Obstacles and Solutions in Establishing Cataloging Standards for Fine Print Collections

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Abstract

In 2011, Georgetown University was awarded a Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) to research and catalog the collections of six significant twentieth-century American printmakers. The artists include renowned wood engraver and book illustrator Lynd Ward (1905–1985), the preeminent printmaker John DePol (1913–2004), and four highly talented, but underappreciated, women printmakers of the same period: Louise Miller Boyer (1890–1976), Helen King Boyer (1919–2012), Marguerite Kumm (1902–1992), and Kathleen Spagnolo (b. 1919). More than 5,400 objects were cataloged for the Undiscovered Printmakers: Hidden Treasures in Georgetown University's Library project, which was successfully completed in 2014.

This paper highlights some of the complex issues involved with establishing standards for cataloging the unique physical nature and characteristics of fine prints. There is not always a clearly defined, logical, or consistent set of rules for recording object information relating to these artworks. The process of creating fine prints is very personal and experimental in nature, producing one-of-a-kind objects that exhibit extremely subtle differences between each printed impression.

Customizing the Cataloging Workspace

The Undiscovered Printmakers project has been a case study for establishing policies and practices for cataloging fine print collections at Georgetown University Library, where it served as a pilot project in the implementation of a new-to-us collections management database, EmbARK. Curators and project staff customized many aspects of EmbARK from setup to interface, anticipating that future catalogers are likely to range from experienced art curator to student volunteer and thus will have varying levels of art knowledge. The database has proven to be an excellent and flexible tool, enabling staff to catalog objects confidently in a coherent and consistent manner that facilitates access and scholarly research.

The EmbARK collections management system is

Fig. 1: EmbARK default cataloging view

designed specifically for the management of visual collections and has a vast variety of tools for recording art object information: 17 interrelated tables record everything from multiple sets of measurements to publications that mention the artwork. Many of these tables do not apply directly to the cataloging process, but the crucial objects table alone contains 145 unique fields spread across 8 tabs (Figure 1).

To facilitate the cataloging process, curators developed a customized cataloging view that displays a streamlined selection of only the essential fields for catalogers (Figure 2). This alteration reduces the eight tabs to just one screen and pares down the number of fields by over 60 percent. As a result, the cataloging process is more efficient, and it is easier to ensure that important fields are not skipped or ignored.

An important aim of the project was to introduce and develop a standardized vocabulary of specific printmaking terms within EmbARK. Drop-down lists were created for many fields, offering catalogers a select list of terms and descriptions to choose from when describing the characteristics of a print (Figure 3). The drop-down lists virtually eliminate the chance for human error involved in free text entry and greatly reduce the amount of time curators spend in checking catalogers' work. They also guarantee that records can be searched more confidently, without the worry that misspelled words may cause objects not to be found.

During the course of the project, the curators and project coordinator edited the lists, as the scope and breadth of material became evident. These lists were retained in
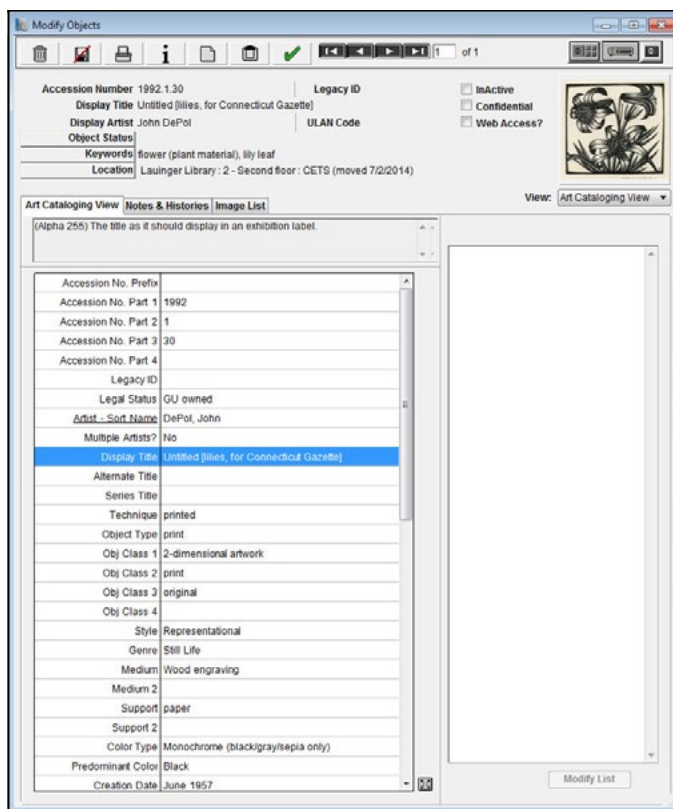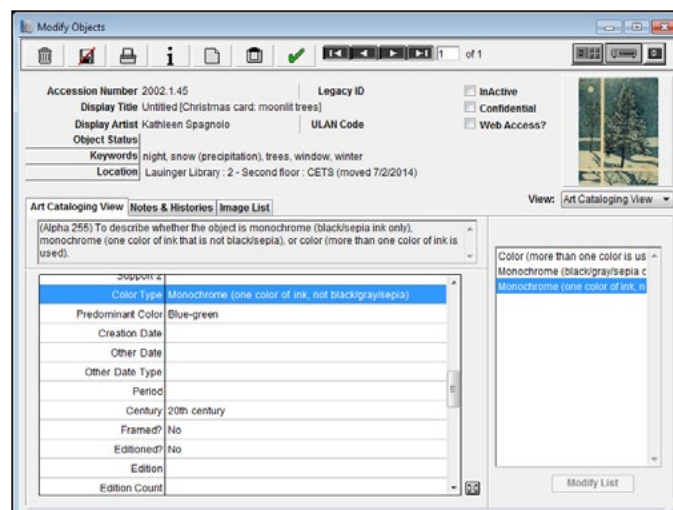

