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CATALOGING

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AN ASSET

WILLIAM WARNER BISHOP

Author R.
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CATALOGING
AS
AN ASSET

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MAY 1, 1915

BY

WILLIAM WARNER BISHOP

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CATALOGING AS AN ASSET

It may not be improper to preface this discourse by saying that the subject was assigned by the Director when he asked me to speak to you. I do not know that I should myself have chosen this topic, nor do I feel that my authority to speak on it may be unquestioned. But I am very glad to have this opportunity of a plain word on a proposition which (it would seem to most librarians) should almost go unquestioned. It may be also that I can approach it with less bias than one who is earning his daily bread by cataloging. I am earning mine (in part) by using catalogs, and have been doing so for ten years past. And as a sort of "ultimate consumer" of the cataloger's wares, I may be entitled to say what I think of his product, and of how much value I find it in my daily work.

But before we begin to talk about the relative value of the various phases of the librarian's calling, it is highly desirable that we ask ourselves just what that calling is. I take it that the ultimate goal of most of you as students of this library school is the administration in an organized way of a collection of books for the benefit of a community of some sort. It has been the distinction of this library school that it has produced administrators. If you look at that ambition carefully, you will see that it involves several elements. There is the executive side of a librarian's duties, the successful management of specialists and the adaptation of their product to the community's needs. There is the actual performance of the technical processes of library work, the strictly "professional" side. Successful librarianship is really good engineering. A civil, or mechanical, or hydraulic engineer *must* be a scientifically trained man. He must be a capable administrator. Shorn of either part of his equipment, he falls into comparative insignificance, even into failure. Just so the successful librarian is necessarily a compound of technical skill, acquaintance with technical processes, and administrative ability. The mere man of affairs seldom attains complete mastery of any profession. If he did, there would be no need for technical training in schools of any sort. The mere grubber, however faithful, in any technical pursuit seldom blossoms into a capable director of large enterprises. Library work has developed a multitude of technical processes in the last thirty years. Simultaneously it has changed from rather small to rather big undertakings, with large plants, many branches, and budgets of considerable size. In all this, of what value is a knowledge of cataloging?

Instead of attempting to answer this question dogmatically, we may perhaps find it profitable to glance hastily at some phases of what is popularly referred to in professional circles as "the library movement." Those of us whose memory goes back even a quarter of a century or who have studied at all carefully the history of libraries in the United States have seen, or noted, a good many changes. The library world has had its shifting fashions, not to say its fads of the hour. And, just as in more common matters of clothes and manners, the striking novelties are sure to attract a good deal of attention and to get themselves much advertised. In the earlier years of the public library movement, those days before the Centennial and the Library Journal, the art of cataloging and the making of catalogs in book form was much honored and much practised. In fact it stood second only to the art and practice of advantageous book-buying. You will find that even very small libraries printed rather elaborate catalogs of their books, catalogs which are now almost forgotten of the foot that passeth by. The larger institutions such as the Astor, the Boston Athenaeum, the Brooklyn Library, not to mention others, brought out catalogs which are still worthy monuments to their compilers. The earlier meetings of the Library Association, the earlier volumes of the Library Journal are full of discussions of cataloging practice. Linderfelt and Perkins and Cutter printed separate (and very diverse) codes of rules; and these are but three of a score. It is hard even for a careful student of cataloging to realize how much the practice of the art was simplified and made uniform by this very excess of discussion and effort. Classification and cataloging occupied the major part of the curriculum in the early years of training in library science. They were definite matters which could be taught, and they were controverted subjects which awakened intense partisanship.

In the early nineties it was very evident that there had come to pass a great change in the thought of librarians about their work. Up to the time of the World's Fair at Chicago in 1893 their attention had been—I think we may safely say—largely centered in the internal management of their libraries, on such matters as bookstacks and binding, cataloging and classifying, charging and registration systems. Of course I do not mean that other matters did not occupy thought and receive attention, but we may truly say that the emphasis was on the internal side. In the next few years two other matters began to forge ahead—buildings and library extension. And then followed with almost alarming rapidity a sudden expansion of the activities of the library in every external relation. First the story hour and children's work was the great discovery, then traveling libraries and commission work, then branch libraries sprang up almost like the dragon's teeth of the fable; work with schools, with clubs, with every form of social organization which could use books. Today it is legislative reference work which is the fad of the hour—destined doubtless to grow into a usefully organized branch of library work, but still unformed, and (tell it not in Gath!) perhaps a trifle self-important and cocksure of its value.

