Scholarship on Cards

*The Museum Catalogue*

**Marica Vilček  Chief Cataloguer**

People who might picture the Catalogue Division of the Registrar and Catalogue Department as a place where brochures are stacked from floor to ceiling would be surprised to know that this division neither issues nor sells catalogues. Instead, a visitor, if patient enough to locate this office in the basement of the north wing of the Museum, would find a long corridor whose walls are lined with neatly arranged file cabinets. These cabinets house about a million catalogue cards, which contain descriptions and reference information relating to almost all the objects owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Museum catalogue was started by Margaret A. Gash, a graduate of the Albany Library School, who came to the Metropolitan Museum in 1906 to keep records on works of art. This system, which in format resembles a library card catalogue, was an invaluable contribution by the Metropolitan to museum methods. Today we have one of the most extensive and comprehensive catalogues in the world.

Generally speaking, the cards for each object contain the Museum accession number, name of artist, title, country of origin, and period, along with a technical description including measurements, type of material, and condition. The cataloguers supplement this basic information with a record of ex-collections, and notes on the history of the object's execution, on its relationship to similar pieces, and on its iconography. Whenever possible, they support their findings with extensive reference to publications, exhibition catalogues, and archive documents. One set of catalogue cards, accompanied by a small record photograph, is filed in the main catalogue, and a duplicate set is sent to the relevant department. To keep the records up to date, additions and corrections to the catalogue cards are made as they become available.

What is included in catalogue cards varies with individual objects. The information available on some archaeological materials may be so scant as to warrant only a few lines on a single card, whereas for the twelfth-century Bury St. Edmunds ivory cross (recently shown in the exhibition *The Year 1200*) it fills no fewer than 121 cards.

To serve their function as a central source of data on all Museum objects, the catalogue cards must be organized in a systematic fashion. For example, to find Claude Monet’s Terrace at Sainte Adresse, one would first go to the section containing the cabinets for Western art and the series of drawers devoted to paintings. Within the subclassification Paintings, French, the cards for this work would be filed under the artist’s name.
Accessibility of information is augmented by extensive cross-indexing. Index entries include names of artists, titles, types of objects, subjects depicted, iconography, provenance, and ex-collections. The usefulness of the index is manifold. For example, works in different media by a single artist will not all be found under one category in the main catalogue. A look into the index quickly helps to locate cards for every work in the collections done by that artist. Or a scholar might want to study all works of art in the Museum representing one subject, for instance, Perseus, or to locate one type of object, such as apostle spoons. He again would turn to the subject index for a quick answer.

Over a period of years, the Catalogue Division, which originally served merely a record-keeping function, has entered into a much closer cooperation with curatorial departments. It is now staffed with nine research cataloguers, each one specializing in one or two areas of museum work. The cataloguers hold master's degrees or the equivalent in art history, and their academic qualifications for appointment are scrutinized by a curatorial committee.

The cataloguing process usually starts with a careful study of newly acquired objects in the Registrar's storeroom. The following stage involves an often tedious study of literature and archive documents. Several weeks of research may be required to locate a single pertinent source. Controversial opinions may have to be clarified in consultations with specialists from inside and outside the Museum. Only then is the accumulated information condensed into the format of catalogue cards and sent to the appropriate department for approval by a member of the curatorial staff.

The complexity of the work involved can perhaps be best appreciated from actual examples. Two different approaches are shown in the accompanying descriptions of recent projects completed by Senior Cataloguer Marian G. Harrison and by Cataloguer Johanna Hecht.

One of my major projects concerned a China-Trade plate datable to about 1760, depicting the gateway to the Oxford Botanical Gardens at Oxford, England. Research for this piece—comprising nineteen catalogue cards—took me to the New York Public Library, including the Annex, and the libraries of Columbia University.

