

The Canon No Longer Applies: How the Fine Arts (N) Range of the Library of Congress Classification System Perpetuates Bias by Privileging Fine Art Over Craft

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Neutrality is one of the founding principles of library classification; however, systems reflect the biases of the societies that created them. Many articles have been written on bias in the Library of Congress Classification System (LCC) and its subject headings (LCSH). But how is bias evident in the Fine Arts (N) range?

One answer to this question lays in the writings of Hope A. Olson who argues that systems like LCC are inherently prejudiced because of their use of universality, which results in hierarchical relationships and Derridean binaries. This is problematic because library classification, according to Olson, functions as a third-space, a place where meaning is created.

Reading the Fine Arts range through Olson's work reveals a system that perpetuates bias by reconstructing the western canon of art history through its privileging of fine art over craft. While each of the fine arts are given their own subclasses, craft mediums are located under one subclass, Decorative Arts (NK), giving them a lesser than status. Artists and art historians have argued that the valuing of fine art over craft in the western canon, something clearly seen in LCC, is a consequence of patriarchal and colonialist power systems.

Introduction

Since the early 1970s, numerous studies have been written on the biases inherent in the Library of Congress Classification System (LCC) and its subject headings (LCSH).¹ Initially, bias in the language of these systems received much of the attention in the literature.² However, since the late 1990s, critiques of biases in the systems themselves have become more common, likely due to the seminal work of Hope A. Olson in the field of Knowledge Organization (KO). Influenced by poststructuralism, deconstruction, feminism, and postcolonialism, Olson's work goes beyond critiquing the language of classification. Instead, she views bias in classification holistically and critiques the systems themselves rather than the language of their parts while also advocating for interventions that destabilize their power. By virtue of these postmodern methodologies, Olson argues that neutral, universal systems are impossible because universal truth itself is a myth. Systems embody the biases and beliefs of the people and societies that constructed them.³

Many of Olson's writings center on close readings of Charles Cutter, whose *Expansive Classification System* and *Rules for a printed dictionary catalog* were influential on LCC, and Melvil Dewey, who created Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC). Through her deconstruction of these texts, Olson identifies three reasons

1. Hope A. Olson and Rose Schlegl, 'Standardization, objectivity, and user focus: a meta-analysis of subject access critiques,' *Cataloging and classification quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2001): 61–80, https://doi.org/10.1300/J104v32n02_06; Monika Kirkland and Pauline Cochrane, 'Critical views of LCSH – Library of Congress Subject Headings a bibliometric essay,' *Cataloging and classification quarterly* 1, no. 2/3 (1982): 71–93, https://doi.org/10.1300/j104v01n02_04; Steven Blake Shubert, 'Critical views of LCSH – ten years later: a bibliographic essay,' *Cataloging and classification quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1992): 37–97, https://doi.org/10.1300/j104v15n02_04; Karen S. Fischer, 'Critical views of LCSH, 1990–2001: the third bibliographic essay,' *Cataloging and classification quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2005): 63–109, https://doi.org/10.1300/j104v41n01_05.

that the structures of these systems are intrinsically biased: universality,⁴ hierarchies,⁵ and binary relationships.⁶ These tenets are intertwined. Universality leads to hierarchies and hierarchies create binary relationships.

When applied to the Fine Arts range of LCC, Olson's feminist poststructuralist theories about universality, hierarchy, and binary relationships reveal a system that privileges fine art over craft and reconstructs the traditional western canon of art history. By doing so, the Fine Arts range perpetuates bias against BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and women artists. The privileging of fine art over craft was commonplace when LCC was first created; however, since Linda Nochlin asked, 'Why have there been no great women artists?' in 1971,⁷ artists and art historians have deconstructed fine art's dominance in the discipline. While the canon is still taught, especially in introductory art history survey courses in the west, it is done with the awareness that it is a biased narrative. Despite these changes in art as a discipline, the Fine Arts range not only reflects but recreates an outmoded way of interpreting art and its histories.

Universality

In her article, 'The power to name: representation in library catalogs,' Olson performs a feminist poststructuralist analysis on how Cutter's *Rules for a dictionary catalog* assumes a universal language, or controlled vocabulary, is necessary and beneficial to classification systems. For Cutter, a universal language is essential for 'the convivence of the public'⁸ and results in economy and logic, as well as ease of use.⁹ Olson argues that a universal language based on the convivence of the public presupposes a universal public, 'a community of library users with a unified perspective and a single way of seeking information.'¹⁰

In the Fine Arts range, universality is seen in how the range reconstructs the traditional western canon. The western canon of art can be 'defined as a body of works traditionally considered to be the most significant and therefore the most worthy of study... as an expression of a universalized or universal standard of quality'¹¹ and includes work of 'the great masters' from Ancient Greece and Rome through the Renaissance and the Royal Academies of Europe. Like Cutter's controlled vocabulary, the western canon is intended to be universal and presupposes a universal public.

