

The Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz

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It is rather uncommon to maintain a research institute for art history abroad. First of all, because culture and art can be distinguished by their national identity and therefore they are regarded as an achievement of a particular nation. The second and probably more important reason is that every nation needs to set up its own appropriate institutions, like museums, archives, libraries, universities and so on. All those institutions, once founded, still today are supported in order to preserve the ensemble of national cultural heritage and to extend the knowledge in this field by promoting scholarly research. However, the case of the Kunsthistorisches Institut is different: it is a German institution in Italy, it was founded primarily by German scholars, its financing is based on German public money and its staff consists predominantly of German scholars; and this will remain unchanged, even in the era of globalisation, international cooperation and borderless communication in supranational networks. This situation becomes even more curious if one takes into account, that there are other German research institutes in Italy, like the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, the art historical sister institution of the Florentine Institute, or the German Historical Institute and the German Archaeological Institute, both in Rome. How can this particular situation be explained?

Let me first describe what the Kunsthistorisches Institut is today. It is a laboratory for basic research in the field of Italian art history. Basic research essentially means the analytic study of sources and their interpretation in historical, social, political as well as aesthetical, philosophical and cognitive contexts. Sources for art historians are, first and foremost, works of art and artefacts, but also documents, images, all kinds of scripture and archive material. Since Florence is one of the most important centres of Italian art the conditions for the study of sources are excellent, thanks to a high number of museums, collections, archives and historical libraries. The access to these locally bounded institutions and the study of the sources is one aspect of research activity, outside of the Institute. The other aspect is their analysis and contextualization with the indispensable help of a research library and a photographic archive, both offered to an

international community of scholars by the Kunsthistorisches Institut. In fact, the library and the image archive are the two central columns on which the Institute was founded more than one hundred years ago. Their outstanding collections of books, journals, catalogues and photographs are complements to the extraordinary richness and importance of the sources not only in Florence but on the whole Italian peninsula. So far, we have no difficulties explaining, why the Institute was founded in Florence and why it will be necessary here also in the future. But this is only one aspect. Beside the 'service' that we are able to offer, we primarily concentrate on our own scholarly research. Currently the staff comprises about 50 scholars, 13 doctorate students, 7 postdoc fellows and ca. 10 guest scholars, that means 80 researchers. They are all working on their own individual as well as on Institute's projects for either shorter or longer periods. The research program as a whole covers – chronologically – the art history from the late antiquity to the present and – geographically – the whole Mediterranean area with Italy as its centre of course, its artistic and cultural relationships to European countries like the Netherlands, Spain, Germany and France, to mention only a few, as well as its connections and the cultural transfer with other continents as for example Asia or South America. The spectrum of subjects, problems and methods is extremely manifold. About 170 different research projects are listed in the last report of the Institute for the years 2006-2008. Their common denominator is the Italian art. This sounds very simple, but is in fact a rather complex situation. Italian art and culture has never been a national phenomenon only. The geographical location of the peninsula and the widespread routes of Italian merchants created over the centuries a permanent exchange not only of goods or objects and persons, but also of ideas. The influence of this cultural transfer is visible in many works of art and architecture in Italy on the one hand and in Mediterranean cities or even in India or Mexico on the other. Consequently the research on Italian art has to consider this important aspect previously almost completely ignored. This fact in mind, the leading scholars of the Kunsthistorisches Institut changed its research policy radically some years ago and transformed it to an avant-garde institution moving on the path towards a global art history. But it is not the geographical extension only. Also in methodological respect the research activity tends towards a wide-spread network of relationships with other disciplines and phenomena like for instance the relationship of art and sciences and the problem of knowledge in its historical dependence. Interdisciplinarity is one of the main topics of the research activity of the Institute. The result is a series of co-operations with different institutions and scholars on an institutional as well as on an

individual level. Indeed, the Institute's research activity covers topics and questions, which go far beyond the Florentine or central Italian art and culture. The reason for that is definitely not a loss or a denial of the Institute's original foundation concept from the end of the nineteenth century. It rather mirrors the tendency of a consequent further development towards an art history capable to broaden its horizon and to discover new dimensions. However, the initial question of my speech, why such an Institute was founded and has been maintained for more the 110 years by Germans remained unanswered. A short look at the foundation's circumstances may help us to understand.

