AMERICAN ART MUSEUMS ON THE WEB[*]

By Jeannette Dixon and Ana Christina Barata

There are 1620 art museum in the U.S. today, according to the <u>Official Museum Directory</u>, published by the American Association of Museums. Over half of them have Websites. However, only a few of the top museums have Internet access museumwide for the staff. According to Kathy Jones-Garmil in her book, <u>The Wired Museum</u>, we still have a long way to go before most of the world's museums are on-line. The expense of maintaining a lively and up-to-date site presents a significant investment for any organization. A budget for its continued development needs to be made on an annual basis. Unless a Website is updated on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, information goes out of date and turns off users who depend on accurate, current information.

The Worldwide Web came into being in 1994. The Web offered the ability to show images and text over the Internet. There was an explosion of interest in developing Web pages, and many art museums made their first Web page, trying to reach this new audience. An enthusiastic museum staff member who had some familiarity with the Internet, and who wanted to promote their institution usually created these Websites. It was exciting, because Web page publishing was instantaneous, giving the creator a sense of instant gratification.

There was a great spirit of cooperation among the early Webmasters; little was written about how to create a museum "homepage." There was no software in the beginning to aid in building a Web page; each tiny element had to be individually coded. There were not many companies who offered to produce corporate Webpages at that time. In Houston, the Webmasters of the major art museums met regularly to learn from each other and talk about what element should be standard, and who our expected audience might be.

By 1995, there were quite a few art museums on the Web. They generally consisted of a few pages that stated: who we are, what makes us special, how to join, and what's showing. But what started as basic public relations type brochures on-line

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changed. More collections information was added, sometimes in the form of virtual tours.

A non-web model that many museums wanted to emulate was the Microgallery, a sophisticated searchable database with images of the works of art, as well as a few animated lessons. The first Microgallery was built for the National Gallery in London. You could visit it at the museum itself, or you could purchase the CD-ROM, which achieved international distribution. The popularity of this product was the depth of information you could find out about a particular work of art or artist. It included all the works on exhibit, and gave access to images, textual descriptions, artists' biographies and maps of the galleries.

By 1996, museum Webpages were common for medium size and large art museums. An annual conference called Museums and the Web was begun. Museum Webmasters became more involved with their audience. They received and responded to email from their users. Some even created surveys on their Webpages to solicit suggestions and to get to know something about the users.

By 1997, the individual staff member working on the museum's Webpage was not the only model. The larger museums began creating advisory teams and hiring outside design companies to do the work. Other departments of the museums also began creating content, adding to the educational value of the Website.

The Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example, has a large team of people involved with the Website's design, production and oversight. However, according to a survey presented at the 1999 Museums and the Web conference, 57% of museums still have only one person working on their Website, and only 3% have more than 5 people involved.

Who is the audience for museum Websites? What do they want? Are the museums satisfying them? Today 41% of Americans are on-line, compared to 23% two years ago According to a study was done by the Princeton Survey Research Associates for Pew Center for the People & the Press (http://www.people.press.org/). The profile of users who just started using the Web in the past year is different from Web users past years. As computers become more widely distributed to the public through schools, libraries, and the workplace, users tend to be getting slightly older, poorer, and less well educated.

The survey results showed that 52% of the users today are between the ages of 30 and 49, an increase in 2% from the previous year. The number of users who had never attended college increased from 16% to 23%. The study also states that over the past 3 years, the number of Americans who own a computer has grown to 43%, up from 36%.

Another interesting point made in this survey indicated that use by females is increasing. It found that females are now 52% of the **new** users, vs. males at 48%. This is different from the more **experienced** users: they measured 55% male and 45% female.

What do people want from a museum Website? In a survey reported on at the Museums and the Web conference in New Orleans in 1999 by Jonathan Bowen, the most requested information on a museum Website was about its collections. The second most requested information type was for education, and general information. Activities and schedule followed.

The National Gallery of Art's Webpage is a model of excellence, especially in the area of providing collections information. (http://www.nga.gov/) There are two ways to find out about the Gallery's permanent collection in this Web site. You can "tour" the collection to view works of art grouped by specific tour topics. Or, you can "search" the collection to access information on more than 100,000 objects in the Gallery's collection database. If you choose "search," you have the opportunity to type in an artist's name. If you enter Vermeer, you are given 4 images to choose from. After selecting an image, you can choose to see a full screen image, a bibliography, detail images, exhibition history, location in the gallery, provenance, or conservation notes.

