

Section 3 Metadata System

3.1 Metadata Schema Used

Our group examined a metadata schema called Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA), defined in Arlene G. Taylor's *Organization of Information* (2009) as a "metadata element set...used for describing and accessing information about works of art, architecture, other material culture, and related images."¹ CDWA was developed out of work done in the 1990s by the Art Information Task Force (AITF), comprising groups that both provide and use information about art, such as museum curators and registrars, art librarians, art history scholars, etc., including members of the Getty Museum research staff.² The AITF defined the broad function of CDWA as being "a framework to which existing art information systems can be mapped and upon which new systems can be developed."³ They also stated that by applying authority control and descriptive cataloging standards to the schema, the "information residing in diverse systems [will be] both more compatible and more accessible."⁴

CDWA comprises 532 categories and subcategories; a number of these make up the "core" elements, which represent the information required to uniquely identify and describe a work.⁵ See Table 3.1 below for an example of the CDWA schema applied to a catalog record for a painting in the Getty Museum online collection, illustrating several of the core elements.

¹ Arlene G. Taylor, *The Organization of Information* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2009), 229.

² See http://www.getty.edu/research/publications/electronic_publications/cdwa/.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Table 3.1: An example record, using several core CDWA elements to catalog “Houses Near Orléans,” Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, 1830⁶

Object/Work	Catalog Level: item Type: painting
Classification	Terms: paintings European art
Titles or Names	Text: Houses Near Orléans
Creation	Creator Description: Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (French, 1796-1875) Creation Date: 1830
Measurements	Dimensions Description: 28.6 x 38.6 cm (11 1/4 x 15 3/16 in.)
Materials and Techniques	Description: oil on paper mounted on millboard
Subject Matter	Indexing Terms: villages, wilderness

Murtha Baca, currently the Head of Digital Art History Access at the Getty Research Institute (GRI), has been one of the lead developers of CDWA. She has argued for applying conventional library methods of descriptive cataloging and authority control to art objects in order to make information on museum collections available to a broader group of people.⁷ Baca’s aim is to serve not just curators and registrars, but also “conservators, educators...docents,” in other words, the whole range of museum staff who need access to information in the online collections system.⁸ Additionally, Baca wants information to be available to those outside the museum, such as academic researchers, scholars, and other end

⁶ Information derived from the following websites:

<http://search.getty.edu/museum/records/musobject?objectid=146004>

http://www.getty.edu/research/publications/electronic_publications/cdwa/examples.html

<http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/aat/index.html>

⁷ Murtha Baca, “Beyond the Gallery Walls: Tools and Methods Leading to Collections Information,” *Bulletin for the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 30 (2004): 14-15.

⁸ Ibid.

users accessing a museum's online collections.⁹ This effort would bring museum cataloging more in line with traditional library cataloging and would no doubt be welcomed by librarians who have migrated to the museum world.

Writing in 2004, Baca noted that museums have only recently become aware “that the approach that libraries and archives have taken for decades is also essential for making information on their own collections available. Museum information has a history of being hoarded if not outright hidden in curatorial files.”¹⁰ Baca has also written at length about authority control specifically and its reception in the museum world. She states that:

Curators and other museum professionals tend to be horrified by an expression like “authority control.” The mere idea that an art historian who considers himself or herself to be an ‘authority’ on a particular artist, school, or art form being told the exact name to use for a particular artist, or what the object in the collections under his or her care should be called, is abhorrent.¹¹

Emily Nedell Tuck of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston notes that current practice entails curators and registrars “collaborat[ing] at the time of accessioning to create an object record, sometimes called a tombstone record, which, as the name implies, is both permanent and deliberately spare.”¹² She explains that the goal of curators and registrars is to document an item as correctly and authentically as possible, basing their choices on how the creator describes the object.¹³ She adds that they also do not like to assign art historical periods or styles to objects,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Baca, “Beyond the Gallery Walls,” 14.

¹¹ Murtha Baca. “Fear of Authority? Authority Control and Thesaurus Building for Art and Material Culture Information,” *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 38 (2004): 143-151.

¹² Emily Nedell Tuck, “Putting the Wagon Before the Horse? Implementing CCO in a Museum Collection Management System,” Unpublished (2012): 2.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

because these are subjective labels imposed by art historians and create bias.¹⁴ Likewise, curators and registrars view subject terms as biased and are reluctant to apply those as well.¹⁵ When searching the collections database for their own needs, they tend to search “narrowly: by accession number, title, artist, or date range, and not broadly, as the general public or researchers tend to do, by subject, style, culture or art historical period or movement.”¹⁶

From our group’s inspection of numerous museum sites over the course of this project, (including the National Gallery of Canada, and Europeana, which provides access to multiple online art collections across Europe), we have discovered that museums, including the Getty Museum, have *not* in fact implemented CDWA when cataloging metadata intended for the end user. For all the discussion and description of the schema that Baca has supplied through publications authored for the Getty Museum, the schema is simply not being used.

