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# SPEC Kit 333

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Art & Artifact Management

December 2012

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## **SURVEY RESULTS**





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Introduction

In June of 2005, OCLC conducted an international survey on people's perceptions of libraries. When asked the question, "What is the first thing you think of when you think of a library?" roughly 70% of the 3,300 respondents answered "books."<sup>1</sup> However, those who work in libraries, especially research libraries, know that they contain a wide variety of types of materials, including large numbers of works of art and artifacts. Increasingly, the convergence of the missions of cultural heritage institutions such as museums, libraries, and archives, and the overlap in the materials they collect, is being widely discussed and debated by professionals in the field.

In 2006, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries chose "Libraries, Archives, and Museums in the Twenty-First Century: Intersecting Missions, Converging Futures?" as its preconference theme. One participant stated: "[A]s the conference progressed it became abundantly clear that collection-based definitions of libraries, archives, and museums are not valid, have never been valid, and never will be valid. Everyone collects everything. Yet each has a unique method of classifying and working with each thing."<sup>2</sup>

In his essay based on a presentation at that conference, Bruce Whiteman writes, "...each of the three types of institutions normally owns many, if not thousands, of the objects-in-trade that are more characteristically associated with the others. What major library does not include paintings, drawings, prints, and archival collections?"<sup>3</sup> At that same conference, Robert Martin, the Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services, argued that all of these

materials, are, in fact, documents, and that the boundaries between them—whether in the way they are collected, managed, or made available—are boundaries we have drawn and that we can also change.<sup>4</sup> The digital environment, in particular, provides opportunities for a convergence in the way we process and present our collections to our audience.

Within this context, the library community has also emphasized the importance of exposing our "hidden collections."<sup>5</sup> The significance of special collections as a major source of the richness of research library collections has great visibility in the recent dialog about the future of research libraries. Recognizing that there are many collections of significant research, cultural, and monetary value that are currently undiscoverable to researchers, efforts such as the CLIR hidden collections grant program<sup>6</sup> and individual library prioritization have focused on this problem. The imperative to provide access to all special collections, including art and artifact materials, in our institutions raises questions about the current state of description and access.

In this survey, the designers were interested in exploring these issues, focusing on three major areas of interest. First, the survey was intended to explore the scale and scope of art and artifact materials held by ARL member libraries. A second goal was to determine which tools and techniques they currently use to manage these collections, including those used by library staff only and those used to make information about these collections available to the public. Finally, the survey attempted to determine if there is evidence of a convergence of library, archive, and museum practices in the management of these collections. Outcomes from the survey will inform strategy

for the continuing stewardship of art and artifact collections in our care.

The survey focused on the systems and techniques used to manage physical art and artifact materials in order to insure intellectual control over them. For the purposes of this survey, art and artifact materials were considered separately in order to determine if there are differences between the management of these types of materials. Art objects include paintings, works on paper, prints, art photographs, sculpture, decorative arts, or graphic design. Artifacts were defined as including historic photographs, historic objects, material culture, merchandise, archeological objects, natural history specimens, costumes, and architectural drawings, designs, and models. Of course, there are objects that might fall into either category, so respondents were asked to make a determination based on the nature and purpose of their specific collections. Recognizing that many institutions have multiple individually managed special collections, respondents were invited to submit a response for each one.

Sixty-eight libraries at 53 of the 126 ARL member libraries submitted a survey between April 16 and May 7 for a response rate of 42%. Data from these respondents confirms that ARL member institutions collect large numbers of art objects and artifacts, sometimes intentionally, but often incidentally. Practices for managing and providing access to these materials vary widely both within individual special collections and institutions and across the entire community, with no universally accepted standard, tool, or techniques.

