



Museums for America

Sample Application MA-249806-OMS-21
Project Category: Collections Stewardship

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$179,135
Amount of cost share:	\$223,573

The project description can be viewed in the IMLS Awarded GrantsSearch:
<https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/ma-249806-oms-21>

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

Project Justification

What need, problem, or challenge will your project address, and how was it identified?

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) respectfully requests a grant of \$179,135 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to support an 18-month initiative to develop a replicable toolkit for co-creating culturally inclusive collections data terms and practices using ethical, interpretive, and analytical principles. Currently, data terms are not systematically reviewed using cultural inclusion criteria and entered largely at the discretion of departments and individuals charged with data entry. Variances in nomenclature, structure (i.e., which metadata field is used to store which facet), and usage result in inaccurate and inconsistent collections analysis and search and browse challenges for end users. As the largest “encyclopedic”¹ art museum in the Western United States, with a deep commitment to the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives, LACMA has the unique opportunity to investigate how an inclusive approach to data creation can positively affect downstream uses such as responsive collections management policies, ethical collections evaluations, inclusive descriptions of artworks in exhibitions and publications, and culturally sensitive community engagement. As LACMA aims to forefront equity and diversity in all aspects of its programming and operations, a thorough review of data terms and methodologies is necessary to ensure that inclusive practices are woven into the fabric of the institution. The toolkit and report produced through this project will provide guidelines, methods, and case studies that other institutions can replicate.

LACMA identified the need for the proposed project while advancing the stewardship and accessibility of its Mark and Carolyn Blackburn Collection of Photography, a rare and unique collection depicting Polynesian, Micronesian, and Melanesian geography and life from the 1860s to the present. In 2018, LACMA received an IMLS Museums for America grant (MA-30-18-0274-18) to catalogue, process, rehouse, and digitize the Blackburn Collection. Through in-depth research to improve metadata accuracy, the need became clear for a reparative strategy to address a knowledge gap of terms and practices overlooked by typical museum data procedures for incoming permanent collection items.

For example, there were several instances of outdated and culturally insensitive terms such as “hula girl” or “hut” used in the titles and descriptions of certain artworks, likely taken from text inscribed on the backs of souvenir photographs. To ensure that data on this specific collection would accurately reflect source communities’ knowledge, LACMA staff formed an advisory board of outside subject matter experts working with Pacific collections to review and suggest new terms and practices. Through these efforts, the advisory board provided counsel to LACMA staff on sensitive collections and other pertinent initiatives. While working with an advisory board of internal and external stakeholders emphasized the benefit of engaging experts from the communities represented in the collection and created an initial workflow, it also made clear that considerable funding and staffing would be needed to develop procedures that ensure an inclusive approach to culturally sensitive data beyond a singular collection. Ultimately, by revising an artwork’s unofficial title, which may include offensive or outdated terms, LACMA will not only provide a more inclusive context for general users but also demonstrate respect for source communities that have often been negatively affected by appropriation and decontextualization.

To integrate LACMA’s core values of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) into collections management processes, the proposed project will involve a cohort of curatorial colleagues and other LACMA data end users that will work with external stakeholders to explore facets of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture, history of colonization, geographic names, titles, artist attribution, along with topics of data structures, ethical collections analysis, data privacy/confidentiality, appropriate levels of access, and asset findability for selected segments of LACMA’s permanent collection, which spans time, geographic location,

¹ This phrase is increasingly falling out of favor as it assumes the possibility of universal collections but is commonly used to mean “large and varied” collections.

media, and culture. The resulting toolkit and report will outline how other cultural heritage institutions may begin to develop culturally inclusive data practices with their relevant communities of practice and accountability, expanding the impact of this project well beyond LACMA.

Who or what will benefit from your project and how have they been involved in the planning?

By focusing on a primary building block of information, the proposed project has the potential to impact all facets of museum activity, from collecting to programming. The project will directly benefit art historians, curators, ethnographers, archaeologists, conservators, educators, students, and artists as well as local, national, and international visitors. LACMA anticipates that primary beneficiaries include three groups who engage with and rely upon collections data throughout the data lifecycle, from the collection, critical review, analysis, and reporting, to interpretation, display, and access from diverse paths.

