GUIDELINES FOR DESCRIPTIVE TERMINOLOGY FOR WORKS OF ART ON PAPER

Philadelphia Museum of Art
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OVERVIEW

Goals

This project is intended to address the need for more accurate and consistent documentation of the materials and techniques used to create works of art on paper. No detailed guide for this currently exists. The guidelines presented here are designed to provide conservators, curators, registrars, cataloguers and others charged with describing art on paper with a step by step approach for describing all aspects of the manufacture of these works.

The project was prompted by several recurring issues: 1) how to effectively and consistently describe and communicate the materials used in works of art to other museum professionals and to the public, 2) how to facilitate the recording and subsequent use of materials information in museum collections information systems, and 3) how to refine descriptive language to contribute most effectively to the education and visual experience of the museum visitor. While these guidelines are primarily "addressed" to the conservator, they are intended to assist all professionals working in this subject area. One intended result is more accurate, and hence more meaningful, material descriptions through the use of consistent terminology, regardless of who generates and records the information. Conservators, curators and other users will bring different levels and types of knowledge and connoisseurship to the task. Therefore, an additional goal is to educate those with less experience, or perhaps less direct access to the physical works of art, in how to record information that is accurate regardless of level of detail. Media-specific "Hierarchies" or charts that provide terminology and preferred usage that progresses from the general to the specific, will serve as tools to assist in this process.

It is hoped that the impact of the project will be three-fold: 1) enhanced ability of conservators to communicate their knowledge about the materials of works of art on paper in a more accurate and consistent manner, 2) greater understanding through improved resources for allied museum professionals (cataloguers, curators, etc.), and 3) increased visual and information literacy of the museum-going public.

Identification and Characterization of Materials and Techniques

Conservators' work bridges the art historical, technical and the scientific. They use visual examination and technical analysis to identify artists' materials and methods of manufacture. They routinely examine and develop detailed descriptions for traditional, contemporary and idiosyncratic artists' materials for exhibition labels and catalogues. This information often appears in checklists and captions in print publications and online catalogues, and in exhibition wall labels and didactic panels.

To describe works of art on paper, the conservator first determines and characterizes the materials and techniques present, and then uses appropriate and consistent syntax to convey his/her observations. The result of the information gathering stage is the **Identification and Characterization of Materials and Techniques,** in which the conservator defines what he or she is seeing. This entails identifying and describing materials according to their unique and distinctive features as determined through direct observation using magnification, different angles and types of light, and occasionally chemical or

instrumental analysis. It combines knowledge of the physical characteristics of materials and techniques and the time periods in which they were used. It may involve research such as consulting comparative images (photomicrographs), timelines and other reference materials. Connoisseurship, the instinct and the critical judgment developed through a deep knowledge of these materials, is a vital component. Identification and Characterization of Materials and Techniques is addressed in Part 1 of the Guidelines.

Rules of Syntax
Once conservators have gathered the information, they need a consistent approach for assembling that information in order to achieve a degree of logical coherence and accuracy. This brings into play the **rules of syntax**, which govern the way words are combined, the structure or order of elements, punctuation and other grammatical issues. The rules of syntax may be the most important aspect of the guidelines – guiding the writer in how to record and order what he/she has deciphered in a detailed, yet economical form, typically from most to least dominant material. Syntax is addressed in Part 2 of the Guidelines.

During this project, certain resources were relied upon repeatedly and thus are not specifically referenced throughout the Guidelines. These include:
- Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT)
- CAMEO: Conservation and Art Material Encyclopedia Online http://cameo.mfa.org
- Whitney Museum of American Art in-house Collections Documentation Initiative (CDI) terminology and terminology hierarchy
- Art Institute of Chicago Italian Drawings Survey Guidelines
- Exhibition and collection catalogues from various museums (included in the bibliography)
- Other print and drawing materials encyclopedias/publications, and collections information presented on museum websites (included in the bibliography)

Information Storage and Use – Museum Collection Information Systems
Since most large institutions use a collections database that is routinely accessed by staff from many departments and who may work in several locations, this project includes identifying user groups as well as recording "levels of information." In fact, after the conservation survey of works of art on paper undertaken at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2008-2010, the complexity of these issues precipitated the formation of an internal committee at that institution to retroactively evaluate terminology and protocols devised and implemented during the survey – with consideration for interdepartmental retrieval and use of information.

