Paulsson's radical thinking was not immediately followed up by Bergh and Wåhlin, who were concentrating on solving problems of space and of funding for acquisitions. During 1918 a room on the intermediate level and southwest corner of the Museum building was equipped and furnished as a separate library by the fashionable department store Nordiska Kompaniet (NK). Electricity was installed, but when the two separate collections of books were amalgamated, the space was almost immediately filled. Wåhlin was appointed 'librarian', his wife was temporarily employed as a professional cataloguer, and the Royal Library's rules for cataloguing and classifying were modified to suit the needs of the art material. But the new Library was not open to external visitors, who still had to pursue their studies in the adjacent Department of Prints and Drawings.

In 1919 Richard Bergh died, and although the reform process continued it did so at a less intensive pace.

1920-1940: opening to external visitors

The 1920s were characterized both by an increasing level of education among ordinary people and also by depression and unemployment. Libraries – especially public libraries – had increasing numbers of visitors, and art education was promoted by the Swedish government. On his appointment as head of the Nationalmuseum Axel Gauffin continued Richard Bergh's improvements. The Museum was modernized technically and lectures, concerts and exhibitions attracted more and more visitors.

Both library and archives were included in the Museum's new rules in 1921. The development of professional library routines continued, and Karl Wåhlin now had the assistance of a half-time colleague and a small staff of female volunteers. In 1923, at the request of the Museum's board, Wåhlin submitted a proposed set of library rules, probably based on a newly-revised instruction from the Royal Library, but adapted to the special circumstances at the Museum library. The rules, which were accepted by the Museum board, laid down that the library at the Nationalmuseum should primarily serve the staff of the Museum, and secondarily employees of other museums and well-known scholars living in Stockholm. The public at large was entitled to use the book collection for reference, while home loans were specified as a privilege only for the Museum's own staff.

Both Richard Bergh and Gregor Paulsson had wanted to see a certain administrative co-ordination between the Department of Prints and Drawings and the Library. This recommendation also was accepted, but it always proved problematic to draw a proper dividing line between the two

collections. The Museum's annual reports at the end of the 1920s also show competition for resources; whereas the book collection was by now efficiently catalogued and classified, the organization of the huge collections of prints and drawings was characterized by inadequate funding and a lack of knowledge about relevant methods.

When Karl Wåhlin retired in 1930, he was succeeded by one of his most capable assistants, Sia Pählman, who had just completed a basic library education. Cataloguing the Library had given her a thorough knowledge of its collections, and the information service she offered to users became famous.

1940-1960: the broadening of interest in art

During the Second World War people flocked to libraries, and a far greater interest in the fine arts developed. The huge evacuation of the collections carried out at the Nationalmuseum did not affect the Library, which again faced the problem of space for the ever-growing book collection.

The special situation of the Library and archives at the Nationalmuseum was made the subject of a thorough State audit. The secretary of this investigation, an employee at the Museum, recommended that the Library's remit be extended in line with Gregor Paulsson's earlier concept of a central resource library for the history of art. Unfortunately Sia Pählman was not consulted and this omission resulted in considerable mistrust on her side, as well as growing opposition to the secretary's underestimate of the consequences of such a move and the need the Library would have for radically improved resources. The conflict between the visionary ideas submitted in the final report and the librarian's sense of reality was suspended when the Museum board finally rejected the

proposals. This unfortunately also meant that the problems of the Museum library were never constructively discussed, let alone resolved.

Small improvements could, however, be noticed. In 1946 an assistant librarian, Gunhild Osterman, was recruited, allowing Sia Pählman to concentrate on the constantly growing task of acquisition. The Museum staff, including the small library staff of volunteers and assistants, was also for a short time strengthened by contributions from European refugees. Once the war was over, the opening of frontiers resulted in an intensified cultural exchange. Temporary exhibitions increased in number, often including loans from abroad. The growing number of catalogues produced resulted in an increase in the exchange of publications, and the Museum library was heavily involved in this process of internationalisation.

