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Organization of Information in Art Museums

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## Informal Explanatory Essay

### **The Topic**

My original annotated bibliographic topic on information relating to the organization and display of art museums artifacts became broader than I ever imagined causing me to change my topic to the organization of art museum information. This grouping of annotations reveals how my perceptions changed as I researched the topic. I also realized during my search that the organization of information in a museum begins from the moment an artist creates to the (hopeful) acquisition in a museum. The topic also covers the meticulous steps of the documentation process that are recorded before the artwork is even hung on a gallery wall (and that is not the end of the story either). These steps are a part of a complex networking system. However, the network fails if a step is missed in the information gathering and sharing process.

### **In Relation to the Organization of Knowledge**

In the text *Art museum documentation and practical handling*, Choudhury stated that, “Museums, like libraries, are depositories of human knowledge in which objects are preserved, displayed and studied (p. 1963).” Art museums must follow standards that require them to use efficient means to catalog, display and store a large variety of valuable materials and still create an informed pathway to the museum audience. Hence as a work of art is going through the primary network process, collaboration is already being considered for the secondary network process of deciding how and what knowledge will be shared with others.

### **Who is my Audience?**

Since my topic became broader, my audience also expanded. I realized that SLIM students are not the only audience that would benefit from the organization of information in museums. While library of information students may use this bibliography

in order to understand how to catalog art, research provenance, or become media specialist in charge of recording and preserving data, additional users include artists wanting to gain an insight into how others view their artwork or receive information about restoring dilapidated artwork, art history students interested in researching provenance, anthropologists expanding new avenues in research, collectors needing documentation training, elementary teachers who need art history resources to supplement a curriculum and students interested in developing their research skills. All of these audiences may seek out this information through the use of electronic resources at libraries, museum websites, conservation databases, books, observations, interviews and hands-on-training. Expanding their research skills and newfound knowledge will prepare all of these audiences for a better understanding in accessing museum information.

### **The Process**

Databases searches, websites and library catalogs became both my saviors and my adversaries. Having the biased illusion of a museum regular, I was disappointed that the Nelson-Atkins Museum's website lacked electronic resources. However, the Denver Museum of Art's website had a resources link that connected me to an informative survey conducted to study their visitor feedback. I also found knowledgeable electronic resources on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website. A search at the Louvre's website revealed that I forgot ninth grade French. Searches at other American museum websites displayed a lack of electronic resources.

The TSCPL (Topeka Shawnee County Public Library) online catalog search for specific subject keywords such as "archiving," "conservation" and "art museums" resulted in irrelevant hits or no subject found. I finally figured out that I was more productive in browsing the 708 Dewey decimal stacks. The electronic resources link teased me by giving me one promising result while sitting at a children's computer

station and then disappeared while I was retrieving an escaping toddler. I never found that result again even with the help of two reference librarians.

I found lots of good books at the TSCPL, Emporia State University's WAWL, Washburn University's Mabee Library and through interlibrary loans. The WAWL catalog liked my subject keywords and willingly looked for "cataloging," "art museums" and "archiving." It directed me to some slightly dated but informative books. However, I did not receive a lot of relevant hits in my electronic resources search at WAWL.

Mabee's ATLAS database directed me to excellent electronic resources like WorldCat and Dissertation Abstracts. It also led me to the highly informative Grove Art Online.

Grove Art Online is probably the best database for art. It is a very user-friendly database that has loads of articles about archiving and bibliographic methods. I had so many to choose from that I had to skim for the words "cataloging," "archiving" and "standards" and weed out the smaller articles (no matter how interesting) to meet the three annotations limit. I had help from OWL at Purdue's APA website when I had trouble figuring out how to cite Grove Art resources. The ability to share my findings from Grove Art Online proved to be difficult until I discovered that WAWL's electronic databases also provide access to it.

