

The Art of finding an illustration – or just Google it!

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Abstract:

Uppsala University Library is one of the few libraries in Sweden that can offer many valuable and rare special collections. The special collections include early printed books, manuscripts, pictures, maps and music scores.

The library curates a large and valuable collection of pictures including water colours, drawings, engravings, lithographic prints and photographs. This material is only partially registered, but there are special sections and staff who can help the individual scholar to find relevant pictures. Illustrations in books and manuscripts' pictures are usually more deeply buried than the collections kept in drawers, but questions about pictures are often put to the staff who manage the picture collections, irrespective of where the pictures might be found.

The time consuming search for pictures has made it important to find ways to make the found images retrievable. The Library has therefore decided to prioritise the cataloguing and digitisation of those pictures that our readers order copies of.

The collections at the Uppsala University Library are also a part of the Swedish cultural heritage and should therefore be accessible for the whole population. Since Google searching is the commonest way of finding information on the internet, it should be easy to find pictures that way too. Cataloguing every picture individually would take an inordinate amount of time, so Uppsala University Library has chosen to create a single bibliographic record for all the pictures in a manuscript or book.

Keywords: Uppsala University Library, picture cataloguing, information retrieval, pictures

1 INTRODUCTION

Uppsala University Library aims to be one of Europe's most modern academic libraries whilst at the same time managing, making accessible and showcasing its cultural heritage. It is one of the few libraries in Sweden that can offer students, scholars and the public extensive and rare special collections. The university library was founded in 1620 by King Gustav II Adolf. Since then the older collections have grown through donations, purchases and legal

deposits.¹ The special collections are nowadays regarded as part of the Swedish cultural heritage and should therefore be accessible to the general public. They consist of the library's collections of early imprints, manuscripts, pictures, maps and music scores.

2 SEARCHING FOR PICTURES

The library has vast collections of pictures, many on single sheets of paper. These include engravings, lithographs, drawings, postcards, photographs and modern printed pictures. The most common categories are portraits, topographical views and historic events. The pictures in the picture collection are normally not catalogued. A small number are searchable through the library's picture-search database, a few have been carefully recorded but the majority are only roughly categorised in the stacks.

In addition there are innumerable pictures elsewhere in the library's cultural heritage collections. There are examples of fantastic views and botanical and anatomical wall charts among the collections of early imprints. Manuscripts contain examples of fabulous book illustrations. Views can be found in atlases, diaries, travelogues etc. Musical scores are often adorned with an artistic frontispiece and so on. Searching for pictures in the collections of early imprints and manuscripts can often seem quite hopeless. When cataloguing books and manuscripts very little attention has been paid to the pictures in them. Finding a picture that has been requested in these collections often involves searching through many books on a specific subject or browsing through an individual archive.

At the Uppsala University Library we have special librarians to help scholars and the public to find the pictures they need. Their questions take no account of in which of the collections they may be found. Since such a tiny part of the collections have been catalogued these searches are inefficient. For the librarians the searches can be very extensive and sometimes it is hard to draw the line about how much time to spend on a particular query.

3 PICTURE CATALOGING

Pictures have long been overshadowed by the written text. We know that texts have been catalogued for over 4,000 years but there is no such tradition for pictures.² In the research concerning the organisation of knowledge, most interest has centred around written documents. The very existence of picture collections in libraries has been and, for many still is, unknown. Nonetheless pictures are in demand. Thanks to increased opportunities for digitisation, the interest in pictorial items has grown.

Government regards access to cultural heritage for research, education and general interest as an important issue in the democratic process. Techniques for digitisation and computer technology have been around for a while, but libraries have not been quick to develop cataloguing tools for pictorial items. We are still far from having all our pictures searchable on the web, even if the number of pictures in our database grows day by day.

¹ The law covering legal deposits ensures that anyone producing multiple copies or publishing a work for general distribution in Sweden is obliged to deliver copies to seven Swedish libraries including the University Library in Uppsala. This law encompasses printed books, journals, brochures, maps, posters, postcards etc.

² F. A. Lerner, *The Story of Libraries: from Invention of Writing to the Computer Age*, New York: Continuum, 2001

A further reason for picture cataloguing lagging behind is that it is time consuming. It has become a vicious circle; since it takes an inordinate length of time to search for pictures, picture librarians have not had time to catalogue the pictures and it is hard to solve this situation.

4 A SEMINAR

In order to draw attention to the problems of hard-to-find book illustrations, Uppsala University Library organised a national seminar in 2007 entitled *Bild i Bok – konsten att finna en illustration (=Pictures in books – the art of finding an illustration)*. The focus of the seminar was the need of pictures for readers and research and how libraries can collaborate to facilitate the retrieval of pictures. Representatives from the world of research, publishing houses and libraries provided different perspectives about pictures in general and book illustrations in particular.

What did the seminar achieve? One scholar emphasised that the cataloguer should resist interpreting the pictures and instead present them objectively. It begs the question, what is objectivity? A certain amount of interpretation is necessary to be able to describe a picture. As a rule there is no title page to start from yet despite this, some information must be recorded to make the picture searchable. Even if it is noted in the record that the title is a construct and the description of the motif is uncertain, the picture will probably continue to coexist with this information and what may turn out to be an incorrect description.

The pictorial elements for example in rare books may be well known to the scholars who study a certain area in depth, but it is not always that the picture are the prime reason for their studies. When their research is concluded the pictorial material may well remain relatively unknown.

One book publisher said that he often used pictures that have been used earlier as illustrations in other books. It is frequently the case that picture librarians receive a request for a picture in a recently published book. A good illustration is re-used many times over. It makes sense therefore to ensure that just these pictures are easy to make use of again.

