HOW DO YOU PICTURE IT? SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR ALT-TEXT IN ART BOOKS

Mehrnoosh Alborzi

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In the summer and fall of 2024, I had the privilege of completing an internship at Concordia University Press under the supervision of interim director Ryan Van Huijstee and editorial coordinator Saelan Twerdy, funded by Doggone Foundation's Elspeth McConnell Fine Arts Internship Award. During this internship, I had the rare opportunity to spend several months deeply exploring, researching, and engaging in writing alt-text specifically for academic and art-historical books. This extended time allowed me to gain meaningful insights into the complexities and challenges of the task, as well as to reflect on and identify best practices. The internship concluded with a presentation where I shared these reflections in conversation with Ryan Van Huijstee in October 2024 at Concordia University's 4th Space during Open Access Week. A recording of this presentation is available on the 4th Space YouTube channel. The following set of suggested guidelines and practices is a result and summary of the internship and presentation.

WHAT IS AN ALT-TEXT?

"ALT-TEXT" stands for "alternative text," also known as image descriptions. It is the text that describes an image for people using a screen reader or people with a slow internet connection. According to WebAIM, alternative text serves several functions:

- Screen readers read alt-texts aloud—this especially allows users with disabilities to perceive the content and function of the image.
- If the image is blocked or fails to load, the browser displays the alt-text in its place.
- Search engines analyze alternative text to assess the content and function of a page.

A SCREEN READER is a software that audibly reads the text in addition to other information, including the user's position within a document, the structure of tables, and the content of images, among other functions. However, keep in mind that these advanced features require the document or page to be specially coded with accessibility information, which varies depending on the publishing format, such as e-books, web pages, Google Docs, PDFs, etc.

CAPTIONS, ALT-TEXTS, AND DESCRIPTIONS

It is important to distinguish between captions, alt-texts, and descriptions.

- CAPTIONS: These are the brief texts that accompany images, most often written by the author. If the image displayed is an artwork, captions generally identify an image by its artist, title, year, medium, and dimensions. The caption might include any permissions information required for reproduction. However, key for our purposes

here, the caption is unlikely to describe in writing what is displayed in the image because captions assume a reader can see the image that is displayed.

- ALT-TEXTS: This is where you come in! Alt-texts are short visual descriptions included in digital publications. These are designed for apps to read aloud, to provide readers who cannot see an image with a general sense of what that image shows. Alt-texts shouldn't repeat information already included in the caption, as this would be redundant. Typically, an alt-text should be no longer than 150 characters, as many screen readers may cut off at this point. Therefore, an alt-text is often written with sentence fragments, and that's okay!
- DESCRIPTIONS: While 150 characters may suffice in many contexts, it can be limiting for academic or art-historical books in which images are the object of focus and where an often-expert audience may be interested in more detailed information. For this reason, you most likely need to include a description (sometimes called a "long description) in addition to the shorter alt-text. A description is a detailed, comprehensive account that could span multiple paragraphs. While there is no character limit for a description, it is still best to keep it concise—ideally no longer than 130 words—to save time for both you and your reader.

THREE QUESTIONS TO KEEP IN MIND

Before writing an alt-text or description, take a moment to consider these three key questions for every image you encounter:

- **What to describe?**

  What elements and qualities of the image are important to describe, and why?

- **How much to describe?**

  To what extent and in how much detail should you describe these elements?

- **How to describe?**

  How should you approach describing these elements and writing the alt-text or description?

To answer these questions effectively, it is essential to understand the context of the image: Where it is presented and for what purpose? Who is the intended audience? What writing style would best suit the description given where the image is located? Is it part of an academic book or displayed in a museum? If it is in a book, why did the author include it? Sometimes, understanding this context might even require reading the entire chapter to grasp the author's intent. By keeping these questions in mind, you'll be better equipped to craft thoughtful and effective descriptions.

WRITING ALT-TEXTS AND DESCRIPTIONS

What follows is an example-driven guideline, in which I provide a variety of examples of images you might encounter in art and art-historical books, starting with simpler ones and moving to more complex cases. For each example, a "takeaway" is included to emphasize key insights. You will notice that artworks are just one type of image featured here, as artbooks often include much more than just artworks.

