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BUILDING AND MANAGING A CENTRAL BANK COLLECTION

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Introduction

In this paper I shall elaborate on the following topics, which I feel are relevant for the situation in Scandinavian central banks today. There is a continuous exchange of ideas and trends between central banks. Right now the popular policy words are "centralizing" and "outsourcing." Support services such as libraries, archives, and museum activities are influenced by this policy, and we must cope with such fluctuating interest in our activities.

Norwegian official Cultural Policy in the late 1990s

Archives, Libraries, and Museums should cooperate - the three sectors have much in common. We are a small country of 4.5 mill. people. Several national organizations in the cultural sectors are cooperating for mutual benefit. For instance, there is a national database project for the large universities, which is developing a national museum database. The group is currently working on standards for numismatics, but the details of that project are beyond the scope of my presentation. So, let us return to the central bank.

The Central Bank

The Central Bank of Norway was founded in 1816. We have always had archives and various collections, and in 1988 these activities were organized in a central Documentation Section. Our responsibilities are:

- Records and archives
- Library
- Postal services and in-house copying
- Collections
- In-house printing

The goal of our documentation section is to document central bank activities and store and retrieve relevant information for our customers. We serve both our own employees and the general public.

Centralizing Collections

The focus of my work during the past 10 years has been on cataloguing and finding storage space for the collections at the Central Bank in Oslo. These are:

- *Photographs* (2,000): mostly of buildings, and banking employees in working situations and on social occasions. Most of the photos are

scanned for easy search and retrieval, but also for protection against wear and tear.

- *Art collection* (1,800): bought during the last 50 years, as a means of supporting young Norwegian artists, and also to decorate our premises.
- *Banknotes* (3,200): mainly Norwegian banknotes.
- *Office equipment tools* (1,600 in the database, numerous un-catalogued items).
- The collection of *coins and medals* at the Royal Mint in the city of Kongsberg.

The Royal Mint collection has been in existence for many years. The former curator there, Ms. Bodil Selnes who is now retired, was a central person in creating ICOMON. Her enthusiasm and capacity were vital in establishing the collection at Kongsberg. The Royal Mint is owned by the Central Bank. After Ms. Selnes retired, the administration decided to transfer responsibility of the Mint's collection to the central Documentation section.

Why and How

The main office collection has roots back to the 1930's. The director of the Printing Works at that time collected tools, pre-prints and other artifacts from the printing of bank notes. He also published a catalogue of the collection. In 1966, for the 150th anniversary of the bank, the professor of numismatics at the Univ. of Oslo Kolbjørn Skaare designed a historic exhibition, focusing on the history of money and central banking in Norway. The exhibition was a success, and was maintained for 20 years. School-children and guests of the bank were the core customers. One of the bank's archivists was responsible for the exhibition. The archive also kept a small collection of bank notes for reference purposes.

We moved to the present main office building in 1986. Objects of all kinds were discovered in the old buildings which we were emptying, ranging from the sublime (gold coins) to the ridiculous (bundles of used string saved during WWII). I was then head archivist, and voiced my interest in taking care of and organizing all these artifacts. Nobody contested my claim.

Today we maintain a limited exhibition of banknotes and printing history at our headquarters.

Among the objects we found when we moved were a large collection of photographs ranging back to the beginning of the last century, some of them professional, others amateur photos. We bought a Macintosh with a scanner at a, at the time, ridiculously high price, and hired a software company to design a database to our specification. This base was converted and integrated into our central collection base last year.

The bank celebrated its "175 years anniversary" in 1991. I was placed in charge of organizing our jubilee exhibition, and discovered how little material we had for illustrating banking activities. Since then we have systematically been collecting office machines, equipment and tools.

