

**Cite this article:** Christina Ayson-Plank and Rihoko Ueno, "Considering Asian American Collections and Critical Cataloging," in "Critical Cataloging: Researching American Art History on Its Own Terms," ed. Tracy Stuber and Jennifer Way, *Digital Dialogues*, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2025), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.19956>.

## Considering Asian American Collections and Critical Cataloging

Christina Ayson-Plank and Rihoko Ueno

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting telework mandates offered an unexpected opportunity for the Archives of American Art to address projects that had been postponed.<sup>1</sup> In September 2020, Erin Kinhart, Head of Collections Processing and Digitization, convened the first meeting of the Subject Terms Working Group (STWG) with the goals to review existing subject terms, to research and replace outdated and problematic terms, and to update records to enhance the visibility and accessibility of collections for researchers.<sup>2</sup> The results of this critical cataloging project underscore the need for sustained cataloging efforts, especially as institutions acquire collections related to Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) artists.<sup>3</sup>

The Archives was established in 1954 as a research center of primary sources that document the history of the visual arts in the United States of America. Today, the Archives holds close to 6,500 collections comprised of more than thirty million objects of artists, scholars, and other art-world figures and institutions. In 2020, the Archives surveyed the collections and found that less than 1 percent related to AANHPI artists. Some of these collections were processed by Rihoko Ueno, an archivist and one of the authors of this article. In response to this gap, the Archives hired Dr. Christina Ayson-Plank, the Asian Pacific American Collections Specialist and this paper's coauthor. Neither of us participated in the STWG, but we will reflect on the project and on access to AANHPI-related collections.

Discoverability means making the content of archival collections easy and accessible for users to find when navigating our website. This is accomplished by enhancing our metadata, whether in the form of providing more richly detailed finding aids, writing comprehensive biographical and historical notes, or improving cataloging practices and tagging. Sometimes archives will mention the existence of "hidden treasures," which are collections that might not get much use because researchers are unaware that they exist. Discoverability is about facilitating users to find what they need more easily, and cataloging is one way we can increase access points to collections and link related collections together.

At the Archives of American Art, cataloging is integrated into the workflow of collectors and archivists. When a collection is accessioned, collectors add tags that are later supplemented by archivists during processing. We receive most of our collections as donations, and to thank our donors for their support, our priority is to make these collections accessible by processing them promptly. All repositories have a backlog of unprocessed collections; we want to minimize the amount of time between when a

collection is acquired and when it is physically processed with a finding aid posted online. Until the audit of the collection, it was hard to see what patterns, omissions, and biases existed in our practices for making collections discoverable. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Archives was not acquiring new collections, which opened an opportunity to shift our priorities from processing to updating our cataloging guidelines and creating a more controlled and concise list of subject terms.

The STWG was a reparative description and tagging project comprised of about ten members, including archivists, interns, an archives assistant, and a reference specialist.<sup>4</sup> Having a wide-ranging group of individuals with different specialties across many departments helped gain insights into the various ways in which people access the collections. For example, an archivist who physically arranges the contents of a collection and writes a finding aid might have a different perspective from a reference specialist who assists members of the public—including curators, professors, students, historians, and auction houses—and the myriad ways in which they might use Archives resources. Collectors interface closely with artists and donors, and they can anticipate the impact of a collection for the history of the visual arts in the United States. By harnessing technical, user, and content experts, the STWG sought to update the Archives' standards of cataloging by balancing theoretical and practical needs.

