

Doc Chat Episode Nineteen Transcript

Naming Pictures (March 11, 2021)

JULIE GOLIA: Welcome, everybody. We'll get started in just a second. We've still got a few people coming in. Thanks for bearing with us. And we're using a new captioning function today. So you will -- if the -- for those of you who would like closed captioning, you can click on the link that I just put in the chat. I'll pop it in one more time for people who are just getting here. So Happy Thursday. Welcome to Doc Chat again. I'm Julie Golia. I'm the curator of history, social sciences, and government information at the New York Public Library. For those of you who are new Doc Chat is a weekly program series from NYPL Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them in the classroom. In today's episode, Jessica Cline, supervising librarian at the library's picture collection, is joined by Peter Kayafas, a photographer, publisher, curator, and teacher who lives in New York City, where he's the director of the Eakins Press Foundation and Adjunct Associate Professor of photography at Pratt Institute. So Jessica and Peter are going to explore the library's picture collection analyzing the concept of subjectivity in the subject headings assigned to images. And discussing how description shapes representation and creates trust in the work of librarians. Our guests will speak for about 10 to 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, please feel free to use the chat function to share general comments with each other. They will make sure that you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees so everyone is included. Then once we begin the question and answer segment, I'd like you to use Zoom's Question and Answer function rather than the chat function to pose your questions. If you want to remain anonymous, you can click that before submitting your questions. So we would also like to know a little bit more about you. So I am going to launch a poll right now that I would love for you all to fill out. And I'll be sharing pertinent links in the chat throughout. But for now, I am going to hand it over to Jessica.

JESSICA CLINE: Thank you. Thank you, Julie. Let's go. While you're filling out the poll here, I'll just kind of explain the picture collection a little bit -- give you some background. The New York Public Library picture collection houses over a million and a half images and has been lending them to researchers for 106 years. These pictures are mostly clip from books and magazines. And then we also have standalone collections of postcards and greeting cards. So how do we find anything amongst all these pictures? We organize them into about 12,000 categories. So the picture on the left of your screen shows the shelves in the picture collection. Then each one of these folders holds pictures representing a different subject heading. The picture on the right is an example of a folder for the subject curiosity, and the array of images found inside. When organizing material librarians are charged with assigning subject headings to each item in a collection whether it's a book, magazine, pamphlet, or picture. This helps researchers find

information of similar content more efficiently. Controlled vocabulary is used to consistently organize materials across a collection, a library, or even a collective of library locations across the country; as in the case of the Library of Congress's subject headings which are used cooperatively by many library systems. The convenience and consistency of a widely used system helps libraries establish authoritative knowledge and trust within their community by relating to a greater whole. When the community recognizes a need for change in the organization system, the cooperative will have to agree to keep consistency and trust in place. And this issue has come up in recent years with the Library of Congress's use of the terminology 'illegal aliens' to describe undocumented immigrants. And I recommend watching the documentary *Change the Subject*, for an overview of how students at Dartmouth College challenged the use of the terminology illegal aliens and worked to change the language used by their library system to create trust in the system for the diverse library users. Today, Peter and I are going to step away from the authority of the Library of Congress subject headings and focus on the locally created subject headings used to organize the picture collection. As a way to consider how naming pictures relies on the unique point of view of the librarian assigned to the test. And how the subject heading system keeps the collection reliable and organized for the researcher. So this first hit -- this is the first page of our subject heading index. These headings are arranged alphabetically beginning with Abacus, as you see here. And then about 380 some pages later in zoology. The subject heading index is unique to the New York Public libraries picture collection. It was formalized in the early 1930s by the collection's longtime celebrated curator Romana Javitz. It considered the interests or quests of its audience who included the ever-growing creative professions of New York City, including illustrators, and designers of the advertising and film industries, artists, historians, and even the US military. As well as educators and the professional opinions of library staff. These subject headings are the product of many classifiers over the last century. They have been updated and changed the categories in areas such as geography, science, and sociology, topics reflect the evolution of subjects and the interests since the collection began in 1915. Peter, do you want to say anything about --

PETER KAYAFAS: I do.

JESSICA CLINE: -- the section headings in general?