Fig. 2: Customized cataloging view

Fig. 3: Drop-down lists that eliminate typos and spelling errors from many fields

EmbARK and are now being augmented by the curators to accommodate the many other types of objects in the broader collection. The original drop-down lists form the core of the vocabulary, however, as the bulk of the collection consists of fine prints.

The following selections from this diverse group of objects illustrate our own cataloging processes as they developed. The questions they presented required research and discussion to resolve how to structure and format particular object information in the customized EmbARK template to best suit project needs and resources. They demonstrate how and why we determined and established particular cataloging policies during the project.

Describing Complex Mediums

Georgetown University Library holds a uniquely personal collection of 70 artworks by Kathleen Spagnolo. She initially worked as an illustrator and eventually specialized in etching, using a special process called multilevel viscosity printing (Figure 4). This method of printing separate layers of colored inks was developed by Stanley Hayter, Krishna Reddy, and others in Paris from the 1920s onward. Spagnolo studied etching at American University in Washington, D.C., with artist-teacher Robert Gates and color etching with Krishna Reddy of Atelier 17, Paris, when he came to the university to teach viscosity printing in 1964. Spagnolo used this printmaking technique to produce her most innovative and outstanding work. By studying a number of the artist's working proofs in the collection, we discovered Spagnolo's experimental use of vibrant color using the viscosity printing technique. She created rich textures through which her bold, three-dimensional forms truly came alive.
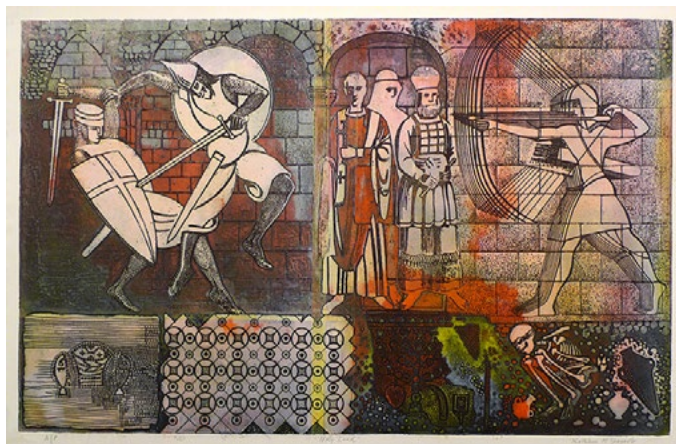

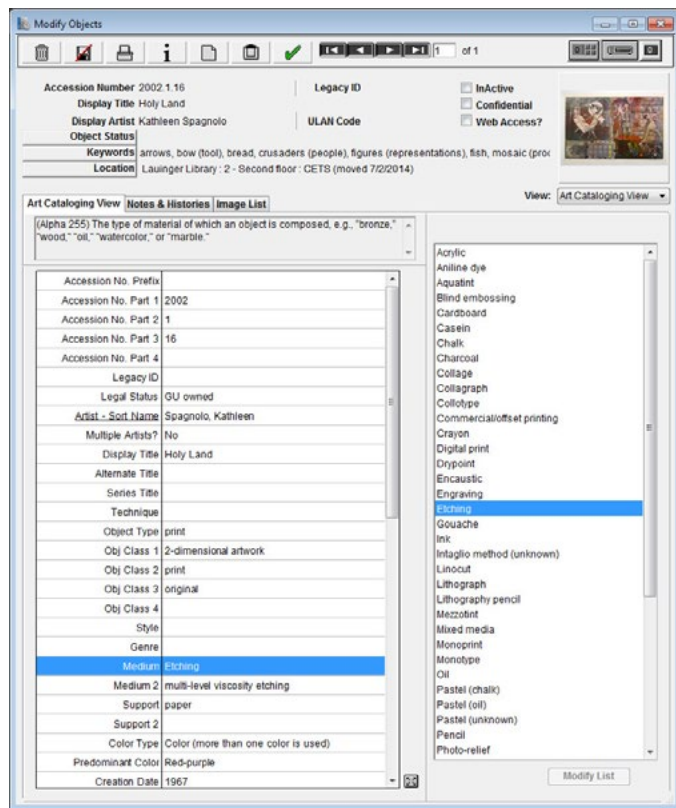
Fig. 4: Kathleen Spagnolo, Holy Land *(1967)*