Right in the midst of all this sudden expansion in various directions came the practical realization of the dreams of theorists of an earlier day in the establishment of the Card Distribution work of the Library of Congress. The unifying and clarifying of cataloging method brought about by the long and arduous labors of the American Library Association's Committee on Catalog Rules and the creation a great central cataloging bureau at Washington mark the opening of the twentieth century in American library history. As the last fifteen years have seen the slow growth of the card stock from nothing to 675,000 titles, so the energy, the will power, the force that used to go into the production of catalog cards in each library have been (to a great degree) turned into other channels. So also has the cataloging product moved along the line of least resistance. The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh is almost the sole large American library that ventures to put out a book catalog. When you come to take account of the change that has taken place since 1900, it is little short of marvelous. Seventy-five per cent of the cards needed in the various libraries of the country are being supplied by the Library of Congress. It is not unnatural, in fact it is almost inevitable, that there should have come a lessening of interest in cataloging work, and even a dearth of catalogers.

I say this is not unnatural. But is none the less unfortunate. The successful adaptation of a manufactured product is seldom as interesting as the making itself. The remnant of books for which cards can not be had which must still be laboriously cataloged in each library is not usually the most attractive portion of the yearly accessions. The knotty problems, the intricate questions, the perpetual rendering of decisions which make cataloging an ever fresh and novel game are vanishing with each entry decided and reduced to print at Washington. Bibliography is claiming the attention of those whose bent is toward the strictly bookish side of our calling. Catalogs and catalogers are not in the forefront of library thought. In fact a certain impatience with them and their wares is to be detected in many quarters. Shallow folk are inclined to belittle the whole cataloging business. And there have not been wanting persons to sit in the seat of the scornful.

How true it is that we can not see the wood for the trees! Here we have gone on losing interest in catalogs, and before our eyes they have grown to amazing proportions. Year by year we have been adding huge numbers of books to all our libraries. We have established more and more branches. We have split up into departments within the library. We have necessarily multiplied records almost without limit. We have office catalogs, shelf lists, card indexes, public catalogs until nobody knows what will be the end. We have continued to use an instrument whose value for small collections is well established, and we have built it up until it fairly threatens to break down of its own size and weight. We have tacitly abandoned catalogs in book form. But we have not seemed to realize that all our skill and all our abilities are now needed to make our huge card catalogs workable. We shall need every bit of energy, vigor, and knowledge that we possess to adapt the card catalog to libraries in the future. Instead of releasing us from an obligation, instead of making the proper record of our books a matter of mere routine, the universal use of the printed cards demands of us librarians new zeal, new skill, and an added technique. Problems of selection, of arrangement, of display, of interpretation of the catalog are pressing hard upon us. The cataloger must be an administrator if he is to meet the needs of the future: and the administrator can not afford to be ignorant of these problems of cataloging, which must be solved.

Perhaps I may bring this home to you with more force by some consideration of the practical use of catalogs. For it is as a working tool that I would have you consider the catalog. It is not primarily a record—remember that! Libraries keep some sort of accessions record for business ends. But they make catalogs for the use of their readers. The point is vital. Unless you think of the catalog as an instrument, you lose entirely the point of view of modern cataloging practice. It is an instrument whereby one can find out—if he knows how—whether the library has a book he wants, or whether it has any books on some topic he is interested in. It may be used for scores of other purposes, but these two are the prime reasons for its existence.

Now no instrument can always be worked easily, safely and successfully by the chance comer. Herein lies much of the difficulty found in the use of card catalogs.

