

Artsy, Technology, and the Power of Public Access

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It is a pleasure to be here, thank you Trudy [Jacoby], Princeton University, and the Index of Christian Art for inviting me to present along with such distinguished experts and scholars. It's especially exciting to think about the future of the digital world of art history in the context of what we are doing at Artsy. [Artsy](#) is a free resource for learning about and collecting art. Our mission is to make all the world's art accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Founded by Carter Cleveland while he was an engineering student here at Princeton University, Artsy launched its website to the public in October 2012.

Artsy Today

Artsy now makes available more than 200,000 images of art, architecture, and design from all time periods and cultures; and we provide the largest freely accessible online database of contemporary art.¹ Since our launch, we have reached more than seven million unique art lovers and collectors in 200 countries—from students in Iran to curators in Hong Kong to collectors in Berlin. Artsy now partners with 2,500 leading galleries (e.g., [Gagosian Gallery](#), White Cube, Galerie Perrotin, Long March Space), 300 major museums and institutions (e.g., [Guggenheim Museum](#), SFMOMA, Getty Museum, British Museum, V&A, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, RISD Museum, Princeton University Art Museum, Fondation Beyeler, Calder Foundation, Diebenkorn Foundation), and 35 influential biennials and art fairs (e.g., [Venice Biennale](#), Gwangju Biennale, The Armory Show, ArtRio, Contemporary Istanbul, Moving Image Fair). By combining educational and commercial content on the same platform, Artsy aggregates art information and disseminates it in ways never before possible.

We have, in two short years, broken down several cultural, social, economic, and intellectual property barriers to art information. Artsy now makes accessible art information that has been often limited to certain users—whether they be students and scholars with access to research resources, collectors with connections to exclusive galleries and auction houses, curators with personal relationships with artists and dealers, or other ways in which art is frequently seen as something that is limited to “those in the know.” As a technology startup company, Artsy's engineering, design, and vision for unifying art information has radically transformed the way we can think about the future of promoting the appreciation and the collecting of art.

¹ According to publisher data sources, more than 80% of art history students in United States state that their focus is “contemporary art.”

Changes in the Cultural Landscape

As much as I would like to think that all of this was made possible by me and the Artsy team, there are clearly other large-scale changes in the cultural landscape that have enabled Artsy to achieve so much so quickly. The first major sea change is the nearly universal adoption of social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube, by museums, artists, and cultural institutions.² International audiences now begin their discovery of any museum with the museum website, and while these technology platforms are also spaces for sharing baby videos and vacation photos, they have without question become powerful channels for reaching the public, and certainly younger demographics worldwide. They have also, like Google Images, served up commercial and non-commercial content to end users on the same platform. This mingling of commercial and non-commercial online has been taking place since the advent of the Web.

The second trend is the incredibly fashionable status technology has attained in popular culture (such as Net-a-Porter's promotion of Diane von Furstenberg's limited edition eyewear Google Glass). Being passionate about technology is no longer limited to "tech geeks" coding in a dark lab somewhere, but rather, nearly everyone is an avid consumer of technology. According to the May 2014 mobile phone forecast from the International Data Corporation (IDC) Worldwide Quarterly Mobile Phone Tracker, worldwide smartphone shipments will reach a total of 1.2 billion units in 2014, marking a 23.1% increase from the 1.0 billion units shipped in 2013.³ The predominant mode of communication and data sharing will be through new technologies, and cultural institutions know that in order to remain relevant their exhibitions, programs, and collections must be accessible online.

Another art world development is the partnering of major brands with mega artists, such as Jeff Koons recent collaboration with H&M coinciding with [Jeff Koons: A Retrospective](#) at the Whitney Museum of American Art. We saw a similar collaboration with Louis Vuitton and [Takashi Murakami](#) to produce a series of handbags which were on sale during the Brooklyn Museum @Murakami exhibition in 2008. Artists are straddling the fine art world and the commercial world of luxury brands and fashion brands in a Warholian style that positions art in the public sphere even beyond what museums can do for artists. Museums, galleries, and artists recognize these important opportunities to attract visitors and buyers. The bright lines separating commercial from non-commercial activities have long been blurred by artists themselves—from the time artists received commissions from popes and emperors to today where those commissions are originating from giant corporations.

