

Not just art: the challenges and successes of integrating archival, library and image collections into an art focused collection management system

Claire Eggleston

Research Library and Archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.
E-mail address: claire.eggleston@ag.nsw.gov.au



Copyright © 2019 by **Claire Eggleston**. This work is made available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Abstract:

Established in 1871, the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney is one of the oldest public art museums in Australia. Alongside a collection of 32,000 art works, the gallery also holds over four hundred art archives (the largest collection in Australia), an extensive visual arts library and a vast collection of visual documentation of Australian art making.

Historically these collections have been managed discretely, each with their own systems, databases and metadata standards. Without any integration of these collection management structures important relationships between material remain underexplored. To better show, utilise and integrate these collections the gallery library and archive has embarked upon a program of cataloguing archival, library and image material onto the art collection management system, Vernon. The ultimate aim of this program is to provide users, both internal and external, with a more wholistic view of our collections and enable a deeper understanding of art making in Australia.

This paper will examine some of the challenges and successes in cataloguing archival, library and documentary image material onto a system primarily designed for singular art objects - How do we adapt metadata standards for art cataloguing to suit other types of material? How do we create linkages between a diversity of material in a system with little authority control or indexing outside of artist authorities? How do we create an online interface that allows for these linkages and is navigable to everyday users? And, perhaps most challenging, how do we engage other departments within the organisation to achieve our goals?

Keywords: art libraries, art archives, cataloguing, collection management systems.

Introduction

Founded in 1871, the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney is one of the oldest public art museums in Australia. Nearly as old as the gallery itself, is the research library. Initially established to support the art collection, the library has grown into a significant record of Australian and international art, comprising a vast collection of visual art monographs, exhibition catalogues, ephemera, artist books, audio and audio-visual material, and a slide library documenting art making and exhibitions in Australia. Alongside the library is the National Art Archive, comprising over 400 collected archives of artists, art societies, commercial galleries, collectors and curators, as well as the gallery's own institutional archive.

All of our collections are open to the public, researchers and curious users alike, however, as with many libraries, much of our collection remains hidden, and the connections between the library and archive collections and the gallery's art collection are shrouded by the mysteries of institutional structures. It is with this in mind, that the library has embarked on a program of cataloguing select library and archive material onto the gallery's art collection management system Vernon. The ultimate aim being to give users, both internal and external, a more wholistic view of the gallery's broader collections and enable a deeper engagement with art making in Australia.



Edmund and Joanna Capon Research Library, Art Gallery of New South Wales

Current state of affairs

Library collections

- Books and journals, including rare material
- Artists personal libraries
- Audio and audio-visual material, including oral histories, artist interviews, recordings of performances

- Australian and international ephemera collections relating to individual artists, group exhibitions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and artists, art societies, public and commercial galleries, private collections, art prizes
- Press clippings dating back to 1871
- Artist books
- Slide and image library, includes images of exhibitions held at the gallery, artworks, artists, performances, events

Most library collections are catalogued onto the library management system, Spydus, using AACR2 (and more recently RDA), Library of Congress Subject Headings, and the Dewey Decimal Classification system library standards. Our ephemera collection of Australian Artist Files is progressively being catalogued to brief record level, however, most ephemera collections remain uncatalogued. All catalogued library material is added to the Australian National Bibliographic Database and is searchable via the National Library of Australia's union catalogue TROVE. The Spydus catalogue is also available online via the gallery's website. Spydus does not include images or digital versions of material. The slide library and other visual material is not catalogued at all, with low resolution scans saved to a local drive and organised via a file and folder structure with basic metadata added to the file properties. Recently image material scanned by our Image Librarian (including the library's image collection and image material from collected archives) has been made available to gallery staff through the image management system Fotoweb. Fotoweb is only available onsite to gallery staff, and is primarily used by the gallery photographers to upload images of the art collection, current exhibitions and gallery events.

