A Modern Database for a Modern Collection

An Examination of the Art Cataloging Project
at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery

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The Albright-Knox and its collection

- Founded in 1862 as the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy
- Over its 150-year history, focused on collecting the art of its time
- Collection includes nearly 6,500 objects
- Uses Mimsy XG as its collections management system
- In 2010, began a project to bring together information on our collection in one place so that we have a complete, accurate, and informative resource for the objects
The cataloging project

- Project is based in the Gallery library
- Project is led by two LIS catalogers, with background in art history
- Why information professionals?
  - understanding of databases and database structure
  - experience in working with controlled vocabularies and assigning indexing terms
  - experience in using standards as a tool in promoting accuracy and accessibility of information
Unique nature of art information

- Different types of information required
  - Exhibition histories
  - Provenance
- Art objects are not self-describing
  - Fundamental data is not printed on the object
- Museums generally use local practices for documenting information
  - Not as accustomed to using controlled vocabularies and other standards

Sources of information

- Registrar’s accession records, documentation files
- Curatorial research, records
- Library resources
  - Collection catalogues
  - Exhibition catalogues
  - Catalogue raisonnés
  - Artist ephemera files
- Gallery annual reports
- Gallery exhibition yearbooks
Establishing guidelines

- Adopt data standards
  - Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO)
  - Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA)
- Use controlled vocabularies from Getty
  - Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT)
  - Union List of Artist Names (ULAN)
  - Thesaurus for Geographic Names (TGN)
- Add citations to substantiate information
Before and after

Before the project:
- Data entered inconsistently, in terms of language and formatting
- Duplicate records existed in some modules, such as people/organizations, exhibitions
- Output needs given priority over good database design

Improvements through the project:
- Application of Getty vocabularies
  - Controlled, consistent language
  - Authority records
- Assignment of indexing terms
- Addition of detailed, textual information to enrich records
Using AAT to define class

- Before, with local terms:
  - Class: Unique Work on Paper
  - Work Type: Drawing; Mixed
- Now, more specific, making use of AAT’s hierarchical structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Work Type (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>drawings</td>
<td>visual works; paintings (visual works)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drawing</td>
<td>visual work; watercolor (painting)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sort</th>
<th>Work Type</th>
<th>Prior Work Type?</th>
<th>Source of Work Type Term</th>
<th>Attribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>drawing</td>
<td></td>
<td>AAT</td>
<td>cataloger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>watercolor</td>
<td></td>
<td>AAT</td>
<td>cataloger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>item name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using AAT for consistency and specificity

- Before, inconsistent use of language
- Now, controlled lists of AAT terms to describe more detailed, specialized information
Using *AAT*, *ULAN*, *TGN* for indexing terms

- **AAT** terms to describe style, process, general subject
- **ULAN** to identify related people
- **TGN** to identify related places
Recording changing information

- Title field
  - multiple title types
  - flags for preferred, prior titles
  - citations for titles

- note field for detailed information

A memo from Ken Wayne dated November 3, 1999 explains that the painting was exhibited in Paris in 1885 as "L'Ambitieuse," and in 1886 in London with the English title, "Political Woman." The painting acquired the title "The Reception" many years after its creation and from an unknown source. The memo indicates that the painting should be referred to with the original titles, with a note about its previous title: "L'Ambitieuse (Political Woman)" also known as "The Reception" (source: Ken Wayne, memo to All Staff, November 3, 1999; located in 1909:10 dcc file).
Controlled data and free-text display

- Provenance field
  - Indexed fields with controlled lists and links to People authority
- Display field, allowing for nuanced and detailed information, expressed in format typical in art community
People & Organizations Authority

- Using *ULAN* as source for authority records
- Cataloging new records for those entities not in *ULAN*, or for those entities of local significance

**Variant forms of name**

**Brief and extended descriptions**

**Links to other modules in database**
Exhibitions, Publications

- Enhancing records for exhibitions and publications, and adding more descriptive information for Albright-Knox ones.

Description from exhibition catalogue

Checklist of AKAG objects

Links to other modules in database
Reaching a larger audience

- Website search function is limited
- Results include select information

Now, focused on reaching our own staff
- All staff members have access to database
- Training sessions on how to use, search database
Improving subject access

- Description
  - portraits
- Identification
  - Rose Caron (1857-1930), French opera singer
- Interpretation
  - ?

- Curatorial collaboration could help in adding interpretation level
Continuing the documentation process

- Must ensure that new information is included in the database
  - Current exhibition and publication histories
  - New scholarship on objects in the collection
- Involvement from key departments
  - Curatorial
  - Registrar
  - Education
  - Publications