First, the project will benefit cultural heritage workers—not limited to LACMA or museum employees—whose practices are informed by data captured in the collections management database. This includes the everyday care and treatment of these physical objects and their digital surrogates as well as further downstream applications of the data such as research, publications, and educational programming. The second group is museum audiences who experience our collections in the museum galleries and through exhibitions, programs, publications, and digital resources. Each of these public-facing endeavors will be informed by a more inclusive interpretation and culturally-informed discourse around collections data. The third audience includes originating or source communities and their descendants whose cultures and practices produced the items that make up museum collections but whose knowledge may not be meaningfully incorporated in institutional databases.

In developing the project proposal, LACMA consulted with colleagues in the museum, library, and archives sectors to research promising practices in the creation of culturally inclusive data. Consultations began with informational interviews with the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art (NMAfA), National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), and the Open Access Initiative along with their partner MHz Curationist. Next, we solicited input from peers at the Los Angeles County Library. These organizations have since pledged their support in a consultative role on the project’s Advisory Committee. Additionally, colleagues from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Guggenheim Museum, Denver Art Museum, and Getty Museum and Getty Research Institute were involved in early discussions and remain interested in the project and its findings. Subsequent conversations with pluralistic representatives of Los Angeles County-based communities, including the Los Angeles County Native American Indian Commission and the Fernandño Tataviam Band of Mission Indians, informed the project strategy for community engagement and protocols with source and descendant communities. Finally, members of the County and the City of Los Angeles’s Racial Equity Task Forces were consulted to align the development of the scope and approach of the proposed project with municipal government initiatives.

How will your project advance your institution’s strategic plan?

The proposed activities will enable LACMA to meet two core priorities of its current strategic plan: (1) improve the quality and presentation of LACMA’s collections, and (2) build and diversify LACMA’s audience. Additionally, the project will support LACMA’s key strategic goal of leading change in the field by ensuring that DEAI are ingrained in every aspect of the museum’s work and sharing findings with the greater field of cultural heritage institutions. In 2017, LACMA’s Board of Trustees adopted an official Policy on Diversity to formalize its commitment to increasing diversity across its programming, audience, staffing, and leadership. To continue to increase core values of diversity in audience and programming, the museum’s data standards and data entry process must accurately reflect inclusive perspectives. Recognizing the data are fundamental to and inform nearly every aspect of the museum’s work, this project will enhance outputs such as exhibitions, programming, publications, and our online collection database to advance our strategic plan and core values and to remain relevant and meaningful in our communities.

How will your project address the goals of the Museums for America program and project category?

The project addresses the goals of the Museums for America program and Collections Stewardship and Access project category by creating an iterative system to integrate inclusive, and thus more ethical and responsible, approaches to collections data. The impact of this approach to data creation will extend broadly, informing the physical care of items as well as the understanding and analysis of how human creativity has manifested in artworks from different cultures, periods, and media. Accordingly, data on our collection are foundational to the museum's ability to serve its audiences, and this project will enhance these efforts through informed cultural sensitivity that is responsive to the region's diverse population and reflective of the cultural groups represented in the collections. With stewardship and access as the ultimate goals, the project will result in more accurate data, serving curators, researchers, students, and the general public. It will also enhance LACMA's value as a resource for cross-disciplinary exhibitions and scholarly engagement.

Project Work Plan

What specific activities, including evaluation, will you carry out?

During the 18-month period, the project team will complete an iterative and responsive process for co-creating terms and practices for descriptive cataloging in three overlapping phases—Phase One (Research & Discussion: September–December 2021), Phase Two (Review & Implementation: December 2021–August 2022), and Phase Three (Assessment & Reporting: June 2022–February 2023).

