

## **Libraries in Italy: a *chiaroscuro* portrait**

***Tommaso Giordano***

The Yearbook of Italian libraries (*Anagrafe delle biblioteche italiane*) lists 12,700 libraries: 6,220 public libraries, 46 state libraries (mostly these are 'historical' libraries holding important collections of books and manuscripts, among them the two national central libraries in Rome and in Florence), about 5,500 libraries of different types (including 1,300 belonging to religious institutions) and 2,000 university libraries, located in 85 state and private universities.

About 2,600 libraries were founded before 1948 (of which 620 were founded before 1800), 2,700 in the period between 1948-1972, and 4,850 from 1972 to present. These data clearly shows an extraordinary growth of libraries in the last fifty years, coinciding with the growth of mass education and the decentralization process started in 1972, devolving responsibility for public libraries to local governments.

The other side of the coin is the low number of readers in public libraries (an average of 14,000 registered readers per year), which matches the poor reading habits of Italians compared to other European countries. Recent surveys report that only 46% of Italians claim to have read at least one book during the year, among these 18% have read 4 to 11 books during the year, and 6.3% more than 12 books. These averages do not show the gap between North and South, which is one of the major problems of the country. While in some areas of the North and the Centre, library services can stand comparison with the highest European standards, in southern regions library services appear in general still precarious and little used. Despite these contradictions, Italy is a country with a well rooted and lively cultural context, not only for its unique historical heritage but also for its initiatives in all fields of art, research, and publishing. In 2012 about 57,000 titles have been published; no small feat, considering that the whole Italian speaking population hardly reaches 60 million – and therefore the publishing potential market is rather limited in comparison to other linguistic areas. Public libraries are also very active in developing significant cultural programmes (exhibitions, conferences, etc. ), and other initiatives (Internet access, IT learning courses, social networks, ...).

It is worth noting the involvement of Italian libraries in a number of digital programs at the international and local level. In addition to their participation in *Europeana*, the two national libraries have undertaken major projects with international partners, such as Google and ProQuest. Also relevant are the programmes aimed at enhancement and promotion of cultural heritage, such as the portal *Internet Culturale*, based on the collaboration of libraries, museums and archives.

The development of libraries in Italy coincided with the advent of new technologies. In the 1980s, there has been a considerable investment in library automation by public authorities. In this framework the Italian library network SBN (*Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale*) was designed and implemented during the period Eighties/beginning Nineties, which today has about 5000 member libraries in the country. The SBN programme has given a great impetus to automation and library cooperation, bringing together libraries of different types and geographical regions.

Library co-operation practice in Italy has been late in developing, compared to Northern and Central European countries. Currently cooperation programmes are fairly well-established in public libraries, especially in Northern and Central Italy. The university sector, meanwhile, appears less inclined to such practice. In any case, the arrival of electronic resources has forced libraries to undertake cooperative initiatives, but these are still weak compared to other European countries. Things are evolving and there are also positive signals on this front. Recently, the Conference of Italian Rectors (CRUI) has decided to set up a national agency for the negotiation of electronic resources. Last but not least, there has been participation in OCLC services: from 2009 to the present 600 Italian libraries have joined OCLC – among them the libraries of the Province of Trento, CIPE (a consortium of 11 universities) and other important state and private universities.

The economic crisis has weighed heavily on education, culture and research institutions. Libraries in particular are paying a high price because of cuts in public finance. It will take years to recover the losses accumulated during this period. On the other side, libraries, archives, museums and cultural institutions in general, are reacting with determination and creativity to face the current difficulties. Fortunately, there is also some good news: recently, the new Italian government – after years of devastating budget cuts - has raised (albeit very slightly), the budget for education and cultural heritage ... so, something new under the Italian sun?

Florence, October 2013

Tommaso Giordano

Published in *OCLC Member-to-Member Newsletter*, 08 November 2013.