The *Image Directory*, Electronic Publishing, and the Changing Socio-Economic Position of Art Museums

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In late 1997, Academic Press will launch the *Image Directory*, an online union catalog of information about art images. Based on descriptions provided by museums and image owners all over the world, the *Image Directory* will be an ever-growing union catalog which will provide item-level and collection-level access to data and low-resolution images. The project is analogous to *Books in Print* in that it collects data from many sources and places them in a uniform format, thus facilitating search strategies and promoting standardized descriptive vocabularies. There is nothing novel about the concept: *Books in Print* began shortly after World War II, building upon a book cataloging tradition that extends backward to hundreds of years. What distinguishes the *Image Directory*—the reasons a union catalog of art images has been impossible to create until now—is inextricably tied to the rise of electronic publishing and changes within the museum community.

There are two parts to the story of art museums' embrace of electronic publishing and their interest in providing data to the *Image Directory*. While details in each part might be disputed, both parts revolve around unsurprising motives, money and control of property.

It is hard to remember a time when museums were flush with cash. In recent years, the search for ways to reduce spending, and in particular subsidies, has become ferocious. In Britain, the Department of National Heritage has been cutting its subsidies by 6% per annum, when inflation is taken into account.[i] The 1996-97 budget, which includes the arts, sport, and tourism, is off 3% from that of the prior year, with further cuts projected in coming years. Within that figure, however, tourism has been left untouched; national museums and heritage bodies have been hit hard.[ii] Lottery funds that the government distributes to subsidize the museums may be used only for capital projects and cannot underwrite the programs that these subsidies previously supported.

In the US, the situation is even more dire. In 1996 the two principal federal sources of funding, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, received only 75% of their 1995 allocations and spent the year operating as if 40% cuts had been enacted, since the bill making the cuts law would act retroactively.[iii] Dispute about the value of the reductions is marked by arguments about the minuscule percentage of direct subsidies to museums within the federal budget—about .01 percent—and the contribution those moneys makes to our quality of life.[iv] What the government takes away, the government gives back; in the US, Uncle Sam uses the tax laws.

The US exempts museums from paying income tax and thus encourages growth in the private, non-profit sector, which accounts for 11% of the country's Gross National Product. This exemption allows museum donors to receive tax deductions for their contributions and, more importantly for the *Image Directory*, allows institutions to engage in revenue-generating activities in order to fund their ultimate charitable purpose. There are on-going discussions about just which activities are taxable and which are not. In general, though, activities related to the educational and thus charitable mission of museums regularly avoid the corporate-rate taxes.[v] Within this scheme, the art museum can leverage its resources with great success.

It is not a cliché to note that among museums of all types, the art museum holds a unique place in its ability to create revenue. Many cultural institutions have no assets to draw upon in creating new sources of funding when old ones disappear. Orchestras and opera companies, for example, have little to sell beyond the sound of their music. But art museums have visitors everyday they open their doors, at least one store, and classes its staff can offer, as well as architecturally striking settings for parties, lectures, and the filming of television advertisements and movies. While an art museum can trim programs and lay off personnel without immediate visible effects on its principal resource, its collection, the performing arts lack such options. [vi] This short-term elasticity in operating costs suggests that art museums have a capacity to overcome economic slowdowns and other exogenous financial pressures.

The task of generating revenue sufficient for meeting those operating costs is nevertheless as large as one might expect. It is complicated by the fact that the museum's principal resource, its collection, constitutes the bulk of its assets, dwarfing the values of its two other major assets: its endowments and its buildings. The value of its art is figured separately from its other assets, and there are ethical codes prohibiting a museum from selling parts of its collection to pay its bills. These codes derive from the need to assure donors that their gifts will be exhibited according to their wishes, not sold to pay outstanding bills. Long-term operating costs are inelastic: the costs of storage space, security, climate control, conservation, and insurance, among others, can be ignored only at the peril of damage to the art collection. In an era of decreasing subsidies, how can the art museum generate revenues sufficient to maintain its collection, play a major role in cultural life, and make investments in its future?

The traditional answer lies in the creativity of the museum curator. It is his or her job to organize exhibits so as to present portions of the collection in ways that attract donors as well as enough of the general population to generate necessary levels of revenue. The curator manages the museum's principal asset, its collection, in ways that develop and maintain the "quality" or "look" of the face the organization presents to the public. He or she strikes that difficult compromise: how to attract potential and actual donors, with their interest in the social prestige and humanistic goals art museums embody, and their preferences for "elitist" art—art which cannot be fully appreciated without some background knowledge—and the general public, which is drawn to less sophisticated artifacts and styles but which holds out the potential of large revenues.