During the weeding process of articles from Grove Art Online, I also discovered the link to the Getty Conservation Institute. The Getty is renowned worldwide for its professional conservation studies (curator's stealing antiquities notwithstanding). Taking complete advantage of this free resource I cited three strong GCI newsletter articles that focused on retrieving documentation, organizing documentation and using digitized technology to better document and study the needs of conservation sites. The Getty also formed AAT (Art and Archeology Thesaurus), which is a faceted and hierarchal database resource that standardizes metadata vocabulary documentation.

**What did I learn?**

I learned five surprising things. One is never do research with a toddler running loose. Two is that museums are still living down the historical reputation as being poor documenters, elite snobs and displacers of art. Three is that the very best databases, catalogs, and websites will give you clearly marked links to resources, articles, related links, relevant hits, helpful hints and tend to use natural language. Four is that provenance studies past ownership. This often applies to stolen art and is a legally relevant consideration in museum documentation. Five is how the many interconnected facets of information become an integral part of the museum network.

The museum network starts with the way artists reflect their views of society through art using a variety of mediums. Collection standards provide curators and directors a forum to work with when purchasing museum quality art. Provenance research is about following up on ownership records. Art history lends interpretation to the historical and social context surrounding the artwork. Preservation and conservation puts damaged pieces of art back together again using the best techniques possible. Technology changes the face of research collaboration and develops better archiving results. Archiving involves the standards and rules needed to keep documentation consistent. Consistent research in technology and updating documentation software generates relevant and accessible knowledge. Designing a fluid display environment produces a feel to the art. Visitor feedback reveals feelings about art, the museum, and accessibility.

In an effort to represent the museum network, I organized my annotations to mirror the museum network's organizational pathway to the user and past to present publishing dates.

## Annotated Bibliography

**Viewpoint of the Artists**

Gray, M. (June 1998). Doing the digital twist. *Art news*, 97 (6). 92-95.

An account targeted towards artists shows how architects, artists and product designers use digital software to create technological wonders. Architects can employ 3-D computer modeling to design fantastic structures including concert halls, museums and art institutes. Japanese designers are also developing products with computer digitization and artists are able to create elaborate sculptures with 3-D software. Since 3-D digitization is measured as illusionary and unable to see an object's physical space, physical models are still a vital part of the design process. A very important point made in the article is globalized collaboration. A powerful example is the shared digitized documentation in this article revealing the new dimensions in art that will digitally change the pathway to the user.

Alberro, A. & Norvell, P. (2001). *Recording conceptual art*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

A series of interviews with artists discusses how recording conceptual art work changes the interpretation of the piece. Conceptual art is a realm of ideas within the artist's mind. Since it is difficult to explain to the museum audience, documentation and labeling of this process is needed. Detailed documentation becomes its own form of artwork. While artists understand how documentation may help viewers interpret their artwork, they feel that it often results in an over reliance of classification and has created an impersonal barrier between the artist and the viewer. Some ideas are very unique and the personal accounts convey that art information professionals need to understand the knowledge and feelings the creators are trying transfer.

### **Collection Standards**

Hoving, T. (1999). Getting ready to collect. *Art for dummies*. New York: IDG Books Worldwide, Inc. 205-212.

A former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art wrote this excellent guide. Guidance for the future collector is started with a section on documentation. First impressions, descriptions and researching the work of art is recorded and evaluated on consistent standards to comply with museum quality. Revelations concerning the steps taken by directors disclose the importance of following standard procedures when looking for museum quality or lack of it. As a whole, *Art for Dummies* is an entertaining yet informative and concise guide for the future director, curator or any information professional.

### **Provenance**

Akinsha, K., Kozlov.G. & Hockfield, S. (Ed)(1995). *The Soviet plunder of Europe's art treasures: Beautiful loot*. New York: Random house.

Provenance relates to the history of artwork's ownership and a complex examination by art researchers details how the Soviets obtained valuable art collections from German Art museums after WWII. A 1987 discovery reveals archival records, books and curator notes detailing the war restitution contributions to the Soviets. The art researchers probe various Russian and German museum archives resulting in finding lots of detailed information regarding the ownership history of German art collections. This fascinating and organized text details the provenance of each collection through interviews, photos and documents. An expansive list of important people, archives' notes, and a huge bibliography reveal the extent of the research. Extensive knowledge of provenance can open new access networks, create new dimensions in organizing information and toughen art market standards.

