

Collections, Connections, and Cooperation: the IRIS Consortium and Art Libraries in Tuscany

Florence, in Italian called, “una città d’arte”, and, more broadly, Tuscany are both geographic areas exceedingly rich in bibliographic resources in support of research in art history. These bibliographic resources are diverse in nature: public, and private, large and small, ranging from the patrimonies of many types of museums, research institutes, foundations, religious entities, and centers of research of prestigious foreign universities. As with any cultural resource, they also range from the the well-endowed, well-connected, and well-known to those rather less, of great potential interest and use to scholars of art history (their collections), but held back, isolated by lack of technical connections and cooperative contacts. What can the IRIS Consortium provide to act as a “discovery tool” for these unique patrimonies?

This paper will examine the evolving role of the IRIS Consortium of Art History and Humanities Libraries in Florence, and why, because of this “evolution”, its name will probably need to change to better describe its ongoing activity.

The IRIS Consortium, 1993-2009

First, a brief description of its beginnings in 1993 with the commitment to cooperation in the formation of a union catalog: with four founding members, the Biblioteca Berenson (Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies), the library of the Dutch University Institute for Art History, the library of the Uffizi (Soprintendenza Speciale per il Patrimonio Storico, Artistico ed Etnoantropologico e per il Polo Museale della città di Firenze), and the library of the Fondazione di Studi della Storia dell'Arte Roberto Longhi. A generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation assured the project was off to a sound start. The emphasis at the time was obviously on art history, and more particularly on Renaissance art. Joining the founding libraries successively was the library of the Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento (1997), with its contribution of in-depth holdings in the areas of Renaissance history, philosophy, literature, theology, political thought and science. Arriving in 1999 the «Ugo Procacci» Library of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, the national and international-level laboratory and school for conservation and restoration of art objects, added the dimension of its patrimony of scientific literature in support of its mission. Joining in 2003 the library of the Università Internazionale dell'Arte brought to the union catalog its small but focused library concentrated on museology. Reaching beyond the confines of Florence, in 2007 the Leonardiana Library at Vinci joined the

consortium as a full partner. (More will be said about this unique resource later in this paper).

The initial decision to create a “union” or shared catalog proved a positive one for a number of important reasons. The end-user consulting the catalog can locate a title held by one or more of the participating libraries and pinpoint its exact location, including its call number and any copy-level details. For the cataloging staff of the IRIS libraries the bibliographic record once derived or created originally can be used by all partners, resulting in a notable savings of time and money.

In 2001 international recognition was accorded to the IRIS Consortium as it accepted an invitation to join Artlibraries.net, the Virtual Catalogue for Art History, formerly VKK, initiated in 1999. A major European online resource, available on the Internet, it provides integrated access to a significant and growing number of art history databases both European and international. The IRIS Consortium shares with other members of this cooperative effort the aim of open access to scholarly information, viewing Artlibraries.net as a fundamental means to the realization of that goal.

In the autumn of 2005, with the major portion of each library’s retrospective conversion completed, the long-awaited and much needed authority control project was begun. This time IRIS was the beneficiary of generous funding from one of the most important Florentine banks,

the Ente Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, to cover the project's expenses. A highly qualified service, Library Technologies, Inc. was engaged to link the catalog's indexed headings for names, subjects and uniform titles to authority records coming from the massive Library of Congress Authority File. Their work pushed the database headings to 97% linkage, providing IRIS with a file of more than 123,000 name, title and subject authority records. From that initial project of "authorizing" the indexes, authority work became an integral part of the IRIS catalogers' work. It must also be pointed out that the ILS software in use, Aleph 500, soon to become Version 20, provides in its Authority Module the possibility to create as necessary "local" authority records of potential interest to established entities such as the LC Authority File. Since 2006, and thanks to the daily participation of the team of IRIS catalogers, over 4,000 additional authority records, downloaded from the LCAF or created locally have been added to the IRIS catalog authority file.

I would like to pause here briefly to focus on two of the retrospective conversion projects currently underway in the IRIS catalog. It gives me much pleasure to report that the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi is in the process of systematically adding its holdings to the IRIS union catalog. While part of the Polo Museale Fiorentino network, its mission and specialization are quite distinct: a patrimony of literature focused on prints and drawings from earliest periods to graphic artists currently at

work. The collection includes materials from all over the world, while, naturally, it is particularly rich in representing Italian graphic artists. The challenge for the librarian in charge of this project was to transform the library from one of primarily internal use to one which would need to meet the research requirements of visiting scholars and students from all over the world. A reorganization and reclassification was studied and realized. Original cataloging is currently producing many, many new titles in the area of material on prints and drawings. The consequent enrichment of the IRIS union catalog is obvious.

