



advancing
digital transformation
in museums

MCN 2019 | NOVEMBER 5-8 | SAN DIEGO

A photograph of a historic mission building, likely the San Diego Mission, with a prominent bell tower and a cross on top. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter.

The Limit Does Exist: Reevaluating Collection Management Systems for the 21st Century

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The Limit Does Exist

- Jeremy Munro, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art
 - Pronouns: he/him
 - Twitter: @porchrates
- Amanda Dearolph, Los Angeles County Museum of Art
 - Pronouns: she/her
 - Twitter: @amandadearolph
- Erin Canning, Aga Khan Museum
 - Pronouns: they/them
 - Twitter: @eecanning

Cataloging, For Whomst?

Welcome to the Theory Zone: Population, These Slides, Upzone the Data

Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (NMAfA)

- Founded 1964, joined SI in 1979.
- Thirteen Smithsonian collecting units use TMS
- NMAfA has 12,000 accessioned collection records
 - of which 1,000 could be called contemporary art
 - 11,000 are older (pre 1950ish) works
- NMAfA has used TMS since 1999



Romuald Hazoumé, Rainbow Serpent, 2007, Mixed media and found objects, Museum Purchase

The “#New?!*” Era of Collection Databases

- Collection databases are more external than ever (cool!).
 - Our data is feeding into:
 - Online collections (for NMAfA on its website and collections.si.edu)
 - External websites using our data (informal, all our collection data is CC0)
 - External data calls by researchers
 - In gallery, label copy, interactives
 - Press/Publications
- Could always go farther
 - Linked Open Data
 - Open Access
 - Initiatives for greater digitization/make more records public.

How We Present Our Data Has Always Matterred

- NMAfA never used “primitive arts” it had fallen out of the field of African Art.
- We don’t refer to “African tribes” - instead we use Culture Groups (the Yoruba peoples) for broad statements. For specifics we try to refer to a political entity - The Zulu Kingdom, the Kingdom of Benin.
- Used to make joint constituent records for couples - “Mr. and Mrs. John Smith” now we do individual where we can.
- All this kind of stuff was always an easy sell to curators/directors you want to avoid obviously outdated language, exoticization, misogyny.

Changes in What We Catalog Too

- We are being asked now to consider cataloging complex socially constructed identities:
 - Gender identity
 - Sexual orientation
 - Ethnicity
 - Nationality
- We are also being asked to report out on them for internal data calls. In some institutions externally or cataloging them for the sake of being queryable on collection websites.

10,000 Feet in the Air (shhh its free real estate)

- We're also being asked to interrogate and change the museum structures created by western cultural and political hegemony, its cataloging systems, as well as the direct colonialist and classist legacies present in the constructs of "museums," "fine art," and "art world" to this day.
 - These issues reach at the very heart of museums, going so far as to ask questions if whether the museum effort is salvageable. It asks us to accept a politics whose solution is the dismantling of white supremacy and late capitalism.

Back to Earth (rent here is not free often it is too high)

- Cataloging objects is not just about discussions over how best to track loans and exhibitions or whether we use 19th or nineteenth century in our display dates field.
- Decolonizing a museum, ending white supremacy, etc require asking tough cataloging questions.
 - As the world destabilizes to climate change, strife, and forever wars how will we manage geography of changing borders/polities?
 - What terms will we use for gender, ethnicity?
 - How to deal with complex scenarios that break processes?
 - Heck, is there even a way to use data around social identities like gender without tokenizing people?
 - How can we note in our public records objects that were stolen by colonizers or gained at the hand of deaths of people?

Ah Yes, I Too Have Witnessed the Academic Realm of Theory and Ideals, A Fine Idyll Indeed

- That's a fair take tbh.
- Here's some common concerns
 - How do we proceed, practically?
 - Internally people are going to think I'm making a mountain out of a molehill
 - I'm worried about how information about gender or ethnicity could be used internally let alone externally, what if we get it wrong?
 - Can stats around gender or ethnicity ever be accurate to the collection? Are they even useful?

Some Best Practices to Proceed

- Make sure communities are involved in decisions that affect the telling of their story.
- Groups are not monoliths, they will have different opinions, it's cool, actually.
 - To that end identify people how they want to be identified
- Try stuff out, see how people feel, go into any changes with the idea that the intent is good and we're going to do the best we can.