In recent years, curators in specific and art museums in general have enjoyed some success in attracting the general public. There is naturally no consensus about whether there is a trend toward more or fewer people visiting art museums. Some staff report rising general attendance numbers, citing a growing desire to be entertained at one's own pace with the help of new educational tools, such as hand-held tape players and video displays. Others blame falling attendance on the evaporation of leisure time and people's interest in staying at home with their families.[vii] Since large and small museums experience these trends in different ratios, there are some general observations we can make about them. Art museums seem to be reacting to the rising attendance figures trend by constructing new buildings with more restaurants. They are addressing falling numbers by both reconsidering their roles *vis-à-vis* their audiences and by hosting major exhibits.

Major exhibitions have played a critical role in attracting both types of audiences to art museums. For the *Image Directory*, they suggest the numbers of people interested in art and the willingness of curators and museum staff in taking part in revenue-creating events. In any given year, general attendance at art museums is directly related to interest in specific exhibitions.[viii]

Some major touring exhibitions have been exceptionally successful. The biggest show of the 1994 and 1995 seasons was "Cézanne to Matisse: Paintings from the Barnes Foundation." In each city it visited--Tokyo, Fort Worth, Ontario, and Munich--it drew about half a million visitors; and about 1.2 million people saw it in Paris.[ix] Others appeal to some population centers more than to others: "Picasso and the Weeping Women," for example, had 153,000 visitors in two and one-half months during its 1994 exhibition in Los Angeles but almost one-half million in New York during the same number of weeks. In showings that each lasted just under three months, James McNeill Whistler drew just over 150,000 to the Tate Gallery, over a quarter million at the Musée d'Orsay, and over 300,000 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Other shows, particularly in contemporary art, are far less successful, drawing in the range of 10,000 to 40,000 people.

The "blockbuster" exhibitions, such as the Barnes Foundation's "Cézanne to Matisse," are analogous to the sales retailers use to attract new customers. The exhibitions take a toll on museum staffs and institutional organizations, disrupting normal attendance patterns and risking the loss of regular revenues. But the promotional attention and financial rewards they bring to their hosts are undeniable: more people come through the front door, and traffic generates sales from museum stores.[x] For the *Image Directory*, the blockbuster shows have introduced more money into the art-related economy and have contributed to increased interest in the fine arts, both in museum attendance and scholarship.

While blockbuster exhibitions can have great appeal to different market segments and immeasurably add to the revenues of a museum, they are expensive to arrange and conduct, and they do not occur on a regular basis. A more consistent and less expensive way to generate revenue is to sell reproductions of pieces in the permanent collection. In 1871, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art was the first US museum to make retailing a large part of its mission, and by the 1920s it was issuing mail-order catalogs and selling art books, calendars, casts of small sculptures, and greeting cards in its shop. In the last decade the Met has opened 14 stores in the US and 19 in foreign countries, from Mexico City to Taiwan, doubling its revenues from $38 million in 1986 to $79 million in 1996. The Met funnels all profits, 10-12 percent from these revenues, into its operating budget.[xi]

Electronic publishing has promised to expand this business. The hope has been that as the trend to use images continues to be facilitated by new technologies, museums will find new markets for their images and thereby generate more money. People love images, and computers offer a flexible medium for the display of images that, at a relatively low cost, can be digitized and transported anywhere. CD-ROMs full of art images have proliferated. Websites sponsored by art museums are also immensely popular. The Victoria & Albert Museum site, established in May, 1996, reports 2,000 hits monthly, while the British Museum's site, established in October, 1996, has 240,000 hits a month.[xii] Not all websites have retail outlets associated with them, but it is reasonable to assume that those that do have realized some revenues, although probably not enough to make the site self-supporting.

The promise of electronic publishing has also produced anxiety within museums about losing control over their images. Because digitized images are so easy to copy and to disfigure, museums have not been able to ensure that copies are as true as possible to the originals, a guarantee that book and journal production methods are more capable of making. Museum staff worry about digitized images that are cropped, that are discolored, and that are corrupted in any number of ways being distributed under their names. They worry that people use digital images without paying the museum for the right to use them. And they worry that digital images can too easily become a substitute for the experience of seeing the originals in a museum where, for example, a painting's texture, its placement in relation to other paintings in the gallery, and the gallery's lighting have an irreplaceable aesthetic effect on the painting itself. Despite the many important uses that museums have found in conservation, exhibition, and education for digital images, these concerns are well-founded.