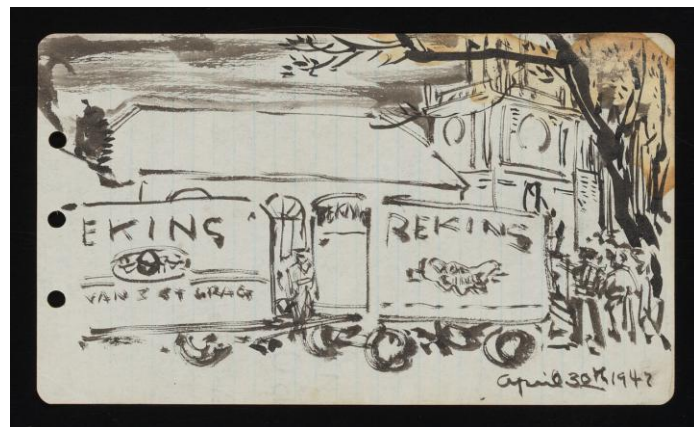
The project was based on the redescription of African American art and artist collections that was already underway by Rayna Andrews, a STWG member and archivist formerly at the Archives.<sup>5</sup> The STWG mostly focused on subjects related to underrepresented groups and underdescribed collections, such as women artists, Latino artists, Black artists, and Asian American artists, as well as war- and craft-related terms. The STWG had four phases: 1) an audit of current subject terms and collections, 2) research and consultation on subject terms, 3) tagging and redescription, and 4) training. The archivists have always cataloged collections, but the STWG would delve more deeply into cataloging practices and their standardization. This article will focus on changes made to AANHPI collections by Lewis Tio, a former archives assistant at the Archives.

Tio began by compiling a list of terms that could be relevant to AANHPI artists, cross-referencing with Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), which was considered for a controlled list of terms. Next came the collection description audit, which involved listing subject terms used for past collections. Tio also identified AANHPI collections in our holdings and supplemented this list by conducting keyword searches in ArchivesSpace, the content management system used by the Archives. As a result of this audit, the STWG found that there were hundreds of subject terms that were only applied once to a single collection instead of across multiple collections to facilitate discoverability. Furthermore, several of our subject terms were not the most updated versions recommended by LCSH, and a few AANHPI collections had no tagging identifying them as such. For example, the [Kahlil Gibran papers, circa 1945–2008](#), were previously not tagged as Asian American. Although we do not know why Kahlil Gibran's collection was not tagged, we can speculate that it was previously overlooked as an Asian American collection because of the shifting definitions of Asian America.<sup>6</sup>

The STWG met regularly to discuss changes to the Archives' subject terms. While LCSH is widely adopted by libraries and archives as a tool for cataloging, it does not always include the most up-to-date terminology, and for this reason the STWG also referenced sources

for additional subject terms, such as the [Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus](#), [Homosaurus](#), and [Densho](#), and reached out to colleagues within the Smithsonian's Asian Pacific American Center (APAC) in order to create a new list of updated terms. The AAA also has the ability to create new subject terms, if the authorized terms are insufficient or not the most current preferred terminology. Other Smithsonian museums have taken this route in the past. Notably, the National Museum of the American Indian created [reference lists](#) of controlled terminologies to describe their collections, because much of the preexisting terms at the time of the thesaurus's creation were problematic. Similarly, conversations with APAC were helpful because the center was also creating a glossary that it hoped eventually to make available online. While no system of cataloging is perfect, the STWG hoped to offset the shortcomings of using any one set of terminology exclusively and to supplement its existing lists of terms by consulting a range of different vocabularies.

Tio contacted Adriel Luis, Curator of Digital and Emerging Practice at APAC, about the most recent preferred terminology related to Asian American artists. Luis recommended [Densho](#), a nonprofit organization that uses digital tools to preserve and share the history of Japanese Americans. APAC's position on terminology coincided with Densho, which, for example, suggests the use of "incarceration" over "internment" when referencing the history of Japanese Americans in World War II. While the LCSH changed from the subject heading "Japanese Americans—Evacuation and relocation, 1942–1945" to "Japanese American—Forced removal and internment, 1942–1945" in 2021, many Asian American scholars note that two-thirds of the Japanese Americans forcibly removed were citizens and thus "incarceration" is a more appropriate term.<sup>7</sup> However, the STWG discussed discoverability in terms of how researchers might search for collections and the continued widespread use of "internment." To balance these interests, the STWG used the LCSH in collections' metadata but edited the biographical notes in finding aids to use "incarceration" and provided greater historical context. This included changes made to the [Chiura Obata papers, 1891–2000, bulk 1942–1945](#) (figs. 1–2).



