Since 2010, a project has been underway at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery to catalog its art collection using the collections management software, Mimsy XG. Historically, the Albright-Knox has relied on a local, paper-based documentation system for tracking, cataloging, and documenting the works in its collection. Although Mimsy has served as the Gallery’s electronic collections database for several years and was managed by the Gallery’s registrars, they simply did not have the resources to fully develop it as a complete collections management system. In 2009, staff in the library recognized a need for a more comprehensive, sophisticated tool for recording and accessing information about the art collection. With input and support from departments across the museum, they began to develop a plan for a systematic and thorough documentation of the collection that would bring together information in one place, providing a complete, accurate, and informative resource for the objects. Funded by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, implementation of the project began in the summer of 2010.

The involvement of the Gallery’s librarians from the outset had an effect on the way in which the project was approached. The two catalogers hired to manage and work on the implementation of the project have master’s degrees in library and information science, with a background or familiarity in art history. The catalogers work with registrars and curators throughout the project, but they are information professionals based in the library and report to the library’s director. Museum culture tends to place a greater emphasis on specialized knowledge in art history, and museum professionals do not necessarily have advanced training in areas related to information organization. But LIS professionals have an understanding of databases and database
structure, they are experienced in working with controlled vocabularies and assigning indexing terms, and they value the use of standards as a tool in promoting accuracy and accessibility of information, all skills that would be advantageous to the project.

Despite this expertise, there are certainly distinctions between traditional library cataloging and cataloging a cultural object. These differences, which largely stem from the fact that museum objects are often unique, are succinctly outlined by Patricia Harpring in her *Introduction to Controlled Vocabularies: Terminology for Art, Architecture, and Other Cultural Works.* Information not typically recorded in other types of repositories, such as exhibition histories or provenance, is vital data for artworks. A cultural object is not self-describing as an item in a library collection might be, and fundamental information, such as the creator of an object or an object’s title, is not printed on the object itself. And whereas libraries have long valued the use of controlled vocabularies and accepted data standards when cataloging and sharing their materials, museums have generally used local practices for describing the works in their collections.

Because of these key differences, cataloging museum objects would require a different approach, involving multiple sources of information and specific ways of documenting this information. At the Albright-Knox, information on our collection was produced by, and kept with, various departments around the museum. The registrar’s office maintained valuable records and files regarding an object, with correspondence, research, photographs, and other documents that often provided primary sources for information that had not otherwise been cited. These files were often the repository for past curatorial research, too, which would be helpful in enhancing our records. And of course, the Gallery’s library possessed many sources that would be useful, including collection and exhibition catalogues, catalogue raisonnés, artist ephemera files, annual reports, and Gallery exhibition yearbooks.
Incorporating these disparate sources of information would greatly enrich the quality of our object records, but we wanted to go about this process in a way that would emphasize accuracy, accessibility and accountability. The first step in doing this was adopting standards for data content and values. Our cataloging guidelines, authored by the project manager, are based on the guidelines set forth in the Visual Resources Association’s *Cataloging Cultural Objects*\(^{ii}\) and the Getty’s *Categories for the Description of Works of Art*.\(^{iii}\) To ensure the use of standardized, controlled terminology, we are using the three Getty vocabularies: the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus*,\(^{iv}\) the *Union List of Artist Names*,\(^{v}\) and the *Thesaurus for Geographic Names*,\(^{vi}\) which have been loaded directly into our database. To ensure that the data in the records is substantiated by authoritative sources, we are also adding citations for our documentation.

Applying these new data standards and vocabularies not only defines how new information is entered, but addresses many of the issues plaguing the information already there. Data was often entered in Mimsy inconsistently, since fields were not explicitly defined in terms of values or formatting. Because there was no use of authority records or control, duplicate records existed for people, exhibitions, and publications. Some fields in the database had been repurposed to satisfy an output need, such as producing label copy, and areas of the database that were designed to serve a specific function were not being used to our advantage.

