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3. Creating Access to the Vigía Collection of Artists’ Books at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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A picture, they say, is worth a thousand words but sometimes words are all we have to describe something unusual. This is one of the challenges in creating access to a group of artists’ books, such as those in the Vigía Collection (Matanzas, Cuba) at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. What really sets the books apart is how different they look, and words are our only tools to express such distinctions.

The Vigía Collection, housed in the Rare Book Collection of the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, is noncirculating, in closed stacks, and unavailable for interlibrary loan. If someone wants to see them, they need to request in person that individual items be brought out of the stacks. Before most researchers come that far, we wish to communicate ahead of time what the items look like, and so paint them a verbal picture by providing our description.

When we create access, we try to imagine who might want to find the work in question and how they might search for it. Although we do this for all records we enter into the catalog, the special challenge of the Vigía Collection is to draw attention less to content, than to the items’ special aspects of form and artistic media. Such aspects are not as easily described with Library of Congress subject headings.

We construct a foundation to access by imagining and observing who our likely users are. We try to anticipate what they might be looking for and how they might search for it. As it is part of the Rare Book Collection, we also use genre headings from controlled vocabularies developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries’ Rare Book and Manuscripts Section (http://www.rbms.info/committees/bibliographic_standards/controlled_vocabularies/).

Many people who use rare book collections are familiar with these search terms. These books would be sought by Cuban studies, literature, and music students. Additionally, because they are artists’ books, they would be of particular interest to art students, artists, and others in the art world. Therefore, we also use headings from the Getty Research Institute’s Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT; http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/aat/) to provide terms with which end-users, and reference librarians who assist them, are likely to search.
Our “Classic Catalog” displays subject information in a similar manner that card catalogs have traditionally done. This version of our catalog, however, is not the first screen to meet the eye when a user signs on to the Libraries’ website. Instead, the user sees our “Endeca” discovery layer, the user interface and search system for discovering, displaying, and interacting with library content. Unfortunately, genre terms are not searchable in Endeca, which uses different software search parameters in its display. This is one of the reasons that we have added long, descriptive, keyword searchable notes to the records of the individual items. The following are examples of five beautiful and unusual items from the Vigía Collection.

Figure 1. Nacimiento de Cristo by Gastón Baquero, View 1.

Here we have Gastón Baquero’s Nacimiento de Cristo.

Figure 2. Nacimiento de Cristo by Gastón Baquero, View 2.
This is the description from the catalog record:

Poem in manuscript capital letters reproduced inside a dove-shaped Christmas card. Card is formed of double-layered white art paper decorated on both sides in black and pale blue with mounted components. Wings fold over text and a collage of decorated paper, silver foil, and wooden shavings that depict a nest holding the infant Jesus with a halo of shiny silver paper and the Ediciones Vigía lamp. Some hand coloring. A brown string forms a hanger at top which allows it to be hung as an ornament, and laces around the card with a blue elastic cord to fasten a blue paper label providing the artist’s name and copy number. Comes in brown kraft paper hand-made mailing envelope.

We also include Library of Congress subject headings where possible. In this case, they are: “Jesus Christ—Nativity,” and “Jesus Christ—in literature.”

Figure 3. La cortada by Ruth Behar, View 1.

This photo is the cover of La cortada by Ruth Behar. The form of the book reflects its subject matter. Similar to the Christmas card described above, the materials employed are not typically used in the construction of most books in our catalog. There are added subject headings for yarn, twine, wood (plant material), and tissue paper, as well as for collage (technique), all headings from the Art and Architecture Thesaurus. As the book is autobiographical, we are able to include Library of Congress subject headings, as well.
Our catalog description reads:

Handsewn with maroon yarn; with an envelope pocket with 12 pieces of a drawing to build another image of *La cortada*. Wrappers of heavy printed brown paper, with wooden sticks, tied with twine forming a checkerboard on p. [1] of cover. Title, printed in red and black, pasted over stick framework. Endpapers of brown tissue paper. Text printed in black, printed primarily on sand-colored paper with reproduced decorative borders; titles and illustrations printed on white bond paper.
Here you can see one of the special features of this item, the envelope pocket with twelve pieces that create another illustration of *La cortada*, the author. Behar uses the recurring image of herself to reflect that she has felt cut off from her past since her family left Cuba. As you can see, these books are made with unusual materials. We try to add AAT genre words for materials and techniques used in their construction whenever possible.

![Figure 6. Piedra líquida by Mae Roque, View 1.](image1)

Mae Roque’s *Piedra líquida* doesn’t have separate pieces as does Behar’s book, but is also unusual enough that it is difficult to describe. In the photograph above, you can see a pair of feet, tied with the same cloth laces that are used to close the book.

