

Obstacles and Solutions in Establishing Cataloging Standards for Fine Print Collections

Authors: Katharine Malcolm, Project Coordinator, Georgetown University Library

Christen Runge, Art Collection Assistant Curator, Georgetown University Library

[\[01-title.jpg\]](#)

[1. Representative artworks cataloged for Georgetown's project](#)

Abstract

In 2011 Georgetown University was awarded a CLIR “Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives” grant to research and catalog the collections of six significant 20th 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 (figure 1) 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 which 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, 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 will have varying levels of art knowledge from experienced art curator to student volunteer. 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 designed specifically for the management of visual collections and has a vast range of tools for recording art object information: 17 interrelated tables record everything from multiple sets of measurements to publications which mention the artwork. Many of these tables don't apply directly to the cataloging process, but the crucial Objects table alone contains 145 unique fields spread across eight tabs (figure 2).

[\[02-default-screen.jpg\]](#)

2. EmbARK default cataloging view

In order to facilitate the cataloging process, curators developed a customized cataloging view (figure 3), displaying a streamlined selection of only the essential fields for catalogers, reducing the eight tabs to just one screen and paring down the number of fields by over 60%. This makes the cataloging process more efficient and also makes it easier to ensure that important fields aren't skipped or ignored.

[03-custom-screen.jpg]

3. Customized cataloging view

An important aim of the project was also to introduce and develop a standardized vocabulary of specific printmaking terms within EmbARK. Drop-down lists were developed for many fields, offering catalogers a select list of terms and descriptions to choose from when describing the characteristics of a print (figure 4). 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.

[04-dropdown.jpg]

4. Drop-down lists eliminate typos and spelling errors from many fields

During the course of the project the curators and project coordinator were able to edit the lists, as the scope and breadth of material became evident. These lists have been retained in EmbARK and are now being augmented by the curators to accommodate the many other types of objects in the broader collection, but they form the core of the vocabulary as the bulk of the

collection does consist of fine prints.

The following selections from this diverse group of objects are revealing illustrations of 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

[\[05-2002.1.16.jpg\]](#)

5. Kathleen Spagnolo, *Holy Land* (1967)

Georgetown University Library holds a uniquely personal collection of 70 artworks by Kathleen Spagnolo. Having initially worked as an illustrator, Spagnolo eventually specialized in etching, using a special process called *multi-level viscosity printing* (figure 5). This method of printing separate layers of colored inks was developed by Stanley Hayter, Krishna Reddy and others in Paris from the 1920s onwards. Spagnolo studied etching at American University in Washington DC with artist-teacher Robert Gates, and color etching with Krishna Reddy of Atelier 17, Paris, when he came to the school to teach viscosity printing in 1964. It was using this printmaking technique that Kathleen produced 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 was able to create rich textures through which her bold, three dimensional forms truly came alive.

[\[06-multi-dropdown-a.jpg\]](#)

6. Object record for *Holy Land* showing choice of Medium as etching

[\[07-multi-dropdown-b.jpg\]](#)

7. Object record for *Holy Land* showing Medium 2 as a refinement of Medium

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 describing the multiple techniques involved, in a clear manner. Looking at the object record for Spagnolo's *Holy Land* (figure 6) we see how the catalogers first selected *Etching* from the drop-down list in the Medium field. The choice of *etching* for the medium determines the choices that then become available in the Medium 2 field (figure 7), which in our example is a specific type. For other multi-media objects, the Medium 2 field can also describe a second, additional medium used (e.g. an etching *with pencil*), rather than a narrower description of one medium.

Describing Multi-Faceted Objects

[\[08-1981.1.744.jpg\]](#)

8. Lynd Ward, original illustration in a book mockup of May McNeer's *Go Tim Go!* (ca. 1967)

Lynd Ward is the most renowned and acclaimed artist of the six artists studied in this project. A pioneer of the graphic novel and well-known illustrator of many adult and children's books, the scope of the Ward collection at Georgetown includes 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"), 481 prints, as

well as 313 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 8) 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.

[\[09-object-types.jpg\]](#)

9. This drawing is both an original artwork and part of a book mockup

[\[10-related-objects.jpg\]](#)

10. The Related Objects view shows all other components of the book mockup

The artwork was defined as an *original drawing* under the Object Classification field, but was also differentiated as a *book mockup* within the Object Type field in Embark (figure 9). Both definitions are important for characterizing the nature of this object (a drawing that is one piece of the larger book mockup) 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 mockup are connected via the Related Objects field (figure 10) so that with one click we can see a list of all parts of the whole. This necessitates a rather finicky process of connecting all Related Objects after they've been cataloged individually, but it's a very important piece of information to have about a work that's part of a larger whole. This information will also be needed for artworks from a portfolio, or published in a series.

Recording an Artwork's Evolution

[\[11-1988.35.1228.jpg\]](#)

11. Helen King Boyer, *Thinking Cap—Circuitry of a Happy Mind* (1983)

The art collections of Louise Miller Boyer (1890 – 1976) and her daughter, Helen King Boyer (1919 – 2012) at Georgetown University are the largest publicly-held collections of their work.

In the process of cataloging Helen Boyer’s artworks, the collection revealed the variety of artistic techniques and media that Helen Boyer 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 that she and her mother are most associated with.

Throughout the course of cataloging we discovered that some of the Boyer prints had multiple dates associated with them. Helen Boyer’s *Thinking Cap—Circuitry of a Happy Mind* (figure 11) is a blind embossing with watercolor. *Embossing* is a technique in which a raised, relief image is created on the paper, using a die that is passed through a printing press with the paper. When this is done without the use of any ink, it’s described as *blind embossing*.

