

AHM collection online

Judith van Gent, head documentation and photography, Amsterdams Historisch Museum (AHM), Amsterdam

The Amsterdams Historisch Museum (AHM) administers the historic collection of Amsterdam, which currently numbers around 70,000 objects. All of these objects are registered and their every movement recorded in a collection management system (Adlib). In addition to this logistics administration, the system is used for publication purposes. For instance, in March of this year the AHM published the entire collection database on the Internet.

The AHM has chosen to make the collection accessible on line and allow free use of the contents. Not only well-documented parts of the collection, but the entire collection database can be searched. Various sub-collections, such as ceramics, are listed with only basic information; while others, such as the paintings, glass and silver collections, are disclosed in greater depth, including the provenance, literature and catalogue entries. The same applies to reproductions: there are high resolution photographs of approximately 40% of the objects, while others have only a low resolution black-and-white image or no photo at all. The images and the texts can be downloaded free of charge for private purposes under the Creative Commons Licence 3.0 "Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported."

The AHM has opted for different interfaces. The collection information is available in two versions: a browser version for the general public and a research version for researchers and interested laymen. The pre-selection and presentation of the data for both versions are provided by the head of documentation in consultation with the curators and web managers.

The AHM favors centrally managed data. The documentation department is responsible for the collection information and basic data are entered only by the documentalists to maintain consistency and enhance data searchability. In collection catalogue projects, curators work intensively with documentalists to enrich the data. Together they research provenance and literature and input the results in the system. When information is already present, it is re-used. Furthermore, comments and catalogue entries by the curator are entered in the database. In this efficient and "green" workflow, the head of documentation has a coordinating role and functions like a spider in the dataweb, overseeing the data like a curator.

The AHM is keen to collaborate with the public. Obviously, the collection database is a work-in-progress and the retro-cataloguing will not be finished for many more years. This is why the museum emphasizes that the collection information is never complete and encourages external researchers and the public to assist it by making comments and suggestions regarding the objects. These comments are then evaluated and entered by the documentalists to improve the collection information.

The AHM supports collaboration with other cultural and research institutions. The Adlib collection database is a standard system used by many Dutch, French and English museums. It can produce XML data and be harvested by different search engines. Now that the database is online, the museum is collaborating on various projects, for instance the semantic search projects of the Free University, and on other educational applications.

Biography

Judith van Gent is an art historian specialized in automation. After studying the history of art, she was awarded a grant from the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, or NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) to research the work and life of Bartholomeus van der Helst, which will culminate in a dissertation in 2010. In addition to the Van der Helst project, in the 1990s she worked on various digitization projects (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie [Netherlands Institute for Art History, or RKD]; Radboud University, Nijmegen) and as a cultural information adviser at Bureau IMC in Rotterdam. She has been the head of documentation at the Amsterdams Historisch Museum since 2001 and is responsible for the collection management system. The first collection project was the publication the online and book version of the catalogue of paintings from before 1800 in July 2008. This was followed up with the launching of the AHM's entire collection database on the Internet in March of this year.