Skeptical “Internal Stakeholders”

- Be tactical, be a salesperson. Make the PR case if you have to.
- Come with a proposal for what to do on the given question/issue. A lot of execs/managers don't know what to do either about the wave of interest in addressing issues of social justice and equity!
- Example: NMAfA pronoun adoption

Skeptical “Internal Stakeholders”

- Remember, the other side that doesn't want a more diverse museum or that thinks we can have our social justice and white supremacy capitalism too is going to make a comfortable argument to people with power:

“Keep things the same until we know what to do for sure” or even “keep things the way they always were, I am uncomfortable.”

- Push back when you can, kill with kindness first, the stick later. Organize your colleagues when you make your pitch

Worries About Data Use

- I too, am worried, a lot of the time in fact!
- It's always worth asking how people will use any sensitive data in any database, whether that's gender/ethnicity data or personally identifiable information like addresses.
- Some museums are including optional identity questions in questionnaires they send to living artists, in order to get preferred terms from living artists.
- There's risk in being more public about your institution's historical legacies, but there's also risk in not, so better to give it a go with a good intent.

How Accurate Can This Be?

- Gender is a socially constructed identity that means different things in different places at different times. Many cultures have had myriad gender identities in the past and the terms we use now aren't historically universal, so I am unsure how to handle something like gender when applied to people who would have had a different understanding of it than us.
- In terms of charting progress for a more diverse collection the answer is always going to be we aren't doing good enough. White western cisgender male artists have had their heyday for centuries. We should swing the pendulum back the other way for a few hundred years.

TL;DR

- The way we refer to and the terms we use for people, places, identities, and objects has never been more important or under more scrutiny.
- This is doubly true if we want to address social justice/equity meaningfully.
- We are taking a political stance in how we construct our data rules and processes.
- Center the people you want to bring in as you make changes.
- Add preferred pronouns to your databases when you get back! Start asking new constituents for their pronouns!

Wrap It Up

I'm an optimistic person, we're living at a time where The Way of Things is shifting in museums and society more broadly. It's up to us as cultural heritage professionals to stake a claim for a better world and carry that vision in our work, our institutions, our lives, and yes, even our collections management software.

We face threats. The wages are low, turnover is high, burnout is higher, the whole thing that underpins the entire enterprise is benevolent philanthropic capital. Also climate change!

The cool thing though, is our work matters to people - it's the best argument to keep this whole thing going.

I wish you much more than luck.

Sense & Searchability

Data In = Data Out

Query Examples

Artworks by female artists
valued at over \$1 million

Contemporary
photographs & time based
media by Chinese artists

LA-based artists with
acquisitions from the past
two years

All donors with gifts in the
Photography Department

A Brief History of Collections Data at LACMA

- There are **15 curatorial departments** with **19 collecting areas** representing a collection of over **140,000 artworks**.
 - Examples of curatorial departments include Decorative Arts & Design, Art of the Ancient Americas, European Painting & Sculpture, South & South East Asian Art, etc.
- LACMA currently uses **TMS 2016 R2** which originally launched in September 2012.
 - Before TMS the museum had Multi MIMSY/Mimsy XG and a homegrown system called LADDRS.
 - The data in the current CMS has a mix of digitized paper records and digital-born records migrated from previous systems in addition to records created in TMS over the last 7 years.

Place Made: a case study

AC1995.108.1

Thailand, Bangkok

Bejewelled Elephant (circa 1950)

Ivory with gemstones set in gilt silver

6 x 7 3/4 x 3 in. (15.24 x 19.69 x 7.62 cm)

Gift of the Helen Dorsey Trust

[LACMA Collection Online](#)



Place Made: a case study



M.2010.115.691

Northern Guatemala or Southeastern Mexico

Whistle with Infant Presentation Scene

(600-900 CE)

Ceramic

5 x 5 x 2 in. (12.7 x 12.7 x 5.08 cm)

Purchased with funds provided by Camilla
Chandler Frost

[LACMA Collection Online](https://www.lacma.org/collection/object/M.2010.115.691)

How do you standardize data of varying levels of certainty for objects spanning the globe and millenia that has gone through multiple conversions?