For who uses a card catalog? For whom is it made? This is the real *crux* of much of the current discussion of the merits—and failings—of that machine. Obviously it is not for the way-faring man: equally obviously not for the child just entering school. Clearly persons who wish to read or study some definite book or some subject are the normal users of card catalogs. For the idle or the curious browser these are the open shelves; for the fiction seeker, the finding list and more open shelves; for the child, the children's room; for the man in haste, the reference collection and its attendants. What a change from a generation ago! I remember too well my despair at searching an author catalog for "something to read" on a Saturday night in my Alma Mater's library, where were no open shelves, no circulation, no reference collection, and no lists of fiction. Is it not plain that these developments of the past twenty years have accompanied the supplanting of the old book catalog and finding list and their replacement by the card catalog? Is it not a perfectly fair statement that in the users of a card catalog there may be presumed some modicum of intelligence and a more than passing interest in some topic? I do not believe that the card catalog can ever be made so easy of operation, especially in this day of huge libraries, that every chance comer can handle it successfully without some instruction. Nor is it intended primarily for the curious or the hurried reader. It is a tool demanding some deftness in its use. More than that, for most inquiries reaching beyond the stage of the merely obvious, it is a most complicated instrument requiring great skill and long practice in the searcher.

But why is the catalog a complex and difficult instrument? Why is it not simple and easy to operate? Why should it not be so sensibly made that the way-faring man—though a fool—need not err therein? What are catalogers, anyway, that they set up rules and practices difficult for the ordinary man to follow? These and suchlike other questions are always with us. They are insistently put forward. They must be met, even in a library school.

There is just one plain and truthful answer to these questions. Catalogs are complex because people and books are complex. Catalogs are not simple, because people and books are not simple. If each book were written by one person, who never changed his name from the way it appeared on the title page of his first book; if each book were published at some plainly designated place and on a date explicitly set forth; if there were but one edition permitted; if there were no societies, clubs, universities, journals, academies, legislatures, governments issuing books; if all reprints, separates, and pre-prints could be prevented, then, and only then, might catalogs become simple—on their author side. But you all know, everybody knows, that the reverse of this is the actual state of things.

Go to your order department and scan the first truck-load you meet of books coming in. Unless you find a batch of current novels just from the press, I venture to say you will find that half the truck-load, at least, can not be cataloged "simply." Every possible variety and mode of publication will meet you in any large library. Divergent forms of surname, and of forename; governmental, institutional and society publications; serials and series; newspapers and magazines; reprints, new editions, translations, abridgments, commentaries; official and non-official reports; dissertations and programs; authors, dead a couple of thousand years, and others just beginning to write; a jumble of every possible sort of responsibility for the appearance of things in print. And somehow these must be treated with a degree of uniformity and common sense which shall make it an easy task to rush to the catalog and identify any one of them!

But what of the subject side? Can that be treated "simply?" Again apply the test of experiment. Go over your truck-load of new books. Remember that the subjects you are going to assign to them must fit in with those already given to thousands of other books now in the library. Remember also that the subject-headings assigned must strike an average between the needs of the specialist and the novice. And more, that you must keep in mind the writer's point of view as well. Is this any easy task to be turned off in a half-hour by any "sensible" person? You will find it much harder than the job of deciding who wrote the books. I repeat, the complexity of cataloging at the present day arises from the complicated and involved problems presented by the books themselves. The rules and the practice are vastly simpler than they were sixty years ago. If you don't believe me, try to apply Panizzi's Rules to the next set of books you come on, and contrast the result with that of the American Library Association's Rules.

One of the favorite arguments of certain folk who think cataloging an expensive and much over-lauded luxury of the profession is that book-sellers and auctioneers make perfectly intelligible catalogs at a very low cost. Now I have been checking and searching such catalogs for many years, and I venture to say that as a rule they are the worst made product of the cataloger's art, and that a good deal of their misleading is intentional. Their careless entries, their suppression of names, their inaccurate proof-reading render it almost impossible at times to discover the fact that you really have the book advertised. It requires a specially developed detective ability to unearth the actual book hidden beneath their frequently seductive entries. Every large library has paid dearly for the errors of the book-seller's "simple" cataloging. And every such library develops a set of assistants who can "search" the catalog for alluring items to the great benefit of the library's purse. You can not, then, do order work (and a large share of reference work) successfully unless you are particularly well versed not only in cataloging as conducted in your own library, but as it has been practiced by generations of book sellers and bibliographers.

