Museum Cataloging Handbook

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Table of Contents

• Introduction

• Differences between Libraries and Museums
  o Collections
  o Use and Storage of Collections
  o Audience
  o Issues

• Museum Cataloging Standards

• Conclusion

• Bibliography

• Appendix A: CCO Core Requirements

• Appendix B: Resources
  o Associations
  o Controlled Vocabulary Standards
  o Data Standards
  o Description Standards
  o Examples of Published Catalogs
Introduction

This handbook is meant to serve as an introduction to museum cataloging so that future LIS students and other interested parties can have a starting point for navigating the plethora and diversity of resources available without being overwhelmed.

In the simplest sense, museums and libraries are institutions that house cultural repositories. Museums can include collections based around art, science, history, culture, and many other topics. Libraries, while they often have archival collections of a very specific nature, primarily include research and reading material most relevant and useful to the communities they serve.

For the purposes of this handbook, a museum is a cultural repository for physical collections (which may include, but are not primarily composed of, books). A library, for the purposes of this handbook, primarily houses public-access books, such as academic and public libraries.
Differences between Libraries and Museums

Collections

A museum collection contains items of differing shapes, sizes, materials, and care methods. An art museum can include paintings with various canvasses, paint types, and sizes; sculptures of various materials, sizes, and weights; ephemera of various ages and shapes; and so on.

A library collection, on the other hand, contains relatively standard-sized and shaped rectangular, bound books made of paper. While variety does exist within the categories of “paper” and “books,” the items in the main collection of a library can be stacked, sorted, and displayed next to each other on identical shelving units. A library’s collection display plan does not need to account for the kinds of materials, sizes, and shapes found in a museum collection.

Use and Storage of Collections

While some interactive museums do exist, a primary difference between museum and library items is their use. Most museum collections are meant for viewing, not physical interaction, and therefore items are affixed to walls, displayed behind glass or roped-off areas, and in other orientations meant to prevent museum patrons from touching and potentially harming the often unique, rare, old, and/or delicate objects.

In addition, most of a museum's collection is in storage, not on view (Alexander 208). Whether on display or not, the variety of materials and conditions in museum objects require multiple methods and resources for safe storage and preservation.
Books in libraries, on the other hand, are meant for the public's use. Main collection library books and periodicals are typically not in danger of being the only copy of that work and are durable enough to withstand use over time. Most of a physical books collection is on display and organized on shelves with public browsing access. There are also fewer method and resource types required to maintain and store a library collection when most books are relatively similar to each other physically.

**Audience**

While museum patrons have many reasons for visiting, the majority go to view items within a theme that the museum or a traveling exhibit specialize in. A museum patron centers around the action of “browse,” and what they are viewing are the items themselves, not surrogates.

A library patron certainly can browse, but many library patrons also go to research or read for recreation. Unlike museum patrons who browse, library patrons most often search. Library patrons’ first point of contact is often the surrogate catalog entry rather than the item itself.

In order for a library patron to find what they need, a catalog entry must primarily include information about the contents of the book, using such metadata as author, title, publication date, subjects, and description. A museum patron already can see the object on display, which does not require a content summary like a book with several hundred thousand words does, so the primary information needs are different. Rather than a summary of the internal contents of a book, a
museum object’s description focuses on metadata external to the object itself: the object’s place in history, within an art movement, its meaning, and so on.

**Issues**

The main issue within museum cataloging is reconciling any established standards with the collection type, needs, and available resources at the local level. The infinite range of museum objects makes any attempt at a comprehensive and exhaustive standardization practically impossible. Museums have often created in-house guidelines. For example, the Sewall-Belmont House and Museum (SBHM) has their own metadata guidelines. The National Park Service museum handbook includes detailed preservation, cataloging, measuring, and other guidelines specific for the cultural institutions housed under the United States Department of the Interior.