Before proceeding, ensure the alt-text or description is technically feasible to implement within the constraints of the platform or format you are using. Different publishing environments—such as websites, PDFs, or social media—have specific and varying limitations on character count, formatting, and implementation process. Consider who will be implementing the alt text—whether it's you, a contractor, or another colleague—and their technical knowledge and ability to integrate the alt-text properly. Research best practices for your specific platform, and after drafting your first handful of texts, test how they are interpreted by screen readers to confirm usability early on.

SUPPLEMENTARY IMAGES

Supplementary images such as stock photos or simple images included in a text for illustrative purposes, for showing one specific element without conveying deeper information, are the easiest to describe. For instance, consider the following image provided by Concordia University's guidelines on writing alt-text, along with its "best accompanying alt-text." In this case, the purpose of the image might be to showcase Concordia University's facilities, and therefore, a straightforward alt-text, like the example provided, would suffice. However, if the same image were used in a different context—such as a discussion on the gendered and racialized connotations of fitness—the alt-text would need to be reimagined to suit this purpose. It might also require an additional, more detailed description to address the nuances: **context is key!** Finally, if an image is solely decorative and does not provide any meaningful context or information, you can leave it without an alt-text or description.

"Best alt text: Riders participate in an indoor cycling class at Le Gym's Spin Studio, Concordia University's downtown fitness centre." Image and alt-text from: https://www.concordia.ca/web/design/components/image-text.html

PEOPLE

People are frequent subjects in artworks, whether as figures within the art or as the artists themselves. Documentary photos featuring people also appear often in the kinds of books we work with. When describing individuals, guidelines usually recommend focusing on four characteristics: **physical features**, **age**, **gender**, and **race/ethnicity**. The challenge lies in remaining respectful, sensitive, and inclusive—all easier said than done. General characterizations are necessary when you have a word or character limit, but they can also be flawed or limiting. For example, when describing physical features, it's important to highlight the most prominent or relevant ones but be mindful that what you choose to describe could also be something individuals are sensitive about. This is particularly important when describing real people. Depending on the context, focus on features that best represent the individual. For instance, a person's formal attire may hold more significance than their receding hairline in helping the audience understand who they are. In some cases, identifying the subject of an image by name (if this information is not already included in the caption) may be more important than describing their appearance.

When it comes to race/ethnicity, many guidelines advise against making assumptions unless these characteristics are explicitly stated and contextually relevant. For describing skin tones, some guidelines suggest using terms like "light," "medium-light," "medium," "medium-dark," and "dark." As a person of colour and a visible minority myself, I'm not entirely on board with this language, but the principle of not assuming ethnicity or race based on appearance alone still holds true. Avoiding assumptions can also be important in describing images from artists who treat gender in fluid ways (as is the case of Colin

Campbell's work, featured below). However, other artists may focus on visibly gendered depictions and could benefit from descriptions that say male/female or female-presenting/male-presenting. Use gender-neutral language where possible. That said, don't shy away from describing these attributes if they are important in the given context.

Image from *More Voice-Over: Colin Campbell Writings*, edited by Jon Davies (Concordia University Press, 2021), page 227.

Alt-text: Colour photo of two figures by a red wall: one faces the camera in shadow; the other faces the wall, their profile lit by a bright light.

Description: The colour photograph captures two figures in an interior against a bright red backdrop. The figure in the background stands facing the wall, with their head turned to the left, revealing their profile. They have light skin, sleek reddish hair tied back, and a tattoo on their arm. Their bare back suggests they could be nude. A light source from the left side highlights their face. The figure in the foreground stands facing the viewer, their face obscured in shadow. They have dark, short curly hair, and wear a white collared shirt. They tilt their head to one side, gazing to the left. A large, black floral motif decorates the wall. The stark red backdrop and the contrast between light and shadow create a dramatic atmosphere.

