

ABM-centrum – coordinating office for archives,  
libraries and museums in Stockholm

*Author:*  
*Kate Parson*

**CIDOC06**  
**GOTHENBURG**  
**S W E D E N**

## A brief presentation of the project ABM-centrum

In a joint initiative of the [Royal Library, National Library of Sweden](#), [Nationalmuseum](#), the [National Heritage Board](#), the [Swedish National Archives](#) and the [Council for Cultural Affairs](#), a new secretariat, "ABM-centrum". It was established on 1 May 2004. The chief objective of the secretariat is to promote understanding and collaboration between archives, libraries and museums (ALM-institutions, or in Swedish, "ABM"-institutions) and professionals.

Another three institutions, The Swedish National Archive of Recorded Sound and Moving Images (SLBA), The Swedish museum of natural history and the Nordic museum (Nordiska museet) entered in end of 2005 and beginning of 2006. The project "ALM-centrum" will end 2007. However we are searching for possibilities to continue after 2007. In what form is yet not decided.

Emphasis is placed on stimulating the development of harmonised digitisation strategies and methodologies. Pending commitment from the Swedish government (the Ministry of Education, Research and Culture) the activities of ABM-centrum will continue in project form until financial support enables making the organisation permanent. The secretariat is housed at the Royal Library, National Library of Sweden.

One major contributing factor to the ABM-centrum initiative was a successful joint project carried out by the founding institutions and financed by the [Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation](#) entitled "[Image Databases and Digitisation - platform for ALM collaboration](#)". Using image-based collections as a starting point, the institutions compared work methodologies and explored the areas of terminology, registration issues (including object classification, name authority files, obligatory dataelement and the indexing of image motif) in the database environment as well as technical standards issues in the digitisation process (covering topics such as file format selection, technical metadata, image quality, colour management, authenticity and long-term storage of

digital media). The final report - with an executive summary available in English - is located at <http://abm.kb.se>

### An overview of ABM-centrum's objectives are:

- to promote understanding and collaboration between archives, libraries and museums
- to stimulate and develop collaboration in digitisation between cultural institutions in Sweden
- to promote the use of new technology in providing greater access to collections
- to contribute to and promote skills development activities across institutional boundaries

### Tasks:

- to monitor development in Sweden and internationally with regard to digitisation issues
- to disseminate "best practices" and new methods
- to organise collaborative efforts regarding quality and standards as well as within each phase of the digitisation process ie. project planning, selection criteria, preparation and post-production treatment of the objects, image capture, registration and indexing, storage and media selection, and both short and long term accessibility
- to arrange educational sessions (meetings, seminars, guest lectures) on digitisation issues for professionals in the ALM-sector
- to create and maintain contacts and a network between central authoritative agencies and local authoritative agencies
- to stimulate and initiate concrete projects and maintain contact with project management
- to draft supportive documents which may serve as basis for national strategy and policy on digitisation
- to develop the Web site at <http://abm-centrum.se> as a support tool and information resource

## Current activity

Recently the Swedish government commissioned the National Council of Cultural Affairs to implement an employment stimulation package (“ACCESS”) for the cultural heritage sector during the period 2006 and 2007 and with a budget of 500 million SEK (= 50 million €).

Current activity of ABM-centrum is to oversee and coordinate training of those employees newly recruited by archives, libraries and museums for the purpose of collections digitisation. The target is to build up a training program in digitalisation skills within parameters of the ACCESS project in keeping with goals of high technical quality and sustainability.

## Digital handbook

One part of the training program will include the MINERVA project’s handbook of good practice which will adapt to meet local needs and translated into the Swedish language. The revised handbook will also take into account policy strategies of digitalisation adopted by the earlier mentioned project “Image Databases and Digitisation - platform for ALM collaboration”. Three important areas are technical quality goals, descriptive tools, and both technical and administrative metadata. Within this context, the term “digitalisation” is used to describe the entire process of selecting objects from the collections, preparing the objects for analysis, capturing images of the objects, describing the objects and images, and saving the data in a long-term digital environment.

The digital handbook is for the moment being updated with facts that has changed since 2002/2003. There will be some new chapters, there among a part about digitalisation of recorded sound and moving images. A working group with members of ABM-centrum is co-operating to develop this digital handbook as a part of the training program in digitalisation. More information about this will be told at the CIDOC conference.

## Background of the project "Image Databases and Digitisation - platform for ALM collaboration"

In 2002 the Royal Library-National Library of Sweden, [the Nationalmuseum](#), [the National Heritage Board](#) and [the National Archives of Sweden](#) united in a project; Image Databases and digitisation – a platform for ALM-collaboration. This project was the beginning of what later became ABM-centrum.