During Phase One, facilitated dialogue around the data collected, issues in citation, and categorization for each case study will begin. The project staff will onboard the grant-funded Ontological Research Assistant who will review and research curatorial case studies for discussion, assist with data mapping and modeling in the collection management database (TMS), develop tools and written procedures around data collection and entry, and assist with project coordination and documentation towards the development of the toolkit and report. The museum will hold an orientation for the internal stakeholder group: a curatorial cohort representing the African Art, Art of the Ancient Americas, Art of the Pacific, Egyptian Art, Native American Art, Prints and Drawings, and Wallis Annenberg Photography departments as well as LACMA staff members from Education and Public Programs, Communications, Publications, Collections Information and Digital Assets (CIDA), Rights and Reproductions, Registration, and the Research Library and Archives departments, each of whom interpret or interact operationally with collection data. The project team will also conduct a formative assessment of internal stakeholders' understanding of LACMA's cataloging practice and data before discussions begin.

Together, the team will nominate and assess members for an Advisory Committee composed of both Institutional Advisors—stakeholders from peer cultural heritage institutions such as Los Angeles County Library, Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art and National Museum of African American History and Culture, Minneapolis Institute of Art, and Autry Museum of the American West—and approximately 20 Community Advisors, including artists and makers, members of source and descendant community for works represented in LACMA's permanent collection, and subject matter experts. The selection criteria for Advisory Committee members will include diagonal representation across multiple facets of diversity including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, career level, and socioeconomic background.

After initial framing conversations to delve critically into missing and exclusionary terminology and practices, the project team and Advisory Committee will review case studies from LACMA's permanent collection. Topics will include race and ethnicity, nationality, culture, gender, sexuality, ability/disability, attribution, and the intersection of these concepts. Introductions to issues in data privacy, informed consent, and the ethical ramifications of coding and tracking this data will also be discussed. Selected for the depth and breadth of research experience with historical and contemporary artists as well as their ability to articulate nuances of

cultural and identity markers across geographic origins, distance traveled over time, and traditionally underrepresented perspectives in museum data, the curatorial cohort represents the following collections which will serve as case studies: African Art, Art of the Ancient Americas, Art of the Pacific, Egyptian Art, Native American Art, The Wallis Annenberg Photography Department, and Prints and Drawings. Cultures and modes of production and representation from these curatorial collections span the globe, space, and time, providing rich case studies for deep discussions. As the series of monthly discussions will span a full year, we have organized them so that Advisory Committee members will be expected to mandatorily attend five to six meetings and remain optional for the remainder based on their identified expertise. The Advisory Committee will be regularly surveyed for feedback.

During Phase Two, the project team will take learnings from Phase One and develop strategies for putting data collection tactics into practice. The aforementioned case studies will be reviewed by the project team to identify what information the museum will track in the database and how it will be gathered and coded. Specific to the case studies, terminology that is deemed outdated or culturally insensitive will be retired and replaced. An artist questionnaire through which living artists can self-identify will be developed based on research and discussions of intersectional identity markers and data privacy. Depending on the results of Phase One, work during this period may include considerations for rating the certainty of information and its origins (such as citation requirements), return to original languages or translation indicators, adoption of non-Western labels and tags, and a method of indicating lost or missing data. This may necessitate the adaptation or design of new metadata fields within the existing architecture of the collections management system which will be under the purview of the Ontological Research Assistant.² Any changes to data standards will be formalized and documented in LACMA's permanent collection data entry procedures and style guide.

During Phase Three, the project team will review and describe how the collection data and participants' practices have changed. A qualitative analysis reviewing changes to data terms and procedures will be provided to LACMA staff and the Advisory Committee from Phase One. After reviewing the new data standards and how they have been implemented, both groups will participate in a summative assessment of how their understanding and practice has changed over the course of the project. The curatorial cohort will write case study reviews relevant to their respective fields. The collection data analysis, summative evaluation, artist questionnaire, data standards and procedures, terminology review, and case studies will be published along with a project summary as a toolkit for other cultural heritage institutions.

What are the risks to the project and how will you mitigate them?

