

Organization of Materials in Museums: a bibliography

Bibliographic Organization

Barta-Norton, NA. (2004). MARC applications for description of visual materials.
Journal of Educational Media & Library Sciences, 42(1): 21-36.

In this literature review, Nancy Barta-Norton summarizes the history of MARC usage for cataloging visual media, and analyzes existing articles for information about the current trends and debates that surround its continuing use. In the past, visual catalogers used MARC to describe objects, laboriously created their own databases, or eschewed digitally describing collections altogether. Those who do use MARC for visual resources collection cataloging commonly criticize its lack of hierarchical structure, its item level rather than collection level focus, its short data entry fields, and its inability to distinguish between original artworks and their surrogates. In addition, the commonly recognized LCSH vocabulary must be supplemented with Getty vocabulary, which not all MARC-based ILS' recognize. Barta-Norton uses specific examples from Linda McRae and Lynda S. White's popular resource, the Artmarc Sourcebook, to illustrate these points. She then frames this discussion among visual resource librarians within the larger and more general dialog about MARCs continuing viability for all catalogers. Some within the cataloging community now vocally advocate abandoning MARC altogether. With the advent of newer XML based standards like Encoding Archival Description (EAD), catalogers and curators now have more cataloging options. Barta-Norton seeks to discover in this article if it is possible for visual librarians to successfully adapt their data to MARC instead of shoehorning it into an unfriendly structure. She concludes that crosswalking possibilities (between MARC and EAD for instance) exist and that further exploration should be done into using MARC as a gateway or pointer to other document types.

Buck, R.A. & Gilmore J.A. (Eds.) (1998.) *The new museum registration methods*,
Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums.

According to the American Association of Museums (AAM) bookstore, this 1998 edition is the most current edition in print and they have not published any other books on this topic. Because the AAM are one of the leading providers of museum books and manuals, I will treat this as the most current resource available on this topic. Apart from its section on databases, which will appear dated to contemporary readers (for instance no one currently uses the Mimco standard, it appears to have spontaneously vanished sometime in the year 1999), *The new museum registration methods* remains surprisingly fresh. Ideally, with this book, the ambitious reader will be able to successfully register everything from an antique car to a live African lion. For someone considering a career as a museum registrar, this book provides a lengthy and detailed look at all the different responsibilities and duties involved in the position. Surprisingly, the typical registrar's duties extend far beyond just careful accessioning and tagging though (I must admit that I was secretly disappointed to learn this, as idea of the isolated registrar painstakingly painting minuscule identification numbers onto obscure objects in India ink with a 000

sable paintbrush has a certain romantic appeal). In fact, the registrar frequently handles international shipping and tracking paperwork, creates and manages financial records, is responsible for liability insurance, must consider object storage and removal, have comprehensive disaster planning skills, be able to fill out tax records, assuage upset donors and think about possible object repatriation, deal with pest management and navigate borrower and loaner relationship issues (including the terms of loan and what to do in the possible event of the death of the loaner). With the exception of the chapter on vocational hazards, which appears to have been written by a hypochondriac (for example, suggesting that registrars avoid using copiers so as to keep from getting cancer), every chapter is interesting and well written. The novice registrar and the seasoned professional looking for a few new tips will find this book most useful.

Reibel, D. B. (1997). *Registration methods for the small museum* (3rd ed.).
Walnut Creek: AltaMira.

Since its first publication in 1978, Daniel B. Reibel's *Registration Methods for the Small Museum* has become the authoritative source for museum registration methodology. Although Reibel's methods are by no means restricted to small museums, his instructions are written in such clear straightforward prose that any reader, even the novice seeking to start the smallest collection, can be equipped with the necessary knowledge and tools to organize and classify its objects according to industry standards. This book includes sample manuals and forms for immediate use and is surprisingly comprehensive, even covering topics such as inheriting collections that have been cataloged badly, how to document and send out loans, and managing volunteers. Although the chapter on computers feels a bit dated, a fourth edition of *Registration Methods*, with more up to date information about computerized methods, is set to be published on April 28, 2008. In the meantime, readers can access this third edition for free through Google books.