The information on each object is drawn from a vast database copied from the museum's collections management system. Each of the 100,000 art objects have differing levels of information available. The screen that you see is not a hard coded, static Webpage. It is created "on-the-fly" from a script that pulls the fields with information out of the database and places them on the screen. This allows for easy updating of the records, and much less time spent in managing the Web files.

For over 4,000 images in the National Gallery's collection on the Web, you can get images. That is an unusually high number for a museum site. It fits with the mission of the museum to try to offer information on its collections to the whole country, so their investment in the Website makes sense.

Education was the second most requested area of information by users in the study. The Getty Museum's Website has an excellent education section called ArtsEdNet. (http://www.artsednet.getty.edu/) Museums in the United States invest much time, energy and staff to creating educational experiences for the public. They target specific age groups and offer programs tailored to them. For the students, there are on-line tours that they can view before visiting the museum in person. For teachers, the Getty Website provides a number of different ideas for related lesson plans. Art works are used to teach in different subjects.

For "General Information," the Museum of Modern Art's Website is a good example of what's offered the user. (http://www.moma.org/docs/menu) The index page for the Museum of Modern Art in New York is very clearly laid out, making it easy to determine where to find general information, such as film programs, the online store, and membership. The page is set up as a menu - interesting to look at, and easy to find what you're looking for. To find the museum's library, for instance, you select "Research Resources." The library is included there, along with other special collections in different curatorial departments, as well as the museum's archive. The first library link that we see it for their on-line catalog. Another very interesting item is the annotated list of art bookstores in Manhattan.

For comparison purposes, here you see the Philadelphia Museum of Art's library. (http://www.philamuseum.org/resources/library.shtml) Beyond the text description, there is a list of library staff with their email addresses, encouraging users to contact them for research assistance.

Conclusion

Many Americans (41%) are using the Web. Because they use it to find information, it is important for museums to have Websites. People expect to find collections information, information about educational programs, and general museum information. Websites must be kept current in order to be useful. Museums should invest resources into making their Webpages good to address this whole new audience.

What can librarians do? Librarians can be guides or coaches to library users learning how to access museum information on the Web. Hands-on instruction is often the best way to get users started. Alternatively, instruction sheets for users to pick up and use on their own, or group instruction using the instruction sheets can also be helpful to users. Because each Website is slightly different, users may need help finding the exact information they're looking for. Unlike books, Websites often lack a proper title page, table of contents, and index in the usual sense. Librarians can also become information providers by creating Webpages that link to their on-line catalogs or describe the highlights of the library's collections. Links can be incorporated to point users to sites that aggregate many museum sites. For example, the World Wide Arts Resources http://www.wwar.com/museums.html is a great collection of museum Websites around the world.

Above all, librarians need to be aware of what kind of information is best found on the Web, versus the kinds of information best found in books. Maintaining current awareness of new art related Websites and art reference books is extremely important in being able to point users to the right sources. Traditional book review

magazines, such as <u>Choice</u> in the U.S., now include reviews of sources available through on-line paid subscriptions, free Websites, and currently published reference books.

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Web sites:

The Art Institute of Chicago	http://www.artic.edu
Detroit Institue of Arts	http://www.dia.org
Minneapolis Institute of Arts	http://www.artsmia.org
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston	http://www.mfah.org
Museum of Modern Art, NY	http://www.moma.org
National Gallery of Art, Washington	http://www.nga.gov
North Carolina Museum of Art	http://www.ncsu.edu/NCMA
Philadelphia Museum of Art	http://www.philamuseum.org
Virtual Library Museums Page	http://www.icom.org/vlmp/
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis	http://www.walkerart.org

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Comparing the web presence of North American art museum libraries and archives in 1999 and 2011. Heidi N. Abbey (a1). (a1).Â 3. While numerous articles have been published on the topic of museum websites in general, to date few publications have attempted to examine the web presence of art museum libraries and archives. Two notable studies that took place in the past decade include Joan M. Benedettiâ€™s â€˜Survey of small art museum libraries,â€™ ARLIS Online Publications, Part I and Part II, last modified April 2002, http://www.arlisna.org/pubs/onlinepubs/ssaml/ssamltab.html, and Pastoreâ€™s, Erica M. â€˜Access to the archives? Art museum websites and online archives in the public domainâ€™ (M.A. thesis, State University of Ne Museums and the Web, Silver Spring, Maryland. 5,828 likes Â· 171 talking about this Â· 12 were here. MuseWeb is an annual conference exploring the socialÂ See more of Museums and the Web on Facebook. Log In. or. Create New Account. See more of Museums and the Web on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account?