

**Cite this article:** Stefanie Hilles, "Critiquing the Catalogue: The Fine Arts (N) Range of the Library of Congress Classification System, Systemic Bias, and the Potential of Digital Technologies," 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/10.24926/24716839.19939>.

## Critiquing the Catalogue: The Fine Arts (N) Range of the Library of Congress Classification System, Systemic Bias, and the Potential of Digital Technologies

Stefanie Hilles

Research has repeatedly shown that art students have a marked preference for browsing as an information-seeking strategy,<sup>1</sup> equating the experience with "a spark."<sup>2</sup> As a library patron myself, I have often been delighted while perusing the stacks and experiencing planned serendipity when I go to retrieve one book and find others alongside it pertinent to my topic. Likewise, as an arts and humanities librarian, I impress on my students the importance of going to the shelves to get their books, so they too can experience the thrill of unanticipated discovery while finding additional sources for their research. Yet when I tell students to go to the stacks, I am sending them into a system centered in white, male, Eurocentric power structures that can thwart discovery. Library neutrality is a myth.

The Library of Congress Classification System (LCC) is used in libraries all over the world. First published in 1904, its outline consists of twenty-one broad classes, each assigned a letter of the alphabet. Classes are based on subject, like Education (L), Technology (T), and Fine Arts (N). Broad classes are then subdivided into subclasses. The LCC gives books their call numbers, puts books in order on library shelves, and ensures that like subjects are next to one another. The experience of serendipity in the stacks is, in fact, intentionally constructed. The LCC, however, is far from perfect. It reflects the biases and prejudices of the society that created it. Since the 1970s, librarians have critiqued the LCC and its subject headings (LCSH), calling attention to inequities and arguing for change.<sup>3</sup> These efforts, called critical cataloging, have become louder as libraries have sought to implement antiracist practices. One of the best-known challenges was by students at Dartmouth, who led a charge to change the subject heading "illegal aliens" to "undocumented immigrants."<sup>4</sup>

Another example I often cover with students is gendered subject headings. The LCC and LCSH assume a white male user.<sup>5</sup> "Women in architecture" and "Women architects" are subject headings, but "Men in architecture" and "Male architects" are not, indicating that, while male architects are the rule, women architects are the exception. There is a subject heading for "African American artists" but not "white American artists." There are subject headings for mentally ill women, children, and the elderly but not men.<sup>6</sup>

Like the LCC as a whole, the Fine Arts range mirrors the beliefs of society at the time it was constructed, thus privileging art made by white European men over art made by women

and people of color. One clear example is the use of the subject heading "Primitive." Although some instances, like "Religion, Primitive," were canceled in 1993, "Art, Primitive," "Sculpture, Primitive," and "Architecture, Primitive" were not terminated until 2022.<sup>7</sup> It was largely art librarians who resisted the potential change in the 1990s. They acknowledged that the term was problematic but claimed they needed a word to refer to the art made by the people of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas collectively—the places subject to European colonialism.<sup>8</sup>

Let us consider the Fine Arts subclasses. With the exceptions of Visual Arts (N) and Arts in General (NX), the primary way the Fine Arts range is classed is by medium. We have Architecture (NA); Sculpture (NB); Drawing, Design, Illustration (NC); Painting (ND); and Print Media (NE) representing the mediums historically considered to be fine art in the West. Where, then, are the craft mediums? Glass, ceramic, woodwork, textiles, and metalwork are included, but instead of being main subclasses, they are categorized under Decorative Arts (NK), under the subclass "Other arts and art industries." The fine arts are privileged, holding the highest place in the hierarchy, while craft is a subclass of a subclass, echoing the belief in fine art's superiority that started during the Renaissance and solidified in Europe's Royal Academies.