PETER KAYAFAS: Thanks to both of you. I'd like to stress and I'll do this throughout our talk today the importance of the role that librarians play in -- particularly for the picture collection, but in general. And you know, we have to remember that the librarians are the custodians of collective public cultural repositories. They become the trusted agents of their constituencies, reacting to the needs and the requests of those users. And you'll hear from Jessica a little bit later on how some of that works in terms of how it's evolved the subject headings. Libraries are only as useful as they are relevant to those that they serve. That's how the picture collection was built, as you'll hear, and it's how it still functions today. In particular, I'd like to highlight the subjectivity of the librarians. It plays in -- a central role in how the images are cataloged, and therefore how they are subsequently found by users. And we'll talk a little bit about the difference between how the librarians function, and for instance, how a more conventional

image search in Google images or online might be. And I think we have some actual images to look at.

JESSICA CLINE: Yeah, so this is our first image from the digital collections. So this is a picture -- of the sun -- of an entry from 1926. The picture collection librarians recorded subject requests from researchers. So Javits wrote of the subject heading index in 1954, that every subject in the picture of collection developed only because someone asked for it. So we see from this logbook, that the picture collection librarians recorded the informational detail of the needs of the visual researchers. The librarians made this log in order to continue the improvement of picture stock and keep track of the needed subject categories. So these visual requests for researchers were written using the phrasing of the researchers include a few librarian notations. These early logs are subject requests, and the researchers' natural language helped to define how pictures in the collection would be given subject names. The entries read things like flag emblem of the Explorers Club. There's one for Spanish wallpaper. There's a request for living quarters used by railroad laborers (not old cars). Even portraits of Lewis Carroll and the librarian is written ours are all out. So we just need more of those.

PETER KAYAFAS: One of the things that's extraordinary about this collection, that's been around for 100 years, is that fact that the librarians are constantly responding to the requests of the users. In a way, of course, that bestows upon the librarians a certain amount of authority. And they bring that authority and action in terms of collecting, actively collecting materials to bear on the collections. It's a service that's provided. That's another word that I like to continually emphasize is that the librarians and the library are providing a service. They balance that authority with what the users need. And in a way, if we look closely at how language defines the social resources that libraries build and protect, we can learn something of how we evolve or not as a society. The picture collection is a particularly dynamic example of the complex relationship between words and pictures; and vice versa. And it's fascinating to me as a teacher to introduce to my students the collection and remind them that there were -- there's a period as long as 100 years ago when these first categories were being built based on user need. And so we have to remember that that history -- that 100-year history, and the requests of the users that Jessica has already alluded to, is what defines the 1.5 million objects that are in the picture collection and the 40 -- more than 45,000 of which are digitized and available online. It is a product of the people.

JESSICA CLINE: Let's move on to the next image here, so this is an image from the American Army Signal Corps during World War I of a carrier pigeon with its wings splayed to show the stamped identification marks that have been labeled with. Pigeons were used by all sides during the war as ways to relay time-sensitive information from the frontlines back to headquarters. This image has been given the straightforward subject heading of 'birds, subdivided by pigeon carrier'. You can see that written in the bottom left-hand corner of the image there. It could have been included in other subject headings though. It could have been under communication, identification devices, army United States 1910s, or even war -- just World War I. In the physical collection or the picture collection, pictures are organized into folders of a single subject.

Therefore, the pictures can only have one subject to represent them. This changes when items are digitized. The inclusion of metadata or descriptive information about the items allows librarians the ability to assign many subject headings to one picture. So the first question students often ask when learning about the picture collection and how it's organized is, "How do you decide which subject to put an image in?" And this applies to whether we are choosing one subject in the physical collection or multiple topics in the library's digital collection. Sometimes the subject is obvious and sometimes an image offers many possibilities. Often historical context needs to be considered. Language used in different time periods may reveal something to a researcher looking for that historical context that another researcher just looking for visual representation might find offensive. The ability to apply many subject headings to an image in that digital database needs thoughtful consideration. It's not an easier task in having to choose just one subject in a picture collection's physical space. And even in the physical collection, the most obvious subject of a picture may not be the only -- your best place for it to be placed. Beyond historical context, librarians take into consideration the number of pictures in a heading, similar representations already available on that heading, and patron requests for certain subject matter. Assigning alternate headings that may not be the first or most obvious choice allows for imaginative thinking, serendipity of ideas, and multiple perspectives on a subject. And as we saw in the logbook image the placement in a subject is influenced by interactions between librarians and researchers, with consideration to frequency of requests for certain subjects, picture stock on the subject and whether -- what is needed, and what the librarian feels needs to be communicated?

