# The Core Categories for Visual Resources – Introduction (VRA Core 1.0)

## I. What are the Core Categories for Visual Resources?

For over a decade the visual resources community has expressed a desire for documentation standards for image collections--standards that would lead to shared cataloging in a national image database. The Core Categories for Visual Resources are intended as a guideline for describing visual documents depicting works of art, architecture, and artifacts or structures from material, popular, and folk culture. While they are not specific instructions for system-building or record structures, they may be used as a template for the foundation of such applications in both local or shared environments.

The Core:

- provides a template especially designed for visual resources collections. The Core element set contains two groupings of elements, the Work Description Categories (19 elements), and the Visual Document Description Categories (9 elements)
- promotes the use of data value standards by recommending controlled vocabularies for specific categories.
- recommends a level of description between minimal and full.
- facilitates interoperability with other cultural heritage information resources. It is mapped to MARC format, the Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA), and the RLG REACH project element. Other mappings are in progress.

## II. History of the Core Categories Project

Beginning with a fact-finding mission, the DSC gathered data on cataloging practices in the visual resources community, with particular emphasis on the data elements or fields comprising a visual resources record.

Data elements from over sixty institutions in the United States and Canada were analyzed and compiled into a master list which was sorted into four types of data elements--elements used to describe the object or work, elements used to describe the carrier of that information (the surrogate or visual document), collection management elements, and elements belonging to ancillary files such as artist authority files. Collection management elements, due to their local, sometimes idiosyncratic nature, were not considered appropriate for a shared database and were not included in the next phase of the study.

The master list of object and surrogate elements was then compared to the Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA), a project of the Getty Information Institute, and where applicable, visual resources elements were tagged with CDWA equivalents. The DSC found that while the CDWA was exhaustive in its list of elements needed to describe museum objects, it was not entirely satisfactory for the description of images, and in particular, did not cover all of the elements needed for the description of architecture and other site-specific works.

## III. The Core Concept and Version 1.0

By 1995, as the DSC began to debate which elements to include and which to leave out, the "core" concept was growing in popularity and was being developed in related information fields. Emerging from the library practice of defining bibliographic records from minimal to full, the core was an effort to find a satisfactory middle ground. More complete than a minimal level which specified only the fewest elements needed to uniquely identify, locate and account for an item, the core was still less than an exhaustive level of description. The Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) published its core for several types of library records. This concept served as a model for the DSC and has since become a model in the museum community as well. When the CDWA was officially released in 1996, eighteen elements were identified as "core elements."

The Core Categories for Visual Resources, Version 1.0 (published in the Fall 1996 issue of the VRA Bulletin and on the VRA website) contained twenty-one elements --thirteen describing the original work, three describing the creator, and five describing the surrogate image. Each category included a brief definition with examples, suggested terminologies for vocabulary control, and CDWA and MARC equivalents. The accompanying notes stressed that the Core was a list of data elements--NOT a list of data fields; that it could be used as a guide in developing local databases and cataloging records; and that the Core was not a set of instructions for data content. Although the DSC recognized the importance of both a standard format and rules for content description, it was also acutely aware of the need to set achievable limits within a given time frame.

At the same time, the DSC also solicited evaluations from a select group of experts in the visual resources and other information fields, which was followed up by an open forum held at the VRA annual conference in New York (February,1997). Resulting recommendations included: (1) broadening the concept of the "object" to include ephemera and non-art objects; (2) providing some guidelines for application; (3) refining and clarifying some of the categories; and (4) adding categories or category qualifiers.

*This page last updated 12/1/99 by Ann Whiteside*