Introduction

The impetus for this book is the art information community's very real need for practical guidelines on how to lead end-users to relevant images of art and architecture online.

The authors of the four chapters are professionals whose daily work and long-term research focus on providing access to art. Sara Shatford Layne gives a definition and overview of subject access to images of works of art and discusses related issues and solutions. Patricia Harpring addresses practical implementations of metadata schemas and controlled vocabularies, as well as specific problems and decisions that are part of building efficient, usable, and useful art information systems. Colum Hourihane stresses the key role played by those who analyze and index images of works of art, focusing on tools and methods for iconographic analysis and description. Christine Sundt discusses some of the major complexities of art information beyond and in combination with subject analysis, exploring the challenges faced both by searchers for art images and by those who wish to assist those searchers.

Just as every viewer brings a distinctive perspective to the viewing of works of art, so each author brings his or her own expertise, experience, and opinions to bear in the individual essays in this book. My own perspective is that the informed use of appropriate metadata schemas and controlled vocabularies is essential for the creation of good art information systems. But I also know from experience that information systems and the methods of populating them must be kept both practical and as simple as possible if they are going to have any degree of success, or even be implemented at all. Individual institutions and projects must do what is practical and achievable with the resources available to them, always with the goal of serving their various user groups. In building information systems, projects and institutions should create a data structure in which information is atomized to the degree that it is compliant with relevant standards and will enable good end-user retrieval. When systems become overly complex, cataloguing becomes more difficult and inefficient, and

usability both for those who are populating the system and for those who are its intended users declines. Practical considerations should take precedence over theoretical analysis. Checklists, local authorities, and any other tools that can facilitate cataloguing and indexing should be used as much as possible. And the importance of training cannot be stressed enough.

The annotated list of tools, glossary, and selected bibliography in this volume are the result of a collaborative effort on the part of the authors and myself. We hope they provide both useful reference tools and a common language for discussing issues and strategies that provide access to images.

The images included in this book are taken, for the most part, from the collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum and reflect to a great degree our own research interests; therefore, visual examples of non-Western art are lacking. But the standards, tools, and methods we discuss can be used to describe any type of art, architecture, or material culture.

Finally, I would like to stress the human element in the work of describing and providing access to images of works of art. Information technology is an integral part of the way in which we work today, but without the art-historical knowledge, intelligence, and experience of art information professionals, it would be impossible to enable users to find the images they seek.

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