



HISTORY OF OBJECT ID

Part I of this series: The crusade to curb the theft of art, antiques, cultural artifacts and antiquities



By Anayat Durrani

Beginning in 1993, the J. Paul Getty Trust began putting into motion what would become known as the Object ID project, an international standard for describing art, antiques and antiquities. The new standard, launched in 1997, was developed through collaboration with police forces, customs agencies, museums, the art trade, appraisers, and the insurance industry.

“The vision of the Getty Information Institute (GII) was to promote communication and access across arts and humanities, cultural heritage, museum, and visual collections,” Eleanor Fink, former Director of the GII, told Fine Art Registry™ (FAR®). Ms. Fink now serves as a senior

cultural heritage specialist in the World Bank in Washington, DC.

“We developed some of the key data standards or building blocks for creating, managing, and accessing information. You could say we played a catalytic role in shaping an information infrastructure that would make it easier to connect across different repositories of information.”

Ms. Fink said they often brought together different organizations and different stakeholders for the first time to discuss issues of common interest. One of these common interests, she would discover, was Object ID. She described Object ID as a data standard that was “meant to help in rapidly reporting a theft.” Ms. Fink, who is credited

with conceiving and launching Object ID, said the idea came to her during a visit with the FBI/Interpol in Washington, DC. While there, she said they had just received news that artwork had been stolen in the Netherlands. When she asked what steps they would take, they explained they would translate the record and then re-enter the information into their database.

“Soon I learned that international police in each country had their own database and these databases were not compatible and could not transmit information from one to another! I thought this observation ironic in the age of computing. The thief could transport a stolen object across a border faster than the

information could be transmitted. There was no envelope, no data standard for reporting a stolen work of art.”

She added that each museum also had their own formats and data records and that often the information they collected was for research and scholarly purposes. Furthermore, she said the technical words and terms in use were foreign to a customs official if they were to attempt to determine whether an object in the trunk of a car might be a reported stolen object.

Ms. Fink explained that since she had already conceived and successfully launched Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA), she felt she could build on the methodology used as well as reach consensus on a core data standard for uniquely identifying an art object.

“Such a standard could be the structure for reporting looted or stolen works of art. It would use simple language that the police or a customs official or non-art specialist could understand. I began talking to various organizations about the idea to see if there would be mutual interest and if I could light a fire to encourage these organizations to work together to address the need for such a standard in order to do something about the illicit traffic of cultural property.”



Birth of Object ID

In July 1993 Fink organized a meeting in Paris to discuss and address the establishment of an international collaborative project to define documentation standards for identifying cultural objects. The meeting drew representatives of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (now the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), the Council of Europe, the International Council of Museums, Interpol, UNESCO, and the U.S. Information Agency.

“I pointed out that the looting and theft of cultural property was too large for any single organization to correct it and we needed to work together. As a result we agreed to work together and do it,” says Ms. Fink. “Now we needed to create the core data standard. At this point I hired Robin Thornes to lead the development of the core standard.”

To develop the standard the Institute worked with six sectors in the art community: the cultural heritage organizations (including museums, national inventories, and archaeological organizations), law-enforcement agencies, customs agencies, the art trade, appraisers,

and the insurance industry.

Beginning in July 1994, the contents of the standard were identified by a combination of background research, interviews, and by major international questionnaire surveys. The survey received responses from organizations in 43 countries, as well as many major museums and galleries, heritage documentation centers, Interpol, and several national law-enforcement agencies. The survey also noted existing standards and standards-making initiatives in the museum world.

The findings of the surveys were published in July 1995, *Protecting Cultural Objects in the Global Information Society: The Making of Object ID* authored by Thornes, who coordinated the project for the Institute. The findings showed that there was close agreement on the information required to describe objects for purposes of identification. The project then surveyed the information needs of the other key communities, specifically the art trade; appraisers of personal property; art insurance specialists; and customs agencies. As a result, over 1,000 responses were received from organizations in 84 countries. From this was developed the Object ID checklist.

A series of roundtable meetings were then assembled to discuss the findings of the surveys. The meetings drew experts from the

communities involved. The first roundtable meeting consisted of conservation specialists and was held in Washington, D.C., in August 1994. This marked the first meeting of an international Conservation Specialists Working Group organized jointly by the Getty Information Institute and the Getty Conservation Institute. Then a roundtable meeting of museum documentation

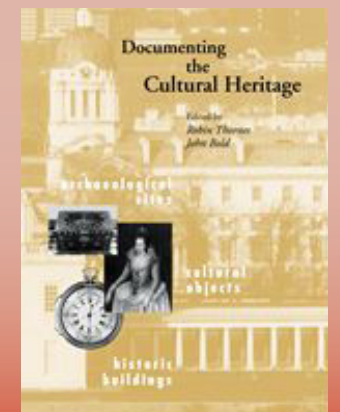
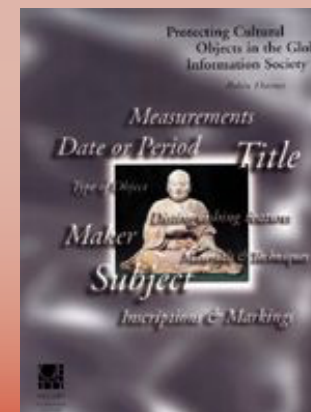
that operate computerized art theft databases, held in Prague in November 1996. It was organized in partnership with UNESCO and the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic.

The surveys and the meetings determined that there was strong agreement on the categories of information that should constitute the standard. This resulted in the creation of the Object ID

In 1997, Eleanor Fink organized and headed an international conference in Amsterdam to introduce Object ID. As a result, Object ID was launched.

See the full checklist at www.object-id.com

Part II will discuss “What happened to Object ID”?



Publications available from the Object ID website

experts followed and was held in Edinburgh in November 1995. The third meeting involved art-insurance specialists and took place at Lloyd's of London in March 1996. The fourth meeting consisted of organizations representing dealers and appraisers of art, antiques, and antiquities and was held at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware. The final meeting was for representatives of law-enforcement agencies and commercial organizations

checklist. The Object ID checklist is a document in a checklist format:

- 1. Take Photographs**
- 2. Answer these questions:** (questions about type of object, materials and techniques, measurements, inscriptions and markings, distinguishing features, title, subject, date or period, and maker)
- 3. Write a short description**
- 4. Keep it secure**