Figs. 1, 2. Left: Photograph of Bekins trucks during forced removal from Berkeley, CA; above: Chiura Obata, Sketch of Bekins trucks during forced removal from Berkeley, CA, April 30, 1942. Chiura Obata papers, 1891–2000, bulk 1942–45, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

The group carefully considered any updates to the proposed vocabulary, given the tremendous diversity of the AANHPI community. They determined that collections needed to be identified with both the panethnic (Asian American) and an ethnic-specific term (Japanese American, Chinese American, and so forth). By identifying collections as "Asian American artists," they sought to address the erasure of identity when collections are underdescribed and to ensure the discoverability of artists. On the other hand, using ethnic-specific subject terms was a way to recognize the diversity of AANHPI communities. For example, the tags for the [Toshiko Takaezu papers, circa 1925–circa 2010](#), include "women artists," "Asian American artists," "women potters," and "Japanese American artists" (fig. 3). By disaggregating our tags, the STWC ensured that artists could be discovered on our website whether a researcher was searching using keywords for ethnicity, gender, or medium.

Smithsonian

Archives **OF** American Art

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Overview

Biographical Note

More Information

How To Use This Collection

Contents and Arrangement

Biographical Material, 1937–circa 2010

Correspondence, circa 1950–2010

Interviews and Documentaries, 1970–2009

Artist Files, circa 1940–2010

Organization Files, 1952–2010

Personal Business Records, 1966–2009

Studio Practice Files, circa 1956–circa 2010

Printed Material, 1949–2012

Photographic Material, circa 1925–2010

Search and Browse Collections / Toshiko Takaezu papers, circa 1925–circa 2010

**Toshiko Takaezu papers, circa 1925–circa 2010**

Takaezu, Toshiko, 1922–2011  
Ceramicist, Educator

This site provides access to the papers of Toshiko Takaezu in the Archives of American Art that were digitized in 2021, and total 27,457 images.

Funding for the processing and digitization of this collection was provided by the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation and the Alice L. Walton Foundation.

**Collection Information**

Size: 24.4 Linear feet; 12.65 Gigabytes

**Summary:** The papers of New Jersey-based ceramicist Toshiko Takaezu measure 24.4 linear feet and 12.65 gigabytes and date from circa 1925 to circa 2010. The papers document Takaezu's career as an educator and ceramicist in Hawaii and Quakertown, New Jersey, through biographical material, correspondence, interviews, documentaries, artist files, organization files, personal business records, studio practice files, printed material, and photographic material.

**Biographical/Historical Note**

Toshiko Takaezu (1922–2011) was a Japanese American ceramicist who was primarily based in Quakertown, New Jersey. Takaezu was born in Pepeekeo, Hawaii, on June 17, 1922. Her parents Shinsa and Kama Takaezu were Japanese immigrants and she was one of eleven children.

**Provenance**

The Toshiko Takaezu papers were donated by Toshiko Takaezu in 1978 and 2006, and by Don Fletcher, a friend of Takaezu's, in 2013 and 2020.

**Related Materials**

Also found in the Archives of American Art is an oral history interview with Toshiko Takaezu conducted by Gerry Williams, June 16, 2003.

**Language Note**

The collection is in English and Japanese.

**Digitization Note**

**Download Finding Aid**

A Finding Aid to the Toshiko Takaezu papers, circa 1925–circa 2010

Get Adobe Reader

**Also in the Archives**

Selected Digitized Items

**Tags**

Takaezu, Toshiko, 1922–2011

Tawney, Lenore

Grotell, Maja

Women artists

Asian American art

Asian American artists

Japanese American artists

Women potters

Women

Asian American

Craft

Lives of artists

Interviews

Sound recordings

Video recordings

Fig. 3. Screenshot of the webpage for the Toshiko Takaezu papers, showing the tags associated with this collection. Toshiko Takaezu papers, circa 1925–circa 2010, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC



Furthermore, artists and other donors of papers can also provide information about their race and gender to the collectors, who can add that to a field within the accession/intake form. Donors can also recommend art movements and organizations to be added to the accession record. This provides artists an opportunity to have a say in how they and their work are described in the Archives collection records. The STWG had many conversations weighing the different interests of researchers, artists, and staff members to establish our best practices.

