

Chapter 3

Look-Here!: Digitisation and Collaboration in the Visual Arts

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Synopsis

The Look-Here! project was a collaborative venture which sought to develop skills and strategies for digitisation within libraries, museums and archives in the arts education sector. Led by the Visual Arts Data Service (VADS), the project worked with partners in nine specialist arts universities and colleges and art departments in multidisciplinary institutions. Through a series of workshops, case studies and cross-sector activities, the project aimed to share and embed knowledge and expertise in the creation and management of digitised collections in the arts. In addition to supporting the nine project partner collections, it is hoped that the outputs shared on the project website will also provide useful ideas, approaches, and reference sources for future teams working with similar visual and creative arts materials in the wider education community.

1. Rationale

1.1. From digitisation boom to digitisation bust

The Look-Here! project was one of eleven projects funded through the JISC eContent programme from the end of 2009 to early 2011.²¹ The background and rationale for the programme stemmed from the findings of the JISC Digitisation Conference in Cardiff in 2007, as well as the change in JISC's funding for digitisation which would no longer be available on such a large scale as it had been in previous years. This followed a period of significant centralised investment for mass digitisation initiatives such as the British Library's Nineteenth Century Newspapers project and the University of Kent's British Cartoon Archive digitisation project, which were funded through the JISC Digitisation programme from 2004 to 2009.²²

The report from the Cardiff conference instead emphasised the importance of increased collaboration and partnerships to carry out digitisation in a more cost effective way, through fostering knowledge exchange and sharing of good practice, tools and technologies. The conference also stressed the importance of not only creating more digital content but also delivering and sustaining existing content in an effective way, and highlighted the importance of 'breaking down silos' and creating a connected mass of digitised content.

It is in this context that VADS applied to the JISC eContent programme to undertake the Look-Here! project as a collaborative venture with a number of partners from libraries, museums and archives in the arts education sector, who were either seeking to embark on digitisation for the first time, or had already begun to develop digital content for educational use.

²¹ Look-Here! Project: www.vads.ac.uk/lookhere

²² JISC Grant Funding 02/09: Full Text: JISC e-Content Programme 2009–11 (2009): www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/funding/2009/02/grant0209econtent.doc

2. The partners

VADS was formed in 1997 and was established as a Research Centre of the Library and Learning Services Department at the University for the Creative Arts in 2008. The Look-Here! project would build on VADS' previous experience in managing a range of art and design digitised collections totalling over 120,000 images, as well as in promoting best practice in the creation of digital visual arts resources, and in leading and partnering in related national projects such as fineart.ac.uk, the Digital Picture, and Kultur.²³

The project partner collections represented a broad mix of collections from differing institutional contexts and covered a variety of visual and creative arts subject matter. This ranged from the Knitting Collections at University of Southampton Libraries, to the Design Archives in the Faculty of Arts at University of Brighton, and from the Stanley Kubrick Archive and other collections held at the University of the Arts London, to the Museum of Design in Plastics at the Arts University College at Bournemouth. The libraries at the University for the Creative Arts and University College Falmouth were also represented, as were the collections of the Royal School of Needlework, Bradford College Textile Archive, and the gallery archive at Norwich University College of the Arts.

The project partners were either made up of small teams of collections staff, or were individual members of staff who were often balancing the management of their special collections with a number of other duties and demands on their time. By working together, the partners hoped to avoid 'reinventing the wheel' when undertaking digitisation, and to harness greater resources, knowledge and impact than they might otherwise be able to achieve by only working in isolation with limited time and resources.

Whilst a handful of the project partners had benefited from digitisation funding and expertise gained through previous JISC-funded digitisation initiatives, such as the Museum of Design in Plastics digitisation project and the Design Archives, which have led several JISC projects to digitise their holdings, the vast majority of the partners were completely new to the area and were embarking on the digitisation of their holdings for the very first time.

