

EDITORIAL

On September 5 1990 the US Secretary of State, Mr. James Baker, declared that the United States of America 'must lead the world' in the new era following the Cold War. 'We remain the one nation that has the necessary political, military and economic instruments at our disposal to catalyse a successful collective response by the international community'.

It is not for the *Art Libraries Journal* to protest against the colossal arrogance of such a claim, which is alien to the true spirit of internationalism, which undermines the authority of the United Nations; and which implicitly belittles the extraordinary vision and diplomacy of Mikhail Gorbachev. What is relevant for this *Journal* to notice is Baker's omission of *culture* from his brief inventory of those 'instruments' which qualify a nation for world leadership. Even while Baker spoke, the USA's thrusting, high-profile leadership of the multi-national resistance to Saddam Hussein, provoking many Muslims who had no other reason to support the Iraqi despot, was threatening to 'catalyse' conflict and conflagration. It was nonetheless still possible to hope for a political solution; by the time this issue of *Art Libraries Journal* appears such a solution may even have been implemented. Yet a political solution, if attainable, will only be cosmetic, leaving a great deal to be done in the long term to achieve real understanding and mutual respect between the various peoples involved. The crisis is the result of a cultural impasse; only cultural tools can resolve it.

What has this to do with art librarians? If cultural tools have their part to play in sustaining peace and goodwill between nations, then surely art, and libraries, and art libraries (of which the United States has so many at its disposal) are at least significant components? But also, the emergence of conflict involving Islamic and non-Islamic countries could have been predicted by examining developments in art librarianship during the last decade. We can be justly proud of the growth of internationalism within our branch of our profession, but the Islamic countries remain another world, unrepresented at gatherings of the IFLA Section of Art Libraries, unmentioned in the pages of this *Journal*. As art librarians we are implicated in an absence of dialogue; we are a measure of the depth of its silence.

And then, are our art libraries – as cultural tools, potential resources for dialogue and diplomacy – all that they should be? Of

course, Islam is permitted space on our shelves; we are more than happy to provide lavishly illustrated books on Islamic art and architecture. But even in the nature of the books and in the way in which they are regarded, symptoms of the problem reveal themselves. As with documentation of other non-Western cultures, many of the books are by Western 'experts', and can in at least some instances be thought of as the trophies of simulated, voyeuristic, post-Colonial plundering. Leafing through them, paying particular attention to their glossy illustrations, we are ready to be enchanted by the dazzling colours and intricate patterns of Islamic art but perhaps less willing to acknowledge its significance as a language of the spirit which we cannot decipher. (We can be similarly ignorant and careless of the meanings of Christian art, as Michel Albaric has very properly reminded us). Moreover, in packaging art into books and 'placing' it within the schema of our libraries and visual resource collections, we assign it, albeit unconsciously, to a safe place in a more or less distant past; while it will always have some power to delight or startle us, we don't expect it to draw blood.

The cultural impasse between Islamic and 'Western' civilisations is of course far more profound than either Saddam Hussein's despicable self-aggrandisement or Euro-American determination (dressed up as enlightened world leadership) to maintain supplies of oil. It is a failure of understanding between a holistic, religious civilisation, and a fragmented society in which 'art' and 'religion' alike have lost their potency to convince, guide, inspire, and hold everything together. (If our faith is in freedom, freedom is so awesome, so mysterious, so comfortless, that we turn away from its challenge to those smaller, selfish 'freedoms' which we lay claim to at others' expense). Like it or not, art libraries, as distinct entities, are symptoms of this fragmentation; like museums, they are places apart, where art is taken to be out of the way. But the process can be reversed. We *know*, beyond doubt and from our own experience, that the art library can be a dynamic resource, releasing art's power for good into communities in which art will always have a vital role, and promoting cultural literacy – a quality in which certain of our political leaders are so dismally and disastrously deficient.