

Ann Kardos

Using art to talk and think about metadata

An experiment

Metadata is not often seen as creative work. I think many metadata librarians, myself included, struggle to describe our work in a way that is meaningful and understandable to our colleagues. We can quantify it, and numbers are meaningful to administrators and budget-crunchers. But it's difficult to imbue numbers with passion, significance, or true understanding of what metadata work supports in a library. If my colleagues don't understand metadata work because it is not visible or obvious, I wanted to find a way to communicate about what I do visually, and I wanted to think differently about my approach to my work as well.

I'm an artist with an undergraduate degree in screenwriting and video production. I also paint, embroider, draw, and take photographs. I'm not a linear thinker at all. I do not follow instructions.

When I got my library science degree, it was to be a museum librarian. I did that for a little while, but eventually transitioned my career to doing academic metadata. Even now I wonder how I ended up spending my days production cataloging, batch fixing bytes of metadata and applying (or writing) rules and standards. I've been trying to see my work from a different angle, and I remembered scientists who were also artists. Maria Sibylla Merian was a naturalist who observed the life cycles of insects. She published books of her beautiful detailed plates and engravings from live insects.¹ Santiago Ramón y Cajal won a Nobel Prize for his work studying the brain, but he was also an aspiring artist who made incredible drawings depicting what he saw when studying brain sections under the microscope.² Art evokes an emotional response or bond to a topic that a chart or rule or standard can't replicate.

I believe you can use art to help someone more fully engage with science and data topics. Using this idea as my theory, I set out to engage other metadata librarians in an artistic endeavor to explain our work. I posted a call out on three metadata and cataloging listservs in the summer of 2021. I was specifically seeking metadata creators who embroider, and I was surprised to receive a great response. I asked contributors to examine their stories and



"This is My Job," embroidered by Ann Kardos.

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The Unseen Labor exhibit was first held at UMass Amherst in the Science and Engineering Library, January–May 2022.

experiences of unseen labor in our work, and to stitch it on a piece of fabric no larger than 15 x 15 inches. The stitched pieces submitted to the project would then be put on display in the Science and Engineering Library at University of Massachusetts-Amherst during the Spring 2022 semester.

Ultimately, my goal was that this project would serve as an educational tool for metadata outreach, and I accomplished this goal pretty quickly! After the exhibit went up, I began to receive emails from students who told me they learned something about metadata and its function in a library. I even did two informational interviews with students who wanted to know more about my work and if it could be a career option for them. I was encouraged to find out that students were paying attention to the exhibit and learned about work being done for them behind the scenes in their library.

I also had surprising conversations with non-metadata colleagues who saw the exhibit and told me it was meaningful to them. Many have been surprised by how emotional some of the pieces are. I've been told that they didn't expect us to have so much creativity in our work, which I'm trying not to be offended by, but it might mean that as metadata librarians and catalogers, we haven't been talking about our work in ways that other people can understand. In my mind, a cataloger's judgment is a bit like art because it's the thing that gives us true personal connection to the piece we're cataloging. But as cataloger's judgment is invisible, it's not something that can be shown to someone who doesn't work with metadata. The

art that metadata professionals created for the project succeeded in creating an emotional connection to metadata work.

Aside from teaching others about the unseen labor of cataloging and metadata, this project also allowed me to explore the idea that art is an innovation tool that helps people imagine, problem-solve, and experiment. I think this is something that metadata librarians don't often focus on in their work. Personally, my creativity is what helps me analyze a workflow and see all the moving parts and pieces. I break things apart in my mind and sprawl them about like a yard sale. When I make art, I can think differently about the things I'm making my art about. Likewise, contributors have told me that this project influenced how they think about their own work. It has been an empowering experience for many of them, and they have used their art to reexamine their work or to talk about metadata and cataloging at their own libraries.

The exhibit was on display at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst from January to May 2022, and a companion online exhibition catalogue is available³ The response to the project has been something I never could have imagined. Other libraries wanted to host the exhibit. It was displayed at the Memorial University of Newfoundland in December 2022, went to Minnesota State University-Mankato, during spring 2023, and is current at California State University-Fresno, through June 2024. The project includes 37 pieces of embroidery and cross stitch made by cataloging and metadata professionals from 19 states, 1 from Canada, and 1 from the United Kingdom. Each piece tells a story about metadata or the workers who create it. The exhibit has truly taken on a life of its own. It continues to show others about the creativity in metadata work and supports the growth and innovation of our contributors in their own libraries.

Notes

1. "Maria Sibylla Merian," Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, September 8, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Sibylla_Merian.

2. Susanna Martinez-Conde, "Santiago Ramón y Cajal, the Young Artist Who Grew up to Invent Neuroscience," *Scientific American*, March 30, 2018. <https://blogs.scientific-american.com/illusion-chasers/santiago-ramon-y-cajal-the-young-artist-who-grew-up-to-invent-neuroscience/>.

3. Ann Kardos, *Unseen Labor* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries: 2022), <https://doi.org/10.7275/qg36-rn69>.