These members of staff possessed subject expertise and collections management skills but generally speaking had less technical expertise and no previous digitisation experience. Some partners were looking to gain groundings in essential topics such as digital copyright, metadata and digital capture, whilst others were also looking to build on existing foundations and to develop their expertise into areas such as the use of Web 2.0 and the development of online learning packages using their existing digitised content. The project workshops set out to cover all of these areas across the complete digital content lifecycle.

3. Approach

3.1. The bigger picture

As Stuart Lee and Melissa Terras observe, the 1990s 'to the librarian at the very least' could be termed the 'decade of digitisation' and digitisation efforts have continued in earnest into the twenty-first century.²⁴ Therefore the first step made by the Look-Here! project was to undertake a literature review of previous digitisation initiatives across the sector to identify key issues and lessons learned. Research was also gathered through a series of interviews conducted by VADS with six of the project partners, to understand their particular issues, needs, characteristics and culture, as well as through initial discussions as a group in the first project meeting at the University of Southampton's Hartley Library. This initial research and group discussion was also important to help develop rapport and trust within the group, which hadn't worked together on any previous initiatives.

²³ VADS provides online access to a collection of over 120,000 high quality digital images contributed by art and design collections in libraries, museums and archives across the UK, which are copyright-cleared and free for use in education at: www.vads.ac.uk. VADS has also authored a number of guides to good practice in the creation of digital visual arts resources, see for example: http://vads.ac.uk/guides/creating_guide. For a full list of previous VADS projects, see: www.vads.ac.uk/projects

²⁴ Lee, S. D. (2002) *Digital Imaging: a Practical Handbook*. London: Library Association Publishing, p. 160. Terras, M. (2008) *Digital Images for the Information Professional*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, p. 110, 115.

The resulting report highlighted a number of issues which helped VADS to develop and hone eight further workshops and master classes for the partners covering the topics of: image selection; copyright and IPR; image cataloguing; digitisation; funding and sustainability; user needs; Web 2.0 and user-generated content; and the development of online learning resources.

3.2. Parlez-vous digitisation?

Each of the project workshops was hosted at a different partner institution and included a blend of presentations by VADS staff and the project partners, and a number of external experts were also invited to provide guidance on new and emerging areas or on notoriously tricky topics in the arts such as copyright. For example, Alun Edwards from the RunCoCo project provided advice on how to run community collections online with content uploaded by users, and the copyright specialist Naomi Korn, along with Bernard Horrocks from the Rights and Images Office at the National Portrait Gallery, provided advice on copyright clearance and rights management.²⁵ To avoid 'death by PowerPoint', the partners were also frequently invited to give micro presentations on particular topics or 'top tips', using only images on a single presentation slide, as well as to provide 'behind the scenes' tours delving into their collections.²⁶

As one partner highlighted in the first project meeting, terms such as 'metadata', which are common parlance in the JISC community, may not be so familiar to some collection curators, who have their own specialist vocabulary, and it can feel at times as if these communities are talking a different language to one another. The project therefore tried to avoid using unnecessary jargon in the workshops and key terms were 'stripped down' and definitions provided for those who were new to the area.

3.3. Knitting it all together

Another central component of the project was the development of a methodology for digitising the University of Southampton's Knitting Collections, which acted as the lead collections for the project, and are managed by Linda Newington at the University of Southampton's Winchester School of Art Library.

One of the library's strengths is its focus on textiles and fashion which has been enriched by the addition of three distinctive knitting collections assembled by renowned practitioners and scholars in the field, including Montse Stanley, Jane Waller and Richard Rutt, who is often referred to as the 'Knitting Bishop'. Together these collections contain a vast array of items including magazines, books, knitting patterns, photographs, postcards, knitted objects, small tools and sample yarns, totalling tens of thousands of items.²⁷ The Knitting Collections have been the focus for two academic conferences organised by the library in 2008 and 2010, and the library was seeking to further promote their use to national and international audiences by undertaking a digitisation project for the very first time and providing access to a subsection of this unique resource online.

