



The Index of Christian Art is three years away from an important milestone; its centennial year.¹ Founded in 1917 by Charles Rufus Morey, the Index of Christian Art was Morey's vision to create the first thematic and iconographic index of existing early Christian and medieval art up to the year 700. The discoverable index of information would allow researchers to organize works of art by subject matter and distinguish stylistic and iconographic trends through a chronological framework. With assistants, Morey created a classification system consisting of a subject description cards and correlating photographs for indexed objects.

By 1933, director Helen Woodruff made significant progress on Morey's foundational work. She wrote a catalogue's handbook, implemented a coding system for the files, and formed a photographic studio to assemble more pictorial evidence from publications. Notably, Woodruff's



Charles Rufus Morey consulting the Index circa 1945. Photograph Index of Christian Art Archives.

directorship propelled Morey's original vision forward by encouraging public consultation of the archive. Her work helped the archive become accessible to a wider public and helped the organization establish permanency during an important time for the art history discipline.

In a co-authored article of 1963, Anna Esmeijer and William Hecksher said of the Index that, in spite of world war and new and changing outlooks for medieval art historical research this “[amazing enterprise](#)” had refused to “[fold up](#).”² They remarked that the Index had grown and multiplied to such an extent that it was now considered “[encyclopedic](#)” in its extent. In that same vein, Esmeijer and Hecksher described the Index as a “[digest](#)” formed out of contemporary art history publications, one which was “[constantly tested, questioned, corrected, amplified, and weighed](#)” under the skillful eyes of Index staff.³

¹ Thanks are due to Adelaide Bennett Hagens and Trudy Jacoby for the invitation to present this paper at the *Digital World of Art History 2014: Standards and their Application* conference at Princeton University on June 26, 2014. I am grateful to my colleagues at the Index, especially Catherine Fernandez, for their help and advice in preparing for this talk.

² Esmeijer, Anna and Hecksher, William. “The Index of Christian Art.” *The Indexer* 3 (Spring 1963): 97.

³ *Ibid*: 102.

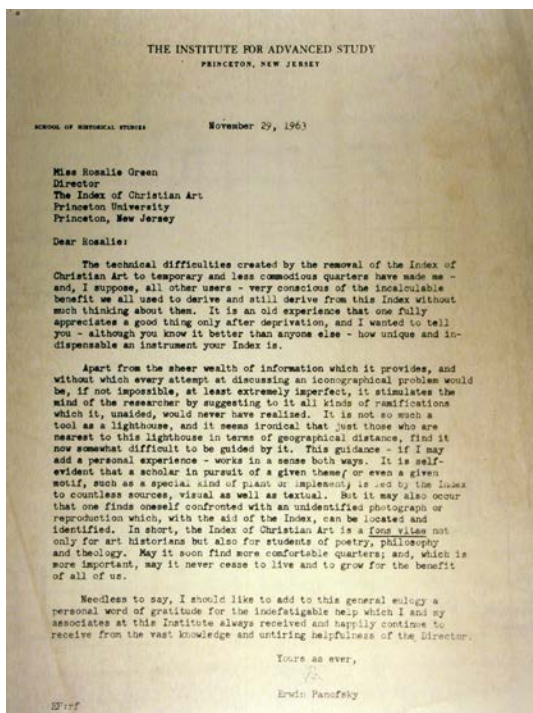


From 1951 to 1982, another Index director, Rosalie Green, significantly added to the Index's breadth of iconographic material; raising Morey's original vision again to new heights. At this time, the scope of the Index project expanded to include medieval art up to the year 1400. Green's directorship emphasized that staff actively read and source books, periodicals, and other printed or unpublished material to maintain currency in the field. As she described in an article published in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, Green said



Rosalie Green and Elizabeth Beatson working in the Index of Christian Art, circa 1980. Photograph Index of Christian Art Archives.

“our days at the Index are not filled with such pleasures as solving iconographic puzzles ... we are engaged at all times in sifting, adding, and correcting information.”⁴ Green advocated that Index work had to be constantly evaluated, checked against standards, and in that new relationships for the subject matter were forming.