Rinehart, Richard. (2003). MOAC - A report on integrating museum and archive access in the Online Archive of California. *D-Lib Magazine*, 9(1): np. Available online at: <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/january03/rinehart/01rinehart.html>

Richard Rinehart is Director of Digital Media at the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, and is Digital Media Faculty in Art Practice at UC Berkeley. He also manages MOAC, or Museum Online Archive of California, and in this article discusses its inception, the lessons he has learned from the project, and what direction it might go in the future. In 1995, a group of archive and museum professionals in the California bay area collaborated to investigate using the newly formed EAD standard to provide online public access to their collections. Ten cultural heritage institutions of various sizes and backgrounds volunteered to work together under MOAC. Rinehart argues that this collaboration benefits museums even though the profits are not immediately obvious. Citizens have begun to demand Internet access to all forms of information and are not satisfied with old and seemingly clunky methods of access. Making data public also allows institutions to know one another's collections better and increases possibilities of collaboration. Finally, museums participating in MOAC experienced increased use of its physical collection and generated additional income because of its increase exposure to

the public. The primary challenge that MOAC faced was using a single tool, EAD to integrate disparate collections of data from both archives and museums, which have different standards of practice. In the end, it was determined that EAD is a natural fit for archives to store and share data. However, although EAD benefits museums by enabling them to share records across platforms, it is not an ideal final format because it is focused on collection level description rather than item level description. Rinehart suggests that museums become more fluent in various metadata languages in order to crosswalk standards to create a “chain” from the collection level down to the item level. It was concluded that participating in a project like MOAC may be a large effort for small museums, but it is achievable if there is a professional community of support, realistic expectations and appropriate and flexible tools. MOAC has since gone on to spawn a host of other regional projects, both in the bay area as spin offs of the original and elsewhere using MOAC as a model.

Slawsky, Donna. (2007). Building a keyword library for description of visual assets: Thesaurus basics. *Journal of Digital Asset Management*, 3(3): 130-138(9)

Slawsky is an experienced public and private consultant who builds metadata models and taxonomies for Digital Asset Management (DAM) systems and web sites, and specializes in image search and retrieval. Her article draws on her experiences to provide a thorough and readable introduction into controlled vocabulary for those who are setting up their own DAM systems, even if they come from non-cataloging backgrounds. Slawsky emphasizes the importance of employing controlled vocabulary thesauri for accessibility, especially for visual objects that cannot make up for bad indexing with good full text searching. She includes an excellent discussion here about determining “aboutness,” and about using faceted classification in order to make visible hierarchical arrangements and relationships between broader and narrower terms. Slawsky also argues that visual resource catalogers should choose or create audience appropriate thesauri that are extensible and include a comprehensive list of related terms. “Building a keyword library for description of visual assets” is generously illustrated with helpful figures and ends with a helpful discussion of the most widely used thesaurus for visual resource catalogers: The Art & Architecture Thesaurus Online (http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/vocabularies/aat/).

Visual Resources Association. (2006). *Cataloging cultural objects: A guide to describing cultural works and their images*. Chicago: American Library Association.

The Visual Resources Association (VRA), whose members are mostly visual resource curators, is a professional organization devoted to the science of image management and preservation. Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO) is published by the VRA and is currently the chief authority regarding metadata content standards for cataloging physical and digital images. Although CCO is largely geared towards art librarians and curators, it is relevant to any archivist or librarian that works with photographs, slides, or digital image libraries. Many institutions of higher learning, in particular, are looking to CCO to help them transition away from maintaining slide banks for art history instructors and towards creating online image databases. The CCO guide is divided into three sections: a

narrative introduction that provides background information and establishes methodology, and a part two and three guide to using CCO elements and authorities respectively. Parts two and three are divided into browseable numbered sections in a manner that reminiscent of AACR2. It is clearly intended to be used for reference and repeats conceptually important information wherever it is applicable. Although many of the “rules” of CCO are framed as “recommendations,” the guide comes from a decidedly archival tradition and emphasizes hierarchical relationships, establishing relationships between records, the ability to create collection and series level records, need for authority headings, and valuing consistency over specificity. Much of the text of CCO is available free at: <http://www.vraweb.org/ccoweb/cco/index.html>. However, the online guide lacks the fuller introduction, clear large font size, in-text figures, and many of the cataloging rules about syntax and disambiguation that are present in the printed volume.