The gateway on our plate consists of three bays separated by engaged, rusticated columns. The center bay is an open archway with a coat of arms on the keystone, and each side bay contains a statue niche. Above the bays is an inscribed frieze and a cornice. A portrait bust is in the center pediment above the gateway, and in each of three pediments are heraldic shields. I began the cataloguing with the following information: “Our plate appears to be after the engraved design by David Loggan in Oxonia Illustrata, 1675.” My examination of this engraving showed a similar architectural plan except that the statues were absent and the doorway was shown closed rather than open. From Oxonia Illustrata it was possible to identify details of the garden walk seen through the archway, and the buildings on each side, namely, the library on the left and the greenhouse on the right.
I next consulted a variety of books dealing with the general history and layout of the Oxford gardens, from which I obtained the following information:

1. The date 1631 on the frieze refers to the year in which an agreement was drawn up between the founder, Henry Danvers, Earl of Danby, and the builder, Nicholas Stone.

2. The portrait bust in the central tympanum represents Henry Danvers. The two side statues—later additions financed out of a libel fine—are of Charles I and Charles II.

3. It was not possible to blazon the heraldry from the sketchily drawn coats of arms on the plate. In some of the texts, however, I found descriptions of the gate that included identifications: (on the keystone of the center bay) Danvers quartering Neville, (in the central pediment) cartouches of royal Stuart arms and swags, (in the left pediment) St. George, (in the right pediment) Oxford University.

After my examination of the source books, I went on to determine the identity of the foreground figure by making a comparative study of people associated with the garden. One description—of the second gardener and botany professor, Jacob Bobart the elder (1596-1680)—seemed to fit. “He was famed for his long beard . . . also for his goat which accompanied him on his walks abroad.” Bobart was appointed to the post in 1632, a year that would be in keeping with the date of the gateway. My follow-up on two portraits of Bobart strengthened this identification. The first was an engraving by Michael Burghers that I was unable to locate but whose detailed description was a confirmation of the identification. The second was a small engraving of Bobart standing in front of the gateway. It appeared opposite the frontispiece to the poem Vertumnus, an epistle written in 1713 about Bobart when he was professor of botany. It was an almost exact representation—not only of the figure but of the entire scene. Here was the source for our plate—a most exciting find!

MARIAN G. HARRISON  Senior Cataloguer
This elaborately carved cabinet or beeldenkast is an outstanding example of a type of object made for the homes of wealthy Dutch burghers in the 1600s—the century of Holland's greatest commercial prosperity. As cupboards for the storage of linens or other household objects, often forming part of the dowry, beeldenkasts belonged primarily to the wife's domain; in this case the rich iconography strikes one as intended to instruct and inspire the lady of the house in the pursuit of virtues particularly prized by the seventeenth-century Dutch bourgeoisie.

After the preliminary cataloguing had been completed, the first step was to identify the subjects of the carvings. Six caryatid figures personifying the Christian Virtues flank the doors on two levels, guarding the family's belongings. Those on the upper stage represent the higher, so-called Theological Virtues, Faith, Charity, and Hope. The relief panels between them show the Judgment of Solomon, exemplifying great wisdom, and the Queen of Sheba, illustrating the proper female attitude of obeisance to the wise man.

On the lower stage is the story of Joseph, a saga dear to the hearts of the canny Dutch, depicting the triumph of acumen and prudence. The caryatids flanking the lower doors portray the Cardinal Virtues, Strength, Justice, and Prudence. Supporting them are drums carved with biblical exemplars: Samson, Judith, and King David.

During my close examination of the piece, I unexpectedly discovered an intriguing detail that had previously been overlooked: a minute, partly illegible, inscription on the open book in front of David clearly states the date 1622 as the year in which the cabinet was carved.

The next step in the cataloguing process was to trace the iconographical sources of the carvings. Since a similar beeldenkast in Amsterdam has reliefs illustrating another biblical theme, after engravings of Marten van Heemskerck, I attempted to locate some of Heemskerck's illustrations of the Joseph story in the Museum's print room. The one example I found did bear a distinct resemblance to the corresponding scene on our cabinet, but the similarity was not as marked as one would have liked. The question here was whether our carver took his own liberties with Heemskerck's prints or whether he was working from an as yet unidentified engraved variant of them.

By great good fortune, the next step, the search for comparable objects, uncovered a cabinet in a Hamburg museum catalogue bearing carvings almost identical to the ones on ours. The two sets of carvings are, in fact, closer to each other than either is to the Heemskerck print.

Uncertainty still remains as to whether this resemblance points to a common iconographical source, or to a common workshop. Resolution of this question is awaiting further investigation and evaluation of the catalogue material.

Johanna Hecht Cataloguer