Rosalie Green can be credited with recognizing the Index as the oldest program of group research at Princeton University. A twentieth-century landmark in the field of humanities, Green called the Index a “great humanistic research tool,” unparalleled in idea and realization.⁵ An archival letter preserved in the historical papers of the Index from Erwin Panofsky to Rosalie Green, written in 1963, echoes this appreciation and reminds us of the importance of such a research tool for in-person access. In the letter, Panofsky expresses his distress over the temporary removal of the Index during one of its moves. He says, “I wanted to tell you – although you know it better than anyone else – how unique and indispensable an instrument your Index is ... apart from the sheer

⁴ Green, Rosalie B. “The Index of Christian Art,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly* (March 1, 1963): 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 8.



wealth of information it provides ... it stimulates the mind of the researcher by suggesting to it all kinds of ramifications which it, unaided, would have never realized. It is not so much a tool as a lighthouse.”⁶ It has been a little over fifty years since these cogent observations endorsed the work of Indexing scholars, who worked to make their analysis of subject matter of medieval art accessible to researchers. Throughout a revolutionary period of digitization, it is evident that their steady work improved the informational value of the archive.

The Index “digest,” which was consistently “tested, questioned, corrected, amplified, and weighed,” experienced extensive data enhancement from 1991 when then scholars developed the heart of the physical file and core image collection onto a digital platform. The online database incorporated expanded templates for art history objects, manuscripts, and authority files, and added valuable layers of discoverable research to the project. The national recognition of Index subject headings as Library of Congress authorities offered a strong basis for continuing the work of detailed subject expertise in medieval art and Index efforts remain unequaled.

The Index of today contains approximately 80,000 work of art records and over 200,000 images searchable through a number of advanced and simple search options. Many of the images which have been transferred to the database in this current phase of digitization are not digitally available elsewhere. Over the past two decades, the Index welcomed significant partnerships with cultural heritage organizations, among them with the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and the Benaki Museum in Athens, which dramatically increased access to high-resolution color photographs of the collections. With increasingly versatile boundaries, the parameters of the digital Index covers some of the earliest Christian iconographic traditions through the mid-sixteenth century, or the “Long Middle Ages;” the geographical scope includes regions in Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, with some recent additions representing Ethiopia, Syria, and Armenia. The types of objects catalogued by the Index range in use and function, from liturgical and



Pierpont Morgan Library, M.1, Book cover

⁶ Typed letter signed from Erwin Panofsky to Rosalie Green dated November 29, 1963. See inset picture (p. 2) from the Index of Christian Art Archives.



luxury objects to commonplace items found in the medieval world, like garments and jewelry. Sixteen canon “Medium” categories are at the crux of Index arrangement, including manuscripts, sculpture, paintings, textiles, terra cotta, and metalwork. Notably, the historical importance placed on recording bibliography consulted by the Index quite definitively preserves a historiographic tradition of medieval art history and overall tributes the Index as a valuable commentary to bibliography; worthwhile to consult when working in the field. An increase in conference activity and series publications provided an arena for thematically-focused sounding boards and were a



Benaki Museum, GE 11840, Terra Cotta Lamp (5c, Egypt)

touchstone in the wider academic community. As well, the Index has additionally opened up access to several external databases of digitized slide collections of prominent curators and historians of medieval art.

The Index is hurtling toward the achievement of one hundred years of assembled art historical and iconographical research, all which continues to thrive in a transforming organization. Importantly, never before has the Index been required to grasp so many dimensions of research in order to serve a user base. The world of art history has expanded into an enormous amount of material. With an influx of images and information, not only has the methodology of the indexing scholar's work been greatly impacted but our researchers have high expectations of the deliverables when most often accessing remotely.

We recognize that our most important objective is to visualize the implementation of twenty-first century applications that will protect our legacy by preserving all of the existing scholarship on the current database, as well as cater to a new generation of users. In light of these current reflections, an interesting parallel begins to form between an early Index, a founder's vision, and the Index's current foothold as a hybrid physical and digital resource for art history scholarship.

