


May 2016

# Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Uktena Monster? Subject Cataloging for Images

Karen L. Kessel M.A.

Sonoma State University, [karen.kessel@sonoma.edu](mailto:karen.kessel@sonoma.edu)

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

 Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), [Book and Paper Commons](#), [Ceramic Arts Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Folklore Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), [Illustration Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), [Painting Commons](#), [Printmaking Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), [Sculpture Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kessel, Karen L. M.A. (2016) "Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Uktena Monster? Subject Cataloging for Images," *VRA Bulletin*:Vol. 42: Iss. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://online.vraweb.org/vrab/vol42/iss2/3>

This Feature Articles 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.

---

# Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Uktena Monster? Subject Cataloging for Images

## **Abstract**

This article describes the difference between cataloging images and cataloging books, the obstacles to including subject data in image cataloging records and how these obstacles can be overcome to make image collections more accessible. I call for participants to help create a subject authority reference resource for non-Western art. This article is an expanded and revised version of a presentation for the 2016 Joint ARLIS/VRA conference in Seattle.

## **Keywords**

image cataloging, image retrieval, tagging

## **Author Bio & Acknowledgements**

Karen Kessel has been the Visual Resources curator for the Art and Art History Department at Sonoma State University for 25 years after nine years in the same position at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and currently is serving as secretary for the Visual Resources Association Foundation Board of Directors.

One of the natural connections between art librarians and image curators is an appreciation of the need for controlled vocabularies to describe our holdings so that patrons can find what they are looking for more easily. However, when it comes to subject matter, pictures tend to be more expansive and amorphous than printed materials. Books usually have a narrow, well-defined focus. In contrast, image subject matter is often ambiguous and multi-layered. Many of the terms that would be considered subject descriptors for printed matter are broken down into more granular categories for images. In addition, standards developed for image cataloging thus far do not cover Asian and indigenous traditions to the same level of detail as Western art, especially in regard to subject matter.

After defining the parameters of subject as an image cataloging category, I will review existing controlled vocabularies, describe some hindrances that cause us to hesitate in adding subject terms to image records, and suggest some solutions that could help make subject indexing much less formidable, or at least help it become a standard part of image cataloging.

Art images can be purely illustrations of a story, a place in time, or an abstract concept. The five basic questions of journalism--who, what, when, where, and why--can serve as the guide for describing a narrative or illustrative story.

Answers to these journalistic questions in turn comprise the answer to the broader question: what is the image *of*? In many instances, what the image is *about* is in turn something else again. Twentieth-century art historian, Erwin Panofsky, established a hierarchical structure for the analysis of the subjects of art objects that has remained a standard.<sup>1</sup> He proposed three levels of meaning to be discerned: the pre-iconographic or physical description, or what the picture is of; the iconographic analysis or reference to a religious, historical, mythical, philosophical, or literary tradition represented by the image that identifies what the picture is about; and above that, the iconological interpretation or abstract concepts conveyed by the particular scene.

*Blind Men walking and falling into ditch, church, landscape, rural  
Christianity, Bible, New Testament, Teaching of Jesus Christ, Parables  
Dogmatism, inexperience*



**Figure 1. Panofsky's three levels: Pieter Bruegel I, *Parable of the Blind Leading the Blind*.**

Panofsky is still cited as an authority for developing subject indexing schemes, as well as in articles about research projects designed to gauge users' success in finding images. A fourth level of meaning, that of the overlay of the period of history in which the work was made, has been appended by recent subject analysts, such as Moshe Barasch, in *The Language of Art*.<sup>2</sup>

Visual symbolism can take different forms. Images serve as official symbols of nations, clans, organizations, and other entities. Ideograms are images that combine disparate parts of animals, plants, abstract shapes, and other physical entities to convey a composite meaning based on particular qualities of the individual elements. Family crests are an example of this usage. Visual metaphors suggest an analogy of one entity with another. The symbol could be said to be a convention unconsciously recognized as representing that entity, such as a national flag or the symbol of the Red Cross. A visual metaphor is more of an *ad hoc* symbol invented by the artist to make visible an invisible idea.