According to the canon, the Renaissance not only saw a rebirth of classical ideals, but also an increase in social and economic status for the artist. No longer a nameless craftsman as they had been during the medieval period, 'many artists in fifteenth-century Italy behaved like intellectuals, investigating the past and solving problems scientifically, so the status of the artist rose as a result.'¹² As artists separated themselves from craftsman, the fine art mediums of architecture, painting, drawing, printmaking, and sculpture came to be seen as separate from the craft mediums of ceramics, glassmaking, metalwork, textiles, and woodwork.¹³

The Fine Arts range of LCC is divided primarily by medium: NA for Architecture, NB for Sculpture, NC for Drawing, Design, and Illustration, ND for Painting, NE for Print Media and NK for Decorative Arts. The first five of these classes (NA-NE) align to the mediums traditionally associated with the fine arts in the western canon. The mediums associated with the craft arts -- glass, woodwork, metalwork, textiles and ceramics -- do not get their own top-level categories. Instead, they can be found in the Decorative Arts (NK) class under the subclass 'Other Arts and Art Industries.' In the Fine Arts range, as in the western canon, art and craft mediums are separate. The 'other' in the title of craft's subclass can refer to the idea that these mediums are 'other than' the fine arts.

As this article will demonstrate, universality is not neutral. Olson argues, 'our systems seem *transparent* [sic]... they appear unbiased and universally applicable -- but they actually hide their exclusions under the guise of neutrality.'¹⁴ Universality results in majority rule where 'The white, male, Eurocentric, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied, bourgeois presence is labelled the mainstream and, hence, universal from which all else is a deviation.'¹⁵ This can be compared to the western canon, which 'is non-objective because it exists as an ideology controlled by the dominate class'¹⁶ -- white, European, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied, bourgeois, men -- and where 'Specific artists, locations and stylistic movements are selected and emphasized to arrive at a grand narrative that fits in with the western notion of evolution.'¹⁷

2. Olson and Schlegl, Olson and Schlegl, 'Standardization, objectivity, and user focus,' 66.
3. Hope A. Olson, 'Education for cataloging is/as women's studies,' *The serials librarian* 35, no. 1/2 (1998): 153–166, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315865386-12>.
4. Hope A. Olson, 'The power to name: representation in library catalogs,' *Journal of women in culture and society* 26, no. 3 (2001): 639–668, <https://doi.org/10.1086/495624>; Hope A. Olson, 'Universal models: a history of the organization of knowledge,' *Advances in knowledge organization* 4 (1994): 72–80.
5. Olson, 'The power to name: representation in library catalogs,' 639–668.; Hope A. Olson, 'How we construct subjects: a feminist analysis,' *Library trends* 56, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 509–541, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2008.0007>.
6. Olson, 'How we construct subjects,' 509–541. Hope A. Olson, 'The feminist and the emperor's new clothes: feminist deconstructions as a critical method for library and information studies,' *Library & information science research* 19, no. 2 (1997): 181–198.
7. Linda Nochlin, "Why have there been no great women artists?," *ARTnews* 69, no. 9 (January 1971): 22–39, 67–71.
8. Olson, 'The power to name,' 641.
9. Olson, 'The power to name,' 641–645.
10. Olson, 'The power to name,' 642.
11. Anna Brzyski, 'Introduction: canons of art history,' in *Partisan canons*, ed. Anna Brzyski (Durnham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 1.
12. Penelope J. E. Davies, Walter B. Denny, Frima Fox Hofrichter, Joseph Jacobs, Ann M. Roberts, David L. Simon, *Janson's history of art: The western tradition*, 8th ed (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 506.
13. Debra J. DeWitte, Ralph M. Larmann, and M. Kathryn Shields, *Gateways to art: understanding the visual arts*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 292.
14. Olson, 'The power to name,' 640.
15. Olson, 'The power to name,' 642.
16. Joseph R. Givens, "The art historical canon and the market," *Grove art online*, 27 Feb. 2019; Accessed 29 Apr. 2023, <https://>

Hierarchy

One of the consequences of universality is hierarchy. The universal language favored by Cutter leads to hierarchical structures to control the language.¹⁸ Olson's article 'How we construct subjects: a feminist analysis,' analyzes how hierarchy functions in LCC and LCSH noting that, in hierarchical relationships, 'the higher levels of the hierarchy define or have authority over the lower ones' creating hierarchical force.¹⁹ Olson further relates hierarchy to logic and argues that these structures are both inherently western, as their use goes back ancient Greece, and patriarchal, noting that, 'Reason has been the province of men since at least Aristotle, through Descartes and the Enlightenment and beyond with emotion being the province of women.'²⁰ For Cutter, hierarchy is a necessary organizational principle that provides structure to chaos.²¹ For Olson, hierarchy is a patriarchal, western system and only one possible way of organizing information.²²

Hierarchy results in fine art being valued over craft in the western canon. By the 18th century, the rise in status of the artist that began in the Renaissance was well established.²³ Artists were now trained at Royal Academies as opposed to guilds and apprenticeships.²⁴ The fine arts become associated with intelligence, creativity, talent, and originality. The craft mediums, on the other hand, are seen as 'merely decorative'²⁵ and associated with 'manual skill and utility.'²⁶ Although there are exceptions, like the Benvenuto Cellini's *Salt Cellar* (1543),²⁷ the majority of artworks in the canon are created with fine art mediums.