The project's overall purpose was to commence the construction of a common platform for collaboration between archives, libraries, and museums where standards, norms, and policy for digital imaging and registration can develop. In more concrete terms: during 21 months (2001-03-05 – 2002-12-04), project participants were to illuminate requirements for the coordination of strategies regarding registration and analogue/digital imaging of objects common to participating institution's collections such as graphic works, posters, drawings, sketches, maps, and photographs. More specifically, this groundwork required that project participants would:

- agree upon a common terminology for use within the project
- agree upon certain obligatory, common data element sets as well as authority file structure
- and policy
- compile recommendations for common strategies in the selection of standards and quality specifications for the production and storage of digital image files.

According to the project instructions, the project's results were to be directed to the entire ALM-sector (Archives-Libraries-Museums).

A number of activities from the original project plan were prioritised with the intention of carrying out the eliminated activities at a later date. The present project was to therefore create a basis for a wider, more thorough project in the nearer future. The project management chose to prioritise issues concerning terminology, registration principles, and technical recommendations. The eliminated activities were mainly of administrative character, including:

- selection criteria for digitisation
- accessibility
- management issues in the cultural heritage sector
- information and educational campaigns.

## The central issues in the project

The working groups' tasks were divided into three main areas: *Terminology, Registration Principles, and Technical Quality and Standards*. Four different aspects of registration-related issues were investigated: *Object Categories, Names of Private Persons, Obligatory Data Element, and Indexing of Images According to Motif*

Prior to the start of the groups' work, a study was conducted mapping out achieved results and praxis in the ALM-sector with the purpose of serving as a basis for the project's comprehensive scope.

Results from the project's different activities are intended either for immediate application or are rather intended as a basis for further study and/or development.

## Speaking a common language

The fundamental prerequisite for collaboration of any kind is the ability to communicate with one another. To effectively communicate, both parties require a common language. The initial task for the project participants was therefore to construct a common terminology to be used in the project.

Already from the outset, project management recognised the importance of effective communication in the group context. Past experiences had shown that incongruities in language usage were common not only between different institutions but also internally within one and the same institution. These same experiences predicted that a collaborative project between four different institutions would carry a high risk for misunderstandings without a pre-defined

common terminology. The purpose of constructing a common vocabulary for the project was to prevent ambiguity in communication and act as a source of support for the daily project work.

The first step was recruiting the help of professional terminologists from the Swedish Centre for Terminology. A number of working process models were discussed. Next, a list of possible terms that might be required for the project work was made. The following process of defining concepts and agreeing upon appropriate terms required many lengthy, drawn-out discussions and the activity took considerably more time to carry out than was initially planned.

Upon completion of the activity, the group compiled a vocabulary (in Swedish) consisting of 45 terms which was to serve as supportive guidelines for the coming working groups' tasks:

*analogt fotografi, auktoriserad form, auktoritet, auktoritetspost, auktoritetsregister, bild, bildfil, bildfångst, bildobjekt, data, databas, databasapplikation, databashanterare, databärare, dataelement, dataelementkatalog, dataelementnamn, dataelementtyp, dataelementvärde, dator, digital bild, digitalt fotografi, fil, filformat, fotografi, fotografisk avbildning, fotografiskt objekt, förlaga, indexera, kategoriindela, klassificera, klassifikationssystem, kontrollerad ordlista, kontrollerad term, kopia, masterversion av bildfil, metadata, motiv, objekt, original, reproduktion, samlingar, term, tesaurus, upphovsman.*

Interesting to note: two important international efforts regarding terminology were underway concurrent with the working group's activity. These were published after the completion of the activity and have therefore not been taken into consideration. Results of these international efforts are the standard SS-ISO 5127 Documentation – Terminology and the “draft” standard ISO-DIS 12231 Photography – Electronic still picture imaging – Terminology.

## What types of image-based objects do we have common in our collections? What names do we give these types of objects?

One important entry point in an institution's database is the possibility of searching and sorting results according to the particular “type” of object in question. Many categories of objects, for

example drawings, graphic works, and photographs, can be found not only in museum collections but also in the holdings of archives and libraries. They do not, however, always possess the same referential name. Collaboration concerning the establishment of common names for categories of objects creates the potential for conducting searches for specific types of objects managed by different institutions and from a single set of criteria. This provides in turn the possibility of gathering statistics regarding collections managed by custodians of cultural heritage.

Thirteen categories are presented as a result of the working group's efforts, together with a number of proposed common names for those categories. The categories are described and exemplified with the help of a number of possible sub-categories. The results are presented in their entirety under the heading *Objektkategorier* (Object Categories).