To understand how the project has helped to improve the quality of our object records, several examples will be examined, focusing on the application of the Getty vocabularies to add descriptive value, the assignment of indexing terms to promote access, and the addition of detailed, textual information to enrich the records.
Prior to our cataloging project, the Gallery used a local system for defining the classification and work type of an object. Translating these terms into AAT terminology allows us to take advantage of the hierarchical structure of the vocabulary and establish consistency with other cultural institutions also using the AAT to classify their works. For many objects in our collection, this transition was quite straightforward. However, some local terms did not correspond directly to a term in the AAT, and so catalogers were required to make decisions based on the information available and the need to appropriately group objects. In the local system, Ree Morton’s untitled work of watercolor, pencil, and crayon on paper was classed as a “Unique Work on Paper,” with the work type of “Drawing; Mixed.” While this classification captured the drawing component of the work, it did not address the watercolor, which was just as prominent in this particular case. We determined, in accordance with CCO, that it was allowable to assign more than one class or work type term to better define an object, which often helped us build a stronger record.

Using the AAT has strengthened our materials and techniques descriptions by promoting consistency in language and providing the vocabulary to describe specific, specialized information. Previously this field was just a free-text statement of the medium, with no controlled vocabulary in place, which led to inconsistent expressions of materials. For instance, Plexiglas appeared in at least five different forms, with varied capitalization and spellings. Acrylic was either just acrylic, or acrylic paint, if it was thought that it might be confused with the plastic, acrylic. AAT uses qualifiers to differentiate between these homographs, eliminating confusion for catalogers and end-users. We can also be more specific and accurate in our descriptions now. A print, described as simply “lithograph” before cataloging, is now described with a number of dedicated terms related to prints, including Arches paper, bleeding, and deckle edges. For those with specialized knowledge, these terms help to convey a much more informative record of the work.
Not only are we using AAT terms to enhance our physical descriptions, but they are functioning as indexing terms that link directly to our records. We are also adding indexing terms to describe artistic styles, general subject matter, and other artistic concepts related to a work. Assigning index terms drawn from the ULAN and TGN has enabled us to make visible the context surrounding an artwork, as when an object depicts a named person or place, or to identify where an object was created. For example, a sculpture by Jacques Lipchitz, *Sailor with Guitar*, is now linked to six AAT terms, including Cubist to describe its style, figures to describe the general subject matter, and lost-wax process to describe the method of casting used in its creation. We have linked to the name of the foundry that cast the sculpture, and we have linked to two places: Madrid, where the original plaster sculpture was created, and Paris, where the bronze was cast. More than just adding descriptive value to a record, these terms are serving as controlled access points that will help end-users in retrieving results.

One of the challenges in creating a successful database for an art collection is balancing the use of standardized, controlled, indexed information with the need to express descriptive, nuanced, and changing information that is common in the art community. Basic information typically used to identify a work, such as creation dates, titles, and even the creator, can be disputed, uncertain, unknown, or different than what it once was due to changing opinions or scholarship, and the controlled fields need to accommodate this. Detailed, narrative descriptions of an artwork are needed in conjunction with the indexed data to amplify the information.

The title field for an object record is one example of how these needs were managed. Previously, only the title itself was recorded in the database. The title area is now comprised of several elements, including title type, attribution source, and note, with flags for preferred titles, translated titles, and prior titles. These elements allow us to more accurately record the title of
an object, or at least the history and reasoning behind why a work has a certain title. Titles used in publications that are different than our institutionally-preferred title are now recorded as a cited title, and titles that have been translated into multiple languages can also be recorded. Historical title changes can be documented by using the prior title flag. Not only does this additional title information enhance the record, it also serves to increase access; a researcher that has come across an artwork under a different title will be more likely to find it through a title search in the database.

The provenance element provides another example of the need to balance use of controlled, definitive values with more detailed explanations. At the beginning of our project, we used the provenance field to create links to previous owners in the people authority, but we found that it was sometimes difficult to convey enough detail using these controlled fields. After about a year of cataloging, we met with curators and other collection stewards in the Gallery to discuss the issue of documenting provenance. We reworked several fields to allow for a clearer definition of ownership. In compliance with recommendations set forth in CDWA\textsuperscript{vii} and by the American Association of Museums,\textsuperscript{viii} we added a name qualifier field, so that we could easily express uncertainties; we defined the relationship type with a small list of controlled terms, allowing for the distinction between owners and dealers; and we developed a controlled list of terms to describe the transfer mode between owners.

Recognizing that it would be difficult to concatenate the controlled fields into an accurate, readable statement, we created a separate, free-text field in the object record for this purpose. We wanted to be able to express provenance in the way that is typical in the art field, using punctuation to convey changes in ownership, certain language to express uncertainties and gaps in the history, and notes to provide background or clarifications. Although this supplementary field was not planned from the outset, it has become an important addition to our
records, and it underlies our concern to produce a useful tool that supports the practical needs of the Gallery and the art community.

