RLG’S CULTURAL MATERIALS INITIATIVE

Karen Smith-Yoshimura
Manager, Bibliographic Initiatives
Research Libraries Group (RLG)
Email: Karen.Smith-Yoshimura@notes.rlg.org

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【Abstract】
RLG members have formed a “Cultural Materials Alliance” to develop a pool of digitized research materials and a coherent, integrated discovery service. Alliance members are identifying best practices to create and describe digital surrogates and a rights-management framework addressing institutional intellectual-property mandates. The paper outlines the issues addressed in developing this new research resource that will promote “cultural heritage” in an unprecedented way. Examples from the RLG Cultural Materials service to be released later in 2001 will illustrate the work done so far.

INTRODUCTION
Cultural materials include published and unpublished texts, images of many types, sound recordings, videos, artifacts, and other objects—rare and often unique materials that reflect and document human culture and civilization. Historians, cultural anthropologists, folklorists, archeologists, and a range of researchers in other disciplines rely on such cultural resources. These resources are dispersed among a spectrum of “memory institutions” such as libraries, archives, museums, historical societies, and other repositories. Only a small amount is currently available in electronic form. There is no existing ability to search across the significant collections housed in institutions around the world.

Teaching increasingly demands access to a large corpus of digital surrogates for cultural materials. Providing access to their cultural collections is a fundamental responsibility of custodial institutions. Digital surrogates of the materials allow remote access to users worldwide, and reduce the demand on handling the originals. In addition to the traditional demand from scholars, researchers, and educators, there is increasing demand for cultural heritage information from other sectors, such as publishers and the media, and the general Web user.

RLG is unique in its ability to partner with its over 160 member institutions in 15 countries. The membership crosses the spectrum of university libraries, national, state and public libraries, archives, art museums, historical societies, and other repositories. By consolidating the recent progress in digital collection development and metadata practices, RLG is collaborating with member institutions to:

- Develop a pooled digital resource of cultural materials that will provide electronic access to a critical mass of cultural research resources.
- Establish means to protect institutional rights and interests while sharing this collective resource broadly.
• Develop and implement the infrastructure that provides integrated, international discovery and use of these digital surrogates.

• Identify best practices and promote consistent practice in making these cultural heritage surrogates accessible.

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL POOLED ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

Libraries have been sharing information about their individual holdings for decades, using a standard machine-readable catalog record format and applying rules defining the content within those records. The online public catalog is now ubiquitous, as are “union catalogs” aggregating the holdings of multiple institutions. (The RLG Union Catalog now holds about 40 million titles.) In North America, the catalogs describe materials in all languages, including those with non-Latin scripts.

Since 1985, the Archival and Mixed Collections (AMC) format has allowed libraries, archives, and other repositories to share information about entire collections, summarizing the contents of linear or cubic feet of primary resource materials. These collection-level records provide researchers with clues to where they might best spend their time. Materials in Arabic, Cyrillic, Chinese, Hebrew, Japanese, and Korean scripts could be transcribed in these records with the original scripts. With the wide implementation of the Unicode™ Standard, access to these scripts—and many more—became available to anyone using the appropriate Web browser and fonts. An example of an AMC record in the RLG Union Catalog for Columbia University’s C.V. Starr East Asian Library’s Tiananmen collection is shown in Figure 1.

A single catalog record cannot do full justice to the richest collections of cultural materials, of course. At most it serves as a “pointer” to the physical location. Adoption of the Encoded Archival Description (EAD) has allowed cultural custodians to mark up and share detailed collection guides (or “finding aids”), some hundreds of pages long. The International Standard for Archival Description functions as a common basis for the content of archival descriptions. The EAD provides a structure and hierarchy that facilitates navigation within a guide, and allows for full text searching. Institutions can provide “electronic resource” links from the catalog record to the electronic finding aid; the online catalog or union catalog can thus serve as a pointer to individual finding aids. RLG’s Archival Resources, released in 1999, now pools over 20,000 electronic finding aids from over 100 contributors worldwide. A researcher can pull information from multiple cultural repositories at a time, and retrieve important contextual information by just reading through the guides. An example of a result set from a search for photographs of Chinatown in Archival Resources is shown in Figure 2, which retrieved finding aids from repositories in Australia, California, Connecticut, Illinois, New York, and Washington. Figures 3 and 4 show sections from a University of California at Berkeley’s finding aid. The container lists for photographs may, as in the Berkeley example, also include digital representations of the photographs with the captions.

Art museums have their own systems for describing the digital surrogates of their works of art and artifacts. The Art Museum Image Consortium (AMICO) members have built a licensed, digital library for educational use of over 65,000 surrogates of diverse forms of art, such as paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs, and decorative arts from around the world. The AMICO Library™ also covers all periods, from the ancient world to contemporary art. Accompanying descriptions of the images can be very detailed, describing both the work depicted as well as the context in which it was created. By sharing and standardizing information about their cultural collections, the AMICO Library allows users to compare images of works from multiple institutions and benefit from the supplementary information provided.

