

Web Museums and the French Population

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INTRODUCTION

Web museums take their origin from the “imaginary museum” (Malraux, 1956). They have sparked enthusiastic claims for art democratization, or the disseminating of images on original artworks for a diversified audience without access to physical art galleries using several forms of medium (e.g., books, magazines, or catalogues). Nowadays, the advent of the Internet for heritage institutions is an indisputable turning point in the 1990s and seen as the most innovative cultural portal by both curators and educators; it holds great potential with the realism of higher-end technologies.

SEVERAL FINDINGS ABOUT THE FRENCH POPULATION

Museum Web masters have little knowledge about virtual visitors’ tastes and needs when browsing art galleries; therefore design semantic networks must be addressed. Referring to an exploratory qualitative study undertaken on 10 Web museums¹ in French and English, regrouped into five main categories (i.e., archaeology/antiquity, ethnology/civilization, gistory, fine arts and heritage) according to geographical location, interface design and captions’ originality (Vol & Bernier, 1999; Bernier, 2007). We then examined some of the French population’s viewpoints with respect to three variables: profession (i.e., IT-related work), taking into account Internet familiarity (i.e., novices vs. experts) and museum practices (i.e., occasional vs. regular visitors). Thirty-seven Parisian users were gathered (21 men and 16 women) between the ages of 15 and 68 (average age of 45 years), with mainly university graduates (bachelor level).

Our methodology was inspired by the hypermedia design model, proven effective for measuring what different nationalities expect in terms of interface designs, namely (1) *contents*, (2) *layout*, (3) *navigation*, (4) *interactivity*, and (5) *features* (Cleary, 2000; Davoli, Mazzoni, & Corradini, 2005; Garzotto & Discenza, 1999; Harms & Schweibenz, 2001; Nielsen, 2000; Schneiderman, 1997; Vetschera, Kersten, & Koszegi, 2003). Much literature exists on the subject, but one cannot give an exhaustive account of all authors studying Internet-based systems, notably perceived usefulness of ergonomics and user’s characteristics.

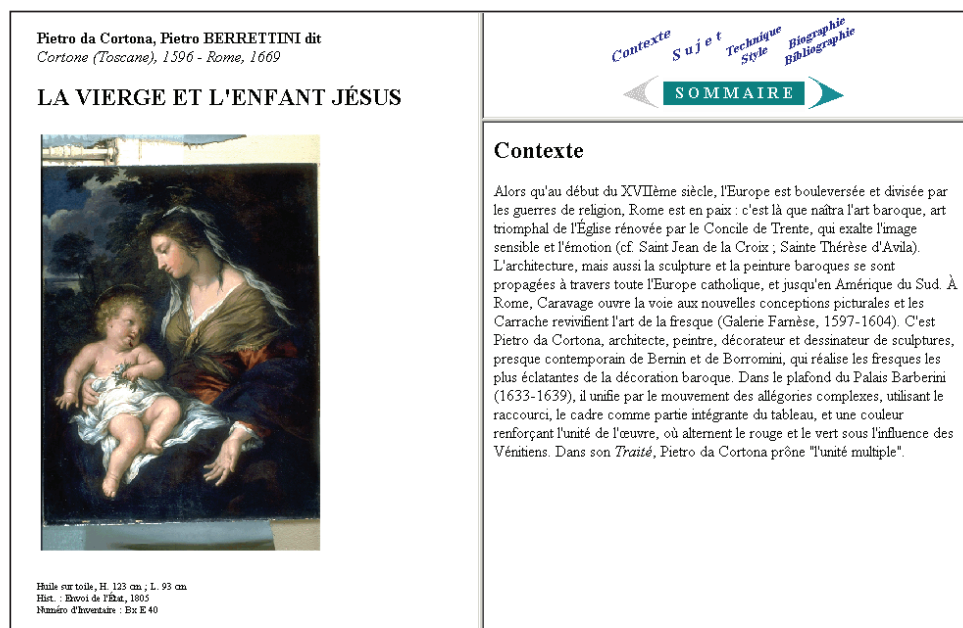
Contents

Assiduous Web surfers and regular museum visitors reported the home page to be the paramount feature, because it provides a wide selection of headings with possible explanations on the painter’s biography, its canvas, and artistic movements. The two most appreciated art galleries responding to these criteria were *The Web Tours* of the National Art Gallery of Washington and *A Hundred Masterpieces* of the Museum of Fine Arts of Bordeaux (see Figure 1).