While the main focus of the cataloging project is the object records, our work has inevitably carried over into other areas of the database. Prior to the project, the people module in Mimsy was populated with duplicate records, and it was difficult to differentiate between records of the same name, since no data content standards had been in place. Adopting ULAN as the source for our authority records for people and organizations addressed many of these problems. Interns, drawn primarily from library and information science master’s programs, worked along with the catalogers to eliminate duplicates and clean up existing records. They have also cataloged new records that were created as a result of work being done in other areas of the database, and particularly enhanced records for those entities that have local significance, such as donors or past directors of the gallery. These new records were created following the same standards used by ULAN, and one of the desired outcomes of the project is to contribute some of our local records to ULAN.

We have also enhanced other types of records in Mimsy, such as those for exhibitions and publications. The documentation of cultural objects includes recording information about the object’s exhibition and publication histories, and while this information could be recorded using a free-text field within the object record, the relational structure of the database provides a more effective way. The exhibition and publication information that was in the database before was incomplete, and, as in other areas, there was never any control or validation exercised on the records. As we built up our object histories to be as comprehensive as possible and cleaned up existing information, we began to discover shared histories and relationships that were previously not as visible. Wanting to serve as a resource on the Gallery’s own exhibitions, we have also used the exhibitions module as a place to record more details for these shows,
including checklists and descriptions. Storing this information in a searchable database promotes ease of access and serves as a useful starting point for more in-depth research on the Gallery’s history.

Ultimately, we hope to provide greater access to the database to our Gallery visitors and the larger art community. The collection search that is available on our website is limited to a keyword search, and the information displayed in the results does not sufficiently represent the information that we have. The work that is being done now could provide the basis for an improved online collections search with rich, detailed records. Exhibition histories and bibliographies for our objects, as well as information on people and exhibitions related to the Gallery, could add value to this resource. And our use of structured vocabularies with defined relationships, like the AAT and TGN, would make retrieval more powerful, allowing for searches based on broader terms or categories, as well as discovery through browsing.

While we are certainly working towards reaching this larger audience, presently we are focused on informing our own staff. In January of this year, we held several training sessions on using the database, and people from various departments, ranging from marketing, to visitor services, and even the deputy director, attended with enthusiasm. All staff members now have access to the database, and we continue to encourage people to use it, if only to search for works in the collection by their favorite artist. As staff members become more familiar with the database and its capabilities, they will hopefully rely on it as their source for collections information.

While the project has certainly gained support across the museum, there are areas that could be further developed through greater cross-departmental collaboration and involvement. Curatorial expertise would be beneficial in providing subject access to an artwork. Both CCO and CDWA define subject as a core element for a catalog record, but, perhaps surprisingly from
the point of view of a library cataloger, subject terms are not always recorded when cataloging cultural object collections. The subject of an artwork is thought about in three levels: description, identification, and interpretation. And although we are applying general subject terms to describe and identify an artwork, we are not providing an interpretation of the subject through indexing. Complete subject cataloging does not fall within our project plan, mainly because the catalogers are primarily information professionals and not art historians, and so this is an area that could be strengthened through the contributions of curators.

Because cataloging art is a dynamic process, involvement from several departments on an ongoing basis would help to ensure that the most current information related to the collection is reflected in the database. The bulk of the work that the catalogers are doing is entering information retrospectively, which is a vital step. But as objects are sent out on loan, as our works are referenced in new publications, and as new scholarship or discoveries related to the collection arise, it is necessary to include this information in the database so that we remain an authoritative and current source on our own collection. Because these activities are initiated and managed by different departments, the documentation process and the database must be fully incorporated into key workflows.

Despite these areas requiring further development, the cataloging project has made considerable progress since its beginning, and we continue to work through the collection object by object. We have organized the information on our collection in a way that makes better use of the database structure, improves the accuracy and consistency of the data, and makes the information more accessible through retrieval. More than these immediate benefits, as information professionals, we are emphasizing the value in sharing data beyond our own institution and are working on setting the precedent for future documentation so that this becomes a reality.


Baca and Harpring, *Categories for the Description of Works of Art*, section 23.
