A Computerized Approach to Art Exhibition Catalogs

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Art exhibition catalogs are unusual items for libraries to contend with: they are difficult to describe bibliographically and they are often overlooked as important source material, yet they continue to proliferate and compound the libraries' problems.

Exhibition catalogs are usually defined as the records of shows of art works, although many librarians treat catalogs of art collections (both public and private) as art exhibition catalogs. Although the exhibition catalog probably originated in collection inventories of the sixteenth century, the most important impetus was a decree by Louis XIV which led to the publication of the catalog of the Salon of 1673, i.e. of the exhibition of works by members of the Academie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. After that time the Salon Catalogs consisted of a listing of the paintings and sculptures exhibited at the annual Official Salon and occasionally included some general information about the artists. During the 1860s, other "salons" took place, and similar catalogs were printed for them. Catalogs gradually became more elaborate, including more complete information about the artist and the works, and containing more illustrations of works exhibited. As the catalogs became more diverse, critical material concerning salons increased, nurturing the generation of the littérateur. By the end of the century, the importance of the exhibition catalog was firmly established, as seen in the extensive publications commemorating the international expositions of art, industry and technology, which persevere to this day under a variety of names ("World Fair," "Expo," etc.).

Catalogs today vary from simple listings of works to extensive research tools. Both kinds have several important functions. They are the most current source of information on a subject or artist, often

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JANUARY, 1975
including important critical essays. They offer representative samples of the works of a school, movement or individual artist, or illustrate a particular taste or style from a certain period. Catalogs may be the only access to important public or private collections which do not travel.

Catalogs vary greatly in content and format. The short catalog—which may include only such information as artist and title of work plus date, size and medium—is useful during the show as a guide to the exhibition, but afterwards is of limited worth. However, it is valuable as primary source material for the research worker and, as such, deserves to be indexed and maintained.

The larger, more inclusive catalogs may contain such information as bibliographies, chronologies, biographies, historical and critical essays, listings of lenders, provenance, and high quality reproductions. Original research is often an important basis for much of the information and these catalogs often present the most current scholarship. The larger catalogs may appear in paperback, published by the museum or gallery, and reappear later as hardback “monographs” or trade publications issued by a publishing firm or by the museum itself.

Both kinds of catalogs cause significant bibliographic access problems. The smaller catalogs are often treated as ephemera or kept unindexed in pamphlet files, an unfortunate circumstance as they are frequently the only source of information and of illustrations for current trends or contemporary artists. Access is needed in a manner similar to that provided for journal articles: a brief subject and (corporate) author approach. The larger catalogs are handled in almost as many ways as there are art libraries—from card file indexes to Library of Congress cataloging to computer indexes. LC has been inconsistent in its treatment of exhibition catalogs; main entry varies from personal author of textual material to editor to museum or gallery to collector to title entry. Perhaps it is precisely because art exhibition catalogs are such problems that LC has left a large percentage of them uncataloged. For example, in 1968 Worldwide Art Books (a major supplier of catalogs) estimated that LC cataloged only 10 percent of the exhibition catalogs produced that year, although this percentage has increased substantially in recent years. It is this lack of cataloging, plus variation in main entry and the inadequacy of the subject headings (Art—Exhibitions) which led the University of California (Santa Barbara) Arts Library to devise a computer-based index to its collection of approximately 20,000 exhibition catalogs.

In 1968, the Arts Library had a large uncataloged backlog of
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exhibition material and very little staff to process these catalogs. It was
a fairly new library with an emphasis on nineteenth- and
twentieth-century art, and exhibition catalogs are an extremely
important part of art documentation for this period. Indeed, in sheer
number, exhibition catalogs form a major portion of the entire
collection. At present, the library's 20,000 exhibition catalogs comprise
40 percent of its total of 50,000 titles in art. A practical solution to the
backlog problem was imperative. The Arts Library decided to use the
computer to provide access to the catalogs because it offers ease of
maintenance, economy and a wide variety of approaches. The
distinctive nature of exhibition catalogs can be easily displayed in an
automated program. The steadily increasing use of exhibition catalogs
since the introduction of this program five years ago has justified the
initial expenditures and continuing commitment.