You don't.



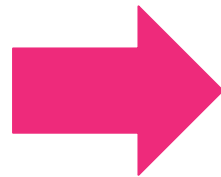
Place Made: a case study

- **Entries include:**

- Modern nations/countries (e.g. United States, Japan)
- Obsolete nations/countries or names (e.g. Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Ceylon)
- Cities from contemporary to ancient (e.g. Corinth, Paris, Honolulu)
- Regions (e.g. Asia Minor, Chiapas, Dalmatia, Silesia)
- **A combination of these**

- **Entries have:**

- Abbreviations
- Misspelling/typos
- Non-location identifying information



Geography Assistant

Geography Type
Place Made

Political

Country	Political Region	
State/Province	Nation	
City	Regional Corp	
County/Subdivision	Village Corp	
Township	Lot	Concession

Physical

Place Made United States, New York	Cultural Region
Subcontinent	Locale
Site	Locus
Subregion	Excavation
River	Building

Global Position

Latitude	UTM
Longitude	Easting
Elevation	Northing
Map Reference Number	Notes

☐ Set as Primary Display

OK Cancel

Geography Assistant

Geography Type
Place Made

Political

Country Political Region

State/Province Nation

City Regional Corp

County/Subdivision Village Corp

Township Lot Concession

Physical

Place Made Cultural Region

United States, New York

Subcontinent Locale

Site Locus

Subregion Excavation

River Building

Global Position

Latitude UTM

Longitude Easting

Elevation Northing

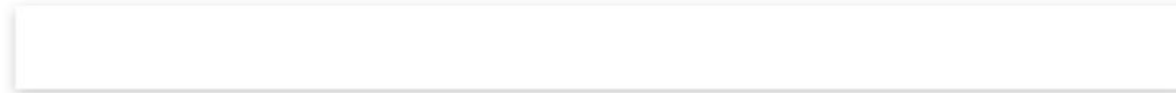
Map Reference Number Notes

☐ Set as Primary Display

OK Cancel

- Staff time & resources
- Reporting
- Inconsistent data
- No enforced relationships between fields
- Complicates the search function

Why is searching so difficult?

The Google logo is centered on the page. It consists of the word "Google" in its signature multi-colored font: blue 'G', red 'o', yellow 'o', blue 'g', green 'l', and red 'e'.A long, white, rectangular search input field with a subtle drop shadow, positioned below the Google logo.

Google Search

I'm Feeling Lucky

Putting it Together

- Data doesn't exist in a vacuum. Learn the history of both the database and the data it holds.
- There needs to be a balance between best practice and what is appropriate and tenable for your institution.
- Train the users who are doing the cataloging or using the data to think critically about their actions and the choices they make.
- Audit. Audit. Audit. And audit some more. Then, yep, keep on auditing.
- We can't hold ourselves and our vendors to the same standards as Google but that doesn't mean it can't be better.

Valuing Information

Different knowledges, different ways of knowing

What is an object?

Shell With Inscriptions

18th century

creator unknown

incised mother-of-pearl

India (Historical Hindustan)

diameter: 14.5 cm

AKM665

[https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/
collection/artifact/shell-inscriptions-akm665](https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/collection/artifact/shell-inscriptions-akm665)



What is an object?

This palm-size, perfectly shaped mother-of-pearl shell displays an elegant design and an intriguing function. Its surface is engraved with eight concentric rings containing verses from the Qur'an and religious supplications. The shape of the shell and some of its motifs suggest that it may have been used as a drinking vessel. In line with the belief in the protective and therapeutic power of the Qur'an, some Muslims drank water that came into direct contact with Qur'anic verses in order to obtain blessings and protection.



Shell With Inscriptions, 18th century
incised mother-of-pearl
India (Historical Hindustan)
14.5 cm
AKM665

“Affect is a **different kind of intelligence** about the world,
but it is intelligence none-the-less.”

— Nigel Thrift (2004)

“Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect”
Geografiska Annaler, Series B: Human Geography, 86(1), 57–78.

“The presence or absence of affective relations in catalogue records can either **reflect or deny community and academic ways of knowing**... Moreover, museums risk compounding source community members’ sense of absence through the exclusion of affect.”