[\[12-dates.jpg\]](#)

12. Two different date fields allows for complexity in an object’s creative history

Helen Boyer kept detailed records about much of her work: this print includes a print mark stating that she made the print impression, that is, the 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 09/19/1983

was entered under the Creation Date field, and 09/12/1995 was entered under the Other Date field with the Other Date Type of *date print amended* (figure 12).

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. Since such calendars aren't 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.

[\[13-1992.2.84-85-92.jpg\]](#)

13. Marguerite Kumm, *Christ Church, Alexandria, VA* (1942 – 1943)

Georgetown University Library holds the only significant public collection of artwork by Marguerite Kumm. The collection consists of 1,120 items, including 595 drawings (both preparatory drawings for prints and stand-alone drawings), 398 prints of varying techniques and 123 printing matrices (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 her work includes countless preliminary works that accompany many of the final prints. These include multiple impressions of printed proofs in a variety of experimental states, which 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 13) we see several stages of development for Kumm's print *Christ Church, Alexandria, VA*. First she made a preliminary pencil sketch of figures outside the church. The next image shows a 6th state proof of a similar image. This is the earliest proof we have of this print, but the artist would have made 5 preceding states of this composition before the image ended up as this version we see in the 6th state. We can see that between the sketch drawing and the 6th state proof the design has been revised by the artist. Lastly we see the 12th and final state of the print. The design is still very similar to that seen in the 6th state proof. However, she 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.

[\[14-states.jpg\]](#)

14. Well-developed list of states

The EmbARK State field proved extremely useful for cataloging these types of preparatory print proofs (figure 14). While the state was indicated by the artist 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 had originally supplied the State choice list with up to five states, but when we started cataloging Kumm's work we found we needed the list to accommodate up to twelve! We also added *early*, *late*, and *final* to the list, for cases where no state numbers were indicated in any of the proofs of a particular print. By recording the print

state in each record, we were also able to quickly identify the extent of different versions of each print we had in the collection, when viewing a list of artworks of the same title (figure 15).

[15-states-list.jpg]

15. Preparatory sketches and many states of *Christ Church, Alexandria, VA*

Describing Annotations as Key Elements

[16-1992.1.66_det.jpg]

16. John DePol, *The Kelmscott/Goudy Press* (1984)

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 work with national financial printing firms to more personal illustration work for which he freely volunteered his time, working with associates in the private printing press world. The DePol collection includes many images of this type 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 so much 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 appear on the prints in the collection ranged from the usual titles, signatures and dates, to more esoteric marks such as edition information, impression numbers, notes about who printed the artwork (if not the artist), and artists' technical notes.

[\[17-1992.1.66_det_b.jpg\]](#)

17. The artist's signature "in the plate"

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 John DePol's wood engraving *The Kelmscott/Goudy Press* (figure 16), the artist has incorporated a single letter *D* into the design (figure 17), serving as a signature. DePol always included his signature within his printed designs, as well as often (but not always) a signature in pencil beneath the image. DePol's initial would be difficult for anyone unacquainted with his technique to find, but it's 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 a thousand), signatures are far less common; in the case of many old master printmakers, *presence* of a signature is a cause for suspicion! Thus knowing our cataloging of marks is comprehensive and detailed (e.g. knowing an absence of recorded marks is deliberate and not simply an omission) is essential.

[\[18-marks.jpg\]](#)

18. Choices for recording a mark's location

EmbARK provides an extensive set of fields concerning print marks, which we were again able to tailor with drop-down lists in order to allow a huge range of information to be accurately recorded for each individual mark. We even went so far as to create a comprehensive 25-item list of marks' possible locations (figure 18). 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 19).

[19-mark_locations.jpg]

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

For an important collection of prints such as this, such a 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 work more independently by empowering them to make these determinations on their own.

[20-1988.35.732.jpg]

20. Helen Boyer, *The Spectator* (1979)

In the early stages of processing the Helen Boyer collection, we noticed some unusual marks that appeared regularly in the bottom left hand corner of a number of Boyer's prints (figure 20; detail, figure 21). 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?

[21-1988.35.732_b.jpg]

21. *The Spectator*, detail

It wasn't until later in the course of cataloging, when we had studied 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 5 onwards, so here we determine that this is the 8th impression she made of this print. EmbARK enabled us to record and fully describe this mark (figure 22).

[\[22-marks.jpg\]](#)

[22. Mark record for Boyer's impression tally](#)

We see the details for each mark, including the type, location, materials and technique that were used to make it. At the bottom catalogers can add a Transcription of the mark, i.e. exactly what it says, and above can be added 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).

Documenting the Process

EmbARK's flexibility enabled us to make many customizations, resulting in a database specifically suited to our kinds of collections. Making changes from the defaults meant it was absolutely crucial that we document 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 that were established were also summarized in reports at the end of the project. Catalogers were able to refer to how-to guides for particular aspects of cataloging, including the basics as well those we have described here. As a result, we

have a reference guide for future print cataloging within Georgetown'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's a very minor one—was remembering not to tailor the database too narrowly for the Undiscovered Printmakers objects. Project staff had only ever worked with these collections, and so had many good ideas for customizations that would have been counterproductive to cataloging the collection at large. Having maintained both proper perspective and meticulous records, we're very pleased to have produced an excellent collection catalog and a database distinctly suited to our needs.