Fig. 5: Object record for Holy Land *showing choice of medium as etching*

When we started cataloging these prints, we wanted to include as much information as possible about the intricate printing technique involved. Drop-down lists proved to be an excellent means of clearly describing the multiple techniques involved. Looking at the object record for Spagnolo's *Holy Land* (Figure 5), we see how the catalogers first selected "etching" from the drop-down list in the Medium field. The choice of etching for the medium determined the choices that then became available in the Medium 2 field (Figure 6), which in our example is a specific type. For other multimedia objects, the Medium 2 field can describe a second, additional medium used (e.g., an etching "with pencil") rather than a narrower description of one medium.

Describing Multifaceted Objects

Lynd Ward is the most renowned and acclaimed artist of the six artists studied in this project. He was a pioneer of the graphic novel and a well-known illustrator of many adult and children's books, and the Ward collection at Georgetown University Library has many key works from his career, including 203 finished original illustrations in ink, crayon, gouache, watercolor, pastel, and scratchboard; 767 sketches; 245 original illustrations for book mock-ups (or artist "dummies"); and 481 prints. Additionally, there are wood blocks used to print Ward's wordless novels: a complete set of 155 blocks for *Gods' Man* (1929), a complete set of 124 blocks for *Madman's Drum* (1930), and an incomplete set of 23 blocks for *Song Without Words* (1936). This original illustration (Figure 7) by Ward for his wife May McNeer's children's book *Go Tim Go!* is an example of an object that required classification in more than one way.
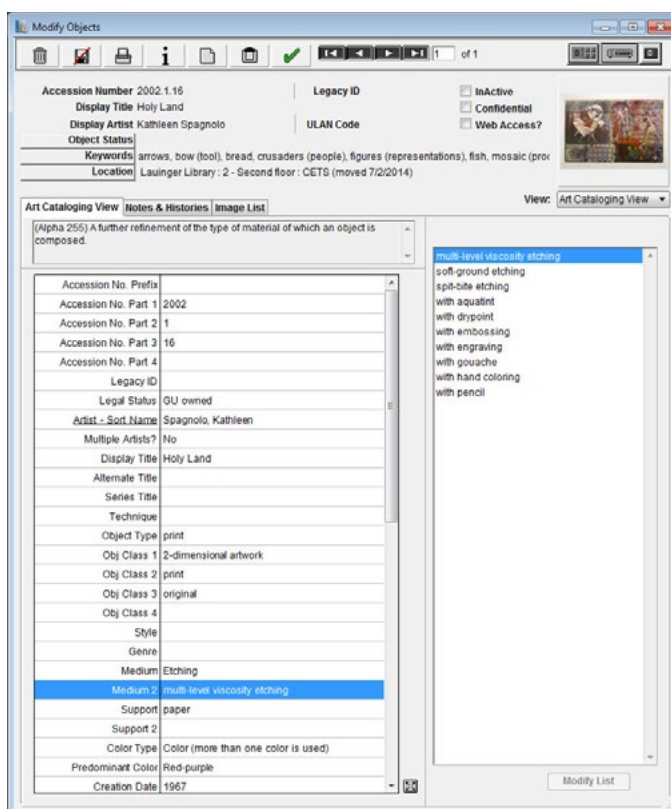

Fig. 6: Object record for Holy Land *showing Medium 2 as a refinement of Medium*

Fig. 7: Lynd Ward, original illustration in a book mock-up of May McNeer's Go Tim Go! *(ca. 1967)*

The artwork was defined as an original drawing under the object classification field, but was also differentiated as a book mock-up within the object type field in EmbARK (Figure 8). Both definitions are important for characterizing the nature of this object (a drawing that is one piece of the larger book mock-up), and anyone searching the catalog would find the object under one or the other term. In addition, all the individually cataloged drawings that are part of the same mock-up are connected via the Related Objects field (Figure 9) so that with one click a researcher can see a list of all parts of the whole. This necessitates a rather finicky process of connecting all related objects after they are individually cataloged, but it is a very important piece of information to have about a work that is part of a larger whole. This information will also be needed for artworks taken from a portfolio or those published in a series.

