

A Briefing on the Academic Image Exchange Project



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Background

On January 8, 1999 an informal meeting was held in New York City to explore ways of using digital libraries to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in art history courses, especially in the nation's colleges and universities. This meeting was held under the auspices and with the active support of the Digital Library Federation. The Digital Library Federation (DLF) is a group of prestigious research universities working under the umbrella of the Council on Library and Information Resources (Washington, D.C.) on ways to integrate digital materials effectively into the very fabric of academic life. (For more information about the Federation, consult the DLF website at <http://www.clir.org/diglib/dlfhomepage.htm>).

Participants in the New York City meeting are listed at the end of this briefing. This select group of individuals was invited to participate on the basis of their evident "hands-on" experience, expertise, and interest in this arena, as art history teachers, art librarians, and visual resources professionals. This list makes no pretence to being a complete roster of interested parties. Indeed it is our hope and expectation that our work will enlist the interest and participation of a wide range of colleagues.

The Evolving Digital Marketplace

The DLF recognizes that many art history teachers and their host institutions have discovered the significant educational benefits of making readily available to their students digitized versions of the images taught and studied in art history courses, particularly, but by no means only, in heavily-subscribed survey courses. Many institutions and teachers now routinely produce digital image collections derived from their own slide libraries and visual resources collections, both for use with course-based web sites and, increasingly, for classroom projection. It is quite likely that with time a robust marketplace will evolve for the commercial distribution of such digital images. This marketplace will almost certainly include commercial publishing enterprises such as the Academic Press Image Directory as well as commercial museum licensing services, presently being prototyped by two national initiatives currently under development, both of

which promise to add significantly to the stock of images available to teachers and students: the Art Museum Image Consortium (AMICO), and the Museum Digital Library Collection (MDLC). However, a well-defined marketplace for digital images does not yet exist and may take years to emerge.

Moreover, there is an important place in this emerging marketplace for the recognition that many of the art works regularly referenced and used in teaching art history are in the public domain and that digital images of these works would comprise a core collection that would meet a wide range of pedagogical needs. For these reasons, DLF and other academic institutions continue to look for additional sources of images other than those that are commercially available, and they seek solutions to the problem of supporting instruction digitally in a manner that takes advantage of art works in the public domain, respects works still under copyright, and responds appropriately to the varied pedagogical needs of art historians.

The Image Exchange as a Model

The model explored in the January meeting hosted by the DLF reflects our appreciation of and admiration for an image exchange project presently under active development in support of survey courses in American architecture, under the umbrella of the Society of Architectural Historians (see the Image Exchange website at <<http://www.upenn.edu/sah/imagex.html>>). According to the model, participating individuals and institutions identify, mainly by reference to the core textbooks in the field, the canonical illustrations used in the majority of survey courses. A repository with well-defined file structures and linked descriptions conforming to evolving national standards is then created where individuals and institutions may deposit examples of the illustrations for which the rights are owned by the contributor or have been cleared for educational purposes and which are made expressly available for use by instructors and students. We were pleased to discover that Professor Allan Kohl has created a prototype of this kind of service for the history of art survey at the Minneapolis College of Art & Design (see <<http://www.mcad.edu/AICT/html/about.html>>). Both Professor Kohl and representatives of the SAH-based image exchange attended the DLF meeting in January.

At the meeting in New York, we explored the feasibility of creating an art history image exchange supporting survey courses in the nation's colleges and universities, but our purpose in doing so was more ambitious. With our small and select group of experts in the field, we explored the broader problem of building a rich set of repositories of digital images needed for art history education in general. Our aim was to identify ways in which the DLF can bring its resources to bear, especially in concert with other organizations in the fields of art history, art librarianship, and visual resources curatorship, to find appropriate solutions. We imagined that any digital image repositories we create would be used as a springboard for the creation of deeply specialized image collections that support

various levels of art history instruction and respond to various research interests and pedagogical approaches in art history.

Next Steps

We left the meeting uniformly persuaded that what we are calling the Academic Image Exchange is an idea worth exploring further -- and worth testing in connection, at least initially, with the art history survey in its manifold forms. The participants have now organized themselves informally in order to create a prototype image exchange. Their interest in assuming this task reflects a shared belief that it is time to coordinate individual initiatives and, as appropriate, to fold them into a larger, federated organizational structure, thus accelerating the progress of all. The initial tasks include identifying an initial set of art images for inclusion based on works of art in the public domain and commonly represented in the standard art history survey texts (Adams, Gardner, Hartt, Honour and Fleming, Janson, Stokstad, et al.). We are also 1) identifying descriptive information that must accompany the images and a process for enhancing those descriptions as appropriate; 2) designing a systems infrastructure that will minimize the cost of maintaining the eventual image database and facilitate the ongoing contribution of scholars, librarians, and visual resources professionals across the nation; and 3) providing a toolkit of services for enabling faculty and students effectively to use the exchange. *Above all, we are firmly committed to creating a non-commercial digital library of images from which teachers, students, and researchers may derive inspiration as well as images.*