The Indian art project at UNC-CH: increasing accessibility and decreasing marginality of indigenous people's art

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The Indian art project at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was prompted by the art librarian, Alice Whitehead's response to a professor's issues with locating materials on the indigenous art of the Americas in our Art Library. She wondered what might be done to make it easier to find the materials the professor wanted.

Some of the catalogers in the Research Description and Management Department met with Alice to see what we could do to increase access to those materials and discuss what would be feasible to do in that regard. Alice indicated that what she would ideally want was to have all of the material given art numbers, more specific subject headings when possible, and to have all of the material transferred to the art library. As they are short on space there, that would also necessitate her clearing space by weeding what she had on site to make room for it, and either deaccessioning it or sending it to general collections or to our off-site location. She made the decision to transfer some material to Davis, our main general collections library, a process which is currently underway.

All material with the subject heading "Indian Art" would need to be reviewed. Despite finding the subject heading itself to be problematic, we decided that that was a bigger problem than we were able to address at this time. Some of this material was located in the Art library, but there was also a lot that was held in general collections, both in on- and off-site locations.

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Subject headings were an issue, but the fact that many of the works were scattered through the E and F schedules (The history of the Americas) and not in the N (Art) schedules, separated the art of these indigenous peoples from that of everyone else in the world. The reason for this is because the N (Art) schedules direct catalogers away from them for indigenous art of the Americas. Although we were limited to using the Library of Congress classification, we thought we would be able to adapt the schedules to integrate this art into that of the rest of the world.

Before we set our priorities, we sent out feelers to the American Indian Center on campus to see if someone there would be willing to meet with us to briefly to discuss the issue and to give us some guidance as to what the problems were and what some of the solutions might consist of. They sent us the names of three professors who served as their advisors, and we sent emails to all three of them. One, Dr. Richotte, agreed to meet with us. The meeting with Dr. Richotte helped us to decide on just what we could do and what we might be best leaving for now. Our conclusions:

One, unsurprisingly, there are many different opinions as to which terms may or may not be better to use. He did feel that things were moving toward indigenous over Indian but emphasized that the main thing we might be working on would be making it easier to find things on these subjects without a user having to do many different searches using as many different terms as a person could think of. One thing we had found is that, although a work might be about the work of a specific tribal group, some of the records did not name that group at all in the subject headings. We decided that part of the enhancing we would do would be to get specific.

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Two, it also made it clear that getting as much of the art material that is classified in the E's and F's into the N's would be very helpful.

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Three, we also felt that, where possible, most specifically in resources that spoke about contemporary art, contents notes, especially those mentioning the names of individual artists and their tribal affiliations, would allow key word searching that might prove helpful in many instances.

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Since a lot of the information about different names for the same peoples is already in the authority records in 4xx fields ("see" fields), I asked our authorities control librarian if our search engine did not bring those things up. She replied that it didn't, but that we should be able to improve upon that. In our system this is not an aspect that the catalogers are able to address ourselves. It needed to be forwarded on to the folks who create the search algorithms for our discovery layer. Our part in this would be adding alternative tribal names to authority records that lack them so that once that algorithm was working, a person searching any of the terms should find all of the works that used any of them.

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Four, SACO authority work would be done, when called for, to create see references for existing tribal groups for whom those were readily available, particularly if we knew that the group referred to itself by a name that did not appear in the authority record. Many of the tribal groups in Latin America had these references, but some of those in the United States were created long enough ago that they did not. We also began to create and submit proposals for tribal groups for which we had material, but who did not have authority records. In addition, we intended to do the same for the art of tribal groups when such headings did not exist, or for a specific artistic endeavor of the group (for example, beadwork, or weaving) for which we held material.

Once we drew our conclusions as to where we needed to focus our efforts, we needed to figure out exactly what we were going to attempt to do and how to implement that action. There were a lot of people who needed to be taken into consideration.

The people to be considered included: Alice and her staff at the Art Library; the people who handle transfers, as we were planning to send materials from general collections to the art library and from the art library elsewhere to make room for those materials; the people who handle re-labelling; the people who physically move the books from one library to another (mail room personnel), and find out how this extra activity would fit into their individual workflows.

We divided the books into six groups, which we later combined into four. Each group would need to be dealt with in a slightly different way. In allowing for this, our plan would be implemented in four broad phases. Although the leadership and some of the participants took a role in all of them, there were those who only participated in one or two. This permitted a wide number of people to contribute to the project.

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These are the four phases we ended up with:

Phase 1. The N-class books that were not going to need to be either transferred or re-classed needed to be looked at to see if the subject headings they have include individual tribal groups and types of art (ex. Pottery, textiles, etc.) This included books in the Art Library, the SILS (School of Information and Library Sciences) library, Wilson library (special collections), and reference and microfilm works in Davis (general collections). Where this information was easy to determine, those records that did not contain this information should have it added. This is work that could be done from home for the most part and required no work from Alice or anyone in the Art Library in terms of shifting or relabeling. As we saw it as the lowest hanging fruit and could be done in large part while we were working from home, it was chosen as the first step. Those books that we felt needed to be looked at directly, so we could add contents notes or verify that the information we were gleaning from the catalog record was correct, were requested from the Art Library, worked on during our on-site time, and were then returned to Art once the records were complete.