I might go on to show that in almost every branch of library work a knowledge of cataloging is practically essential. From the moment a book is suggested for purchase until it lands in the hands of the first reader there are a number of processes to be gone through, as you of course know. Almost all of these (save the merely mechanical) call for an acquaintance with rules of entry, increasing with the size of the library and the complexity of its contents. In the other processes of administering the books added to the collection a knowledge of cataloging is equally important. But it is in reference work particularly that a thorough knowledge of cataloging counts. I can not state too strongly the need for reference workers who are trained catalogers. When I hear any one in my force begin to say "*they* do so and so" in speaking of the catalog and its makers, I despair of him. Unless his thought (and his word) is "the *rule* is so and so," he has not the root of the matter in him. Up to a certain point one may do fairly good reference work without resorting to the catalog, but that point is reached very quickly in a modern library. Perhaps you do not realize the difficulty of ascertaining that a book wanted is, or is not, in your library. It may seem an easy matter enough, requiring only a glance at a few cards. But even in a small library this is not always certain, and in a moderately large one it is always dangerous to say that a book asked for is not owned by the institution. The longer I work, the more do I respect the rule (which we rigidly enforce in the Library of Congress Reading Room*) against giving a negative answer as to our possession of a certain book. There are so many possibilities which lurk concealed in the form of the question, the intricacies of the catalog, the lack of knowledge of the searcher!

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*When this address was delivered the author was Superintendent of the Reading Room in the Library of Congress, and drew freely on his experience in illustration of the arguments advanced.

It is but seldom that you have all the elements in the problem within your control when you begin your search. If you find the book, well and good. But if you don't, the problem bristles with queries. Is the name of the author correctly spelled? Is he really the author? Is the title right? Is it possible that the book is part of a set not yet analyzed in the catalog? Has a magazine article been asked for under the impression that it is a book? Can you find a correct description of the book, (to settle a few of these doubts), in some other catalog or index? Is it a book too new to have been received and cataloged? These are but a few of the questions you must ask yourself before you dare say "*No, it isn't here.*" A reference assistant who doesn't know how to use his own and other catalogs is practically worthless.

But I do not ask you to accept this opinion without proof. Take a couple of representative inquiries received within a few weeks as illustrative of thousands. An historian working on early California history came to me recently, lamenting that we did not have a copy of a book frequently cited in works he was using as *Viage de Sutil y Mexicana añ el año de 1792. Madrid, 1802.* No entry was found under Sutil or Mexicana in our catalogs, old or new. "But," said I to myself, "Mexicana is feminine. It probably can't be even a compound Spanish name of a person. Must be a ship since this is a voyage. Let's look at the British Museum Catalog, which has a comfortable fashion of neglecting no proper names found on title pages. Sure enough! Here it is: Mexicana (Ship) see *Relacion del viage de Sutil y Mexicana*, etc. C. Valdés is given in brackets after the "Mexicana," perhaps her commander, perhaps the author. Let's look at Valdés in our cards. Here it is: "Valdés, Flores Bazán y Peón, Cayetano . . . . *See* Espinosa y Tello, José. *Relacion de Viage de Sutil*, etc. Two copies!" Now I call your attention to two facts. First, that the Library of Congress catalog had a title entry for "*Relacion de viage*," and had the title been quoted accurately the book would have been found at once. Second, in the fear of too many entries, of making the catalog too complicated, the cataloger had violated one of the plainest rules and there had not been made added entries for the names of the ships. There were five added entries without them. The result of knowing the habits of the British Museum Catalog was that the book was found in ten minutes from the time the inquiry was made.

Take another case: A Senator telephoned over that he wanted the report made by Justice Hughes on the Railway Mail Service; he didn't know when or where, but it was since he became a Justice of the Supreme Court. This proved a poser. Of course there was no entry under Hughes, nor did *Who's Who* mention in its modest account this particular service. It merely gave a *terminus a quo*, for it said he was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1910. Clearly here was a report concealed somewhere in a government document, so the Document Catalog and Supplements were put into requisition. No results; nothing under Hughes, or Railway Mail Service. But a hazy recollection that there had been a Congressional row over second class mail matter lead me to look at that subject. Still no help, but a little "See also" reference to "Postal Commission" at the end sent me to our cards under

U. S. Postal Commission. Here I found cards for the old commission of the nineties, and at the very end, an added entry referring to a message from the President to Congress, transmitting a Report of the Postmaster General which, when sent for, proved to contain the Report of the Commission on Second Class Mail Matter, headed by Mr. Justice Hughes. This took half an hour. And without a knowledge of cataloging rules (particularly those of the Documents Office) it never would have been found—unless we had telephoned over to Justice Hughes' Office and asked about it—and you couldn't do that when he was on the bench listening to argument and the Senator wanting his document at once.