In 2004, Baca explained that museums have been reluctant to transition to CDWA because they could face major obstacles in conducting such a large-scale effort.¹⁷ First, museum staff tend to think that “making collections available online or in a public access system is a discrete, finite project that will sooner or later come to an end...rather than as an ongoing part of their core mission and activities.”¹⁸ Furthermore, she stated, museums underestimate the staffing required to implement and develop such a project and may typically expect the registrar or other staff to do the work.¹⁹ Implementing CDWA, she stated, is much more complicated than that. Museums must realize that “the cluster of activities related to creating, managing, and publishing

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷ Baca, “Beyond the Gallery Walls,” 15.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

collections information will require new people, new skill sets, and yes new positions.”²⁰

More recently, Tuck notes, the Getty has published examples of art objects catalogued using CDWA, giving the impression that museums have indeed begun to implement the metadata schema.²¹ For example, on the Getty’s CDWA website, there are numerous examples illustrating objects in the Getty collection itself. But when viewing the metadata for these same objects via the Getty Search Gateway, the user does not encounter CDWA in use. Tuck implies that the Getty, perhaps in hoping to promote broader use of CDWA, has attributed a greater use of the schema than there exists.²²

Our group made several attempts to contact the Getty Museum to have them clarify this situation for us, but the museum has not responded to our queries. We turned, therefore, to other museums for information on what they are doing to categorize/catalog their online collections and why they haven’t implemented CDWA. We will be referring to these contacts and/or resources throughout the remainder of Section 3.1.

When creating metadata for particular online collections with the end user in mind, as Baca noted, museums are confronted with a number of issues. Andrea Selbig, registrar at the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison, WI, lists some of these problems in relation to implementing CDWA: 1) museums may not have adequate resources of staff, time, or money to “implement or develop a significant metadata schema”; 2) “standard metadata schemas are wonderful ideas but are difficult and cumbersome to apply to local collections...how we organize our collection is quite different than how another museum may organize their collection” (even within the same museum Selbig notes that there can be differences among curators, which means that each object

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Tuck, “Putting the Wagon Before the Horse,” 1.

²² Ibid.

in the collection “will be viewed, studied, and categorized in a variety of ways”); 3) the profusion of schemas and vocabularies available means that the museum must choose between a diverse array of nomenclatures; and 4) the effort involved in digitizing a collection leaves little time to consider metadata schemas (Andrea Selbig, e-mail message to the author, April 19, 2012).

Selbig goes on to note that in the Chazen online collection she does not use a particular metadata schema:

We developed our own way of categorizing our collection and how to organize it. I spent months meeting with our curators and director and discussing our approach. I basically started by looking at other online collections (Getty, Met, the Frick, Currier, Akron, other university collections such as Bowdoin, Memorial Art Gallery (U of Rochester), Maier (Randolf) and others). (Selbig 2012)

With regard to authority standards used in cataloging, Selbig states that she uses “CCO and the Getty resources as a baseline,” but she points out that different curators within a museum may prefer different systems. At the Chazen she explains that one curator likes to use ULAN, one Grove, and for Japanese works they use yet a completely different resource (Selbig 2012).

While the Chazen is a small-sized museum, Selbig believes that large museums, too, have their reasons for not implementing CDWA. In a large museum, she states:

one would need compliance with all departments in order to accomplish such a goal.

Large institutions have several curators for one department. I have found that scholars, curators, PhDs, directors, etc. have issues with pigeon-holing information into concise, black-and-white terms, and understandably so. Art historians and scholars are much more subjectively-minded when they develop theories, concepts, etc. and constantly

research and publish. It is not a science to pin down and authenticate with any true conviction. (Selbig 2012)

Leah Kolb of the MMoCA in Madison corroborates Selbig's statements. She believes that a museum may start by trying to implement a major schema but will later alter it to a more "home-grown method for recording and storing data about their collections" in order for it to be more applicable to their specific collection (Leah Kolb, e-mail message to the author, April 16, 2012). She also suggests that the people working in museums who are given the task of developing these methods may not have degrees in library science and will therefore be unfamiliar with conventional cataloging methods (Kolb 2012).