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Collecting art - by computer

By Colin Farmer

IN 1959 Zurich art lover Hans Rahn visited the Prado Museum in Madrid, bought 12 colour slides, and reasoned: "If people buy records of music, why not slides of art treasures for home enjoyment as well?"

And that was the beginning of a remarkable personal initiative which today offers students of art history a unique catalogue of 14,000 colour slides of European paintings, broken down into computerised inventories according to the artist, current location, the subject of the painting and the people, animals and objects depicted in it.

By the time Mr Rahn had acquired 3,000 slides he needed a computer to catalogue his growing collection. So he talked to a friend who specialised in electronic data processing and with help from IBM he then made up a list of 350 key words relating to the subject matter of the painting.

When the collection reached 12,000 slides he went to the computer unit at the University of Zurich. The experts there agreed to programme the catalogue without charge. Mr Rahn buys computer time cheap from ICL, a British computer firm that acquires time bought but unused by firms and sold back by them.

With the growing size and scholarly value of the catalogue, Mr Rahn turned the project from a one-man hobby into a business-like but non-profit-making operation by setting up the Rahn Slide Collection Foundation (*Stiftung Diapositivsammlung Rahn*).

The foundation is currently acquiring slides at a rate of more

than 2,000 a year with an ultimate goal of 50,000 paintings. They are bought around the world from museums, and photographers and dealers in colour slides. In addition the foundation makes its own, photographing private collections in Switzerland such as the famed Thyssen-Bornemisza treasures at Lugano-Castagnola.

It is this inclusion of works in private and church hands which makes the Rahn inventory different from other computerised catalogues which are limited to state or public collections.

His collection currently contains a thousand artists dating from the 13th to early 20th century and works in more than 900 museums, private collections or churches.

The number of key words has

also been increased to 1,500. These words are organised into 15 generic groups such as "history and geography", "life of the people", "professions and rank", "towns and buildings".

A small group, "furniture", breaks down into three key words - "interior of houses", "mirrors" and "vases, crockery and pottery".

"New Testament" begins with "Joseph, father of Jesus" and goes on for two and a half pages, ending with "Judas".

The great "Arnolfini Wedding" turns up in the catalogue under Jan Van Eyck, National Gallery, London, Couple, Women's clothing, Men's clothing, Candlelight, Mirror, Dog, Clog, Bed (Alcove) and Window.

Mr Rahn, who retired from the chemical business in 1973, now works full time for the foundation.

He is trying to make the entries for certain artists as complete as possible, such as those for Swiss artist Angelica Kauffmann.

One of the very few women painters to have made a brilliant career, she was born in Chur in 1741. By the age of 12 she was already renowned for her talents.

She enjoyed great success in Rome and London where she became one of the original members of the Royal Academy when it was founded in 1769. She later retired to Rome where she died in 1807.

The entire Academia di San Luca, the Roman painters' association, followed her to her tomb and, as at the funeral of Raphael, two of her pictures were carried in the procession.

Principal purpose of the Rahn Foundation is to help people understand painting. The slides and the catalogue are valuable tools for students of art history, enabling them to survey the works of particular artists, of different epochs and the treatment of various themes over the ages.

Slides are lent to teachers and students at a charge just sufficient to cover the cost. But with the expansion of the collection the increase in iconographic key words, and the consequent need to revise the whole catalogue, the foundation's overall costs have risen sharply.

Support is needed beyond the means of even so generous an individual as Hans Rahn. Assistance for the foundation will have to be found elsewhere if the goal of 50,000 inventoried slides is to be accomplished.