The project to integrate the bibliographic holdings of the Leonardiana Library at Vinci is also well-underway. With its mission of collecting and cataloging materials relating to the life and works of Leonardo in all formats and languages, it needed a database capable of dealing with this extremely detailed material. The IRIS union catalog was chosen as a “host” capable of integrating and managing the information which the Library desired to make available to scholars from all over the world. Numerous summary notes and content analysis notes regarding Leonardo will be searchable and recoverable. Again, a notable enrichment of the IRIS catalog.

The IRIS Consortium, 2009, enhancing collections, providing connections, developing cooperation in Florence and in Tuscany

With generous funding from the Ente Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, a project has begun to convert the library of the Fondazione Casa Buonarroti, whose patrimony includes important material from the library of the late Charles De Tolnay, distinguished Michelangelo scholar. This notable sector of the library dedicated to all aspects of Michelangelo's life and work has been added to the IRIS union catalog, enhancing the bibliographic holdings regarding this preeminent artist of the Italian Renaissance.

Reaching beyond the walls of Florence to Vinci, Italy, as I have already described in some detail, the arrival of the Leonardiana Library, internationally renowned for its exhaustive bibliography devoted to all aspects of the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci, will enrich the content of the union catalog with information regarding once again a central figure of Italian Renaissance art.

The IRIS Consortium will also bring online the library of University of Florence Prof. Alessandro Guidotti, his precious gift to the beautiful, 11th century Badia a Settimo, located in the town of Scandicci, Florence. The addition of its more than 30,000 titles will add notable depth in the areas of art, decorative arts, and the history of medieval Italy. As a collateral benefit, the library's presence within the Badia, and its availability online in the IRIS catalog represents an occasion to establish

a commodious study center for scholars and university students of the Scandicci metropolitan area.

Now let's have a look into the future:

The IRIS Consortium proposes to be the online site most indicated for hosting the presence of specialized art history collections in Florence, and beyond its confines, in Tuscany. The library of the Uffizi and the library of the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe are to name only two of the renowned resources located within the network of the Florentine Polo Museale which includes the libraries of the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, the Galleria dell'Accademia, and other specialized libraries located within Palazzo Pitti, to name several, the Galleria Palatina, the Galleria d'Arte Moderna, and the Galleria del Costume. I am able to confirm the very recent development that two of these, the Galleria d'Arte Moderna and the Galleria del Costume will begin, in the new year, adding their holdings to the IRIS union catalog.

With regard to those libraries born "private", the Italian word "collezionismo" has a particularly significant meaning in the context of art history scholarship. The figures of famous collectors/scholars/professors have had a notable impact on the "landscape", so to speak, of art history research in a number of cases.

The IRIS consortium has since its beginnings recognized the importance of the bibliographic patrimonies of these figures, both Italian, as was Roberto Longhi, collector, scholar and professor, whose private library is a founding partner, and foreign, as was Bernard Berenson, whose private library again was among the four original members. Continuing, but by no means exhausting the list of “*collezionisti studiosi*” one must also include the private libraries of the Museo Horne, the patrimony of Herbert P. Horne (1864-1916), and the library of the Museo Stibbert, the bibliographic patrimony of Frederick Stibbert (1838-1906). As did Longhi and Berenson, these two important figures willed to future generations of scholars not only their art collections, but also their libraries, an essential key to the study and analysis of art history in context. The generous gifts of these Florentine “citizens by adoption” would also add a new dimension of research into the social history of the periods in which they lived.

I would also like to introduce this audience to some thoughts about additional future projects by speaking briefly about the archival collections and photographic archives residing in each of the IRIS libraries.

What role can the IRIS consortium catalog have as a vehicle of “resource discovery”, connecting materials; obviously unique by definition, and of great potential interest, to scholars not only of art history, but also to

those engaged in related interdisciplinary studies? One first step: thanks to an initiative well underway in the Fototeca of the Berenson Library, the IRIS union catalog now hosts more than 250 “artist files”, collection-level records which give the end-user a brief but informative *entree* into the photographs connected with the artist in question. This figure represents a “work in progress”; as they are readied additional artist file records will be added to the IRIS catalog. Also resulting from archival work at the Berenson Library collection level records representing a growing number of their archival resources which will soon be appearing in the IRIS union catalog. In the future both types of records could serve as models, prototypes, infinitely flexible and modifiable, adjusted to the subject matter, organization, and dimensions of each resource to provide a preliminary guide, or “discovery tool” for access to collections of this exceedingly specialized material.

To conclude:

What has been described in this brief paper is presented as an occasion for art libraries both in Florence and beyond in Tuscany to evaluate the advantages of joining a project whose union catalog is a recognized and highly regarded tool for research in art history and related disciplines.

We look forward with enthusiasm to welcoming new library partners in this collaboratively promising environment.

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