The library faced several complexities in this first foray into digitisation, particularly surrounding the copyright of the seemingly harmless and ephemeral knitting pattern. Many of these knitting patterns are 'orphan works' as the companies have been dissolved or are untraceable, and the patterns can also contain multiple 'layers of rights' including both the 'artistic work' of the cover photographs and the 'literary work' of the knitting pattern instructions themselves.

Through the support of the project workshops and by tapping into the advice of the Look-Here! community and invited experts, the library has built knowledge and confidence in this area and has developed approaches to image selection, copyright clearance and metadata creation, and an initial tranche of digitised content has also been trialled on the VADS test website. The Look-Here! community has also provided the library with highly focused, 'bespoke' and subject-specific advice and support, such as providing feedback on the library's draft permissions letter, researching rights holders and sharing existing contact details held on file, and sharing information about the commissioning process for knitting patterns, to name a few examples.

²⁵ RunCoCo Project: <http://projects.oucs.ox.ac.uk/runcococo>

²⁶ Look-Here! Project: Workshops: www.vads.ac.uk/lookhere/workshops

²⁷ Newington, L. *Guide to the Knitting Collections held by the University of Southampton Library*. Southampton: University of Southampton.

3.4. Small is beautiful

Another core output of the project was the development of seven case studies by the project partners which document their individual digitisation initiatives.²⁸ These case studies are available on the project website and were also presented at a one-day project conference at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in February 2011.²⁹ Broadly speaking, two overarching approaches can be observed from across these case studies. On the one hand, this includes a 'small is beautiful' approach to digitisation which focuses on thematic pilots or showcases. For example, the Winchester School of Art Library has chosen to digitise 100 books, 100 patterns and 100 objects from the Knitting Collections, based on subjects of particular interest to users as well as reflecting the strengths of the collection. These themes include 'World War One' and 'World War Two', 'the Nineteenth Century', 'Vintage Fashion' and 'Domesticity' as well as 'Sport' which was selected in light of the forthcoming 2012 Olympics.

Similarly, the Design Archives have used the Look-Here! project as an opportunity to develop digital content around a key research theme, the 1951 Festival of Britain, as well as to extend their existing expertise in the digital reproduction of analogue photographs, instead digitising a selection of textual documents from the archives. The documents were digitised in anticipation of increased user demand during the festival's 60th anniversary in 2011, which has already yielded enquiries from the press such as the BBC and *The Independent*, and the team also intended to provide a more 'rounded' picture of the archive's content and the variety of item types that it contains.

The Museum of Design in Plastics has focused on digitising the most popular object types within their collections, such as plastic toys, radios and telephones, which are the most heavily requested by students, who often like to look at how objects are designed and to compare like with like. The museum's case study and workshop presentations have offered insights into a range of topics surrounding digitisation, for example, the promotional aspects of copyright clearance and how it can get people excited about their collections, including several companies that have provided new information about their objects, or have donated additional items and images as a result of being contacted.

The case study from the library at University College Falmouth also gives an account of its efforts to create an institutional digital image repository to replace its extensive slide collection. Like many other slide collections across the UK arts education sector, the collection was underused and the technology is no longer supported. Restricted by the lack of a digital equivalent of the blanket slide licence from the Design and Artists Copyright Society (DACS), the library has digitised a subsection of its slides that are unique to its holdings, showing work by former staff and other artists and designers based in Cornwall, as well as work in final year degree and MA shows, where copyright permission could be sought on an individual basis.

Finally, the Bradford College Textile Archive, which joined the group part-way through the project as an unfunded partner, has developed a case study entitled 'Carpe Diem' which looks at the development of a small scale digital collection of 600 images using very limited resources in a time of austerity. This was achieved, for example, by utilising the help of college alumni and by only digitising out-of-copyright nineteenth century textiles. The case study raises questions about whether it is better to wait until significant funding is granted and there is a perfect scenario for digitisation, which might never happen, or whether to take the plunge and undertake a small scale digitisation pilot to support educational usage, promote the archive and assist with fundraising itself.

