

The Museum of English Rural Life. An online collections database.*

Reviewed by Elise DeCamp

Founded in 1951 by the University of Reading, the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) houses one of the finest and most extensive collections of artifacts, photographs, videos, and other media on the rural heritage and material culture of the country. One of the more noteworthy features of the museum is its collections database, which allows the integrated searching of its library, archives, photographs, and object records as well as a bibliography of relevant materials on British and Irish rural history.¹ The catalog is quite accessible to anyone, whether the visitor carries only a casual interest in browsing the topic of rural life, or wishes to pursue a more rigorous course of academic study. These qualities of accessibility and media integration combine with the museum's detailed records and images to form a convenient and engaging forum for investigating English rural life.

In keeping with open access collections policies of major institutions like the American Museum of Natural History, the MERL permits anyone to access their collections database. Beyond providing unrestricted use, the MERL devotes a full page to explaining first, what could cause problems for users new to their system, and second, some of the unique features that can serve either highly specific or broadly general searches. These features include a keyword search that accounts for misspellings, alternative word endings, and "Americanisms (Zs instead of Ss)" ["English"] as well as tools for delimiting searches by media types.

In addition to this provision of sophisticated search tools and advice on how to adapt them to various purposes, the museum also demonstrates its innovative talents at combining library and archival data in the same database as its material collections. If a researcher applies no restrictions to a keyword search of MERL's collections, a mix of photographic prints, ephemera, artifacts, and library books/articles may appear on the returned records. Upon selecting the records for all of these different media, the full record for library/reference materials has comparatively little or no descriptive data beyond its bibliographic information and shelf location. The records for the archival photographs, however, like most artifact records, include a moderately detailed account of their dimensions, material composition, appearance/condition, and symbolic or practical uses. Both of these media types contain links within their full records that open digital images of the items in new windows—windows that permit enlargement of the objects without losing the fine detail of the photographs.

During my exploration, the noticeable influence of including library and artifact materials in the same collections database occurred in the format of the records. When a full record appeared after selecting one of the returned artifact hits, it resembled a record from a library catalog. For example, a cornhusk doll record had the following classifications listed down the left side of the box: title, name(s), physical details, publication (date), class marks, and subjects. Across the top, in a second box directly below were listed the categories: barcode, location, shelf, shelf mark, status, and category. Although adaptable to objects in a museum collection, the categories of

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publication, subjects (with active links to related object types instead of book topics) barcode, and status (availability) are clearly originally intended for a library patron searching for books. Other headings like title, name, and shelf, though, could easily appear in the average collections database that omits library materials.

Some of these categories seem at first a little ill-suited to and awkward for structuring artifact records, yet it is relatively easy to adjust to them and find the information one seeks. If I were to criticize the museum for anything, it would be on the point that in all their detailed information about how to deal with searching difficulties, they did not call attention to this potentially confusing format. Aside from this, I found the combination of library, archival, and artifact records into a single database a beneficial arrangement. From one search, a visitor to the collections database could locate a variety of material types that enhance and complement the information offered by one another on a given subject. The MERL's ingenuity in creating this unique version of a collections database, when coupled with their user-friendly approach, make them an excellent resource for anyone interested in the subject of rural living in the recent past. The database also provides lessons for other museums seeking to establish or improve their online collections databases.

Note

1. At the time this review was being finalized (March 23, 2008), the MERL database could be found online at: http://www.reading.ac.uk/Instits/im/the_collections/ad_search.html .

Elise DeCamp is a doctoral student in the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University Bloomington. Her research is located in the United States and focuses on performance techniques and audience-performer interactions in standup comedy venues with respect to the sensitive subject of racial humor.