

'Le patrimoine culturel', or in other words, national cultural heritage, was the theme of the IFLA Section of Art Libraries' Pre-Conference at Paris last August, and it is the theme which links those papers from that conference which are now published in this issue of *Art Libraries Journal*.

Cultural heritage happens; it accumulates piece by piece, without design or direction; as such it is splendidly piecemeal, inevitably and infinitely various. Yet it is *also* designed and defined; the temptation to tidy it up, to identify and interpret its character, cannot be resisted. Governments, for example, frequently yearn for, and endeavour to reconstruct, a 'patrimoine' which will convincingly demonstrate, to their own people and to outsiders alike, the nation's essential unity. Alas, neither nations nor history are so simple; national celebrations, in which 'le patrimoine' is flourished, cannot always succeed in their aim of presenting a united front – witness the Aboriginal response to the Australian Bicentenary, while celebrations of the French Revolution were accompanied by undercurrents of discord and by qualms regarding the violent and bloody nature of those Revolutionary events. In contemporary Britain, where tensions and dissensions inherent in British society have been aggravated by a government which is stridently, aggressively, and chauvinistically patriotic in its stance, 'heritage' has become a word which arouses suspicion, for not only have cultural traditions been manipulated for political ends but also they are being ruthlessly exploited for commercial profit. 'Le patrimoine' is being packaged and marketed; that both prior to and during this process, it is distorted out of all recognition, is apparently of no consequence.<sup>1</sup>

Properly conceived, 'le patrimoine' is as subtle, as manifold, as elusive, as it is beyond price. It does indeed have the potential to represent unity, *not* by being reduced to jingoism, but by being expanded to include cultural manifestations of diversity. 'National heritage' is enriched, not undermined, by variety; that its boundaries tend to be dissolved by the refusal of culture to be contained should be a cause of rejoicing. The question 'Whose heritage?' is crucial; surely the answer must be 'everybody's'? and yet there remains an important distinction to be made between, on the one hand, a few (whether governments, scholars, entrepreneurs and/or a cultural élite) defining heritage on behalf of all, and on the other, of heritage

which genuinely represents the many forms and traditions through which different people express themselves and their identities. Furthermore, apart from the question of what we choose to celebrate and to conserve, there are additional questions, nearly if not as important, of why and how we cherish and interpret the past; of how history, and artefacts, are re-presented as part of 'le patrimoine'; of whether 'le patrimoine' is frozen into a definitive and historic relic, or whether it is a living thing, nourished by our life in the present; whether, if the latter, its growth is controlled (how, and by whom) or is free and open to cross-fertilisation from other cultures.

As Deirdre Stam rightly points out, 'le patrimoine' must represent, in its scope, but also *in itself* – in the questions and debates it embodies and should perhaps be content *not* to resolve – a pluralism of 'points of view'. In spite of the problems which ensue, the pluralism of 'le patrimoine' needs the existence of a quantity and range of independent institutions and projects to sustain it – for while governments must be allowed a role in the continual process of reconstructing nationhood, and although government support is likely to be crucial, not least if the activities of different bodies are to be adequately coordinated, governments are too much inclined to adopt a narrow view, flattering to or determined by their own ideologies. However, many institutions, even those which value their independence, tend to devote themselves to 'high' culture and to those aspects and interpretations of 'le patrimoine' to which prestige is attached and money gravitates. And thus, while one can only agree with Susan Swartzburg that the various specialists involved in preservation should work together, it is highly debatable whether *only* these 'experts' – associated in many cases with institutions and, very often, representatives of institutional or establishment values – should be trusted with responsibility for deciding what merits preservation and of what 'le patrimoine' should consist.<sup>2</sup>

If 'le patrimoine' is to be enriched, as it should be, by cultural pluralism, it is likely to depend not only on a three-legged Establishment of government, prestigious institutions, and commerce, but also on smaller bodies, on groups representative of minorities, on institutions which are willing to take risks, on the kind of dedication and commitment which can survive without government support or commercial encouragement, and

# EDITORIAL

## EDITORIAL

on the enthusiasm, eccentricity, and insights, of individuals. The latter include collectors motivated, not by greed, but by a wish to save artefacts which would otherwise be lost because they have escaped the attention of, or been overlooked by, the professional custodians of 'le patrimoine'. In Britain, Robert Opie's collection of packaging, formed when few if any museums took such ephemera seriously, is now a museum in its own right;<sup>3</sup> Tony Lewery has 'collected' and photographed examples of the craft of sign-writing, which still contributes so significantly – so signally – to the visual environment, the local heritage, of so many people.<sup>4</sup> Lewery records signs *in their context* and leaves them where they belong, albeit vulnerable to destruction and decay; in the pages of his book they are safe, and accessible, not least through the agency of libraries.