PETER KAYAFAS: We should remember that the basis of the picture collection is picture objects as I like to refer to them. These are actually physical objects that are either available for users to look at and check out when they're on-premises, or as we've mentioned, is the case with the 45,000 that have been digitized, they can be found online. When we find something online through a more conventional search the process and the results is somewhat different than if we were to find it in the picture collection in the library itself -- the building itself. Online images or catalogs are found through user-informed algorithms. I like to think of it as a sort of highest common denominator, or digital objectivity, right, calculated by hundreds, thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of user affirmations that build that algorithm. Essentially, removing the individual human semantics from the equation. A search for the word pigeon, for instance, is likely to return in the top results, a picture like the one we're looking at now. While a search for World War I or communication, two categories -- two other categories that this picture could arguably go in, is not likely to return this picture as a result. Or at least not as a top result. There's something unique about the experience of being in that room with thousands of those folders, each filled with ideas distilled over a century that are just waiting to be discovered. Each of the 45,000 images available through the website was scanned from the 1.5 million objects in the library. And like an experience in a library in general, being amongst those folders encourages us to make accidental discoveries, just as the folders themselves are filled with things that we might not have expected to find. Whereas when we type in pigeon in Google image searches, we tend to not be too surprised by the results. I encourage you to try it later on today if you have a few minutes.

JESSICA CLINE: This next picture is of a birthday card. And it's actually a postcard from 1909. We haven't organized with other birthday cards as a subject. But I just wanted to use it as an example of how even a simple picture can offer many subject choices to consider. So you see it's just a picture of children on a swing. So it could easily go into children. So divided by playing, it could go under swings. With looking at what the children are wearing, it could be under costume, children 1900s, or even friendship. The swing is made of a horseshoe, which symbolizes good luck. And we have a heading for that -- for symbols of luck. She's holding up a glass of wine offering a toast to the birthday recipient so we could put it under the heading of drinking toasts. And as Peter was saying, with Google images, I did a search for drinking toast to see what I would get back. If there's going to be anything you know, this old or kind of strange looking as a drinking toast picture. And mostly what I got was some champagne flutes or beer mugs coming together. But actually, mostly it was quotations and not visual images at all. So it's kind of the different -- -- results you get back from looking through a purely visual collection and doing a Google Images search. Move on to talk a little bit about teaching with the picture collection and subject headings So keeping all this in mind Peter is going to explain a little bit of a project he did with his curatorial studies class at Pratt Institute.

PETER KAYAFAS: Thanks, Jessica. Yeah, the curatorial practices class is actually offered through the photography department at Pratt. The -- one of the things that's been most satisfying about the three times that I've now taught the class has been the diversity within the Institute of people who apply for the class. So most of my students are fairly well immersed in images and the semantics around images and -- but I also have had architecture majors and design majors pretty consistently. And the way the class is structured is actually to collaborate with a number of my colleagues in the curatorial fields in New York; whether they're private gallery owners, or museum curators, or archive librarians. And over the period of the semester, my students meet with those various people to talk about what are their respective responsibilities. So obviously, somebody who's running a gallery in Chelsea has a different audience, a different set of responsibilities, requirements, and complications than somebody who is the curator of the Museum of the city of New York -- the photography collection there, or indeed Jessica herself. And taking into account those different roles, the students then also have the privilege of being immersed in various archives that are accessible to the public. The picture collection has been one of the most productive, and I -- thanks to Jessica's generosity and her fantastic colleagues. They host myself and my students, every other year when this class is taught and provide really extraordinary insight into the process of curating, cataloging, interacting with their constituencies. And in the case of what turned into this exhibition called the Naming Of Things, quite aptly I think, the students put together a proposal -- I usually have three or four different archives -- different projects going at once. And the proposal for the picture collection was just so strong, that we actually pitched it as an exhibition to the Pratt photography gallery and the Pratt libraries. And the exhibition consisted of two rooms. The first room was -- -- a selection of 15 objects that the students had chosen from the already cataloged objects; which is to say their captions were the subject headings. So you see a picture and beneath that, you would have a subject heading like the ones that we've looked at; pigeon, etc. The second room, which is where things got really very interesting, and what I think is relevant

to those among us here today who are teachers, and it's how we activated the collection. We were able to work with Jessica and the generosity library to choose 15 objects that had not yet been cataloged. And we built a proprietary app for iPads. You see that in the right picture there. And that app offered people the ability to choose from a curated list of words, what they -- which catalog of the 12 -- which subject heading of the 12,000 available most describes the picture. And of course, we wanted to have some somewhat eccentric or non-obvious categories as well. If you just go back one picture quickly --

JESSICA CLINE: Yeah.