The initiative for the foundation of the first German institute for art history outside Germany in 1897 was based on the idea of creating a platform for research in Florence, the birthplace of the admired Renaissance art and culture. Interest in Renaissance art and culture was particularly high in Germany at the end of the 19th century. This seems to be not least down to the fact that this example provided a model for the young German nation in search of its own cultural identity. The leading personalities amongst the Institute's promoters never tired of underlining the importance of a profound knowledge and understanding of Italian Renaissance art as a key to defining the appropriate standards for German national art. This, combined with admiration and love for Florence as one of the most fascinating Italian cities, provoked a substantial immigration of foreign scholars, intellectuals and art lovers, many of them from Germany, who started to study the works of art, to consult the local archives and to visit museums and private collections. A library and a photographic archive were seen as the tools which were needed to complement this new activity in the old Renaissance town. Renaissance was considered to be a peaceful revolution which gave birth to the modern human being by setting fundamentals for the culture and civilization of the late 19th Century. The main destination of the many travels, which Germans have made for centuries to Italy, was now Florence, the centre of Renaissance art and culture. In order to define the appropriate standards for a national German art, the founders of the Institute fairly agreed about the idea that German art history has to be in permanent contact with Italian Renaissance art. The Italian Renaissance was considered to be much more than a local or national phenomenon; it was believed to be *the* fundamental cultural breakthrough in modern times. Certainly, the emphasis on Renaissance art and culture was very strong, but at the same time it was a short-lived motor in the Institute's initial history. Soon, the importance of medieval art in Florence was recognized too and even more recent time periods from the 19th and early 20th centuries became matters

of interest over the years. Today, as we have seen before, the institute's activities are performed on a multidisciplinary level and reached a more or less global dimension. However, the original idea of creating a scientifically-profiled platform for research and study as well as a meeting place for scholars from all nations is still valid today.

What does all this mean for the library?

Since the creation of a library and of a photographic archive was the fundamental idea for the foundation of the institute, from the very beginning the library occupied a central position in all considerations and planning activities. The goal was defined, but its realization was more difficult. Most of the books which came into the library in the first years were donations. Thus the profile of the collection was decisively determined by the selection of books given by the donators. Nevertheless, a sort of acquisition policy is recognizable too. With a very modest budget a collection of monographs on Italian artists, topographical works and museum catalogues were acquired from the local Florentine booksellers. For decades there was a clear concentration on central and north Italian art and, as explained before, the culture of the Renaissance. But even if Renaissance art was of outstanding interest, the spectrum of subjects in the new library went far beyond. And obviously also literary sources were purchased from the beginning. One must also take into consideration the formative influence of new methods of art historical research. Aby Warburg, one of the outstanding figures in the Institute's initial period, was the first prominent advocate of iconography as a new method for interpreting art. The parallel analysis of works of art and literary sources soon became a standard in art history and made it necessary to make accessible a vast collection of this kind of literature in a modern art library. Consequently, the new library was, right from the beginning, much more than a specialized collection of literature on Florentine Renaissance art. In fact, it has been ever since a library for Italian art as a whole, covering the vast period from post-antiquity to present times, with all its various facets and manifold connections to other adjoining disciplines, epochs and countries.

Apart from the profile of the library's collection, there is a characteristic of the strong connection between Institute and library which has remained valid until today. The Institute was intended, as expressed in a memorandum of 1899, to promote and support research, facilitating the activities of scholars and connoisseurs by offering tools of high quality. As far back as the annual report of 1904/05 the systematic

arrangement of the library in a rather uncommon open shelves system was emphasized as a remarkable quality that, while obviously not automatically expected, was highly esteemed by the users. The library was not only an archive of literature but served also as a tool for finding unknown sources and additional information as well. Today, more than hundred years later, the readers often confirm that this major advantage is still valid, despite the greatly expanded holdings and the complexity of modern academic literature.

However, for almost 100 years, the library's existence was dedicated more or less completely to the Institute's research activity – undoubtedly on an excellent level – but rather resistant to external cooperation and networking. Only in the early nineties of the last Century this perspective needed a profound modification, not in respect of the quality of the library but regarding its almost completely isolated existence. The further development of the library during the fifteen years was deeply influenced by the achievements of modern librarianship: today we are aware about the fact that scientific information is not necessarily bound to the traditional medium of the book and that modern libraries accomplish their tasks only by collaborating with other libraries and institutions in a large network. And this, first of all, is the point of divergence between tradition and future. The foundation in 1994-96 of a consortium of the libraries of the three leading German research institutes for art history – the above mentioned Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome, the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence – was probably the most radical but at the same time the most indispensable reform, not only for the Florentine but for all three libraries.

