



## The Spanish national museum libraries: an undiscovered heritage

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### **ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF MUSEUM LIBRARIES IN SPAIN**

The first major public museums in Europe, created back in the eighteenth century, are the starting point for the history and development of museum libraries.

In Spain, the first museum projects were also developed in the eighteenth century as a result of the increasing scientific and naturalistic interest, brought by the Age of Enlightenment. This was the case of the Royal Cabinet of Natural History, founded in 1772 by Carlos III as the first public exhibition in Spain, the Royal Botanical Garden (1774) or the failed plan to build up the Naval Museum in 1792. The libraries of these institutions have come to us with invaluable collections of natural history, scientific expeditions, botany and other related subjects which today represent an important bibliographical heritage.

But also, as distinctive examples of centenary museum libraries in other specialties, we can highlight the Army Museum (1803), the Museo del Prado (1818), the National Archaeological Museum (1867) or the National Museum of Art Reproductions (1877).

As a whole, all these libraries –that were created to cover their museum needs- have a common denominator, which comes not only from their belonging to the museum itself, but also from the need to support the documentation and research tasks that are being held in the institution. They were originally designed as restricted or semi-restricted research services, and, with few exceptions, almost none of them was fully opened to general public. That inertia has persisted in the spirit of the Spanish museums for many years and it has been difficult to introduce the idea that the library must become a public service.

Although the current Spanish laws dealing with museums hardly mention the role of libraries, the historical legislation often included some statements about the purpose, tasks and services of the library within the museum. When discussing the origin of the Spanish museum libraries, it is important to refer to the first Regulations for Museums,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Reglamento general de los museos regidos por el cuerpo facultativo de archiveros, bibliotecarios y arqueólogos* (1901).



from 1901. The regulations devoted several articles to the role and functions of the library. Specifically, article 26 stated that all museums require a specialized library for the particular use of curators and researchers. This library should be in charge of a librarian appointed by the director of the museum. Despite this "particular" or internal use of the museum libraries, according to article 27 they may also be used by external public after special authorization from the institution management.

On the other hand, some national, regional and municipal museums did include several articles referred to the library in their founding decrees or in subsequent regulations. This was the case of the "Rules to reorganize the regional and municipal museums of fine arts", from 1913<sup>2</sup>, which stated that "[...] the museum Board of Trustees will be responsible for the reorganization or, if it is the case, the creation of a library specialized on art history and art industries, that will be part of the museum and will be opened to the public during the institution opening hours. In addition, the public visiting the museum may also attend the library, as well as any interested persons prior authorization from the institution head".

In this context, the National Museum of Industrial Arts<sup>3</sup> -established in Madrid in 1912, following the model of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London- deserves a special attention. The original regulation of the museum devoted a full chapter to the organization and functioning of the library, focusing indeed on the educational mission of the museum and the consequent need to provide a public service to citizens of all social classes. Literally, the chapter states that "the museum, in order to reach its educational goals, will have a library consisting of books, journals, prints and photographs specialized in industrial arts." Furthermore, it remarks that "the library will be opened to public during the days and hours determined by the director and by the Board of Trustees, ensuring that the service working hours are compatible with the leisure time of the working class". Taking into account that this was written in 1913, the museum certainly shows a rare sensitivity and a firm purpose to serve the educational and training needs of workers. No need to say that this attitude was not the leading one in Spanish museums at the time.

As you can infer from what we just mentioned, a clear vocation of public service was perceived in some of the Spanish museum libraries from the early twentieth century. Since then, the events and setbacks that have marked the political, administrative and socio-cultural history of Spain in the twentieth century, have seriously affected the progress of our cultural institutions. No doubt, the Civil War disaster and the ostracism suffered during Franco's dictatorship are aspects that have influenced the development of libraries and museums. This explains the stagnation and obscurantism that have characterized these services for decades. Today we can confirm that things have changed for good, and museum libraries (especially in those centers with a higher projection) are undergoing a considerable growth and consolidation, supported by a more favorable cultural and political scene.

In summary, the idea of the library as a key element in the museums organization is now consolidated. The museum is no longer understood without a specialized library that defines itself as part of the public services of the institution.

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<sup>2</sup> *Reglamento de reorganización de los museos provinciales y municipales de bellas artes* (1913).

<sup>3</sup> Currently, National Museum of Decorative Arts



## THE COLLECTIONS OF THE SPANISH NATIONAL MUSEUM LIBRARIES

Nowadays, you can find more than a thousand museums in Spain, both in the public and in the private sector, and most of them having their own library (obviously, some of them much larger and important than others, and a few consisting of very small collections). The Spanish Museum System -developed as a result of the creation of the autonomous regions, as defined in the Spanish Constitution of 1978- consists of national or state-owned museums, regional museums, and local ones. We are going to focus this presentation on the libraries from the state-owned museums that depend directly on the General Sub-Directory of State Museums, under the Ministry of Culture. They constitute a representative part of all the museum libraries in Spain and they certainly play an important role among specialized libraries in our country, both in terms of volume and quality of holdings.