ARTWORKS

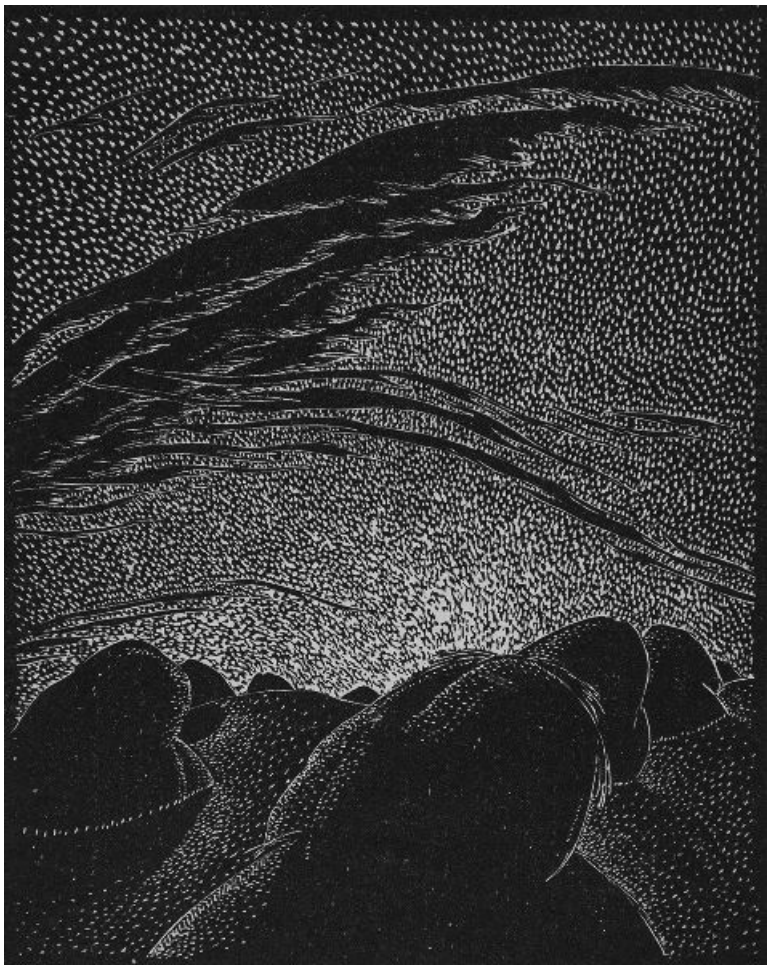
The "Cooper Hewitt Guidelines for Image Description" is the most comprehensive guideline I have encountered for writing descriptions for artworks. It can be found here.

The five main elements to focus on when describing artworks are the **subject**, **size**, **colour**, **orientation**, and **medium and style**. Subject refers to what is depicted in the artwork, while size may include both the overall size of the artwork (if relevant) and the relative size of elements within it. Colour refers to individual elements or the overall colour palette. Orientation can refer to how elements are positioned and relate to each other, or it can refer to the orientation of the artwork itself (e.g., portrait or landscape). Medium and style require a careful and accurate description, using the correct vocabulary. So, if you are uncertain, it is worth researching the artwork to ensure the style or medium is accurately described, as this often provides a good overall sense of the artwork. Interpretive qualities, such as mood, may also be included. However, it is important not to over-interpret or insert too much personal perspective. Provide concrete evidence to support any interpretation; for instance, describe the lighting or other visual elements that contribute to a specific mood.

Descriptions should start with the most important elements and then branch out into more details. What is considered the most important element often depends on the given context within the book. Structure the description logically to avoid spatial confusion—for example, begin with elements in the foreground and centre and then work your way to the background. The style of writing, as well as the length and level of detail, depends primarily on the context but it could also reflect the personal preference or interests of an author in their article or book. In certain settings, such as exhibitions or art magazines, descriptions may

even be creative, narrative, or poetic. However, for art historical books, which often contain numerous images and cater to an academic audience, straightforward descriptions are usually the most effective approach.

