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Review of a Metadata System: Art Institute Chicago

Metadata Standards

A search through the Art Institute of Chicago's database will show a variety of standards when viewing its page source. While there are meta tags in use, the exact schema is unclear. Viewing the page source of a few records, one will see XML as a declared schema as the examples I viewed contain XHTML in the heading

tag. `<head profile="http://www.w3.org/1999/xhtml/vocab">`

However, one will also find tags relating to Dublin Core tags (e.g. DC:Title) as well as DRUPAL Core.

`<script type="text/javascript" src="http://www.artic.edu/misc/drupal.js"></script>`

My best guess as to what schema is used is XML.

Metadata Elements

The Art Institute of Chicago includes a number of different metadata elements for its artworks. There are more general elements, such as artwork and creator name, that exist for each piece. However, some elements exist only for some pieces, such as artwork descriptions, or a creator's short biography. This indicates that the AI works to include as much information as

possible about each piece, and does not limit the content it provides for viewers.

As stated above, each artwork includes metadata elements such as an image of the artwork, the artwork name, and the creator's name. Also available are the creator's birth and death dates (when applicable) and the creator's nationality. The creator's name is hyperlinked and, when clicked, brings the viewer to a page that displays all of the art AI owns by that particular artist.

A number of other metadata elements exist for artworks. They include:

- The work's creation year
- Manufacturer, as in the case of furniture
- The art medium. If the medium is something that may be unfamiliar to the average user, such as UPM ProFI, there is also a small description that offers more detail. In the case of UPM ProFI, the description is "recycled paper and plastic composite" (retrieved from http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/202131?search_no=1&index=2)
- Artwork size
- Purchasing fund, or donator. Since many artworks are purchased using special funds or donated by people or organizations, this information is listed where applicable.
- Purchase year and accession number. It is difficult to determine whether the accession number is assigned based on how many other pieces AI received that year (for example, if a painting was the thirty-second item AI acquired in 1970, its accession number would be thirty two), or whether it refers to the number of other items purchased or received using certain funds (for example, if a sculpture was the fiftieth item purchased using a specific grant fund, its accession number would be fifty).
- Collection name, as each piece is part of a larger collection. The collection name is

hyperlinked and will bring the viewer to a display of all other artworks in that collection.

- Gallery location, if the artwork is on display in the museum, or a statement that the item is not currently on display. If the artwork is on display, the gallery name is hyperlinked and brings the user to a page containing other works located in that gallery.
- Item description. This may be a description of the physical work, information about its creation or media, or may describe the intended meaning or inspiration behind a piece.
- Suggestions for browsing related subjects, including hyperlinks to take the user directly to those subjects if desired.
- Links to information about exhibition, publication, or ownership histories. This information is generally only available for famous and well-known pieces, and offers lists of exhibition locations, publications that reference the artwork, and previous owners.

It is important to remember that not all artworks include all metadata elements. Famous pieces are likely to include each of those elements, as they are well known and information about them is extensive. However, some pieces may only contain a few elements. As stated previously, it seems that the Art Institute strives to provide as much information as possible, and therefore includes as many metadata elements as are available and fitting.

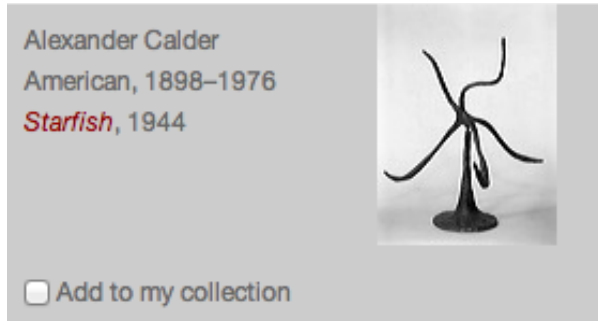
Metadata Contents

There is a typical, fairly standardized form in which the records appear, with some differences and additions depending on the particulars of a piece of art and the information that is known about it. From comparing records across categories, it appears that the standards were designed for particular kinds of artwork: a painting, drawing, or sculpture, with one or only a few media, by a single known artist. The analysis of each element's contents will demonstrate the