Recording an Artwork's Evolution

The art collections of Louise Miller Boyer (1890–1976) and her daughter, Helen King Boyer (1919–2012), held at Georgetown University Library are the largest publicly held collections of their work. In the process of cataloging Helen Boyer's artworks, we noted the variety of artistic techniques and media that she experimented with and developed in her varying career as an artist. Research into the collection of this underappreciated artist revealed that Helen Boyer's talents went beyond merely the drypoint printing technique with which she and her mother are most associated. Throughout the course of cataloging, we discovered that some of the Boyer prints had multiple dates associated with them. Helen
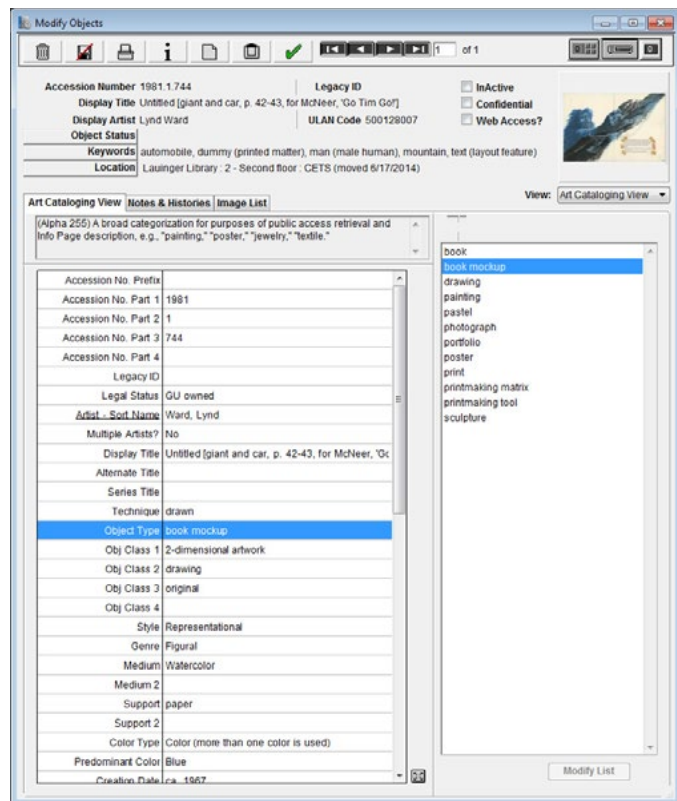
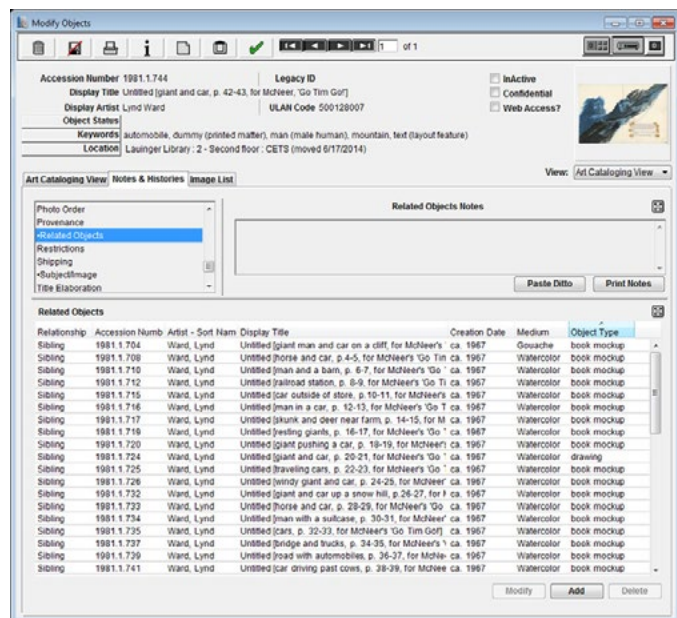*Fig. 8: Ward drawing that is both an original artwork and part of a book mock-up*

