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Improving Access to Cultural Materials

Research Libraries Group Announces New Initiative to Provide Integrated Access to Cultural Materials Worldwide

Mountain View, Calif., 7 January 2000—The Research Libraries Group has made electronic access to cultural materials a priority in the opening years of the 21st century. In a collaborative, international effort, the organization will be creating shared access to high-quality images—plus descriptions—of the works and artifacts that document culture and civilization. The result will be a globally accessible, Web-based research resource drawn from pre-eminent collections in RLG member institutions.

Cultural materials include published and unpublished texts, images, objects, and artifacts of many types. For example, the Chicago Historical Society holds architectural drawings, maps, and plans of the city. The New York State Archives collections include Shaker furniture. The International Institute of Social History in the Netherlands has extensive collections of political posters, banners, broadsides, and recordings.

Reg Carr, director of university library services and Bodley's Librarian at the University of Oxford, is chair of the RLG board of directors. Carr explains that this new effort stems from strategic planning undertaken by the board and management for the new century. "Given the quality and range of scholarly research materials held in RLG member institutions and the expertise of RLG staff and partners," he says, "the resulting resource and service promises to make a major contribution to the electronic accessibility and use of our collections. Importantly, too, it means our members need not separately—and expensively—invent the same set of wheels for the benefit of our different user communities."

Improving access to such materials is vital to the advancement of research and learning, especially as the definition of "research data" expands in many disciplines. Historians, cultural anthropologists, folklorists, historical archaeologists, historic preservationists, and a host of other researchers rely on such cultural resources. Only a small amount of this kind of information is currently available in electronic form, and there is no adequate existing ability to search across the significant collections housed in institutions around the world.

Better access is equally important to the sustained health of the research libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural repositories that hold unique and underused collections of these objects. Building a sufficiently large resource to support research is an imperative for many institutions. Teaching and distance learning increasingly require access to surrogates for cultural materials, and hard-pressed repositories increasingly seek revenue, implicit in off-site use of collection surrogates.

James Michalko, RLG's president, notes that the initiative is "the next step in 'improving

access to information that supports research and learning'—a role the membership corporation has played for nearly 25 years." He credits "a very timely Ford Foundation grant" for helping RLG to plan and shape RLG's cultural materials initiative with a core group of committed RLG members: Chicago Historical Society, Cornell University Library, the International Institute of Social History (Netherlands), the New York State Archives, Library, and Museum, Oxford University Libraries, and Yale University Library.

Participants in RLG's initiative will develop best practices and conditions for creating electronic surrogates of cultural materials. They will also address institutional intellectual property mandates, contribute to a collective, "critical mass" resource of unique or rare cultural materials, and ensure that the resulting service is international, representative, and self-sustaining.

"We are confident that this is a critically important and realistic effort," concludes Michalko. "The accomplishments expected within the cultural materials initiative are consistent with the mission, history, and operating capabilities of RLG and its international membership."

The Research Libraries Group (www.rlg.org) is a not-for-profit membership corporation of over 160 universities, national libraries, archives, historical societies, and other institutions. In addition to a range of collaborative activities that address members' shared goals, RLG develops and operates databases and software to serve the information needs of member and nonmember institutions and individuals around the world.

For more information, see this [description](#) and contact [Anne Van Camp](mailto:avc@notes.rlg.org) (avc@notes.rlg.org).

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