

Researchers Anonymous? How to collaborate on the study of (alcoholic) imagery in a digital world.

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Rather than focussing on a specific alcohol-related theme, my brief contribution to this issue takes the imagery of alcohol use and abuse as a point of departure for the exploration of more general issues of information provision in the field of iconography. I shall focus on two issues that may be considered two sides of the same coin. First I shall look at the way thematic information can be offered *to* researchers by, for example, libraries and museums. Secondly, I shall develop some ideas about the way thematic information might be shared *by* researchers with their audience, in particular with fellow researchers.

The latter needs some clarification. Simplifying things a little, we can say that researchers in the humanities, in particular those working with visual sources, often build their own 'image bank' of sorts, gathering photos, slides, photocopies, and, of course, more and more digital images. Whatever shape it takes, we are safe to assume that behind every book or article dealing with visual information, there exists a '*dataset*', a collection of source material, of which only a fraction ends up in the final publication in a direct sense. A much larger part of such a dataset permeates the article or book, but in a 'digested' form, i.e. implicit in the text and distributed over footnotes and references.

Every (art) historian will be familiar with the obstacles that prevent easy sharing, with colleagues and readers, of one's sources and of the observations, the descriptions, and the annotations with which they are enriched during an investigation.

It goes without saying that before we can begin to think about *sharing* datasets, we need to think about how we build them in the first place. Gathering material on the basis of an iconographic research question is not without its problems, to put it mildly. The explosive growth of the number of digital images at the researcher's disposal by all manners of digital archives so far escaped attempts at organization and standardization. Still, an increasing awareness of the disadvantages of chaotic and wildly multilingual metadata and the improvement of software tools and vocabulary webservices are cause for optimism. This is not the time to go into detail on this topic, except for one aspect every image researcher will recognize, i.e. that catalogue descriptions, subject keywords and other iconographic metadata never completely match their specific research interest. Which is exactly why researchers create their own datasets, collections of images upon which they build scholarly arguments.

Simplifying things again, I would like to distinguish two 'default' categories of cases where a researcher enriches the information offered by the indexer.¹ The first case is where the primary information - label, caption, keywords - does not immediately give away that the object might be of interest for an investigation into the '*iconography of alcohol*'. Imagine, for the sake of argument, that the representation of Lot and his daughters is labeled as just that: "Lot and his Daughters"². The removal of inhibitions by alcoholic intoxication and the heightened libido to which it appears to lead, will then remain implicit. In that case the researcher needs to know that Lot's daughters make their father *drunk* before persuading him to get them both pregnant, because a query for 'alcohol' or 'drunkenness' will not retrieve this image, which was frequently depicted in early modern times.

