

This issue of the *Art Libraries Journal* continues the publication of papers presented to the IFLA Section of Art Libraries' Pre-conference at Brighton, the theme of which was 'Art libraries for the people'.

Of the many and diverse papers received, perhaps the most challenging – although on the day delegates were charmed rather than challenged by a presentation of fascinating and engaging slides – was from a speaker who is not a librarian at all. Emmanuel Cooper introduced us to the art of working class people in Britain – a genuine 'people's art', which of course is paralleled by people's art of one kind or another in other countries, including folk art and the 'vital arts'<sup>1</sup>. (For examples of the latter, drawn from all over the world, see Guy Brett's recent volume *Through our own eyes*<sup>2</sup> which should be on the shelves of every art library.) And the challenge? 'Art libraries for the people' should obviously embrace 'people's art'. But do they? Anthony Burton's introductory remarks (in a paper which, like Emmanuel Cooper's, is also published in this issue) suggest that the art with which art libraries are concerned 'has always been the art of the élite', and he quotes an argument to the effect that libraries are one device by means of which 'indigenous forms of popular culture' are discouraged.

Are we, in fact, guilty of equating 'Art' with the so-called 'Fine arts', of 'packaging' an élitist concept of art? Do we think in terms of 'taking art to the people', or of 'bridging the gap between art and the public', without having proper regard for 'the people's art'? Are even our most committed public library art departments and artotheks élitist, propagandists of élite art?

The visual arts are a means and a language; art has become relatively remote from many people's lives (and attracts less support than literature and music) because for too many people it has become a *foreign* language. We all use words; music is something we can whistle, sing, and dance to; the visual languages of signs, advertisements, and the media assail us but theirs is a language in which we ourselves are not articulate. There *are* ways in which people use visual signs, gestures, marks, and artefacts, but they are ignored both by the media and by scholarship, and there is little recognition that these actions and makings can have any intrinsic value or connection with 'art'.

In his *Made in America*, John Kouwenhoven revealed what can happen when a gulf

yawns between 'folk' and 'fine', and between 'the people' and an élite. In 18th and 19th century America, those people who regarded themselves as sophisticated and refined craved for European culture – and were indulged by libraries – thus preventing, or at least hindering and holding-up, recognition of a distinctly American tradition and identity, embracing the 'vernacular', and distinguished by innovative making, by means of which 'the people' were creating America without fuss.<sup>3</sup>

Can art libraries help to restore 'art' to 'the people' as a means at their disposal, and to renew their confidence in its use? Mary Ashe identifies the role of public art libraries in the United States as 'the principal means whereby their users can share in the record of man's thought and ideas, about the arts *and learn to make some expressions of their own creative imagination to add to the record*' (my italics). 'Literacy' includes the ability to read and to write; visual literacy should include the ability to create as well as to appreciate forms of visual expression – and, because art is *more* than a language, to have the use of it is to have access to the most marvellous and complete construction kit imaginable, an inexhaustible means, the value and fascination of which does not consist solely of its potential for producing masterworks. Like language, and Lego, its primary purpose is to give all of us opportunities to live richer, more creative lives.

#### References

1. *Vital arts, vital libraries: cultural life and tradition in developing countries and the role of libraries*. Preston: IFLA Section of Art Libraries, 1985.
2. Brett, Guy. *Through our own eyes*. London: G.M.P. Publishers, 1986.
3. Kouwenhoven, John. *Made in America*. New York: Octagon Books, 1975 [reprint of 1948 edition].