## How does one lay the groundwork for the creation of a common database of personal names?

One additional important point of entry into the collections of cultural heritage institutions is by way of reference to individuals who in some way are related (for example, as creator, archive builder or donor) to the object in question. Often the same individuals are related to different institutions' holdings. It is therefore essential that the information about these individuals correlate, for example, with regarding to spelling of names.

Compiling documentation on individual persons such as year of birth, title, area of profession, etc is a time-consuming task. Sharing the compiled documentation across institutional boundaries – for example, by means of a common database or via a portal – would be a major benefit stemming from collaborative efforts in the ALM-sector. The construction of a common database shared by cultural heritage institutions holding the documentation of private persons represented in the holdings requires however a consensual strategy for how that documentation is to be registered and organised.

## How should information regarding our image-based objects be organised in a database?

The fundamental requirement for conducting border-crossing searches between different institutions' linked collections is that the stored information is compiled and structured compatibly. A set of such regulations is essential in defining which parts of the information regarding the individual objects in the holdings are possible to register in a database and how that information ought to be organised.

Using the international standard *Categories for the Description of Works of Art* (CDWA), the working group has compiled a “data element catalogue” comprising of recommendations as to how the information surrounding objects in the collection should be structured in a digital register. The term “data element” means here the smallest component in a register that can be consistently demarcated from all other information in the register. The purpose of demarcation is partly to facilitate conducting searches from a standard set of criteria, partly to ensure that register in the ALM-sector become compatible. Additionally, in some cases the demarcation of data element facilitates the use of authority files and controlled vocabularies.

The data element catalogue can be used as a set of guideline for the compilation of local data element catalogues as well as providing the keystone for comparison (“mapping”) between different institutions data element catalogues. It also provides a basis for the stipulation of minimum levels of registration in the registration of image-based objects with regards to collaboration on the national level.

## How does one describe the visible “content” of an image?

An additional, fundamental point of entry into an institution's collections is by way conducting searches for image-based objects in the register according to a certain “motif”. The purpose of indexing according to motif is to find image-based objects possessing a visual representation of the concept that the search/indexing term refers to. Examples of different types of motif can be

anything from types of animals, historical events, seasons, and natural phenomenon. The requirement involved in conducting searches according to motif are that the image-based object had been indexed with the help of special, “controlled” terms describing the image’s visual content. Indexing according to motif is not a part of regular registration practice at the participating institutions. The working group has illuminated this problematic challenge and investigated the prerequisites for implementing description of motif as a component of the registration of image objects.

## What are the important things to keep in mind during the digitisation process?

Digitisation occurs today at all of the participating institutions without any higher degree of collaboration or peer consultation between institutions. This means that institutions work isolated from one another while facing the same daily challenges. During each phase of the photo-technical digitisation process one is inevitably faced with a number of decisions that will have a direct affect on the final quality of the digital material. These decisions even affect the possibility of re-using that material in different contexts and from a number of different platforms.

In addition to the rationalisation of the decision-making process, a broad and comprehensive co-ordination of strategies regarding digitisation and digital preservation would ensure consistent quality and that the material would be exchangeable across institutional boundaries

## The project in a broader context

In recent years, there has been an on-going debate concerning ALM-issues and how those institutions, which maintain the material Swedish cultural legacy, can in the best way possible fulfil the citizens’ demands for full-access. With regards to the principles of democracy and the goal of providing unfettered access, it becomes obvious that cultural heritage institutions’ strategies ought to be co-ordinated. The central issue has come to deal with how that co

ordination ought to be implemented in order to achieve optimal results. Co-ordination of strategies across institutional borders can be implemented in a number of ways. Co-ordinating the general operations of ALM-institutions can be implemented, as one example, through central co-ordination from higher levels in the institutional and/or departmental hierarchy. Today, the responsibilities for archives, libraries and museums are divided between the Departments of Culture and Education. This may contribute to what may be interpreted as a lacking of co-ordination between cultural heritage institutions. In other countries, the solution of central co-ordination of ALM-institutions has enjoyed increased popularity, as shown in the examples of the governmental agency ABM-utvikling in Norway and in agency ReSOURCE in Great Britain.

One other variation of co-operation in digitisation across institutional boundaries is the numerous projects that seek to co-ordinating strategies, where participants work parallel to one another towards in order to attain goals established individually at each institution respectively.

The networking project MINERVA1 and the investigative project DigiCULT2 are prime examples. One more additional variation of co-ordination in the ALM-sector is the collective efforts between institutions according to shared goals, with the purpose of creating applicable results for all involved. As cultural heritage institutions define common goals, one defines simultaneously that which is unique for each cultural heritage institution. This project has been such an example.