Figurative, abstract, and conceptual artworks each present unique challenges that require creative problem solving. For figurative paintings, the challenge lies in accurately and precisely describing details such as lighting, texture, and brushstrokes. Developing the skill of writing visual analysis, as an art historian would, is an excellent exercise for honing this ability. For abstract images, creative analogies can be particularly helpful—for example, comparing swirling lines to cloud-like formations or jagged shapes to glass shards—so long as they are used with caution and without imposing subjective interpretations. In the case of conceptual art, performance and other time-based art, or works presented as series—such as video stills, contact sheets, or photos of performances—the image may only represent part of the larger artwork. The challenge lies in acknowledging the limitations of images and their descriptions in fully capturing the essence of the work, while still finding a way to convey the experience of seeing those images. For example, if seriality and repetition are critical aspects of the artwork (as is often the case in postmodern works), your description can mimic that repetition in language. Using the same sentence structure to describe two nearly identical images, altering only the specific differences, can effectively reflect the experience of viewing such works.



L. LeMoine FitzGerald, *Harvest Season*, ca. 1935. Image from *Some Magnetic Force: Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald Writings*, edited by Michael Parke-Taylor (Concordia University Press, 2023), page xviii.

Alt-text: Black-and-white linocut print of a landscape with rounded mounds in the foreground, and swirling forms and countless white dots in the sky above.

Description: Black-and-white linocut print presents a dynamic landscape. In the foreground, large rounded, pile-like forms dominate the lower third of the image, each tilting slightly to the right. White dots depict light and shadow, adding texture to the forms. Above, cloudlike formations swirl from the middle left of the image, extending upward and rightward. The sky is filled with countless white dots, with a concentration at the centre where the sky meets the ground.

OBJECTS

In art history, we encounter many wonderful, yet unusual, objects. While the intended scholarly audience of a book may already be familiar with specialized terms associated with medieval drinking vessels, heraldry, or other historical objects, you will often need to conduct research to understand and describe them accurately. Start by reading the accompanying text to gain a clear understanding of what you're looking at and what specifically you need to focus on in your description. A helpful approach is to search for similar items—such as a coat of arms or a comparable drinking vessel—especially on museum websites. These often provide detailed descriptions that can help you acquire the vocabulary needed for your own descriptions. That said, avoid overusing jargon or overly specialized terms. When possible, include both specialized and general terminology. For example, instead of only describing a "lion passant," you could also clarify by calling it a "standing lion." The same principle applies to architectural images, which are common in art history. To accurately describe these, you may need to familiarize yourself with the necessary vocabulary, such as distinguishing between a plan and an elevation, or identifying architectural styles and elements. A little research can go a long way in improving your descriptions.

Finally, it is just as important to practice sensitivity when describing objects as when describing people. Many objects have culturally significant, sacred, colonial, or otherwise complex histories. While it's essential not to shy away from describing what you see, especially if the context requires it, be mindful of the language you use to ensure it remains respectful and appropriate.

Caption: A stained-glass version of Nova Scotia's coat of arms displayed in the province's legislature. From Lauren Beck, *Canada's Place Names and How to Change Them* (Concordia University Press, 2022), page 135.