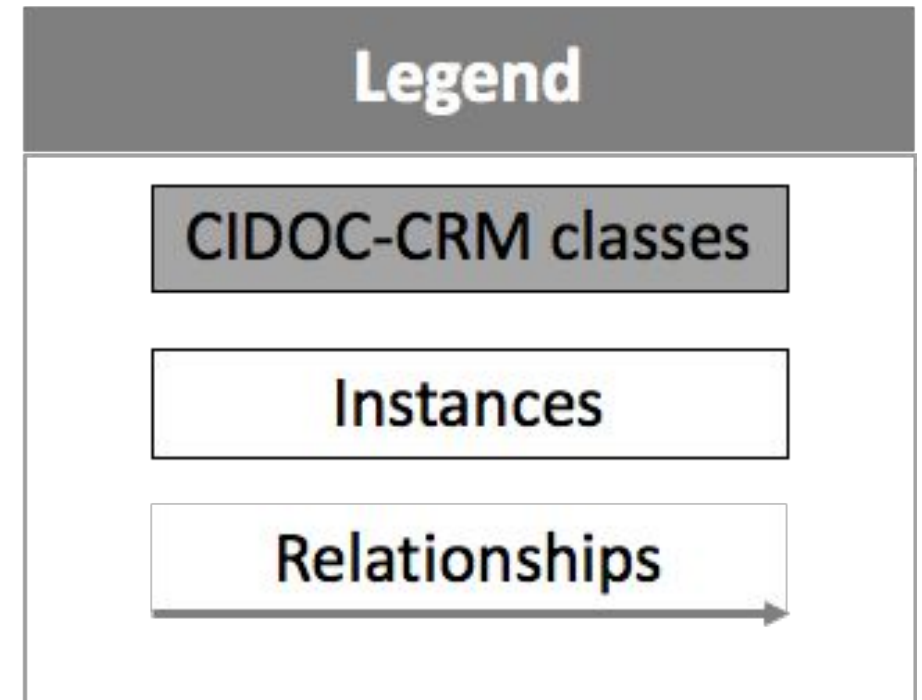
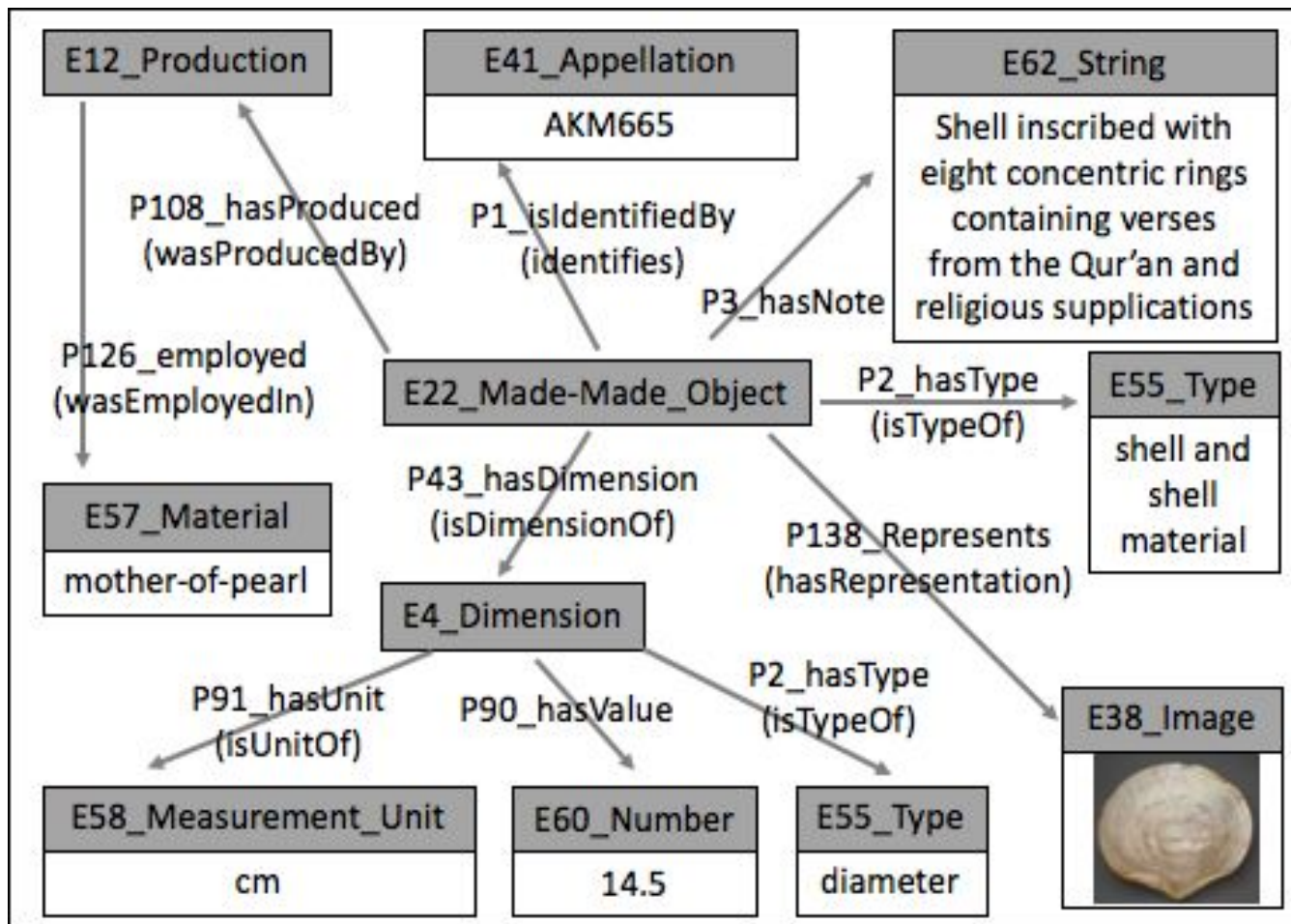
— Cara Krmpotich & Alexander Somerville (2016)
“Affective Presence: The Metonymical Catalogue”
Museum Anthropology, 39(2), 178–191.