PETER KAYAFAS: -- I just want to show -- say something about the background. It's a little hard to tell on the slide but you can see there's a sort of wallpaper behind those unnamed objects. And that wallpaper consists of in alphabetical order all 12,000 categories. And it went around the entire room. I think it was about 95 or 100 square feet. And it just gave a sense of the vast options really, that are associated with what -- where a picture could end up being cataloged. It was an amazing experience for the students. The data -- the real-time data, if you want to go back to that next slide, this is an example of one of the items and I don't know how high the resolution of your screens -- -- are. But you can see on the left picture, there's the item on the wall. And then there are about 20 categories. The user would touch one of those categories that they felt was the one that they would choose to actually insert this picture into that particular folder. And then they get instantaneous real-time results of how other people voted for it. And we collected that data and gave it back to the library at the end of our four-week run or whatever it was. And it was really an opportunity for students to think about how, you know, how we define pictures. And I think, you know, as a society, in some ways, we're the measure of how we apply words to images, and then also reciprocally, how we apply images to words. And it's my hope, of course, that the picture collection -- with the picture collection, that we'll be able to continue to empower the users and the audiences or future generations to define their resource. Because it really is their resource. Those 12,000 categories came from their interests and requests for the library. There's so many more things that Jessica and I could talk to you about and to show you, but I know that we want to have some time for questions. And I think we're maybe at that point, right, Julie?

JULIE GOLIA: Yeah. We're at that point. Oh my gosh, so much to talk about. Well, actually, I'm going to start with a question from me, maybe, because I think it leads right from the exhibition. "For teachers who don't have the capacity to, you know, design an exhibition with the New York Public Library, what are some one-off or sort of simpler lessons that they can take from your work Peter and your work, Jessica, and incorporate in their classes if they were doing like a one off visit? Or in this coronavirus world, only a virtual visit?"

PETER KAYAFAS: Jessica, do you want to answer that?

JESSICA CLINE: I was thinking of things that other professors have done even during the pandemic now. A comparative search between what you find with a digital collection subject and

a Google collection subject and the kind of information you get back and available. And the ability -- even trace that image to where it comes from. And to know who took it or who made it and all of that sort of thing. Just kind of exploring subject headings that way, or finding a particular image that you like, and then looking into the metadata and the subject headings that are available. And then clicking into those subject headings. And talking about the relationships that come up between images that maybe were unexpected is a few things that could be done. Peter, what do you think?

PETER KAYAFAS: Yeah, I would add something that's I think, useful to point out, which is that while librarians especially the librarians of the picture collection have a particular responsibility to their users, the users themselves have a little bit more flexibility in terms of what they call things. And so I think one of the exercises that has been especially useful for my class, and it actually resonates with, you know, for instance, a critique base class where people are looking at images and talking in words about what those images are doing to them. Personally, I think that one exercise would be if you have the privilege of actually being on the premises, which God willing, we will explore soon, you can take one of those folders almost randomly and spill it on a tabletop and ask your students to talk about whether or not they agree with the cataloguing process. And also maybe even -- not to create an adversarial situation necessarily, to think about where these pictures that they're looking at on the table might also go. What other folders might they end up going into? And they don't even have to know the 12,000 categories by heart. Chances are if there's something close to whatever they can imagine it's already in those 12,000. So -- and of course, there's a remote online version of that. Well, because there's 45,000 pictures, I would say you could ask a student to come up with a search term and see what the results return. And then talk about those results and talk about whether or not the students have any ideas for how it could be cataloged in a way that perhaps is outside of the box. And again, without the stigma or the responsibility, the librarians have to make sure that it makes some sense.

