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The Swiss Database Project for Art and Cultural Heritage

*Brigitte Meles**

The application of information science in the museums of Switzerland seems to be more or less the same as in the other German-speaking countries of Europe. Very few museums have more than five years experience in the application of computers. Most museums have only been using word processors so far. They are now confronted with the personal computer as a new tool for efficiently cataloguing the collection and keeping the inventory.

Politically, Switzerland is divided into 26 cantons, each of which is proud of its independence from the federation. The federal government in Berne is operating only very few museums, the Swiss National Museum in Zurich, the Foundation Oskar Reinhart in Winterthur and some much smaller institutions. In general, the medium-size museums (staff, collection, exhibitions, administration) are financially supported by their cantons. Not necessary to say that every canton stresses different points in its museum politics.

It is remarkable that museums in the French part of Switzerland started earlier and are more advanced in applying informatics. The software TEXTO is often used on various hardware, following its adoption by the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire of Geneva ten years ago. The museums in German speaking Switzerland are mostly using dBasell + , LARS and Oracle on IBM-compatible hardware.

The foreseeable result of this diverse situation could well be that every museum will solve its own museum management and cataloguing problems on its own, all by itself, spending an enormous amount of time and money, without realizing what is happening in comparable collections elsewhere.

These apprehensions were made, known to one of the few independent institutions that Switzerland has for scientific politics. As a result, the Swiss Academy for the Humanities commissioned in February 1986 a supervisory group to study the application of information technology in the fine arts and the applied arts.

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This group in turn commissioned in autumn 1986 five specialists from the museum world, I being one of them, to study the present state of computer applications in Swiss museums and to analyze future requirements, especially data exchange. We were to issue recommendations for museums with fine arts and applied art collections to standardize cataloguing and to facilitate data exchange.

Our report was published in August 1987 in French and German. It was distributed to those museums that had actively participated and to individuals upon request. In June 1988, a conference was held in Berne which unified all interested museums of the different parts of Switzerland. Once again, we explained the findings of our study. As a result of our report, a manager of future planning was funded and hired. It is David Meili, the former director of the Ballenberg open-air museum. Of general interest and central importance for the acceptance of our report is the data field catalogue, which is partly based on the data field catalogue of the art museum in Geneva, particularly their painting collection and partly on a general data field catalogue of all museums of Basel, produced by a working group which I chaired. This combined catalogue of data fields is a general proposal for the structure of an inventory. Details, such as the important rules for writing names, descriptors, thesauri as well as other data files in the three official languages of Switzerland, are to be added as soon as possible.

The present widespread availability of personal computers in Swiss museums suggests that all museums should start using them immediately, however, this appears to be unattainable due to the lack of trained personnel. Additional obstacles are the lack of application programs proofed in museums and the uncoordinated use of soft- and hardware products existing already. Last not least, the political emphasis in collection policies varies widely.

Therefore, another cornerstone of our report is the recommendation to start professional computer applications in a few pilot museums, each of them responsible for the development of a specific application which would match the common data catalogue. Those pilot museums would also be responsible for the transmission of their data into the common data catalogue of all Swiss museums and for the dissemination of their acquired know-how to comparable museums. We proposed to offer subsidies for this additional work as we consider it unlikely to find suitable pilot museums otherwise.

One advantage of our proposal is its respect for the federal structure of Switzerland. Even the different cultural and scientific traditions of museum documentation in the French, Italian and German speaking parts of Switzerland are taken into account. Let me give you one example: The French catalogues in the fine arts are based on Garnier's iconographic

system, the German speaking museums mostly prefer the iconclass system. To obtain a reasonably common data base in such a situation, all we can do is to let them continue their tradition, however, in the planned central data base of cultural heritage, each group will have its own set of fields and will leave the fields of the other group empty. This is not elegant but feasible.

For data entry and retrieval, we propose central data base storage, to be run by a foundation or an association. We consider it impossible to create a compulsory integrated system due to our heterogeneous political situation. Therefore, museums should be obliged to copy only the art historical part of their catalogue into the central data base, excluding and retaining their sensitive data. We, therefore, hope that the central data base will contain in the near future a reasonable amount of data of scientific interest, but no more.

I shall skip the organizational and financial details of our proposal. But before ending, let me mention two other details, the distribution of museum data and the reaction of the Swiss universities.

From a technical point of view you may object to the concept of central storage, as other distribution methods are feasible today and new technology is on the horizon. However, we consider a unified concept of paramount importance, particularly for data entry, even if retrieval will later be using other equipment (CDROM etc.).

Asking all Swiss universities to contribute their requirements, we received no response from the university world. A data base of museum objects apparently is not required, neither by researchers nor by students. But can there really be a demand? Let us recall that only very few museums have had their collection catalogues published and that much of the material stored in museums is unknown and inaccessible. So we should not be surprised at this lack of demand.

It is obvious that the advent of information technology into the museum arena should be recognized as a challenge. A challenge to museum personnel to complete their inventories and to publish their collection catalogues. Only then can we expect the universities and research to follow us.

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