Subject Access to Art Works:
Issues and the CONA Example

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27 March 2011

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What is Subject?

- The subject matter of a work of art (sometimes referred to as its content)
- is the narrative, iconic, or non-objective meaning conveyed by a figurative or an abstract composition.
- It is what is depicted in and by a work of art.
- It also covers the function of an object or architecture that otherwise has no narrative content.

In CCO and CDWA it is broadly defined

“Core” information

For all objects, even those that have no “subject” in the traditional sense

What is Subject?

- Using fields specifically dedicated to subject assures that subject matter is consistently recorded and indexed in the same place using the same conventions for every object represented in the database
What is Subject?  

Quick overview

You are probably accustomed to thinking of subject in these ways:

- Representational, narrative
  - Tells a story
- Representational, not a story
  - Portraits, landscapes, still lifes, genre scenes, architectural drawings, allegories

But these may also be “subject”:

- Nonrepresentational
  - Abstract
  - Decoration
  - Function
  - Implied themes or attributes

Do repositories record subject?

Issue: One of the primary ways by which users want to retrieve information and images of art is by subject content

However, few repositories of art or of images record subject terms

How does the community overcome this problem?

We all recognize the problem; but there is no easy solution
Do repositories record subject?

Repositories of objects would be best source of current data for objects; but do they index subject content?

OCLC study in 2009
Cataloging data from 9 art museums was analyzed for compatibility to CCO and CDWA

See D-Lib Magazine for article on the project

Results of analysis show the percentages of records that have correctly included data for core CCO/CDWA fields

Most museums generally are compliant with most of the core fields
Some are missing data due to incorrect parsing (e.g., work type, role creator, which can be extrapolated and inserted globally in export)

Exception: Only one of the nine museums had subject indexing
However, subject may often be found in title or work type but how to index it as subject? Automated parsing (matched against controlled subject lists) or entered by hand as subject? Combination of auto parsing and human editing would be best solution.

Title: Modern Rome–Campo Vaccino
Joseph Mallord William Turner (English, 1775–1851)
1839
oil on canvas
36 1/8 x 48 1/4 in. (unframed), 48 1/4 x 60 3/8 x 4 3/8 (framed)
J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles, California); 2011.6

Using organizational categories for online data to extrapolate that subject = “cityscape”
Example from Getty museum Web site; JPGM is a contributor to CONA
We will try to map this category label to the controlled CCO/CDWA/CONA general subject terms to provide minimum subject access
Works in art libraries & special collections often have subject access

In this example, subject access is through the group, not item-level.

Subjects in CONA: What is CONA?

New vocabulary in development:

- Basic structure is the same as other three Getty vocabularies, AAT, ULAN, and TGN (ISO compliant for controlled vocabularies)
- Also compliant with CDWA and CCO
- Contains information about built works and movable works (e.g., paintings, drawings, sculptures, prints, furniture, etc.)
- Contributions will be accepted in late 2011 or 2012
- Editorial manuals, fields are available online
- NOTE: All system screen shots in this presentation are from the CONA internal editorial system, NOT available to the public, not published
Elements of a CONA record

**titles/names**
- Irises
- Les Iris
- Pianti di irisi
- Die Irisse
- Irysy
- Irissen

**creator**
Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853-1890)

**date**
1889

**work type**
painting

**style**
Post Impressionist

**subject**
botanical
nature
irises
regeneration
soil

**materials**
oil on canvas, applied with brush and palette knife

**measurements**
71 x 93 cm (28 x 36 5/8 inches)

**sources**

**current location**
Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles, California, United States)
creation location
Saint Rémy de Provence (Provence Alpes Côte d’Azur, France)

**notes**
This work was painted when the artist was recuperating from a severe attack of mental illness; it depicts the garden at the asylum at Saint Rémy...

**work**
800123

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**Relationship Diagram for Getty Vocabularies**

**SUBJECT**
ISO-compliant thesaurus

**MAIN TABLE**
basic record information, unique ID, parent_key, record type, descriptive/scope note, flags

**NAMES / TERMS**
multiple names, one is flagged preferred; dates for names

**Language**

**Contributors**

**Sources**

**ASSOCIATIVE RELATIONSHIPS**
links between subjects, dates

**• Equivalence relationships between terms/names that are linked to the same concept ID**

**• Hierarchical relationships between different concept IDs; each record is linked to its immediate parent**

**• Associative relationships between different concept IDs; are reciprocal**

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CONA complies with entity relationship diagram for an art work and authorities

