Towards the New Library of the Institut national d’histoire de l’art

Abstract: The Library of the Institut national d’histoire de l’art (INHA) is a relatively recent creation (2003). After years of renovation work, debates and consideration, it will soon be moving to the historic reading room of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, “The salle Labrouste”, thereby realizing the dream of a great library of art.

Keywords: Art library; Institut national d’histoire de l’art/Paris; Bibliothèque nationale de France; moving collections

1 Introduction

The Library of the Institut national d’histoire de l’art (INHA) is a relatively recent creation (2003). Housed in France’s Bibliothèque nationale premises on rue Vivienne in Paris, together with the study and research department it constitutes one of the pillars of an institution that is still young in terms of French academic research; its mission is to “carry out scientific activity and contribute to international scientific cooperation in the area of the history of art and culture”.

The library has more than 1.5 million documents and receives more than 35,000 visits and 139,000 communications annually. Its important activity will soon reach a decisive turning point: in a few months it will be moving to the historic reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, “The salle Labrouste”, thereby realizing the dream of a great library of art, completing – or beginning – a decades-long adventure.

2 The Genesis of an Art History Library

In 1983, a report by French art historian André Chastel to the prime minister stressed the urgent need to establish an institute of art history in France. Since this initial project, the library has played a key role in it. This importance is linked to the fact that in France there was a Bibliothèque d’art et d’archéologie (BAA) which had been set up at the turn of the last century by the great couturier, collector and patron Jacques Doucet (1853–1929), but which, after a period of splendour and influence, collapsed like many French university libraries, even as elsewhere in the world and in other disciplines innovative new libraries were being designed based on the early promises of information technology. This national art history institute project was therefore fashioned with the urgent desire to “save the BAA”, as art historians demanded.

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1 Decree 2001–621 of 12 July 2001 establishing the Institut national d’histoire de l’art.
2 André Chastel (1912–1990), French art historian.
3 Pierre Mauroy (1928–2013) was prime minister at the time.
5 Several publications are now being prepared on the history of the BAA and Jacques Doucet; see latest information at: blog.bibliothèque.inha.fr; Jacques Doucet is also the creator of the Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet (literary library). The Angladon Museum in Avignon holds his collected works. The Société des amis de la Bibliothèque d’art et d’archéologie (SABAA) is also pursuing its work in support of the library.
This report also affirmed the idea of a reconfigured, open library, and in particular recommended free access to the collections, as at American libraries, or an entirely new type of public library that has just opened in France, the Bibliothèque Publique d’Information at the Pompidou Centre. “A library of art and archaeology”, writes André Chastel, “should, like all similar institutions abroad, allow access to the shelves for qualified researchers, by means of an appropriate facility, of course”.

For this institute and its library, there were no plans to build a new site but rather to install the library in existing buildings in Paris, such as the Louvre, for example, or the Grand Palais.

While this dream of a new art library made gradual progress, another dream was shaping up at the same time: the dream of building the large or even very large library of France called for by President François Mitterrand in 1988, which became the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 1994. Four towers shaped like open books were built along the left bank of the Seine in the eastern part of Paris. Then began the daunting transfer of the print collections of the Bibliothèque nationale to the new Tolbiac site. Through 1998, thousands of printed works left their historic homes to experience a new fate.

Then the question arose of what to do with the Bibliothèque nationale building, emptied of its print collections but still holding the prestigious collections of the specialised departments of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF): manuscripts, prints and photographs, music, maps and plans, coins, medals and antiques.

In the 1990s, in the wake of André Chastel’s report, several reports in turn cited the need to create a national art history institute in France, as well as an art library.

Historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie wrote at the time: “The great French exhibits, the most important ones, are too often held beyond our borders: Los Angeles, Munich, Rome [...]. To date Paris does not have a great art library. Research in art history is marginalised, with no convenient access to the necessary resources. There is a risk that fewer and fewer foreign researchers will be inclined to choose any French topic. And yet, solutions exist [...]”

The solution envisioned brought together several large Parisian art-history collections. The main collections involved were the Jacques Doucet’s Bibliothèque d’art et d’archéologie, the Bibliothèque centrale des musées nationaux at the Louvre, the library of the Ecole nationale des Beaux-Arts, and the library of the Ecole nationale des Chartes. They complemented the collections of the specialised departments of the National Library. The premises of the BnF seemed the perfect place for them. The public authorities were in favour, and the question arose whether this was a juxtaposition or a union, or even a merger, of multiple collections and institutions. All options were considered and vigorously debated.