Many assiduous surfers who are occasional visitors said that broad topics failed to arouse their curiosity, whereas regular visitors wanted Web museums with more imaginative headings for the given information. Several occasional visitors found some captions of the Metropolitan Museum of New York too general (i.e., *Themes*) or the wordings of the Caen Memorial (i.e., *Virtual Exhibitions*), others from the New Gallery of Art of Washington and the Natural History Museum of London too extensive (i.e., *Education*), even a few too subtle from the Museum of Lausanne (i.e., *Cabinet of Curiosity*) for their didactic goals. This comment is all the more true when curators offer a set of topics that are supposedly known by the general public, instead of answering what the public ought to learn. As for privileged sources of information, regular and occasional visitors are interested in: (1) art collections, (2) virtual guided tours, (3) conferences, (4) databases, and (5) upcoming exhibitions (Vol & Bernier, 1999). The latest figures (Kravchyna & Hastings, 2002) revealed that virtual visitors expect content on recent physical exhibits (80%), art collections (62%), special events (66%), and images of artworks (54%).

Layout

Some regular visitors and assiduous surfers appraised computer graphics representing explicit visual cues. This was also stressed as essential by novice surfers and occasional visitors. For instance, the iconography of Medieval Paintings in the South of France, like the Death’s-head’s caption, matched the information to be obtained and encouraged investigation. Many regular visitors were displeased looking at thumbnail images of the masterpieces, when in reality they can lose themselves in the exhibits, except for the National Gallery of Arts of Washington, where one can easily seek known or unknown paintings. Several others, mainly assiduous surf-

Figure 1. Museum of Fine Arts of Bordeaux[©]

ers who were regular visitors, claimed “a classy” lighting effect augmenting the paintings’ texture as provided by the National Art Gallery of Washington (see Figure 2).

With respect to the visual presentation of contents, assiduous surfers who are regular visitors highly favored the plentiful homepages of the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York and of the Museum of Natural History of London, which use multiple subject areas, which had a positive result on their exploration. Regardless of Internet familiarity and museum practices, users appraised the headings *Kids only* of the MNH or *Explore & Learn* with Timeline of Art History of the MET; both museums aimed at reaching specific audiences and raised a strong interest in testing their knowledge (see Figure 3).

Navigation

Several regular visitors appreciated a topographical view of their art collections and galleries with great ease of use or a preliminary guidance derived from the real building such as offered by the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Furthermore, assiduous and novice surfers sought information in a traditional way, and therefore preferred hypertext followed by the table of contents, whereas regular visitors wanted Pop-up text boxes with features that enrich the visit. Some assiduous surfers as well as regular and occasional visitors, were displeased with nonstandardized indexes and stated a major inconvenience in becoming acquainted with most online exhibitions. Most virtual visitors that browsed the

National Art Gallery of Washington were unanimous about having the best guidance facilities. Nevertheless, many users, regardless of their Internet familiarity, complained they were forced to consult another Web page to obtain textual information on artworks.

Interactivity

Web museum designers need to highlight one media in relation with another, based on a single user-based approach, such as text leading to an image and images linking to sound. However, it is more natural to listen first and visualize second for better memorization of information (Bernier, 2003). In this respect, some novice surfers and occasional visitors indicated that images are extremely important, but that sound makes the information less grim (Vol & Léger, 1997). Several novice surfers and occasional visitors have a preference, for instance, palliative aids when visualizing masterpieces. The same users also expected a three-dimensional environment to guide them from one exhibit space to another with sophisticated software (e.g., QTVR, VRML), like the *Virtual Tours* of the National Gallery of Art of Washington.

Numerous occasional visitors criticized the absence or the under-utilization of audio and video comments for Medieval Paintings in the South of France, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and the Jacques-Édouard Léger World Art Foundation, as well as for the Museum of Fine Arts of Bordeaux. Since our research was undertaken, the Léger Foundation has considerably improved its headings

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