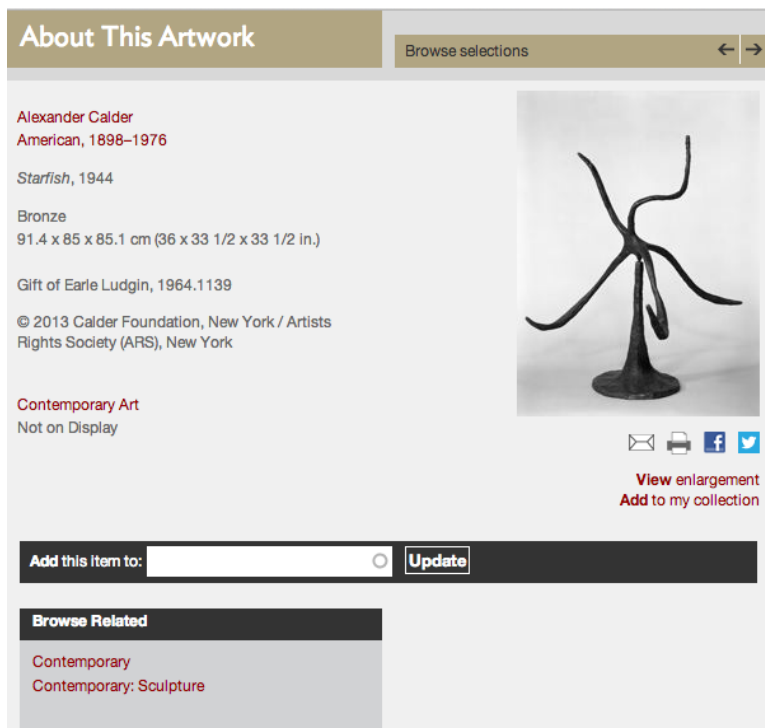
works that deviate from this model, such as quilts, found object sculptures, pottery, are more loosely standardized, may not include all elements, and have extra information added into elements if it fits nowhere else.

How information is displayed

The search result for an item typically looks like this:



Clicking on the image provides further details:



Searchability

All of the text in the “About This Artwork” and in “Browse Related” is searchable. A an

example, the above work turned up in a search for “sculpture” and is also a result when searching for “Artists Rights Society,” along with other artworks whose copyright is held by ARS.

However, the search system does not allow quotation marks to be used in a search. Using them prompts the system to say “You must specify valid search criteria.” This means that searching “artists rights society” without quotation marks also turned up the following record:

Leon Golub
American, 1922–2004

Interrogation II, 1981

Acrylic on canvas
305 x 427 cm (120 x 168 in.)

Gift of Society for Contemporary Art, 1983.264

Art © Leon Golub/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Contemporary Art
Not on Display

A leading cultural and civil rights activist in the United States from the early 1960s until his death in 2004, Leon Golub consistently created works that addressed humanitarian issues. This piece belongs to a series of paintings that deals with human rights violations in Central America. By fixing the gaze of his grinning perpetrators directly on the viewer, Golub makes it difficult to look away. The artist thus compels viewers to examine their own relationship to the brutality depicted.








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Browse Related

- [Artists in Chicago](#)
- [Contemporary](#)
- [Contemporary: Featured Works](#)
- [Contemporary: Paintings](#)

Though it has nothing to do with the Artists Rights Society, it contains “artists” under browse related, “rights” in the description, and “society” in the name of the group it was donated by, “Gift of Society for Contemporary Art.”

Other searchable information is included as checkboxes in the advanced search or as facets in a sidebar when presented with search results. These include whether or not an item is on display, whether or not the record includes an image, and whether or not it has an interpretive resource.

Overview of Contents by Element

These are the most commonly included elements for each record, though not all are always included. Exceptions were also seen, such as an additional area for the transcription of the text from a quilt, but the elements listed below are most frequently seen.

1) Artist Name / Country / Birth-Death Date

The “First Name, Last Name, Nationality, birth/death” portion is a link that brings the user to search results for all of Alexander Calder’s works. Most records seen are formatted this way. Living artists birth dates are recorded “Born (year).” Variations occur, especially in less frequent cases, such as artist collaborations. Below are excerpts from the records of all three pieces by Bernd and Hilla Becher held by the museum, all with different formatting:

Becher, Bernd & Hilla
German. Bernd Becher (1931-2007), Hilla Becher
(born 1934)

Bernd Becher (German, 1931–2007) and
Hilla Becher (German, born 1934)

Bernd & Hilla Becher
German
Bernd Becher (German, 1931–2007), Hilla Becher
(German, born 1934)

The nationality portion also occasionally includes birth country information, as in “Kazimir Malevich / Russian, born Ukraine, 1878–1935”

When a specific artist name isn't given, location, regional, or tribal information is given instead.

An example of this is a jar from the 1880's, in the "Indian Art of the Americas" category:

"Acoma / Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico, United States." One piece of armor simply lists "Roman" in this portion.

Another example of the variability of this field is the collection of quilts. The names in these records are often preceded by a descriptor, such as "Executed by Rebecca C. Hayward," "Designed and executed by Cora Meeks," and "Made by Carolyn A. Ford." No explanation is given for the terms, such as the difference between "executed by" and "made by." Other textiles, such as a yardage of commercially produced fabric, list "Designed by 'name'" followed by the designer's birth/death dates and country, and then list "Produced by 'company'" followed by the country.

