

Yale Center for British Art, website, launched May 2011: <http://britishart.yale.edu/>

In a scathing review of Thomas Friedman's bestselling analysis of globalisation, *The World is Flat*, Matt Taibbi poked fun at the title. 'The significance of Columbus's discovery', he mocked, 'was that on a round earth, humanity is *more interconnected* than on a flat earth. On a round earth, the two most distant points are closer together than they are on a flat earth'.ⁱ Tabbi makes a point that is especially relevant for art historians and curators. Does digitisation bring us closer to the objects we study, or push us further away?

The distances in question can, to be sure, be substantial. So when a leading American collection digitises its collections, scholars far removed will be very pleased. The Yale Center for British Art's new website, launched in May 2011, is a good example. Comprising roughly 200 sculptures, 2,000 paintings, 20,000 drawings and 30,000 prints, along with a large collection of rare books, manuscripts, and photographs, the Center for British Art's holdings are crucial to almost all scholars of British art. The new website has images of all the paintings, most to download under a Creative Commons license, and the Center has taken the trouble to offer each image in three resolutions, as well as showing all the paintings both with their frames and without. The sculptures are helpfully photographed from a number of different angles. Some of the key drawings collections are online, and the rest will follow in due course. None of the language material such as manuscripts is reproduced, with users instead being taken via a link to Yale's *Orbis* library catalogue, where the Center for British Art printed and manuscript materials are fully catalogued.

To scholars working further afield than the north-eastern United States, the Center for British Art's new website is good news, because while the Center's own collection has also grown significantly since the it opened in 1977, the modest paintings catalogue of that year has not been superseded until now. Visiting scholars at the Center for British Art, often generously funded by the Center itself, have found themselves in the odd position of working with closely with objects in the company of knowledgeable curators, while at the same time being unable to perform a simple task like searching the collections. (I was at the wedding of a couple who had been in a relationship for a long time and whose big day had taken, it seemed, even longer to organise. When the bride had arrived, the minister rose, beamed at everyone, and said, to laughs, 'At *last*, Sarah and Phil are getting married'. Historians of British art may feel the same about the Center for British Art's online catalogue).

Perhaps the most vexing question in publishing any reference work is the depth of data that one provides. The Center for British Art's catalogue, as it stands, takes a conservative line, offering only the tombstone data for each object, along with some useful information about frame size, and other matters. It does not offer any commentary on the objects, and nor does not solicit public engagement through activities such as tagging. These possibilities – one with a view to public engagement, the other venturing to interpretation – have shaped the approaches of some of the more well-known projects to make collections of art available online. Perhaps the most ambitious is the BBC 'Your Paintings' website (www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings), which recently completed its digitisation of every oil painting in public ownership in the UK, including NGOs such as the National Trust, and university collections. The project invites the public to 'help us tag the nation's paintings', thereby leaving the question of depth of data in the user's hands. The Center for British Art's site also lacks the kind of in-depth introductory essays on parts of the collection that can be seen on the

recently re-launched V&A website (www.vam.ac.uk), and the Yale Center doesn't encourage visitors to get in touch to edit and augment its database, unlike the British Museum's new collections website ('Noticed a mistake? Have some extra information about this object?'). Within the context of a university art collections, there are models for public engagement in the service of scholarship that the Center may want to follow, especially in the transcription of its extensive manuscript holdings; UCL's Bentham Project (www.ucl.ac.uk/bentham-project), and Oxford's 'Ancient Lives' project to transcribe fragments of Greek papyri from Egypt (www.ancientlives.org), are two examples.

These quibbles may seem ungenerous, given the Center for British Art's continued support for scholars in the form of a wide range of grants, as well as its provision (under the terms of Paul Mellon's bequest to Yale University) of free entry to all its exhibitions and events, as well as to the permanent collection itself. It has also supported online publications *sotto voce*, for example allowing the Institute of Historical Research to offer free digital access to the *Survey of London* volumes, an immense scholarly project begun in 1900 whose publication costs were recently taken up by the YCBA, who published five volumes in six years, after only two had appeared in the preceding twenty (www.british-history.ac.uk). It has also allowed the Henry Moore Institute to publish a free searchable edition of Roscoe, Hardy and Sullivan's *Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain*, whose most recent print edition was published by Yale. Even so, initiatives such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art's recent offering of free online access to digitised versions of its in-house print publications (www.metmuseum.org/research/metpublications) makes one wonder whether the Center for British Art may follow suit. They have provided direct funding for digitisation projects for some time now, usually through curatorial research grants, and are about to begin publishing online catalogue raisonnés: the 2014 *Richard Wilson* exhibition, showing at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, and the YCBA, will have an online catalogue, and Richard Stephens' catalogue raisonné of Francis Towne will appear in 2016.