This parallel was further evident with a glimpse into the Index founder's historic papers.⁷ Morey's papers are organized into four series held in over fourteen record center boxes in Princeton University Special Collections. The first series is largely notes-based consisting of his mock

⁷ Charles Rufus Morey Papers; 1900-1954 (mostly 1924-1945), Princeton University, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, C0511.



catalogues, mainly of objects in the *Museo Sacro* and *Museo Cristiano* in Rome; not surprisingly these two repositories were at the center of Morey's early endeavors and fed into much of the foundational Index research material. Secondly, and dispersed over several boxes, are miscellaneous photographic materials, composed of negatives and prints. Most are reproduced from publications or are assemblages of original shots; they vary in date but are mostly from the 1940s and 50s. This photographic material is largely unlabeled but covers Morey's trips to the Middle East and records various objects in European museum collections.

The largest portion of Morey's papers is in the form of miscellaneous teaching material created by this influential professor who lectured widely at Princeton and New York University. The evidence of Morey's enthusiastic interaction with students; his correspondence, the various lecture drafts, course notes, and other extracts of his vertical files are given uniform housing in the third and fourth series. The contents of these files are an organic, virtually "untouched" representation of a great bulk of material that Morey kept as a professor up until the year of his retirement in 1945. Serving as a cultural attaché in post-war Rome, as founding member of the *Art Bulletin*, as an active Princeton community member and diligent educator, the bulk of Morey's papers do preserve his contributions; their value is maintained in that miscellany, of a profession well packed with ideas and growth of knowledge.

Reprocessing Morey's papers as an Index staff member was an invaluable experience.⁸ This project offered me greater sense of the proportion and scope of Morey's interests which were not monolithic but covered a large number of subjects, media, figures, and continental reaches. I was encouraged to find that the beginnings of Index cataloguing methodology form a large part of this collection, spreading over various containers. This largely took the familiar form of index cards arranged in subject and authority files, various annotated photographic reprints, and the beginning of a classification scheme which would grow into the Index of Christian Art. Moreover, I found that Morey's archive, as a focused inspiration, provided the impetus to gather the necessary resources and take a huge, collective step forward in the organization's history. Morey's collected knowledge and systemization provided the foundation of the original physical card archive, which over time provided the foundation for an online database, serving subscribers since 1991, which

⁸ I am grateful to the Manuscripts Division of Princeton University Special Collections for the opportunity to reprocess the archive of Charles Rufus Morey in the Spring of 2013.



now provides Index staff with an enormous amount of amassed, digitally-housed research to steward, preserve, and reorganize for future intake.

As we consider how we meet the needs of the twenty-first century researcher, the Index must develop a broad understanding of the successes and challenges faced by art history information environments and the global community of researchers they support. They must begin to dream about the possibilities of their informational reach, much like early Indexers before them have done. This longstanding tradition of “testing, questioning, correcting, amplifying, and weighing” content has infused the digital Index with even greater potential for meeting better accessibility. We foresee that the next online version of the Index of Christian Art will implement different levels of database access. It will provide a starting point for a researcher, getting Index information out there and searchable in broad web-based information sweeps, while still offering full-subscription access, which is essential to fund our initiatives. We aim to implement a more flexible interface that responds to a researcher’s search behavior and environment depending on screen size and orientation. We are currently reviewing Getty lexical resources and other established authorities to provide better standardization and more accurate, reliable references, the backbone of any index, to our records. Importantly, revolutionary approaches have been taken to revise the hierarchy of the current taxonomy, which will better represent information on singular records.

The Index remains a vital testament to the continued need for an organized reference tool of collected information. By undertaking item-level description for individual works of art, the Index maximizes the potential for richly-researched, standardized starting points into medieval art research. With seemingly limitless digital possibilities before us, the existing rich layers of scholarship will form the fabric of a pioneering online research tool. We look forward to celebrating our centennial year with an Index redesign which will project our collective vision, a fully reconsidered, contemporary Index which is deeply rooted in an archival past. As Panofsky remarked over fifty years ago, the Index is a “lighthouse.” Indeed, it is a beacon, a guide for medieval art history research now navigating the seas of usability, accessibility, and discoverability in the twenty-first century.

Jessica Savage
Index of Christian Art