Physical Organization

DuPont, C. (2007). “Libraries, archives, and museums in the twenty-first century: Intersecting missions, converging futures?” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 8(1):12-19.

The theme for the 47th annual preconference of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries, held June 20-23, 2006, in Austin, Texas, was "Libraries, Archives, and Museums in the Twenty-First Century: Intersecting Missions, Converging Futures?" In this article, Christian DuPont, chair of the ACRL/RBMS Executive Committee, summarizes the attitudes and responses of the 364 attending participants. In 2003, the American Library Association (ALA) the Society of American Archivists (SSA) and the American Association of Museums (AAM) came together to forming the Joint Committee on Libraries and Archives and Museums (CALM). Furthermore, library architecture has recently begun to include exhibition spaces, museums have slowly been increasing public access to holdings, and digital tools have fostered a growing interest in collaboration between different kinds of institutional collections. These kinds of partnerships and boundary blurring have led to philosophical questions about the fundamental distinctions between the different disciplines. Although there is a strong academic interest in the interdisciplinary nature of cultural heritage institutions, conference goers revealed that philosophical differences between the disciplines at a practice level remain strong. In general, curators felt attacked by librarians for not being “user friendly” enough and countered that libraries do not make any effort to serve as memory institutions even though it is within their mandates to do so. Many attendees were concerned about the misconceptions by those with differing specialties and backgrounds, but most were glad to have the opportunity to clarify and to positively represent their discipline. Some were even inspired by the differing practices, but most felt that the answer to “Converging futures” was a definite no. This article is the introductory article for issue eight of RBM, which is devoted to exploring this title’s theme, so those wishing to read more about this topic will do well to browse the entire issue.

Lord, B. and G.D. (Eds.) (2002). *The manual of museum exhibitions*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira.

Beginning with the most basic questions about why museums should organize exhibitions at all (instead of focusing solely on research, preservation and collecting), *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* progresses logically through a series of instructive essays. These essays instruct project managers in the art of creating exhibitions for outreach and education in a neutral but meaningful way, covering the entire process from conception and planning all the way to tear-down and post-evaluation. All chapters have been given the same level of careful attention to detail and include specific guidelines where applicable (for instance, showing charts about the amount of space needed for different sized display cases and including wattage guides for lighting). Where a guide of this nature could lapse into a tedious and meaningless series of directives, *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* never loses its focus on visitors as the central raison d'être for having and designing exhibitions. The multitude of real life examples and floor plans showing how different museums from around the world have dealt with the different architectural and media display challenges are insightful. Included as well are a step-by-step financial planning guide, a section about emerging trends, and a glossary of terms. This practical in-depth guide would be a valuable addition to either the experienced or the new curator's bookshelf.

McDonald, S., ed. (2006). *A companion to museum studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Part of the Blackwell Companions in Cultural Studies series, this volume presents a postmodern perspective on museology. Six different sections address: museum studies as a discipline, the history of museums, use of space in museums, the gaze of the museum viewer, museum practice, and the function of museums in the future and postmodern era. Essays are very loosely grouped under each theme and most read as if they were intended to stand on their own rather than as part of a larger volume. Unfortunately this compilation does not make the qualifications of its contributing authors transparent, and one must do outside research to discover a particular contributor's area of expertise. However, each essay earns a place in this collection by engaging in the deconstruction of the museum in a clear and thoughtful manner. The authors examine the layout of how objects are arranged in exhibitions and how those exhibitions are situated within the larger architecture and existing culture of the museum. This approach can provide surprising insight into the history and politics of museums and their choices. Most essays are written in a readable style that should be accessible to its intended audience: cultural studies buffs and undergraduate students. Although it is primarily aimed at academics, *A Companion to Museum Studies* still manages to be engaging for a general readership and can have practical applications for curators and other visual resource professionals. Looking critically at the meanings of how objects are arranged in museums, rather than only at how to organize objects most efficiently, can help museum professionals be self-reflective about their practice. Examining how we present our cultural narratives exposes our assumptions and biases, and illuminates those that we may unintentionally exclude or marginalize from our institutions.