LACMA is committed to minimizing any operational challenges in the implementation of the project and to creating an inclusive, relevant, and meaningful space for communities that have historically been underrepresented in traditional museum practices. To achieve this, LACMA staff have built a work plan that fosters collaboration by engaging communities using participatory design methodologies to co-develop database nomenclature and architecture in a way that centers missing and marginalized perspectives while serving operational data needs such as collections analysis. To preserve the evidentiary and historical contexts in which the sector has operated prior to an acknowledgement of knowledge gaps and biases, the implementation of new terms and practices will not erase past museum frameworks.

Given the timeliness of and urgency for discussions around diversity, equity, and inclusion in the museum field, we decided to limit the scope of the project team so that the discussions would remain focused and productive. In this, we hope to alleviate the risk for the project to become too broad and disparate, and thus not achieve specificity in its recommendations. Another risk to the project would be a more traditional "top down" approach to decision making that ultimately leaves those who work most closely with the data without agency over and

² Please refer to job description for Ontological Research Assistant in Supplemental Documents

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connection to their work. To address this, the selection criteria for members of the Advisory Committee include considerations for diagonal representation across facets of diversity and levels of seniority. We also foresaw limitations to the Advisory Committee selections due to availability, financial feasibility, and access to technical infrastructure and expertise. Hence the project budget includes honoraria to compensate community-based advisors and to provide technical support, including hardware and training for web-based discussions.

Who will plan, implement, and manage your project?

The project will be planned, implemented, and managed by CIDA staff in collaboration with other LACMA departments. LACMA's Head of CIDA, Yvonne Lee, will act as project director responsible for programmatic and budgetary oversight, coordination between various stakeholders, reporting, and final project assessment. Lee will supervise the core project team consisting of one grant-funded Ontological Research Assistant responsible for research into data schemas, ontological structures, and systems for access and discovery beyond LACMA's current platforms. They will also work in consultation with the Cultural Competency Educator, who will facilitate complex and challenging discussions investigating facets of race, ethnicity, culture, and other identity markers. The project will assemble data end users from LACMA's Communications, Education and Public Programs, Publications, Rights and Reproductions, and Research Library and Archives departments, each charged with active engagement in conversations, particularly lending their expertise and experience with data usage and audience engagement. Curatorial staff from the departments of African Art, Art of the Ancient Americas, Art of the Pacific, Egyptian Art, Native American Art, Photography, and Prints and Drawings will research and present case study discussions of facets of identity and naming practices for artworks in LACMA's permanent collection. LACMA project staff will nominate candidates for the Advisory Committee, including artists, representatives of underrepresented and marginalized communities, and subject matter experts, emphasizing participation from individuals and members of communities whose perspectives are traditionally missing from collections data narratives, who will be invited to co-create data.

Will partners be engaged and, if so, for what purpose?

For this project, LACMA will seek participation from an Advisory Committee composed of external partners. From the museum sector, colleagues from Smithsonian's NMAfA and NMAAHC will share information and procedures related to their data collection and cataloging practices. Additionally, advisors from Smithsonian Open Access and the Linked Infrastructure for Networked Cultural Scholarship Project (LINCS) will advise on the technical aspects of ontological research and data modeling. Managers from Los Angeles County Library's American Indian Resource Center, Asian Pacific Resource Center, Black Resource Center, and Chicano Resource Center will serve as institutional advisors on community engagement and ethical cataloging practices. In addition to the confirmed Institutional Advisors, the project staff will identify artists and makers, representatives from source and descendant communities, and subject matter experts on aspects of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and other identity markers to participate as Community Advisors.

When and in what sequence will your activities occur?

If a grant is awarded, project activities would begin in September 2021 and end in February 2023, and occur in the following sequence. In Phase One: Research & Discussion (September–December 2021), a Cultural Competency Educator and an Ontological Research Assistant will be hired and onboarded in the first two months. Their roles will be to facilitate, research, and document discussions and related deliverables. During this time, an Advisory Committee of community-based and institutional advisors will be nominated per selection criteria described above and, once confirmed, participate in monthly, facilitated meetings with the project team. The curatorial cohort will develop object case studies to kickstart cultural, identity, and data discussions with the goal of critical review and creation of terms and procedures where indicated. An artist questionnaire draft will be developed early in Phase Two: Review & Implementation (December 2021–August 2022). The questionnaire and prior discussions will inform new data standards, a style guide, and data collection and data entry procedures. Previous and new data terms and fields will be updated and mapped. Phase Three:

