

From Byzantine Art to Winnie-the-Pooh: classifying a private library

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I recently had the opportunity to do something unusual: create an entirely new classification scheme for a library which had not previously been catalogued or classified.

The library in question is the personal property of a private individual. It consists of several thousand volumes, most of which reflect the owner's interest in art. They include monographs about art, exhibition catalogues, auction catalogues, dealers' catalogues, museum collection catalogues, private collection catalogues, and a few other miscellaneous items. The client wanted the books catalogued as a way of keeping track of what he did and did not have in order to avoid acquiring duplicates, and because he wanted the ability to search his library for books on a specific subject – Byzantine icons, or Medieval enamels, for example.

I have been cataloguing for a number of years, mostly in art libraries, so when I was approached about this job I felt quite comfortable with the cataloguing and with the materials. However, I had no idea what the client might want in terms of classification. I didn't know at first whether he would even want the books to be classified at all, or perhaps might just want me to give them a shelf number to indicate their physical location, with new acquisitions added to the end of the sequence. By the end of our first conversation, however, it was obvious that he definitely wanted the books arranged on the shelves by subject, which of course requires them to be classified.

The next question was, obviously: which classification scheme to use? I considered using either Dewey Decimal Classification or Library of Congress Classification, but decided against them. They both seemed too big and too general for this small and very specialised collection. More importantly, they can be complex to use. I knew that my time in this library would be temporary. After my departure, any scheme adopted would need to be usable by someone else, who would not be a librarian and therefore probably not accustomed to navigating through classification schemes. To expect someone with no training and no experience of classifying to happily tackle the complexities of a large scheme such as LCC would be unrealistic. If I wanted the scheme to continue to be used – and useful – after I left, it was vital that it be user-friendly. I needed to ensure that neither the structure nor the notation were over-complicated.

The owner had already instinctively arranged the books in general subject groupings. All books on Medieval art were grouped together, and subdivided roughly by art form. This was the largest section of the library. Byzantine art, African art, Asian art, and American art formed smaller sections. Auction catalogues were shelved together, as were private collection catalogues and most of the museum collection catalogues. The owner told me there were three things he considered important in arranging his books: time period, place, and art form. Without realizing it, he was talking about facets. This turned my thoughts towards a faceted classification scheme such as Universal Decimal Classification. I decided against using UDC, for essentially the same reasons I had decided against LCC; but I did feel inspired to consider a UDC-style approach in which each of the three facets the client had identified would be represented by a number, with the three numbers separated by a punctuation mark.

This idea appealed greatly because it could reflect all three of the facets, and still be relatively easy to use. Unfortunately, a problem became apparent when I started to consider citation order. Unlike some classification schemes, this one was not intended as an attempt to organize all human knowledge, or to serve all possible types of users. It is a practical tool to meet the needs and requirements of one specific individual user. Under the circumstances, that one individual's wishes are important. Taking into account the client's preferences and the existing shelf arrangement, when I considered citation order it seemed most sensible to prioritise place.



However, this would have put, for example, French Medieval manuscript illumination and French Impressionist painting near each other because both are French. Prioritising art form would have disturbed the existing shelf arrangement by putting ancient Egyptian sculpture near Medieval European sculpture. Either of these approaches would have resulted in an unhappy client. He preferred a shelf arrangement in which all things Medieval, regardless of art form, were kept together, and in which European, African, Asian, and American art each formed their own distinct sections. Even prioritising time period would separate many of the books on Africa, Asian, and American art and mix them up with each other and with the books on European art, rather than keeping them together as the owner wished. The same would be true of an enumerative classification with main classes of place or art form.

To provide a sensible structure for the collection, while accommodating the client's wishes, I was going to have to come up with something a bit unconventional.

The solution eventually adopted is a structure in which European, African, Asian, and American art each have their own section, within which books can be arranged by time period and art form. According to the client's wishes, Byzantine art also has its own section. This seems reasonable, considering the Byzantine empire's unusual position overlapping Europe and Asia, and its unique art and history. The Byzantine section is the most rapidly growing part of the library. The owner has recently acquired many new books on the subject.