Archive collection

Material held in the archive collections is vast and varied, is physical and digital, and includes:

- Correspondence
- Diaries and notebooks
- Exhibition documentation
- Business records
- Image material, including glass plate negatives, transparencies, slides, negatives, printed images
- Audio and audio-visual material, including reel to reel tapes, film, video, cassette tapes, DVDs
- Artworks
- Preparatory material for artworks, including maquettes, sketches, sketchbooks, diaries
- Artist materials
- Performance objects, including costumes, props

Archives are catalogued onto Spydus at the collection level, with a brief description and manuscript guide attached for download. Most manuscript guides are detailed to the series level of description. As with library material, catalogue records of archives are added to the Australian National Bibliographic Database.

Art collection

Works in the gallery's art (or curatorial) collection are catalogued onto the Vernon collection management system. Standards for cataloguing art works are based on the 1980 Australian

Gallery Directors' Council publication *Cataloguer's manual for the visual arts*, with updates provided by our collection systems manager. Select Vernon fields are mapped to an online interface, allowing users to search the collection via a simple keyword search or through a more structured advanced search. Indexed authorities include: artist name, artist country, artist gender, Aboriginal language, Aboriginal community, Asian art period, and media category. All other searches are free text keyword. Individual art work records display the work's physical details, acquisition details, any text written about the work, its exhibition history, and a bibliography of material referencing the work. Biographies of Australian artists are gradually being added to the collection pages, and are often illustrated with images of the artists from the library and archive.

What's missing?

Currently there are no links between artworks and artists in the gallery's art collection and material in the library and archive collections. Users must search the library management system and the art collection databases separately, with no links between collections made visible. Through the online art collection related books, posters or gifts from the gallery shop appear, ready to be purchased, and yet there are no links to material held in the library. No links to exhibition catalogues or monographs, no links to the records for references listed in the work's bibliography, no images in the slide library of the work on exhibition, no archival correspondence, sketches or ephemera that relate directly to the work or artist. Without these links, our audiences and users are provided with an incomplete picture not only of the gallery's broader collections, but also of the individual artworks held.

Further to enriching understandings of the art collection, material held in the library and archive offers the institution an opportunity to tell a much broader, and oftentimes more inclusive, story of art and visual culture. In surveying who and what modes of practice are represented in the curatorial, library and archive collections we find that there are gaps in the curatorial collection that the archive and library can begin to fill. As with many public collections, the gallery's art collection is vastly unequal when it comes to the representation of women. While the library and archive collections may not be at parity, they certainly do represent a far greater number of women artists, and artists who sit outside the traditional art historical canon. Artists who, for whatever reason, have not been collected by the institution are often present in archive and library collections. This is also so for differing modes of practice, such as performance, conceptual and mail art, which are under-represented in the curatorial collection but may be found in the library and archive. As histories of art evolve and are re-appraised, it is in the library and archive that artists, movements and practices that are part of such re-appraisals can be discovered.

Where to from here?

To open up these hidden collections, we have embarked upon a program of cataloguing selected material from the library and archive onto the gallery's broader collection management system, Vernon. Material that is catalogued onto Vernon at an item level is also digitised by the gallery's photography department, enabling direct access for users. This process has had its challenges, its setbacks and its successes, and has involved much trial and error.

It is also a project that is by necessity a selective one. We don't have the resources to fully catalogue or describe every item in the library and archive. We must decide what gets catalogued and digitised, and to what level. So how do we prioritise what we catalogue? Should we prioritise material that relates directly to the art collection? Prioritise material that is at risk of loss? Significance? Lack of representation elsewhere? User demand? Ultimately, it is a weighing up of all of these. And it's a selection process we need to make to clear to users, that what they may see online is just a selection and that a visit to the library and archive may be necessary.

Linking the library catalogue to the online collection search, such as the gallery shop, is also fundamental to the opening up of our collections. The interoperability of Spydus and Vernon via the online interface of the website is proving difficult to enable this. We haven't given up, and are pursuing this facility to sit alongside material that is directly catalogued onto Vernon.