Assessment & Reporting (June 2022–February 2023) will focus on validating the data standards, and reviewing the new terms and procedures for consistency, feasibility, and accuracy through iterative data collections analyses. Though documentation, review, and reporting activities will take place regularly throughout the project period, the final six-month period will concentrate on the development of the toolkit, report, and some incidental deliverables such as articles and conference presentations. The detailed Schedule of Completion and RACI Matrix (included under Supporting Documents) outline the discrete tasks under each phase.

What time, financial, personnel, and other resources will you need to carry out the activities?

To ensure the proposed project succeeds, the museum will need to invest significant financial and human resources. If awarded, IMLS grant funds will fund the salary of one full-time Ontological Research Assistant, as described above. Additionally, the grant would support consulting fees for a Cultural Competency Educator who would develop and moderate discussions among the project team and Advisory Committee. In addition to the grant-funded position and consulting fee, LACMA needs financial resources for honoraria, training, and hardware and software costs to engage external experts and stakeholders from underrepresented communities. LACMA will invest substantial staff time and expertise in the projects, including members of the following areas: CIDA, African Art, Art of the Ancient Americas, Art of the Pacific, Communications, Education and Public Programs, Egyptian Art, Native American Art, Prints and Drawings, Publications, Registration, Research Library, Rights and Reproductions, and the Wallis Annenberg Photography Department.

How will you track your progress toward achieving your intended results?

Regular biweekly meetings to review and evaluate the project’s progress will occur throughout the grant period, led by the project director and CIDA, and include project staff from Curatorial and Education departments. The project director will also review and evaluate the Ontological Research Assistant’s progress every other week. Regular evaluative check-ins will be incorporated into quarterly reports (six total throughout the course of the grant period) to key project staff, the Advisory Committee, and museum leadership. These reports will include topics of discussion led by the Cultural Competency Educator, a running inventory of records (object and constituent) reviewed, a glossary of new and deprecated terms, and iterative work products like an artist questionnaire, data models, procedures and guides, and expenditures.

How and with whom will you share your project’s results?

For the public, project results written by Curatorial and CIDA staff will be published via four long-form posts on LACMA’s *Unframed* blog. For practitioners, project findings will be shared in conference sessions at American Alliance of Museums, Museum Computer Network, MuseWeb, and other relevant convenings. For culturally-specific source and practitioner communities, a review of open data platforms touting rich data expression will be published with the toolkit. Platforms considered include but are not limited to Getty Vocabularies, Homosaurus, MHz Curationist, Mukurtu, Smithsonian Open Access, and Wikidata, will . A public-facing collections data API will be developed for further expression of co-created data values that facilitate inclusive search and browse terms. At the completion of the grant period, a toolkit and report including guidelines, methodology, promising practices, and case study reviews will be made available for cultural heritage institutions eager to begin the work of diversifying and indigenizing data practices, with an emphasis on a replicable, iterative model of community-responsive development.

Project Results

What are your project’s intended results and how will they address the need you have identified?

The primary goal of the project is to further LACMA’s capacity for serving diverse audiences by incorporating inclusive perspectives in the collections management database. Through this project, the museum also intends to improve the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage items while also stewarding relationships with communities whose cultural heritage is reflected in our collections. The project also aims to develop ethical

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evaluation criteria around data collection and reporting for a multitude of analyses and reports. To develop procedures that ensure an inclusive approach to culturally sensitive data beyond a singular collection, the project will result in a toolkit and report to inform LACMA's policies around data collection, storage, use, access, and expression. Beyond addressing the need for more thorough and ethical systems around the creation of collections data, this project is one pillar in LACMA's commitment to diversity and inclusion in all areas of its programming and operations. With culturally-inclusive collections data terms and practices, LACMA will be more capable of meeting educational programming and evolving community needs. If data on the museum's collections are not sensitive to the complex and nuanced cultural traditions and histories of communities and artists who created these works, LACMA will not be able to develop programming that accurately reflects evolving understandings of cultural heritage and community needs.