Feliciano, H. (1997). *The lost museum: The Nazi conspiracy to steal the world's greatest works of art*. NP: Basic Books.

The Nazis had a grand scheme to plunder art from Europe's museums and individual collectors in an effort to create one giant art museum. Research conveys how Nazis obtained lists of the most valuable art collections in an effort to implement a two-fold strategy built upon proving the social worth of Arian domination and disintegrating the social and cultural connections in the plundered museum's community network. A study that not only rediscovers provenance in lost art, but it also demonstrates how one organized institution can take advantage of another by being better organized and informed. This is also an excellent guide for information professionals facing ethical decisions about collection development and providing access to records of personal collections.

### **Art History**

Fabre, J. P., (1984). *Picasso*. New York: Rizzoli.

The knowledgeable author discusses Picasso's life, artistic stages and the artwork from these stages. A summary of Picasso's genealogy interconnecting the various artistic stages is provided. Revelations concerning the changing times is also mirrored in the interpretation of the paintings. Fabre concisely organizes 150 illustrations according to these stages by taking in consideration what an audience of artists and art history majors would need in order to interpret and study the works of Picasso.

Macdonald, M. (2003). *Scottish Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Macdonald traces Scottish art from prehistoric times to current times. He reveals the understanding of prehistoric cultures and tracks the social history of Scotland. Macdonald organized this study by following the path laid by prehistoric carvings, interpreting ancient cultural beliefs and organizing the intricate web of Scottish art

history. An accomplished art historian, the author knew what path to follow in order to transfer organized pieces of knowledge through the use of historical archives, photos and paintings.

### **Preservation and Conservation**

Cather, S. (Ed.). (1991). *The conservation of wall paintings*. London: The Getty Conservation Institute.

A symposium exploring how GCI (Getty Conservation Institute) conducted a particular wall painting conservation project. Many of the works of art include the Frescos of Michelangelo on the vault of the Sistine Chapel and reliefs in Queen Nefertari's tomb. Each site goes through a detailed program encompassing scientific analysis, emergency stabilization and a preservation plan. Sketches, photos and notes document the knowledgeable observations concerning the variety of deterioration that occurs over time due to extreme climates, pollution, biological disturbances like salt and manmade damages. This informative symposium was a grand opening for a postgraduate training course in wall painting preservation and serves as a valuable resource for any museum preservationist.

Oddy, A. (Ed.)(1992). *The art of the conservator*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

A mesmerizing overview pertaining to preservation techniques, study and climate control is provided. Basic rules and principles are followed to ensure the integrity of the original parts of the piece is respected, restoration is reversible and every step of the restoration process is thoroughly recorded, illustrated and photographed. While this text is not designed to be a teaching tool, it serves as an excellent training resource for artists interested in “preserving the man-made material remains of the past (p. 7).”

### **Using Technology in Research**

Eppich, R. & Piqué, F. (Summer 1999). Harnessing digital technology for conservation documentation. *Conservation: GCI Newsletter*. 14.2. Retrieved on February 22, 2006 from

[http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications/newsletters/14\\_2/news2\\_1.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications/newsletters/14_2/news2_1.html)

Eppich and Piqué give a comprehensive overview of how technology has changed research, documentation and preservation. In the past studies were manually documented in notebooks that were collected and stored. Computer technology has changed the face of conservatory documentation and has developed new avenues of evaluation, elevating the levels of visual and written records through digital graphics and organizational software. This fascinating article is filled with conservation stories showing how technogadgets create flexibility within the preservation process. It serves as an interesting read for anyone considering archiving in the field.

Eppich, R. & Levin, J. (Fall 2005) People and technology: A discussion about heritage documentation. *Conservation: GCI Newsletter*. 20.3. Retrieved February 22, 2006 from

[http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications/newsletters/20\\_3/dialogue.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications/newsletters/20_3/dialogue.html)

The authors interview three documentation experts. The interviews focus on defining documentation, better guidelines within documentation and maintaining proper documentation processes as technology changes. Various interpretations of documentation were discussed in relation to creating an understanding of cultural heritage, the different dimensions of documentation (visual, locational and environmental) and how those dimensions are important to the knowledge base of an object. Guidelines communicating consistencies in metadata projects and the preservation of those archives for future use is a current focus for anyone entering the information profession.