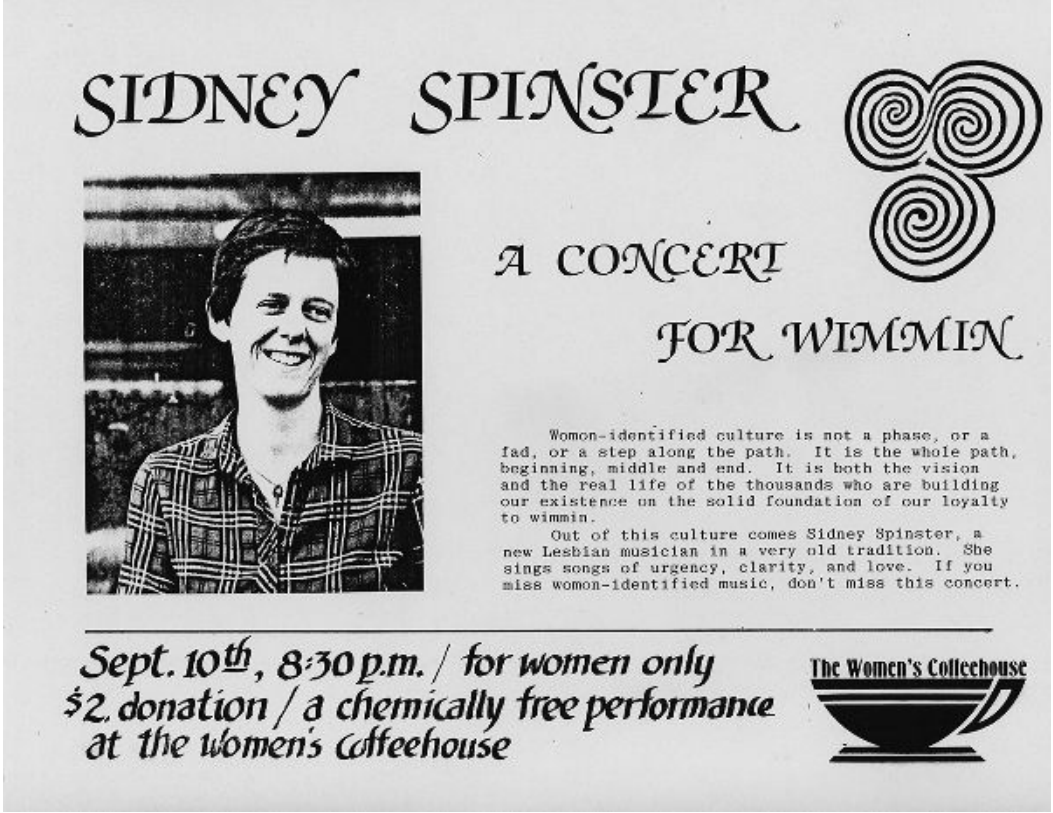
Alt-text: Ornate coat of arms features a central shield with Saint Andrew's cross, supported by a chained unicorn and an Indigenous man with Caucasian features. *(** Notice how this description highlights the problematic nature of the object itself, which is also addressed in the accompanying text of the book. **)*

Description: A black-and-white image of an intricately designed coat of arms. The central shield features a diagonal Saint Andrew's cross, with a smaller shield in the center adorned with a standing lion, or lion rampant. A chained and crowned Scottish unicorn supports the shield on the left, while on the right stands a supposedly Indigenous man wearing a loincloth and a headdress, holding an arrow in one hand. The figure has lighter skin, light hair, and characteristically Caucasian features. The shield is topped with an ornate helmet, above which two clasping hands—one bare and one clad in armor—are depicted. Above the hands are a thistle and a laurel branch. The motto "Munit haec et altera vincit" is placed above.

TEXT-HEAVY IMAGES

It is not uncommon to encounter text-heavy images in books, such as posters, announcements, letters, maps, menus, images of social media posts, comics, book pages, or even a complete book. The first question to consider is whether the text within the image should be transcribed or not. This decision depends on the given context and your intended audience. For example, for scholarly readers of academic books, even the smallest details can be of interest, especially if the text within the image contains information relevant to the accompanying content. In other cases, such as a catalogue of an artist's work, a work is included to make it accessible to readers who do not have access to the original work. In such cases, it is reasonable to assume that readers would want access to everything the image contains, including the text, and therefore, transcription is useful.

When dealing with text-heavy images, the challenge lies in balancing the description of visual elements, transcribing the text, and describing the layout and relationship between visual and textual elements. A good approach is to summarize the gist of each element in the alt-text and provide more details in the long description. Begin with a general overview of what you see, then offer additional details, including a summary of the text—begin broadly, then narrow. If you decide to provide a full transcription, conclude your initial description by indicating that a transcription follows. This helps to prepare a listener for a longer alt-text description. AI tools can be helpful with the tedious task of transcription, though it's worth noting that many of these tools are either limited in capability, require payment, or pose ethical considerations over labour or data extraction.



Caption: In the archives of feminist restaurants, cafes, and coffeehouses it is not uncommon to find posters advertising Sidney Spinster, Holly Near, and Alix Dobkin concerts. These musicians toured between feminist and lesbian venues and connected women internationally. (Courtesy of University of Iowa Women's Archives Collection, Jo Rabenold Papers). From Alex D. Ketchum, *Ingredients for Revolution: A History of American Feminist Restaurants, Cafes, and Coffeehouses* (Concordia University Press, 2022), page 226.