![Figure 7. Piedra líquida by Mae Roque, View 2.](image2)
In this illustration, the laces are untied and the wraparound cover opens up. This is how it is described in the catalog:

Covers have title, author, and series title on painted paper pasted on heavy paint-washed paper. Prescription forms, crumpled and overpainted, have hand-written phrases and fabric patches are glued down as well. Page one of cover has cut-out of black crescent moon. Page 4 of cover has colored paper collage with female face, ocean, crescent moon and Vigía lamp whose red flame is made of fabric. Back cover wraps around front almost to middle, the top of which displays the author’s name. On the lower two thirds, heavy paper wrapper in the form of multi-colored designs surrounding a nude female figure divided down the middle into brown and white halves wraps around volume. Strip of cloth emerges from below her breasts; her feet, at the end of her body which has wrapped around entire book, are tied with cloth, forming the second tie to close the volume, creating a sort of case. End papers are decorated with collages of paper, fabric squares, and prescription forms.

Publisher information is on verso of wraparound woman. Body of work on white bond in black with decorated borders, and some prescription forms, again crumpled and overpainted with hand-written phrases. Each poem has individual title page with title overpainted in a mustard color.
Lázaro Horta Venta’s ¿Dónde están los caballos? is presented in the form of a very elaborate scroll with an audio CD included. This is the description in the catalog record:

At head of scroll, flap with twine attached has author’s name on one side and name of poem on other.
Top part of scroll is on heavy tan paper with illustration of naked man with horse in black ink. Crescent moon of thin wood veneer pasted in black sky, sand and soil pasted onto lower part of illustration, representing the ground. Lower part of scroll is finer white paper with poem printed in black with decorative borders, and dried flowers pasted at bottom. Below white paper, decorative heavier tan cardboard piece painted with thin brown paint and decorated with wood veneer and dried flower.

![Image of a scroll with a poem and illustration](image)

Figure 11. ¿Dónde están los caballos? by Lázaro Horta Venta, View 3.

On verso, at head of scroll, white envelope with title in Spanish and English and author’s name paint-washed in brown, contains audio cd of the song set to music and decoration of wood veneer on other side. Below, printed on white paper, with illustrated borders, English translation is pasted onto heavy tan paper edged with thin brown paint. Decorations of wood veneer are glued onto heavy tan paper around poem. On lower part of scroll, on thinner white paper, words of poem are printed with music. Below, decorative colophon with publication information and Vigía lamp finish the page.
Pasted with a piece of wood, twine at top of scroll connects thin white sheet of paper, 14 x 21 cm printed on both sides in black and painted with thin brown paint containing illustrator information, an homage to the poet’s father, and a note of thanks from the publisher to Dr. Adolfo Valhuerdi for his help in the realization of the scroll. Folds up accordion-style and can be tied closed with attached twine.
The last example is *Ritual de sobrevida* by Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui. This book is enclosed in a beautiful and elaborate slipcase. It includes poetry from her book *Haiti, fuego sagrado,* and its subject headings are “Folklore—Haiti—Poetry,” and “Voodooism—Haiti—Poetry.” The catalog description reads:

Issued in slipcase that is formed by a semi-circle whose edges fold inward to the center; rectangle descends from center of diameter and folds upward, creating pocket for book. Exterior of slipcase is decorated with cotton wool, upon which a sun and moon are collaged on the back. Behind the moon, a string connects to a white cardboard cut-out crown, decorated with a cross and a silver oval. The front sides have a collaged snake, and the Vigía lamp, held by a hand that peeks out from behind the right cover. The bottom edges are decorated with drawings enhanced with water colors, and the front is held together with two double strings, which can be tied shut.

![Figure 14. Ritual de sobrevida by Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui, View 2.](image)

When opened, the slipcase becomes a semicircle of decorated white oaktag enhanced with water colors containing publication information; rectangular tail descending from bottom of center contains title and author information, also enhanced with water colors. Wrappers of book are crumpled white paper with collaged design of cotton, fabric and water-colored paper.
Volume bound with string tied through two holes. Back and front have decorated endpapers in black and gray; author information on white folded page pasted sideways on back free endpaper. The text and illustrations are photocopied on white paper with decorative borders. Flame in Vigía lamp is colored red.

Having seen five examples of the Vigía artists’ books, I hope it is now clearer why they so deserve to be seen and yet are so hard to describe. As with all our catalog records, we strive to make those for the Vigía Collection as helpful as possible. At the very least, our records do provide people with a large number of searchable words as they embark on their various journeys of discovery.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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