Wong, L. (Fall 2005). From silk road to digital domain: Managing information for a wall painting conservation project. *Conservation: GCI Newsletter*. 20.3. Retrieved on February 22, 2006 from

[http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications/newsletters/20\\_3/dialogue.html](http://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications/newsletters/20_3/dialogue.html)

The author addresses the underlying problems of keeping digitized information organized and presents the simple solution of appointing an information manager to any given project. Wong relates how an eight-year collaboration effort between the Getty Conservation Institute and Dunhuang Academy had to shift halfway through the large conservation project to establish a digitized data management system so the team had access to all data. The problems discussed provide a reminder for all information providers as to how communication, consistency, procedures and maintenance of data are an important part of team practices.

Bibliographies. (2006). *Bibliography of art: On-line databases*, §III(5). Retrieved March 11, 2006 from <http://0->

[www.groveart.com.www.whitelib.emporia.edu/shared/views/article.html?section=art.008708.3.5](http://www.groveart.com.www.whitelib.emporia.edu/shared/views/article.html?section=art.008708.3.5)

An overview discussing the difficulties and attributes of online retrieval focusing on indexing journal articles and other published records also covers how broad-topic and foreign language searches are not as successful as the specific or complex search. The development of the Art and Architecture Thesaurus (1990) that standardized terms in art bibliographies has opened a door in all levels of art research. This article also reviews other databases that focus on art literature and humanities such as AHCI (Arts and Humanities Citation Index). Knowing where and how to look is an important step for any information professional as well as having a working knowledge of the correct search terms allows for successful searching.

## **Archiving Standards**

Choudhury, A. R. (1963). *Art museum documentation and practical handling*.

Hyderabad, India: The Times of India Press.

A compilation of the steps involved from acquisition to exhibition is provided in detail. Choudhury discloses the same organizational concepts that are consistent to current texts and articles concerning documentation. Examples of archival documentation include copies of invoices, provenance notations, scientific measurements and useful photographs illustrating storing practices, packaging and display preparation. The text may contain technologically outdated information, but Choudhury's message was not. "Museums, like libraries, are depositories of human knowledge in which objects are preserved, displayed and studied (p. 4)."

Keaveney, S. S., (1983). *The fine arts library and the information network: The information network of contemporary art and the fine arts library*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International. 58-62.

Keaveney relates in his dissertation how there are two different pathways in the art information network. He divulges how the primary networks focus on documentation about the art while the secondary networks focus on the writings about art and its reproductions. As a secondary network, museum libraries have created the perception of lending certain permanence to constantly changing exhibits and secondary documents while presenting an understanding in the changing relationships within art and the networks. Museum libraries also shape their collections through a contribution process with the interaction of both primary and secondary network colleagues. This further proves that collaboration in the information professional network can develop more pathways to museum visitors and users.

Raikes, S., (May 1996). Is collection management an art or a science? *Journal of conservation and museum studies*, 1. Retrieved on March 11, 2006

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/conservation/jcms/issue1/raikes.html>

A historical dissertation that advocates using experimental formulas in museum cataloging, deciding on basic cataloging rules and standardizing the metadata portion of documentation. The study revealed how scientific formulization of categorization was too difficult for the museum staff to follow and was later directed towards art history classification. The implementation of catalogs improved the care and storage of artwork, advancements in computerized documents expanded to the Internet and research sharing eased the process of updating archives. Information professionals will find this history about the development of museum information sharing to be an important resource.

Buck, R. A. & Gilmore, J. A., (Ed)(1998). *The new museum registration methods*.

Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.

