

Boundless Information:

Bibliography at the Index of Christian Art

Until the early 2000s, nearly all information and images of medieval art which were studied by the Index of Christian Art derived from art history publications. Core practice of Index work involved the regular reading and review of bibliographic sources to gather references and photographs for entry into the iconographic system. By continuing to give exhaustive attention to bibliography and recording these publications as authorities, the Index grew to encyclopedic proportions over the twentieth century. Today, the amassed references cover over ninety-five years of publications and preserve a historiographic tradition of medieval art history scholarship. Importantly, Index bibliographic authorities contain valuable information to locate publications, many of them are little-known, and remain an access point to work of art records through their thematic published content.

With the introduction of collaborative digital photography projects and the increased discoverability of online holdings at peer institutions, the Index scholar's research practice shifted in regard to bibliography. Publications were now not the sole source for gathering information and pictures about a work of art. Access to better, in color, and more holistic sets of images meant the cataloguer had an advantage to impart more accurate analysis of the iconography and material nature of the work. Due to the growing hybridity of research at the Index and throughout the dawn of the digital age, beginning at the Index in 1991, the information and images to support the cataloguing research of records could be verified through a variety of means and not only through earlier published study. It also meant that these layers of cataloguing could be justifiably enhanced, with closer attention given to documenting technical and stylistic classifications and elaborating on the medieval origins of these works.

Despite increased access to digitized images and information, the value of print publications in Index work is not diminished. Traditional print materials still have a huge role in research at the Index. And like many of their peers, the Index overall benefits from the digitization of printed source material. The ability to word search through massive search engines, like "Google Books," have provided surprising links back to bibliography and have exponentially helped to shape records. As well, the proliferation of digitized journals allowed for the same broad information sweeps to gather knowledge about a work of art. Bibliography, now better harnessed through digitization and

also taking the form of vetted websites and online academic research tools, is still the foundation to creating a work of art record. Yet, there are times in the research process when bibliography proves to be scarce. In this way, the Index can be viewed as the “original publisher” of the unstudied work of art. The Index is the first to analyze the work, give it an Index standard description, and classify it by subject matter into the online platform for researchers. With library and museum collection becoming more discoverable, there is simply more and more unpublished works that the Index can include in the database.

An example of an unpublished work of art entered into the Index is this sixteenth-century Flemish Book of Hours in the Pierpont Morgan Library (M.1175). A new library acquisition of 2011, the research gates were opened on this Book of Hours with only knowledge of its De Ricci catalogue number, its sale number from Sotheby’s Auction House, and the starting description from the library. Thus, the Index scholar relied heavily on quality high resolution images of the manuscript to create an authentic catalogue record. This newly created, descriptive information on Index “Manuscript Main” and subsequent folio records, which was produced solely from primary source images, contributes to a new and valuable venture. This venture asserts Index scholarly analysis and written descriptions in place of publications, as a neutral stand-in, with the understanding that researchers have an unrestricted, yet



The Annunciation. Pierpont Morgan Library, M.1175, fol. 33v.

gathered, starting point to make further interpretations. Save for facsimiles, most bibliography had limited means to reproduce comprehensive views and allow for unmitigated study of one object. The database project has improved on the accessibility to information through specialized, item-level research attention and the inclusion of novel research support materials.

Accessible in a number of ways, the Index’s subject-driven platform is best navigated through keyword searching. This allows the user to combine terms and make broad information sweeps in the over eighty-thousand records in the database to gain familiarity with Index formatted subject headings. Bibliographic keywords also describe subject matter – but that of books. Devised in our

own format and loosely based on Library of Congress subject headings, bibliographic keywords link bibliographic authorities together and provide another means of access to the iconography. For instance, a bibliographic keyword of “Altarpieces, Gothic, German” is currently linked to five bibliographic authorities in the database. A researcher might browse these citations for further insight into scholars who have worked on Gothic German altarpieces or could access the citation headings in the database which show exactly where this bibliography is applied to work of art records. Expansive bibliographic authority fields, including those for publication type, location of original exhibition, figure and plate numbers, and Princeton library call numbers, are “value-added” information, developed as a response to the increased accessibility of bibliography for projects and the mission to glean the most out of every source.



The Index of Christian Art physical archive and reference collection at Princeton University

Another corpus that has grown over time, also due to the increased accessibility to bibliography, is the Index’s own, non-digital reference collection (See: <https://ica.princeton.edu/books/>). Now home to approximately six-thousand printed materials, the Index library encompasses volumes on art in all media covering the period of the “Long Middle Ages” in history, art history, and general medieval studies. Shelves are arranged thematically intended for unexpected discovery while browsing. Some headings include “Iconography,” “Saints,” “Heraldry,” “Animals,” “Music,” “Astrology,” and “Nature.” This conceptual and physical framework embodies the mission of the Index to encourage associative thinking and illuminate connections between subject areas. A PDF document of authors and titles in the collection was launched on the Index of Christian Art website in the spring of 2012 to assist in the finding of in-house research materials.

Strengths of the Index reference collection reflect both past and current projects. For example, there is deep coverage of publications on illuminated manuscripts; doubtless much of it owed to our long-standing collaboration with the Morgan Library and the research needs of the staff. The Index also has an excellent reference collection of books on liturgy, containing several out-of-print titles. In 2011, the addition of books formerly belonging to Index research scholar Lois Drewer anchored the

Index as a prime resource to consult printed materials for the study of Early Christian, Late Antique, and Byzantine Art. There is extensive coverage of books in a wide geographic range important to these cultural and stylistic periods; from the Balkans to Georgia, from Egypt to Russia; with many titles in previously underrepresented media in the Byzantine field, like frescoes and mosaics. Some notable books in the collection include the complete, eighteenth century in-folio volumes of the *Acta Sanctorum*, manuscript catalogues of the Mount Athos monasteries, extensive print versions of the serials *Gesta* and *Studies in Iconography*, and several unpublished PhD dissertations, including Drewer's own valuable work on the wood beams of St. Catherine's Monastery.

Bibliographies in the physical archive and on the database of the Index of Christian Art comprise a valuable pool of citations of medieval art history. The accessibility of this information by the researcher remains a key aim of Index work. Whether through database bibliography searches that provide information paths to work of art records or through the centralization of discoverable, original art history research on the database itself, it is clear that the Index has reframed their use, creation, and application of bibliography to an evolving project.

Jessica Savage
Index of Christian Art