

## DIGITISATION AND MATERIALITY FORUM

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**The ‘Factory’ Project is currently working towards digitising and creating/improving catalogue records for a large section of the paper-based art objects, including Prints, Drawings, Watercolours, Designs, Photographs, Wallpapers, and Ephemera held in the Word and Image Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum, much of which dates from the nineteenth century.**

In making a virtual collection, we are making a new object; in using digital referents, even within a ‘serious’ functional structure and format, with a prescribed use and aim, such as a catalogue, we are creating a new art object. In the history of the V & A, there is an established trend for both ‘reference’ material and finding aids/object documentation to gradually become ‘museum objects’ in their own right, which then in turn are preserved and documented. The history of attitudes towards our Photography collection is a dramatic case in point — the major early photographs we now display in our galleries were originally kept in the Library and seen as reference material. Similarly, the contents of the most famous and popular galleries in the V & A — the Cast Courts — are referents for earlier ‘authentic’ objects, and were originally viewed as secondary to other more uniquely engendered objects in the collection, but are now most definitely museum objects of the highest order. It is fascinating to be able to observe and compare the different trajectories of the original Trajan’s Column, and the various casts made from it in the nineteenth century which are now housed in several museums around the world (including the V & A) since the casts were first made. Such examples prove that digitised online collections do fit in within the tradition of re-representation of objects, and the creation of referents.

A virtual collection is an entity entirely separate from the objects it features images of; the images are not the object, they are new objects in themselves, with new material properties. Digitised images of museum objects are going to be a brilliant research resource, but I also think they will become a new artistic material, and perhaps, taken as a whole, the virtual collection will eventually become a museum object in its own right.

I don't subscribe to the fear that digitising collections will reduce visitor numbers to galleries; people will always wish to witness the original unique material properties of actual objects, and witness their 'aura'. Digital images still don't provide trustworthy information about the weight of objects, their flexibility, texture, and size. We subconsciously experience very different feelings toward an object that is so light and delicate that we have to breathe shallowly in order not to blow it from our grasp, or one that is large, flapping and unwieldy, and needs both arms to support it, for example. In digital images, everything is computer-screen size, and obediently magnifies and shrinks itself at the touch of a button. Size is implied, or stated in accompanying text, but the real object has to be imagined to scale from a digital image.

In most cases, having a digital image of an object does not diminish the 'aura' of the actual object when viewed in the flesh (though a poor quality image could dissuade people from seeking out first-hand viewing of the object), but there is little or no 'aura' felt when viewing the digital referent. This may change in future, as digital art becomes more mainstream, and we encounter more art that is intentionally digital, but at present we have little difficulty in differentiating a digital referent from a digital artwork, and the line between a documentary item (such as a digital referent), and a work of digital art (that is to say, an original artwork created expressly in a digital format) is usually easy to discern. When viewing digital referents we know that they give incomplete sensory information about the object that they represent, so we forbear from criticism on certain digitally intangible factors until we can experience the actual object. In digital art, the materiality of the work as viewed on computer/data projector is potentially more authentically experienced as the artist intended, and is therefore open to criticism on its tangible nature.

It is interesting to consider the different ways in which we view digital referents of objects we have seen in the flesh, and digital referents of objects we have never seen in actuality. The brain has such amazing capacities for recognition that we 'see' things in digital referents of objects we know well that are not visible in the image (but we know are there on the actual object) in the same way that we recognise music we know being played on a radio with lots of static — if we know

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the tune, it plays in our minds and we ‘hear’ it in full as our brain fills in the gaps, whereas a tune we are not familiar with becomes impossible to decipher. In this way, digital referents, even though they give incomplete information, can be used very effectively as understudies or ciphers for the actual objects for someone who knows them well — I envisage this to be how curators interact with digitised collections. With viewers unfamiliar with the ‘actual’ object, digital referents can still give a detailed and truthful appropriation of the appearance of an object, and therefore provide enough data to answer many queries not easily resolved textually. There are, however, still issues surrounding the authenticity of digital referents, even beyond the material questions addressed earlier, as some objects just don’t photograph well (daguerreotypes and holograms spring to mind), and it is widely accepted now that photography, even when digital, is as subjective as any other art form. Therefore, when viewing digital referents, especially digital images of objects not digitally engendered, distance is created by viewing on computer screen, and also by distrust or cynicism about the information portrayed.