It is clear enough, then, that reference librarians must know well cataloging principles and practice. But so must all workers who have to do with library records. Consider the problems presented by the need of keeping track of books scattered in the branches of a modern public library. What a complicated thing is a modern "union shelf list," a "combined catalog!" And how near we are to the day of union catalogs or "repertories" designed to show the resources of cities, or regions, perhaps of the entire country! Can you imagine anyone unversed in practical cataloging undertaking to supervise such records? I venture to predict that inside of ten years we shall have in Washington a card record of practically all the important books in that city. Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and the State of Indiana have produced printed lists of serial publications on file in their libraries. Union lists of *all* books in sharply defined fields (as books in Chinese) are even now projected—perhaps almost completed. The future is a day of co-operation, and co-operation in most cases on the common basis of one set of cataloging rules governing a supply of contributed entries. You will begin to see something of the value of those rules, of your practical work at cataloging. It is not drudgery. It is not wasted effort. In studying cataloging you have been learning the grammar of your calling, the tools of your trade, which will be taken for granted in the conduct of large enterprises, in the planning of successful librarianship.

If, then, a knowledge of cataloging is a very practical necessity for a trained librarian—though by no means his sole necessary equipment, I hasten to add, lest we fall into exaggeration—it would seem to follow naturally that the courses in that subject in library schools should prove one of the most profitable and practical parts of the curriculum. Far be it from me to criticize the manner in which instruction in cataloging is presented! But I have a feeling that the method of approach on the part of both instructors and pupils has in many cases left something to be desired. The reader's point of view and the administrative point of view have been, I venture to say, rather frequently and unfortunately neglected in the instruction. Here are codes of rules to be taught, here are certain practices, certain devices to be inculcated. The time is short and the devious ways of makers of books are legion. The minutiae and the mechanics of cataloging (which *must* be acquired!) naturally loom large in the eyes of the teacher. And on the other hand the pupil is rather apt to be impatient of so much detail, so many rules, so many exceptions, so much that is plainly drudgery. But if both keep in mind the reader and his needs, the task imposed by the very mass and variety of the books to be listed in due and orderly fashion; if the very human inquiries of the one, and the imperative demands made by the budget on the other, are never lost sight of, the study of cataloging will, I fancy, take on a fresh and perennial interest.

Again, I think I am safe in saying that most students in library schools would rather do anything else than take up cataloging on graduation. They are all for administration, for reference work, for the charge of branches or of departments. This perfectly natural. But not all the desire of the natural man, if we may trust St. Paul, are both wise and good. If I were planning for the best sort of experience as a training for later work, I would urge *most* library school students on graduation to spend a couple of years in the cataloging department of some good-sized library. I do not know anything more valuable in the way of training in accuracy, in observation, in judgment, and in general library skill than such practical work in cataloging. In my own work I should prefer graduates with such experience even to persons of the same equipment who had had a couple of years practice in reference work. And I am sure that as a foundation for later service in charge of a library the practical benefit would be very great. Persons who have been thrust into the control of libraries can seldom comprehend the real difficulties and needs of the work. They are either disposed to cut expenses to the great detriment of the service, or helplessly to allow the technical processes to remain a mystery not to be too closely looked into. But the librarian who has served his time at classifying, cataloging, or ordering books is never helpless or mystified in the face of library technique. Nor is he ignorant of its real needs and its true value.