The library collections of our museums, due to their intrinsic heritage value, must be considered as important as the rest of the museum collections. All of them are involved to the same extent in the basic functions of acquisition, preservation, documentation and research, granted by de Spanish museums law. The libraries primary aim is to support the museums mission. But it is undeniable that, altogether, they constitute a precious heritage consisting of books, journals, manuscripts, prints and other special materials, whose acquisition, classification and control respond to scientific and technical criteria.

Spanish museums depending on the General Sub-Directorate of State Museums, under the Spanish Ministry of Culture
Museo Nacional de Arqueología Subacuática (Cartagena)
Museo Arqueológico Nacional (Madrid)
Museo Nacional de Artes Decorativas (Madrid)
Museo del Traje, CIPE (Madrid)
Museo del Greco (Toledo)
Museo Altamira (Santillana del Mar, Cantabria)
Museo Sorolla (Madrid)
Museo Nacional de Antropología (Madrid)
Museo Sefardí (Toledo)
Museo Nacional de Cerámica (Valencia)
Museo Nacional de Escultura (Valladolid)
Museo Casa de Cervantes (Valladolid)
Museo de América (Madrid)
Museo Cerralbo (Madrid)
Museo Nacional de Reproducciones Artísticas (Madrid)
Museo Nacional de Arte Romano (Mérida)
Museo Romántico (Madrid)



Every state museum has its own library, specialized in its particular field of research (fine arts, archaeology, decorative arts, ethnography, anthropology, etc.).

Some of these institutions are more than a hundred years old. For instance, the library of the National Archaeological Museum (Museo Arqueológico Nacional), founded in 1867, the library of the Museum of Anthropology, founded in 1875, or the library of the National Museum of Art Reproductions, created in 1877.

Some other libraries were the result of donations or legacies from prominent figures of the XIXth century society. In this case are the libraries of the Cerralbo Museum and the Romantic Museum, whose collections were donated to the state at the beginning of the XXth century by the Marquis of Cerralbo and the Marquis of the Vega-Inclán respectively.

All in all, these libraries have a long tradition and, as a result of acquisitions, donations, bequests and deposits, they have come to collect a considerable bibliographic heritage over the years.

For decades, this heritage has been scattered and hidden in the museums, kept for the almost exclusive use of curators. Maintenance resources were very limited in several cases, and part of the holdings was stacked in precarious conditions. In this situation, it is almost a "miracle" that some works have arrived intact to us...

Today, the Ministry of Culture is undertaking several initiatives to recover and rescue from oblivion the library collections of its museums, in order to make them available to both researchers and general public. But we will talk about this later.

When analyzing in depth the bibliographic collections of museum libraries, the main problem we find is that almost each institution represents a single case. The libraries situation is radically different depending on their history, status, nature, volume, and the existence or not of human and material resources to guarantee control and preservation. Some museum libraries are autonomous departments with their own personality and means, while others are seen as mere deposits of books to support the documentary work of curators. Most of them have a part of their collection still uncataloged and some do not even have specialized staff in charge.

On the whole, the average museum library holds about 18,000 titles, while, according to a statistical analysis conducted by the General Sub-Directorate of State Museums in 2006, the total of the seventeen museum libraries would reach the 350,000 volumes (some of them still uncataloged). Journals and serial publications play a primary role in all museum libraries, since they are obviously essential for scientific research. In general, the bibliographic holdings of museum libraries are highly specialized and extensive in their fields, and they often include odd, expensive and hard to find documents that mean an added value for scholars and researchers. Thus, it is not unusual to find real bibliographic treasures –due to their rareness, antiquity, or simple beauty - among merely academic publications.

All these circumstances underline the importance of combining efforts for the promotion and preservation of the almost unknown heritage of museum libraries. Together with



the need for appropriate staff, it should be a priority to implement mechanisms to make all the bibliographic collections recognized and available for anyone interested in them.

## **CURRENT SITUATION OF STATE MUSEUM LIBRARIES**

Currently, there are many projects on library cooperation running among different institutions in Spain. Several museum libraries have joined these initiatives, particularly in projects of automation of processes and digitization of collections.

However, the need for a further cooperation among all the museum libraries has always been a hot topic that, until today, did not seem to find its way through.

