

Who's afraid of the Big, Bad, Uktena Monster? Subject Cataloging for Images

One of the natural connections between art librarians and image curators is an appreciation of the need for controlled vocabularies to describe our holdings so that patrons can find what they are looking for more easily. However, when it comes to subject matter, pictures tend to be more expansive and amorphous than printed materials. Books usually have a narrow, well-defined focus. In contrast, image subject matter is often ambiguous and multi-layered. Standards developed for image cataloging thus far do not cover Asian and indigenous traditions to the same level as Western art, especially in regard to subject matter.

After defining the parameters of subject as an image cataloging category, I will review existing controlled vocabularies, the hindrances that cause us to hesitate in adding subject terms to image records, and some solutions that could help make subject indexing much less formidable, or at least help it become a standard part of image cataloging.

[SLIDE 2] Art images can be purely illustrations of a story, a place in time, or an abstract concept. The five basic questions of journalism can serve as the primary basis for describing a narrative or illustrative story: the who, what, when, where, and why?

Answers to these questions in turn comprise the answer to the broader question, what is the image *of*? 20th century art historian Erwin Panofsky established a hierarchical structure for the analysis of the subjects of art objects that has remained a standard. **[SLIDE 3]** He proposed three levels of meaning: the pre-iconographic or physical description, or what is the picture of; **[SLIDE 4]** the iconographic analysis or reference to a religious, historical, mythical or literary tradition represented by the image that answers what is the picture about, and above that, **[SLIDE 5]** the iconological interpretation or abstract concepts conveyed by the particular scene. Panofsky is still cited as the authority in developing subject indexing schemes and research projects to gauge users' success in finding images. A fourth level of meaning, that of the overlay of the period of history in which the work was made that impacts its meaning has been added by recent subject analysts such as Moshe Barasch, in *The Language of Art*. **[SLIDE 6]** Images can be pure symbols of a nation, clan,

organization or other entity, or a veiled symbol, an ideogram, or a visual metaphor **[SLIDE 7]**. The symbol could be said to be a convention unconsciously recognized as representing that entity, such as a national flag or the symbol of the Red Cross. A visual metaphor is more of an ad hoc symbol invented by the artist.

[SLIDE 8] Non-objective art can be challenging to describe. The AAT recommends reserving the term “non-objective” to contemporary art, but in my opinion, that cuts off the possibility for scholars to make connections between modern abstract art and the art of other times and places. **[SLIDE 9]** I have developed a list of terms for non-objective works in my local database for searching.

This brings up the first of the barriers to subject indexing: portability. Many curators hesitate to use subject terms because the existing standard vocabularies available are inadequate in scope and extent in describing pictures, and they want their data to be portable in anticipation of merging with other collections.

So let’s look at what standards are available. **[SLIDE 10]** The Library of Congress Thesaurus of Graphic Materials provides many terms for describing an image at the pre-iconographic level. So do the Art and Architecture Thesaurus and the Thesaurus of Geographic Names. All of these sources are limited in the levels of meaning that can be ascribed, and they are particularly limited in the terminology of Asian peoples and indigenous peoples of Africa, the Americas, and the South Pacific, although the Getty vocabularies are constantly endeavoring to improve in this regard. The AAT excludes iconographic terms. The Fogg and Tansey traditional slide cataloging systems that have largely been abandoned provided two levels of subject description in their catalog coding, pre-iconographic and iconographic. ICONCLASS, the alphanumeric code system developed by Henri van der Waal on index cards in the 1940s, has been upgraded by Hans Brandhorst by transforming it from a multi-volume print resource to the internet and adding a feature to allow expansion on the web by invited contributions. It was originally designed to track the iconography of prints and paintings of the low countries from the Renaissance through the 17th century and has been used by European museums to catalog and retrieve images by iconographic subjects on multiple levels of meaning. CCO, Cataloging Cultural Objects, provides a guide for

standardizing the way descriptive cataloging of images is recorded. It contains a chapter on creating authorities.

Other barriers discouraging subject cataloging include the inability for any one curator to have enough breadth of knowledge across the whole terrain of art history, and many image repositories still have solo curators. But even a physical description of the image for a searcher will help, because people looking for symbols and iconographic images know what physical attributes to search on, so if you provide at least that, you provide a hook.

Another barrier is choosing terms that reflect current usage but still convey accurate meaning. Maureen Burns has been working with a team of librarians to document images and stories of the Japanese internment camps during World War II. They point out that the term used to describe the removal is “evacuation”, as if the Japanese Americans were being rescued from danger when actually they were being imprisoned. For Native Americans there would be many similar scenarios. So how do you correct the language but still provide access by the terms people are accustomed to using? Subject indexing can take time, but so does creating an artist authority. The difference is in deciding how much description is enough and how much is too much.

[SLIDE 11] Automation is one solution researchers are trying to both speed up data entry and objectify the process. The CLiMB Project, the investigators for which have presented a few times at VRA conferences, endeavors to add subject terms by creating algorithms that find the nouns and verbs in a descriptive text provided by the object’s repository or another text source and automatically insert them into the cataloging record. They are currently doing experiments with this method. One drawback is that you need a text in hand to work with.

[SLIDE 12] Finally, the advent of the internet has made it easier to look up museum descriptions and other authoritative sources at our fingertips. I was able to identify the river in this Jasper Cropsey painting of the Starrucca Viaduct and learn that it was one of the first stone railroad bridges in the country, possibly useful for engineering history, in a few moments on the internet.

Some museums are inviting online visitors and scholars to tag their objects with social tags, and several studies have been done comparing social tagging with professional cataloguing. While the drawbacks of social tagging such as the lack of hierarchical and associational relationships that will link synonyms and broader and narrower terms are obvious to librarians, by analyzing social tagging they can bring to light the interests that the general public and novice museum goers have that professional catalogers, who are addressing the needs of scholars would not include. Including art historians with expertise similarly provides the terminology needed if not the structure. Paying attention to the terms people use for tagging might promote more interest in image collections and art, especially for museums. It will educate us on how different demographic groups look at images. As we have seen in recent conferences, researchers in subject cataloging are paying more attention to the users of collections to analyze how well our current vocabularies serve them.

The Getty vocabularies as well as ICONCLASS actively solicit contributions to broaden their coverage. It is time-consuming to send in proposals, but institutions with larger staffs could work on contributing more in the area of indigenous arts. It will take some complex planning to develop a scheme in the nature of ICONCLASS for Asian and indigenous art, but a task group or a wiki or some other sort of team effort could be developed with members having expertise in different areas of art and architecture. Such a task force could work on developing authority records that would link related terms using the CCO guidelines and also contributing to the Getty vocabularies. Shalimar has also suggested developing a bibliography of reference sources for subject cataloging, especially for non-Western art, that could also be accessible online so it could be added to. These are ideas that we hope will stir discussion after our formal presentations.