In 1958 the Museum of Modern Art was opened in a restored building on Skeppsholmen, ten minutes walk from the Nationalmuseum, whose library was expected to serve this new institution as well. In the same year Sia Pählman was succeeded by Gunhild Osterman, who was appointed 'first librarian'. Finally external readers, now frequently to be found in the overcrowded Library, were provided with a special reading-room. Volunteers were gradually replaced with assistants paid by the Labour Market Board. In 1959 the Library, in co-operation with the University of Gothenburg, started constructing the *Svensk konsthistorisk bibliografi* (Bibliography of Swedish Literature on the History of Art), and took part in this project until the beginning of the 1970s.

1960-1990 : the decades of students and an expanding art market

Growth in the numbers of art books published produced new demands on the Museum library. The acquisitions grant increased gradually during the 1960s, and new technical equipment for book

storage was introduced. In 1965 Sia Pählman retired and Yvonne Frenzel was recruited as the new assistant librarian, subsequently becoming head of the Library when Gunhild Osterman retired in 1974. The entire staff now comprised eight people, six of them without library qualifications.

In Sweden, as in most European countries during the 1960s, undergraduate studies expanded, and large numbers of students began to seek relevant library provision. New university libraries were gradually built, and old museum libraries such as the Kunstbibliothek Berlin and the National Art Library in London went through crises leading to radical change. In Stockholm a new university library opened in 1970, which was largely made up of several smaller faculty and institution libraries. Art history, however, suffered from a very underdeveloped profile in the new university library collections, and students became used to relying upon the resources of the Royal Library and the Library at the Nationalmuseum.

Work in the Nationalmuseum Library continued in the traditional way, the lack of change leading to a stagnation commented upon in several official investigations and reports. Not until the beginning of the 1980s, however, was there an opportunity for change. Just before Yvonne Frenzel's retirement a new, relatively young professional librarian, Inger Fredriksson, was recruited. Her background was a doctorate in the history of art, a library education, practical experience within the public library sector and specialization in public relations. While Fredriksson was being trained by Frenzel, preparations were made for the removal of the Library to rooms in a newly-restored building next to the Museum. In 1984 the Library transferred to this new space and, at the same time, changed its name to Konstbiblioteket (The Art Library). This change marked a new epoch for the Museum library, which extended its opening to the public and came into line with modern library developments, as was clearly shown when the Library joined LIBRIS, the library information system for Swedish research libraries. This initiative was regarded with suspicion by several members of Museum staff,

and even more irritation was caused by the increasing number of Library employees and by Inger Fredriksson's public relations. And the increasing numbers of external users caused particular criticism. Within a year these had almost doubled and home loans to external users had increased from 3,000 – half of them to Museum employees – to 6,300 volumes, only 800 of them to Museum staff.

In fact the Library's connection to LIBRIS was a logical consequence of its earlier participation in the official union catalogue, and the antagonism this provoked was due to the fact that computerization was almost completely foreign to most of the Museum staff. The increase in Library staff was marginal and unfortunately did not reflect any growth in the numbers of professionally-qualified librarians. But it is certainly true that external visitors outnumbered internal users, resulting in a decline in service to Museum staff.

Criticism grew steadily, and in 1986 an acute crisis blew up between the chief librarian – a title introduced when Inger Fredriksson was appointed head of the Library – and the head of the Museum. To improve relations between the Library and its parent organization a special Library committee was established, but the conditions for dialogue were already spoiled. Without consulting the Library staff – which was now ideologically and emotionally split – the head of the Museum reminded them of the 1923 Library regulations and, as the next step, decreed strict new rules for loans to external users. The chief librarian and the members of staff loyal to her objected and Inger Fredriksson delivered an ultimatum: if the new rules were accepted by the Museum board, she would resign.

