Scholarship on Disks

The Museum’s Computerized Catalogue

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The catalogue is not static; together with the Registrar files it is the only centralized record of the first hundred years of scholarship about the Museum’s holdings, and it is constantly growing and changing. To keep abreast of the enormous growth of the volume, as well as to be able to offer, in time, more extensive indexing ability and other scholarly material for curators, public, and administration, the department has turned to computer technology.

In July 1969, the Registrar and Catalogue Department began automating its academic records. The first rather lengthy phase of this effort was to design a method for conversion of the existing accession and catalogue cards. This system has now been developed and is firmly established.

The “data converters,” who translate the scholarly work of the cataloguers into machine-readable form, all work part-time; they are students whose main qualifications are a resourceful intelligence, patience, enthusiasm, some typing ability, and cultural interests, or, better yet, a major in art history. There have been a number of Urban Corps interns, some of whom graduated to Museum employment when their internships ended.

The first step in conversion is “editing” the cards, that is, making light pencil notations as reminders of how data should be coded for the machine. For every unit of information about an object, an “annotation class” must be assigned. It tells the machine what type of information a unit is: 70 is the name of an artist, 32 a generic type, 48 a material or technique. After a few weeks of practice, the data converters find that most annotation classes come easily without reminders. Only the less frequently used ones require notation on the cards, and obscure units of data that can be recognized or interpreted only by a specialist in one of the varied cultures represented in our collection must be researched before an annotation class can be supplied. This is where resourcefulness comes in. Sandy Hernández and Dale Seecof, who have been working on the conversion for more than a year, have become expert at ferreting out the meanings of difficult, obscure, or foreign terms; or the modern geographic equivalents of vaguely defined, ancient cultural areas (modern equivalents are used in addition to local, ancient, or historical place names); or the dates included in a historic—or prehistoric—period to make chronological retrieval possible, even if it involves several millennia; or extrapolating from a vast number of stylistic designations the place names, periods, techniques, and materials these names often indicate.

With great care, patience, and understanding the edited data is entered on a typewriter terminal connected to a commercial time-sharing system. The terminal, thanks to its connections with a time-sharing system, has a life of its
own: it can talk back by typing out messages, and play the temperamental prima donna when there is a breakdown in the time-sharing system, in the telephone line or acoustic coupler that are the intermediary components, or in the terminal itself. It can allow entered material to be corrected and additional data to be inserted. The converter must be alert to all the terminal’s signals and symptoms: when a lack of sensitivity results in the failure to take proper corrective action, much work can be lost.

Once a quantity of data is entered, a command is given via the terminal to have an overnight print-out done at the time-sharing service installation. The print-out is proofed, and the data, still stored in the system, is corrected and then transferred to magnetic tape, all via the terminal. The tape is sent to the State University of New York at Stony Brook, where the data is processed further by computer and stored on disks in association with the Museum Computer Network data bank.

Ninety-five per cent of the “raw data” concerning 1960s accessions has been converted. It is considered raw data because not all problems have been resolved: some identifications were tentative; many photo negative numbers or measurements were missing; the person with the answer to a specific question was unavailable at the time of conversion; through the years cataloguing inconsistencies had crept in as a department changed terminology or reorganized classifications. All this raw data must now be refined, and the computer can help in this task. For instance, it can compile an index of terms from which a department can decide either to retain a varied nomenclature or discard one word in favor of another. This phase — eliminating current gaps and developing a system for continuous updating of data — has just begun.

While the complexities of computerization have been tremendous, the expected bonus will be sufficient compensation: the rich fund of scholarly work in the catalogue can be disseminated to a vastly increased audience, thus helping to fulfill the Museum’s goal of sharing its collected knowledge as well as its treasures.