In addition, recognizing the power of the Internet to expose art collections to wider audiences, numerous institutions have adopted open access policies for images without any restrictions on educational or commercial use, including the [National Gallery of Art](#), Rijksmuseum, LACMA, Walters Art Museum, Yale University, J. Paul Getty Trust, and others. These open access policies represent a complete reversal of photographic rights and reproduction policies of previous decades. While many museums are still holding fast to those old gatekeeping practices, new leadership within cultural organizations is now shifting toward free, unrestricted access to images. [The Getty](#) states that it adopted an Open Content Program "because we recognized the need to share images of works of art for free and without restriction, so that all those who create or appreciate art—scholars, artists, art lovers, and entrepreneurs—will have greater access to high-quality digital images for their studies and

² Many artists are also selling artwork directly via Instagram. See Vogue May 2014: <http://www.vogue.com/culture/article/buying-and-selling-art-on-instagram/#1>

³ IDC Smartphone analysis, press release, May 28, 2014: <http://www.idc.com/getdoc.jsp?containerId=prUS24857114>

projects.”⁴ The trend to make art images and associated data freely available to the public for any use is now more common, and has also resulted in numerous Linked Open Data projects for cultural heritage.⁵ This also signals a change in how curators, connoisseurs, and scholars think about sharing art historical scholarship and data with the public—a very encouraging development in our field.

Last but not least, the recent influx of venture capital funding in educational technology companies such as Coursera signals that education, particularly higher education, is also ripe for disruption and profit-making. To further drive home the point that education and commerce have already merged, Coursera recently hired former Yale University President Richard Levin as Chief Executive. Coursera is a for-profit educational technology company. As of April 2014, it has 7.1 million users in 641 courses from 108 institutions.⁶ Universities, museums, and art schools are actively running courses on Coursera and while there are challenges to this mode of learning, the vast number of learners and the potential for global impact is already being felt by well-established universities and colleges, including the Ivy League schools.

Design and Experience

As art images continue to flood the Web at an exponential pace, there remains the challenge of making art *accessible*—that is, not only can art be free to view online, but we can also aim to make art searchable and easy to explore for people who do not have a specialized knowledge of art history. This desire to make art accessible to anyone with an Internet connection is the original impetus behind Artsy. Inspired by Pandora, the Internet radio site, which recommends music you might like based on songs you already enjoy, Artsy uses metadata and search algorithms to make art recommendations to users so that no matter what level of expertise the user has in art, he will be able to discover art on Artsy.

Similar to Pandora’s Music Genome Project, The Art Genome Project at Artsy is our metadata think tank to map the characteristics of art and to create pathways for experts and non-experts alike to serendipitously discover, learn about, and collect art. The Art Genome Project now utilizes more than 1,000 “genes” or categories to recommend art to users—from [Abstract Expressionism](#) to [Splattered/Dripped](#), from [Minimalism](#) to [Striped](#), from [Contemporary Figurative Painting](#) to [Animals](#) or [Food](#). The categories include traditional art historical terms as well as everyday vocabulary anyone would use to describe art. It is also just as easy to look at portraits across time periods going from [Vermeer](#) to [Chuck Close](#) to [Mickalene Thomas](#) and to explore more than 25,000 artists on Artsy.

Most users begin their search on Artsy by artist name. For example, if you were to start your search with [Andy Warhol](#) (most people know Andy Warhol), you would land on Warhol’s page on Artsy. From there, you will find a short artist biography, related categories (Glamour, Silkscreen, Pop Art, etc.), works for sale (Leila Heller Gallery, Sims Reed Gallery), works from museums (SFMOMA, Fondation Beyeler, Dallas Museum of Art, Art Institute of Chicago), posts featured by Artsy to provide extra information about the artist (written by Artsy Editorial, Artsy staff, or by the community), shows at galleries and museums all around the world exhibiting Warhol works, and related artists ([James Rosenquist](#), [Tom Wesselmann](#), [Richard Hamilton](#), [Roy Lichtenstein](#)) and related contemporary artists.

⁴ <http://www.getty.edu/about/opencontent.html>

⁵ Linked Data <http://linkeddata.org/>

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coursera>

On Artsy, a single search for one artist provides a rich learning experience that requires no prior knowledge of art history. From a single search, any user can discover galleries, museums, exhibitions, articles, and related artists. From each image, the user can keep discovering new associations, new artists, and new visual, stylistic, and formal relationships. And though the engineering and search algorithms are invisible to the user, one critical piece to the user experience is the beauty of the design.