The success enjoyed by the *Image Directory* in responding to these concerns exists in inverse relation to the initial experiences of the Microsoft Corporation with the museum community. The Chairman of Microsoft established Interactive Home Systems in 1989 to research multimedia systems that would combine visual images, audio, motion video, and animation. Reorganized in 1992 as Continuum Publications, the company focused on amassing content, and its 1995 successor, Corbis, has dedicated itself to creating an interdisciplinary bank of digitized images.

Corbis has used an innovative business plan: to offer museums computer work stations and other materials worth about $25,000, at least in the cases of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust, as well as the promise of future royalties from sales of high resolution images created and distributed by Corbis.[xiii] It would then license these electronic images to home, institutional, and commercial buyers. Early in its life, Corbis offered only exclusive contracts, restraining museums from entering into agreements with other publishers about the use of those images. Although there were some notable signings under this provision, the museum community quickly recognized this aggressive strategy. The resulting uproar forced a change to a non-exclusive agreement. Still, there are unresolved intricacies. For instance, the US Copyright Office recognizes Corbis' copyright claim to digital files, stating in effect that the creation of a digital file entails a new level of originality. Corbis is thus able to require a museum to lease a digital file of its own image if the museum wants to place that file with another licensing agency.

As a union catalog of item-level information, the *Image Directory* is a very different electronic project from the image bank being built by Corbis. The core of the each record in the *Image Directory* database is a set of 25 datafields that describe an art object, not a digital scan of the image itself. It is a text-based project, not an image-based one. And the *Image Directory* seeks to own no rights to materials provided by museums, so there is never any question about a museum to control its property.

The *Image Directory* gives the museum's curator and registrar their customary control in presenting their collection to the public. When providing the data to fill each record's 25 datafields, such as artist name, title of the work, date of creation, medium, and the like, the museum staff have the opportunity to make public what they believe to be the facts about the items in their collection, unmediated by outside art historians. The staff can also protect its images from electronic theft through two means: the *Image Directory* uses only low-resolution (72 dpi) scans, and the image is optional. It is optional because not all institutions own photographs of the items in their collections and many are wary of providing any image available in a medium they do not control. If the data about the image are good, then users will find the record; a low resolution scan would only confirm that users were viewing the image they had sought. The low resolution of the image offers adequate protection against theft on the Internet, since there is not enough data in the image for it to be of much use to anyone, and watermarking presents additional safeguards.

A union catalog of images is not a novel idea, and the datafields upon which the *Image Directory* is built have long been recognized as cataloging standards. Why, then, has nobody published a *Books in Print* for art images? Although part of the answer is that art museums have never cooperated until recently, instead exerting their energies in competition over unique cultural artifacts, a more accurate answer lies in the motivating incentives of money and control of property. The *Image Directory* explicitly addresses both incentives.

As we have seen, museums have overhead costs that, although somewhat elastic, cannot be ignored. Museums large and small need to find new revenue streams, but because of cutbacks in government subsidies, every museum staff is overworked and every new undertaking is evaluated in part by the amount of staff time it requires. The ideal revenue stream for the art museum creates revenue from an existing asset without an investment of staff resources. Sales of images is therefore a compelling business because it can avoid corporate business taxes, increase the visibility of the museum, and after the initial investment in creating the image, cropping it, correcting its color separations, and the like, require very low incremental costs.

We have seen that there is growth in the museum store industry and that in large part art museums have not been attracted to the offer of selling electronic scans of their images to Corbis. Other business plans that include an entity assuming control of rights to a museum's images have met similar resistance. The *Image Directory* answers the search for revenue streams by building into its business plan an incentive for museums to provide new and revised records over the long term. Through the *Image Directory* database architecture, museums may license images and sell their byproducts, such as books, to customers who might not otherwise have access to them. In each image record is a space for museums to list rights and restrictions conditions for each image, as well as the various price levels at which images are offered. Users can select among the options museums present, enter their credit card information, and click an icon to deliver the order directly to a museum's fax machine or e-mail address. The museum would then fulfill the order in its usual manner and retain all of the revenues.

