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Professional Resource:

ArtBabble: A Partnership of Art Appreciation, Curation, and Media Literacy

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ArtBabble (<http://www.artbabble.org/>).

ArtBabble (<http://www.artbabble.org/>) was accepted and created in 2009 by the Indianapolis Museum of Art (IMA) with a mission to provide a collaborative online video platform for art content. ArtBabble is a high quality showcase from various museum partners, which aims to bring topics surrounding art and artists to a wider audience. The site, and its content, is approachable, yet authoritative. A novice of artistic appreciation, criticism, and creation is a welcome viewer, as are professionals and specialists in the field. At the core of ArtBabble are the partners and the unique content created through spotlighting art, artists, exhibitions, as well as the surrounding community.

At the launch in 2009, ArtBabble had seven museum partners, including the IMA, and one hundred and fifty videos. According to personal communication with Emily Lytle-Painter (2012), Media Project Coordinator for IMA, currently, they have thirty-eight partners; over one thousand, five hundred videos; and twenty interested parties to increase partnership in the future (Emily Lytle-Painter, pers. comm.). A small selection of ArtBabble's partners are: the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the National Gallery of Art, plus global partners, such as the Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam) and the Prado Museum (Spain). ArtBabble's start-up costs were funded through the Ball Brothers Foundation (ArtBabble 2012). Current hosting fees and additional expenses to run ArtBabble are covered by the IMA. A future step towards increasing funding could be corporate sponsorship (Taylor 2009).

ArtBabble is an excellent example of a collection adeptly managing barriers to access. Heather Nodler's article "A Haystack Full of Needles: Scholarly

Access Challenges in Museum Video Archives" lists five barriers to access (Nodler 2012).

The first barrier is the nature of video itself. Managing streaming video files, format migration, storage need for large video data, and conversion of analog to digital are challenges and can quickly slow down a site's progression, time management, and growth. To better manage this, ArtBabble relies on the partners to create, migrate, upload, and provide metadata (tags) for their videos (Emily Lytle-Painter, pers. comm.). On the backend, the videos themselves are hosted and accessed in the cloud via Amazon Web Services, which "outsources" the hosting and server maintenance, so ArtBabble's team can focus on the portal site (Bachta et al. 2009). There are some downsides to managing a collection this way. First, relying on the cloud can be risky, but for services that rely on a third party, downtime of a server is a known necessity and possible risk. A second downside can be partners themselves. Very often it is a large undertaking for the partners to create the exhibit, learning objects, and videos themselves, so assigning subject categories, metadata, and tags can be rushed or limited. It is the role of ArtBabble to monitor and approve the organization and consistency of the terms assigned to the videos (Emily Lytle-Painter, pers. comm.).

The second barrier is scholar attitudes. The visual mediums are not always considered the most authoritative format, though they are excellent primary or supplementary sources. By relying on the partners, ArtBabble has a ready-made community of scholars, curators, and artists. At this moment, the videos available on the site are heavily curated and the partners choose content. This is both a positive and a negative. The ability for anyone to upload content is not available, so the audience voice and reactions are limited to comments. By limiting who can upload, all content

available on the site is seen as authoritative and reliable because it is created from the scholarly community surrounding the art and artists. Another way ArtBabble could draw from their community would be to allow crowdsourcing from users to help with organizing, tagging, and cataloging content. Opening up the site to users, beyond commenting and annotation, would bring the resource to a higher level. For example, a portal for user uploads, discussion, and a way to create/mash-up resources would be a benefit to patrons of the site.

The third barrier is rights management for video. ArtBabble relies on the partners to manage any rights and licensing issues (such as video releases, image use, etc.) on their end, so what is available on the site operates under a Creative Commons license. Partner credit is given on all individual videos.

The fourth barrier involves retrieval issues surrounding video specific information. Searching for and retrieving videos is different than text. How videos are labeled, categorized, and tagged will bring different results. Think about the image of an artist painting red on a canvas. How many different ways can this be imagined or defined? Therefore, how many different ways can this be found in a search engine? Each word has a different representation and personal interpretation: Who is the artist? How would you define the color? Red, crimson, scarlet, burgundy, rose, rouge, maroon, and merlot, are just a few terms you could use. What type of paint? What type of canvas? Cotton or linen? Stretched or oil-primed?

Currently, the site is organized by “series,” which are specific exhibits or programs at the partner institutions. “Channels” are browsable by art genres or topics. “Artists” is an alphabetical listing of names. Finally, “Partners” provides a list of museums and institutions with direct link to their videos. There is a basic keyword search box. This has become more of a challenge as ArtBabble grows. In addressing these challenges for future redesign, ArtBabble is identifying meta-theme categories to index and search, in addition to the current categories of channels, artists, partners, and topics. The location, people, medium, period, and style will be the largest categories, as well as overarching themes, such as “behind-the-scenes” and “conservation.” These themes will provide facets, for improved browsing and navigation of the site (Emily Lytle-Painter, pers. comm.).

The final barrier is treating video as text and the challenges to presenting the context of the video. Is ArtBabble advertising the exhibit, the artist, or the

museum? How does the videos fit into their context, but also avoid being “dated”? This all varies, depending on why the video was created and the focus of the video. Tools are offered alongside content to make ArtBabble resourceful in terms of context. The videos are high-definition h.264 with options to download (to an iPod), embed, comment on, rate, or share the individual video. Access to social media sites is prevalent on each video and throughout the site.

One of the most interesting features is on the home page. There is a section called “video quotes”—these are clips and quotes, usually very pointed and interesting, that pull you into the whole video. Alongside each video are “Notes” that sync along with the video and point viewers to extended content and resources on the partner website or elsewhere on ArtBabble. The videos also have an option for closed captioning and provide a time-coded transcription. There is an option for permalinks (persistent URLs) for each video and suggested relevant video content.

Right now, the site’s interface is intuitive, simple, and clean, which makes it all the more unique and approachable. ArtBabble is currently planning a redesign to incorporate the need for greater organization and browsability, as well as the shift to mobile and tablet devices. The redesign will also allow partners the option to embed from other video sites, such as YouTube and Vimeo. It will be interesting to see how the site evolves (Emily Lytle-Painter, pers. comm.).

ArtBabble is a great resource for close studying of art, artists, medium, and technique for a variety of audiences. By partnering with the institutional voice and their resources, ArtBabble provides vetted and behind-the-scenes content for analysis of artistic subjects and the literacies surrounding the works.

References

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