### **Scale and Scope of Art and Artifact Collections**

Fifty-nine of the 68 responding libraries (87%) reported holding art objects and 62 (91%) reported holding artifacts. The variety of the types of art and artifacts is broad: prints are included in 92% of the libraries' collections; paintings in 87%, works on paper in 83%, and sculpture and art photographs in 65% each. The most commonly mentioned type of art object for the category "other" was artists' books. When it comes to artifacts, respondents report similarly high numbers and variety: 97% of respondents' collections contain historic photographs, 84% historical objects, and 75%

contain material culture and architectural drawings, designs, and models. All the types of artifacts listed in the survey received positive responses; the smallest number was natural history specimens with 12 respondents (19%). The items cited under "other" indicate that almost anything can be found in a special collection somewhere, from the typical (ephemera, toys, souvenirs, medals) to the truly unusual and unexpected (locks of hair, condoms, death masks).

The quantity is also impressive. Although 40% of responding libraries said they have fewer than 500 works of art, over a third (22 respondents, or 37%) reported owning more than 5,000, with nine of those (15%) owning more than 25,000. Not surprisingly, artifacts were even more numerous, with only eight libraries (13%) reporting fewer than 500 artifacts in their collections, while over half (33, or 52%) have more than 5,000. The holdings of more than a third of those exceed 25,000 artifacts and, based on the comments received, several actually number in the millions. This data might suggest that most respondents collect art and artifacts intentionally, although four respondents commented that artworks were acquired haphazardly or incidentally as part of larger collections and one said the same for artifacts.

### **Tools for Managing Art and Artifacts**

The authors considered several hypotheses about the tools that libraries might use to manage their holdings of art and artifacts. As libraries use their library catalogs to describe books, journals, and other resources at the item level, one speculation was that libraries might be using their integrated library systems (ILS) to describe art works, since these are typically described at the item level. On the other hand, the authors' experience suggested that artifacts often come to libraries in the context of archival collections; the hypothesis being that these materials would be treated as such, and probably described in finding aids. The authors also speculated that many institutions would use more than one tool.

The survey gave the following options for tools believed to be commonly used: MARC records in an Integrated Library System (library catalog); Museum collections management system such as PastPerfect; Archival management system such as Archivists'

Toolkit; Finding aids including EAD; Database developed and maintained by the library; or Spreadsheets such as Excel. Respondents were also given the option to name other tools. While other tools were mentioned, the options provided on the survey were the most widely used, particularly the ILS and finding aids.

Many institutions reported digital asset management tools in the “other (please specify)” category. CONTENTdm was the most frequently mentioned, along with some other image or digital resource management tools. This is interesting as the survey was intended to focus on the management of physical objects. Future work could delve more deeply into the connections between intellectual control of physical objects and their digital surrogates. Certainly there are important issues around description and access when physical objects are digitized. For the purposes of this study, the focus remained on comments and responses related to management of physical collections.

#### *Tools for Managing Art Collections*

Finding aids were the most frequently used tool for managing art collections (43 of 60 respondents holding art collections, or 72%). MARC records in a library’s catalog were used by 35 of the institutions (58%). Also frequently used were library-developed databases (26 respondents, or 43%) and spreadsheets (25, or 42%). This indicates libraries are using the available and familiar tools.

Systems designed for the purpose of managing collections were not widely used. Twenty respondents (33%) use archival management systems like Archivists’ Toolkit. Even fewer reported using a museum collection management system in order to catalog art (11 responses, or 18%). Nine of these use Past Perfect; two use TMS (Gallery Systems Inc.)

Several respondents specifically pointed out that the tools they use are no different from those they employ for their other materials. For example, “We are not using any special tool for art objects; we use the same tools as we use for archives, manuscripts, and books within Special Collections.” This response indicates another finding; that many institutions are using more than one tool. Only 12 of the 60 institutions (20%)

holding art works use only one tool; of these, four are using a museum collection management system and four a local database. Nine of the institutions (15%) are using five different tools. On average, institutions are using three different tools to manage art objects.

Within these tools, institutions are clearly describing art at both collection and item level. Collection records describe materials as a group. In comparison, item records describe one object. For example, 32 institutions (53% of the 60 respondents holding art objects) are using their ILS to describe art objects; all of them do so at the collection level, while 23 institutions also have item-level records in their library catalogs. Of the 55 total responses to the question about collection or item level descriptions, 94% of respondents create collection-level records and 93% create item-level records. Therefore, institutions are consistently providing both levels of description.