Like the western canon, the Fine Arts range gives prominence to the fine art mediums. As we have seen, the craft art mediums are subsumed under one class, Decorative Arts, where they are found, yet another step removed, under the subclass 'Other Arts and Art Industries.' The craft mediums are thus a subclass of a subclass, literally othered by their title, while the fine art mediums are primary categories. This results in a hierarchical relationship. The fine art mediums, by virtue of their privileged status, define art as being architecture, sculpture, drawing, painting and printmaking, not glass, ceramics, textiles, metalwork and woodwork. The fine art mediums have authority over craft, which, according to its lesser than status in the hierarchy, is not as important. Fine art and craft become both opposites and mutually exclusive categories. Within the system a medium cannot be both a fine art and a craft. Likewise, in the western canon, the Cellini's *Salt Cellar* becomes fine art by virtue of its inclusion within said canon.

Binary Relationships

According to Olson, hierarchical relationships create Derridean binaries.²⁸ In her article, 'Patriarchal structures of subject access and subversive techniques for change', Olson goes into great detail on how binary relationships operate in library classification systems.²⁹ In these relationships, one of the binaries is dominant, or privileged, over the other. However, since the privileged binary defines itself by being the opposite of the non-privileged binary, the privileged binary is dependent on the non-privileged binary for its meaning and the hierarchical relationship breaks down, deconstructing the binary.³⁰ The Fine Arts range of LCC creates a binary relationship by privileging fine art over craft in a universal, hierarchical system thus supporting the grand narrative of the western canon.

However, poststructuralism argues that binary relationships, although they might appear natural and inevitable, are unstable. For example, universality is privileged over diversity and, while universality might be the privileged binary, its power is deconstructed because universality cannot be universal unless it also includes the diverse.³¹ Some additional examples provided by Olson include man/woman, reason/emotion, and subject/object.³² To this list, we can also add fine art/craft.

Since binaries are interpreted, at least initially, as opposites, it creates a situation where the privileged binary – in this case, universality, man, reason, subject, and fine art – become associated with one another.³³ Thus, man is likened to universality, reason, subject and fine art, while woman is related to diversity, emotion, object and craft. If we replace man/woman with white/BIPOC in the example, we see that whiteness becomes associated with universality, reason, subject, and the fine arts while BIPOC cultures become associated with diversity, emotion, object, and craft. Unchallenged, privileged binaries reconstruct the myth

www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-2000000208.

17. Kimberly Mast, 'The art history canon and the art history survey course: subverting the western narrative,' *Journal of social theory in art education* 39 (2019): 46.

18. Olson, 'How we construct subjects,' 514–519.

19. Olson, 'How we construct subjects,' 515.

20. Olson, 'How we construct subjects,' 512.

21. Hope A. Olson, 'The ubiquitous hierarchy: an army to overcome the threat of a mob,' *Library trends* 52, no. 3 (Winter 2004): 605–606, <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/1780>.

22. Olson, 'How we construct subjects,' 509–541.

23. Dewitte, Larmann, and Shields, *Gateways to art*, 292.

24. Dewitte, Larmann, and Shields, *Gateways to Art*, 292.

25. Hope Irvine, 'The art of crafts,' *Art education* 38, no. 5 (1985): 44–46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3192859>.

26. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old mistresses: women, art and ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 50.

27. The *Bayeux Tapestry* is an embroidery.

28. Hope A. Olson, 'Patriarchal structures of subject access and subversive techniques for change,' *The Canadian journal of information and library science* 26, no. 2/3 (June–September, 2001), 1–29.