Alt-text: Simply designed Women's Coffeehouse poster advertising a Sidney Spinster concert as "a Concert for Wimmin," "for women only," and "chemically free".

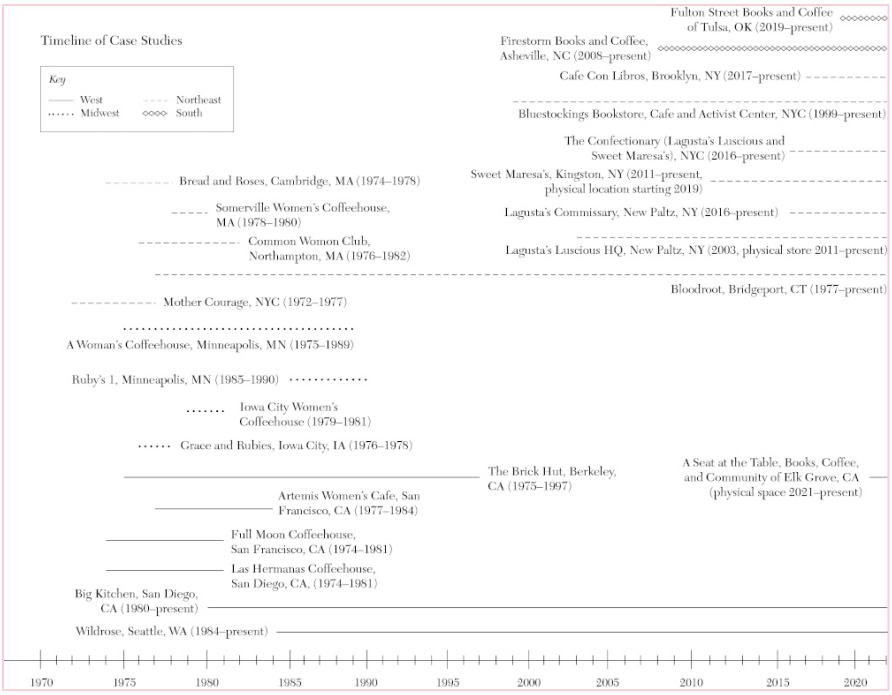
Description: This black and white Women's Coffeehouse poster advertises a concert by Sidney Spinster. Sidney Spinster's name is prominently displayed at the top, next to a triskelion symbol featuring three spirals curving outward from a central point. Below this, to the right, a text reads, "A Concert for Wimmin," and to the left is a photo of Sidney. She is wearing a plaid collared shirt and smiling as she looks to the right. In the middle of the poster, there is a block of text about feminist culture and Sidney Spinster's music. At the bottom right, the logo of The Women's Coffeehouse is displayed, and, to the left, the event time and ticket price are listed. The event is "a chemically free performance" and "for women only." **The poster is transcribed below: […]**

VISUAL DATA

Visualized data such as charts, graphs, tables, diagrams, and timelines are more common in scientific literature, but they do appear in art-historical books as well. The primary challenge lies in deciding how much of the data to describe and, most importantly, how to present it. There are many resources and guidelines available to assist with this process, including this comprehensive guideline developed by the Carl and Ruth Shapiro Family National Center for Accessible Media at WGBH (NCAM) in conjunction with the DIAGRAM Center at Benetech.

One effective approach is to summarize the key information in the alt-text and provide a longer description if necessary. If you choose to include all the data, consider transforming the graph or chart into a table. However, keep in mind that tables are typically easier to navigate for experienced users and ensure the table is formatted in a way that is accessible for screen readers. Screen readers generally read tables line by line, so the table should be structured in a way that is still easily comprehensible when read sequentially.

Although some guidelines suggest converting visual data into a table, our experience with ePub contractors has shown that, while technically possible, encoding alt text in table form is rarely practical. On this basis, we strongly recommend using verbal descriptions for charts, tables, and diagrams. This approach is also more accessible and user-friendly, especially for simpler datasets.