Ray, J. (2004). Connecting people and resources: Digital programs at the institute of museum and library services. *Library Hi Tech*, 22(3): 249–253.

This outreach piece, written by the Deputy Director for Library Services at the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), gives an overview of the work done by the Institute to “encourage museums and libraries to explore their potential contributions to learning technologies” (249). Thus far, the IMLS has sponsored over a hundred different digitization projects, and is most proud of its Colorado Digitization Program (CDP), which it helped fund in 1999. It also regularly holds conferences, sponsors forums, and encourages research into the aggregation, interoperability, preservation of digital media at various cultural heritage institutions. Although digital projects have no direct physical manifestation, I have included this article under physical organization rather than bibliographic organization because the IMLS conceives of its projects as concrete attempts to bridge the gap between people and institutions within a physical region rather than as abstract attempts to standardize data sets. Unlike many other articles on this topic, that conceptualize the museum experience as exhibition of pre-selected objects for the masses, the IMLS hopes to “help educators, from kindergarten teachers to university faculties, find appropriate online content for classroom use” (250). In other words, although it is may not be aware of the radical nature of its goals, it is making the far-reaching assumption that in the future museum users might want to appropriate materials and use them in a non-museum context, organizing objects into their own collections according to their own self-determined logic.

Rosenbatt, A. (2001). *A building type basics for museums*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

I selected this book from the “Building Type Basics” series in order to include a source about how architecture influences museum content and organization and vice versa. Because it is one of the few books to addresses the architecture of museums from anything other than a coffee table book perspective, and because reviews by prominent architects hail it as a useful resource, I decided that it might fit the bill. Unfortunately, this friendly looking volume is deceptively opaque to anyone other than a professional architect, and even more unfortunately, I could not locate any other comprehensive sources that do address this topic. Rosenbatt organizes the book by museum according to an architectural principle called twenty questions. Because I could not discern what this principle included, each entry felt to me as if I were playing the familiar childhood game, asking myself, “animal vegetable or mineral?” and turning the book upside down to perhaps see if that yielded a clue as to if it was “bigger than a breadbox.” Each museum entry is a series of cryptic illustrations such as early original conceptual drawings scribbled on a napkin, unlabeled site plans, and the occasional annotation written in architectural jargon. Text in *A building type basics for museums* is so minimal that it is almost non-existent. In fact, the longest passage in the entire book is the two page preface written by the series editor Stephen A. Kliment. I hope that someday a more thoughtful and accessible book about museum architecture will be written, or perhaps I will fortunate enough in the future to be able to locate a hidden gem on the topic of the

organizing principles of museum architecture. In the meantime, I would advise anyone without an architectural degree to steer clear of this book.

von Lehn, D. (2006). Embodying experience: A video-based examination of visitors' conduct and interaction in museums. *European Journal of Marketing*, 40(11/12): 1340-1359.

Dirk von Lehn, a member of the Work, Interaction and Technology Research Group, Department of Management, King's College, London, UK, examines the organization of objects in museum exhibitions from a marketing perspective. He draws a correlation between the commercial "point-of-sale" and what he terms the museum's "point-of-experience." Although the focus is on marketing in UK museums, the research results are pertinent for improving museum exhibition design regardless of profit motives. von Lehn uses video footage from a variety of different art, science, and cultural museums in Great Britain to examine how that visitors react physically and verbally to museum objects. Few studies have been done on the active sense making process of museum goers while they are still in the museum because, von Lehn suggests, museums are more interested in the overall educational results of the experience rather than in the subjective sociological aspects of museum visits. The most fascinating aspect of this observational study is its examination of group dynamics in museums. Using screen shots of visitors and transcriptions of dialog, the author reveals that meaning is often formulated via discussion between two or more visitors. Rarely does an individual experience an object purely as an individual. Even unaccompanied visitors respond physically to the presence of other museum visitors by, for instance, wandering towards a popular painting with a large group already around it. With this in mind, von Lehn proposes that curators create materials to assist likely group leaders, like parents or more vocal museum participants, in making meaning from what they see since they naturally are performing this role for other visitors anyway. In addition, he recommends that if curators intend for a particular viewing experience to be individual or private for visitors, that they should use spatial cues, such as walls or curtains to encourage this outcome.