**Figure 2. Left: Symbolism. Faith Ringgold’s *Flag Story Quilt* references a national symbol. Right: Visual Metaphor. Shepard Fairey’s poster image for the 2008 presidential campaign identifies Barack Obama with the nation by painting his visage in the colors of the flag.**



**Figure 3. Wendy Red Star, *Indian Summer, Four Seasons*. 2006.**

subject matter in images can include what is not shown as well as what is. He provides the example of sculptors depicting Christ’s apostles as literally standing on the shoulders of the Old Testament prophets in medieval church sculpture, representing the lightness of the prophets’ burden by not expressing the weight of the bodies they are supporting.

Similarly, artists use allegory to adorn the human figure with suggestive attributes and settings in order to represent political issues or abstract concepts, such as flower blossoms for spring or autumn colors for fall (Figure 3).

Patterns can identify particular groups or concepts recognized by their creators and users. The figure on the left represents Autumn, Indians, and in particular, the Crow people, identifiable by the geometric pattern and primary colors of her costume.

In the work cited above, Moshe Barasch points out that





**Figure 4: Robert Delaunay, *Homage to Bleriot*, 1915.**

Nonobjective art can be challenging to describe. The Art and Architecture Thesaurus recommends reserving the term “nonobjective” for contemporary art, but in my opinion, that limits the possibility for scholars to make connections between modern abstract art and the art of other times and places. Abstract art is not always as nonobjective as it might appear initially. Practicing subject indexing provides the opportunity to look more carefully at the works we are cataloging. For the image in Figure 4, I first used the terms

“nonobjective” and “geometric” to describe the work, since interlocking concentric circles

dominate the image, but a closer look revealed the Eiffel tower, a glider airplane, a bird, and a propeller, adding a different dimension to the circle images. In 1909, Louis Bleriot became the first pilot to fly a plane from France to England over the English Channel. The blue patch in the upper right hand corner apparently represents the shoreline viewed from above.

I have developed a list of terms for nonobjective works in my local database for searching<sup>3</sup>, which I have been comparing with the terms found in the Library of Congress Thesaurus of Graphic Materials and the Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT). It is part of a simple controlled list of subject terms I use based on the [Simons Tansey cataloging system](#).<sup>4</sup> I initially developed my subject list to provide local searches for faculty on a stand-alone computer. When I began to migrate my data to shared image delivery systems, I discovered its limitations.

Portability, then, is the first barrier to subject indexing. When I contemplate migrating my data to a larger entity, such as our state university system’s shared repository or Artstor’s Shared Shelf remote image hosting service, will my local terms mesh with terms that other contributors have created? [Artstor](#) has not made a practice of including subject terms unless the image contributors provide them in their cataloging data. I use the composite term “urban landscape” to describe city views. I did a Google search on this term and found city views as I expected, but when I searched on the same terms in Artstor, the images that were retrieved were images of parks in cities, all contributed by a vendor that specializes in documenting urban parks.

Many curators hesitate to use subject terms because the existing standard vocabularies available are inadequate in scope and extent in describing pictures, and they want their data to be portable in anticipation of merging with other collections. The Library of Congress Thesaurus of Graphic Materials provides many terms for describing an image at the pre-iconographic level. So do the Art and Architecture

Thesaurus and the Thesaurus of Geographic Names. The Getty Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA) offers a list of twenty-seven general subject matter terms. These sources are limited in the levels of meaning that can be ascribed, and they are particularly limited in regard to the terminology of Asian peoples and the indigenous peoples of Africa, the Americas, and the South Pacific, although the Getty vocabularies are constantly endeavoring to improve in this regard. The AAT excludes iconographic terms. The Fogg<sup>5</sup> and Tansey traditional analog slide classification schemes, that have largely been abandoned in the Digital Age, provided two levels of subject description in their catalog coding, pre-iconographic and iconographic, and their cataloging guides could still be used as models. There are specialized iconographic resources, such as the [Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae \(LIMC\)](#) for iconography of works from Classical antiquity, and the Princeton Index of Christian Art. [ICONCLASS](#), the alphanumeric code system denoting iconographic themes expressed in artworks, developed by Henri van de Waal on index cards in the 1940s to annotate paintings and prints of the low countries from the Renaissance through the Baroque periods, has been upgraded by Hans Brandhorst in the last thirty years by transforming it from a multi-volume print resource to an Internet resource and adding a feature to allow expansion on the Web by invited contributions. It has been used for some time by European museums to catalog and retrieve images by iconographic subjects on multiple levels of meaning. The cataloging guide developed by the VRA, [Cataloging Cultural Objects \(CCO\)](#), provides for standardizing the way descriptive cataloging of images is recorded. It includes a chapter on creating authorities.<sup>6</sup>

Another barrier discouraging subject cataloging includes the inability for any one curator to have a breadth of knowledge across the whole terrain of art history, and many image repositories still have solo curators. However, even a physical description of the image for a searcher will help, because people looking for symbols and iconographic images know what physical attributes to search on, so if you provide at least that, you provide a hook.

