

Curating Collections of Curiosities Using the TEI

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This paper aims to contribute to the on-going discussions of the Ontologies SIG focusing on development of the TEI for treating objects identified in historical documents (Rahtz and Eide). I propose here a case study of a large digitization project that is object-focused and poses challenges to any attempt to develop and implement a standard data structure for identifying and describing objects and the circumstances surrounding them. The project in question is “The DigitalArk,” a Web-delivered virtual museum of all known collections of rarities and curiosities in England and Scotland from 1580-1700, comprising documentary and graphical representation of up to 10,000 specimens and artifacts collected in that period, some of them surviving today in museums in England.

Collections of curiosities became a defined field of study in the late 1970's and early 1980's with the historical and theoretical groundwork laid by Krzysztof Pomian and Arthur MacGregor. The program of research described here will advance the growing body of historical work on early modern collections of rarities and curiosities by producing an extensive database of collections in Europe from 1580-1700. These collections represented the sum of early modern European knowledge and experience of the world in a time of rapid scientific and geographical expansion and reflected fundamental epistemological shifts in attitude toward curiosity, wonder, and credulity on the cusp of the modern age. Collectively, these artifacts and specimens represented the known world—the ontology of the early modern period—and informed European culture, arousing the curiosity of those who viewed them, firing the imagination of its writers, and informing the researches of the new science. In recent years, the social relations represented by this network of collections have become of special interest to social and cultural historians (Zytaruk 2011). To understand fully the impact of this central early modern practice on individual and cultural formation, writes Joanna Picciotto, “We need to be exposed to in-depth readings of contemporary catalogues, as well as contemporary descriptions of and responses to collections.” At present, the primary material for studying these collections and their cultural milieu remains scattered and difficult to access, many of them not previously identified. The virtual museum I am building collects and analyzes these materials to represent the extent and variety of the enterprise of collection in England and enable a clearer context for a comparative study of individual collections and collectors in their cultural milieu.

The aim of the DigitalArk is to contextualize collections not as accumulations of discrete objects but as nodes in a complex network of social exchange, emphasizing the categorical (likenesses between objects) and circumstantial relationships (between people, places, and time periods) resulting in a prosopography of both persons and objects (Stone). Thus, one of the objectives is to track and analyze the “life histories” (Appadurai 1986) or “biographies” (Daston 1999) of things. Drawing examples from early modern catalogues of curiosities, this paper will explore the limits of what can be expected of a TEI treatment of objects and identify ways in which related technologies (RDF and databases) might be leveraged to extend the affordances of a TEI treatment of objects and object-centred relations.

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