29. Olson, 'Patriarchal structures,' 1–29.

30. Olson, 'Patriarchal structures,' 3.

31. Olson, 'Patriarchal structures,' 3.

32. Olson, 'Patriarchal structures,' 3.

33. Olson, 'Patriarchal structures,' 3–4.

that the white, male, European perspective is not only the only perspective, it is the natural perspective. The western canon, similarly, 'function[s] as a mechanism of oppression, a guardian of privilege, a vehicle of exclusion, and a structure for class, gender, and racial interests.'³⁴

However, within contemporary art and art history, the western canon no longer carries the weight it once did and the fine art/craft binary, still evident in the Fine Arts range, has been deconstructed from both feminist and postcolonial perspectives. Rozsika Parker convincingly argues that needlework's lesser than status is because of the medium's association with women and the home³⁵ while Larry Shiner asserts that craft's subordinate role in the hierarchy is a result of craft's association with BIPOC artists.³⁶ These are but two examples. In fact, such challenges are so plentiful that art appreciation textbooks call attention to the binary, noting that it 'has broken down in the twentieth and twenty-first century.'³⁷

Like art historians, artists have long questioned the 'inherent truth' of a western canon that privileges fine art over craft and, thus, reconstructs white, male, European artists' authority over BIPOC and women artists. Again, examples are numerous. Artists like Judy Chicago use craft as part of their art to reclaim the mediums while artists like Bisa Butler, Faith Ringgold and Dawn Williams Boyd use craft as a way to call attention to its importance in the Black community.

An additional deconstruction of the fine art/craft binary happens when one looks at art from non-western cultures. Both LCC and the western canon claim universality. However, in non-western societies, like China, Korea, and Japan, ceramics are considered one of the highest artforms. Thus, LCC and the western canon fail in their claims to universality and, as a result, neutrality.

Conclusion

So, why is this problematic? Olson argues that LCSH functions as a third space and, 'Viewed in this manner, LCSH has the power to create meaning whether that power is used consciously or not.'³⁸ If LCSH functions as a third space, then LCC does as well. The Fine Arts range does not simply reflect the western canon, it participates in the creation of the idea of the western canon much as the canon came to 'frame the ideology present within the discipline of art history itself.'³⁹ The Fine Arts range reconstructs a narrative that is no longer dominant in the art field. While we might be telling students that the canon is biased, we send them to research in a system founded in that bias.

Dividing the Fine Arts range by the mediums defined by the western canon as fine art has additional consequences for contemporary art and the discipline of art history, which also demonstrate that the structures of LCC mirror the field of art history as it was in the 19th century when the system was created. The fact that photography, embroidery and sewing are classed in Technology (T) comes to mind,⁴⁰ as does the tendency for Indigenous art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas to be classed in the Philosophy, Psychology, Religion (B) range⁴¹ and the lack of new media like video art, installation and performance as classes (privileged or otherwise) within the system.

I will be the first to admit that the idea of trying to re-class the Fine Arts range so that all mediums are represented equally is daunting enough to be a non-starter. Furthermore, one of the tenets of poststructuralism is that systems will always reflect the biases of the society that created them and thus neutrality is impossible.⁴² Creating a new system would not eliminate bias.

Instead of creating new systems, Olson advocates for disrupting current systems by seeking ways to breach their limits through technologies like user tagging and mapping additional thesauri to create more web-like structures within the hierarchy.⁴³ To disrupt the fine art/craft binary seen in the Fine Arts range, art librarians first need to be aware of its existence. Then, like the artists and art historians that came before them, art librarians can start asking questions: 'How does this structure that privileges white, male European art over art made by BIPOC and women artists, create relationships amongst books on the shelves?' 'What relationships are absent in this structure? What relationships are emphasized?' Or even more existentially, 'Is medium still the primary way we should

34. Anna Brzyski, 'Introduction: canons of art history,' 1.

35. Rozsika Parker, *The subversive stitch: embroidery and the making of the feminine* (London: The Woman's Press Limited, 1984).

36. Larry Shiner, *The invention of art: a cultural history* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 270–274.

37. Dewitte, Larmann, and Shields, *Gateways to art*, 292.

38. Hope A. Olson, 'Difference and change: the untapped potential of LCSH,' *Cataloging & classification quarterly* 29, no. 1–2 (2000): 66, https://doi.org/10.1300/j104v29n01_04.

39. Kimberly Mast, 'The art history canon,' 46.

40. Colin Higgins, 'Library of Congress Classification: Teddy Roosevelt's world in numbers,' *Cataloging and classification quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2012): 251, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2012.658989>; Rochelle Smith, 'Thinking and making: art and craft in library of congress classification,' *Library and philosophy practice*, (December 2015), <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/1299/>.

41. Janna Singer-Baefsky, 'Why have there been no great art libraries: the role of radical cataloging in the reassessment of art history,' *Art documentation: journal of the art libraries society of North America* 40, no. 2 (Fall, 2021): 181, <https://doi.org/10.1086/716734>.

42. Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: a very short introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2022): 47.

43. Olson, 'How we construct subjects,' 521–537; Olson, 'The power to name,' 659–663; Olson, 'Patriarchal structures,' 21–25.

divide the arts in a hierarchical schema?' or 'Should we use a hierarchical system at all?' 'What are the other possibilities?' The answers to these questions will lead to possible points where the limits of the fine art/craft hierarchy can be breached and the binary can be deconstructed.

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