

March 2019

# Review of Steven J. Miller's "Metadata for Digital Collections"

Maureen Burns Ed.D.

*IMAGinED Consulting*, moaburns@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://online.vraweb.org/vrab>

---

### Recommended Citation

Burns, Maureen Ed.D. (2019) "Review of Steven J. Miller's "Metadata for Digital Collections"," *VRA Bulletin*:Vol. 45: Iss. 2, Article 7.  
Available at: <https://online.vraweb.org/vrab/vol45/iss2/7>

This Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by VRA Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in VRA Bulletin by an authorized editor of VRA Online.

---

## Review of Steven J. Miller's "Metadata for Digital Collections"

### **Abstract**

In eleven chapters, *Metadata for Digital Collections* by Steven J. Miller provides an accessible and practical how-to-do-it metadata manual. This review explores the book's content with an emphasis on how useful it might be to serve as a reference work in visual resources collections. The book is well-organized and clearly written with extensive illustrations and examples making it easy to find information quickly and focus on specific concepts. The reviewer suggests visual resources professionals consider sharing the other resources that they are currently finding most useful through additional book reviews.

### **Keywords**

CSUJAD, CONTENTdm, Densho, VRA Core, CCO, Getty Vocabularies

## Review of Steven J. Miller's *Metadata for Digital Collections*

While consulting on the California State University Japanese American Digitization (CSUJAD) project (<http://www.csujad.com/>), the digital archivist who is responsible for all the metadata coming in from over twenty partner collections mentioned to me that she found Steven J. Miller's *Metadata for Digital Collections: A How-To-Do-It Manual* useful.<sup>1</sup> She is handling a full range of archival objects (letters, photographs, oral histories, etc.) in a variety of formats (text, image, audio, & video) and I wondered about the book's utility for curators in visual resources collections. Therefore, I thought it might be useful to look this resource over and share my findings with other information professionals.

The author is a Senior Lecturer Emeritus in the School of Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and he retired in 2016.<sup>2</sup> His book, *Metadata for Digital Collections* was published in 2011 and his website (<https://people.uwm.edu/ml/>) says that a second edition will be out in 2020, published by ALA Neal-Schuman. He has a "Metadata Resources" link on his institutional website that was last updated in 2011, but suggests that current information will be added later this year or early 2020. It appears that Miller used the book as a textbook for his graduate courses on information and knowledge organization, metadata, cataloging, information architecture, linked data, and ontologies. He periodically teaches an online course on "Linked Open Data for Beginners" that is intended to be continuing education for practitioners and there is a section of his website devoted to this topic as well.

The book is well organized and flows naturally from an introduction to metadata including types of metadata and standards (examples include Word documents, iTunes music, books, digital images, and digital collections of all sorts), to more sophisticated conceptual topics, ending with Linked Data and the Semantic Web. The second, third, and fourth chapters focus on the Dublin Core, which is presented as a minimum standard and "the most commonly used scheme for digital resource description."<sup>3</sup> Examples using the CONTENTdm software abound because the author is assuming that most of the readers of this book will at least be familiar with this digital collection management software.<sup>4</sup> For example, the CSUJAD project uses Dublin Core and CONTENTdm and so these examples are quite useful. Miller then discusses controlled vocabularies, from simple lists to complex thesauri with associative relationships, and how they improve resource discovery for users. He mentions using the Library of Congress Subject Headings, the Thesaurus for Graphic Materials, and the Getty Vocabularies while also providing guidance on creating your own vocabularies.<sup>5</sup> This is something that the CSUJAD project has done in collaboration with Densho, who established a controlled vocabulary for Japanese American history that CSUJAD is greatly expanding with the associated influx of archival materials from early immigration to the Redress Movement.<sup>6</sup> An introduction to metadata encoding so that the reader can understand and work with XML-encoded metadata records is then provided. Chapter Seven provides an overview of the Metadata Object Description Schema (MODS) and Chapter Eight, the Visual Resources Association Core Categories.<sup>7</sup> These sections allow the reader to obtain familiarity with richer XML-based schema that use attributes and hierarchically-nested sub-elements and compare the characteristics of different schemes used in the cultural heritage metadata world. The final chapters explore: issues of metadata interoperability,

share-ability, and quality (including Open Archives Initiative harvesting); designing and documenting a metadata scheme (including information about content guidelines with detailed specifications such as the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules and Cataloging Cultural Objects); and understanding Linked Open Data, and the Semantic Web (including the Resource Description Framework data model and its applicability to cultural heritage metadata.<sup>8</sup>

Although most information professionals have had formal schooling or a working knowledge of metadata, Miller's book still seems to be a very practical and useful resource, especially as archives and libraries take on an expanding array of digital projects. The traditional roles of the visual resources curator have greatly expanded with the transition from analog to digital resources, but many curators still spend large percentages of their time cataloging cultural heritage materials or supervising students and other staff in cataloging endeavors. Therefore, Miller's book could be a very handy resource to add to the cataloger's bookshelf and to refer students/staff to when they have questions about metadata. The introductory nature of the metadata material presented and overviews of more complex issues, schemas, guidelines, and tools are presented in a user-friendly, manual type of format. Most people would be unlikely to read the book from cover to cover, but it is very easy to pick and choose the topics of interest and obtain quality information, extended illustrations and case study examples, as well as additional references to obtain more information. Each chapter ends with a concise summary of what was presented allowing for additional efficiencies in terms of learning about important concepts. These concepts are clearly explained in the text, the figures and other visualizations provide useful examples, and the manual type of format makes it very easy to find specifics quickly and easily. I would go as far as to say that this book would also be useful to the general public who might want to start a digital collection of family photographs or other such materials.

