

Recent Publications

BOOK REVIEWS

Markey, Karen, *Subject Access to Visual Resources Collections: A Model for Computer Constructions of Thematic Catalogs*. New York: Greenwood, 1986. 189p. \$35 (ISBN 0-313-24031-0). LC 86-7658.

The subtitle describes this book, based on the author's doctoral dissertation at the University of Syracuse, much better than the title. The book deals primarily with the important problem of constructing a thematic catalog to a collection of art works and other images, and it is not a systematic introduction to the problems of subject access to such collections. A thematic catalog to art works links elements of primary or natural subject matter (preiconographic description)—such as "male figure with knife" or "female figure with a peach in her hand"—to elements of secondary or conventional subject matter or themes, which are identified through knowledgeable interpretation (iconographic description)—such as "St. Bartholomew" or "Personification of veracity." (This distinction was elucidated most clearly by Panofsky.)

Thematic catalogs for broad realms of art works exist. (Among the standard works are James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, 2d ed. (London: J. Murray, 1979); Percy Preston, *Dictionary of Pictorial Subjects from Classical Literature* (New York: Scribner, 1983); and Maurice Drake and Wilfred Drake, *Saints and Their Emblems* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1916). This work is cited in the book.) They are meant

primarily as an aid in interpreting art works. This reviewer can also imagine a sophisticated retrieval system in which art works are indexed by primary subjects (this can be done cheaply by nonexperts) yet which makes it possible to search for a theme: the system translates the theme into a combination of its primary manifestations and that combination is searched. To carry this thought further, consider that iconographic interpretation is a special case of the ubiquitous problem of diagnosis, which is a prime application of expert systems. A thematic catalog can thus be seen as an embryonic knowledge base for an expert system for iconographic interpretation.

The present book emphasizes another use. Most catalogs to art collections provide access by themes, allowing the user to retrieve, for example, all paintings representing St. Bartholomew. Access by primary subject, as in a search for depictions of a dagger, can only be indirect, through searching for themes whose representation usually involves depiction of a dagger, as in a painting of St. Bartholomew. A thematic catalog enables the nonexpert user to identify the themes linked to her primary subject topic. The book provides no evidence for the size of this need. In any event, as the book points out, online catalogs make it possible to provide direct access to primary subject matter, should the need warrant it.

This book focuses on a method for con-

structuring a thematic catalog for a specific collection. The method involves preparing preiconographic descriptions of the art works using a controlled vocabulary for objects, expressions, and events depicted. Using a computer program, the descriptors are then clustered; a cluster contains descriptors that tend to co-occur in descriptions. The descriptors in each cluster are augmented by the context(s) in which they occur, and these "clusters in context" are submitted to iconographers who assign a theme where possible. This information is then arranged once by primary subject and once by themes to yield a two-part thematic catalog. This method is interesting, but the book does not present a rationale for the method in general or for the clustering step in particular. Nor does the book discuss such alternatives as drawing on existing general thematic catalogs and augmenting them for the collection at hand or using iconographers' assignments of themes for every art work (for many works they may already exist) and consolidating the linkages from pri-

mary subjects to themes that result. The example given in the instructions to the indexers preparing the primary subject matter descriptions includes *Christ* as a primary subject, even though Christ (as are all named persons) is a secondary subject or theme as the book itself correctly states (p.58).

The book launches into the discussion of thematic catalog construction after a brief explanation of the underlying concepts of art interpretation but without providing the overall context of subject access to image collections from an information retrieval point of view. The final chapter, "Present Methods and Future Directions," is meant to make up for that but does not quite succeed.

Subject Access to Visual Resources Collections could have gained from more careful editing: the writing is repetitive and wordy, sometimes to the point of trying the reader's patience. Clarity could also be enhanced; for example the description of the clustering algorithm is thoroughly opaque.—Dagobert Soergel, College of Li-



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Other Publications

Baird-Lange, Lorraine Y., and Hildegard Schnuttgen. *A Bibliography of Chaucer 1974-1985*. Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String, 1988. 345p. \$39.50 (ISBN 0-208-02134-5). LC 87-35157.

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Council on Tall Buildings & Urban Habitat: Second Century of the Skyscraper. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1988. 1,109p. \$82.95 (ISBN 0-442-22116-9). LC 88-5577.

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Encyclopedia of Legal Information Sources. Detroit: Gale, 1988. 634p. \$140 (ISBN 0-8103-0245-4). LC 87-25901.

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Keener, James P., *Principles of Applied Mathematics*. Redwood City, Calif.: Addison-Wesley, 1988. 576p. \$48.50 (ISBN 0-201-15674-1). LC 87-18630.

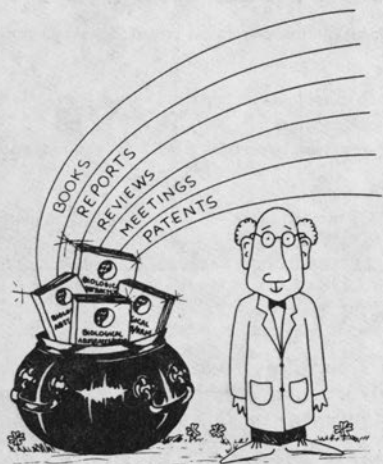
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