The privileging of fine art over craft in the LCC, just like its gendered categories, is not neutral. Hope Olson's work with critical cataloging, particularly her article "Patriarchal Structures of Subject Access and Subversive Techniques for Change," is helpful here. Influenced by the philosopher Jacques Derrida, Olson argues that the hierarchical structure of the LCC creates binary relationships where one element of the pair is privileged over the other—in this case, fine art over craft.<sup>9</sup> Since binaries are perceived as opposites, privileged elements of binaries become associated with other privileged elements, and unprivileged elements of binaries become associated with other unprivileged elements. Since man is the privileged element in man/woman and fine art is the privileged element in fine art/craft, man becomes linked to fine art and woman to craft. Likewise, the privileging of white in the binary white/BIPOC means that white becomes linked to fine art and BIPOC to craft. Art historians and philosophers, like Rozsika Parker and Larry Shiner, have argued that craft's lesser-than status in the Western canon is a direct result of these mediums' association with women and BIPOC artists.<sup>10</sup> Some artists, including Judy Chicago and Bisa Butler, have intentionally used traditional craft mediums to draw attention to and destabilize the hierarchy of fine art over craft in the Western canon. These efforts, however, are not reflected in the LCC, where the hierarchical structure privileges fine art over craft and, by doing so, privileges art made by white European men over art made by women and people of color, reflecting biases and prejudices pervasive in the traditional Western canon of art history.

Particularly blatant cases of bias and prejudice concern the classification of art books outside the Fine Arts range, as is the case with many books about art by Indigenous people. For example, if you were trying to find a book about the stunning jars made by the Pueblo of Acoma in New Mexico (fig. 1), running a search for the subject heading "pueblo pottery" Miami University's library catalog returns twenty-one results. Only one is found in the Fine Arts range. The others are all located in History of the Americas sections (E–F). This separation impedes browsing, especially when the art library is located apart from the main library, as it is at my institution. My library primarily houses the Fine Arts and Photography (TR) ranges.<sup>11</sup>

Last semester, a ceramics professor assigned students to come to the art library and choose a pre-1900 ceramic object from one of our books to inspire their first project. Students did not receive any library instruction before being given this task.<sup>12</sup> Instead, many asked for assistance at the circulation desk and were directed by staff to browse the ceramics section of the art library stacks. In many ways, this is an excellent approach. As mentioned above, art students have a predilection for browsing, and the subject was too broad to search for in the catalog, unless the student already had a particular area of interest.



Fig. 1. Unknown ceramist (Pueblo of Acoma), *Polychrome Jar with Rainbow, Macaw, and Floral Motifs*, 1880–90. Ceramic and pigment, 16 3/4 × 18 3/8 in. Chicago Institute of Art, Ethel T. Scarborough and Major Acquisitions funds; Gladys N. Anderson Endowment Fund, 2006.749

However, there was one huge drawback to the browsing method. In the ceramics section, the students did not come across all the books on ceramics in the art library, because many of the books on Indigenous American ceramics, for example, are not located there, making it impossible for the students to see them on the shelves and choose an Indigenous American ceramic object for their assignment. They lost the opportunity to learn about Indigenous ceramics and to share new knowledge with their classmates during critique. Planned serendipity had failed. Additionally, by not including Indigenous American ceramics in the Fine Arts range, the LCC implies that the ceramics and other creations of Indigenous Americans are not art. It also implies that Indigenous American pottery is the stuff of history, not something made by living people in the present. For example, the students did not come across the book *Storytelling Time: Native North American Art from the Collections of the University of North Dakota*, which includes both historical and contemporary art, while browsing in the art library, because it is classed in History of the Americas.<sup>13</sup>

Library materials need some kind of classification system so they can be found. Attempting to completely redo the LCC would not result in a neutral system, because neutral systems are impossible. So, what is an art librarian to do? Digital technologies could offer ways to breach the system and start deconstructing the binaries in the LCC's hierarchical structure. Olson recommends digital interventions like user tagging and

mapping additional thesauri to create more weblike structures within classification hierarchies.<sup>14</sup>

Personally, I would like to see browsing brought into the digital realm. Some libraries currently have a search function that recreates a virtual shelf, allowing users to click on a book's call number and retrieve information about the books next to it. However, this does not solve the current problem. Books on Indigenous American pottery would still be classed in History of the Americas, so they would not be found using this digital aid. One of the problems with physical books, and hierarchical structures, is that things can only exist in one place, making only so many relationships between objects possible. Digital technologies are not limited by physicality and allow for multiple relationships. Books in Indigenous American pottery could be assigned two call numbers and live, virtually, in two places. This way, books could be found in the History of the Americas, where they would remain available for students studying Indigenous American culture, and alongside ceramics in the Fine Arts range, resulting in a richer and less biased user experience when searching and browsing library materials. Admittedly, this would require a significant amount of work on the part of catalogers and, potentially, subject librarians like myself. Someone would need to decide which books require additional call numbers. Yet, with more and more libraries moving materials off site and compromising students' ability to browse library stacks, digital interventions that not only mimic the browsing experience but enhance it are needed to both counteract systemic bias and enable users to fully experience the "spark" of planned serendipity.

