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10th and 25th anniversary of OKBN * ARLIS/NL

The consortium Overleg Kunst(historische) Bibliotheken Nederland * Art Libraries Society / The Netherlands (OKBN * ARLIS/NL) brings together librarians and subject-specialists working in Dutch libraries of museums, universities and research institutions. On 14 December 2007 OKBN celebrated the society's 10th anniversary as a formal body, and its even longer existence as an informal consultative body. On this day OKBN launched the festschrift *Kunstabibliotheken in Nederland. Tien korte schetsen* (Art libraries in the Netherlands: Ten brief sketches). The theme of this publication is the history of the Dutch art libraries for the first time described in a systematic manner by ten fascinating contributions. The publication was presented to Prof dr. Rudi Ekkart, director of the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History).

OKBN has a long and varied history. Already in 1949 Dutch art librarians met to share their concern about the availability of art historical publications in post-war Netherlands. From 1982 onwards their successors organised regular meetings and visits to the various participating institutions. In 1995 it was decided to transform this informal consortium into an official, registered association, which came into being in February 1996. The first general meeting took place a year later in the Amsterdam Historical Museum. Presently, the society has close to 70 members. The characters of the participating institutions diverge widely. They include purely academic and research libraries, museum libraries of various sizes and specialization, the libraries of some academies of art and schools of architecture and design, and those of some other insti-

tutions that have for various reasons built up a specialized collection in the field.

OKBN's status as a legal entity gave it a stronger juridical and administrative basis for realising its goals. These vary from practical matters related to acquisition, cataloguing and shelving, to more fundamental issues such as the library's position within an organisation. The challenges of automation and the opportunities of the digital era run throughout OKBN's history. One constant aim of OKBN is to offer an accurate overview of location, size and nature of collections of art historical documentation in the Netherlands. The society also defends the interests of the art history libraries and librarians in the case of threats. Very successful was the interference of the society with the impending closure of the library of the Nederlands Openlucht Museum (Dutch Open-air Museum) in 2002.

An important objective of the society is to cooperate with national library institutions and organisations and it has maintained international relations since its infancy. At the first European conference of the IFLA Section of Art Libraries in Geneva in 1984 it was decided that OKBN would organize the next conference. This conference was dedicated to art periodicals and OKBN managed to publish its proceedings. In connection with this conference OKBN was invited by *Art Libraries Journal* to provide copy for a special issue on Dutch art libraries, which appeared in the spring of 1987. Maggy Wishaupt (librarian at the Royal Library) was a member of the standing committee of the IFLA Section of Art Libraries (1987–1995). Between 1989–1993 she was the president of the committee.



From left to right: Maggy Wishaupt, Geert-Jan Koot, Kees Kok, Rudi Ekkart and Michiel Nijhoff.



Members of OKBN during the tour through the port of Rotterdam.
Photos: Chris Smeenk and Martien Versteeg

She was succeeded by Geert-Jan Koot (head of the Rijksmuseum Research Library) who became secretary of the committee and editor of the *Newsletter*. The current chairman of OKBN, Michiel Nijhoff (head of the library of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and chairman of OKBN since 2000), was a member of the Art Section of IFLA. In 1998 IFLA held its annual congress in Amsterdam. OKBN organised a special programme for and in cooperation with the Art Libraries Section of IFLA, which included a reception, an open session and a workshop in the Rijksmuseum. The trip to Amsterdam and The Hague was also prepared and supervised by members of OKBN. In addition, *Art Libraries Journal* devoted almost a whole issue to the situation in the Netherlands.

Once a year the OKBN organizes a seminar on current topics related to the field of art libraries. The symposium in 2005 about art historical digital images and the one in 2006, on marketing, were very successful.