2) Title, Year

The next portion of a typical record is "Title, Year." This is fairly standard across records, though some works say "Untitled" in lieu of a title, and some translations of titles appear, as in "Two Candles (Zwei Kerzen), 1982." Some have a range of years, suggesting that these are the years the work was created in, not the year completed. There is no specific information that defines this year.

3) Medium

The content and format of this field varies, since there is great variety in media and technique. A standard painting will have the type of paint, and the surface, such as "Oil on canvas." A sculpture will simply say the material, such as "Bronze" or a list of materials, such as "Wooden sled, felt, belts, flashlight, fat, and rope." One work found, made up of eight separate sculptures of found objects, was listed simply as "Mixed Media," which seems to be

done when the list would be very long.

If the piece is made up of separate parts, this sometimes appears as a number in parentheses after the medium. Any print number information (in one example, “Chromogenic print, edition 1/5”) also appears after the medium.

In textiles records, this section also gives specific information on details like embroidery stitches, types of weaves, and other techniques.

4) Dimensions

Most, but not all, records examined have dimensions listed. The format that dimensions are listed in varies greatly. For units of measure, at least four formats were seen:

- inches (centimeters)
- centimeters (inches)
- only inches
- only centimeters

Parts of units are rendered in decimals if given in centimeters, and as fractions if given in inches. For works such as photographs, the dimensions for the frame were sometimes also included.

Dimensions for works made of separate pieces were also formatted differently. An example with four identically sized photographs simply listed the dimensions as “16 x 19 1/2 in. (each)” while a work comprised of eight differently sized sculptures listed then as “Name: dimensions, Name: dimensions...” to specify the dimensions of each piece.

A textile yardage examined included the dimensions of the piece in this area, as well as the dimensions of the portion of the print that repeats.

Additionally, text description may be included if the sizing isn’t standard, as in

“Dimensions vary with installation”

5) Ownership Information

This area can include the fund the work was purchased with, the collection it belongs in, or the giftee, in which case it is listed as Gift of _____.

Some items include an accession number, most often if the item was gifted by a specific party, as in “Gift of Isamu Noguchi, 1946.63”. This also happens after the purchase fund: “Twentieth-Century Purchase Fund, 1973.56” or a specific collection: “Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection, 107.1991.” It seems that these numbers appear only on items owned by the museum, and refer to the year acquired.

6) Copyright Information

Many records do not include this information. When they do, it appears as the copyright symbol followed by the copyright holder. For an artists, this is First Name Last Name, as in “© Gerhard Richter” and for a foundation or other corporate body it is typically Name, Location. If there is an additional copyright holder, it is after a /, as in “ © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn”

7) Background/Description

If included, this appears as a paragraph of text, most often describing the background and context of the artist, and sometimes information about the specific work described.

8) Browse Related

This portion lists the categories and sub-categories that any given artwork falls into. These are drawn from the listing on the left of the page. When an item is also in a sub-category, both the sub-category and the main category are listed:



Encoding

No information is available on the encoding. The closest found was a mention of the use of the Dublin Core schema. It is uncertain how the metadata is encoded.

Usability

Search Terms

It is fairly easy to determine the search terms to use. Searching terms from the artist's name, title, subjects, and format tend to turn up relevant results, and facets on the right-hand side serve to narrow results.

Record format

The parts of each record are not labeled. For an English speaker with some knowledge of art, the parts are recognizable, but if the user had minimal English skills or didn't know terms for types of media or techniques, it may be more difficult to determine what information is included. Differences between records can complicate this - for example, most artists' names are followed by birth-death dates, but a few are followed by "active in" and a range of years. Trying to deduce information simply by the typical format, without the text, could result in confusion.

Metadata

Generally, records contain enough metadata for most users. For example, a future visitor to the museum can find art by artist, period, etc. and find out if it is on display and where.

Someone interested in a specific artist can click on their name to find more works by them, and can find their country and birth date. A user interested in a specific period or medium can use the browsing facets, and information about technique, materials, and dimensions help users understand what they are looking at and how it was made.

Some records don't include information that could be helpful. Donators and year acquired are not available for many pieces, and only some have explanatory materials such as artist biographies or political context. Older items may not even have artists or years. However, it appears that as much information is given as is available.

Improvements

Labeling elements in a record would help users understand what they are seeing. Even more helpful would be links to pages explaining terms, especially those that are art-specific. The categories on the left could be more helpful if the sub-categories were displayed. Search suggestions, especially when typographical errors are made, would make searching easier and more effective.

When materials are on display, clicking on the gallery name brings up other works in that gallery. For museum visitors, the option to see where the work/gallery is on a museum map would be helpful.