The singular versus the collective

One of the greatest challenges with Vernon is using a system that is geared towards the singular art object to catalogue and arrange material that is much more suited to a collective and connected style of cataloguing. We've worked with the gallery's Collection System Manager to develop a hierarchical cataloguing structure in Vernon to reflect archival practices and allow for categorisation of non-archival library and image material. In developing hierarchies, we can allow for the context of material to be visible and ensure the connections between material are preserved. The hierarchy for cataloguing material follows the relatively simple system of a top-level collection record, a series record, and an item level record. While this system tends to reflect a more archival approach to the arrangement and description of material, it is working for the categorisation and cataloguing of library and image material.

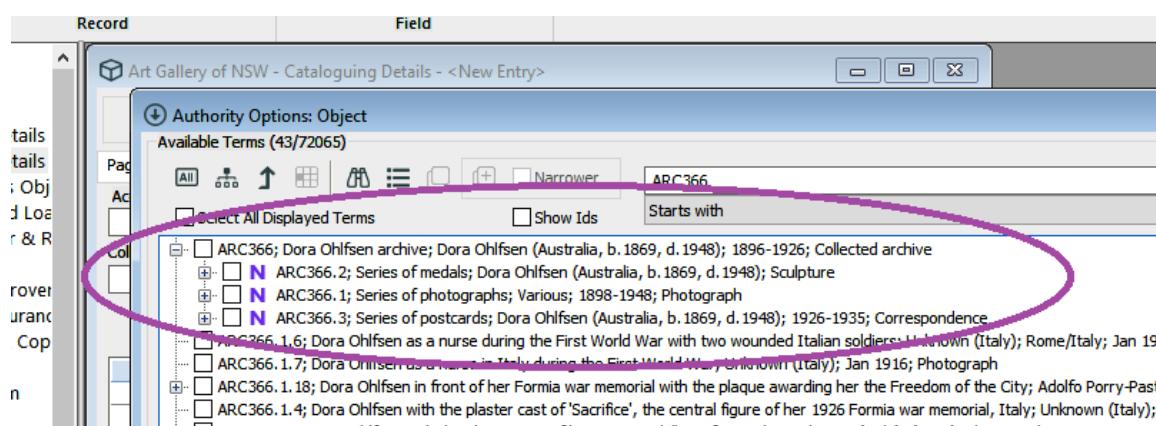


Fig. 1 Top level archive record with series records attached

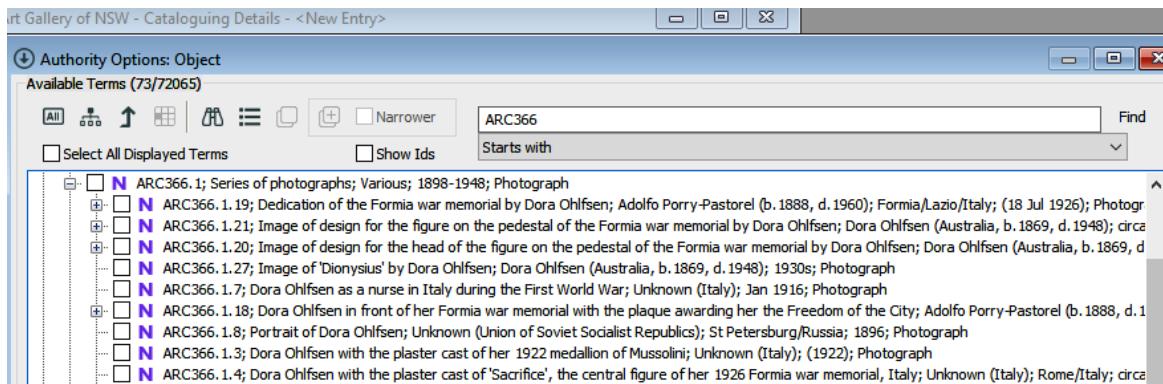


Fig. 2 Series level records with item records attached

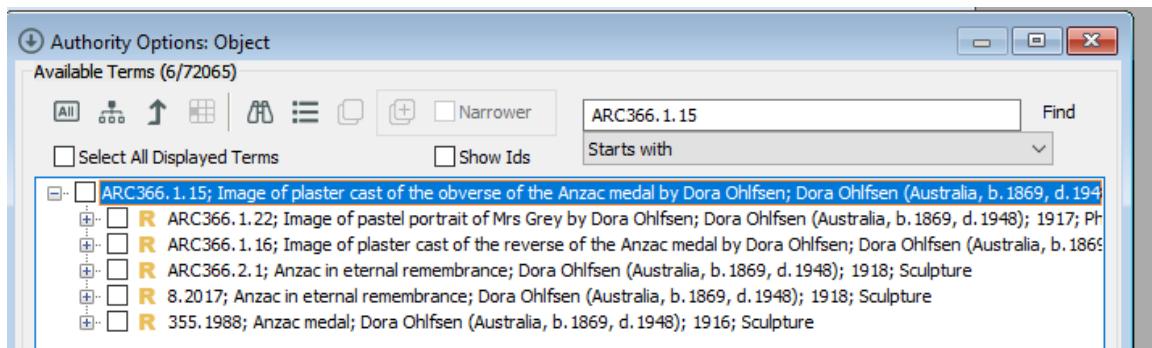


Fig. 3 Item level record with related records attached and links to works in the art collection

As well as developing a structure for cataloguing library and archival material onto Vernon, we've had to create cataloguing standards specific to this material. How to construct titles, record authorship and the content of material. These standards have been particularly important for images of artworks, where the catalogue record must reflect the item but still accurately record the content. For example, a 1974 slide of an artwork dated 1962 must record both dates, the creator of the slide, the title and creator of the artwork. This is especially important considering we are cataloguing onto a database that includes artworks and we must differentiate between objects and their representations. We do have to observe some of the more general standards that apply to cataloguing of the art collection, but we have been able to use fields in different ways, use fields that are not usually utilised and add to existing thesauri to make the system work for library and archive material.