In the questions that explore why several tools might be used, the key issues fell into two categories: characteristics of the objects and the resources available. Over 70% make the determination of the tool to use based on the nature of collection; about half base the tool on the material type. For 57% of respondents, the staff and resources are a key aspect of this decision. Respondents commented, “Various tools have been available to us over time. Choices have been made regarding the best tool for the job at any given time” and “We have not had a systematic approach to this in the past.”

When considering variety of tools and levels of description, it is not surprising that a wide range of public access options are used. Significantly, 23% of respondents do not display any information about art collections to the public, and in 12% of cases the user must be on site to access a database. When information is available online, over 50% of respondents indicated they offer access through documents on websites and in library catalogs. For about 40% of respondents, a web-accessible public search of another type of tool is available.

#### *Tools for Managing Artifact Collections*

The overall distribution of tools used to manage artifacts was very similar to those used for art objects. Finding aids and MARC records remained the top two

choices; 48 use finding aids (76%) and 35 use MARC records (56%). Archival management tools were used at slightly higher rates for artifacts, with 40% of respondents, compared to 33% usage for art objects.

Like works of art, institutions are likely to be creating both collection and item level descriptions within these tools. Overall, 90% of the 60 respondents provide collection-level description, and 93% provide item-level description. Although there is a slightly higher prevalence of item-level description of artifacts than was the case with art, libraries are also describing artifacts at both collection and item levels.

Institutions are using many different tools to manage artifacts. Ten of the 60 respondents (16%) use only one tool. Of these, three institutions each use finding aids or a local database. One respondent uses seven tools; 11 institutions (18%) use five or more tools. The average number of tools used to manage artifacts per institution is three, the same as with artworks.

Nature of the collection, staffing and resources available for description, and material type were each cited by over 60% of respondents as factors in determining which to use in a particular case. Several comments pointed to limitations of systems as an underlying factor. One respondent said, "Some artifacts have large amounts of detailed information ... for which there is no room to efficiently input or display. Also need a system that allows managing and easy link to related ... materials."

Similarly, information about artifact collections is made available to the public in a variety of ways. Thirty-eight respondents (60%) indicated that the library catalog is the primary mechanism for the public to find records for artifacts; 33 (52%) distribute documents through a website. The same percentage of institutions offers a web-accessible database of some kind; the databases include archival management systems, museum collection management systems, and library-developed databases. Thirteen institutions (21%) indicated that no information is available to the public.

#### *Factors in Choice of Tools*

Looking at the aggregated data, the overall patterns for management of art and artifact collections were quite similar. These findings suggest that ARL members

are likely to use several tools to manage art and artifact collections, and that the ILS and finding aids are the most prevalent tools for both types of materials. Respondents also seem likely to describe materials at collection and item levels in all types of tools.

Looking at some subsets of the survey responses, some other notable patterns emerged. An identical number and percentage of institutions use a museum collection management system for artwork and for artifacts: 11 institutions or 18%. Nine use it for both types of material.

Another factor is the type of collection the institution considered their primary collection. Twenty-six respondents considered books/published material to be the primary collection; 28 indicated archives; 13 manuscripts. Looking at the art and artifact management tools broken down by primary collection did reveal some differences; although MARC records and finding aids were the most used tool, the distribution took on different characteristics.

Collections that considered books to be their primary collection used MARC records for art collections at a high rate, but used finding aids for artifact collections. Archival institutions were highly likely to use finding aids for both art and artifacts. Manuscript institutions used MARC records at about the same rate as book institutions and finding aids at about the same level as archival institutions. These findings are not surprising and are likely due to the descriptive and collecting practices of these types of collections, but it is interesting to see that there is a logical correlation with primary collection types.

