

Art History in and for the Digital Age

Is a Public Art History Possible?

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Today I am going to talk about what it means to a humanistic discipline in the digital age. In particular, how the digital age forces scholars to examine their values in light of what is made possible by digital tools and methodologies. My organizing principle for today's talk is the notion of a Public Art History.

But first, I want to provide some context for the title of my talk.

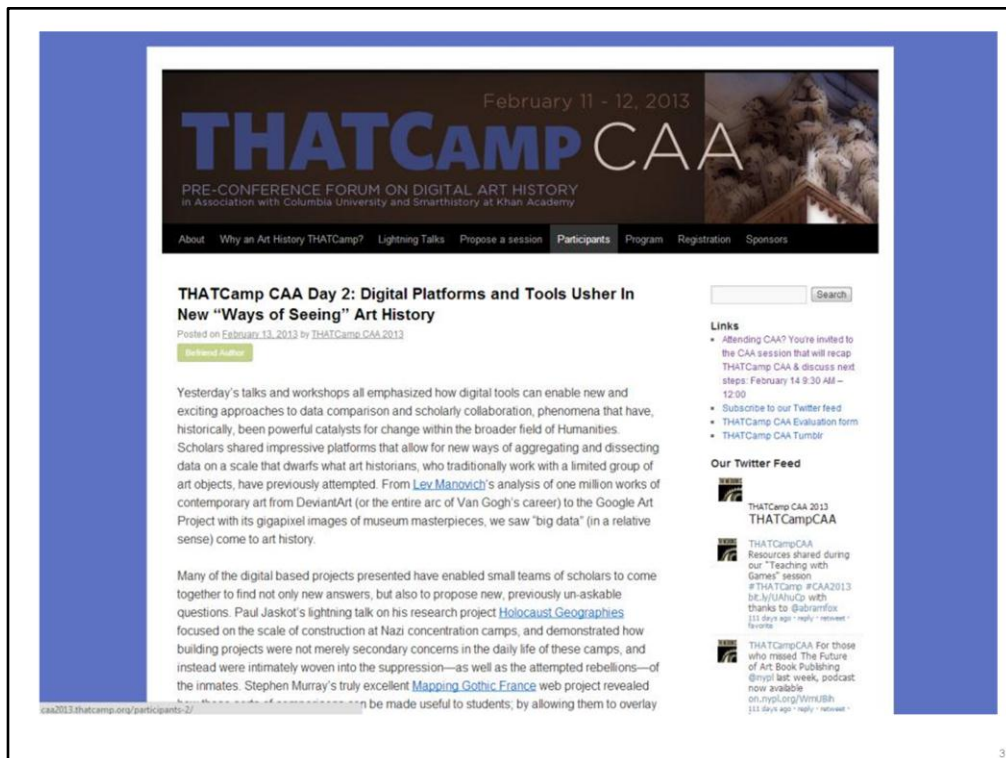
Digital Humanities?

Humanities in and for the Digital Age

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Art History in and for the Digital Age, comes from a conversation between two humanists, Kathleen Fitzpatrick of the MLA and Bill Cronon of the American Historical Association. At a meeting of the Scholarly Communication Institute in 2011, Bill Cronon was talking to Kathleen about the digital humanities, and he said that the term “Digital Humanities” seemed to imply that there was some other branch of humanities – one that is analog; he proposed "the humanities in and for the digital age" as a more appropriate category.

While Digital Humanities does describe a type of humanities, a discussion of humanities, or for our purposes, Art History – for and of a Digital Age allows us to explore the values and responsibilities of a scholars in the digital age. What and who is art history for in a digital age? What does art historical scholarship look like in a digital age?



These questions emerged this past February at the THATCamp I helped organize in conjunction with the College Art Association Annual Conference. Along with partners, Beth Harris and Stephen Zucker from SmartHistory, Carole Ann Fabian from the Avery Library and art history graduate student Ileana Selejan, we planned a pre-conference on the THATCamp model with staff from CAA. THATCamps, The Humanities and Technology Camp, is an open, inexpensive meeting where humanists and technologists of all skill levels learn and build together in sessions proposed on the spot. Generally associated with the digital humanities, these camps happen regionally and often in conjunction with conferences. Over the course of the two-days and at a recap session at CAA itself, the discussion often moved beyond the use of digital tools and methods to a dialog about what it means to be an art historian in a digital age.