These existing pooled resources serve to provide access to part of the universe of “cultural materials”, and will continue to co-exist with other resources. The individual representations of cultural materials reside in multiple places—the owning repository, which may include digital surrogates on its own Web site—as well as in one or more aggregated collections. The search interface for each can vary widely.
WHAT MAKES RLG'S CULTURAL MATERIALS INITIATIVE DIFFERENT

RLG members have already digitized materials in their collections on a variety of subjects and in diverse formats. Many highlight strengths in their collections, unique treasures that reflect well on the holding institution, and promote pride in our cultural heritage. The resources have already been selected for their quality and research value, judged by their custodians to have contemporary or enduring value.

A subset of RLG members have joined RLG's Cultural Materials Alliance, collaborating to leverage their institutional capabilities with RLG's infrastructure and distribution to provide access to a critical mass of digitized materials. The aggregation of these digitized materials constitutes our shared heritage. As with other pooled resources, the owning institution retains complete control and intellectual property rights over their own digital surrogates. What differentiates RLG's Cultural Materials is that the resource pulls together digital surrogates from a broad range of topics and formats, taking advantage of existing library, archival, and museum documentation in whatever form they exist. It is a major challenge to provide coherent, integrated access to this large body of information in an aggregated, Web-accessible resource. The descriptive information varies widely in structure, depth, and content. Since Cultural Materials Alliance members include a diverse mixture of universities, libraries, museums, archives, and historical societies, participants have domain-specific curatorial practices, discipline-specific perspectives, and unique institutional requirements that need to be respected and supported.

To provide useful, integrated access despite differences in descriptive practices, RLG has been involved with work being done on the CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model, an object-oriented data model first published in 1998 by the International Committee for Documentation of the International Council of Museums. This framework offers an approach to integrating cultural heritage information, but source data still needs to be mapped to a common format before it can be made available in the RLG Cultural Materials service.

The goal is not only to provide access to individual surrogates, but also to present relationships among digital objects and a context that will aid further discovery. Even minimally documented collections can "borrow" descriptive detail and contextual background from other resources, creating a whole much greater than the sum of its parts. RLG's Cultural Materials service will allow users to not only find a particular object, person, place or event, but also to discover classes of related objects previously unknown. Users will be able to discover rich cross-collection links, compare and contrast digitized objects from different collections, and assemble and export groups of objects for educational or research purposes.

RLG's Cultural Materials service is currently under development, advised by experts among the RLG membership on policy, data description, surrogate formats, content development, and user interface. When the service is first released for the 2001-2002 academic year, it will likely look different from the current development system. Figure 5 shows screens from the "preview" system in April 2001, which includes a limited but representative set of collections and works, supports basic searching and display capabilities, and builds on the interface and database architecture of the production system. The figure illustrates the types of search retrieval to be supported, an initial result set of thumbnail images accompanied by brief "tombstone" text, and a more detailed view of one of the objects retrieved. For a current view of RLG Cultural Materials now available for subscription, click on the "tour" at the bottom of http://culturalmaterials.rlg.org/.

CONCLUSION

The aggregation of digitized cultural materials that RLG is developing offers unprecedented ways to share and promote our common cultural heritage. Digital surrogates of materials that have been previously inaccessible or unknown can be retrieved with surrogates of well-known national treasures and endangered originals. The Cultural Materials service will "virtually reunify" dispersed collections—and allow users to create new "virtual collections" no one has yet imagined. We are entering an exciting stage
of discovering new themes within and among cultures through our Web browsers.

References

The AMICOTM Library:
www.rlg.org/amico/index.html

Art Museum Image Consortium: www.amico.org

CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model: www.villeg.ch/musinfo/cidoc/oomodel/

Encoded Archival Description: www.loc.gov/ead


RLG Cultural Materials Initiative:
www.rlg.org/culturalres/

RLG’s Archival Resources:
www.rlg.org/art/index.html

Unicode: www.unicode.org
Figure 1 A record from the RLG Union Catalog for Columbia University's C.V. Starr East Asian Library's Tiananmen collection.

Figure 2 Some finding aids retrieved from a search in RLG's Archival Resources for photographs of Chinatown.
Figure 3 Section from a University of California at Berkeley finding aid on a collection of Chinatown photographs explaining scope and content

Figure 4 Handling of digital representations of photographs in University of California at Berkeley finding aid on a collection of Chinatown photographs
Figure 5 Screens from RLG's Cultural Materials preview system illustrating search options, a result set, and detailed view (National Library of Scotland's 1st letter of Mary, Queen of Scots)