The author is very clear about the basic intentions of the book, the title also indicates that it is a "How-To-Do-It Manual," and Miller does not presume that readers come to it with much cataloging experience. So, this may not be the book for the metadata sophisticate. It seems like the chapter on the VRA Core would benefit from an in-depth review by a visual resources professional, especially one deeply involved in the VRA's Cataloging and Metadata Standards Committee, with recommendations, although Miller does note that it is only a "superficial overview."<sup>9</sup> He emphasizes VRA Core is "used primarily in the museum community" and does not mention the teaching collections of surrogates from which the VRA Core was born.<sup>10</sup> Miller explains VRA Core's usefulness for describing museum objects, but could expand more about its utility for describing architecture. Both VRA Core 3.0 (which he compares to Dublin Core) and VRA Core 4.0 (compared to MODS) are discussed in detail with illustrative material. The three critical components of descriptive data standards are explained—element sets (structure standards like VRA Core & the Categories for the Description of Works of Art), content standards (CCO), and value standards (Getty Vocabularies).<sup>11</sup> Concepts such as the "One-to-One Principle" of item level cataloging and the distinction between a "work," "collection," or "image" and how they can be linked together are provided. It is wonderful to see that the VRA Core is included in the book and a tribute to all the efforts of the VRA members and other information professionals who developed this trifecta of critical metadata components.

In conclusion, this reviewer looks forward to the 2020 update to the “Metadata Resources” on Miller’s website and the future edition of the book. It seems like Miller’s *Metadata for Digital Collections* will continue to be a valuable resource and reference for anyone starting to work with digital materials or managing digital projects. The book made me wonder about other reference resources that visual resources curators are currently finding useful and make available to the staff/students working in their collections? At the risk of showing how long I have been in the field, *Slide Libraries* by Betty Jo Irvine and Eileen Fry, *Management For Visual Resources Collections* by Nancy Shelby Schuller, *Introduction to Imaging* by Howard Besser and Jennifer Trant, *Introduction to Metadata* by Murtha Baca, and *Introduction to Controlled Vocabularies* by Patricia Harpring all came to mind as such staple references.<sup>12</sup> What’s on your visual resources collection bookshelf? Maybe more reviews can follow this one in future issues of the *VRA Bulletin* to find out. Perhaps it is also time for VRA to consider publishing more how-to type manuals with broad and practical appeal.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Yoko Okunishi for calling my attention to this resource.

<sup>2</sup> Information about the author was obtained from the book itself and the Miller’s website at <https://people.uwm.edu/ml/cv/>.

<sup>3</sup> Steven J. Miller, *Metadata for Digital Collections: A How-To-Do-It Manual* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2011), 25 and Dublin Core Metadata Initiative at <http://dublincore.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about CONTENTdm software, see: <https://www.oclc.org/en/contentdm.html>.

<sup>5</sup> For more information: LCSH <http://id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects.html>; TGM <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/tgm/>; and Getty Vocabularies <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/>.

<sup>6</sup> For more information about Densho, see: <https://densho.org/>. The CSUJAD controlled vocabulary can be found at <http://csujad.com/practices.html>.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see: MODS <http://www.loc.gov/standards/mods/> and VRA Core <https://www.loc.gov/standards/vracore/>.

<sup>8</sup> For more information, see the following links: OAI <https://www.openarchives.org/OAI/openarchivesprotocol.html>; AACR <http://www.aacr2.org/>; CCO <http://cco.vrafoundation.org/>; RDF <https://www.w3.org/RDF/>.

<sup>9</sup> Miller, *Metadata*, 213. For more information about the VRA Cataloging and Metadata Standards Committee <http://vraweb.org/about/committees/vra-cataloging-and-metadata-standards-committee/>.

<sup>10</sup> For more information about the visual resources collections and the Visual Resources Association, see: <http://vraweb.org/about/history/>

<sup>11</sup> Miller, *Metadata*, 213-225. For more information about CDWA, see: [http://www.getty.edu/research/publications/electronic\\_publications/cdwa/](http://www.getty.edu/research/publications/electronic_publications/cdwa/).

<sup>12</sup> Betty Jo Irvine and Eileen Fry, *Slide Libraries* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1979); Nancy Shelby Schuller, *Management for Visual Resources Collections* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1989); Howard Besser and Jennifer Trant, *Introduction to Imaging* (Santa Monica, CA: The Getty Art History Information Program, 1995); Murtha Baca, *Introduction to Metadata* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008); and Patricia Harpring, *Introduction to Controlled Vocabularies* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010).