Fundamental questions emerged about the values of the discipline and the responsibility of art historians to utilize new digital tools for disseminating scholarship beyond the academy. Diane Zorich's, Kress report, Transitioning to a Digital World was invoked on several occasions, especially her finding that some in the profession are concerned about the "lack of vision and introspection that keeps the discipline operating solely in the "bubble of academia..."

From my perspective, the most interesting question to emerge from THATCamp and CAA is the question – how can art and architectural historians leverage new digital tools and methods to reach new audiences and create a more open, public scholarship?

In other words, is a Public Art History possible?

Fundamental Concern

“Noting that the objects of art historical study are of huge interest to the public – and that the public increasingly engages with these materials online – they worry that art historians are poor spokespersons for what they do and for their own value to society. In a culture where visual literacy is increasingly important, the most visually literate discipline in the world is absent from the realm of *public discourse*.”

- Diane Zorich, “Transitioning to a Digital World: Art History, its Research Centers and Digital Scholarship

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This quote from Diane Zorich gets right to the heart of why a public art history is worth talking about.

If the THATCamp proved anything, it was that a public art history is possible. The digital tools and methods are there to enable a more public facing form of art historical scholarship. The question that remains is – do art historians find a public art history desirable and should they? This is the question I want to explore with you today.

Public Humanities

- ▣ 1965 NEH and NEA
- ▣ State Humanities Councils
- ▣ Public History
- ▣ Museum Studies

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To understand the current environment of public scholarship in the humanities we need to look back at the last few decades of humanities practice and the rise of a notion of the public humanities. The dual construction of the humanities – either or academic or public - emerged in the mid-sixties with the establishment of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Humanists, concerned about parity with the sciences, demanded a federal agency like the National Science Foundation for their work. From the start, the NEH focused on academic scholarship, while state humanities councils funded public humanities projects created outside the academy.

In the 1970s, this split between humanities work done within and outside of the academy was further codified by the establishment of educational programs such as Public History and Museum Studies as distinct from the disciplines of history and art history. Knowledge as a public resource was a foundational idea of these programs.

Public Humanities

Public Humanities at Yale seeks to augment graduate student training by expanding intellectual discourse beyond the confines of the classroom, the rarified arenas of academic publishing and the academic conference circuit.

- Yale University Public Humanities Mission Statement

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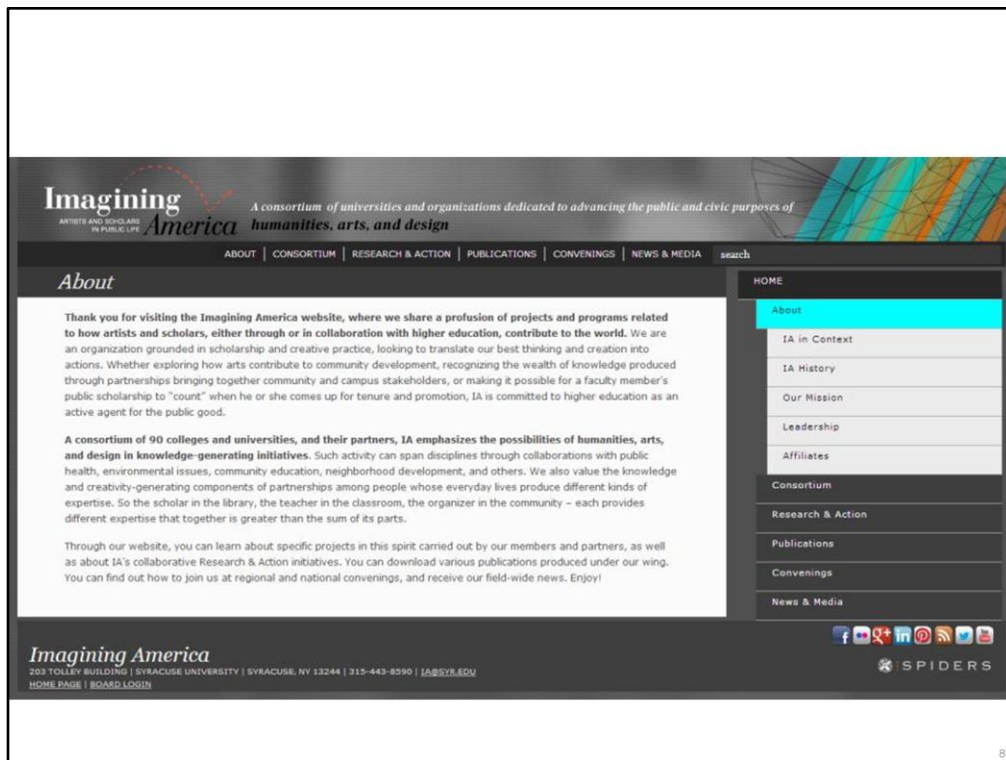
These programs are still going strong with a new one added at Brown in the last decade and this one at Yale in the past few years. In many instances, these programs dovetail with Digital Humanities efforts, but have a laser focus on the audience for scholarship rather than the enabling elements of digital technologies as DH programs have.