JULIE GOLIA: I think these are great ideas for so many different fields. Just looking to have students think more critically beyond the notion of just googling something right, Google imaging something. Sort of related to this. Eliza asks, "How often are the subject headings updated to remain relevant?"

JESSICA CLINE: We update them all the time. And it depends a lot upon if we have enough pictures to create a new heading. We tend to wait until we have at least 15 pictures to create a new heading or to make a new folder. So we'll -- if we see a topic that's changed or something new of interest has come up, we'll start trying to collect pictures of that. So we can create a new heading but we are open to doing it for our collection at any time. And we just made a new one for COVID-19. So we've been collecting lots of pictures of that.

JULIE GOLIA: A lot of really interesting questions on process. Nora asks, "Peter mentioned how important library and subjectivity is here. Can you describe the process of assigning subjects? Is it just one person, multiple who decide each extra subject?"

JESSICA CLINE: It's one person -- there's multiple librarians who have the task of assigning subjects. But whichever librarian is handling, that particular item will be ultimately the person who just decides which subject to put it in. But we do have conversations with each other and talk about, you know, what we think would be best, or, you know, to consider different angles.

JULIE GOLIA: It is so interesting having this like sort of librarian-driven nomenclature in the context of a world in which there are these, you know, very standardized and rigid headings. So someone -- Marcos asks, "Do you have crosswalks to, for example, the Library of Congress subject headings, Getty, etc?"

JESSICA CLINE: Yes, especially in the digital collections, because we do rely on those subject headings in the metadata. We do use those terms. There are subjects within the picture collection index that do look to the Library of Congress or Getty or whatever. But many don't. You know, if it's a new subject, and we're trying to look, think, consider how to -- what terminology to use, we will look and see what's already being used out there.

JULIE GOLIA: We've got a lot of great questions here. But I want to end with this kind of bigger think question, which is, "It's interesting given that many users think that, you know, Google will find it. How do we justify something that's a little bit more bespoke, like the picture collection?"

JESSICA CLINE: Peter, what do you think of that?

PETER KAYAFAS: I love that question. Because it gives me an opportunity to say how important I think the picture collection, as a place and as a resource, and in a way as what is one of the best-kept secrets of archives in the city, if not way beyond that. There is no experience to replace an actual experience with an object that is an image. There just isn't. And I'm not saying -- I'm not disparaging Google, which is incredibly powerful and useful, or any other database-driven picture resource. But let's remember, those of us who are old enough, when the internet was first, conventionally accessible, it was only as good as the material that people put into it. And I think that in many ways, that also defines the picture collection, which has the advantage of 100 years of history. And just to stress again, the subjectivity and the picture-object nature of it, in an era where so many things -- almost everything is digital, is just a completely different experience. It's like teaching photography in the darkroom. Everybody is making dozens or hundreds of digital pictures a week. Very few people are making objects. And my students when they make an object out of work that they've done to make pictures, to make decisions, are really much more deeply satisfied by that than having it on the back of a camera or on a phone or on a screen. So I just think you know, as a counterbalance to our digital culture and our screen culture. There's really nothing quite like opening a folder on one of those beautiful oak tables and looking at dozens or in some cases 100 pictures that fit into a category. It is just inspiring. It inspires artists. It inspires curators. It inspires set designers. It inspires anybody you can imagine who comes to the picture collection for a purpose -- to use it and has that 100 years of built trust that the librarians have continued to nurture.

JULIE GOLIA: Perfect way for us to wrap up. Thank you so much to both of you. Just a little housekeeping for our doc chatters. I just popped the links to these collection items into the chat. And a blog posts will follow shortly with these links and a video of this wonderful episode. And we'll send that out to all the registrants. You can find all previous episodes on NYPL's blog. I linked there as well. Doc chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next episode, we have Ian Fowler, NYPL's map curator, and Elizabeth Cronin, our photography curator in conversation delving into the many applications and meanings of aerial photography, providing historical context for its use and exploration, the military, mapmaking, and more. So we're keeping it very visual. So you can find a link to register here in the chat. And you can look for future doc chat event pages on NYPL's calendar, in the research newsletter, and on social media. Great audience today. Great speakers. Thank you, Jessica. Thank you, Peter, so much.

JESSICA CLINE: Thank you.

PETER KAYAFAS: Thanks so much.