For art libraries have a role, perhaps several roles, to play. The breadth, or conversely, the narrowness, of 'le patrimoine', as represented by the documentation we librarians make available, contributes to the ethos, to the corporate awareness, in which crucial decisions (such as what to preserve) are made and in which 'le patrimoine' is constantly redefined and reconstructed. Our selection strategies may enable us to infiltrate or subvert this process – always, one would hope, with the aim of enlarging the boundaries, enabling different voices to be listened to. And the *information* we provide complements the nation's preservation and representation of artefacts, and indeed makes possible some recollection (if not, literally, re-collecting) of what has been lost or discarded.

In his pioneering study, pan-European in scope, of the problematic nature of 'le patrimoine', Donald Horne asked disquieting questions of the role of art museums; his misgivings are akin to Frère Albaric's fears for the fate of religious art. 'What is most debilitating in a museum', he says, 'is the senseless reverence given to objects merely because of their authenticity';<sup>5</sup> naked objects, that is, torn out of context, deprived of 'points of view', presented in a silence from which the diverse voices of previous generations have been erased. Yet in the same breath, he validates art books, visual resources, and thus, by implication, art libraries:

. . . a whole dimension of intellectuality can be given by collections of photographs in art

books that is not available in the originals . . .<sup>6</sup>

Art libraries help to restore context, meaning, points of view; they can also contribute to the process of sharing 'le patrimoine', redistributing its wealth (freely, and without reducing it to commodities), bringing it back to wherever people are. Even if we cannot or dare not follow Horne's argument through the momentary, magnificent disregard of practical and political constraints which follows (which also suggests something of the reality of *écomusées*<sup>7</sup>), we surely can, can we not, extract from his vision inspiration for our purposes?

How splendid it would be if all the great collections . . . might simply be broken up, and reduced to a series of smaller museums, preferably in different cities. Or, even better, if the great works of art could simply again be scattered, and put on display in public buildings, so that they became part of ordinary life . . .<sup>8</sup>

## References

1. Hewison, Robert. *The Heritage industry: Britain in a climate of decline*. London: Methuen, 1987. See also Lumley, Robert. *The Museum time-machine: putting culture on display*. London: Routledge, 1988.
2. For example, at the present time in Britain the aims and priorities of English Heritage have been called into question by certain of its projects which hardly seem to be in the best interests either of local people or of conservation. See Hale, John. 'Gentlemen versus players'. *The Guardian* 11th November 1989.
3. The Robert Opie Collection ('Pack Age Revisited') is at the Albert Warehouse, Gloucester Docks, Gloucester, U.K.
4. Lewery, A. J. *Signwritten art*. Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1989. ISBN 0-7153-9273-5. £14.95
5. Horne, Donald. *The Great museum: the representation of history*. London: Pluto Press, 1984 p. 249
6. *Ibid.*, p. 250
7. The *écomusée* concept, as I understand it, seeks to replace the local museum-within-walls with a collective consciousness of community heritage, an informed and affectionate sense of place in which the past is encouraged to flourish in the present and through which the whole of a place is transformed into a living museum of itself. In such a context, a local tradition of sign-writing, for example, would be nourished by appreciation, and historic examples would surely be preserved.

The only literature on *écomusées* known to me is a note by Mark Watson, 'Écomusées', in the *Design History Society Newsletter* no. 22 July 1984 p. 26-28. I would welcome more information. What a pity that *écomusées* did not feature in the discussion of 'le patrimoine' at Paris, especially as they intentionally set out to challenge more orthodox approaches to 'le patrimoine'.  
8. Horne, *op. cit.* p. 250

# EDITORIAL