Public History

- ▣ Answer questions posed by others
- ▣ Branch of History since 1970s
- ▣ *The Public Historian* journal
- ▣ Over 200 programs around the world
- ▣ Training for museums, government, & societies

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In the early days of Public History in the 1970s, it was defined by the employment of historians and historical method outside the academy. Another definition posed by Robert Kelly in a 1978 article defines public history as the answering of questions posed by others, not just those posed by the researcher herself. The discipline has a devoted journal and over 200 programs throughout the world devoted to the training of historians who will work in museums, libraries, governments, etc. An examination of the discipline of Museum Studies reveals a similar history with publications devoted to the scholarly discourse in the discipline, programs throughout the world educating professionals for careers in museums, archives and societies.



The advent the digital age in the late 1990s/early 2000s began to partly erode. Signs of the coming together of academic and public humanities emerge in what Julie Ellison, University of Michigan English professor calls “public scholarship.” While previously the audience for academic work was other academics, Ellison’s conception of public scholarship is one in which academic scholars are producing public-facing scholarship, and sometimes collaborative projects, with and for the public. Ellison has created a consortium of universities and organizations dedicated to advancing the public and civic purposes of humanities, arts and design. Imagining America is engaged in the possibilities of humanities, arts and design in knowledge generating initiatives with the public.

Values in Digital Age

- ▣ Openness
 - ▣ Open access
 - ▣ Sharing of scholarly output and data in repositories
 - ▣ Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)
- ▣ Reaching new audiences or “publics”
- ▣ Working across disciplines
- ▣ Collaboration

Initiatives like Imagining America are a sign of what is possible because of the digital age. This consortium developed because digital technology enabled the creation of a community around the ideas of public scholarship and made possible the intersection between the academy and the public. The following can all be seen as characteristics of the digital age, but all these characteristics can also be seen as values of a discipline. In Ellison’s words “while what we make is important, the emergence of a new kind of public humanities registers most powerfully at the level of who we are.” These are some of the values that can be enabled by digital.

Openness
Reaching new audiences or “publics”
Working across disciplines
Collaboration

Modern Language Association

“...the locus of a society's value in the process of knowledge creation may be moving from providing closed access to certain research products to instead facilitating the broadest possible distribution of the work done by its members. ..”

- MLA Statement on Access to Federally Funded Research

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As a quick case study, I want to highlight what the Modern Language Association has been doing in the past year to enable an ethos and environment for MLA members to think about their research and scholarship in line with the values just stated.

Many of you will be aware of the recent White House directive for expanding access to the results of federally funded research. This directive has required federal funding agencies such as the NEH to come up with a way for scholars to share their research output in the form of publications, data sets, etc with the public. The Modern Language Association created a statement in support of this policy emphasizing how this helps achieve the goal of broadest possible distribution of the work done by its members.