Artsy's award-winning design is spearheaded by Robert Lenne, former principal interaction designer at IDEO. Artsy's goal is to provide an online experience that is beautiful, engaging, and worthy of the art, architecture, and design we are sharing with the public. The site design foregrounds the art on every page and makes the contextual info and industry knowledge secondary to the user's visual experience of the art. The first thing you see on Artsy is big, beautiful images of art, architecture, and design. I believe design of the site speaks to our mission more clearly than any presentation, press article, or description. The Artsy website itself embodies Artsy's commitment to making art accessible on the Internet.

Artsy Services for Partners

Making art accessible is, of course, not only about front-end design, but also about the tools and services we provide to our partner galleries, art fairs, museums, and institutions. We recently launched personalized emails for our users so that as they favorite various artists, galleries, and museums they will be automatically notified of any new exhibitions or works that are published to Artsy so they are not getting spam, but rather customized information they are interested in receiving.

We also enable each partner to set up their own page to promote their exhibitions, programs, and collections. Our partners may showcase exhibitions using our special panoramic installation view, and also to use their page as an exhibition archive for past exhibitions if they wish. For many exhibitions, the installation view is critical. Recently, when we featured The Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China," Maxwell Hearn talked about how he is now juxtaposing contemporary artworks in the traditional [Asian art galleries](#) and how this has attracted new audiences. Having the installation views becomes critical to the dialogue that curators are trying to share with visitors and we are thrilled to be able to give a taste of that online.

Museums have also said that being able to tell stories about their collections is critical to their educational mission. The Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt: National Design Museum uses Artsy posts to have curators post about objects in their collections. The Fondation Beyeler posted about their collaboration with Olafur Eliasson for Art Basel Miami Beach. And Princeton University Art Museum used Posts to talk about their exhibition of [Japanese prints](#). The posting layer also enables partners to upload their own event photos, videos, as well as post with any of the images already in the Artsy database.

As the database grows richer with content from galleries and museums, we are also serving the research needs of curators, scholars, and other academics. When [Dedalus Foundation](#), established by Robert Motherwell, joined Artsy they explained that they had been using Artsy to research their catalog raisonné because they needed to see all the Motherwell works that were on the market, not only the ones in public collections. We have also had museum directors and curators email me to say that Artsy has been indispensable for our coverage of contemporary art galleries and major art world events, such as the 55th Venice Biennale.

We have also made a serious investment to build out [Artsy Education](#) as a resource for students, teachers, and educators. In fall 2013, we partnered with the New York City Department of Education on their new digital literacy program for high school students. We also now make more than 25,000 open access images freely downloadable (no registration required). This September, Artsy will collaborate with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation to launch a new [Emerging Curator Competition](#). Open to students all over the world, students may curate exhibition proposals on Artsy posts with any images from Artsy's institutional partners. The judges will be: Christopher Rauschenberg, John Elderfield, Shirin Neshat, Sarah Roberts, and Branden Joseph. The winning student will be able to mount an actual exhibition with Rauschenberg works loaned from the Foundation. It is an astounding way for a young curator to kick off her curatorial career.

Finally, Artsy provides each partner with an Artsy CMS account, which allows partners to control their digital assets 24/7. Along with the ability to edit metadata and images at any time, Artsy CMS generates monthly analytics and also syncs with Folio, Artsy's free iPad app for partners. Folio enables educators, curators, docents, and others to take their images with them throughout the galleries or traveling to meet with other colleagues. Artsy CMS also enables institutional partners to upload works for e-commerce or benefit auctions to support their fundraising efforts. To date, Artsy Auctions has raised significant funds for TWO x TWO for AIDS and Art, Watermill Center, Public Art Fund, Independent Curators International, Brooklyn Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art, and more.

Conclusion

This is an exciting time in the field of art history because so many artists, scholars, curators, museums, and institutions are passionate about sharing their exhibitions and collections with audiences worldwide. We have already witnessed seismic shifts in the cultural landscape that have enabled us to move from a closed system of restricting access to art and art knowledge, to one that is more inclusive and takes advantage of the opportunities for large-scale engagement that digital technology offers us. I encourage all of us to make efforts to make our scholarship, our collections, and art knowledge available on publicly accessible platforms. By doing so, we are fostering the next generation of curators, students, collectors, and patrons of the arts.

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For more information: [Artsy.net](#)



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