Honest Description for Honest Abe:
Applying CCO Standards to Improve Discovery and Access of the Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana

Authors: Carrie P. Mastley & Ryan P. Semmes | Mississippi State University Libraries

INTRODUCTION

This case study rethinks the practices of description of a private collection and presents the best practices established by Mississippi State University archivists and the lessons learned to allow for better description and ultimately better discovery and access of cultural objects in archives.

- The Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana
  - Chief Justice Frank J. Williams began collecting Lincolniana (or materials relating to Abraham Lincoln) when he was in the sixth grade. He used his lunch money to purchase books and photographs. Over fifty years later, he and his wife Virginia have amassed a collection of over 16,000 artifacts, manuscripts, statuary, numismatics, and ephemera. They have also collected over 24,000 volumes of books, microfilm, journals, and 19th-century pamphlets related to Lincoln and the Civil War-era.

Image 1

Image 1. Screenshot of Lincoln-Calhoun Composite Portrait created by William Pate.

- Acquiring the Collection
  - Negotiated with donor what we as a repository could provide:
    - New climate-controlled storage.
    - Brand new gallery space devoted to collection.
    - Establish annual speaker's series.
  - Agreed to provide single staff member devoted to collection.
- Size and makeup of collection
  - All types of materials but significantly high number of cultural objects such as prints, ephemera, statuary, and artwork.
  - Processing plan developed by Mississippi State to prioritize the needs of the collection.
    - Sorted materials after arrival.
    - Rehoused items into archival-quality enclosures.
    - Inventoried unprocessed print and three-dimensional materials.
    - Discovered that this plan would not work.

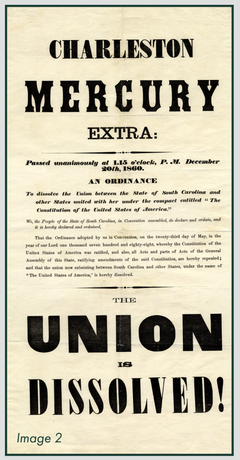
CHARLESTON
MERCURY
EXTRA:
Passed unanimously at 1.15 o'clock, P. M. December 20th, 1860.
AN ORDINANCE
To dissolve the Union between the State of South Carolina and other States united with her under the compact entitled "The Constitution of the United States of America."
We, the People of the State of South Carolina, in Convention assembled, do declare and ordain, and it is hereby declared and ordained,
That the Ordinance adopted by us in Convention, on the twenty-third day of May, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-eight, whereby the Constitution of the United States of America was ratified, and also all Acts and parts of Acts of the General Assembly of this State, ratifying amendments of the said Constitution, are hereby repealed; and that the union now subsisting between South Carolina and other States, under the name of "The United States of America," is hereby dissolved.
THE
UNION
IS
DISSOLVED!
Image 2

Image 2. Image of The Charleston Mercury's "The Union is Dissolved" broadside, which was the first Confederate publication as South Carolina was the first state to secede.

- Development of Website and Digital Collection
  - Per the donor agreement, a Website and digital collection were developed to make the collection fully available online.
  - Website provides background information on the donor and the collection.
  - Digital Collection houses information on the entire collection. This was built in three phases:
    - Phase I included materials on display in the gallery.
    - Phase 2 included batches of materials with completed inventories.
    - Phase 3 included the cataloging of pamphlets.

LEGACY DATABASE

Image 3

Image 3. Image of John Rogers's sculpture, The Council of War, which features the likenesses of President Abraham Lincoln, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, and General Ulysses S. Grant.

- The MSU archivists found traditional archival description (i.e., DACS) unsuitable for this collection and needed a standard for item-level description.
  - Original artifact inventorying
    - The donor's personal archivist provided a locally created description guide.
      - The guide contained only 21 Class types: e.g., Cartoons, CDVs, dolls, ephemera, maps, sculpture.
      - It had only 41 locally created Subject Headings.
      - The guide also provided a list of reference works used for describing the collection.
  - What was not working
    - FileMaker Pro database
      - No standardization/consistency in database. While standards for abbreviations, measurements, etc., were established they were not always followed and not accessible to the public. (Image 4 illustrates the dearth of fields in the old FileMaker Pro database.)
      - The legacy work record was extremely limited in relation to the types of descriptive metadata it allowed one to record. Originally it supported only six descriptive fields, and there were no specific fields for metadata such as title, creator, or date.
      - In more descriptive work records, this information would be recorded in the "description" field. However, often, the "description" field would contain a brief sentence or title with no further information about the object.
      - In addition, nationally recognized controlled vocabularies were not utilized to describe an object's subject or creator. Thus, the collection had very little consistency, and its access points were limited.

Image 4

Image 4. Screenshot of original FileMaker Pro database featuring six descriptive fields for John Rogers's statue *The Council of War*: Number, Category, Description, Dimension, Subject A, and Subject B.