The most important innovation was the transition from traditional cataloguing to data technology and a new method of organizing bibliographic routines (cataloguing and indexing) in a network of the three geographically separated libraries. A united worldwide available online catalogue as well as the rationalisation of cataloguing routines are the most visible results of the reform. Against some initial misgivings, the three libraries did not lose their traditional identity as local centres of high-profile research. The new tools rather help and offer guidance to the scholars of orientation within the still excellent and constantly growing holdings much more effectively than before. Furthermore, the catalogue of the consortium also provides bibliographical information of high importance, in such a way as to support the scientific work of the

whole community of art historians far beyond the basic concern of being a library catalogue. First of all, the co-operative indexing of more than 700 international periodicals improved navigation in art historical literature to a degree previously unknown. Today the online catalogue contains more than 1.5 million bibliographic records, including entries for some 700,000 articles published in periodicals. But this is not enough for us. The consortium is very much involved in networking in two directions. On the one hand through integrating its own catalogue in national and international bibliographic data bases. On the other hand through implementing additional information and digital sources into its own search interface. Thus, the catalogue actually plays a major role and distinguishes itself by a higher quality than in the past. In this respect, the library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut is now fully integrated in the global development as well as in the international network of modern librarianship.

Furthermore, the library is also active in a rather experimental area. Let me illustrate this with an example – the digital collection of Florentine coats of arms and its innovative feature for an image based search. We are in possession of a collection of some 2,800 colour drawings of Florentine coats of arms. The drawings, created by an anonymous draftsman of the 19th century, were acquired in 1901 and it has become an important instrument of reference. For this reason, the library decided to digitise this collection and make it accessible on the Web. To support the traditional access on this content, it was necessary to digitise the drawings and providing a heraldic blazon, i.e. a verbal description of a coat of arms according to the rules of heraldry in German language, based on a complex specialist terminology. The information from the heraldic blazon for each coat of arms was entered into a database and various search attributes for relevant aspects such as colour, heraldic ordinaries and charges were created in order to allow combined searches for the content. So far, it became a conventional data base. In co-operation with the Institute of Information Science and Technologies of the Italian National Research Council (CNR) in Pisa the library started a project of extending the traditional text-oriented search options with a new feature with the objective to allow a pure image-based retrieval procedure. The best way to explain this process is the presentation of an example. The starting point of an image-based query is always an image, like in our example the coat of arms of the Corbinelly family which shows a silver stag on blue ground. By clicking on a special button on the data base entry one skips into another data base, run by the colleagues in Pisa. In this moment the so called segmentation was started and the image is presented in different segmented versions.

Now, the user has the possibility to search for other images with similar formal characteristics. It will be retrieval for coat of arms with the same or similar elements like the stag which was separated completely in segment no. two. Clicking on this segment a search process starts, which shows results of formal similarity. And we can see that three other very similar coats of arms with the same erected stag in the centre were found in the data base, without any text-based assistance.

Well, what are the motivations for such activities? First, the library possesses material of higher scientific interest. The easier the access to these documents is the better for the academic community. And second, as a research institute, we feel to be predestined to be active in developing new instruments for research, at least in an experimental form.

To conclude: the library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut was always related very closely to the Institute itself. This is not so surprising. But in the same moment, the library played also a strong decisive role in developing the specific profile of the Institute. It was never a pure instrument for the scholars but an integral part of the whole organism. Its policy was and is action and reaction. With its far-reaching autonomous acquisition activity the library is provoking new research activities, but in the same moment it follows carefully the paths, which were laid by the research program of the institute. Keeping the before mentioned developments of the last years in mind, we see this as the big challenge for the next future. New themes from neighbour disciplines, sometimes in less current and therefore difficult languages, have to be represented in the collection. And, as a consequence, appropriate solutions for indexing and collocation have to be developed. In this respect the traditional balances of the book collection are changing: for about one hundred years the collection of the library was dominated by literature on Italian artists, the Italian art topography and on museums- and exhibition catalogues. They cover roughly 80% of the holdings. The rest, the non Italian art, the neighbour disciplines like philosophy, history, literature, archaeology etc. were subsumed in the resting 20%. But those 20% are actually considerably expanding. If we manage to continue this acquisition policy, together with the corresponding electronic services, a probably unique research centre for interdisciplinary studies focused on Italian art could be created. Of course, this objective can be achieved only on the basis of a very close collaboration between the scholars and the library. But, as we have seen

before, this has a long tradition here. It is undoubtedly a big challenge, which requires extraordinary efforts. However, we are working on it.