What the digital referent loses in ‘aura’ it gains in other ways: images can be reproduced indefinitely; they can be viewed by a million people at once; they can be used as ‘understudies’ for their actual counterparts (thereby aiding the objects’ material survival); they can be magnified and manipulated without permanent harm. I also believe that the loss of ‘aura’ democratises the work, in that digital referents can still arouse curiosity and spark interest, but the removal of pressing weight of awe means that viewers can feel less creatively paralysed by art works, and more free to draw elements from the works for their own inspiration or creative projects. Part of the ‘aura’ of nineteenth-century art is created by age, and another part by uniqueness. Digital referents are not old, and not unique. This fact alone will ensure that people will still want to interact with actual objects — if such encounters go well, one has feelings of awe and excitement and significance which encourages philosophical thought and artistic inspiration. In particular, the immediate sense of craftsmanship, and the awareness that you are interacting directly with an object touched and handled by its creator, is dulled with digitised images. However, this also means that viewers are more likely to feel empowered to draw what they want from the image and make new things of their own, rather than feeling overawed and

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insignificant in comparison to the perceived might and authority of the object and its creator. This is in line with the V & A's founding aims of inspiring creativity among manufacturers, designers and craftspeople. We should not just be asking what original material properties have been lost by digitisation, but also remind ourselves of what new properties have been granted to us with digital referents, and how they may be of benefit to us.

There has recently been a sea change in the nature of the public's search criteria in our study rooms. In the past, one expected requests for named artists or genres, and historically our cataloguing has been geared towards that. Now, people want to run thematic, content based searches across the whole collection, and are interested in comparing disparate objects with, for instance, one linking element (for example 'portrayal of tea drinking customs in the nineteenth century', 'images of fathers and children in art', 'portrayal of servants', as opposed to 'drawings by Constable', 'portrait miniatures', 'Gillray's satirical prints', 'photos by Henri Cartier-Bresson', etc.). In addition to improvements in catalogue entries and database search functions, digitisation aids this new trend by letting people search through vastly more material in digital form in a given period than any study room could support, and enabling people to quickly gauge the usefulness and appropriateness of their results. The data they gain from digital images lets them make more informed decisions on what to view in actuality.

The digitisation of nineteenth-century material alienates us from it. The very act of viewing nineteenth-century objects with the help of twenty-first century technology makes the content seem lost, out of place, and surreal. Nineteenth-century prints and photographs are used in popular culture to signify surrealism, or nostalgia and whimsy, and it is hard to shake that opinion and try to view them as contemporaneous audiences might have done. The history of the (mis)use of nineteenth-century prints is an interesting one, and clearly shows the psychological weight of such items in our visual consciousness. From Max Ernst's collages, through to Joseph Cornell, the Beatles, Fornasetti ceramics, Terry Gilliam's animations from Monty Python, down to current revivals of 'Victoriana', 'burlesque' and 'retro' in design, nineteenth-century images have a potent range of modern interpretations. Most current manifestations involve at least one of the following: a

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yearning for a more 'innocent' fictional pre-World War I past; a slow metabolising of the impact of the collapse of the British Empire on the national psyche; a desire for a return of 'mystery' in gender roles.

In my role as curator in the Word and Image department of the V & A, I am very keen to resist the pressure to prioritise digitisation of the 'Greatest Hits' of our department as, after all, they would not have become so popular if there wasn't a multiplicity of images of them already in existence and easily accessible. Rather, we wish to continue to promote a systematic approach, working consecutively through the stores, thereby assisting curators in sourcing and bringing to light the inspirational and iconic objects of the future. Other organisations are clearly coming to, or have already reached the same conclusion, and the variety and scope of what one can find digitised by museums and online is suddenly becoming far more varied. Rapid recent expansion of online digital museum resources has also created far greater possibilities for visual comparison of objects in collections around the world, thereby encouraging new thought and inspiration, and forging new links in research. The dissemination of images from our online catalogue (Search the Collections — <http://images.vam.ac.uk/indexplus/page/Home.html>) onto journals, websites, blogs and web 2.0 facilities such as Stumbleupon, Facebook and Flickr ensure that a far wider demographic will be viewing images of our objects in radically new settings. I hope this will encourage an increased sense of ownership and accessibility, particularly among people who don't feel at home in museums and galleries, and also give the confidence of prior knowledge about our collections to those who might feel unconfident or too disenfranchised to enter the V & A building.

Digital collections certainly have the potential to give the visitor far more creative control over their experience, in ways that sites such as <http://bibliodyssey.blogspot.com/> are only just beginning to explore. I envisage the advent of web portals where you can download your choice of mapped gallery space (perhaps the Raphael Court at the V & A, Trafalgar Square, and galleries in the Louvre, the White Cube, the Tate St. Ives, or Guggenheim Museum Bilbao), then download your choice of display objects from digitised collections across the world (plus your own digital artwork, or non-art objects) and decide your hang, before writing your own label text and inviting all your friends to a virtual private view via

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Facebook — or entering competitions to have your gallery made actual, thereby launching your career in curatorship.

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