Another barrier is choosing terms that reflect current usage but still convey accurate meaning. Maureen Burns has been working with a team of librarians to document images and stories of the Japanese internment camps during World War II.<sup>7</sup> They point out that the term used to describe the removal of the Japanese Americans from their homes is “evacuation,” as if they were being rescued from danger when actually they were being imprisoned. For Native Americans there would be many similar scenarios. So how do you correct the language but still provide access by the terms people are accustomed to using?

Subject indexing can take time, but so does creating an artist authority. The difference with subject description is in deciding how much is enough and how much is too much.

Automation is one solution. Researchers are trying, to both speed up data entry and objectify the process. The [CLiMB Project](#)<sup>8</sup>, whose investigators have presented a few times at VRA conferences, endeavors to add subject terms by creating algorithms that find the nouns and verbs in a descriptive text provided by the object’s repository or another text source and automatically insert them into the cataloging record. They are

currently doing experiments with this method. One drawback is that you need a text in hand.

The advent of the Internet has made it easier to look up museum descriptions and information from other authoritative sources. Museums are increasingly providing quality descriptive metadata for the objects in their online collections.

**Susquehanna River (link to TGN), autumn leaves, train, transportation, stone arch railroad bridges (AAT), landscape, mountains, panoramas, bodies of water (AAT)**



**Figure 5. Jasper Cropsey, *Starrucca Viaduct, Susquehanna Valley*, 1865.**

In a few moments on the Internet, I was able to identify the river in this Jasper Cropsey painting of the Starrucca Viaduct and learn from the Toledo Museum of Art website that it was one of the first stone railroad bridges in the country, making it a useful source for engineering history, as well as possibly a commentary on the effect of industrialization on the beauty of the countryside, represented by the two individuals contemplating the view in the foreground.

Some museums are inviting online visitors and scholars to tag their objects with social tags, and several studies have been done comparing social tagging with professional cataloging. The drawbacks of social tagging, such as the lack of hierarchical and associational relationships that link synonyms and broader and narrower terms, are obvious to librarians. But we should pay attention to its positive aspects, bringing to light the interests of the general public and novice museum-goers that professional catalogers, who are addressing the interests of scholars, might not consider. Paying attention to the terms the public uses when tagging might promote



more interest in image collections and art works in museums. It will educate us on how different demographic groups look at images. As we have seen in recent conferences, researchers in subject cataloging are paying more attention to the users of collections to analyze how well our current vocabularies serve them.<sup>9</sup>

Tapping art historians for their expertise in specific areas for subject terms similarly provides the terminology needed for subject cataloging if not the structure. The Getty vocabularies, as well as ICONCLASS, actively solicit contributions to broaden their coverage. It is time-consuming to send in proposals, but institutions with larger staffs could work on contributing more in the area of indigenous arts as their faculty contribute to the scholarship. It will take some complex planning to develop a scheme in the nature of ICONCLASS for Asian and indigenous art, but a task force or a wiki or some other form of team effort could be developed, with members having expertise in different areas of art and architecture, to develop standard terminology in areas that are lacking. Such a task force could work on developing authority records that could link related terms, using the CCO guidelines, and contribute to the Getty vocabularies at the same time. Shalimar Fojas White, Fine Arts reference librarian at Harvard University, has also suggested developing an online bibliography to which individuals could contribute reference sources for subject cataloging, especially for non-Western art.

If you have reference sources for identifying subject imagery in non-Western art, please send them to me at [Karen.kessel@sonoma.edu](mailto:Karen.kessel@sonoma.edu). I would also be pleased to hear from you if you are interested in working on developing an authority for terminology in this area. Developing standard terminologies and authority records for image subjects in non-Western areas will take a significant amount of work, but it will provide more understanding of the links between cultures and ultimately make subject cataloging less formidable.