As a result of this project, eighty-six AANHPI collections were identified and updated with new subject terms. The biographical and historical notes of finding aids were also edited to revise outdated terminology and supplemented to provide more detailed information about the artists. Although the STWG successfully revised many collection records and finding aids with updated controlled vocabulary, time constraints prevented the group from having the opportunity to train their colleagues to widely adopt these subject terms. After the pandemic, the AAA returned to the office in stages, with the archivists returning first since they physically handle collections that needed to be accessioned and processed. STWG, however, continued to meet online, as some of the staff continued to telework. The STWG no longer meets regularly, but its members are still implementing these changes individually. As many critical catalogers have noted, limited resources and mounting priorities often result in the postponement of cataloging work.<sup>8</sup> We bring this up not to excuse cataloging but to demystify the contemporary realities of archival labor.

When we spoke to some members of the STWG in preparation for this article, they expressed appreciation for the space to reflect on the success of the project but also the desire to revisit conversations on cataloging. Perhaps the next phase of this work is to establish quarterly meetings to discuss evolving subject terms, update our [Internal Procedures and Guidelines](#), and continue collaborating across the Smithsonian to develop updated subject terms. As the Archives acquires more collections related to AANHPI artists and art, it is imperative that cataloging efforts are sustained, because subject terms and identities are constantly evolving. In addition, the Archives is expanding its collections on Native Hawaiian, Korean American, and Chinese American artists, communities that require a new set of subject terms. AANHPI art history is an ever-expanding interdisciplinary field and one with its share of biases, as it simultaneously grapples with historical disenfranchisement from the American art canon. As Sharon Mizota powerfully says, "Taxonomy is necessarily reductive, but it is a necessary abstraction. If we do not have language to describe groups of people, particularly those who experience oppression or disenfranchisement, those people do not get represented or accounted for. When people are not represented, they have more difficulty accessing resources and getting their needs met."<sup>9</sup> Revisiting the efforts of the STWG was an opportunity to celebrate our colleagues and reminder to continue the work.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Archives of American Art is just one GLAM (gallery, library, archives, and museum) institution that embarked on critical cataloging projects during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other institutions include the Minneapolis Institute of Art, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the National Gallery of Art. Editors' note: The Smithsonian closed to the public in March 2020. Beginning that month, most personnel were working based on a telework model. Between May and August 2021, its museums reopened to the public.

<sup>2</sup> We would like to thank Erin Kinhart, Stephanie Ashley, and Jennifer Snyder for speaking to us about the STWG and other critical cataloging initiatives at the Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>3</sup> Our understanding of critical or radical cataloging is largely derived from the work of K. R. Roberto and the archivists of the Cataloging Lab, who define critical cataloging as efforts and projects to be more inclusive, transparent, and equitable by redressing controlled vocabularies and systems of organization. Drawing on the scholarship of Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, we emphasize the word "critical" to point out that a key aspect of this work is institutional and systemic change. For more information, see K. R. Roberto, "Preface: What Does 'Radical Cataloging' Mean, Anyway?" in *Radical Cataloging: Essays at the Front*, ed. K. R. Roberto (McFarland, 2008), 1–3; Violet Fox, Elissah Becknell, Tina Gross, Amy Gabbert-Montag, Charlotte Kadifa, and Jaylene Telford, *Connecting with Our Radical History in Cataloging* (Cataloging Lab, 2024), 1–21; and Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand, "Critical Archival Studies: An Introduction," *Critical Archival Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 1–8.

<sup>4</sup> The STWG included Erin Kinhart, Jennifer Neal, Lewis Tio, Stephanie Ashley, Rayna Andrews, Elizabeth Botten, Jennifer Snyder, Jess Purkis, and at least two interns.

<sup>5</sup> Rayna Andrews, "Redescribing African American Collections at the Archives of American Art," *Los Angeles Archivists Collective*, accessed February 10, 2025, <https://www.laacollective.org/work/redescribing-african-american-collections-at-the-archives-of-american-art-by-rayna-andrews>.

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 24–44.

<sup>7</sup> Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, "Incarceration," in *Keywords for Asian American Studies*, ed. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, Linda Trinh Võ, and K. Scott Wong (New York University Press, 2015), 133–38.

<sup>8</sup> Sheila Bair, "Toward a Code of Ethics for Cataloging," *Technical Services Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2009): 13–26.

<sup>9</sup> Sharon Mizota, "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Principles for Custom Taxonomies," *Journal of Digital Media Management* 12, no. 1 (2023): 46–52.