As an electronic marketing tool, the *Image Directory* provides museums with a medium for gathering information about the purchaser and so enables that much more control over the distribution of its images. As a scholarly reference tool, the *Image Directory* can both help curators develop successful exhibits and simultaneously give art patrons greater access to material that is not being exhibited. In its educational mission it indirectly enriches visits to museum galleries without serving as a substitute for them. Users who want more information about or access to the image are led by the *Image Directory* record to contact the museum itself.

One might object by saying that the proliferation of websites maintained by art museums and their heavy usage would obviate the need for a union catalog. On these websites, one might expect a museum to include as much information as it can about its collections, showing them in their best possible light. While there seems no end of growth in this area, the *Image Directory* offers users the ability to search diverse sources with one search strategy. This capability is now missing from the universe of art images. One must instead go from site to site, learning new search strategies at each stop. In addition, very few if any museums use their sites as reference sources, the most notable exception being the site of the San Francisco Museums of Art. Websites are more commonly showcases for a few pieces and general information about the museums themselves.

It is possible that over time this type of website will be replaced by more sophisticated presentations of material. One of the reasons the *Image Directory* has been impossible until now is because of the lack of cataloging standards. Operating as independent entities, art museums have never had a reason to define such standards; the opportunity afforded by the *Image Directory* to see how others describe and classify objects will lead to the gradual adoption of new rules and agreements. The Getty Information Institute's vocabularies—the *Union List of Artist Names* and the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus*—are incorporated in the *Image Directory* to bridge the gaps between institution-centered conventions. There is a movement within the scholarly community toward "metadata," a standardized cataloging scheme that institutions would follow in providing universal access to their data. Users could use a single search strategy while moving from site to site, assured that the results of their search are complete. At present, however, any widespread adoption of metadata standards seems remote. Whether any metadata scheme can improve upon the value offered by a single source of information in a standardized format with built-in reference tools will be revealed in the future.

The *Image Directory* is an excellent example of an electronic publishing project crystallizing social, cultural, and financial trends. Before the Internet and online commerce became available, this rather traditional union catalog project was impossible. Holding out the potential for real scholarly benefits to museums, students, researchers, commercial image users, and anyone interested in art images, the project exhibits the signs of being able to grow in ways that are not yet clear. It is this feature of electronic publishing—unfettered growth with corresponding flexibility—that makes this project unique.

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[i] Mason, Robert. "National Outrage." *Museums Journal.* January, 1996. Page 15.
[ii] LS "Three Percent Cut in Culture Budget." *The Art Newspaper.* January, 1996. Page 5.
[iii] Kaufman, Jason Edward. "An Arts Lottery for America?" *The Art Newspaper.* May, 1996. Page 1.
[iv] Monroe, Dan L. "Federal Funding of Museums: The Reality." *Museum News.* November-December, 1995. Pages 50-1.
[v] This special tax applied to nonprofit institutions, the Unrelated Business Income Tax (UBIT), requires that merchandise be directly related to the museum's collection and mission. It results in exempt articles such as scarves that carry the image of a classic textile design or contemporary painting and in nonexempt articles, such as t-shirts, coffee mugs and umbrellas that carry only the museum's name or logo.
[vi] Rosett, Richard. "Art Museums in the United States: A Financial Portrait." In *The Economics of Art Museums.* Ed. Martin Feldstein. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. Page 168.
[vii] Giuliano, Charles. "Survival Strategies for Museums in the 1990s." *Art New England*, June-July 1995. Page 82.
[viii] Guiliano, op. Cit.
[ix] *The Art Newspaper.* Number 44 (January, 1995, page __; Number 55 (January, 1996), page 9.
[x] Blattbert, Robert C. and Cynthia J. Broderick. "Marketing of Art Museums." In *The Economics of Art Museums.* Ed. Martin Feldstein. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. Pages 334-7.
[xi] Foderaro, Lisa W. "Museums Step Up Their Retailing to Turn Art into Revenue." *The New York Times.* February 18, 1997. Page B5.
[xii] Ruiz, Cristina. "Lost in Cyberspace." *The Art Newspaper.* No. 68, March, 1997. Page 21.
[xiii] Kaufman, Jason Edward. "How Fares the Digital Revolution?" *The Art Newspaper.* No. 60, June, 1996. Page 6. See also John Adlai Franklin, "Image Control." *Museum News*, September-October, 1993. Pages 36-56.