However, to make this far-reaching art library project a reality, it was decided to move the Bibliothèque d’art et d’archéologie (art and archaeology library) to the National Library site: “With this action”, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie could write, “the cornerstone is laid for the creation of an art library, or a national library of the arts (as they say now)”. In 1993 the “Mortreuil space” adjoining the “salle Ovale” formerly used for consulting the BN’s periodical collection, was set up to welcome the teams, collections and readers. Then a space was set up within the “salle Ovale” and, gradually, the Bibliothèque d’art et d’archéologie was installed there. Hence it had two sites: a reading room in its original building on rue Michelet, and a reading room within the BnF on rue Richelieu.

At the same time, the idea of a national institute of history and art was taking shape; gradually the idea spread that, as art historian Michel Laclotte wrote in 1996, one of its missions should be “to create a great specialised library by bringing together multiple entities; and, finally, to put together the documentation whose absence is handicapping art history research in our country”.

After several scenarios were considered, it was decided that the library of the future national institute of art history would be installed in the former BN main reading room, the “salle Labrouste”, and in the adjoining bookstacks, whereas the specialised departments of the BnF

9 At the time, the Performing Arts department, another specialised BnF department, was still housed at the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal. In 2004 it moved to the Richelieu Library site.
10 On creation of the INHA, see INHA News: http://www.inha.fr/fr/ressources/publications/nouvelles-de-l-inha.html.
13 Henri Labrouste also built the “magasin central” (central bookstack), that was partly refurbished by French architect Michel Roux-Spitz to create more space (1954–1959).
would remain under the BnF, in their historic reading room or in new halls. The library of the Ecole nationale des Chartes would take over one wing called the Petits-Champs, alongside the INHA library.

In 2001, the Institut national d’histoire de l’art was finally created and set up facing the libraries, across the rue Vivienne, in premises also freed up by the Bibliothèque nationale. Its bylaws stated that its mission was and still is to “form, conserve, enhance and develop its own collections and the collections entrusted to it, together in a library”. Another milestone was reached in 2003 when the collections from the Bibliothèque d’art et d’archéologie were turned over to the INHA.

3 The Library of the Institut national d’histoire de l’art

One year later, in 2004, in an article published in the Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France, Martine Poulain, director of the INHA library, gave a complete accounting of the plans for this new INHA library.14

It is a research library specialising in art history, open to master’s level scholars. In terms of design, it is a library where the collections are the mainstay. As Martine Poulain puts it, “Right from the start, a series of reports discarded the idea of creating such a library from nothing”, based on the wealth of collections already in Paris which it was better to bring together than to duplicate. So by bringing together three art libraries – the Jacques Doucet Library of Art and Archaeology, the Central Library of the National Museums, and the print collections of the Ecole nationale des Beaux-Arts – its documentary holdings were increased immeasurably, pursuing the dream of an exhaustive collection that Jacques Doucet held so dear. It is not so much the size that gives it value but rather the successive layers of acquisitions and the rich history behind each of its libraries that ensures the unrivaled quality of the resources made available to scholars. In addition, over the past ten years, it has had an active acquisitions policy that has today put it on the same level as similar libraries abroad, the Getty library, the Courtauld, etc.

The library will offer free access to a vast collection, according to Martine Poulain: 260,000 documents eventually, giving the public access to three levels of stacks previously reserved for staff of the Bibliothèque nationale.

With this approach of openness and change in its relationship with its collections and readers, the information desk was taken down off its pedestal and set up in the middle of the reading room; two ramps enable those with limited mobility to access the central stacks. An area was set up at the back of the room in the amphitheatre for consulting reserved documents, as well as a place for photocopying them.

There was also a proposal to modernise the tool offered to the community of art-history researchers. It was accompanied by a re-computerisation and, in particular, implementation of a digital library that today has 15,183 documents, or 551,471 images.15

Everything was in place to ensure that the hoped-for great art library would become a reality, and that it would do so within the historic building of the BnF. No one imagined then that the renovation of the site would be so disruptive16 and that the INHA Library would spend such a long period awaiting completion of the renovation of its future home.

4 Renovation of the Richelieu Site

In the early 2000s, it was found that the run-down old national library site, which no longer met safety standards, needed a complete renovation, and the BnF managed to undertake a simultaneously architectural and scientific renovation project for its Richelieu site. The government chose a contractor17 to run a 220-million-euro renovation project for some 58,000 m² of floor space in rooms that had never undergone a complete renovation since the Bibliothèque nationale was established several centuries earlier. It is an expansive complex, built on 15 levels, in one of the most densely populated and oldest districts of Paris. The buildings date from various periods and have been modified, constantly refurbished and endlessly redesigned, always to contain the ever-growing collections of the Bibliothèque nationale.