An organized and extensive compilation provides details about the role of the registrar, the tasks involved in the job and even included a detailed job description. All documentation steps are demonstrated including the latest standards of consistencies in classification, preservation, and handling. Illustrated examples include photos, copies of documents and information including preservation of art and computerized documentation. A complete how-to-guide for any future registrar to piece together the intricate inner workings of the art museum network.

Lemke, A. B. & Stam, D. C. (2006). Sources and methods. *Archives: modern examples*, §3(ii). Grove Art Online: Oxford University Press. Retrieved February 22, 2006

from <http://0->

[www.groveart.com.www.whitelib.emporia.edu/shared/views/article.html?section=art.003855.3.2](http://www.groveart.com.www.whitelib.emporia.edu/shared/views/article.html?section=art.003855.3.2)

An overview pertaining to the growing need to maintain archives and documentary evidence is provided. It focuses on the importance of reliable and accurate collection records and finding aids that play a major role in accessing resources for archival research. Developments of databases France's ARCADE and North America's (AMC) Archives and Manuscripts Control system of description that is in machine-readable format allowing for the sharing of data. An article placing importance on having reliable, accurate and standardized information that should be shared by all information professions.

Lemke, A. B. & Stam, D. C. (2006). Ordering and access. *Archives: modern examples*, §3(iii). Retrieved February 22, 2006 from <http://0-www.groveart.com.www.whitelib.emporia.edu/shared/views/article.html?section=art.003855.3.3>

A discussion on the importance of order and perceptions related to the problems of standardizing descriptions for accessibility is presented. It points out how materials should be placed in a logical order that highlights the entire collection. The authors discuss how descriptions in historical archives are more from the standpoint of the “record groups that reflect its organizational structure” rather than the items themselves and how particular materials require specially designed descriptions that divide the collection into levels or divisions. This interpretation of description alleviates some of the confusion that newcomers to archiving may encounter in a museum.

### **Development of Computerized Documentation**

Chenhall, R.G. (1975) *Museum cataloging in the computer age*. Nashville, TN:

American Association for State and Local History.

Museum documentation, consistency in cataloging and the future of effective computerized cataloging is thoroughly examined. The author also discusses the universal problem of what to document, how to document and what will make the process easier.

The uses of consistent subject data entry subsections and terminology are also focused on in how the computer does the work chapter and illustrates the painstaking database process. This is a technologically dated piece that accurately predicts computerized documentation, reveals computerized cataloging in its infancy and is a must for a cataloger wishing to evaluate his or her own system.

Sarasan, L. & Neuner, A.M. (1983). *Museum collections and computers: Report of an ASC survey*. Lawrence, KS: Association of Systematics Collections.

A compiled historical study on the development of computerized documentation and the growing pains surrounding size, cost, data entry and filing storage. This does an excellent job observing the baby steps museums took towards computerized documentation. Early documentation examples included copies of grids, vocabulary and terminology standards. Examples of the pathways used to illustrate the software and data entry is added. The study also revealed the disappointing cataloging results due to incapable software storage. Ancient computer terminology aside, knowing the stepping-stones of early digitization explains how cataloging was built from the bottom up.

Sabin, R. (May, 1997). Museums and their websites: An examination and assessment of how museums are coping with the challenge of the World Wide Web. *Journal of conservation and museum studies*, 2. Retrieved March 11, 2006 from <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/conservation/jcms/issue2/sabin.html>

A carefully focused study on the conceptual development of museum websites, current changes in the dissemination of information for research and evaluating the efficacy of websites. Compared to the difficulties in the early development of computerized cataloging in *Museum collections and computers: Report of an ASC survey* (Sarasan, & Neuner, 1983), reasonably priced computers, user-friendly software and the development of higher storage capacity makes setting up documentation for websites

much easier, affordable and useful for museums. While the whys and wherefores discussed may seem slightly redundant, scrutinizing changes in the information superstructure is an important part of sharing and understanding knowledge in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Display**

Nelson, G. (1953). *Display*. New York: Whitney Publications, Inc.