	Books	Archives	MSS
MARC Records: Art	65%	42%	69%
Finding Aids: Art	61%	83%	92%
MARC Records: Artifacts	57%	44%	58%
Finding Aids: Artifacts	70%	85%	83%

Another factor correlated with tool selection is collection size. While in all cases finding aids or MARC records are the most used tool for descriptions, there are some differences based on collection size.

Collections with fewer than 500 objects are far more likely to use finding aids than any other tool



for both art and artifact collections, with about 60% selecting this tool and 30% selecting spreadsheets, the next highest. They are much less likely to use MARC records than the other categories, with only 33% use rate for art objects and 25% for artifact materials.

Collections of 500–1000 objects are far more likely to use databases developed and maintained by the library, with over 60% of collections this size using this tool.

Collections of 1,000–5,000 or 5,000–25,000 are most likely to use finding aids for either art or artifact collections, with over 80% with this size of collection indicating they use this tool. This compares to 77% use rate by larger collections and approximately 65% use rate by smaller collections. They are also most likely to use MARC records, with 79% of art collections this size represented in MARC records and 73% of artifact collections. For larger collections, the use rate dropped slightly to 67% and 59% respectively.

Collections of over 25,000 objects showed differences in treatment by types. For art objects, very large collections are even more likely to use a local database, with a 78% use rate. However, for artifact collections, institutions with very large collections have a significantly lower use rate of 41% for local databases. Instead, 77% of collections this size were managed with finding aids.

### Museum Standards and Practices

Given that works of art and artifacts are traditionally the purview of museums, the survey designers wanted to determine if libraries had adopted museum collection management practices when cataloging them. Although we have seen that management practices vary widely, there seem to be minimal signs of libraries and archives consistently embracing standard museum practices in terms of how they manage art and artifacts.

In museum collection management, it is standard practice for each item (artwork or artifact) to be cataloged separately and to have a unique number, usually an accession number.<sup>7</sup> Slightly more than half of the respondents to this survey said that they routinely separate art objects (59%) and artifacts (56%) from collections of books or archival materials for purposes of arrangement and description. However, only

25% always give art objects a unique number while only 21% do so for artifacts. The most popular type of numbering system for both art and artifacts is an archival identifier, such as a series, box, or folder number (61% for art and 66% for artifacts). Given that 46% of respondents indicated archives as their primary holdings and all respondents reported having some archival holdings, it makes sense that this approach is the most widely used. Accession numbers were the second most popular in both categories—more libraries use them for artifacts (64%) than for art (59%). Local numbering systems were also quite prevalent, with 54% employing them for managing art and 60% for artifacts.

Also notable is the number of special collections using more than one numbering system. Of the 33 institution using museum accession numbering for art, only five do so exclusively. Similarly, only four of 37 institutions using museum accession numbering for artifacts use only that numbering approach. Archival identifiers and local numbering were most commonly cited as the additional numbering practices in use. This finding is one of many that suggest that libraries are not managing all their art and artifact collections consistently.

Only 9% of the respondents report they use *Cataloging Cultural Objects*, a data content standard developed for the museum and visual resources community, for art objects and only 7% use it for artifacts. Similarly, only 11% use the Getty Union List of Names, also developed by and for the museum community, for art and only 9% for artifacts. The Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus enjoys more widespread use: 35% of respondents use it to describe artifacts and 33% for art.

Instead, the institutions responding to this survey are looking to familiar standards for description of art and artifact collections. *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS) is the most widely used; 47% report applying it to art and 60% to artifacts. *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (AACR2) is used as the descriptive standard by 46% of respondents for art and 50% for artifacts.

The museum community has less mature metadata standards, particularly for encoding, than the library community. Not surprisingly, survey responses

indicate that only a very few ARL special collections have adopted the museum community's metadata standards, VRA Core (9% for art; 4% for artifacts) and Categories for the Description of Works of Art (4% for both art and artifacts), for either category of object. Metadata standards are used nevertheless, particularly for artifacts; 82% of respondents indicated they use EAD, 62% use MARC, and 53% use Dublin Core. These standards are also widely used for art collections (67% EAD, 51% MARC, and 38% Dublin Core). Metadata standards are an area where libraries, archives, and museums have many opportunities to collaborate more closely in the future.