The creation of BIMUS (State Museum Libraries Network) has its origin in the State Museums Plan for 2004-2008, from the General Sub-Directorate of State Museums of the Ministry of Culture. As part of the documentation program for the Collections Area, the plan projected to computerize the collections of libraries belonging to the seventeen museums managed by the Ministry. This was not something new, but the result of many years of cooperative work, dating from the 90s. At that time, the first steps were taken for the development of a computerized network of national museum libraries, involving the implementation of an integrated library system (ILS). It was remarkable as well the role played by the BAEP initiative (Art Libraries of Spain and Portugal), that worked on the idea of deploying a large network of art libraries.

In 2005, as a consequence of the mentioned State Museums Plan, the General Sub-Directorate of State Museums undertook a study to evaluate the situation of the 17 libraries in the state-owned museums. The conclusions of this study disclosed two main problems: the shortage of technical staff - only 9 staff members were professional librarians at the time- and the lack of a uniform cataloging system -only 5 of the 17 libraries were cataloging in MARC format-.

By the end of that year, a Working Group on Museum Libraries was created to definitely push the development of a library network. The group was integrated by professional librarians from some of the main museum libraries, and Ministry representatives from different information technology, museum and library departments.

One of the main responsibilities of the Working Group was to evaluate the existing library management systems (LMS) for libraries and to recommend the most suitable for implementation in the museum libraries network. After several months of presentations and tests, the system chosen was Absysnet, from the Spanish company Baratz.

In 2009, with the union catalog already on line, we can say that the implementation and development of BIMUS has involved a great deal of planning and coordination. Not only for the coordinator team, but especially for those museum libraries that have joined the project without even having professional staff in charge. In this context, it has been essential to define plans and to concrete actions and future needs.

BIMUS aims were clear from the beginning: to improve and optimize the material and human resources of libraries, starting from a common library system. The ultimate goal was to achieve a change in work processes, encouraging cooperation through the use



of tools such as the union catalog, and, at the same time, developing common policies and services, such as cooperative acquisition, interlibrary loan, etc.

The General Sub-Directorate of State Museums study of 2005, settled the basis for a SWOT analysis, from which we may summarize BIMUS weaknesses and advantages, as we see them now.

The main weaknesses can be easily spotted:

- First of all, the lack of technical staff is still a drawback in most libraries. This factor conditions the successful implementation of an integrated system, since it is obvious that the work of catalog merging, homogenization of bibliographic records and authorities, and drafting of regulations and procedures, require the presence of specialized staff in each one of the libraries. Since these same staff have to take care of the daily work of their centers, it is easy to understand why this project took so long to materialize...
- Secondly, some libraries do not have the appropriate technological equipment yet, to guarantee their smooth running in the network. Further on, some centers are closed to public at the moment, with a big part of their holdings stacked in closed deposits.
- Finally, many libraries do still have a considerable amount of uncataloged materials. The implementation of the union catalog must be necessarily accompanied by a cataloging campaign which will ultimately provide access to important collections that, due to the lack of staff, could not be processed until today.

To partly address these weaknesses, one of the first decisions taken by the BIMUS team was to hire a technical coordinator, responsible for data cleansing, development of standards and procedures, and coordination of actions among the different libraries. The adoption of common procedures for cataloging in MARC format and the choice of a uniform system of classification and indexing, were settled as indispensable steps.

On the other hand, with respect to advantages and opportunities, BIMUS opens up a full range of options:

- The possibility to search all the library catalogs through a single interface increases the visibility and use of all collections, simultaneously reinforcing the image of the institutions involved.
- Cooperative work, through the sharing of human and financial resources, facilitates the provision of new services and encourages the development of others that were underused (interlibrary loan, for instance, in the case of museum libraries).
- The network is a good starting point for the creation of working groups on specific topics, and the common environment is a good field to test and apply new procedures. We are talking about working groups on bibliographic and authority control, statistics, evaluation techniques, etc.



- Finally, BIMUS will definitely widen the libraries offer of web services. The design and implementation of these new or renovated services should be shared out among the different institutions, not only to save efforts but also to promote team spirit.

On a short-term, the pending matter is the development of a portal for art libraries that, through a web site, will link our union catalog to the library catalogs of the main Spanish museums: the Prado, the Reina Sofía National Museum, and the Spanish Cultural Heritage Institute.

Besides the catalog, BIMUS will feature a digital library, providing access to both digitized collections from various institutions, and electronic resources of common interest, such as databases -full text or abstracts-, electronic journals, institutional repositories and other Internet resources.

To support the virtual platform, it will be necessary the cooperative acquisition of some basic tools:

- A metasearcher, to enable the simultaneous search of all the resources available, including, of course, the catalog.
- An integrator of electronic resources, such as SFX for instance, in order to dynamically link all databases and allow quick and relevant results for all queries (from bibliographic records to digitized images or full texts of articles).

We surely believe that our libraries digital collections, because of their special historical, artistic or scientific value, will involve a significant added value to the relevance of the portal.

And the rest is a matter of spreading the news. In other words: marketing and promotion.