The board approved the new rules – home loans only to staff members, advanced scholars and, in addition, artists – and Inger Fredriksson carried out her decision to leave. Three other Library employees followed her, two other people subsequently left because of serious illness, partially

provoked by the conflict. Encouraged by Fredriksson and her adherents, several Swedish newspapers wrote about the 'scandal', portraying the head of the Museum as an arrogant anti-democrat, and the chief librarian as a heroine.

The consequences for the remaining members of Library staff were tough, since they were left with the task of informing visitors about the new, hastily-formulated rules. The first year after the crisis saw mainly provisional arrangements, and not until a year later was Marianne Sandels appointed as the new chief librarian. Inger Fredriksson's fighting spirit was now replaced by gentle diplomacy, and also by a discreet retrogression, caused by a reorganization which, on the Library's part, implied subordination to a small and provisional department of the Director's office. After seven difficult years Sandels decided to retire and devote her time to literary interests.

Conclusion

The Library's subsequent development lies beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, however, a provisional interregnum followed, coinciding with the total reorganization of the Museum. The Library struggled for professionalization and the formulation of objectives, but these efforts ended in defeat when a new structure was introduced in autumn 1997. The Museum was divided into two large departments, one for the collections, the other for their mediation. Like other existing departments, the Library lost its chief function and was incorporated into the second of these. Its ability to carry out its special role and duties was now effectively blocked.

The history of the Art Library, formerly the library of the Nationalmuseum, raises several questions. The size of the Library's collections – about 350,000 volumes – is comparable with those at the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin, the third biggest art library in the world. Consequently, the Art Library in Stockholm must be regarded as a national resource of great value and also one which should be of

concern to politicians responsible for the rational use of library resources. Unfortunately the organization of Swedish libraries is not characterized by planned co-ordination of the special libraries within the humanities. The parent institution is expected to show praiseworthy initiative in opening the Library to the public, but this expectation seems remote from the realities of museum life. Swedish museums are unable to rely on the type of sponsorship common in the Anglo-Saxon world and, in a poor economic situation, are increasingly exhorted by the Ministry to find their own funding. As libraries are rarely gold-mines, the results are extremely discouraging for those which belong to museums.

The best that can be said at present is that several large museum library collections will be under-utilized and will probably as a consequence be saved for future generations. As a case study in state economics, the Art Library can only appear as an example of failure, which should stir up any citizen who expects politicians to promote methodical investment and logical decision-making.

Internal criticism about the present management of the Museum has been fierce and there are clear signs that there will shortly be new developments. My own hope is that an informed dialogue will be enabled to take place between the Library, the Museum management and the politicians. A museum is part of society, a society made up of people, and a museum library will therefore always have dual loyalties. It is urgent that the parties involved find the optimum solution to this predicament. And it must be emphasized that there is not just one single solution but a whole range of solutions, which need to reflect the fact that a museum library's strongest resources are its collections and its professional competence.

References

1. This article is a short extract from a longer text by Magdalena Gram about the Art Library, *Nationalmusei bibliotek: en krönika och en fallstudie*, which will be published as vol. 18 in the series *Skrifter från Valfrid* by the Swedish School of Library and Information Studies (Bibliotekshögskolan/Biblioteks- och informationsvetenskap) in 2000. (ISBN 91-973090-8-7, ISSN 1103-6990). Apart from a short essay by Sia Pählman ('Nationalmusei bibliotek'. *Biblioteksbladet* 33 1948, p.158-161), and one by Yvonne Frenzel about the old Library room ('Historien om ett rum'. *Nationalmuseum bulletin* 8 1984, p.92-96), there is almost no literature about the Library. The most important sources can be found in the Museum archive at the Nationalmuseum and the Library archive at the Royal Library (Kungliga biblioteket).

Magdalena Gram

Head of Section of Maps, Pictures and Printed Music

Kungliga Biblioteket/Sveriges nationalbibliotek

Box 5039

S-102 41 Stockholm

Sweden