### Challenges and Successes

The survey invited respondents to list up to three challenges and three successes in managing art or artifact collections. Several themes emerged, particularly for challenges. These themes are areas for further research and collaboration in our community.

The extent to which storage and other space concerns were expressed is remarkable. The survey designers specifically excluded questions about physical arrangement and storage in order to focus on intellectual access. However, of the 63 responses to this question, 49 (77%) noted proper and adequate space for storage, use, or processing as a challenge; moreover, 34 listed this as their first challenge. The second most mentioned challenge was preservation/conservation, with 34 institutions (53%) listing this. The comments in the survey suggest the potential broad scope of this problem, going beyond available square footage, to concerns like the challenge of storage in a space that was designed for books and archival materials to lack of exhibit capacity to conservators who are trained primarily for paper and books. A critical finding of this survey was the extremely high frequency at which ARL institutions noted the physical circumstances of their art and artifact collections as a challenge; the authors hope that additional work will be done to assess space and preservation/conservation needs.

Other themes that emerged in the challenges section were categorized as lack of resources (21 respondents), intellectual control (20), access (17), and training/expertise (13).

To group together aspects of resources and training/expertise, institutions expressed concerns about either the number of staff available to do the work or the knowledge of those staff to deal with art and artifact collections if their expertise was in other areas of librarianship or preservation, for example. The survey gathered data on staffing levels for the special collections responding and found a wide range. At the minimum, one institution reported a single individual at 0.4 full time equivalence (FTE); at the maximum, another institution employs 95 individuals at 87 FTE. The mean was 12.6 individuals at 10.4 FTE. Comments on staff suggest many institutions use student assistants and temporary employees for management of art and artifact collections. Many also indicated inadequate staffing to meet the processing description needs of these types of objects. Other resources, such as supplies, space, funding, and recognition were identified as important as well.

Of particular interest to this study were the challenges reported around intellectual control and access. In the category of intellectual control, many respondents mentioned that the lack of descriptive and metadata standards for art and artifacts makes it difficult to execute the work. A few noted that even if such standards came into common use, legacy data not based on standards would be a challenge. Several institutions noted problems with access, in that existing systems may make inadequate use of existing description or that potential users have no access to these systems. In some cases, access is also hindered by condition of the objects, lack of appropriate research space, or other concerns.

Respondents reported many successful strategies that are the counterpoints to the challenges that were raised. Digitization, proper housing, and successes of providing description in a variety of settings were all significant accomplishments. Both item and collection level description were mentioned as successes, but a more generalized conclusion could be that providing any intellectual access is better than none. Many respondents had success with providing thumbnail images with the metadata describing the physical objects, which made it easier for both staff and researchers to access and use the materials. Appropriate housing and clear labeling were also reported as a

good strategy to improve the management of three-dimensional objects. Another success to highlight is integrating processing of these types of materials into routine workflows.

The challenges and successes all suggest a major underlying issue. Many of the institutions responding to this survey have a primary focus on other material types, particularly books and published materials and archival collections. Through the challenges and successes, institutions expressed an understanding that these materials may require different management tools and techniques and are seeking appropriate ways to integrate them into daily practice. When asked how satisfied respondents were with their management of art and artifact collections, only one answered 5 “very satisfied.” Nineteen (34%) were somewhat satisfied (4 rating), while the largest number (22, or 39%) were neutral. Seven (13%) respondents were somewhat dissatisfied (2 rating) and an equal number were very dissatisfied (1 rating).

## Conclusions

The scope and scale of art and artifact materials held by the institutions responding to this survey is stunning. The variety and research potential of these objects provide a glimpse into the rich collections that may be hidden due to lack of intellectual control. The survey data points to a lack of consistent practice within institutions. Just as individual institutions have made different decisions for art and artifact collections over time and in different circumstances, so does the library community lack a best practice for the management of these collections.