3.5. Bird's eye view

In addition to these case studies which focus on particular art and design collections, other case studies also provide a 'top-down' perspective from across multiple collections or departments. For example, the Special Collections and Archives Centre at the University of the Arts London has undertaken research to develop and implement a charging policy across their collections, for the supply of digital images which are requested by external users for commercial purposes such as publications or broadcasts, which is happening more frequently as the collections are becoming increasingly well-known through publicity such as events, exhibitions and exposure on VADS.

²⁸ Look-Here! Project: Case Studies: www.vads.ac.uk/lookhere/casestudies

²⁹ Look-Here! Project: Conference: www.vads.ac.uk/lookhere/conference

In a similar vein, the case study from the Library and Learning Services Department at the University for the Creative Arts provides another type of ‘bird’s eye view’. This case study describes a digitisation audit which was undertaken to identify all of the digitisation activities taking place across the whole university, to provide an overview to inform the development of a proposed digitisation strategy and new digitisation facility in the university library. This audit uncovered pockets of isolated digitisation activity taking place across various academic and support departments, and made a number of recommendations for sharing good practice between these staff and developing university-wide policies and support.

3.6. If you’ve got it, flaunt it

During the course of the project, members of the Look-Here! project group have also made use of the national image repository hosted by VADS to provide online access to a number of their digitised collections. This content spans, for example, the collections of plastic design objects from the Museum of Design in Plastics, through to a slide collection of abstract and landscape paintings by the artist and former principal of University College Falmouth, Tom Cross.³⁰

Further institutions in the wider arts education sector have also approached VADS during the lifetime of the project to deliver their images online, for example, digitised content has also been generously contributed by the Royal College of Art, Goldsmiths, London College of Fashion and Bucks New University, amongst a number of others. In total these collections represent in excess of 10,000 digital images of art and design material that have been shared during the course of the project for free use in learning, teaching and research across the sector.

In some cases, this has included pre-existing digital image collections which were originally only available for in-house use by staff and students at the holding institution, and in one case this included digitised images of a unique research archive which were simply laying dormant on a hard drive. Digitisation is often described in terms of bringing physical collections ‘out of the dark’, but in the project’s experience, there are also unique digitised collections that are sometimes hidden from view and could, potentially, be opened up from behind closed doors for wider use and promotion.

3.7. Computer says ‘Yes’

The project has found that an element of flexibility has also been a key factor in enabling this digital content to be shared online, for example, VADS has accepted deposits of digital collections in differing database formats; accommodated some of the variances in metadata approach; taken deposits of collections one section at a time; and enabled collection holders to undertake proofing and ongoing editing of their metadata via a login to the VADS test website.

The collections in the VADS repository are also being ‘harvested’ by other national and international cultural portals such as Europeana, Culture Grid and Trove, to further enhance their accessibility, and more vitally, as Martin Flynn noted in an earlier issue of the *Art Libraries Journal*, the VADS website also provides good visibility on web search engines. As he writes, it ‘regularly returns hits from Google Image searches, revealing content on the web more effectively than the holding institution and one feels that this fact should be celebrated and capitalised on more’.³¹

Working with the project partners has also highlighted other useful enhancements that could be made to the VADS image repository to accommodate the wide variety of item types held in the partner collections. For example, the Victorian knitting books that have been digitised from cover to cover by the University of Southampton highlighted the issues surrounding the display of book works within the database and VADS is now hoping to explore the use of more visually enticing ‘Turn the Pages’ technology. The digitised archival documents from the University of Brighton Design Archives have also required display at a larger size than the default size on the VADS repository, in order for the handwriting and type to be legible, and these images are now being displayed at a larger size.

³⁰ Look-Here! Project: Collections: www.vads.ac.uk/lookhere/collections

³¹ Basic metadata is ‘harvested’ from VADS by other cultural portals via the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH).