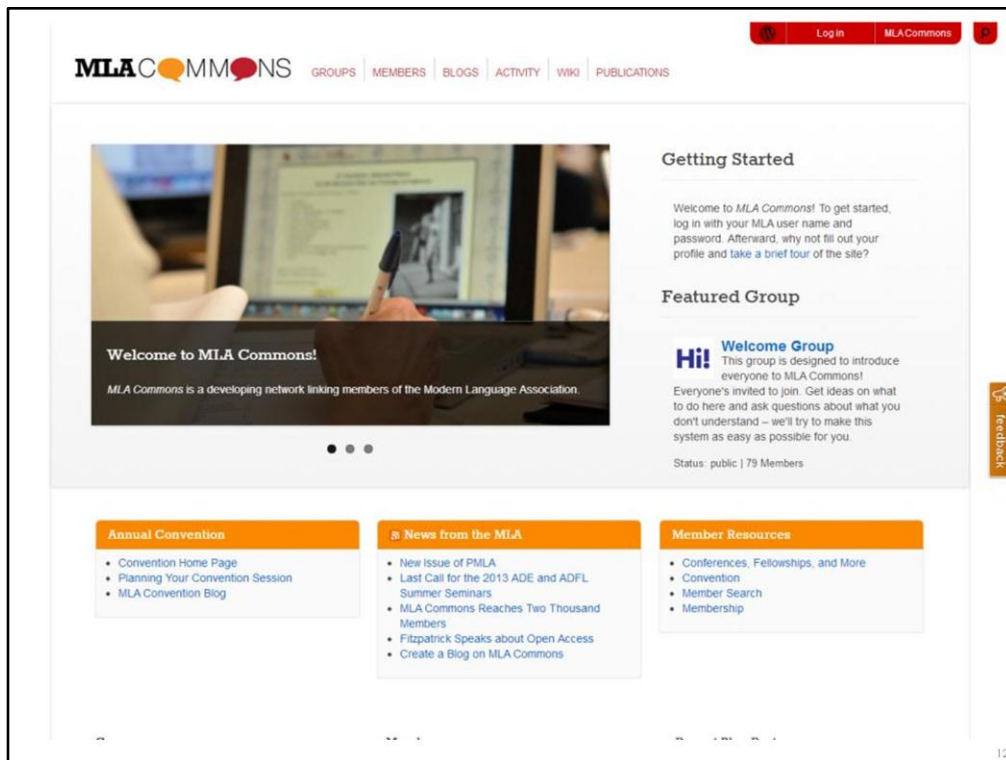
MLA Commons

"The value of joining a scholarly society in the age of open, public web-based communication, then, may be in participation. ...we are committed to the idea that the role of the society in the years ahead will be to support those new practices, to promote the work done by our members, and to create the broadest possible public understanding of the importance of such work for our collective future."

- MLA Statement on Access to Federally Funded Research

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In January, several months before making this statement, MLA released a platform for members called the MLA Commons. The MLA Commons is an online environment where members can collaborate with one another, conduct group discussions, and share their work freely with the world. Through the use of the platform and the work being done there, MLA is working with members to develop a set of new professional practices and standards for open, publicly accessible communication – new modes of editing, and new forms of peer review.



An example of public scholarship on the MLA Commons platform is the collaborative and open Literary Studies in the Digital Age: An Evolving Anthology – Ray Siemens, U of Victoria Humanities & Computing and others

The Heart of the Matter

"Scholars and the public will both benefit if scholars project the broader implications of their research and writing, and if they articulate these implications for a wider audience. Scholars in all disciplines should embrace the chance to connect with the larger community."

-Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences

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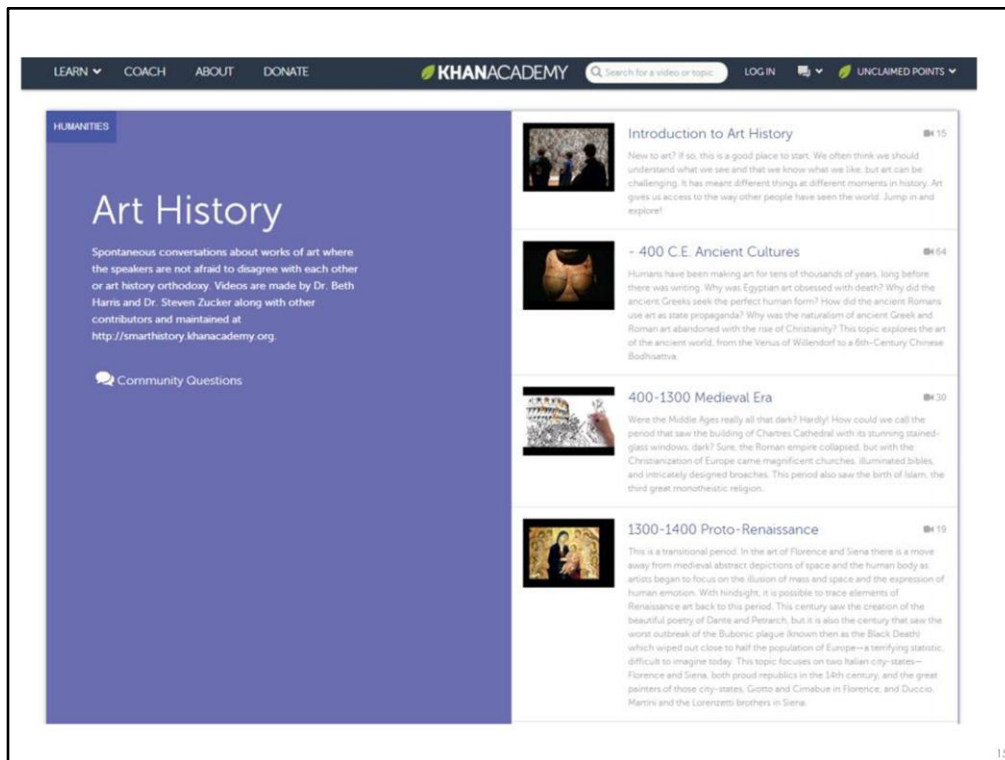
A report that came out in June highlights the importance of humanities and social sciences in education covering five main areas of concern: K-12 education, higher education, research, cultural institutions and international security and competitiveness.

