

Subject Indexing for Pictures: An Overview

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Tip. To understand how subject indexing works in online catalogs, search for records using subject terms from a formal authority file such as AAT, LCSH, or TGM. Ask yourself:

- If I needed pictures on ‘abc’ topic, would I be glad a subject heading brought me to these records?
 - Did I get too many records (e.g., pictures that barely show the topic) or too few?
- What approach the indexing follow-- broad (general categories) or detailed (very specific terms)?
- How easy is it to gauge the relevance of the indexed material to the subject I’m pursuing?

Subject information in catalog records can appear in:

- Title
- Notes
- Subject headings and subdivisions
- Classification scheme codes

Subject note patterns:

- [Type of material] shows ... [summary of overall key topics; the ‘of’ factor]
- Includes ... [more specific topics; the ‘about’ factor]
- Also has ... [topics of interest, but in low quantity or not directly related to the core scope]

Subject headings and notes should accomplish the following: (with less done in minimal level cataloging)

- Be specific to the overall scope of the material. (What the pictures are ‘of’ or depict.)
- Convey what the pictures are “about.” (What the pictures “about,” their meaning, purpose, or function.)
- Mention predominant subjects.
- Point out unusual subjects, even if shown in only one picture among many. (Alternatively, make an item-level records for special pictures.)
- Provide name headings, e.g., for individual buildings, people, events.
- Include generic or topical headings, e.g., for types of kinds of buildings or occupations depicted.
- Refer to a finding aid or item records for more detailed subject access to large or diverse collections.
- Rely on a thesaurus to guide people from broad subjects (e.g., animals) to the specific subject in the pictures (e.g., rats), rather than assign broad and narrow terms to the same catalog record.

General Observations

- Make it clear in the title or a note why a subject was assigned and where it appears in a collection.
- Set up a priority order among subject indexing tools, e.g., Start with LCSH, then TGM, then AAT.
- Establish subdivision practice, e.g., use of “Pictorial works,” or chronological and geographic.
- Propose new terms to AAT, TGM, LCSH as you need them.
- Needed: subject systems that distinguish between primary and secondary subjects.
- Needed: subject systems that distinguish “of” from “about.”
- Needed: thesauruses integrated with online catalogs for easy retrieval of records indexed by terms connected through broad, narrow, and synonym relationships.

Basic Reading List:

- Alexander, Arden, and Tracy Meehleib. "The Thesaurus for Graphic Materials: Its History, Use, and Future" in *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 31 (2001): 189-212.
- Petersen, Toni, and Patricia J. Barnett, eds. *Guide to Indexing and Cataloging with the Art & Architecture Thesaurus*. NY: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Shatford, Sara. "Analyzing the Subject of a Picture: A Theoretical Approach," in *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 6:3 (1986), pp 39-62. (Discusses the different kinds of subjects in pictures.)
- Shatford, Sara. "Describing a Picture: A Thousand Words are Seldom Cost Effective," in *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 4 (1984), pp 13-30.