The primary advantage of the computer listing is the low cost. The
processing cost per catalog is approximately $2.50, and the computer
cost per catalog is approximately $0.12 per title. This figure is based on
a 2,000-item list, with three basic printouts. It does not include monthly
storage costs, which are very low. The economy of the program is due
to a standardized approach to form, the use of student assistants for
most of the processing and the short processing time—approximately
50 minutes per title: 40 minutes by students, 10 minutes by staff.
Another advantage is the prompt availability of the material. Catalogs
are usually processed and ready for use two weeks after arrival in the
Arts Library. Since exhibition catalogs are to be used under controlled
conditions in the Arts Library, there is no time delay or cost for binding
the material.

The computerized list presents the usual bibliographic information
in a standardized format. Each entry includes date of the exhibition,
number of illustrations (black and white and/or color), number of
pages, inclusion of chronologies, footnotes and/or bibliographies.
Additional data lists title, author, agencies, agency city, state, country,
and up to twenty-five different subject descriptors. In addition, the
entry may note series information, name of publisher if the catalog is a
book trade item, language if not evident from the title, and any other
usual information such as artists' biographies, extensive catalog notes,
reprint information, or distinctive formats. Each catalog receives a
unique accession number which acts only as a locational device—there
is no attempt at classification.

The computer manipulates this bibliographic data in a variety of
ways, offering a very flexible approach to exhibition catalogs. The
various program packages determine which manipulation is used. To date complete bibliographic listings have been produced by accession number (the shelflist), agency, author, city, country, date of show and subjects in permuted order. Also produced are authority files and indexes or abbreviated bibliographic lists by agency, subject and author.

The lists most frequently used by the library's patrons are the subject list, subject index and the agency index. The majority of the users are students, who think in terms of subject or museum/gallery approach, so these are the printouts produced most frequently. The other listings are used primarily by staff, although the author list is used occasionally by library patrons.

The subject list presents complete bibliographic information for each catalog every time one of the five main subject headings appears in the alphabetic list. Each catalog's subject headings are separated by semicolons and are permuted into their proper alphabetic places in the list, so a catalog may be indexed as many as five times. For example, a show might be about any one of these categories: an artist, a style or movement, a specific medium, a specific subject, or a specific collection. It is very likely that these categories may overlap. A hypothetical show may be about Pierre-Auguste Renoir, about impressionism, about painting, and include some portraiture. The following subject headings would then apply: Renoir, Pierre-Auguste, 1841-1919; Impressionism, French, 19th century, 1880-1890; Painting French, 19th century, 1880-1890; Portrait Painting, French, 19th century, 1884-1890.

From the above example, the system of subject heading subdivision can be demonstrated. Each major category (except personal name) may be subdivided five times. The basis for subdivision is by country, then city if applicable, date by century, and specific dates if applicable, each separated by commas (see figures 1 and 2).

In addition to the subject list there is an abbreviated subject index. This list is alphabetical by each word of the subject heading, referring to the catalog number with no other bibliographic information. For example, the catalog cited above about Renoir would appear as follows (in the respective alpha-numeric order):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Heading</th>
<th>Catalog Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impressionism, French, 19th century, 1880-1890</td>
<td>1234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French, 19th century, 1880-1890, Impressionism</td>
<td>1234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French, 19th century, 1880-1890, Painting</td>
<td>1234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French, 19th century, 1884-1890, Portrait Painting</td>
<td>1234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting, French, 19th century, 1880-1890</td>
<td>1234</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Subject heading - the list is arranged alphabetically by subject headings.
   a. These are the alternate subject headings. This catalog will also be found listed under these headings in their proper location in this alphabetical list.

2. Number of the catalog. The catalogs are shelved in numerical order in the Art Exhibition Catalog room.

3. Agency or museum where show was held, city, state and country.

4. Date of the exhibition.

5. Number of pages in the catalog.

6. Notes. This includes the number of black and white illustrations, the number of color illustrations, inclusion of bibliography, footnotes and/or artists' chronologies.

7. Author(s) of the catalog.

8. Title of the catalog. This may also include publication or series notes, or other notes about the content of the catalog.