Many non-members also attended these symposiums. Naturally the 2007 seminar was focused on the 10th and 25th anniversary of OKBN. In the morning four speakers talked about the past, present and future of the OKBN and the Dutch art libraries. The first contribution was made by Rudi Ekkart. He sketched the multifaceted and qualitatively rich landscape of art history libraries in the Netherlands. Altogether, the Netherlands has more than 50 specialised art (history) libraries, varying from large institutions such as the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History) and the Rijksmuseum Research Library to small, specialised ones like those at The the Princessehof, the National Museum of Ceramics in Leeuwarden or the Nederlands Fotomuseum (Dutch Museum for Photography) in Rotterdam. All these libraries have their regular visitors, but are often unknown to the public at large. The ambition of most librarians to attract more visitors is modest, for they often find themselves constrained

by limited personnel and space. In her contribution Maggy Wishaupt shared her memories of the early days of OKBN. Geert-Jan Koot pleaded for more (international) exposure of OKBN and cooperation with comparable organizations. The only non art librarian, Kees Kok, described the problems that the association of educational media centres LWSVO had experienced as an independent association. Just after its 25th anniversary Kok was involved in the merger of this professional association with the Dutch Association for Library, Information and Knowledge Professionals (NVB).

Michiel Nijhoff introduced the speakers with great humour and placed their contributions in a larger context. But at the sametime he stressed that visibility and legitimacy of its members are major concerns of OKBN. Modesty of OKBN's members is apparent in the virtual lack of recorded histories of these institutions. Aside from a significant number of smaller occasional publications,



Frontcover of *Kunstabibliotheken in Nederland: Tien korte schetsen*.

the bibliography on the history of art librarianship in the Netherlands that the OKBN began compiling a few years ago includes only a few substantial publications. For many libraries, little more is known than what the present or previous librarian can still recall. To change this situation the OKBN decided to compile *Kunstabibliotheken in Nederland. Tien korte schetsen*. This richly illustrated publication highlights the history of several important art libraries. The editors, Roman Koot, Michiel Nijhoff and Saskia Scheltjens, tried to arrive at a representative selection of articles covering equally: types of institution, collecting area and size. *Kunstabibliotheken in Nederland* comprises portraits of the libraries of the following institutes: the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten (Mariëtta Dirker), Rijksmuseum (Geert-Jan Koot), Art History Institute of Utrecht University (Roman Koot), Amsterdam University Art History Institute (Martien Versteeg), RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History) (Rudi Ekkart and

Goos Dullaart), Van Abbe museum (Diana Franssen), Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (Michiel Nijhoff), Boekman Foundation (Saskia Leefsma), Van Gogh Museum (Anita Vriend) and the Netherlands Architectural Institute Nai (Petra van der Ree). The authors outline the often complex history of their libraries and some unique and some still undiscovered, collections. They treat a wide variety of subjects, such as the library's policy, collection, housing, personnel and persons of particular importance, the role of the library within the organisation, the library users, digitalisation and automation, future plans, etc.

By limiting the number to ten, more than forty art libraries fell by the wayside. Unfortunately, various important as well as historically interesting libraries, for instance that of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, are missing. Hopefully, this book will stimulate additional research and more publications on art libraries. As it postulates, art historical research and museum practices in the Netherlands would never have reached their present high level without these libraries, their collections and their librarians. The ten portraits are preceded by a concise description of the society's history and activities. From this description it appears that in the past the OKBN kept to itself despite initiatives to attract data processors from a field wider than that of art historical libraries collaboration with registrars in museums, united in the SIMIN, has always remained limited.

In the afternoon we enjoyed a trip through the port of Rotterdam, one of the largest ports in the world. After the lunch we visited the new home of the Nederlands Fotomuseum

(Dutch Museum for Photography) in the renovated Las Palmas building. We visited the library, the exhibition room and the storage spaces for the photographic negatives. Although it was rather cold in these depots, it didn't reduce our ambition to enter the next 25 years with a broader vision, which Geert-Jan Koot advocated in his presentation. After all, many of the new developments are taking place in sectors other than that of art history libraries.

Kunstabibliotheken in Nederland. Tien korte schetsen

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ROMAN KOOT, MICHIEL NIJHOFF
AND MARTIEN VERSTEEG.