Signs of a Public Art History

- ▣ Smarthistory – Khan Academy
- ▣ Mapping Gothic France
- ▣ African American Performance Archive
- ▣ Your Paintings

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Four examples of public art history from different sectors – one from independent scholars who hoped to expand the audience for their scholarship; two from institutional contexts and one from a national context.



Smarthistory was started in 2005 by Dr Beth Harris and Stephen Zucker with the goal to make high-quality introductory art history content freely available to anyone, anywhere. Smarthistory is a platform for the discipline where art historians contribute in their areas of expertise and learners come from across the globe.

Smarthistory currently offers 500 videos in the form of informal conversations in front of a work of art with over 65 contributors from field of art history. Smarthistory is currently part of the Khan Academy and was the first and primary humanities content in Khan Academy. Content is available in numerous languages and accessed by people in over 200 countries. There were 1.5 million visitors since January 2013 which gets to one of the fundamental goals of Smarthistory – Stephen and Beth used to reach 100-200 students per semester and now they reach millions. A true mark of a public art history.

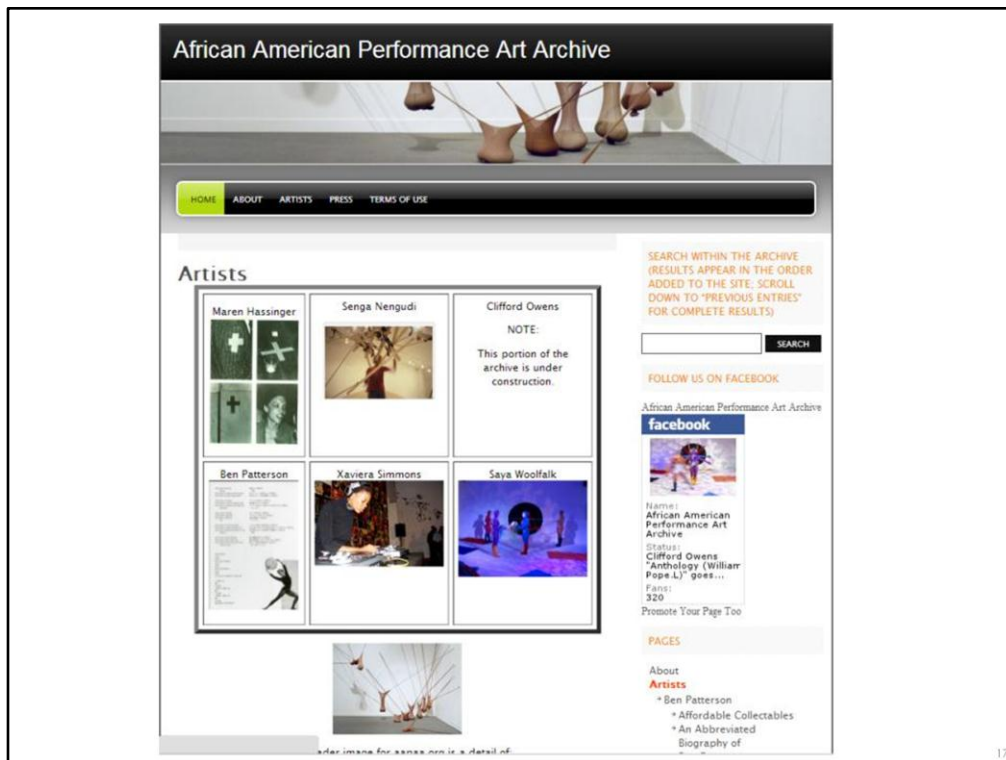
One further point – Smarthistory is possible because of the commons – images in Smarthistory come from the increasing number of art images freely available on the internet. Thus, Smarthistory uses images from the commons and contributes back to the commons through their project.



