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Session 18: New Voices in the Profession 2: Papers on Arts and Visual Resources Librarianship
Sunday, April 29, 2007 11:00am-12:30pm

Presentation notes for Unlocking the Stories of Serendipitous Cultural Object Collections with Digital Libraries

Speakers: Claudia Dold and James Ascher

Like many Special Collections departments in major academic libraries, USF Tampa Library has its share of "rare and wonderful" items. We had heard about a collection of Roman antiquities and thought it would be an intriguing summer project, and a good project for a course in digital libraries, to research them and set up a demonstration digital collection.

These objects are important documents from a distant culture; they have a place among the books in the library. As a library at an educational institution, we concluded that these items have relevance to a number of courses on campus. As budding librarians, we wanted to provide access to them. However, we needed to protect these fragile and irreplaceable items from the deterioration that comes with handling.

Our goals were to identify the items and their context, to provide for preservation, and to enable intellectual access. Our idealism was tempered by a limited budget, limited staff, limited time and off-the-shelf components. We had ourselves, some library equipment and a short summer semester. Fools rush in where angels dare not tread!

We split the work and designed a work flow so we could work in parallel. Claudia researched and digitized the objects, and created an initial description while James constructed the digital library and worked out the controlled descriptions.

For the digital library, the main goal was to enable intellectual access in an appropriate way. Since the focus on this collection was educational, we sought to protect the materials from unnecessary handling through the creation of a digital surrogate record that would provide access to components of interest as well as the background information of the material.

Our workflow proceeded from the artifact, thru initial description and digitization to the controlled description. The digital image and the controlled description were stored in a digital library object, while the physical artifact was housed and indexed in a secure manner. This digital library object provided the surrogate for the physical artifact.

The controlled description was based on a custom version of Cataloging Cultural Objects. We used a custom version for two reasons: first, the CCO was still in draft, so we could not use the full version; and second, our needs were not as comprehensive as a fully CCO cataloged object would have supported. Given our limited time to work on the project, a customized description was developed. The structure was based on the CCO categories, although CDWA was considered. The custom structure was chosen to help with potential crosstalking to a structure more closely adapted to the CCO. Our authorities were a mixture of the Library of Congress Authorities, the Getty's Union List of Artist's Names, and the Getty's Art and Architecture Thesaurus. We chose these standards as a mix because each could describe a different facet of the object in a way that supports professional standards.

We used Greenstone software for our digital library for several reasons. It is free GNU General Public License software. This means that we didn't have to pay for it and could extend its functionality as we needed, since the source code was available. Greenstone is very easy to use. It relies heavily on graphical user interfaces, and even the module for constructing the metadata structure was simple to use. Greenstone functions with OAI resources finding, so search engines can access the data, which was also crosswalked to Dublin Core in each record for this reason. Greenstone also supports flexible data formats, so we could change our descriptive and structural metadata as needed. Lastly, Greenstone automatically creates access points from quality cataloging, with minimal tweaking. The CCO enabled us to focus on describing the objects and once we had the database, we could choose the points of access that we desired.

Several factors worked in our favor. First, technology has matured to the point where we could display a photo with text. Second, faculty and other experts were generous with their time and knowledge. Third, our skill sets meshed well. We could work in parallel and have confidence that we were making good progress.

In hindsight, we could have done several things better. Subject headings are a notorious challenge for these types of material. Our project could have attempted to break new ground and explore new ways of doing subject analysis, rather than relying on conventional techniques. A successful numbering scheme for the photos emerged on the third try. We would have saved a great deal of time had we created the final scheme initially. Furthermore, had we known more about the software the library uses to house its digital collections, we could have made the transition from demonstration project to full-blown digital collection with fewer bumps. As it

is, Special Collections was impressed with our work and accepted our proposal to set up the entire collection as a digital collection.

As students, we learned a lot on this project. Furthermore, it is gratifying to leave a useful product in the library as we graduate and move on to a career in librarianship.