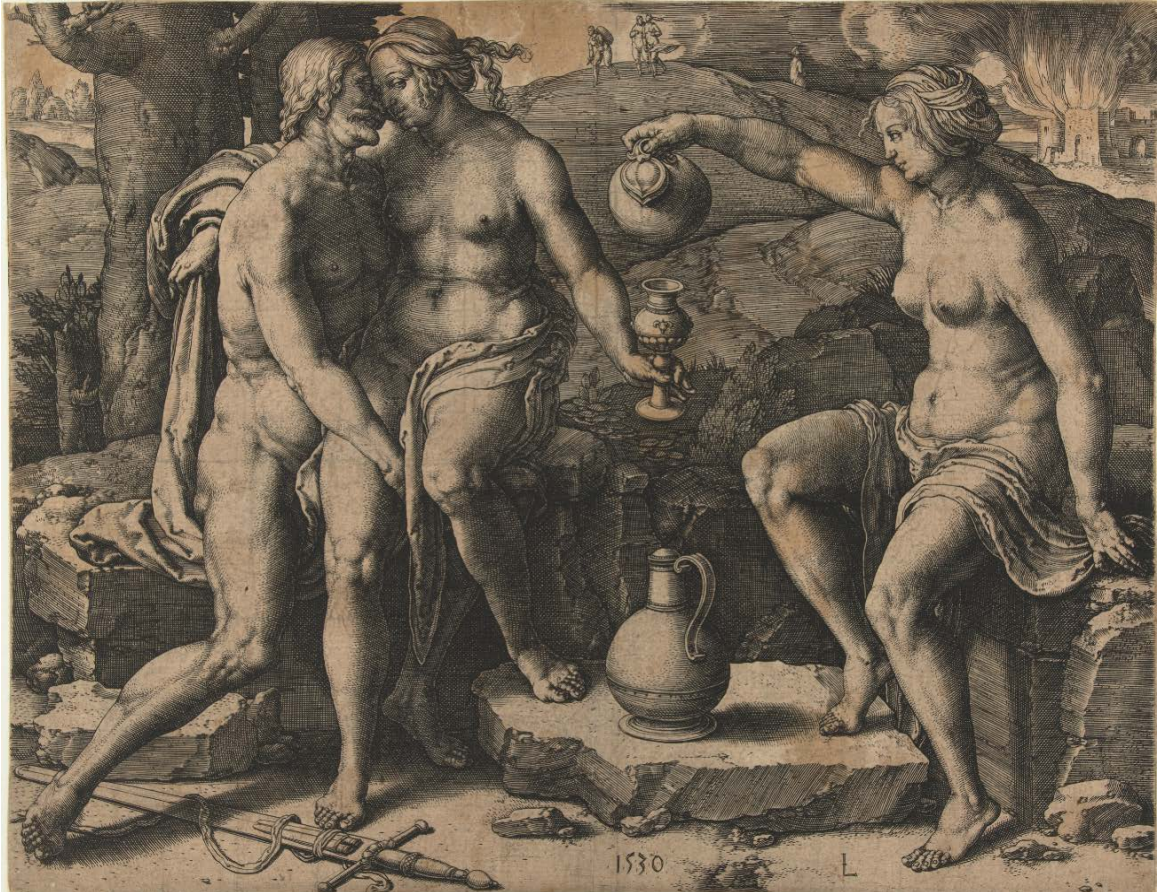


Figure 1. Lucas van Leyden, *Lot and his daughters* (1530). (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, object number: RP-P-OB-1587)

Another biblical scene (Figure 2) illustrates a different aspect of alcohol abuse, i.e. the loss of self-control, leading to embarrassing behaviour and situations. To what extent Noah's drunkenness and nakedness caused his sons to experience the mixture of embarrassment and loss of respect for their father that children would feel today, obviously cannot be determined on the basis of the five verses from Genesis describing the event. What concerns us here is the parallel with the theme of Lot and his Daughters. If the drunkenness of Noah remains implicit, for example because the metadata focus on Noah's cursing of Ham,³ the document will not be retrieved when searching for 'alcohol'. With a representation like the miniature in Figure 2 this could easily happen since there is no direct visual clue to Noah's intake of alcohol. There is just his embarrassing nakedness and the word **liuresce** (l'ivresse - drunkenness) in the rubric.



Figure 2. The Hague, Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum, MS 10 B 23. Petrus Comestor, *Bible Historiale* (Paris, 1372), miniature on fol. 17 verso: *The drunkenness of Noah*

In the second default case alcohol is indeed explicitly mentioned as a central theme. Still the miniature in Figure 3 does in no way provide a *visual* hint that the use of alcohol is at its centre.



Figure 3. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, MS 71 A 24. Gautier de Coinsi, *Les miracles de Notre Dame* (Paris, 1320-1340), miniature on fol. 12 verso: *Legend of the drunken monk, attacked by the devil in the shape of a bear and two lions*

This story from the Miracles de Nôtre Dame tell us how the devil appears to a **moine yvre** (the *drunken monk* that we see in his cell)⁴ in the shape of lions and a bear. The rubric (and the story's full text, of course!) give away the fact that the monk is seeing the devil in the form of scary animals, a phenomenon often described as one of the symptoms of a *delirium tremens*.

It is unlikely that these three scenes will appear related unless to a researcher of alcoholic imagery. If this link is not made explicit by some form of shared annotation or description, the next picture, showing a demon clad in a wine cask, crowned by playing cards and dice, and holding a sword and a tankard, could not easily be connected to the first three. Since its warning against the dangers of (drinking while) gambling neatly complements those of the others against lewdness and incest, shameful behaviour, and hallucinatory intoxication, that would be a pity.



Figure 4. Cornelis Anthonisz. (1499-1553). *De Speel-en Wijnduivel* (the Demon of Boozing and Gambling). (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, object number RP-P-1927-311)

To top off this briefest of anthologies, I am including an emblem by Abraham à Sancta Clara showing Death looking over the shoulder of a gentleman who is speeding up his own destruction by drinking excessively (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Abraham a Sancta Clara, (1644-1709), *Besonders meubliert- und gezierte Todten-Capelle, oder, Allgemeiner Todten-Spiegel* (Nuremberg, 1711), emblem 15: *Death helping a glutton to drink excessively*

Needless to say that the five documents gathered above illustrate the concept of a *dataset* only in the most basic sense. All five of them, moreover, were actually retrieved from the same online resource⁵ with a single query using the (truncated) keywords "drunk*" and "alcohol*", in spite of the fact that the first two are in the first place biblical illustrations. The use of Iconclass facilitates this.

My point is, however, that no matter how elaborate the descriptive metadata are, they will by definition leave room for additional observations by the researcher investigating the aspect of 'alcoholic imagery'. If they did not, the investigation would be redundant, since everything noteworthy would already have been said in the existing metadata.

The important practical question confronting researchers eager to collaborate is how they can share their observations about, let us say, the behaviour of the drunk in relation to their social status. What if, for example, the researcher asks himself how a 16th century peasant vomiting on the floor of an inn compares to an 18th century elegant gentleman emptying his bladder in the corner of a room after a dinner party⁶? What if he annotates his 'raw material' and wants to share his enriched dataset with other researchers, even if or, more accurately, *precisely because* his annotations do not make it to the actual publication. This question has only

become relevant in our digital age, simply because an 'analogue dataset' (read: 35mm slides, or shoeboxes with photocopies and photographs) cannot be shared in a practical way. If we have a solution for this problem - and make no mistake: the issue is *not* a technical one - a second, much more fundamental question arises. Ideally, when organizational and legal obstacles are overcome, we could link an article to its underlying dataset in such a way that our colleagues could better evaluate what we are saying and could further enrich our dataset. The real question is whether researchers in the humanities are prepared to incorporate this form of data sharing and collaboration into their working practice. If so, however, there is no point in doing it anonymously...