Fig. 9: Related Objects view showing all other components of the book mock-up
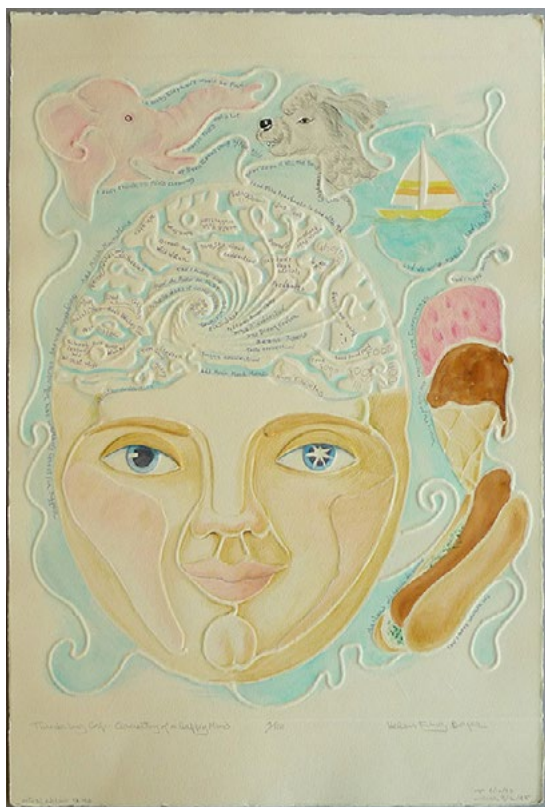
Fig. 10: Helen King Boyer, Thinking Cap—Circuitry of a Happy Mind (1983)

Fig. 11: Two different date fields allows for complexity in an object's creative history

Boyer's *Thinking Cap—Circuitry of a Happy Mind* (Figure 10) is a blind embossing with watercolor. Embossing is a technique in which a raised, relief image is created on the paper, using a dye that is passed through a printing press with the paper. When this is done without the use of any ink, it is described as blind embossing.

Helen Boyer kept detailed records about much of her work. This print includes a print mark stating that she made the print impression (blind embossing) in 1983, but she did not add watercolor to the print until 1995. We wanted to list both these dates for the object to provide as much information about the story of this print as possible. Therefore, we entered "09/19/1983" under the Creation Date field and "09/12/1995" under
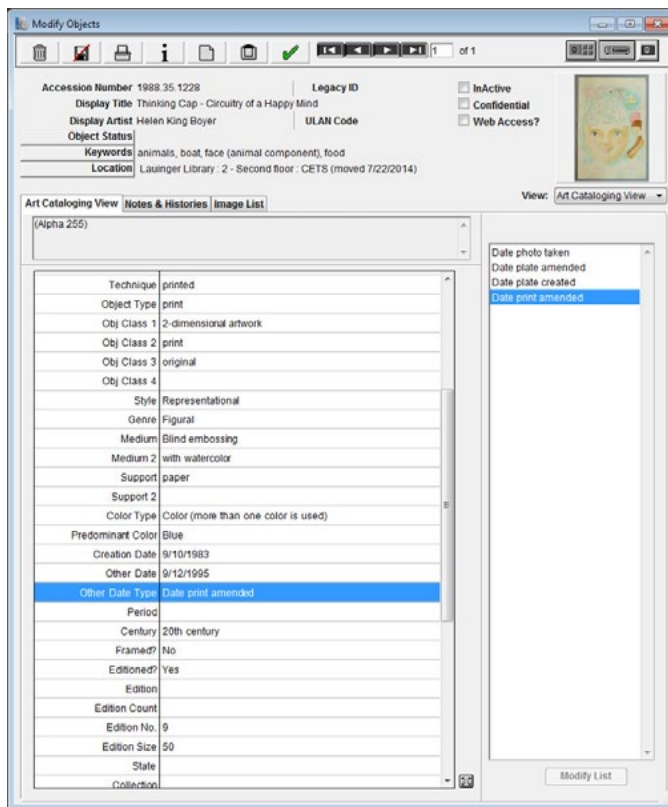
the Other Date field with the Other Date Type of "date print amended" (Figure 11).

The Other Date and Other Date Type fields were originally intended to record dates from other calendars, such as the Islamic calendar, or the Chinese calendar or dynasty name. Because such calendars are not used to date any objects in Georgetown's art collection, we decided to repurpose those fields. Setting up this ability to record and describe two dates for one object anticipated another common scenario for objects in the larger collection: that of a photograph, where the picture was taken on one date but the print itself was made later—sometimes decades later.

Georgetown University Library holds the only significant public collection of artwork by

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Fig. 12: Marguerite Kumm, Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia *(1942–1943)*

Marguerite Kumm. The collection includes 595 drawings (both preparatory drawings for prints and stand-alone drawings), 398 prints of varying techniques, and 123 printing matrices (i.e., the plates or blocks used to produce a print). Describing her style as Realist, Kumm depicted people in everyday situations, at work and play, in her prints. She was influenced by the work of John Sloan among others.