CONA uses this same model; no full image records (only links to images)
Authorities are linked to Work and Image
Authorities are linked to each other

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CONA complies with entity relationship diagram for CCO/CDWA

Is the first Getty vocabulary to be actually linked to the others (others have controlled lists based on another vocabulary, e.g., “roles” in ULAN)

Subject fields are in the CONA work record

The subject authorities that control values in the fields come from controlled lists and from the ULAN, TGN, AAT, and Iconography Authority

General subject vs. Specific subject

General subject is drawn from a controlled list suggested in CDWA and CCO

Specific subject is controlled by authorities: ULAN, AAT, TGN, Iconography Authority

Minimum requirement for CONA is one general subject term, although a default “undetermined” is available if absolutely necessary

Obviously more subject terms would allow better retrieval on subject
### General Subject

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advertising &amp; Commercial</th>
<th>Allegory</th>
<th>Animal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apparel</td>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Botanical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartographic</td>
<td>Ceremonial Object</td>
<td>Cityscape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didactic &amp; Propaganda</td>
<td>Funerary Art</td>
<td>Genre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History &amp; Legend</td>
<td>Human Figure</td>
<td>Interior Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscape</td>
<td>Literary Theme</td>
<td>Machine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>Mixed Motif</td>
<td>Nonrepresentational Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object (Utilitarian)</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Portrait</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion and Mythology</td>
<td>Seascape</td>
<td>Still Life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Choose appropriate general subjects
- In addition, add terms to describe subject as specifically as possible

### General Depicted

- Botanical
- Cartographic
- Ceremonial Object
- Cityscape
- Didactic and Propaganda
- Funerary Art

### Specific Subject

- Ins (genus) (Iridaceae, Asparagales, Angiospermae, P)
- Regeneration (events, Events, Activities, Facet)

- General depicted subject chosen from controlled list in CONA
General Subject

May also list Indexing Type and Subject Extent, if applicable and supported by incoming data

Analyzing the subject

Three levels of analysis
(“indexing type” in CONA)
- Objective description
- Identification of named subject
- Interpretation of the meaning or theme

Loosely based on method prescribed by Erwin Panofsky
Subject: human figures
women
nudes
fruit
mask
African
Iberian
Carrer d'Avinyó (Barcelona, Spain)
brothel
prostitution

Description
Identification
Interpretation

Indexing type may be used as a systematic method for analysis, even if the three levels are not labeled.

Subject: animal
religion and mythology
literary theme
allegory
pelican
blood
feeding
Hugh of Fouilloy, De Avibus
Psalm 102:6
Holy Eucharist
Resurrection of Christ

Issue: But if you do not label indexing type, identification and interpretation, cannot distinguish a portrayal of the “Resurrection” from this allegory for the “Resurrection”?
Subjects from ULAN

- ULAN is used to record artist and repository of the CONA object
- But is also linked to Depicted Subject, in order to control names of any person or corporate body that is a subject of the work
Subjects that are historical people (vs. fictional) are controlled by ULAN

- Issue: Scope of ULAN is artists, architectural firms, repositories
- Facet for non-artists has been added in ULAN, to record patrons and sitters, etc.; had already included many patrons, rulers, etc.

Subjects from TGN

- TGN is used to record the geographic location of a work in CONA
- But is also linked to Depicted Subject, to control names of any existing or historical place depicted in the work
Boy Viewing Mount Fuji
Katsushika Hokusai, (Japanese, 1760-1849); 1839, Edo period; ink and color on silk; height: 127.0 width: 69.2 cm; Freer Sackler Museums, Smithsonian Institution; Washington (DC); Gift of Charles Lang Freer; F1898.110

- Physical features (e.g., mountains) and administrative places (e.g., cities, empires) are controlled by TGN

Subjects from AAT

- AAT is used to record the work type, materials, style, etc. of a work in CONA
- But is also linked to Depicted Subject, to control generic terms describing the subject
- AAT and all of the Getty vocabularies are thesauri; the variant terms and hierarchical links may be used in retrieval of the works
Thesaurus: A semantic network of unique concepts represented by terms – not headings

- Thesauri may be monolingual or multilingual
- Thesauri may have the following three relationships:
  - Equivalence Relationships
  - Hierarchical Relationships
  - Associative Relationships

Animal Kingdom

- Vertebrates (phylum)
- Mammalia (class)
- Carnivora (order)
- Felidae (family)
- Felis (genus)

Felis domesticus (preferred, species name)
- domestic cat (preferred, common name)

Felis silvestris (preferred, species name)
- wild cat (preferred, common name)

Felis domesticus and Felis silvestris are equivalent, while domestic cat and house cat are hierarchical relationships.