Exhibition catalogues and catalogues raisonnés surely offer a compelling rationale for the application of online know-how, because while online publication of an exhibition catalogue may not be cheaper, in every circumstance, than hard copy, it allows a curator to incorporate the outcomes of the exhibition, and associated events, into the finished product. The exhibition then assumes a formative purpose, rather than one that is more summative. (Using digitisation in this way may, for contemporary artists and smaller galleries, overcome issues around copyright; for example, problems with contacting living artists can be an opportunity for public engagement: did your grandfather paint this?). In this way different interfaces may be designed to offer different ways of exploring the objects, and different depths of data. When exhibition catalogues grow to more than 400 pages, as those published by the Yale Center for British Art sometimes do, and when permanent collection catalogues (even the concise ones) have you calling for a wheelbarrow, it is easy to forget that their original purpose was to be carried lightly round a collection or exhibition. Digitisation makes it possible to do that again, and to augment the experience of visiting a gallery in various ways; it is easily conceivable that major institutions could produce an app even for their temporary shows, thereby keeping scholarship up to date at the same time they spare themselves the cost of the paper (for scholars) and electronic hardware (for the general public).

'However, perpetual *aggiornamento* brings with it losses as well', notes Walter Kaiser in a recent *New York Review of Books* piece on the newly-completed 15-volume catalogue of the Metropolitan Museum's Lehman Collection.

[T]he handsome volumes [...] have an enduring stability and nobility that any online catalog, essentially mutable and transient, lacks. What is more, these volumes tell you important things about the time in which they were written, the point of view of the author, and the way in which a work of art was perceived at a certain moment in history; an online catalog may or may not give you that information, and authorial voices [...] may well be lost.

Authorial voices are often represented as something of a problem for public art museums. The 2012 Museum Edition of the New Media Consortium's *Horizon Report* said: 'The model of a museum curator or educator who stands in front of an object and interprets meaning for a passive audience is simply no longer realistic in this world of instant access' (p.7). Yet it is not clear that a demand for instant access is the same as an activity in an audience. As Walter Kaiser notes at the end of his review, being able to point your smartphone at an object and read what a curator says about it is surely a development that will be welcomed by visitors, and perhaps all the more so in a setting such as the Yale Center for British Art, and need not imply the loss of authorial voice in the scramble to keep information up to date (and let's face it, new information on single objects is not all that forthcoming).

If anyone is likely to want to contest or contribute to an online catalogue, it is curators and academics working together, using the web as a medium for communication. Yet it's unclear what 'working together' really means. As the *Horizon Report* notes, 'The days of gigantic, multi-year, foundation-funded collaborative projects are probably on the wane. Increasingly, multi-institutional collaboration will occur at the data level with institutions being collaborative partners only in the passive sense, and the real work of pulling multiple resources together being accomplished downstream, possibly by third-party organizations' (p.8). This brings us to the question raised at the beginning, of whether a 'flat world' brings us together or drives us apart. If digitisation opens new horizons for object-focused scholarly collaboration, we must remember that we do not study objects in isolation: we consult colleagues, we make contacts, we confess our ignorance and seek help, we provide expert knowledge ourselves, and we marvel at objects in the company of others. A more pressing question, and perhaps one too rarely asked, is this: does digitisation bring us closer to one another? While digitisation may facilitate our learning about objects, I suspect it removes many of the unexpected insights and exchanges that happen when we meet face to face.

In this regard, it is surprising that there is no portal for British art, a virtual threshold through which potential members of the community might step in order to participate in its activities. The Institute of Historical Research's site (www.history.ac.uk) is perhaps a model for others to follow, because it constantly updates 'live' information regarding events, job opportunities, digital initiatives, as well as offering access to bibliographies, databases, blogs, and so on. There are a wide range of digital initiatives on both macro and micro scales, from heavily funded websites to the 14 different people tweeting on 'british art' in the last hour, but no place to draw them all together, and in so doing, to facilitate better sharing of information. The Yale Center for British Art, or its London-based sister body the Paul Mellon Centre, would be the ideal home for such an initiative.

Digitisation might not bring us closer to our objects or to each other, but that doesn't mean it drives us further apart. Columbus discovered that we're more interconnected on a sphere than a plate, but he had to use the flattening, levelling technology of his day – maps – in order to find that this was so. A portal for British art would be something of an equivalent, a means of finding our way to our objects, and to one another, and I think the subject will be all the better for it.

ⁱ Matt Taibbi, 'Flathead: the particular genius of Thomas L. Friedman', *New York Press*, April 26, 2005: <http://www.nypress.com/article-11419-flathead.html>. I would like to thank Stephen Beer for this reference.