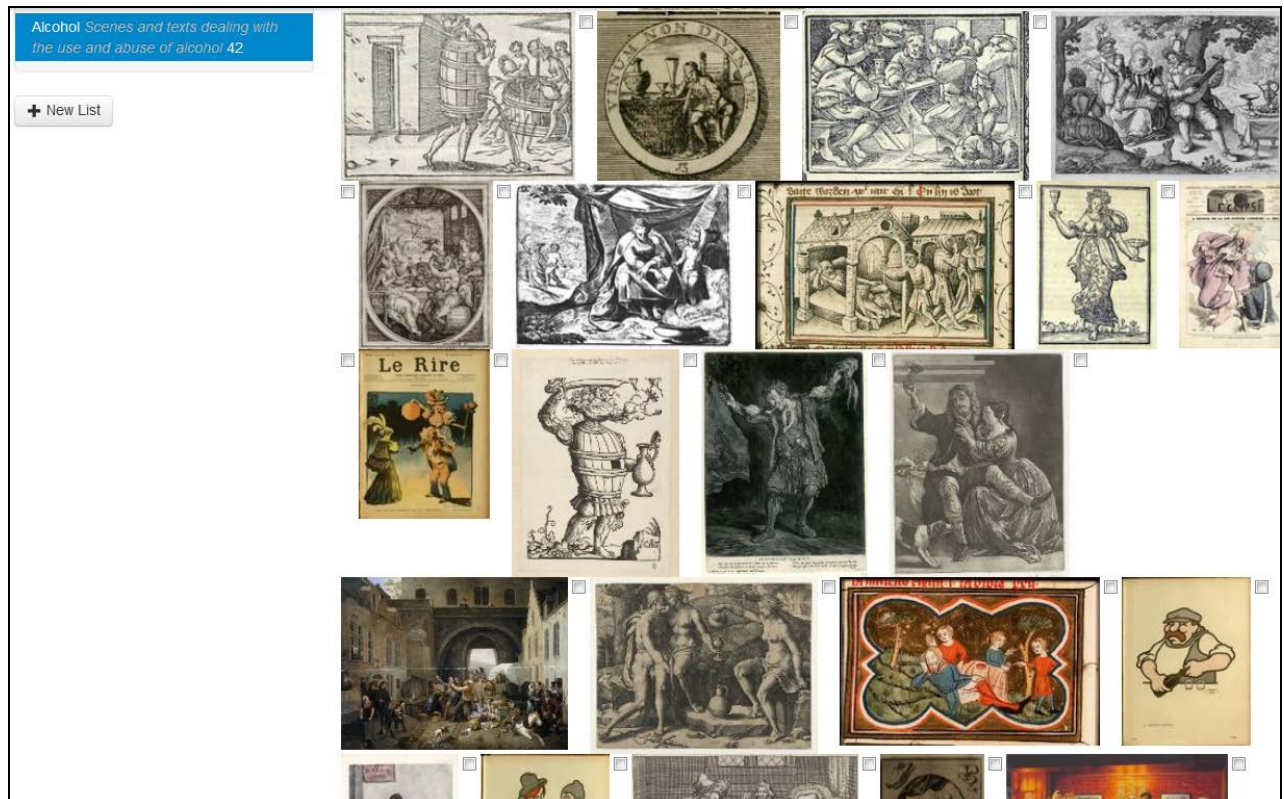


Figure 6. A screendump showing part of the dataset I created for this short article, a hand-picked selection of alcohol-related imagery from the Arkyves database.

¹ I am aware that this is a highly artificial distinction, if only because to me every 'indexer' is a researcher by definition.

² As a matter of fact, the print is described (in Dutch!) in sufficient detail to retrieve it with a keyword like 'wijn' but (Dutch equivalents for) 'drunkenness' or 'drunk' are not used in the description. See: <http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/collectie/RP-P-OB-1587/>

³ The actual rubric in this History Bible mentions both: "De liuresce Noe. et de la maleicon Chaim selonc la bible" (*About the drunkenness of Noah and the cursing of Ham, according to the Bible*)

⁴ The full rubric reads "dun moine yvre cui li diables asailli en guise de toriel de chien et de lyon". Of the animals mentioned we only see two lions and a bear.

⁵ The query was done on <http://www.arkyves.org>, and produced circa 2,000 hits.

⁶ The former a detail of many paintings and prints, the latter a detail of a painting by Cornelis Troost, entitled 'Loquebantur omnes' (Everyone was speaking), dated 1740, The Hague, Mauritshuis, inv. nr. 188. In: E. Buijsen & J.W. Niemeijer, Cornelis Troost and the theatre of his time. Plays of the 18th century. (The Hague & Zwolle, 1993), pp 88-89. For a digital, online copy see: <http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/?/nl/items/MAU01:0188>