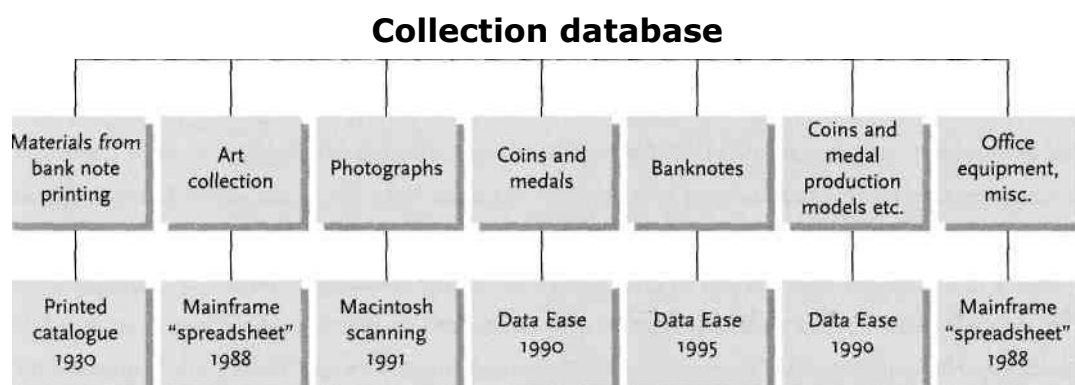
In 1993, the head cashier's office bought a very large collection of Norwegian and Danish-Norwegian banknotes from a private collector. A couple of years later the Documentation Section was asked to catalogue the collection, and it was included in our collections. The still unsolved problem was how to pack and store the banknotes. We are still not 100% sure of the quality of envelopes which we choose, so the banknotes are stored in various types of envelopes to minimize the risk of deterioration.

Last but not least on our list: the Bank's art collection. This used to be the responsibility of the information department whose director was an art historian. After an organizational change the responsibility was transferred to my department. The objects at our main office and our branches have been photographed, and the photographs stored on photo-CDs. They have later been transferred to servers, and today we use digital cameras for image capturing.

The Collection Database

This was a brief summary of the background for our central bank collection. My professional interest was originally in creating order and method - a librarian's goal. Information storage and retrieval were the means of bringing order to chaos. In the 80's the only technical possibility was the mainframe computer. I designed a rudimentary classification scheme, and an IBM systems designer designed a simple computer system, close to today's excel-type spreadsheet. A few years later we hired a very able systems designer to write a program for the PC, into which we converted our data for the art collection and the museum pieces. The Royal Mint also decided to use the same basic software. This system has since been replaced by a solution designed by the same systems designer, based on Sybase/Delphi.

For cataloguing banknotes and coins we have used the numismatic works of Norwegians Dr. Bjørn Rønning and Dr. Kolbjørn Skaare.



Current strategy at the central banks in Scandinavia

Scandinavian central banks have been steadily reducing the number of employees over the last few years. There is a trend towards outsourcing support services such as building maintenance, canteen, and even banking services for bank personnel! Denmark is closing its central bank museum, and Sweden donated their collection to the Royal Mint Cabinet several years ago. The number of branches has been heavily reduced in all three countries. The Bank of Norway closed three branches this year, and those remaining are being organized into a separate commercial corporation partly owned by the Bank.

The Royal Mint was a branch of the Bank of Norway from 1962 to January 1st this year. They are now organized as a separate company 100%-owned by the bank. The process which led to this included negotiations on the future of the substantial collections at the Mint. Museums cost money, and the new company did not wish to fund these services at the earlier level. Solution: ownership of the collection remained with the bank, the collection remains at Kongsberg. We now pay the company to run museum activities at Kongsberg. Kongsberg is our pride, and our window to the world.

Collections Management Today

Due to our focus on cataloguing the collection, we know what we have in our possession today. Our database will be expanded by converting the local bases on coins and medals from The Royal Mint. We aim to keep our collection manageable at the present level, and have no plans to expand it. Of course new products (notes, coins, medals, art) will be added. We shall continue to build relations with professionals in numismatics. We may design an electronic exhibition, and we do have plans of publishing a catalogue of our banknote collection. Articles for our in-house magazine, a home-page and temporary smaller exhibitions are some of our plans for promoting the collection. Our public efforts are in Kongsberg.

I choose to see the collection as a valuable gift from our predecessors and ourselves to posterity. In that view, there is no need to be discouraged by the present situation at the central banks. On the contrary: the purpose of our work is to document the activities of our colleagues. Collections management today requires a combination of creative minds and computers, and is an important and exciting area of work.