

Virtual museums need real curators

Pierre-Yves Desaive, online collection manager, Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België - Museum voor Oude Kunst, Brussels

A few years ago, Belgian national museums were asked to describe their needs and priorities for the digitization of their collections. The term “digitalizer” is now widely used in the French-speaking museum community, replacing the somehow old-fashioned “informatizer” (to computerize). This semantic shift has consequences, as “digitizing” means to convert a work of art from one state to another, while “informatizing” underlines the idea of using information technologies – a much broader concept. Indexing, creating metadata and links between records, these are some of the operations resulting from research conducted on the works of art, which help improve our knowledge of them. The first databases for art museums were meant to take advantage of query languages to make existing or potential links between objects visible: metadata and thesauri were to play a leading role in this.

Today, “digitizing” generally means to produce digital images. Consulting the online catalogues of some of the leading art museums, one is frustrated by the fact that the available data is usually reduced to its core compared to what is available in printed form. Is this really worth long-term, expensive digitizing plans? We believe that digitization should be only the very first step on the way to creating true digital online museums. Like the physical ones, digital museums need more art historians than computer scientists. The debate surrounding the durability of digital data should not overshadow the questions related to the quality of the online content. In the near future, the online catalogue will be THE reference document. Accordingly, the data going online must be up to date and accurate, and expandable as new information becomes available: virtual museums need real curators working in close collaboration with IT developers.

Biography

Pierre-Yves Desaive is an art historian with a degree in computer science applied to art history from Liège University. He has worked at the Koninklijke Musea voor Schone Kunsten van België, Brussels, since 2000, creating the museum’s online catalogue and conducting various research projects linked to the digitization of the collections. He is currently charged with developing the new website, which will be a portal to a larger project referred to as the Digital Museum. Since 2001, he has been representing the museums at the Belgian Ministry of Scientific Research within the framework of a long-term plan for digitizing the collections of the national scientific institutes. He is conducting research for a Ph.D. in museology and new media art. Since 2008, he has been a visiting lecturer at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Visuels de la Cambre, Brussels (National School for Visual Arts of la Cambre [ENSAV]), teaching a class entitled “Contemporary art and new media art.”