This collection of Kumm's work includes numerous preliminary works that accompany many of the final prints. These include multiple impressions of printed proofs in a variety of experimental states that led to the final artwork. In printmaking, a state is a different form of a print, caused by a deliberate and permanent change to a matrix. In these three images (Figure 12), we see several stages of development for Kumm's print *Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia*. First, she made a preliminary pencil sketch of figures outside the church. The next image shows a sixth state proof of a similar image. This is the earliest

proof that we have of this print, but the artist would have made five preceding states of this composition before reaching the version that we see in the sixth state. We can see that between the sketch drawing and the sixth state proof, the artist has revised the design. Lastly, we see the twelfth and final state of the print. The design is still very similar to that seen in the sixth state proof. However, Kumm has added more tone and detail, giving the image improved definition and perspective. This sequence of artworks demonstrates the detail-oriented nature of this artist's work and the intricacies of her working methods.

The EmbARK State field proved extremely useful for cataloging these types of preparatory print proofs (Figure 13). Although the artist indicated the state on the paper in some cases, in many other cases, the catalogers had to study all the available impressions of the same image, to identify whether impressions were earlier or later states of the print, based on slight

amendments in the composition. We originally supplied the State choice list with up to five states, but when we started cataloging Kumm's work we found the list needed to accommodate up to twelve. We also added "early," "late," and "final" to the list, for cases in which no state numbers were indicated in any of the proofs of a particular print. Recording the print state in each record allowed quick identification of the extent of different versions of each print that we had in the collection when viewing a list of artworks of the same title (Figure 14).
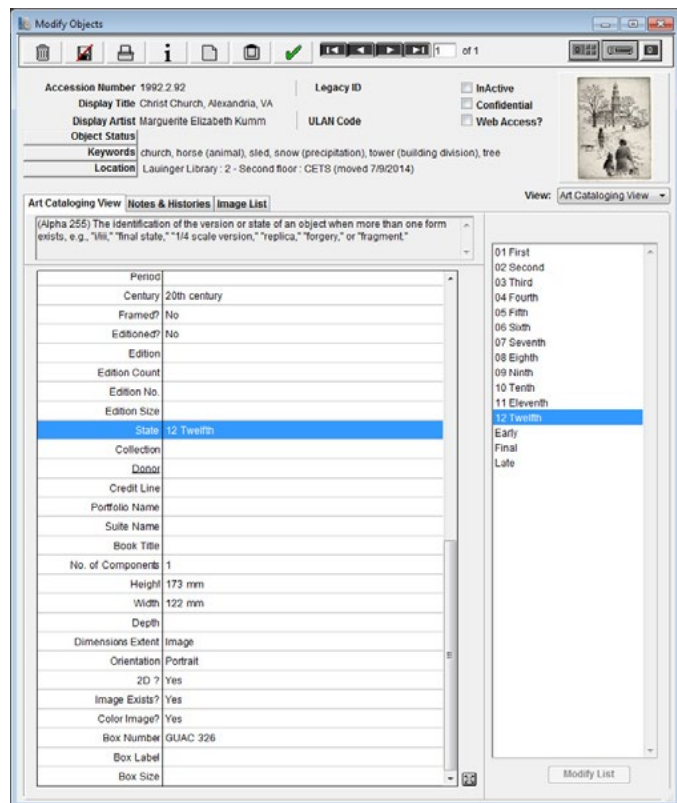
Fig. 13: Well-developed list of states

Fig. 14: Preparatory sketches and many states of Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia

Describing Annotations as Key Elements

John DePol is recognized as one of America's finest wood engravers. A self-taught artist, DePol was devoted to his craft and produced an incredible output of work during his lifetime. His work ranged from commercial pieces with national financial printing firms to more personal illustrations for which he freely volunteered his time, working with associates in the private printing press world. The DePol collection includes many images depicting the subject of printing.

One of the most important aspects of cataloging prints has to be recording print marks (broadly, anything communicative on the paper other than the image). Because marks can reveal a great deal about an artwork and can distinguish between two almost identical prints, they are absolutely crucial elements of cataloging for scholarship. For this project, the marks that appeared on the prints in the collection ranged from the usual titles, signatures, and dates to the more esoteric marks, such as edition information, impression numbers, notes about who printed the artwork (if not the artist), and artists' technical notes.