Phase 2. The same work that was done on the N-class books mentioned above would also be done for those books in the LSC (our off-site location). While working on-site, those books that we determined we needed to look at could be requested from and promptly returned to our off-site facility. The books that are at the LSC will be remaining there, and there is no need for them to be re-classed as no one will be scanning the shelves off-site.

Phase 3. The E and F class books in Davis needed to be reclassed. We would want to review subject headings to make sure that, like the books in the first phases, they contain the headings that will help them be findable, especially as we are going to be interfiling them with the rest of the art created in the Americas. Most of this could be done without having to physically touch

the books. However, when deemed necessary, catalogers would be able to pull any that they felt needed to be looked at off the shelves in Davis with no intermediary since that is where our on-site working area is. Any contents notes could be entered that way and any questions as to the accuracy of the subject headings already in the record could be reviewed. Once they have been reclassed and the subject headings checked, they will need to be relabeled by Preservation and transferred to the Art Library.

Phase 4. The E and F class books in the Art library needed to be reclassed as well. We would want to review subject headings to make sure that, like the books in the first phases, they contain the headings that will help them be findable and to add any contents notes that will be helpful. Shifting will need to be done at Art to accommodate the change, and re-labeling will need to take place in Davis. This is the only batch that is going to have to make 2 trips, but no additional space will need to be cleared in the Art library to make room for them.

Once the catalogers had completed phases 1 and 2, we needed to make certain that we were all on the same page as to how we would be re-classing the works that had been classified in the E and F schedules. After looking at the Art schedules, we created a document to guide the catalogers.

I am posting a link to the document that gives the exact instructions as to how we decided to go about that, but I will give you a brief overview of what we decided to do.

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We told people that a decision had been made to locally reclass those works within the LC schedules. Since the schedules allow for individual artists by country, works of that type are not a problem, but works about the artistic output of more than one artist, or of a group of indigenous artists of the Americas are relegated to the E and F schedules. We have decided at UNC-CH to provide an alternative number within the N schedules for those works to better incorporate them into the broader collection and are going to do this by putting the works in the artists' geographical areas, much as is done with other national or ethnic groups.

In our collection, the schedules most likely to be needed are the N (Visual Arts), ND (Painting), and the NK (Decorative Arts). As many indigenous peoples will overlap current national borders, defer to the broader area if a specific country is not mentioned. For example, if Mayan art in the state of Chiapas is discussed, then we know that we should be using Mexico as the country, but if Mayan art is discussed in general, we would move to Central America, as the Mayan peoples live in Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, not to mention those who may have emigrated.

Some of the schedules provide a great deal more granularity than others, but with this general guidance, we had agreed on a process of decreasing marginality of the art and integrating this art into the art made by other peoples in the world.

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We created a workflow to keep track of our progress and decided on how we would manage to change the call numbers in our catalog. It was decided to enter the new call numbers in separate fields that would later be flipped at the same time by our authority control librarian once the books were ready to be relabeled. We also decided on a temporary home for books that we had pulled off the shelves and which were going to be needing new labels but could not yet be transferred. We decided to track the numbers we were assigning and at the end of this phase, before the numbers were switched, make sure that they would end up alphabetically where they needed to be. So, briefly, if the catalogers could determine that a book was predominantly about art and it was currently classed in the E or F schedules, they should reclass it with an N-number.

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Meanwhile, having now worked on this project for over 9 months, there is another question we are thinking of tackling, the possibility of overlaying the heading Indian art with something else in our discovery layer. We are beginning to talk about that now. As part of a consortium, we need to run any changes in the discovery layer by the other members. We have overlays for "Indians" from various parts of the Americas; for example, "Indians of South America" is overlaid with "Indigenous peoples of South America." The suggestions being considered are the phrase "Indigenous art (America)" or “Indigenous art of America. Unfortunately, we need to stick with the LC form of America instead of Americas, which we might prefer.

The scope note for "Indigenous art" reads: “Here are entered general works on the art of indigenous peoples, not limited to a particular racial or ethnic group. Works discussing collectively the traditional art of the preliterate and non-industrialized peoples of the world are entered under Art, Primitive. Works on indigenous or primitive art from a specific place or specific people are entered under the heading for the art of that place or people, e.g. Art, Polynesian; Inca art.”

Given that at the LCSH policy meeting in February, Judith Cannan said that LC is looking holistically at how Indigenous people are described in LCSH and in other description, and hoping to make some changes this calendar year, we have decided to see what action they are going to be taking before making any overlay recommendations.

At this moment we have completed the first three phases of the plan I just described and are in the process of working on the last one. Each participating cataloger has a list of titles to work on and we have set a deadline for the end of May. We are hoping that once the semester ends, the people at the Art Library will have time to work on the shifting and weeding needed on their end and the relabeling and movement of materials from one collection to another will complete the project.

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