THE ELECTRONIC SLIDE LIBRARY
THE APPLICATION OF AN ELECTRONIC DATABASE IN THE ART HISTORY SLIDE LIBRARY AT HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITY BERLIN

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Apart from the library in every Art Historical Institute the slide-library supplies the most documents for the lectures and seminars. As usual the library supplies information about artist's biographies or the development of styles, as they are described in art history writing. Additionally the slide library provides an extensive collection of art-reproductions for the use in lectures and seminars.
It is an old and consistent paradigm that images do not present key scientific documents of historical studies. Inquiries about images are very often only the second step in the process of scientific research and the organisation of images in the archive resembles the structures of traditional art history writing. The reproductions are graded alphabetically by the names of artists or by names of locations.

Since the rise of Iconography as a method of history writing art historians work mainly with pictorial documents. To fulfil this idea art historians needed the possibility of a more direct access to visual documents.
The Institute for Art History at the Humboldt-University Berlin started in 1993 the project of a picture-database specialised for the needs and competence of art historians. The database operates like an electronic picture-catalogue. According to the inquiry it shows the images present in the actual slide-collection. The user can choose among ten different groups of classifications - Artist, Date, Stile, Technique, Material, Art Genre, Cultural Landscape, Location, Formal Structures and Iconography, the last group basically takes hold of the figural motifs of an image. This ten classifications can be combined if the user undertakes for more specific enquiry. As the result of the inquiry images appear on the screen comparable to a picture-board. If requested further background information about the images can be delivered.
Compared to traditional archives this presents already a beneficial tool but it does not present a great innovation in the possibilities of research.
But there are much more sophisticated and promising qualities of an electronic database which provide enormous benefits specially for art historians.

On the level of iconographic study the database enfolds the full range of its qualities. Without any further information the user can capture pictorial material of a very wide range and of all techniques and historical periods. If the user specifies his inquiry by further classifications, he or she will receive a more focused information. This flexibility allows the inquiry in conventional means like names, stiles or locations besides more visual defined aspects like Iconography or formal design. The flexible structure of the database allows searches for different pictorial motifs. This is an achievement which could not be obtained by any other catalogue-form. The advantage especially for the purposes of cultural history writing seems obvious and can not be discussed in the briefness of this text.
The administration of the database requires a high level knowledge from the slide library staff. The pictorial documents have to be analysed in art historical means and systematised in various

abstract groups. Thus the database not only contains objective information but also historical and analytical interpretations.

The electronic slide-library offers a choice of pictorial material and the user can choose from a wide spectrum of thematically related material. This effect can be compared to the benefits of a systematic library system. If books are shelved in terms of topics or themes, than the user might find interesting books related to his or her topic by chance. This associative capacities are the second crucial characteristic of the database.

Last but not least: our electronic slide library is made for internal use. It displays the profile and interests of our institute. In other words: we are not documenting every possible image, but we display the profile of the Art History Institute at the Humboldt-University. Of course this had consequences for the structure of the Thesaurus. We did not had to use the very complex numerous-alphabetical classifications of Iconclass. With some references to Iconclass and also to other classification-systems we developed a simpler vocabulary. The Thesaurus is a work in progress and developed corresponding to the images in the database. The vocabulary is, if possible, generally intelligible.

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