The most common place to find an artist's signature is just below the bottom right corner of the image, but the artist's initials or signature mark might appear almost anywhere—including within the printed image itself (in the plate). In DePol's wood engraving, *The Kelmscott/Goudy Press* (Figure 15), the artist incorporated a single letter D into the design (Figure 16), serving as a signature. DePol always included his first initial within his printed designs and often included a signature in pencil beneath the image as well.
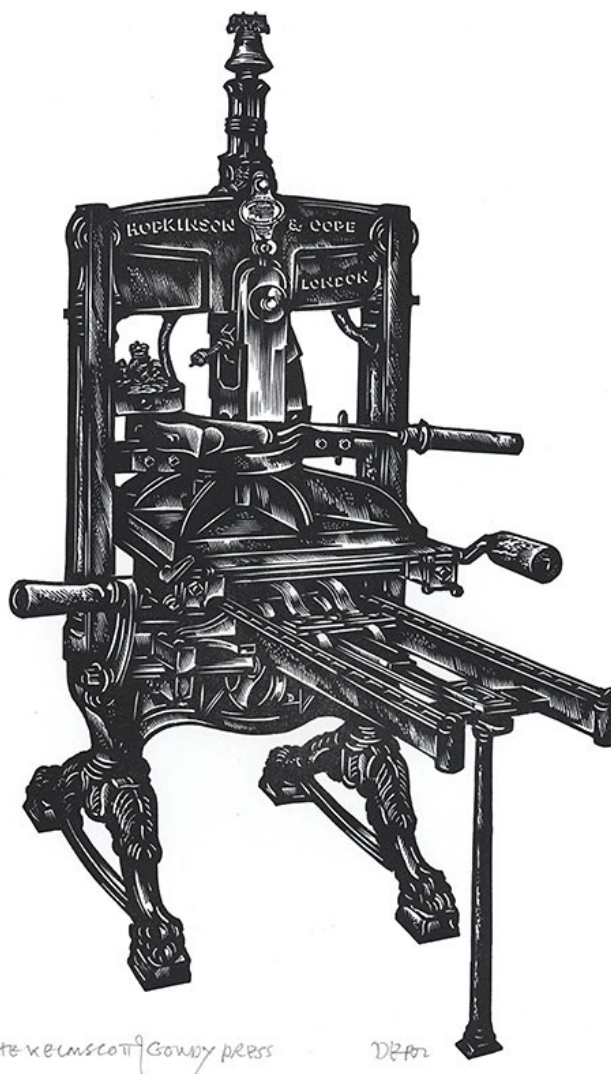

Fig. 15: John DePol, The Kelmscott/Goudy Press *(1984)*

Fig. 16: Artist's signature in the plate

DePol's initial would be difficult for anyone unacquainted with his technique to find, but it is a crucial point of identification for his work.

Sometimes the lack of a signature or other mark is the salient point. For prints created prior to the mid-1800s (of which the larger art collection has at least 1,000), signatures are far less common than they are on later prints; in the case of many old master printmakers, the presence of a signature is a reason to doubt the print's authenticity. Thus, it is essential to know that our cataloging of marks is comprehensive and detailed (i.e., to know that an absence of recorded marks is deliberate and not simply an omission).

EmbARK provides an extensive set of fields concerning print marks, which we were again able to tailor with drop-down lists to allow a breadth of information to be accurately recorded for each individual mark. We even created a comprehensive 25-item list of marks' possible locations (Figure 17). Recognizing that future catalogers might not have terms such as recto, verso, and margin on quick recall, the curators also created a visual key for easy reference (Figure 18).

For an important collection of prints such as the DePol collection, this level of detail is not excessive. Additionally, the specificity of the drop-down lists and their matching keys (we also have keys for taking measurements and describing colors) allows less experienced catalogers to familiarize themselves with print morphology and empowers them to make these determinations on their own and to work more independently.
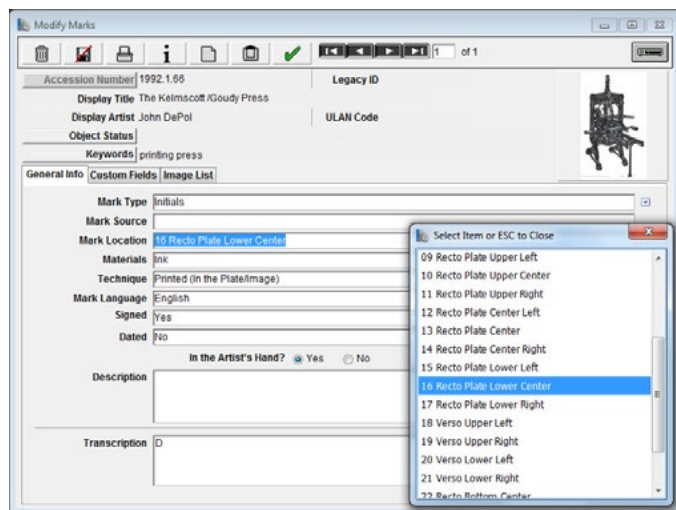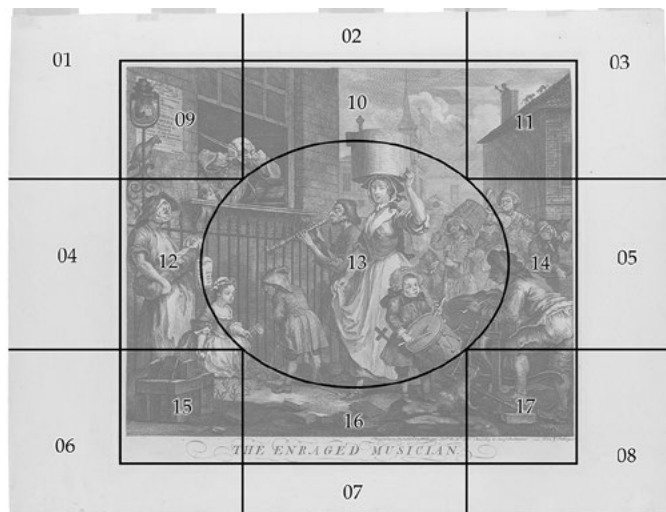