CHOOSING CCO

- Thus, the team chose Cataloging Cultural Objects: A Guide to Describing Cultural Works and Their Images due to its focus on describing individual cultural works and their visual surrogates (e.g., physical and digital reproductions).
  - Looked to DACS's companion standards for advice on how to catalog objects not supported by traditional archival description. CCO was the suggested standard for the cataloging of objects (DACS, 2013, p. 142).
  - Assessed the benefits of adopting CCO standards:
    - Unlike traditional archival standards (e.g., DACS), CCO allows for consistent description at the item level (Baca et al., 2006, p. 1).
    - The standards were easily molded to fit our resource management system (RMS) platform, FileMaker Pro.
    - CCO can be easily mapped to other descriptive standards, such as Dublin Core, which allowed for the use of the same metadata in our digital collection platform, CONTENTdm (Baca et al., 2006, p. xi).
    - Most importantly, CCO supports end-user access (Baca et al., 2006, p. xi).
  - Researched institutions using CCO:
    - Getty Research Institution Photo Archives;
    - Metropolitan Museum of Art;
    - National Archives of Canada;
    - National Archives (England; Harpring, 2019, pp. 78, 81, 115-16).
    - Yale Center for British Art (Delmas-Glass, 2010).
  - Based on these points, MSU archivists made the decision to implement CCO standards to describe the FVW Collection of Lincolniana to gain better intellectual control over and provide better access points to the collection's cultural objects.

DATABASE REDESIGN

- The team redesigned the collection's RMS, FileMaker Pro, to accommodate CCO and mapped it to the Library's digital standards, Dublin Core.
  - In the revised FileMaker Pro work record, fields were expanded to include fourteen fields: class, work type, title, creator display, creation date, subject, current location, creation location, measurements, materials and techniques, inscriptions, description, description sources, and related work. Four subfields were utilized, which included title type, creator role, earliest date, and latest date. In addition to these CCO descriptive fields, local administrative metadata were created. These serve to track what items have been cataloged and digitized. These metadata fields also manage specific storage locations for objects and preserve the original subject terms used in the legacy work record.

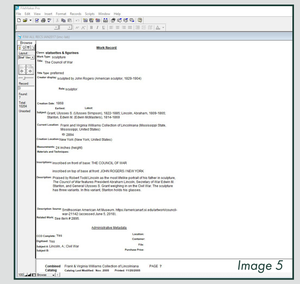
Image 5

Image 5. Screenshot of updated FileMaker Pro database featuring CCO descriptive fields for John Rogers's statue *The Council of War*: Note the addition of vital access fields such as Title, creator, date, etc.

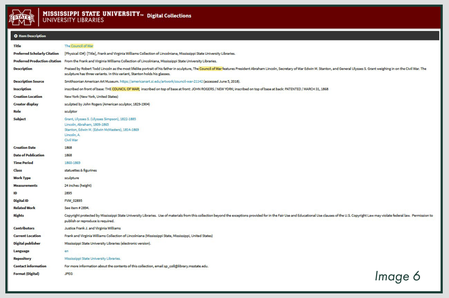
Image 6

Image 6. Screenshot of John Rogers's *The Council of War* utilizing CCO metadata in the Mississippi State University Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana Digital Collection.

LESSONS LEARNED

- It is important to note that archivists at MSU not only found success with the conversion of the database but were met with setbacks as well.
  - Why CCO standards worked:
    - Created more access points for individual items.
    - Mapped easily to CONTENTdm.
    - Eliminated guesswork by establishing a standard.
  - The challenges of CCO and FileMaker Pro:
    - Created clutter through leveled description.
    - Required knowledge of cataloging and metadata standards. Not intuitive.
    - Required significant amount of training.
    - Allowed for easy mistakes/changes. FileMaker Pro is too easily manipulated.

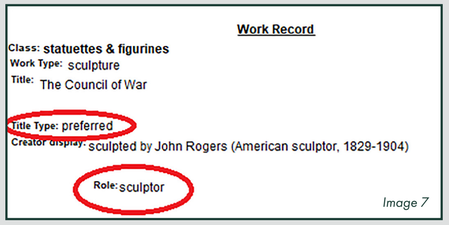
Work Record
Class: statuettes & figurines
Work Type: sculpture
Title: The Council of War
Title Type: preferred
Creator display: sculpted by John Rogers (American sculptor, 1829-1904)
Role: sculptor
Image 7

Image 7. Screenshot of a work record from FileMaker Pro illustrating leveled description.

CONCLUSION

- MSU Special Collections will establish CCO as its standard to include:
  - Museum pieces in the Ulysses S. Grant Museum, Charles Templeton, and John Grisham collections.
  - CCO sets a single standard for entire University Libraries.
  - We hope to eventually upload metadata into OCLC.
- Unlike manuscript collections, item-level description of cultural objects is necessary for access, CCO sets this standard.
  - This will allow archives to standardize language if other institutions use CCO as well.
- We encourage repositories to implement similar projects to standardize the description of cultural objects and widen the pool of sharable metadata.

REFERENCES

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