The architectural renovation project was launched in 2006.18 The main contract was awarded to architect Bruno


16 As recounted by François Autier, renovation project foreman (2006–2015).

17 EMOC (contractor for cultural projects), in 2010 became OPPIC: Opérateur du patrimoine et des projets immobiliers de la culture, the French institution responsible for real estate transactions in the area of culture.

Gaudin and his firm in 2007. Those parts of the building listed or registered in the supplemental register of historical monuments were renovated by architects Jean-François Lagneau and Patrice Girard, especially the Labrouste Hall redesigned in 2008. In 2011, after the design phase and award of the public contracts, the work got under way in earnest. The Richelieu site was cut into two areas. While Area 1 was under renovation, the libraries (BnF and INHA) remained open to the public in Area 2. The BnF was adamant in fact that the collections should remain accessible for the entire duration of renovation. Once Area 1 completed, it was planned to open it to the public, and to renovate Area 2 in turn.

More than 200 people gradually started working every day at the construction site, while in Area 2 the public kept on consulting the collections in sometimes jerry-rigged reading rooms, oblivious to the construction site on the other side of the fire wall. So the INHA shared its reading room, with the BnF; every day it welcomed more than 300 people, all while preparing for the move it thinks would come any day now.

But in 2012, after another discovery of asbestos and lead, the renovation site was shut down completely; work was not fully resumed until a year later. Then, in 2014, the site made quick progress: the spectacular look of Labrouste Hall was restored; several parts of the building yielded discoveries and a greater understanding of the building’s history; the facelift to the facade transformed the building; repair of the closed and covered spaces almost kept pace with the original schedule, as did work on an annex in which the Ecole des Chartes opened in September 2014. During the winter of 2014–2015, the pace slowed once again due to the problems of an engineering company. The delivery date for Area 1 was once again pushed back, to 2016.

5 The INHA Library, Today and Tomorrow

Today, the INHA Library finds itself once again, on the eve of its move, facing multiple challenges. To achieve its goals, it is relying on the three fundamental principles
behind its plans: free access to collections, main attention to the public, and the excellence of its collections.

Moving the collections and services is in itself a complex operation. This will be done at the same time as the specialised departments of the BnF, representing about 50 linear kilometres of collections to be moved, 19 of them for the INHA. This particular configuration led the BnF and the INHA to sign joint public contracts. The difficulty of the move comes from this volume and the heritage value of the collections, as well as to constraints of time and space. These collections, which are currently in Area 2 of the Richelieu Library (area open to the public), need to be switched to Area 1 so that Area 2 can then be renovated. In order not to delay the second phase of the renovation project, this switch period also needs to be completed within a record time of six months. Added to this is the matter of severely limited space: the Richelieu Site is located in an area of the capital where the streets are narrow and traffic is especially congested. For the most part, therefore, the collections will be moved via an indoor rather than an outdoor route. In addition, the firewall protecting the construction site will have to be breached. This delicate operation can only be done at the right moment and according to well-defined processes. During this same period, the INHA also needs to incorporate the collections of the BCMN hosted by the Louvre, bring back collections stored outside Paris at the Higher education technical Centre for books, set up free access, which will require a great deal of decision-making, and complete the transformation of the library in Labrouste Hall.

Free access, as we saw, is a basic factor in the conception of the INHA library. Mentioned in André Chastel’s report, this innovative aspect comes up constantly in the many versions of the project, almost like a revelation. Direct access to non-rare books is one of the essential conditions of fast and fruitful scientific work (1986). Some have called for all collections to be publicly accessible: some two million documents. But the layout of the building and the value of the heritage collections means that this idea was not followed through. Ultimately a more limited number of documents will be made available on three stack levels, 150,000 when the library opens and 260,000 when full operation is reached. Today free access seems like a no-brainer, even an obligation. It is rare for a library project not to call for direct access to all or part of its collections. The originality of free access to the INHA library lies not so much in the idea but rather in its extraordinary magnitude, in the choice of classification and in the context in which it will occur.

In fact, the central bookstack built by Henri Labrouste is the holy of holies of the Bibliothèque nationale. It was designed to match the library’s unique organisation. The reading room, which Labrouste called “salle de travail” is the place where readers work. At the time it was more common to refer to “workers” rather than to readers. The librarians officiate from the back of the room, in the slightly raised amphitheatre. A midway area was used for preparing the collections for circulation or reshelving; the central stack was visited mainly by the staff and provided excellent conservation conditions. It is at the building’s core, the centre of the system, yet accessible.