This project from Columbia and was jointly created by Stephen Murray and Andrew Tallon from Vassar. With generous funding from the Mellon Foundation, this is an exemplary early digital humanities project in art history. In fact, Stephen along with Prof. Bowles from my next example, both spoke at the THATCamp CAA about this project.

The Mapping Gothic France site explores the parallel stories of Gothic architecture and the formation of France in the 12th and 13th centuries, considered in three dimensions: Space, Time, and Narrative. The project focuses on the interaction between builders and users and it both an educational and research tool.

While a DH project, I also identify this as a public humanities project because of the insertion of the narrative feature. Like similar public history sites, this narrative element makes the site more accessible and less academic, while not being less scholarly. It is an example of how a site may start as a research and pedagogy tool for the academy and can grow into a site both interesting and accessible to the public.



Another THATCamp contributor, Professor John Bowles, Professor of African American Art, Department of Art, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, created the African American Performance Art Archive.

The African American Performance Art Archive (aapaa.org) makes crucial documentation of historically significant performances by African American artists available on-line to artists, scholars, and students in the spirit of intellectual exchange.

Prof. Bowles began the archive in order to apply the questions posed by performance artists to the study of art history. During the fall of 2009, Prof. Bowles graduate seminar built the present alpha version of the archive through a collaborative process. Students and scholars contributed historical essays to the site and approached the project with questions about how the design of an archive mediates the knowledge it engenders.

The first six participating artists were invited to provide documentation of one or more performances or other materials to be published or streamed as a part of the archive. Their generosity consisted of 35mm slides, exhibition announcements, posters, photographs, and videos.



Your Paintings is a joint initiative between the BBC, the Public Catalogue Foundation (a registered charity) and participating collections and museums from across the UK. Your Paintings is a website which aims to show the entire UK national collection of oil paintings, the stories behind the paintings, and where to see them for real. It is made up of paintings from thousands of museums and other public institutions around the country.

The project enables users to tag paintings with words and phrases. This is a form of crowdsourcing the metadata but also makes this more of a public project as scholars are invested in project but there are elements open to citizen contributions.

Public Images (Commons)

- ▣ Digital Public Library of America & Open ARTstor
- ▣ Europeana
- ▣ Google Art Project
- ▣ Rijks Studio
- ▣ V&A
- ▣ National Gallery
- ▣ Others...

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Varying degrees of openness.

ARTstor and DPLA – 10,000 images from six museums: Dallas Museum of Art, the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art (paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection), the Walters Art Museum, the Yale Center for British Art, and the Yale University Art Gallery. In addition to linking to the original contributing museum's own website, each DPLA record will link to the image in Open ARTstor, a new ARTstor initiative that allows users to view and download large versions of public domain images.

Europeana.eu is an internet portal that acts as an interface to millions of books, paintings, films, museum objects and archival records that have been digitized throughout Europe. [Mona Lisa](#) by [Leonardo da Vinci](#), [Girl with a Pearl Earring](#) by [Johannes Vermeer](#), the works of [Charles Darwin](#) and [Isaac Newton](#) and the music of [Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart](#) are some of the highlights on Europeana.

More than 2,000 institutions across Europe have contributed to Europeana. These range from major international names like the [Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam](#), the [British Library](#) and the [Louvre](#) to regional archives and local museums from every member of the [European Union](#).^[2] Together, their assembled collections let users explore Europe's cultural and scientific heritage from prehistory to the modern day.

The Rijksmuseum recently released many images of artworks from the collection in high resolution on the museum website.

Barriers in Art History

- ▣ Copyright | legal contracts
- ▣ Promotion and tenure
- ▣ Solitary nature of scholarship
- ▣ No institutions modeling openness
- ▣ Funders do not require openness

Provocations

- ▣ Is there a public art history?
- ▣ What and who is art history for in a digital age?
- ▣ What are the core values of the discipline of art history in the 21st century?
- ▣ Do art historians have a responsibility to the public?

Questions?

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