Europeana: www.europeana.eu/portal

Culture Grid: www.europeana.eu/portal

Trove: <http://trove.nla.gov.au>

Flynn, M. (2009) ‘An Emerging Picture: Some Recent UK Digital Visual Arts Initiatives’, *Art Libraries Journal*, Vol, 34, No. 1, 2009, p. 24.

4. Feedback

Feedback collected from the project partners has described the project and the sharing of knowledge and training in this often complex area as 'invaluable' and 'transformational'; it 'has removed some of the mystery surrounding the subject' and 'came at just the right time'. The idea of working together and sharing expertise to address some of these challenges has not only proved useful for the Look-Here! project partners, but has also been welcomed by many of the attendees at the Look-Here! project conference. As one conference attendee stated, 'seeing the common challenging issues faced by VADS and the partners was reassuring to us as we also face them as do the wider sector. It made it clear that we should all be working closely together as a community.' Other attendees also appreciated the 'real-life knowledge sharing' and making 'contact with similar professionals and meaningful relationships started'.

5. Lessons learned

The feedback and the progress made by the project partners has demonstrated the significant benefits of sharing digitisation knowledge and training across the visual and creative arts education sector. Collaboration surrounding the online delivery and public profiling of this digital content has also been made possible using the established infrastructure and flexibility of the VADS image repository. The possibility of sharing the creation of this digital content and the sharing of digitisation equipment was also discussed by the project partners but was felt to be less viable at this stage, due to the idiosyncrasies, different stages of development, differing requirements (such as 2D slides and 3D museum objects) and geographical spread of the different project partner collections.

Many of the project partners are interested in deepening this collaboration further in the future by developing content in areas where there are strong thematic overlaps, such as the textiles material held by five of the project partners and the ambition to develop a national textiles network, or the intersections between the university private printing press materials that are held by two of the partner archives. In terms of joint digitisation training, a number of the partners have been motivated by the project's Web 2.0 workshop, and would like to have further advice and support in this area to develop their skills and strategies for online community engagement and user-generated content.

A further lesson learned by the project is that arts universities and colleges contain what could be termed 'knowledge cul-de-sacs', which are departments that possess knowledge and experience in digitisation, often gained from prior external funding during the 'digitisation boom', but this knowledge hasn't always been tapped into and transferred to others who are digitising content within the same institution. This was apparent from several of the interviews with partners as well as the digitisation audit undertaken as part of one of the project case studies. There is perhaps, therefore, potential benefit in applying the Look-Here! project model on an internal basis and holding similar joint events for 'digitisers' across a single institution.

Another lesson learned by the project is that the willingness, drive and determination of 'collection champions' is a vital component for digitisation, as demonstrated, for example, by the efforts of staff at Bradford College to undertake a small scale digitisation pilot of their textile archive as an unfunded partner in the project. Likewise, as another one of the project partners stated in interview at the beginning of the project, 'digitisation is a fundamental part of stewardship' and 'if you completely refuse to do it without any external funding then you'd be shooting yourself in the foot. But it's just the scale of things, isn't it?'

6. Future developments

Following on from the successful completion of the Look-Here! project and building upon this collaborative approach, the VADS team will continue to lead, support, and promote the needs of partners and collection holders in the highly complex area of digital image creation and management to support learning, teaching and research in the arts. The VADS team endeavours to continue enhancing and developing the VADS website to ensure that it is kept relevant and up-to-date with evolving web technologies and user expectations; to include further high quality

content contributed by the sector; to expand existing research on the users, usage and value of the collections that it hosts; and to publish and disseminate this research more widely. VADS will also foster new partnerships and projects for the arts education community, for example, at the time of writing VADS is also leading the Kultivate project, which is supporting the development of institutional repositories for academic research in the visual and creative arts, a subject area which is currently greatly underrepresented in the institutional repository landscape.³²

³² Kultivate Project: www.vads.ac.uk/kultur2group/projects/kultivate