Fig. 17: Choices for recording a mark's location

Fig. 18: Key for identifying areas of a print (William Hogarth, The Enraged Musician, *1741)*

Fig. 19: Helen Boyer, The Spectator *(1979)*

Fig. 20: The Spectator, *detail*

We see the details for each mark, including the type, location, materials, and technique that were used to make it. At the bottom of the record, catalogers can add a transcription of the mark (i.e., exactly what it says), and above, they can add a description of what the mark means. Not visible here, but also present, is a field to record a translation of a mark in a foreign language. Even some non-Roman alphabets are accommodated; we have successfully pasted Arabic text into the Transcription field.

In the early stages of processing the Helen Boyer collection, we noticed some unusual marks that appeared regularly in the bottom left corner of a number of Boyer's prints (Figure 19; detail, Figure 20). At first, we presumed that the dashes represented 1's, but the numeral in combination with various quantities of dots was a puzzle. What, if anything, was being counted?

It was not until later in the course of cataloging, after studying multiple impressions of many different prints, that it became clear. Boyer used a tallying system of dots and dashes to record the sequence in which each impression was printed in each edition she made. She marked a dot for each impression number up to five, then a line and dot system for numbers five onward, so here we determine that this is the eighth impression she made of this print. EmbARK enabled us to record and fully describe this mark (Figure 21).
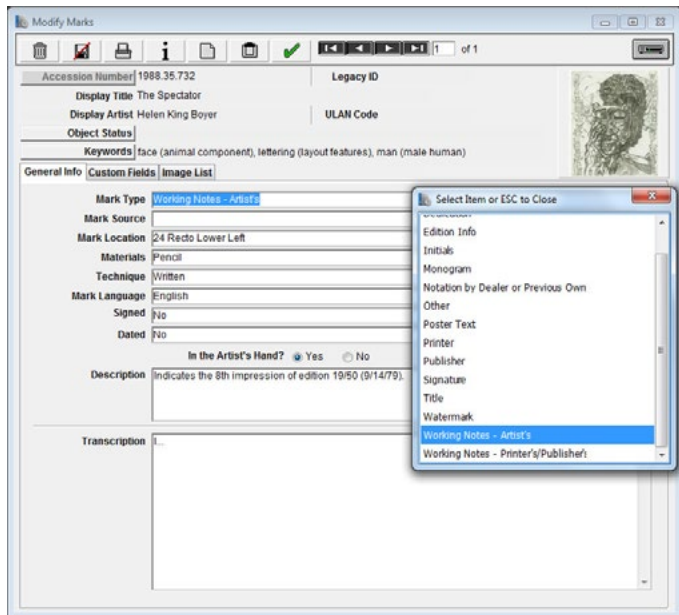

Fig. 21: Mark record for Boyer's impression tally

Documenting the Process

EmbARK's flexibility enabled us to make many customizations, resulting in a database specifically suited to our kinds of collections. Because we made changes from the defaults, it was crucial that we document the process in as much detail as possible. The discussions and deliberations involved in developing cataloging policies for this project were recorded as the project progressed; reviewing our thinking on previous questions often made it easier to answer subsequent ones. The cataloging decisions established were also summarized in reports at the end of the project. Catalogers referred to how-to guides for particular aspects of cataloging, including the basic techniques as well as those we have described. As a result, we have a reference guide for future print cataloging within Georgetown University Library's art collection, and the foundation of a comprehensive cataloging manual for the collection in the future.

Working through a fairly homogeneous collection as we familiarized ourselves with EmbARK and its capabilities was a good plan. The greatest difficulty—and it is a very minor one—was remembering not to tailor the database too narrowly for the Undiscovered Printmakers objects. Project staff had worked only with these collections and had many good ideas for customizations; however, some of these ideas would have been counterproductive to cataloging the collection at large. Having maintained both proper perspective and meticulous records, we are pleased to have produced an excellent collection catalog and a database distinctly suited to our needs.

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