General Subject

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>General Depicted</th>
<th>Indexing Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>botanical</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Specific Subject

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Depicted Label</th>
<th>AAT ID</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Nature (philosophical concepts), Associated Concepts</td>
<td>300179372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>iris (genus) (Iridaceae, Asparagales, Angiosperms)</td>
<td>300343602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>regeneration (events, Events, Activities, Process)</td>
<td>300343606</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AAT record

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>Terms/Names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>naturur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>natura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>naturaleza</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Terms in other languages and hierarchy of "Nature" in the AAT may be used to retrieve van Gogh's Irises in CONA.
• Issue: Are required generic subject terms (i.e., non-proper names) within scope of AAT?
  • Yes. The scope of AAT allows generic terms for subject access
  • For example, physical activities

Subjects from the CONA Iconography Authority

• The CONA Iconography Authority (IA), contains names/terms and other information for iconography and other subject terminology not contained in the other linked vocabularies

• The IA includes proper names for events, religion/mythology, fictional characters, named animals, themes from literature, and fictional places

• E.g., mythological and fictional places and characters (e.g., Zeus), the names of specific events, (e.g., the American Civil War), or iconographic themes (e.g., the Adoration of the Magi)
CONA Iconography Authority is a thesaurus in structure
- Includes equivalence, hierarchical, and associative relationships
- Links to AAT, ULAN, TGN, other CONA IA records

- Includes basic searching capabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Iconography Search/Hierarchy</th>
<th>Search Text:</th>
<th>Search Type:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NORMALIZED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Iconography Id</th>
<th>Pref Term</th>
<th>Matching Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1000065</td>
<td>Xbalb500a</td>
<td>Xbalb500a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Subjects from other sources

- CONA allows references to other sources of subject, such as Iconclass or LC subject headings
- For contributors who are already using these sources for subject indexing
- These references are in the Depicted Subject of the Work record (not in the CONA IA)
Subjects in which authority?

• **Issue:** Where to place subjects that conceptually could belong to multiple vocabularies/authorities? Examples:

  • What if a place is known in literature, but exact location is unknown?
    • TGN = “lost settlement”
    • but a mythical place is in CONA Iconography Authority

  • What if a person is probably historical, but a large legend and iconography surrounds the person?
    • John the Baptist in CONA IA “Christian iconography”
    • but Herod Antipas in ULAN non-artists as a ruler
• CCO/CDWA say that a subject could go in multiple authorities; but in practice, it is easier to establish rules and enter in only one authority.
• In CONA, IA is linked to ULAN, etc., better allowing us to enter each subject only once.

Subject may be another art work in CONA:

- CONA depicted subject fields link to other CONA records
- (separately from Associative Relationships, which are also links between CONA records)
Subject for this photograph of the Eiffel Tower under construction is the built work, Eiffel Tower.
• Combine a link to the CONA record with links to AAT and other vocabularies for thorough indexing of subject

• Use Subject to record method of representation and purpose for architectural drawings

**Subject**:
architecture
San Lorenzo (Florence, Italy) (built work)
church
façade
elevation
plan

**Issue**: This façade was never constructed. Link to built work?

**Issue**: As a design drawing, link also as an Associative Relationship to the actual built work?

**Subject**:
architecture
San Lorenzo (Florence, Italy) (built work)
church
façade
elevation
plan
In this case, the painting is probably not the Subject of the drawing. The Subject of both is Madame Moitessier.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres; Study for the Dress and the Hands of Madame Moitessier; 1851; graphite on tracing paper, squared in black chalk; 13 15/16 x 6 5/8 inches; J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles, California); 91.GG.79

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres; Madame Moitessier; 1851; Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC); 1946.7.18

For non-narrative works

- Works without narrative subject content should also have subject term
- General subject term could be, for example, “architecture” or “object (utilitarian),” extrapolated from object type
• General subject may be “architecture”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>General Depicted</th>
<th>Indexing Type</th>
<th>Subject Ex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>architecture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Dedication of a church or temple may be indexed in Subject
  • E.g., “Sophia” = holy wisdom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Depicted Label</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>house (dwellings, &lt;residential structures&gt;, &lt;single bui</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is there a subject?