“It is not only about shifting the focus of projects so that they feature marginalized communities more prominently; it is about **ripping apart and rebuilding the machinery of the archive and database** so that it does not reproduce the logic that got us here in the first place.”

— Miriam Posner (2016)

“What’s Next: The Radical, Unrealized Potential of Digital Humanities”

Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016.



Simplified segment of an object record profile for AKM665 using CIDOC-CRM.

Some projects to check out - just a few to get you started

- CMS - **Mukurtu**: mukurtu.org.
- Online access - **The Reciprocal Research Network**: rrncommunity.org.
- Documentation model - **Documentation & Conservation of Media Arts**: docam.ca.
- Documentation method - **Variable Media Network Questionnaire**: variablemedia.net.
- Linked data vocabulary - **Homosaurus**: homosaurus.org.
- Thesauri and controlled vocabulary taxonomies - **So many!**

Takeaways

Takeaways

- Be **self-aware and self-reflective** about your role in this process, and the relationships of power that you are engaging in throughout, with all aspects of data and your work.
 - Consult with appropriate communities and not just curators/peers for terminology.
 - Think critically about why and how the institution is creating data and what purpose it serves both internally and externally.
- This is a shift in thinking, held beliefs, practices across an institution and how knowledge/expertise is perceived - **change can be slow and difficult, but important.**
- If stakeholders internally are asking about gender/etc stats to know how the institution is doing, fine, but the real answer is they could always be better, higher. **There is no end point when cis white men have dominated art since the inception of museums.**

Discussion Topics

- Does your institution have a strategic plan/long term goals for your data and/or CMS?
- What questions/activities is your CMS/collections data unable to support?
- Is your institution working on any data clean up projects? Do these projects focus on addressing a backlog or improving data for new uses/tasks?
- Other than as a record keeping tool, how does your institution use your CMS? Are the people who enter data the same people who need to extract it?
- Who is responsible for decision-making in your institution about data projects?
- How can we get all the relevant knowledge holders to work together - communal buy-in as to importance, direction, etc.?
- Do you encounter data or projects that the structure of your CMS seems to restrict or create barriers regarding? What is the nature of the project, it's goals, and the constraints experienced?

Thank You

Jeremy Munro, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art | @porchrates

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