Concepts concerning display are covered and discussed including creative descriptions using specialized materials to set up temporary exhibits. Various floor plans are illustrated as well as dozens of photographs demonstrating the use of lighting and space. The diversity of display ideas ranges from the mundane like 50's designer furniture to the strange like pictures hanging at 90° angles. These ideas relay the concept that art viewed at various angles and environments can effect the interpretation and meaning behind the artwork. Photos of designer furniture may be outdated, but the text reminds information professionals that organizing knowledge requires thought and imagination.

Serrell, B. (1983). *Making exhibit labels: A step-by-step guide*. Nashville, TN: AASLH Press.

The author of this guide discusses the recognition and implementation of quality exhibit labels. Details concerning fonts, differences in typography, the importance of careful research, knowing what catches the readers' eye and ideas for labels are presented. A slightly dated guide that is filled with important concepts advises art information professionals to focus on the users.

Pearce, S. M. (1992). *Museums, objects and collections: a cultural study*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute Press. 249, 265-273.

Pearce discusses the virtues of understandable gallery labels and informative templates, relating how label writers tend to overestimate the reading ability of the visitors by using technical jargon and scientific usage (p. 249). The author also points out that visitors use gallery labels to comprehend the intrinsic knowledge and to understand the social and symbolic values contained with the artworks. Pearce's dry wit is used to soften the issues that museums need to address concerning displays and label readability.

Barker, E. (Ed.) (1999). *Contemporary cultures of display*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. 13-15.

Barker discusses the art museums primary role of art display. The editor relates how museums are not just a place to hang pictures but also a place that "imposes meaning onto objects by classifying them (p .13)." Derived from art history, art is displayed by period, school, style and artist. Thus creating environments that enhance the deeper meaning behind "museum quality" art. Some cynicism relating to display perspectives and exorbitant pricing (\$54 million for van Gogh's *Iris*?) is discussed. Barker reminds information professionals that enhancing the environment enhances knowledge.

### **Visitor Feedback**

Edwards, R., Loomis, R., Marc, F., & McDermott-Lewis, M. (1990). *Appendix: A cluster analyses of visitor expectations and expectations*. 139-150. Retrieved February 13, 2006 from

[http://www.denverartmuseum.org/resources/DAMIntProj\\_16.pdf](http://www.denverartmuseum.org/resources/DAMIntProj_16.pdf)

The appended results are from an interpretive research study conducted by the Denver Art Museum. The researchers and staff discovered that they needed to do more than enhance the visitors' art experience. They needed to know what it entailed. Survey questions focused on visitor interest, value of their experiences at the museum, visitor

orientation and interpretation of the experience was the intent of the study. The results gave the museum an opportunity to delve into the complex issues concerning aesthetics, the nature of experiencing art and human psychology. An extensive and well-organized study presenting important information concerning interpreting visitor needs provides a fine example of how information professionals can tailor their services towards meeting their users' needs.

MacDonald, G. F. (1992). Change and challenge: museums in the information society. *Museums and communities: The politics of public culture*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press. 162-170.

Social issues are discussed regarding the difficult process of getting museums and communities to share cultural information. The author seems somewhat critical of the social order of expectations, but MacDonald's use of constructive criticism is designed to help museums overcome problems concerning visitor information needs. MacDonald poignantly points out that museums must be dedicated and responsible educators that place the "highest value on quality in packaging our information products for public consumption (p.164)" and understand the visitors' need to discover and explore without being overwhelmed. MacDonald provides a variety of viewpoints concerning cultural and societal links in the community and reminds information professionals to focus on the primary purpose of museums, which is to educate people in the community.

Falkenstein, M. (March 2005). Who goes here? *Artnews*, 104(3). 94-95.

This overview relates how many museums across America have changed their focus from the collections attracting visitors to visitors connecting with the collections. Through the use of corporate marketing tools, museums have employees conduct surveys, timing-and-tracking observations, exit polls, focus groups and up-to-date research tools to find the right kind of visitor balance. The museums actually follow up

on visitors' requests. Noted examples include adding more seating in the galleries, welcoming signage and changing cultural exhibit labels to represent first-person narration. For the last 10 years museums have learned as art information professionals that user-centeredness is the key to success.