Subject
- object (utilitarian)

Earth
- geography
- cartography

Subject for furniture and decorative arts
- function of musical instruments, textiles, ceramics, furniture, numismatics, stained glass, tools, artifacts
- what is it “of” or “about”

Subject
- object (utilitarian)
- music
Subject for furniture and decorative arts
- function of musical instruments, textiles, ceramics, furniture, numismatics, stained glass, tools, artifacts
- what is it “of” or “about”

Subject:
- apparel
- religion and mythology
- ceremonial object
- human figure(s)
- face

Subject may include design elements, symbols of the patron

Subject:
- object (utilitarian)
- sunflower
- carpet
- acanthus leaf
- scrolls
- fruit
- Chinese porcelain
- flowers
- Sun King
- bowls
- Louis XIV (French king, 1638-1715, reigned 1643-1715)
Is there a subject?

Subject should be included even if there is no figurative or narrative content

- Nonrepresentational art

Subject:
nonrepresentational art

Subject:
- botanical
- literary theme
- herbal (reference source)
- De medicina ex animalibus by Sextus Placitus of Papyra (active ca. 370 CE)
- Stachys (genus)
- remedy

Inscriptions: Discussion of the plant betony (vetonica, genus Stachys), which, according to the text, has a wide variety of uses, including curing nightmares, sore eyes, toothaches, stomachaches, nosebleeds, and constipation.

Subject may include the content of the text in addition to the visual subject content

- Transcribe or describe the text in the Inscriptions field
Is there a subject?

- Performance art also has Subject
- Objects, props, people, function, as well as the meaning or symbolism of the performance

*Subject:
- performance
- men
- Vietnam War
- death
- remorse

How many terms are required?

- CCO / CDWA recommend local rules be established to guide cataloger in number of terms
- For CONA, one subject term is required, a general subject designation
  - although it is strongly encouraged to include specific subject terms too
- As a last resort, “undetermined” may be sometimes allowed in if no subject can be extrapolated by contributor
Specificity and Exhaustivity

What are they?

- Refers to the precision and quantity of terms applied to a particular element
- **Specificity** refers to the degree of precision or granularity used (e.g., *campanile* rather than *tower*)
- **Exhaustivity** refers to the degree of depth and breadth that the cataloger uses, often expressed by using a larger number of index terms or a more detailed description
- The greater the level of specificity and exhaustivity in catalog records, the more valuable the records will be
- However, practical considerations often limit this
- Cataloging institutions should establish local rules and guidelines regarding the levels of specificity and exhaustivity
- Issue: Is it useful to index every item in the scene? If not, where do you draw the limit?

---

Cater your approach

- to the characteristics of the collection
- available human resources, time, available technology
- and the needs of end-users in retrieval
- accommodate expert and non-expert alike

**Subject:** •apparel •animals
- squirrels (animals) •tree •branches
- cages • Usgwinni mor • nature
- dreams • creation myth •Tree of Life (Baluwala legend, Kuna culture iconography) •Olouaipipilele • Sun-God •tree • cutting down (felling)
Specificity and Exhaustivity

Establish rules regarding the number of terms to assign and method of analyzing:

- description - identification - interpretation
- major elements to minor ones, etc.
- foreground to background, top to bottom

Subject: •apparel •animal
- squirrels (animals) •tree •branches
- cages • Usgwinni mor • nature
- dreams • creation myth •Tree of Life (Baluwala legend, Kuna culture iconography) •Olouaipipilele • Sun-God •tree • cutting down (felling)

Subject of a Group

Subject: •architecture
- views • Paris (France)
- International Exposition of 1889 (Paris, France) •Versailles Palace (Versailles, France) •Parc de Saint-Cloud (Paris, France) •Parc du Champ de Mars (Paris, France) • travel

For a collection or group: Either record subjects of all or the most important works in the group. Or record general subjects, with individual works indexed in separate item-level Work records.
Multiple Subjects

May distinguish Extent of multiple subjects on one work

**Extent: overall**
- *Subject* • religion and mythology • object (utilitarian) • ceremonial object • human figure(s)

**Extent: side A**
- *Subject* • Athena Promachos (Greek iconography) • women • men

**Extent: side B**
- *Subject* • Nike • victor • competition • women • prize

What if subject is unknown or uncertain?