Caption: Timeline of the years of operation of the feminist restaurants, cafes, and coffeehouses used as the primary case studies in this book. From Ketchum, *Ingredients for Revolution*, pages 38–39.

Alt-text: Graph titled "Timeline of Case Studies" from 1970 to 2022, with lines to note locations in the West, Midwest, Northeast, and South of the United States.

Description: The figure is a graph titled "Timeline of Case Studies." The horizontal axis spans from 1970 to 2022. In the top right corner, a key specifies four different lines representing the West, Midwest, Northeast, and South. The data are summarized in the following table, ordered from the top left-hand side to the bottom right: *

Name of enterprise	Location	Years active
Bread and Roses	Cambridge, MA. Northeast.	1975-1978

* We would advise presenting data as a verbal transcript rather than a table format.

CHALLENGES

Here are the four main challenges I faced during this process. Sharing and reflecting on these challenges is important for developing better alt-text writing practices in the future.

- **The guidelines—or lack thereof**: The first challenge was finding a comprehensive, well-researched guideline. While many exist (some of which are included in the appendix of this document), to my knowledge, a "gold standard" guideline of best practices has not yet been developed and published. The available resources are mostly general and not specialized for specific fields or academic use.

- **The language**: The second challenge was developing a writing style suited to alt-texts, particularly for the scholarly books published by Concordia University Press. We all have several writing styles that we adapt depending on the task. For this purpose, I developed a style that was simple and easy to understand without being too informal. With practice came the consistency required for writing multiple alt-texts for the same book.

- **The process**: Writing alt-texts can be challenging. For some books, every image and chapter were so drastically different from the previous ones that each new image presented a unique challenge. Conversely, other books contained multiple images of the same type, making the task feel repetitive. Switching between books helped combat this issue at times. As with any task, discipline and persistence are key.

- **The inherent difficulty in describing**: Last but not least, description is inherently difficult, as most people view the world through an interpretive lens. My training as

an art historian, particularly in writing visual analyses proved invaluable. Typically, visual analysis begins with a through description of an object or artwork based on careful observation, which then serves as evidence for more interpretation. I recommend this exercise not only for those writing alt-texts for artworks but also for art enthusiasts in general.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Drawing on my experience with alt-text writing over the course of several months, I have identified several critical areas that warrant further consideration. These considerations are intended to guide the development of practices that prioritize accessibility, ethical responsibility, and effectiveness.

- **A participatory approach**: Addressing accessibility issues requires input from those who rely on the service or product. Best practices for alt-text writing can only be developed through the direct participation of screen reader users. We recommend sharing early writing samples with them to gather feedback on accessibility and effectiveness of your text. Given the specialized nature of art historical writing, it is highly recommended that authors write their own alt-text and descriptions. Incorporating this step early in the manuscript process would be highly beneficial, and we aim to integrate it into our editorial workflow moving forward. Additionally, we strongly recommend involving tech contractors early in the process.

- **Collective and dynamic guidelines**: More comprehensive guidelines should be developed collectively in collaboration with all those associations and individuals engaged in the practice. However, such guidelines should remain a suggestion rather than a rigid set of rules, allowing room for creativity in this artform, while empowering individuals to approach alt-text writing with greater confidence and sensitivity.

- **AI and ethics**: The presence of AI tools for writing assistance cannot be ignored. However, these tools are currently just that—assistance tools. AI should not replace the human eye and mind, as it lacks the ability to fully understand the nuanced context and sensitivity required for accurate image descriptions. Additionally, AI-generated alt-texts are often flawed, frequently failing to capture the intended meaning, overlooking key details, or misinterpreting visual elements. If used, AI should be applied cautiously, limited to minor or repetitive tasks, and always reviewed thoroughly. While ethical concerns about AI use in writing and publishing are widely debated, issues of accessibility often receive less scrutiny, with ethical considerations being treated more permissively and with less rigour. This approach is flawed; accessibility is not an afterthought that can be addressed with an imperfect tool. The labour of human writers who create these texts is just as valuable as any other form of writing and deserves equal respect and protection. While we do not endorse the use of AI in publishing, ongoing discussions about its place when it comes to alt-text writing are both necessary and inevitable.