#### Image Credits:

The images for this presentation are reproduced following the College Art Association's 2015 guidelines for fair use for analytical writing about art:

1. Pieter Bruegel I, *Parable of the Blind*, 1568, Museo e gallerie nazionale di Capodimonte, artwork in the public domain
2. Faith Ringgold, *Flag Story Quilt*, 1985; and Shepard Fairey, Barack Obama presidential campaign poster image, 2007
3. Wendy Red Star, *Indian Summer, Four Seasons*, 2006, <http://www.wendyredstar.com/four-seasons#/3>, accessed 3/30/2016
4. Robert Delaunay, *Homage to Bleriot*, 1914, Basel, Kunstmuseum
5. Japer Francis Cropsey, *Starrucca Viaduct, Susquehanna Valley*, 1865, Toledo Museum of Art, artwork in the public domain.

## ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

- Baca, Murtha, ed. *Introduction to Art Image Access: Issues, Tools, Standards, Strategies*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2002.
- Harpring, Patricia. *Introduction to Controlled Vocabularies: Terminology for Art, Architecture, and other Cultural Works*. Series Editor Murtha Baca. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010. In print and electronic versions. [http://www.getty.edu/research/publications/electronic\\_publications/intro\\_controlled\\_vocab/index.html](http://www.getty.edu/research/publications/electronic_publications/intro_controlled_vocab/index.html) (accessed March 30, 2016)
- Marshall, Hannah M. "Preliminary Findings: A Comparative Study of Subject Metadata in an Images for Teaching Collection," *Visual Resources Association Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (2015) Article 5. Available at: <http://online.vraweb.org/vrab/vol41/iss2/5>
- Matusiak, Krystyna K. "Towards user-centered indexing in digital image collections." *OCLC Systems & Services: International digital library perspectives* 22, no. 4 (2006): 283-298.
- McRae, Linda. "More than MARC: Developing a standard descriptive terminology for visual image collections." *Visual Resources Association Bulletin* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 25-26
- Roberts, Helene. "A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words: Art Indexing in Electronic Databases." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 52, no. 11 (2001): 911-16.
- 
- <sup>1</sup> Panofsky, Erwin. "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," Chapter 1 in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.
- <sup>2</sup> Barasch, Moshe. *The Language of Art: Studies in Interpretation*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- <sup>3</sup> Gustafson, Karen. "A Simple In-house Subject Indexing System." *Visual Resources Association Bulletin* 20, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 16-23.
- <sup>4</sup> The Simons Tansey classification system, published in 1970 as VRA pioneer Luraine Tansey's library science master's thesis under the supervision of Wendell Simons while she was a slide librarian at the University of California at Santa Cruz, was the first automatic indexing system for cataloging images. The document attempted to merge computer-readable codes and terminology for history, art, and science images to provide cross-disciplinary access. It is

---

available at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED048879.pdf> (Accessed May 18, 2016)

- <sup>5</sup> At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum and the Harvard Fine Arts Library catalogued and organized the Museum's growing collection of thousands of lantern slides. The ensuing Fogg alphanumeric classification system using library Cutter numbers became one of the standard systems for cataloguing slides and photographs in the twentieth century.
- <sup>6</sup> Baca, Murtha, Patricia Harpring, Elisa Lanzi, Linda McRae, and Ann Baird Whiteside. *Cataloging Cultural Objects: A Guide to Describing Cultural Works and their Images*. ALA Editions, 2006.
- <sup>7</sup> Williams, Gregory L.; Tyson, Sue; and Burns, Maureen (2015) "Building a Statewide Archival Collaborative: The California State University Japanese American Digitization Project," VRA Bulletin: Vol. 42: Iss. 1, Article 9. Available at: <http://online.vraweb.org/vrab/vol42/iss1/9>
- <sup>8</sup> (<http://clip.umiacs.umd.edu/archives/climb/>, accessed 3/30/2016)
- <sup>9</sup> See also Bearman, David and Jennifer Trant. "Social terminology enhancement through vernacular engagement: Exploring collaborative annotation to encourage interaction with museum collections." *D-Lib Magazine* 11, no. 9 (2005). Available at [www.dlib.org/dlib/september05/bearman/09bearman.html](http://www.dlib.org/dlib/september05/bearman/09bearman.html) (accessed March 10, 2016)