- As with all indexing, better to be accurate and broad than incorrect and specific
- May index multiple subjects if scholarly opinion is divided
- If authoritative opinion on the subject content has changed over time, list current and historical to allow retrieval
**Record Type:** item  
**Class:** prints and drawings  
**Work Type:** print  
**Title:** Pomegranate with Blue Morpho Butterflies  
**Creator:** Maria Sibylla Merian  
**Creation Date:** ca. 1705  
**Materials:** watercolor and gum arabic over partial transfer print on vellum  
**Dimensions:** 14 5.8 x 11 7/8 inches (37.2 x 30.2 cm)  
**Subject:**  
- animal  
- botanical  
- pomegranate (Punica granatum)  
- Blue Morpho (Morpho menelaus)  
- Banded Sphinx Moth (Eumorph fasciatus)  

**Description:** Pomegranate with Blue Morpho Butterflies and Banded Sphinx Moth Caterpillar (Punica granatum with Morpho menelaus and Eumorph fasciatus).  

**Relationship Type:** part of  
**Related Work:** The Insects of Suriname (plate 0)  
**Current Location:** The Royal Collection (London, England), copyright 2011 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II  

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**Uncertain Subjects**  

**Subject:**  
- religion and mythology  
- human figure(s)  
- bodhisattva  
- Avalokiteshvara  
- Maitreya  
- compassion  

**Bodhisattva, probably Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin), Northern Qi dynasty (550–577), ca. 550–560.** Shanxi Province, China. Sandstone with pigments; height 13 3/4 ft. (419.1 cm); Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York); The Sackler Fund, 1965 (65.29.4).  

- Where subject is uncertain due to scholarly debate, list multiple possibilities (Avalokiteshvara or Maitreya)  
- Use Descriptive Note field to explain the controversy  

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*Do not guess  
Broad and accurate is better than specific but incorrect  
e.g., “butterfly” is better than incorrectly labeling it “Blue Morpho”*
A work may have former subject designations

Index all

Subject:
portrait
Francesco Guardi (Italian nobleman, born 1514)
Cosimo I de' Medici (Grand duke of Tuscany and patron of the arts, 1519-1574)
halberdier
nobleman

Subject: • still life • allegory
• flowers • medallion • death • bird • nest
• eggs • Constitution of 1791 • French Revolution • French monarchy • French National Assembly • Roman Senate • Hadrian • Louis XVI (French king)
• failure • ending
How to index subject of the work at hand

Subject of the work at hand (vs. subject as a topic as represented in the Iconography Authority)

Issue: In the Work record, do you need to include specific topics related to the subject, if those specific topics are already part of the authority record?

Recommendation: Yes. For the work at hand, index those aspects of the subject that are apparent or important. Particularly where those terms represent aspects of the subject that are unusual or particular for the work at hand.

Issue: Not all aspects of a subject topic are necessarily portrayed in every work having that subject. E.g., Adoration of the Magi, cast of characters, animals, allegorical themes.
• Are the three ages of man portrayed in this work? **Yes**
• Are the three races of man portrayed? **No**

Other important iconography:
* Jerusalem = Siena;
* Journey of the Magi
* kings = astrologers with Phrygian caps;
* unbeliever rustic groom contrasted with believers Magi and retinue

Benvenuto di Giovanni; Sienese, 1436 - before 1517; The Adoration of the Magi, c. 1470/1475; tempera on panel, 182 x 137 cm (71 5/8 x 53 15/16 in.) ; Andrew W. Mellon Collection; 1937.1.10

• This later painting has both three ages of man and the three races of man
• This one also has both three ages of man and the three races of man

• Structure of the stable (new Church) built upon ancient ruins (the old order, Pagans)

• Notably no animals, no other elements of the story other than the figures

• Close-up view is mimicking a Roman relief
• This one has Adoration and Journey of Magi
• Animals not just ox, ass, horses, and camels, but a peacock (symbol of eternal life via incorruptable flesh)

Balthazar, Gaspar, Melchior are characters in Western art, but not in all art

Syrian Christians’ names for the Magi are Larvandad, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdas

In brief:
• If you know it, include it
• But do not index subject data unless you have authoritative sources for the info
• Better to be general and correct than specific and incorrect
Subject of the Image (Visual Surrogate)

**Issue:** Image subject may be different than subject of the work

**Index image in View Subject**

Subject:
- religion and mythology
- human figure(s)
- Krishna Subduing Kaliya
- lake
- snake demon
- Krishna
- Kaliya
- Nagapatnis
- Vrndavana
- Bhagavata Purana
- salvation

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**Image subject may be different than subject of the work**

Index image in View Subject

**Is Image record linked to Work record? This may influence indexing of image subject**

Subject:
- religion and mythology
- human figure(s)
- Balarama
- despair
- Vrndavana

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Detail of Krishna Subduing Kaliya