

# Book Reviews

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Book Review Editor

Murtha Baca, Patricia Harping, Elisa Lanzi, Linda McCrea, and Ann Whiteside (eds.). *Cataloging Cultural Objects: A Guide to Describing Cultural Work and Their Images*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2006. 396 p. ISBN 978-0-8389-3564-4 (pbk.)

At a time when cataloguing code revision is continuing apace with the consolidation of the *International Standard Bibliographic Description* (ISBD), the drafting of *RDA: Resource Description and Access*, and the development of common principles for an international cataloguing code (International Meeting of Experts on an International Cataloguing Code [IME ICC]), the publication of a guide for cataloguing cultural objects is timely and purposeful. Compiling this data content standard on behalf of the Visual Resources Association, the five editors—with oversight from an advisory board—have divided the guide into three parts. Following a brief introduction outlining the purpose, intended audience, and scope and methodology for the publication, Part One, General Guidelines, explains both what the Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO) guide is—“a broad document that includes rules for formatting data, suggestions for required information, controlled vocabulary requirements, and display issues” (p. 1)—and is *not*—“not a metadata element set per se” (p. 1). Part Two, Elements, is further divided into nine chapters dealing with one or more metadata elements, and describing the relationships between and among each element. Part Three, Authorities, discusses what elements to include in building authority records. A Selected Bibliography, Glossary, and Index, respectively, round out the guide.

As the editors note in their introduction, “Standards that guide data structure, data values, and data content form the basis for a set of tools that can lead to good descriptive cataloging, consistent documentation, shared records, and increased end-user access” (p. xi). The VRA Core Categories, for example, represent a set of metadata elements expressed within an XML structure (data structure). Likewise, the *Art & Architecture Thesaurus* contains sets of terms and

relationships, or defined data values. While much effort has been expended on developing both data structures and values, the editors argue, the third leg of the stool, data content, has received less attention. Unlike the library community with its *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules* [sic—though RDA is referenced in the Selected Bibliography], or its archival equivalent, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS), those in the domain of cultural heritage responsible for describing and documenting works of art, architecture, cultural artifacts, and their respective images, have not had the benefit of such data content standards. CCO is intended to address (or redress) that gap, emphasizing the exercise of good judgment and cataloguer discretion over the application of “rigid rules” [p. xii], and building on existing standards.

Part One, General Guidelines, sets the foundation. Beginning with the question, “What are you Cataloguing?”, this 41-page section articulates the difference between a work and an image, and continues with what institutions need to consider in determining what kinds of, and how much information to include in, a minimal description for a Work Record—elements subsequently covered in Chapters 1–8 of Part 2—an Image Record—dealt with in Chapter 9 of Part 2—records for a group, collection, or series of cultural objects, and related works, or, “those having an important conceptual relationship to each other” (p. 13). Less familiar, perhaps, to the eyes of those responsible for bibliographic or archival description, is the inclusion of recommendations concerning database design, field structures, database construction, and the purpose of a database—as a cataloguing tool? collection management system? digital asset management system? online catalogue? This latter part, while a useful inclusion, seems somewhat contradictory within a set of guidelines that profess to be “system independent”. Part One concludes with definitions of, and guidelines for, creating and maintaining controlled vocabularies and authority files, respectively. Examples of work records (Figures 1–7), and a work record with two related image records (Figure 8) pro-

vide concrete, visual samples of the issues covered throughout the General Guidelines, and foreshadow the part to follow.

Part Two, Elements, provides (1) definition, context, and terminology, (2) cataloguing rules, and (3) guidelines on presentation of data for each of eight broad metadata element types, grouped by purpose, and associated with a work record (e.g., object naming [work type/title]; creator information [creator/creator role]; stylistic, cultural, and chronological information [style/culture/date]; subject; etc.). The ninth chapter, view information elements, addresses how to describe aspects of a work as captured in its surrogate, an image of the work. Each chapter within Part Two concludes with illustrated examples, again, to reinforce concepts and applications discussed relative to a particular element set. Those expecting the inclusion of administrative, structural, and/or technical metadata for creating and managing digital repositories, will be disappointed. The list of elements in Part Two is explicitly restricted to descriptive metadata.

Part Three, Authorities, follows a similar format as Part Two, including discussion and terminology, editorial rules, and presentation of data for (1) personal and corporate name authority, (2) geographic place authority, (3) concept authority, and (4) subject authority. As with Part Two, examples liberally populate the text of each chapter, with specific illustrations of the four types of authority record coming at the end of respective chapters 1–4.

The consistent formatting of chapters within the text, overall, ensures that perspective cataloguers understand the meaning, context, terminology, and application of guidelines for descriptive metadata and authority control. Thus, in its own internal structure, CCO remains true to its stated objective of promoting consistency of interpretation and implementation. Bolded recommendations throughout Part One are, in some instances broad level—“CCO recommends good and versatile database design and consistent cataloging rules” (p. 25)—and in others, appropriately specific—“Because of the complexity of cultural information and the importance of Authority Records, CCO recommends using a relational database” (p. 20). Regardless of their degree of specificity, recommendations provide clear, logical, and principles-based guideposts for both institutions and individual cataloguers, alike. They also provide context for the series of “rules” which follow in Parts Two and Three. The rules, while named as such, and articulated in a prescriptive tone, are discussed and pre-

sented throughout in a spirit of “recommended best practice”. This is to allow for individual institutions to “make and enforce” local rules that accommodate their requirements and those of their end-users most effectively and efficiently (p. 2).

This manual will serve as an important tool for museum documentation specialists, visual resources curators, archivists, librarians, or others responsible for providing descriptive metadata and authority control for a variety of cultural objects, including architecture, paintings, sculpture, prints, manuscripts, photographs and other visual media, performance art, archeological sites and artifacts, and different functional objects associated with material culture. While its coverage is impressively wide-ranging, CCO is not intended for natural history or scientific collections.

*Cataloging Cultural Objects*, in linking the work of cataloguers from different institutional contexts, provides a timely and useful content standard for cross-domain application. It also serves as an effective teaching tool for those who recognize and value, less the location—museum, archive, library—where descriptive metadata are to be assigned, and more the purpose for which they are intended, namely to facilitate access to, and sharing of both records and their corresponding objects. While this reviewer would have appreciated more than a “Selected Bibliography”, and an expanded Glossary (e.g., where is a definition of “format controlled” among “controlled fields”, “controlled list”, and “controlled vocabulary?”), the inclusion of additional specialized sources for cataloguing museum collections, and within-chapter references to standard tools for particular metadata elements, are especially foresighted, and commendable. There is mention throughout the text of a “CCO website”. A URL or other link eluded this reviewer, though a Google™ search led to <http://vraweb.org/ccoweb/cco/index.html> [accessed September 28, 2007].

Overall, *Cataloging Cultural Objects* with its attending guidelines for descriptive metadata and authority control for “one-of-a-kind cultural objects” should merit a place among the “well-established” data content standards of the library and archival communities that CCO references with obvious regard.

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