Different manifestations of a picture have been discussed. A picture in a book can also exist as a picture on a single sheet of paper in a picture archive. Can these be regarded as the same picture? A photograph can also be a postcard. Does this matter? For the person who wishes to use the picture as an illustration or is only interested in what is represented, it may be of no consequence. But for the person who regards the picture as an object and perhaps wishes to know how it has been used, it is vitally important. We must note therefore that the picture should not lose its context.

5 PROBLEMS

Questions about pictures are often posed to the section and the staff who manage the picture collections irrespective of where they might be found. In the best of cases they may be about pictures that are easy to find, but equally they may arise because of inaccurate picture referencing or pictures that possibly do not exist but that we feel *should* exist. Vague source details in combination with the fact that the collections are generally not catalogued makes the work of retrieving pictures time consuming and sometimes inconclusive. What can be done about this situation?

We were aware that the section for photographic services at the library continually produces digital files of pictures that have been ordered by various library users and that there was a need to save these files and make them searchable. Certain objects were scanned again and again because the previously produced digital copies had not been saved or saved in such a way that they could not be found. Sometimes CDs were made of the most popular pictures. But none of these physical items contained information about the existence of these pictures. This resulted in a picture being digitised again since the member of staff handling the request was unaware that a digital copy already existed on a CD.

6 THE UPPSALA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY'S SOLUTION

At the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, Uppsala University Library started to develop a database for pictures. The database was primarily intended to make the picture collection's loose leaf pictures available. A start was made to catalogue and digitise all the items in the library's vast collection of drawings and paintings. That way the pictures would be searchable on the internet by students, scholars and the general public.

Over and above this, and to meet the problem of optimising the work spent on searches, retrieval and scanning, the library decided to save all digital image files produced as a result of requests to the photographic services and that the original work would be catalogued in the picture database. Initially there was some opposition to spending even more work time on the already time consuming picture requests, but the benefits soon began to be apparent that end-users could find their own pictures online and order digital copies without needing to fetch the original pictures out of the stacks again.

Nowadays tasks can be dealt with in the following way: A researcher studying a manuscript encounters an illustration that s/he wishes to use by requesting a copy from the photographic services. The picture librarians both catalogue the picture and pass it on to be scanned or photographed. Even if there is only one picture to be scanned, the librarian may choose to catalogue and digitise all the pictures in the book at the same time. In such a case the librarian makes one catalogue record which includes all the pictures in the entire work. Notice it is just the pictures that are catalogued, not the work itself. If there is already a catalogue record for the manuscript volume in a digital manuscript catalogue, the record of the pictures is linked to it.

Thanks to the decision to make all ordered images re-searchable, the picture database has begun to contain all sorts of digital reproductions that are not usually regarded as pictures, for example Darwin's signature and various title pages. It has not been altogether clear whether this type of object should be in the library's picture database at all and sometimes it can be difficult to decide which documents or parts of documents are worth allocating the resources necessary for cataloguing and saving digital copies.

There are also times when the librarians catalogue and get pictures digitised that they have spent a lot of time searching for even if it has not resulted in an order for a digital picture from the photographic services. In these cases the picture or pictures have been deemed so interesting that they will probably be ordered by somebody sometime in the future and that when that day comes they will not need to search for them again. It may also be a case of something so spectacular that it should be used and showcased in the database. There is an interest in mediating the picture outside the library. It can also be the case that the librarian has spent so much work on a request that he/she want to get some result out of the effort.

It is not only the end-users' orders that govern the choice of what to digitise. The library also allocates resources for the cataloguing of all the collections. It is important to show the breadth of the library's potential. It is impossible to guess which pictures can be interesting for our end-users.

7 TEACHING

When showing the library's pictures to scholars, students and the general public, the librarians do not confine themselves to showing pictures from the picture collections, but also pictures that can be found in books and manuscripts. This is a tradition that does not apply in all libraries. Just now we are attempting to use more and more of our digitised pictures in our teaching, partly to be able to show more items without wear and tear, partly because the digital pictures afford opportunities not available with the physical items. For example you can show them on a larger scale and zoom in on them.

8 TOGETHER WITH THE PHYSICAL ITEM

The digital catalogue record in the picture database sometimes contains more information about the object than is visible in the actual picture. They complement each other. To facilitate access to the catalogue record with its added value and getting the picture on your computer or smart phone without needing to photograph it again, it is important that there is a connection from the physical object to the digital picture and its catalogue record. This can, for example, be done with the help of a QR code placed with the physical object that can easily be scanned with a QR reader. In this way it is obvious that there is already a digital copy, or alternatively that it needs to be scanned and catalogued.

9 EVERYBODY GOOGLES

Google is the most popular search tool on the web. This might change but probably most people will choose to use a simple dialogue box whatever it is they are looking for. Google however gives many irrelevant hits, however as long as it is the search tool of preference for most people, it is vital that our collections can be accessed that way. So we decided that it was important that items in the library's picture database should be searchable there. In addition there are many platforms for the dissemination of pictures. Unfortunately however we lack the resources to devote much time to them. At present the library's pictures are accessible using search tools such as Google, the *Europeana* platform and in the picture search-database on the library's website.

10 CONCLUSIONS

A simple solution for reutilising the work that is spent on picture searches can be to catalogue and save those pictures where end-users have ordered copies. In order to rationalise cataloguing, it is possible to make a catalogue record for all the illustrations in a book. Pictures in the same volume are kept together and retain their context. A picture that is ordered and which a librarian has spent several hours tracking down, can later be found easily by anyone by doing a search on Google.

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