Not only is there discrepancy for content standards, but also for data encoding standards for the purpose of cross-institutional record sharing. For example, some SBHM metadata fields have Dublin Core equivalents, but the cataloger must take the time to include the equivalency information in the handbook and to make sure encoding across the databases is accurate.
Museum Cataloging Standards

Museum catalogs should include all the item characteristics already described in this handbook so far. How such a record should be organized and standardized varies within the museum community. Despite the difficulty with establishing an overarching standard guide, museums and art institutions tend to agree on the fundamentals. At the most basic, a museum object’s record should include “three types of information: Collections management information, beginning with acquisition information; physical descriptive information; and artistic, historical, and/or scientific contextual information, including significance to the museum's collection” (Alexander 201).

Unlike libraries, which are mostly internationally standardized with either AACR2 or RDA, museums do not have an internationally recognized content or display standard for record keeping since “given the diversity of cultural works described by catalogers, no single set of minimal elements could suffice in all cases” (CCO Part One).

Many attempts have still been made to introduce standardization of vocabularies, categories, and description, but the variables among institutions can include size and requirements of the collection, focus of the collection, expertise of the catalogers and availability of information, expertise of the users, and technical capabilities (CCO Part One). Therefore many museum cataloging guides focus on how to build relevant metadata, vocabularies, databases, subjects, and other cataloging elements according to individual institutions’ needs.

Recent attempts at standardization come from such institutions as the Getty Foundation, National Park Service, and Visual Resources Association (VRA). The VRA, for example, developed
metadata guidelines in Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA), which is an extensive handbook with recommendations for best practices for cultural institutions. A subset of CDWA, Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO), seeks to define the metadata elements that should make up the basic requirements of a museum object’s catalog entry. CCO eliminates administrative data like provenance, conservation history, exhibition history, and other similar information that can be found in CDWA (Harpring).

The core descriptive requirements set by the CCO best practices guide is listed in Appendix A as an example of information cultural institutions find most important. Many of these fields, in practice, draw from controlled vocabularies established or referenced in CCO. The guide acknowledges that catalogers will not always have the information to fill some of even the core fields and suggests to put “unknown,” “n/a,” or something similar rather than leaving out the field in a display meant for users.

This handbook has focused mostly on content standardization attempts among museum cataloging. Just as there are various content standards, so too are there multiple standardization attempts for thesauri, data display, and authority control. For example, the Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) is a commonly used “standardized vocabulary for fine arts, architecture, decorative art, and material culture of the Western world” (National Park Service). More resources are referenced in Appendix B.
Conclusion

This handbook has served as a simplified summary and introduction to the world of museum cataloging. While there is much more information and expertise to be gained, the reader of this guide should walk away with the understanding that cultural institutions at the local level are dedicated to the best practices that benefit their collections and patrons. There exists a great sense of collaboration among museums, which both draw from externally established resources and develop internal standards to best serve their community’s needs. Museum cataloging will continue to grow and proves to have an exciting future.
Bibliography


Appendix A: CCO Core Requirements

- Work Type
- Title
- Creator display
- Controlled Creator
- Role
- Measurements display
- Materials and Techniques display
- Display Date
  - Earliest Date
  - Latest Date
- Current Location display
- Subject display
  - Controlled Subject
- View Description
- View Type
- View Subject display
  - View Subject Controlled
- Personal and Corporate Name Authority
  - Names
  - Display Biography
  - Birth Date
  - Death Date
  - Nationality
  - Life Roles
  - Sources
- Geographic Place Authority
  - Names
  - Place Type
  - Broader Context
  - Sources
- Concept Authority
  - Terms
  - Broader Context
  - Note
  - Sources
- Subject Authority
  - Subject Names
  - Sources
  - Broader Context
Appendix B: Resources

Associations
American Alliance of Museums
Getty Foundation
Visual Resources Association

Controlled Vocabulary Standards
Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT)
Cultural Objects Name Authority (CONA) Online
Library of Congress Authorities

Data Standards
CDWA Lite
VRA Core

Description Standards
Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO) Commons
Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA)

Examples of Published Catalogs
Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative
Princeton University Art Museum