

## **Assignment #5: Controlled Vocabulary - Analyze**

### **Controlled Vocabulary:**

The Getty's Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT)

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### **Description:**

- **When was it created / published and by whom?**
  - The origins of the Getty's Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) date back to the late 1970s when art libraries, art journal indexing services, and museum cataloguers conveyed a need for a controlled vocabulary to establish consistency in cataloguing and a more methodical way to retrieve information. In 1983, the Getty Trust took over editorial responsibility of the AAT, succeeding the small team of library directors and architecture experts who originally began the initiative. The AAT was officially published (in print) in 1990. The AAT has been published online since 1997 and is freely accessible to any user today. It is compliant with the following standards: ISO 2788 (Monolingual Thesauri for Information Retrieval), ISO 25964 (Thesauri and Interoperability with Other Vocabularies), and ANSI/NISO Z39.19-2005 (Guidelines for the Construction, Format, and Management of Monolingual Controlled Vocabularies).
  
- **Who maintains it?**
  - The AAT is created and maintained by the Getty Vocabulary Program in the Getty Research Institute and receives technical assistance from Getty Digital. The terminology of the AAT continues to expand based on contributions from expert user communities and open resources online. Projects undertaken at the Getty Research Institute, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the J. Paul Getty Museum are also contributing bodies. Currently, the Getty Vocabulary Program is managed by a small staff of seven working out of the Getty Center in Los Angeles.
  
- **What resources / concepts does it label and describe?**
  - The AAT is used to describe art, architecture, decorative arts, material culture, and archival materials. The AAT is one of five Getty vocabularies that were created to provide terminology and other important information about objects, artists, concepts, and places important to various disciplines that specialize in art,

architecture, and other material culture. It consists of a structured vocabulary of around 125,000 terms and scope notes, and also includes sub-facet classifications.

- **What institutions / collections is it for? Which currently / historically use it?**
  - The primary users of the AAT include: "...researchers in art and art history, museums, art libraries, archives, visual resource collection catalogers, conservation specialists, archaeological projects, bibliographic projects concerned with art, and the information specialists who are dealing with the needs of these users."<sup>1</sup> Students, scholars, and general members of the public also interface with the AAT. It is used to manage art and cultural materials in museums, galleries, auction houses, art libraries, and other cultural heritage organizations that manage art collections.

### **Analysis:**

- **What use case is it best for?**
  - There are five ways in which the AAT can be used:
    - at the data entry stage, by catalogers or indexers who are describing works of art, architecture, material culture, archival materials, visual surrogates, or bibliographic materials;
    - as knowledge bases, providing information for researchers;
    - as search assistants to enhance end-user access to online resources;
    - as target for enriching free-text descriptions of cultural objects;
    - as a pivot vocabulary for coreferencing (interlinking) other art vocabularies.<sup>2</sup>
  - The ideal use-case for the AAT would be within the institutions listed in the **Description** section above.
- **What are the obvious issues with the system?**
  - The AAT was originally created in response to a need for a more specific vocabulary to improve the accuracy of art-related searches that were not being satisfied by the more generalized Library of Congress Subject Headings. Writing on the shortcomings of the AAT is limited, however it was noted that AAT doesn't contain any proper names (exp. "Notre Dame Cathedral"), only general terms (exp. "Cathedral"), so the level of detail can limit searching capabilities at times.

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<sup>1</sup> "About the AAT (Getty Research Institute)." Getty Conservation and Research Foundation Museum. The J. Paul Getty Trust, December 16, 2020. <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/aat/about.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Art & Architecture Thesaurus." Wikipedia, October 14, 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art\\_%26\\_Architecture\\_Thesaurus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_%26_Architecture_Thesaurus)

Another issue with the system, as discussed by Taylor, is the fact that the AAT was not created with the singular needs of object catalogers, but rather privileges the broader range of meaning and context.<sup>3</sup> Taylor also addresses how the specialized language the AAT uses may also pose access and retrieval barriers for researchers or users who are not knowledgeable in the primary subject areas; therefore, the AAT is not the most democratic classification system to use.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, certain areas of the AAT are more overdeveloped than others due to an imbalance of specialized and technically skilled contributors to the AAT. Indigenous or non-Western art also present a challenge to the AAT as they are typically created at the margins of dominant culture. Language exclusion may also present discoverability issues.

- **How are you likely to encounter / implement it?**

- An information professional is most likely to encounter and implement the AAT if they are working in a museum, gallery, or other cultural heritage organization. The AAT is both a faceted classification system as well as a hierarchical one. The seven facets are:
  - Associated Concepts (Hierarchy: Associated concepts)
  - Physical Attributes (Hierarchies: Attributes and Properties, Conditions and Effects, Design Elements, Color)
  - Styles and Periods (Hierarchy: Styles and Periods)
  - Agents (Hierarchies: People, Organizations)
  - Activities (Hierarchies: Disciplines, Functions, Events, Physical and Mental Activities, Processes and Techniques)
  - Materials (Hierarchy: Materials)
  - Objects (Hierarchies: Object Groupings and Systems, Object Genres, Components; Built Environment: Settlements and Landscapes, Built Complexes and Districts, Single Built Works, Open Spaces and Site Elements; Furnishings and Equipment: Furnishings, Costume, Tools and Equipment, Weapons and Ammunition, Measuring Devices, Containers, Sound Devices, Recreational Artifacts, Transportation Vehicles; Visual and Verbal Communication: Visual Works, Exchange Media, Information Forms)
- More details about the AAT facets can be found here:  
<http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/aat/about.html>

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<sup>3</sup> Bradley Taylor, "Chenhal's Nomenclature, the Art and Architecture Thesaurus, and Issues of Access in America's Artifact Collections." *Art Documentation* 15, no. 2 (1996): 22.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, "Chenhal's Nomenclature, the Art and Architecture Thesaurus, and Issues of Access in America's Artifact Collections," 22.

**Sources:**

“About the AAT (Getty Research Institute).” Getty Conservation and Research Foundation Museum. The J. Paul Getty Trust, December 16, 2020.

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Molholt, Pat and Toni Peterson. “The Role of the 'Art and Architecture Thesaurus' in Communicating About Visual Art.” *Knowledge Organization* 20, no. 1 (1993): 30-34.

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