The development of museum collections information systems has in many ways by-passed the once routine internal dialogue that led to a critical review of the materials and techniques used in individual works of art. That is to say, when information now is being entered into such databases, often by cataloguers not trained in materials identification, the entry takes on the appearance of authority yet may not even be the result of a formal assessment of the actual object. Technical descriptions entered into such systems are often used either out of context or without full appreciation or understanding of their nuances. For example, descriptions are often extracted from a collections database for a specific use (e.g., as an image caption in a publication) without first being vetted by curators for accuracy or consulting a conservator for close visual assessment of the object. Scrutiny of wall labels in museum exhibitions reveals the ongoing struggle of how to bring clear and accessible (and consistent), yet technically-accurate and interesting information to the viewer. A quick internet search of online museum collections catalogues exposes inconsistent descriptions and misidentified processes,

sometimes for the same object (e.g., print multiples). Even in the same print publication, descriptions often vary both in technical degree and language use. These examples highlight the pressing need for guidelines to direct how information about materials and manufacture is documented, used and understood in the broader museum context.

The "Medium" field/descriptions in collections information systems typically define(s) the physical or material aspects of a work of art, including design media (watercolor, acrylic, gold leaf), techniques and processes (collage, etching), and sometimes support (paper, board, other). To better inform an understanding of methods of manufacture, implements and manipulations of media are also traditionally included (*pen* and ink, watercolor *with scraping*). Often extracted directly from collections information systems for wall labels, websites and exhibition catalogs, such descriptions greatly inform the viewer's experience/understanding of the material work of art relative to the artist's working methods, and yet vast inconsistencies are found in the presentation of this information not only in comparisons across collections, but often within single institutions.

These guidelines are intended to guide conservators and other museum professionals in selecting terms and standardizing descriptions for drawings and prints in dedicated fields in collections databases. Guidelines for improved practices for recording changes made in information databases are also included. Additionally, these guidelines make a call for direct visual examination when describing works of art. Though it is hoped that this document will benefit all museum staff charged with describing and caring for collections of works of art, the authors cannot overemphasize the importance of involving conservators in the process of identifying and describing media and techniques for all works of art.

Levels of Description – Using Dedicated Fields in Collections Information Systems
This section addresses the recording of three levels of information describing materials and techniques. It is proposed that three levels of detail (using three different dedicated fields in collections information systems) be used to record and store descriptive information about print and drawing mediums. In addition, it is recommended that detailed information about print and drawing supports be recorded in the "support" field included in most collections database, and that changes/updates to any of this information be tracked in a concise and consistent way. The use of three distinct levels of media description allows an individual/institution to capture a range of information in designated fields in collections information systems for different purposes.

The "extended" description (Level 2) is the primary focus of these guidelines, and reflects the principal goal of describing the works of art as concisely and consistently as possible, while conveying maximum information. Ideally, such descriptions (and all descriptions) will derive from direct visual examination of a work of art and will follow the rules set forth in this document for language, syntax and order. When there is doubt (or a material cannot be discerned visually with some degree of certainty), a less detailed approach using more general terms drawn from the print and drawing hierarchies is preferred.

- Level 1: **Medium**. This is the simplest or most concise description of materials and techniques for a given work of art and may be the description displayed on the front tab of a collections information system or that appears on exhibition wall labels or a museum website. It may reflect institutional or curatorial preferences and protocols applied to the Extended Medium description (level 2 below). It may be the same as that description (contain it in its entirety) or be derived from it by the conservator, curator or cataloguer in abbreviated or slightly altered form.

- Level 2: **Extended Medium**. This description is the focus of these guidelines. It is a detailed yet concise description of the work of art, the result of a conservator's close scrutiny of an object, or of close assessment by a curator or cataloguer. As described in these guidelines (and aided by referencing the hierarchies, glossaries and lists of terms), the word choices should follow the rules of syntax and accurately characterize aspects of manufacture.

- Level 3: **Notes on Materials/Technique/Manufacture**. This description can be most comprehensive or highly detailed, and is intended to accommodate detailed observations and notes (possibly for conservation documentation or scholarly purposes). It may take the form of a more comprehensive materials & techniques characterization, or a range of observations not necessarily structured or limited by the rules of syntax given in these guidelines.

- **Paper/Support**: In TMS and other collections information systems, there are separate fields for Media and for Support.

Protocols for Entering, Updating, Changing Information. This section provides guidelines for evaluating existing descriptions from various sources such as catalogues, artist/gallery designated materials and descriptions already in a museum database. It also provides protocols for entering the descriptions into the collections information system, retaining original source information and documenting any changes made.

Guidelines project staff/authorship
Philadelphia Museum of Art:
Nancy Ash, Senior Conservator of Works of Art on Paper
Scott Homolka, Associate Conservator of Works of Art on Paper
Stephanie Lussier, Consultant and Project Conservator
Eliza Spaulding, Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Paper Conservation

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