User experience in applying collections information

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S W E D E N

1. Aims and objectives

After a career developing museum information standards and content, I have become an active user of museums and the information which they provide to the public. This paper and the conference presentation describe my experience in using the information about three artists and their works. I have taken as my examples the information provided by five museums with major art collections in London, Cambridge and Edinburgh.

In the paper, I will demonstrate the current state of progress with public access to information in the five museums, identify strengths and weaknesses of the approaches being adopted by the museums and develop informal recommendations for the types of information services which a museum with art collections should offer.

In the conference presentation, I will concentrate of examples of good practice, based on the work of the five museums and the recommendations.

2. Artists

Three artists have been used as the subjects of the review, Eugène Delacroix, Richard Bonington and John Constable.

Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) spent most of his career in Paris, apart from lengthy visits to London in 1825 and Morocco in 1832. He was one of the leading artists of the Romantic movement, with his most famous work being Liberty Leading the People, 1831 (Musée du Louvre). He was strongly influenced by Bonington and Constable and was himself one of the great influences on the Impressionists.

Richard Bonington (1802-1828) grew up in England, before moving with his family to France. He became a close friend of Delacroix, with the two artists sharing a studio and working on common subjects for some years, before Bonington's early death. Some of Bonington's greatest seascapes are at the Wallace Collection, such as A Sea Piece, 1824-25.

John Constable (1776-1837) was slow to establish his reputation in England, but received acclaim in France when landscapes such as The Hay Wain, 1821 (National Gallery) were exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1824, where they were seen by Delacroix and Bonington. Constable subsequently became regarded as one of finest of English landscape painters.

3. Museum case studies

I have reviewed the resources provided about these artists by the five museums, looking at the usability of the information made available online, in publications and in the galleries themselves.
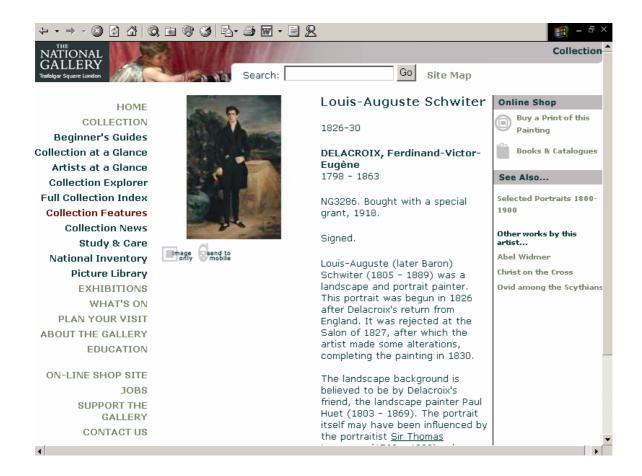
National Gallery, London
The National Gallery includes major works by Delacroix (Portrait of Louis-Auguste Schwiter, 1826-27) *(Fig. 1)* and Constable (Stratford Mill, 1820, The Hay Wain, 1821).

Web resources (www.nationalgallery.org.uk)
The Gallery's Web site provides multiple ways into the collection (guides, gallery outline, highlights, main artists, timeline, full list, basic keyword search, themes, news, etc.). There are links to a print purchase facility and an online bookshop. These services provide an excellent resource, with extensive detail and cross-referencing, which should work well for the public, students, life-long learners and researchers.

The full catalogue includes a record for every work in the collection. This is accessed through an A-Z list of artists. Each letter can have multiple pages (five pages for the letter C) which the user has to browse through, which can be a cumbersome starting point. However, once an artist has been selected, the system is very effective. The works by the artist in the Gallery can be listed in three formats: as a thumbnail image and title, with no image but additional text, or one at a time. When you select an individual work, the catalogue screen includes a larger image (with a link to a full size image, with a zoom facility for some works), brief description and basic object information (title, date, artist name and dates, with link to the biography, ID and acquisition information, medium and dimensions) *(Fig. 1)*. There are links to a number of glossary terms. One shortcoming is that there is no information about whether a work is on display.

Figure 1. Catalogue screen (National Gallery)

In a minority of cases, there are links from the painting to an artist biography. These include a brief history and links to works by the artist (not available for Delacroix or Constable).

There is a site-wide search option, but no specific artist search facility apart from the A-Z list.

Search services provided within the museum

The Gallery has two search areas (Artstart), one of which is alongside a coffee bar in the heart of the Gallery. These areas have over 20 computers and printer facilities. The excellent resources include a version of the collections information and additional content including gallery locations and further artist biographies. Users can refer to predetermined tours or create their own selection and print a route through the galleries.

Information available alongside the collection
There is a comprehensive audio guide, which covers each work on display, with thematic versions for children, etc. Each room has a panel with a summary of the scope of the room. There are detailed captions beside each work, with descriptions and the reference number for the work in the audio guide.

Publications
The Gallery has a comprehensive range of collection catalogues, exhibition guides and CDs, including a superb concise guide and full academic catalogues.