How will the care, condition, management, access to, or use of the museum collections and/or records improve?

The project will improve the accuracy of the descriptive metadata, including nomenclature, structure, and usage, while also filling important gaps in knowledge representation. Internally, LACMA staff using TMS will have more inclusive and reliable information, enabling them to share more relevant, meaningful, and higher quality data with the public and better utilize the collection. Externally, the project will enable researchers worldwide to identify and improve the inclusiveness of their collections data, resulting in new, cross-disciplinary scholarship. Ultimately, the project will produce a wealth of fresh content that can reach global audiences, far outliving the impact of short-term exhibitions on LACMA's physical campus.

What data will you collect and report to measure your project's success?

The impact on the museum's data standards and procedures will be measured along with the collections data. The collection analysis will compare the data before Phase One to after Phase Two. This will include a list of deprecated and replacement terms, their rates of usage, and the effect on the overall collection. LACMA staff will also participate in formative and summative assessments of their practice and understanding of cataloging objects. The analyses of collection data and cataloging practices will be included in the toolkit.

What tangible products will result from your project?

The project will result in the addition of terms and protocols centered around the contextual description of LACMA permanent collection objects and artists. To collect these data, the team will develop an artist questionnaire for evaluative purposes with an informed consent and data use section. Additionally, LACMA will produce a report including guidelines, an iterative methodology, and research documentation, including case study reviews, to be shared widely with cultural heritage partners, particularly those that steward vast collections. This will take the form of a toolkit published on LACMA's website with a long form report intended for practitioners, thus providing wider access to the emergent methodology and promising practices to build relationships with marginalized populations and broaden contextual knowledge around collections and creators. Based on findings from critical discussions, other tangible products will include research and feasibility assessments for pathways in the expression and access of data values, standards, schemas, and ontologies. Migration and data sharing workflows may be supported by tools such as a public-facing API for appropriately secure data fields to the utilization of aggregate platforms if deemed appropriate.

How will you sustain the benefit(s) of your project?

The project is central to LACMA's mission to advance access and inclusivity, and to the museum's efforts to care for and accurately represent its collection. As such, staff and financial resources will be allocated to sustain the benefits of the project beyond the grant term. Designed to be iterative, the project intends to embed culturally inclusive data practices into core institutional operations in cultural heritage cataloging, building knowledge beyond a "neutral" or universalist Western framework into the collections data creation process. The long term goal is to repeat the process established in this project for other collecting areas in the museum and continue to proactively dedicate resources to this work.

SCHEDULE OF COMPLETION						
Activity	Sep-22	Oct-22	Nov-22	Dec-22	Jan-23	Feb-23
Phase One: Research & Discussion						
Activity 10: Cultural competency learning experiences	■	■	■			
Activity 11: Data science and ethics learning experiences	■	■	■			
Activity 12: Research, discussions, case study investigations, decisions	■	■	■	■		
Activity 13: Selection of appropriate/new/deprecated terms	■	■	■	■		
Phase Two: Review & Implementation						
Activity 1: Data mapping and entry/deprecation	■	■	■	■		
Activity 2: Develop artist questionnaire	■	■	■	■	■	
Activity 3: Draft new data standards and style guide	■	■	■	■	■	
Activity 4: Draft new data collection and entry procedures	■	■	■	■	■	
Activity 5: Biweekly reviews and project tracking (key project staff)	■	■	■	■	■	■
Activity 6: Monthly review and project tracking (LACMA project staff)	■	■	■	■	■	■
Activity 7: Quarterly review with Advisory Committee	■	■	■	■	■	■
Phase Three: Assessment & Reporting						
Activity 1: Summative assessment of LACMA staff				■		
Activity 2: Collection data analysis				■	■	■
Activity 3: Data standards and procedures review				■	■	■
Activity 4: Terminology review				■	■	■
Activity 5: Case study reviews	■	■	■	■		
Activity 6: Finalizing the toolkit and report						■