A further difficulty in using Vernon to catalogue material is the lack of subject authorities. Vernon has the capacity to utilise subject authorities, however, its current use is restricted to a subject keyword authority, the thesaurus for which is rigid and very limited. It is also not indexed. This reflects the gallery's traditional use of Vernon as an art collection management system, where authorities outside the artist and possibly place or period are not part of usual cataloguing practices, or considered important. This is a larger project we are yet to tackle, and so for the time being cataloguing of library and archive material is highly structured through the hierarchies, manual linking of records, titling and contextual information provided in free-text fields. The development of subject authorities would not only benefit the cataloguing of library and archive material, but also the art collection, and the successful integration and searchability of the two.

Institutional challenges and successes

Despite the immense amount of work in developing the library and archive presence on the gallery's collection database, material digitised and catalogued onto Vernon is not yet available through the online collection. After briefly going live a couple of years ago, the material was swiftly taken down due to concern from other departments within the gallery about the lack of distinction between the archive and the “collection”; that the archive would swamp the art collection and that the curatorial selection process would be undermined by all this ‘other’ stuff. And some of these fears were not entirely unfounded. There was little web infrastructure to adequately manage the archival material for users, however, this did reveal past value-based attitudes to the library and archive. These attitudes are now shifting, with the library and archive being increasingly considered part of the collection, and complementary to the art collection rather than supplementary. The activity of cataloguing material has contributed to this shift in perception. A record in Vernon confers a ‘collection’ status on material, and resources have been extended to library and archive material, with registration, conservation, photography copyright, exhibition and curatorial departments now involved in its broader management.

A further flow on effect of this project has been that the processes of acquiring archival and rare library material are now comparable with those of the art collection, with acquisitions being formally presented to our board of trustees. This has given the library and archive a presence and visibility at the executive level, which we've never had previously, adding further momentum to getting our material online, leading to the next challenge – working collaboratively with our digital team to build an appropriate web infrastructure that enables a successful integration of library and archival material into the online collection database.