

Cataloging in Libraries and Museums

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Introduction

While visiting the Historic New England Library and Archives, I was first introduced to the differences between cataloging standards in libraries, archives, and museums. While I had not expected all three entities to use the same method to describe holdings, I thought there would be standardization within each group. This paper will look at the different practices involved in describing and cataloging materials in libraries and museums and will detail the systems in place.

Explanations of Library and Museum Cataloging

Libraries catalog their collections according to “classification systems.” Two systems are “Dewey Decimal Classification” and “Library of Congress Classification.” These systems provide “classes” that each library holding can be placed into depending on its subject. When a library is using the Dewey Decimal System, each book is assigned a code consisting of numbers to show which category it fits into. The Library of Congress Classification System uses a combination of letters and numbers (Rubin, 2010).

The descriptions are then stored in records following MARC format. “One of the most important advances in the creation of electronic records and fields was the development of MARC (Machine-Readable Cataloging)”... “The intention was to create a standard machine-readable format for bibliographic description” (Rubin, 2010, p. 152). Since library records are highly standardized, libraries are able to share listings of their holdings in online catalogs with the holdings of other libraries (Elings & Waibel, 2007).

I thought that all museums would catalog their collections in the same way because of my experiences as a volunteer at the Tolland Historical Society in 2003 and 2004. As a volunteer, I typed catalog cards listing the museum pieces in the Old Jail Museum and collections storage into an Access database. To catalog the items the acquisitions volunteers made used a book

listing categories and found which term described each museum piece. I think we were using a version of *The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Catalogs: A Revised and Expanded Version of Robert G. Chenhall's System for Classifying Material Objects*. I believed that all museums followed the same practices. However, during both field trips it was emphasized that all museums have different methods for cataloging. Another system is CDWA. "CDWA Lite is an XML schema for encoding core records for works of art and material culture" (Coburn et al., 2010, p. 18). "CDWA Lite is based on the data elements and guide-lines in *Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA)*, a framework for documenting and organizing information on cultural works and images" (Coburn et al., 2010, p. 18).

Both of the sites that I visited during fieldtrips mentioned problems that they encountered with their catalogs. The Windsor Historical Society has a library and archive in addition to a museum and two house museums. They use one software package, called PastPerfect, to manage all of the records for their holdings in addition to their membership files. Their librarian mentioned that an issue with the software package was that the library portion did not use MARC (Barbara, personal communication, December 22, 2011).

The Historic New England Library and Archives encountered difficulties when they built an "online collection portal." Although each museum piece already had an acquisition number they had to be assigned a new universal number that serves as a unique identifier in the system that shows images of holdings in the library, archive, and museum collection. The records also had to be set to display in a different manner so that users would not notice a large difference in the appearance of the records from the library, archive, and museum collection (Kardos, A. & Dwiggins, D., personal communication, December 8, 2011).

Some efforts have been underway to standardize museum catalogs and even to create combined catalogs for library, museum, and archival holdings. Elings and Waibel (2007) wrote about attempts to create consortiums among museums for the purpose of sharing records of holdings. In setting up the consortiums either the member institutions had to have full time positions for people to prepare the records and make them conform to a standardized format or the consortium had to hire full-time staff to standardize the records that were submitted by member institutions (Elings & Waibel, 2007).

Similarities and Differences between Libraries and Museums

On the surface, cataloging in libraries and museums appears to be the same. In both settings, items are grouped with similar items. For example all books on English grammar are assigned to the same group. In a museum, all chairs would be assigned to the same group. Items are given an individual number so that they can be located within a collection. Beyond that point some differences appear. The cataloging system for libraries is standardized. Libraries across the country use MARC for their records.

My Position

If museums had a standardized system for cataloging items and producing records it would make accessing pieces simpler for researchers and curators attempting to organize exhibits. The reason for this would be that museums could be able to create shared catalog more easily (Elings & Waibel, 2007). However, this might be expensive to implement. Museum collections that have already been processed would have to be cataloged again and new records created. Institutions might not have sufficient funding to hire someone for this work or sufficiently trained volunteers to carry it out.

I was interested in the idea described by Elings and Waibel (2007) that all libraries, archives, and museum follow the same cataloging system based on what they are cataloging; MARC for “bibliographic” records and CDWA for “material culture records.” However, I am not certain that I would support implementation of this immediately. I still have questions about it such as what would you do with books as museum pieces? Would they still have MARC style records or would they be seen strictly as objects like paintings or chairs? I hope that one day the information in libraries and museums will be made more accessible to the public through improved cataloging methods and information sharing between organizations.

Conclusion

While cataloging in libraries and cataloging in museums have the same goals of tracking materials and making them more accessible, the two are not the same. Cataloging in libraries is much more standardized than the system in place in museums, which varies by institution.

References

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