May I be permitted a word of personal reminiscence? I was pitched into library work twenty years ago almost without warning, and wholly without technical library training, although I fancy I had fortunately seen more of the inside of libraries than most youngsters of twenty-four. I had entertained large bibliographical plans at the university, and in company with another enthusiast had combed the "Berichte" of the Berlin and Vienna Academies of Sciences for all articles on classical philology. We left the cards for these articles as a pious legacy to the Classical Seminar at Michigan. (I wonder what became of them?) Now my first task as a librarian was to catalog the whole of Von Gebhardt und Harnack's *Texte und Untersuchungen;* and precious little guidance for that job did I then find in Cutter's Rules, my sole aid. But I found out all about contents, series, monographs, translators, editors, commentators, and subject cards for the lot. I had to. It was a case of sink or swim. I don't know what sort of entries I produced, but I do know that the professors had no difficulty in finding those books. And nothing in the way of cataloging has ever seemed an impossible task to me since. Perhaps I am led to over-estimate the value of cataloging experience because I have had so much of it from the very beginning of my work as a librarian. But I covet that experience for others.

Moreover, there are certain indirect results of the study and practice of cataloging which I must at least name. The extremely difficult task of correctly describing a book or a document becomes from repetition and criticism practically a habit. The work breeds a truly accurate habit of mind, at least so far as the observation and noting of certain externals go. Likewise, a cataloger is not ordinarily at a loss in an effort to locate a book, or to identify a citation. This ability is worth much. Scores of abbreviated book titles come to us every day, and it is persons with a good knowledge of cataloging who most readily interpret them. Every librarian has to use the tools of his trade, and they are every day getting more complicated. Bibliographies of all sorts are more easily used by one who has cataloging training than by others, particularly card bibliographies. The day is coming when most library records will be on cards, and when one set of rules for entry (the cataloging rules) will govern most of these records. Finally, let no one underrate the value of the cataloger's acquaintance with reference books. Not only does he perforce learn to use them—he learns to sit in judgment on them, to adopt a critical and discriminating attitude toward them and their makers, for he uses them for his own needs, not (as does the reference worker) for the needs of others. These indirect benefits of cataloging practice are worth perhaps as much or more than the obvious training in one line of work.

There is a certain pathetic element of transitoriness and instability about the librarian's calling. His work is for the day, the hour. No visible monument is ordinarily erected by his labors. Readers come and go, are served and aided, and others surge forward the next day. Books are bought, arranged and marshalled for the needs of one generation, and the next rearranges them to meet its own wants. There is no element of permanence in a classification system, for instance. In the very nature of things there can not be, for a grouping of books which suits one time and place can not suffice for another set of readers and another view of life. But the accurate and faithful descripion of a book according to a known code does abide. Didbin's entries are as good for purposes of identification as Proctor's or Pellechet's. The item in the Boston Athenaeum Catalog is as useful as that in the A. L. A. Book List or on the Library of Congress Card. The cards written here in Albany and put in the catalog have a permanent value. Even if they are replaced by a printed entry, it is the same entry, perhaps in a trifle fuller form. In cataloging, then, there is an element of stability and permanence which carries a certain inner satisfaction that is very real. *Non omnis moriar* can be said of each cataloger's work. That at least is an asset in a world of change.

And what of the future? Are we to have practically the same sort of catalogs as in the past? Are there no signs of change? He would be a rash man who would predict, and I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. But some things are very plain even to a reference librarian who is not a cataloger. We have just begun, in America, an era of huge libraries. The average size is increasing very fast. Our large libraries are getting very large. They are being run for wide constituencies on broad lines. More and more the practical American spirit is seeking for coordination and cooperation. It is by no means certain that the card form of catalog will continue indefinitely as the chief tool of library workers. It is highly probable that selected catalogs will take the place of huge general repertories for most purposes. Dimly one can see possibilities of mechanical changes and alterations, of the use of photography, instead of printer's ink, possibilities of compression or even total change of form. Certainly our present card catalogs will require intelligent direction of the highest order to make them respond to the demands of readers, to the needs of the community. Changes such as these will require an intelligent and sympathetic oversight to insure their success. The librarians who will carry them out, who will guide and mold the development of cataloging, must perforce have been experienced and trained catalogers.

And here we come back to our beginning, to your aim as students of library science. If you are to administer libraries, you must know libraries, you must be able to work your machine, you must have practical knowledge of its parts. Nothing in the craft should be foreign to you, least of all the art of cataloging.