*Stefanie Hilles is the arts and humanities librarian at Miami University.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Derek Tonye, "A Philosophy for Falmouth," *Art Libraries Journal* 2, no. 4 (1977): 24–30; Philip Pacey, "How Art Students Use Libraries—If They Do," *Art Libraries Journal* 7, no. 1 (1982): 33–38; Joan M. Day and Elizabeth McDowell, "Information Needs and Use of Art and Design Students," *Education Libraries Bulletin* 28, no. 3 (1985): 31–41; Deirdre C. Stam, "Artists and Art Libraries," *Art Libraries Journal* 20, no. 2 (1995): 21–24; Susie Cobbledick, "The Information-Seeking Behavior of Artists: Exploratory Interviews," *Library Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (1996): 343–71; Polly Frank, "Studio Artists in the Library: An Investigation of How They Use General Academic Libraries for Their Creative Needs," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 25, no. 6 (1999): 445–55; William Hemming, "An Empirical Study of the Information-Seeking Behavior of Practicing Visual Artists," *Journal of Documentation* 65, no. 4 (2009): 68–703; Patrick Lo and Wilson Chu, "Information for Inspiration: Understanding Information-Seeking Behaviour and Library Usage of Students at the Hong Kong Design Institute," *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 46, no. 2 (2015): 101–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2015.1019604>; and Sander Münster, Christina Kamposiori, Kristina Friedrichs, and Cindy Kröber, "Image Libraries and Their Scholarly Use in the Field of Art and Architectural History," *International Journal on Digital Libraries* 19, no. 4 (2018): 367–83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00799-018-0250-1>.

<sup>2</sup> Tami Echavarria Robinson, "Unanticipated Fortuitous Information Discoveries: Serendipity in Research," *Alki* 30, no. 1 (2014): 15.

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Foskett, "Misogynists All: A Study in Critical Classification," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 15, no. 2 (1971): 117–21; and Sanford Berman, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People* (McFarland, 1993).

- 
- <sup>4</sup> After backlash by Republicans in Congress, the change from "illegal aliens" to "undocumented immigrants" was not made. "Illegal aliens" was eventually updated to "noncitizens" and "illegal immigration" in 2021.
- <sup>5</sup> Emily Drabinski, "Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction," *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 83, no. 2 (2013): 94; and Hope A. Olson, "How We Construct Subjects: A Feminist Analysis," *Library Trends* 56, no. 2 (2007): 520.
- <sup>6</sup> Hope A. Olson, "How We Construct Subjects," 520.
- <sup>7</sup> American Library Association, "Report of the Subject Analysis Committee (SAC) Ad-Hoc Subcommittee on Concepts Denoted by the Term 'Primitive,'" *Technical Services Quarterly* 2, nos. 1-2 (1984): 124; and Library of Congress, "Summary of Decisions, Editorial Meeting Number 2203," March 18, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/saco/cpsod/psd-220318.html>.
- <sup>8</sup> Timothy Shipe, "Cataloging Problems," *Art Documentation* 12, no. 2 (1993): 65.
- <sup>9</sup> Hope A. Olson, "Patriarchal Structures of Subject Access and Subversive Techniques for Change," *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 26, nos. 2-3 (2001): 1-29.
- <sup>10</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (Woman's Press, 1984); and Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).
- <sup>11</sup> The placement of photography in the Technology (T) range further indicates how the LCC mirrors societal beliefs at the time it was created, when the debate on whether photography was an art medium was still ongoing.
- <sup>12</sup> Students will receive formal library instruction as part of the class next year, in part, to address this issue.
- <sup>13</sup> Arthur F. Jones and Lucy Annis Ganje, eds., *Storytelling Time: Native North American Art from the Collections of the University of North Dakota* (Hudson Hills Press, 2010).
- <sup>14</sup> Hope A. Olson, "How We Construct Subjects."