One of the problems identified is that many special collections do not collect art and artifacts intentionally, so they are not given the same priority as printed and archival materials. This is reflected in comments such as:

“Ours has been a slap-dash approach and trying to keep our head above water. Managing art objects is/has been secondary after traditional book/serial processing.”

“We attempt NOT to collect 3-D artifacts, and yet, we keep getting them. They are useful in exhib-

its and do often provide important historical or cultural information, but they come with many problems for a collection whose focus is on 2-D documents!”

“Because they are not integral to our mission (except occasionally in the University Archives) we have not made their care a priority in any way.”

Many comments indicated that libraries are struggling to manage this type of material, and seem to be doing so as lower priority efforts, without a sense that other institutions shared the same problems.

The survey found that libraries are using a variety of tools, but looking primarily to library catalogs and finding aids to provide intellectual access to art and artifact materials. However, these tools are not meeting their needs. Only about a third of respondents indicated satisfaction with their strategy for managing art and artifacts. The survey also documented a widespread practice of using multiple tools at a single institution. Moreover, at least one-fifth of art works and artifact objects are not discoverable through publicly available discovery systems, and when information is available it has inadequate levels of description for discovery and access or is only available to on-site researchers. Given the extent of art and artifact materials the survey responses indicate ARL members hold collectively, a strategy for providing better intellectual control and public access should be given attention.

While our community has great expertise in metadata and standards, we could collaborate with other communities of practice, particularly museums, to better understand the needs of these materials. In “Metadata for All: Descriptive Standards and Metadata Sharing across Libraries, Archives and Museums,” Elings and Waibel point out that in common practice, “Materials often receive their descriptions not on the basis of material type, but on the basis of the availability of local systems to house the description and the expertise to generate it.” So special collections that are primarily archives tend to manage cultural materials (art and artifacts) using EAD and DACS, while those that are primarily libraries use MARC and AACR2/RDA. Elings and Waibel suggest reconceptualizing standards as material-specific,



rather than community-specific. “For example, rather than conceiving of the suite of standards ... as the ‘museum way’ of describing objects, this combination of standards emerges as the appropriate form of description for cultural materials, regardless of whether they happen to be housed in a library, archive, or museum...The successful integration of digital images of material culture from library, archive, and museum collections hinges on the emergence of a more homogeneous practice describing like-materials in different institutions.”<sup>8</sup>

Achieving a standards matrix and establishing best practices for art and artifact collections would enable all types of cultural heritage institutions to become better stewards of these resources and increase the potential for sharing information. Libraries should collaborate further with archives and museums to create rich and shareable metadata based on standards; adopting a systematic approach to the management and description of art and artifact collections will advance the mission of all cultural heritage institutions and expose hidden collections.

## Endnotes

1. *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*. Dublin, OH: OCLC, 2005, p. 38–39.
2. Christian Dupont, “Libraries, Archives, and Museums in the Twenty-First Century: Intersecting Missions, Converging Futures?” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 8, no. 1 (March 20, 2007): 16.
3. Bruce Whiteman, “Cooperative Collection Building: A Response to Gerald Beasley,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 8, no. 1 (March 20, 2007): 29–30.
4. Robert Martin, “Intersecting Missions, Converging Practice,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 8, no. 1 (March 20, 2007): 81.
5. Association of Research Libraries. 2009. *Exposing Hidden Collections*. [www.arl.org/rtl/speccoll/hidden.shtml](http://www.arl.org/rtl/speccoll/hidden.shtml)
6. Council of Library and Information Resources. *Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives*. <http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/index.html>
7. Rebecca A. Buck and Jean Allman Gilmore, editors. *The New Museum Registration Methods*. Washington DC: American Association of Museums, 1998, p. 43–44.
8. Mary W. Elings and Günter Waibel, “Metadata for All: Descriptive Standards for Metadata Sharing across Libraries, Archives and Museums,” *First Monday* 12, no. 3 (5 March 2007): 8.