For that reason the INHA’s desire to make its collections accessible to their readers, which means that the architects needed to adapt both the reading room and the book stack itself. The safety constraints are stringent, especially to prevent fire and allow for evacuations. In order to preserve Labrouste’s work while ensuring comfortable and safe use of the spaces, the Gaudin firm is paying particular attention to lighting, materials and traffic patterns. Additional work spaces will be developed amid the shelves, including glass shelves where books can be placed while still allowing light to reach the lower shelves. The entire renovation of the central stack is aimed at bringing back a legendary place, up to now kept closed, secret, stern and imposing, and at the same time at creating a place that will experience a new life, a life with new generations of readers who will wander the many kilometres of the stacks. There they will find the contemplative, secret atmosphere of the library stacks; at the same time, they can work and pursue their research.

These collections will be catalogued using the Library of Congress system. Very rarely used in France, this classification system was chosen by art historians and librarians in 2001 after some hesitation among multiple options, including the Dewey system widely used in France, or even no classification at all with books shelved by format and input number, as in closed stacks. The LCC carried the day undoubtedly because American art libraries served as a seductive model for the researchers, but also because it allows a level of analysis and specificity that the more systematic Dewey classification seems to make less easy.

The Library then faced a major challenge: how to give a classification mark, title by title, to hundreds of thousands of documents when you don’t have the time or human resources needed to go through every book manually, one by one.

21 Programme proposal by architect François Gauthier, October 1986, Bibliothèque de l’INHA, Fonds André Chastel 90 178–03.
Anyone who has ever faced the issue of classifying or reclassifying library books knows how difficult it is, especially when extended to some 260,000 documents.

Several attempts were made to deal with this, but the growing numbers of people, tables and lists involved gradually turned the plan for a single, consistent classification system into a thorny issue. The teams in the Library’s cataloguing service then came up with a system allowing an initial, automatic switch from the Dewey to the Library of Congress classification, which was refined by crosschecks based on the classification marks chosen by the reference American libraries. They managed to set up an internal method and processing chain that has now moved the reclassification work well along, with a tight team of nine people to deal with the 150,000 titles that will be reclassified by 2016.

Once the intellectual reclassification has been completed, the library will have to break in these books, all of which will have been sent to be bound. Here again, it is a complex project: Which labels should be chosen? What formats? At what point should the facilities be fully equipped when there is no space to set up free access gradually and ahead of time, and when books need to be moved within a very tight space? How can the labels be made legible when this classification is unknown in France and will undoubtedly seem primitive to the students introduced to it? The matter of layout is also being studied in detail, and two work groups are currently determining how these challenges are to be met.

Establishing this free access, which will have taken several years of preparation, will also take several years of breaking-in after the opening to adapt it to user habits. Internally, the entire organisation needs to be redesigned, especially the shelving, and the acquisitions policy. The INHA Library can draw on the experience of other libraries in France: the Sorbonne Library (reopened in 2014), the Strasbourg National Interuniversity Library (reopened in 2015), and the Public Information Library, which in France is entirely free access. But there is really no model that blends, as the INHA Library does, a research collection with an approach combining conservation and free access of this scale in a heritage setting for specialised collections.

While free access has always been an integral and permanent aspect of this project, the attention paid to welcoming the public seemed far less meaningful when the INHA library was conceived. Since the INHA Library was designed by and for a research institution, its readership can logically be assumed to be “art-history researchers”. Today this public seems less monolithic than it did in the early stages of the project. In fact, by bringing together multiple libraries, the INHA Library is bringing together different publics. The Bibliothèque d’art et d’archéologie bequeathed by Jacques Doucet to the University of Paris, was for years housed in a building designed for it. Art history students and professors from Paris 1 and Paris 4 Universities near the Latin Quarter rubbed elbows there. Today they still comprise a majority of the Library’s readership, which operates like a French university library and, consequently, is heavily used. The readership of the Bibliothèque centrale des musées nationaux, which will join the INHA in 2016, is quite different. Its readers are museum curators. Its needs, practices and expectations are all different. In addition to this public, there are people doing research in art history, gallery owners, artists, publishers, auction houses, French and foreign individuals, etc. The spectrum expands even further when we consider the attraction of art and heritage for the general public. To deal with this, the Richelieu Site renovation project, as conceived by the BnF, provides for a heritage route, in particular with the creation of a glass gallery between two wings of the building, overlooking the Labrouste reading room, as well as an exhibition space. Labrouste Hall being popular with visitors, the INHA will need to provide a special group reception facility. The BnF views the opening to the public of the Richelieu Site and the successful reopening of this building as part and parcel of its mission as national library. In addition to people going in person to the library, there are also remote users, users of the digital library or of online publications; they are known to vastly outnumber art-history researchers. These new users – sometimes the same ones who are in the library – could also be a very different public of connoisseurs, or the simply curious, whose expectations will be very different from those of the specialist researchers.

