

IFLA and the UNESCO framework for Memory of the World

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Abstract

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the peak global organisation for libraries and information services, has long held a particular focus on the conservation and preservation of documentary heritage. The special role of IFLA and its sister organisation the International Council on Archives (ICA) is recognised in the statutes of the International Advisory Committee for the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme which were approved by the Executive Board of UNESCO in May 1996. Close cooperation between IFLA and UNESCO, especially through the IFLA Core Programme for Preservation and Conservation (PAC), has fostered the development of Memory of the World.

IFLA's core interest

Preservation of documentary heritage has been a central concern of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the peak global organisation for libraries and information services, since its inception. Even at its First World Congress in 1929, the preservation of books and manuscripts featured among the resolutions¹. Today that theme is carried forward by a number of IFLA sections including, of course, Rare Books and Manuscripts and Art Libraries but most notably by the IFLA Preservation and Conservation core activity. IFLA PAC, as it is known, is coordinated by an office located at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and pursues its very active program through a network of offices including one here at the National Library of Australia.

That strong network and IFLA's long standing cooperation with UNESCO has underpinned the Federation's wholehearted support for UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme. The special roles of IFLA and its partner peak body the International Council on Archives (ICA) are recognised in the statutes of the International Advisory Committee for the Memory of the World Programme which were approved by the Executive Board of UNESCO in May 1996. The recognition is reciprocated with the Programme featuring regularly at IFLA's World Library and Information Congress and was formally expressed when IFLA awarded one of its highest honours, the IFLA Medal, to M Abdelaziz Abid from the Information Society Division of UNESCO. The medal was awarded on the occasion of his retirement to celebrate

his distinguished service to the international community and especially for his role in promoting the development of library services in developing countries and UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme.

IFLA's endorsement of the Programme and active support for it reflects the Federation's strong commitment to preservation and conservation of documentary resources and its awareness that the Herculean task of preserving documentary heritage demands a broad international partnership. IFLA agrees with UNESCO that there is a need for vigorous action to raise awareness, stimulate initiatives and develop partnerships². The Memory of the World Programme acts as a flagship program and provides an internationally recognised banner to draw attention to the need for preservation and conservation and to signal the achievements.

IFLA's involvement in the Programme has been of central importance. Directly and via national Memory of the World committees, it has harnessed the involvement of libraries, especially national libraries, which hold such important documentary treasures. But it has also made a major contribution to the implementation of the Programme through developing criteria, practices and processes which enable the Programme to operate.

Practical assistance

Many of the tools and guides which have made the Memory of the World Programme feasible have been developed by or in conjunction with IFLA. For instance, IFLA signed a contract with UNESCO in 2001 to prepare guidelines for digitisation especially in developing countries. That project was undertaken in consultation with the ICA. Other early key documents have included a survey of library preservation³, general guidelines for the safeguarding of documentary heritage⁴, a report on libraries and archives destroyed in the twentieth century⁵ and a special issue of *IFLA Journal* (vol 21 issue 3) in 1995 which visibly demonstrated IFLA's commitment to the Programme and set the scene for later developments.

In a signal initiative, the IFLA Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) responded to a request from UNESCO⁶ that IFLA advise on the operationalization of the criteria that are used to evaluate nominations for its Memory of the World Register. A working group was established under the chairmanship of Jan Bos, the Secretary of the Section* to investigate and report in consultation with other members of the Section.

The report of the working group⁷ recommended that the World Register "is and should be a list of works of great impact, works that changed the world history, changed the conditions of man, innovated cultural or scholarly disciplines, or stand symbol for these developments". They eschewed selection on aesthetic grounds and recognised that the Register would inevitably be shaped by the predominant professional and other concerns of the time of its construction. More contentiously, the working group asserted that "the greatest part of valuable collections [of documentary cultural heritage] are [sic] kept in the Western world"

* Membership of the working group was: Jan Bos (National Library of the Netherlands, RBMS Secretary and chair of the working group); Marie-Thérèse Varlamoff (Bibliothèque National de France; IFLA/PAC); Kai Ekholm (National Library of Finland; IFLA National Libraries Section); Alice Prochaska (Yale University Library; IFLA RBMS); Katia Genieva (Russian State Library for Foreign Literature; Memory of the World IAC); Graham Shaw (British Library).

but recognised that concepts of ‘universality’ and ‘world significance’ would be understood differently in different parts of the world. They recommended that nationally significant items should not be admitted in the World Register but should rather be listed in a national or regional register, implying the need to promote the creation of national and regional registers.

The criteria developed by the working group strove to respond to the diversity of materials held by libraries. Criteria identified for selecting materials for the Register included: the unique contribution of each civilisation to world heritage through the listing of cultural historical collections; the historical importance of major archival collections; collections of personal documents for individuals of world significance; specific outstanding items which are unique and irreplaceable; documents that testify to or symbolize events and developments of great historical significance.

This very practical work exemplifies the contribution that IFLA makes to the Memory of the World Programme. IFLA’s professional units will continue to provide such assistance where relevant to their particular mandates. Member institutions and other libraries will contribute by putting such recommendations into effect through the acquisition, curation and preservation of items and collections of significance, whether world, national or regional significance.

International network

However, there is another way in which IFLA and its members are contributing and can do more. That opportunity is located in the establishment and operation of national committees for the Memory of the World Programme. The creation of a truly international network of national committees would do much to strengthen the Programme by bringing together alliances of organisations and individuals committed to the preservation of cultural heritage. They would be able to pressure governments to support the Programme at national, regional and global levels and, at times, to help protect vital heritage from official neglect or disapproval. The establishment of a truly international network of national committees would also strengthen discourse about the meaning of cultural heritage and especially documentary cultural heritage. It would lead to debate about the construct of documentary heritage as a predominantly Western manifestation and could lead to a more nuanced understanding of such heritage.

IFLA’s understanding of its role in terms of the “Three Pillars” – Society, Profession, Members – can inform the Memory of the World community. As with libraries, the Memory of the World Programme derives its warrant from society, from the need to preserve the heritage of humanity. By adding items and collections to the Register of the Memory of the World and to national and regional registers, awareness of their significance is raised and a measure of protection is given to them. The operationalization of the Programme helps the institutions and the profession to pursue their important work of carrying forward that heritage to future generations. However, much of the discussion about the Programme is internal, directed at the participating organisations, the ‘members’. In its second decade, it would be valuable to place greater emphasis on communicating with the wider profession and society in general through exhibitions (such as the Treasure’s of the World’s Great Libraries and Australian Treasures which were held here at the National Library of Australia), publications and public programs.

Conclusion

IFLA is proud to have been one of the founding partners in UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme. The Federation has put its shoulder, and the shoulders of its professional units and members, to the wheels of the Programme. IFLA will continue to do so in order to advance the protection and promotion of our shared heritage.

References

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7. IFLA Rare Books and Manuscripts Section. *Operationalization of the UNESCO Memory of the World Register criteria*. Den Haag: IFLA, 2005.