The European art section is still the largest section of the library, therefore I made that section of the classification scheme slightly more detailed than the other sections. It is subdivided by time period – ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, etc. Each of the subdivisions starts with a round number – 3000 for ancient, 5000 for Medieval, 7000 for Renaissance, etc. In order to specify art forms or more precise locations, I created two tables, one for geographic places and one for art forms.

In the table of places, I tried to ensure that I covered all reasonable possibilities. Using a combination of atlases and the Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names, I tried to list all countries. Because some of the books in the collection discuss general regions (northern Europe, or west Africa, or the Pacific islands, for example) rather than specific countries, I built numbers for these regions into the table as well. The Thesaurus of Geographic names again provided some very useful help with this. I followed its guidance on questions such as which countries to consider north African, or east African, or west African, etc. I did not create numbers for individual cities. In a collection like this one, which is small but very wide-ranging in its geographic coverage, the large amount of work involved in trying to identify and number all the cities and towns that might be relevant would have been disproportionate to any benefit that might have resulted.

As an example of how the scheme works, the class number for a general book on Medieval European art would be 5000. To classify something more specific, such as a book on Medieval French painting, the tables are used. In the table of art forms, painting is 200. For Medieval painting, the two numbers are added together to get 5200. If necessary, specific places can be indicated by adding a decimal point followed by the appropriate number from the geographic table. France is 90, so Medieval French painting would be 5200.90. Similarly, Renaissance French painting would be 7200.90 and eighteenth-century French painting would be 11200.90. The numbers are, I hope, easy to recognise and understand because anything with a 200 will always indicate painting, and anything with a decimal point followed by 90 will always indicate France. Similarly, anything between 5000 and 6000 will always indicate Medieval and any number between 7000 and 8000 will always indicate Renaissance. Just as 5200 is Medieval painting, 7200 is Renaissance painting. Other art forms follow the same pattern. 5010, for example, is Medieval sculpture; 7010 is Renaissance sculpture. 5300 is Medieval books and manuscripts; 7300 is Renaissance books and manuscripts. This structure keeps all Medieval art and all Renaissance art together, as the client wished, while still making it possible to indicate various art forms.

The sections for Africa, Asia, and the Americas are structured very similarly, except that I did not use the terms Medieval and Renaissance in those sections, because they are specific to European history and not as relevant to the other parts of the world.

I did use the term Medieval in the Byzantine section however, because it is used in the literature on the subject, and does have relevance.

Of course, not quite everything in the collection fit into this part of the classification. The most obvious exceptions were the auction catalogues, dealer's catalogues, museum catalogues, and private collection catalogues. The auction catalogues were the easiest to deal with. I added a class number for auction catalogues, and arranged them by the name of the auction house. I did something similar with the dealer's catalogues, but with one exception. The owner preferred to have dealer's catalogues of the work of one individual artist classified with that artist, rather than with other dealer's catalogues.

I added another class number for museum catalogues, which I used for guidebooks to museums and general catalogues of museum collections. Catalogues of specific parts of museum collections were classed with the subject if possible. For example, a catalogue of Byzantine art in the Hermitage Museum was classed with Byzantine art, but a general guidebook to the Fitzwilliam Museum was classed with museum catalogues. I dealt with the private collection catalogues in a very similar way.

The collection includes a small number of items which are not related to art at all. One of the great joys of this work was unexpectedly coming across everything from car catalogues to some previously-classified documents about the D-Day invasion of Normandy, or treasures such as some beautiful books from William Morris's Kelmscott Press, or a lovely first edition of Winnie-the-Pooh. I added a class number for literature, to accommodate things like the William Morris books and Winnie-the-Pooh. Finally, I had to decide what to do with the car catalogues and a few other random items. Since I could not, within the context of this small classification scheme for this small collection, attempt to represent every imaginable subject, I added a class number for miscellanea. This worked very well as a home for the few odd things that didn't fit elsewhere in the scheme.

I do not yet know what will happen in the future with this scheme. One of the advantages of its simplicity is that it should not need a great deal of updating, though I was careful to leave some space in each section where more numbers could be added in if necessary. Perhaps the client will call me back occasionally to catalogue and classify new items, or perhaps he will prefer to hand that work over to his assistant. I tried to make the scheme user-friendly enough that it could easily be taken over by someone else if that is what the client chooses. Either way, my main hope is that it will still be used to classify new additions to his collection. If it continues to be useful, I will consider it a success.