Figure 1
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ART EXHIBITION CATALOGS IN PERMUTED SUBJECT SEQUENCE</th>
<th>JUNE 1972</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SUBJET -------------------------------&lt;NO.&gt;-----------------------</td>
<td>AGENCY---------&lt;DATE&gt;-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUNTINGTON LIBRARY AND ART (1966)</td>
<td>15P (1 EEW ILLUS, 1 COLOR ILLUS, FOOTNOTES, INC. CHRONOLOGY) AUTHOR: HUNTINGTON ART GALLERY, 1530, CALIFORNIA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOUNT FUJI IN ART, JAPANESE COLLECTIONS</td>
<td>7080 MOUNT HOLYoke COLLEGE, DEPT. OF ART</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUSK, PIERRE-VICTOR, 1933-1: PRINTING, CONCRETE, 20TH CENTURY</td>
<td>2114 PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUSK, PIERRE-VICTOR, 1933-1: PAINTING, ITALIAN, 20TH CENTURY</td>
<td>4545 SAN FELICE GALLERY MILAN, ITALY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUGGIA, ANDREW, 1932-1:</td>
<td>3407 RUSSO GALLERY ROME, ITALY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This subject index is particularly useful for producing very detailed chronologies and for putting together all material pertaining to a specific region or country (see figure 3). It can be used with either the numerical list or the subject list if complete bibliographic information is required.

The other approach to the catalogs is by agency (exhibiting museum or gallery). The agency is listed directly by name rather than location, except in a few instances of citywide shows such as the Venice Biennale. Since perhaps 25 percent of the library's exhibition catalogs represent traveling shows, it has a method of listing alternate locations. Each catalog has a distinctive number, and the first location of the show is the primary agency. The other agencies are added entries with the same distinctive number, but also with the alphabetic code "AA," "AB," "AC," etc., added to the number. Thus a catalog of a show from the Museum of Modern Art in New York will have a number, 3456, and will be in the agency index or list with that number. Other locations become AA 3456 and AB 3456, etc., respectively.

As with the subject approach, there is both an agency list, with full bibliographic information, and an agency index, with partial bibliographic information. The agency index is used rather than the agency list because it is less expensive to produce and just as useful as the full list. The agency index is alphabetical by agency name, including city and state, date of show, catalog number, title and miscellaneous notes (see figures 4 and 5).

At this point the important question to ask would be: If we were to do it all over, what would we do differently? Assuming the ideal, if the program were to be rewritten for use on a wider scale than that of a single institution, the following would be attempted:

1. Develop programs of compact storage, perhaps utilizing computer produced codes for the agency and subject fields. This
4. Art Exhibition Catalogs

1. Agency or museum where show was held, city, state. The list is arranged alphabetically by agency.
2. Date of the exhibition.
3. Number of the catalog. The catalogs are shelved in numerical order in the Art Exhibition Catalog room.
4. Title of the catalog. This may also include publication or series notes, or other notes about the content of the catalog.

Figure 4
would alleviate storage problems and reduce the cost of storing and sorting data. However, these codes must be computer generated and translated into full language equivalents prior to printout and public use. Code lists are less acceptable for instruction and use than conventional subject headings.

2. Expand the subject field to include more than five subjects. Though minor, limited need for more subjects has been encountered.

3. Increase the overall number of fields beyond eighteen to accommodate future expansion.

4. Develop more sophisticated update programs which would allow revising subfields within larger fields. This would be particularly advantageous in the subject field.
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5. Increase the pagination field to enable entry of multivolume sets.
6. Develop fields for displaying holdings of various institutions as found in a union list.

We would not attempt to index illustrations or artists included in omnibus catalogs (i.e., Documenta, Venice Biennale, etc.) because these elements would increase costs substantially, probably well beyond the expense of conventional card cataloging. Even if an institution could justify this expenditure, there really is limited need for this effort as many of the individual artists are reviewed and acknowledged elsewhere, and many of these group shows have published indexes. We have considered using LC MARC but find the complexity of fielding too time-consuming and costly to consider at present. All of the suggested improvements would increase present costs. However, the current basic needs for bibliographic control do not justify a greater budgetary commitment.

We have no doubt that better programs can and will be written. It is our hope that these new programs will be linked to a system of regional and national depositories, devoted to these publications. Only then will we have recognized the value and content of this highly specialized form.²

References

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