APPENDIX

THE FOLLOWING IS A COMPILATION OF BASIC INFORMATION GATHERED FROM VARIOUS SOURCES, CONVENIENTLY ASSEMBLED IN ONE PLACE FOR EASY REFERENCE.

DEFINITIONS

- ALT-TEXT is a concise textual replacement for an image that is read by a screen reader. It is typically a short phrase or sentence fragment.
- CAPTION is a visible text accompanying an image, usually written by the author.
- LONG DESCRIPTION is a detailed and comprehensive explanation of an image, offering in-depth context beyond what alt-text can convey. It can span multiple paragraphs.
- A SCREEN READER is assistive software that converts alt-texts for images, among other types of digital information, into speech or other accessible formats for users with disabilities.

SUMMARY OF BEST PRACTICES:

- Given the specialized information contained in art historical writing, it is highly recommended that authors of books and articles write these alt-texts and descriptions at the manuscript stage.
- Maximum 150 characters for alt-texts, preferably under 125.
- **Context is key!** The two main pieces of information to include are what the image consists of and how it relates to the rest of the text.
- Be specific and descriptive. Describe what you see, not what you interpret or analyze.
- Use punctuation and read drafts aloud or use a text-to-speech reader of draft text, to ensure natural flow when listening.
- Do not include the phrase "This is an image/graphic of…" as this is redundant, except to identify the medium of an image, e.g., "A black-and-white photograph of…"
- Use clear structure, start with a general overview before narrowing down to details.
- If there is text within an image, include it in the alt-text or description.
- Alt-text should not include information available in the surrounding text such as the image caption. Do not rely on the image caption.
- Consider your intended audience: age, expertise, etc. Use appropriate vocabulary.
- Use present tense and action verbs to be engaging.
- Use inclusive and sensitive language in your descriptions.
- Describe the physical characteristics of people in images: hairstyle, skin tone, facial features, clothing, etc. For skin colour, it is recommended you use what's called "the emoji scale": Light Skin Tone, Medium Skin Tone, Dark Skin Tone.

- Descriptions should be objective and free from censorship. Don't omit uncomfortable or controversial content.
- Purely decorative images that do not convey meaning should be marked as such and do not require visual description.
- Apply the same writing style and terminology as the surrounding text.
- Different screen readers pronounce abbreviations in different ways, so spell them out.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES FOR ART IMAGES:

- Drawings and paintings: describe setting, subject, and action first, then include texture, orientation, and color, if relevant. The description should not introduce any new terms or concepts that are not discussed or defined in the surrounding text.
- Photographs: Describe the location/setting and the subject. Describe foreground, background, color, and directional orientation of object.
- Cartoons and comics: Describe the picture first to give a set-up, then write out the text.
- For other recommendations see: http://diagramcenter.org/table-of-contents-2.html

IMPORTANT SOURCES:

- Concordia University: "Images for Your Website, Best Practices" https://www.concordia.ca/web/design/components/images.html#accessibility

- Accessible Libraries: Checklist: "Adding Alternative Text and Long Descriptions"

https://accessiblelibraries.ca/resources/checklist-adding-alternative-text-and-long-descriptions/

- University of Michigan, Accessibility: "Alternative Text for Images"

https://accessibility.umich.edu/training/alt-text

COMPREHENSIVE GUIDELINES:

- Cooper Hewitt Guidelines for Image Description

https://www.cooperhewitt.org/cooper-hewitt-guidelines-for-image-description/

- Web AIM: Alternative Text

https://webaim.org/techniques/alttext/

- Diagram Center: "Image Description Guidelines"

http://diagramcenter.org/table-of-contents-2.html

- Long description for complex images:

https://www.w3.org/WAI/tutorials/images/complex/

- Architecture and buildings:

https://universaldesignaustralia.net.au/writing-alt-text-for-buildings-and-architecture/

https://veroniiiica.com/how-to-write-image-descriptions-for-buildings-and-architecture/