The extraordinary size of the reading room that the INHA will add means that the new INHA Library will be able to provide a quality reception for the public. The reopening of Labrouste Hall, a gem of 19th century architecture, will be a major event in itself; for the reader, it will be a sign of comfort and a special welcome. Completely renovated, with its original and in some cases unexpected colours, pink or bluish-grey, the hall should at least arouse the interest or approval of the art historians who are the library’s readers. With the cleaning of the domes and windows, there will be daylight where previously it was shut out by centimetres of dust on glass too inaccessible to be washed. The paintings by Desgoffes with their spring foli-
In order to make visits more pleasant, a specific accreditation space will be set up in the hall and a joint INHA-BnF card will be issued, so that users will not be forced to go to different windows depending on which institution they want to join. Hours will also be expanded, from 48 hours weekly to 65 hours, Monday through Saturday. Other improvements are planned: seat reservations, appointment-free access to the heritage collections, improved bibliographic searches and reader training. The concept of a service-oriented library that holds sway today in library projects will be essential when the INHA opens the doors to Labrouste Hall.23

The excellence of these collections, today comprised of 1.5 million documents, remains and will remain a cornerstone of the INHA Library. As an art history research library, the INHA developed its acquisitions policy in a specialised discipline. The library seeks to cover French and foreign art history publications in all formats. To achieve this, it works in close collaboration with the BnF, as well as with museum libraries, other university libraries, and its peer institutions abroad. In art history, most publications are still in the form of printed books. A recent American study24 shows that this discipline is one
where paper is basically resisting digital publishing, because of the matter of images. Image reproduction processes are so complex and costly that, to date, the paper book remains the most important distribution vector in art history, which is dominated by the abundant production of contemporary art and the increasingly important influence of contemporary art on other branches of art history. The other lesson from this study is that, from a practical standpoint, the book is quite well suited to research in art history. Books can be opened, leafed through, stacked atop one another. The reader can compare reproductions, photograph pages and easily perform all sorts of more delicate tasks on the screen. Nonetheless, as in all disciplines and all contemporary libraries, digital publishing plays an essential role. And while the collections remain dominated by paper, the library has digitised its old collections using various programmes, and its collections are accessible in its library. Like most libraries, it subscribes to online databases and periodicals and gives its readers remote access to paid resources. This year it is experimenting with subscription to an e-book package through Dawson; in preparing for the future, it works with the BnF on the digital collection of art gallery web sites accessible for future generations via legal deposit of the web. With research programmes developed with the INHA’s own design and research department, it is undertaking to establish open archives on the one hand, as well as oral archives and audio-visual resources intended for researchers. This work on the collections is evolving in an overall context of caution in France and the institution of a new mapping of university collections and the creation of Collex, collections of excellence, run by the French ministry of higher education.

6 Conclusion

One of the unique aspects of the INHA Library is that it is being built around the idea of a project that is coming into being gradually, replacing what was intended to be temporary with what today has become an active library recognised among the panoply of Parisian academic libraries. While it is necessary to view the project as ongoing, the library at the same time is forced to adapt to different timetables and must question the guidelines set at the start of the project. The arrival of the digital age with the consequent upheaval in publishing, the world of ideas and library practices could shake the foundations of a project designed in the 1980s. There is a tenacious, old-fashioned desire to open up and fill a 21st century library, designed in the 20th century in a 19th century building, as old and new documents accessible on line increase in number, and the production of knowledge can occur today largely without the use of a library. The INHA Library therefore faces the matter of its role and the significance to be attached to such a long, drawn-out project. But no doubt this is because it was defined at the outset with no room, ultimately, to include a monument as emblematic as Labrouste Hall, which, on the eve of its move, is eagerly adapting and preparing for its transformation.

In just a few months, in 2016, it will begin moving its collections. The Central Library of the National Museums will finally be joining the Richelieu Site, with free access to the central stacks, and the public will again be able to enter Labrouste reading room. This will be the beginning of a new era, and the INHA Library will adopt the motto of the illustrious founder of the Library of Art and Archaeology, Jacques Doucet: “C’est toujours de l’avant que je veux aller.”

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25 It is always forward that I want to move.