Tate Britain, London
Tate Britain includes works by Bonington (Venice: Ducal Palace with a Religious Procession, 1828, etc.) *(Fig. 2)* and Constable (Hampstead Heath, with the House called 'The Salt Box', c. 1820, etc.).
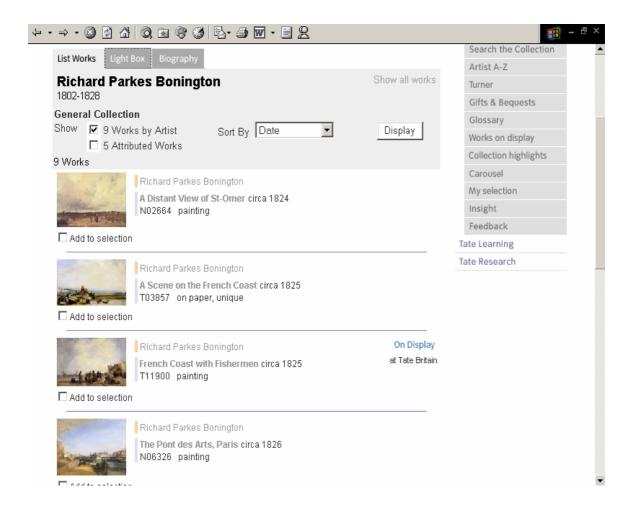
Web resources (www.tate.org.uk)
Users can access the overall Tate collection in five main ways (artists, subjects, glossary, new acquisitions and a 'carousel'), plus information about individual display areas and basic and advanced keyword search options. This is also an excellent resource, with extensive detail and cross-referencing. It is more complex than the National Gallery facility, with many additional features, but these are not a barrier and the resource should work well for all types of user, but particularly life-long learners and researchers.

The collection search options include a basic search screen with fields for artist or title, while the advanced screen has fuller facilities, including restricting the results to works that are on display.

The full catalogue (65,000 entries) is accessed through an A-Z list of artists. Each letter may have multiple pages (12 pages for the letter C), but there is a pull-down list to support efficient moving from one page to another. Once an artist has been selected, their works can be listed in two styles, either the default with thumbnail image, title, date, ID number and medium, and whether the work is on display *(Fig. 2)*, or a light-box display. In the case of a major artist, there may be many works (for example, there are over 250 entries for Constable) and the user can refine the selection

Figure 2. List of works by an artist, sorted by date (Tate)

and the display criteria before re-running the search. Selecting one of the works takes you to a catalogue screen with a larger image (with a link to a full size image), brief description and basic object information (artist name and dates, title, date, medium and dimensions, ID number, acquisition information). The brief description is typically taken from the gallery caption, but as an alternative, you can view the full catalogue entry for the work, with history and provenance details. If the work is on display, you can view the location information. You can also display the subject terms relevant to this work and follow links to other works with this subject. The artist biography is accessible from the header to the list of works and the header to an individual work. The sources of information are credited, including authors and dates. This combination of facilities provides a superb resource for the advanced user.

You can also review information about the individual display areas within the Gallery. This includes a description of the display theme and a list of all the works in that area.

The subject resource supports searching for a subject term or viewing a detailed subject hierarchy. Once a subject term has been selected, the relevant works are listed. The glossary includes 300 terms about art history, accessible through an A-Z list and links within the descriptions of the works.

A user can also set up one or more groups of records relevant to their interests. This is a good concept, but is cumbersome to use.

Search services provided within the museum
The Gallery has two small-scale search areas, one in the main entrance area with three computers but no seats or printer, and the other at an alternative entrance with two computers and seats. The work stations provide access to the standard Web version of the collection resources, with no additional configuration.

Information available alongside the collection
There is a highly selective audio guide, covering some of the works on display, but this is much less effective than the National Gallery guide. Each room has a panel with a summary of the scope of the room. There is a caption beside each work, with good descriptions and an audio guide number where available.
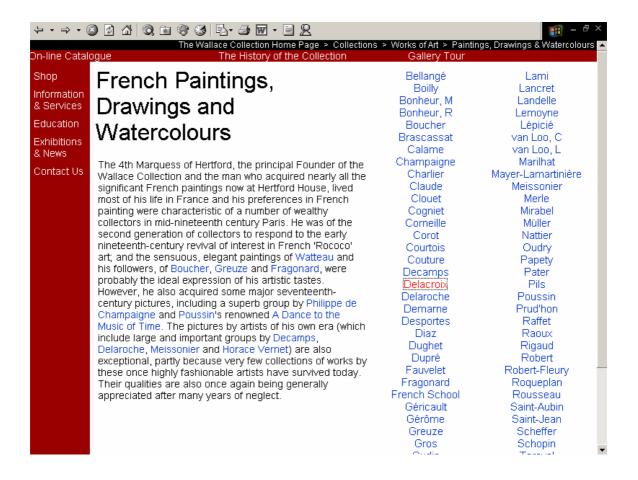
Publications
The Gallery has an extensive range of exhibition and thematic catalogues and artist guides, a companion guide to British art, but no concise or full catalogues.

Wallace Collection, London
The Wallace Collection includes works by Delacroix (The Execution of Doge Marino Faliero, 1826 and Faust and Mephistopheles, 1826-27) *(Fig. 3)* and Bonington (Anne Page and Slender, c. 1825, On the Coast of Picardy, 1826, Venice: the Piazza San Marco, 1826, Henry IV and the Spanish Ambassador, c. 1827-28).

Figure 3. Summary of a school represented in the collection (Wallace Collection)

Web resources (www.wallacecollection.org)
The Web site includes an introduction to the 750 works in the paintings collection. An initial page has information about the main artists and schools, leading to separate pages about individual artists and schools *(Fig. 3)*. The artist page includes a short biography and checklist of works, with the entries for each work limited to an image, title, date, dimensions and ID number, with no description or gallery location. There is no separate search facility.

While the existing resources are good, they need to be extended to include more of the details from the published sources and a search facility. At present, they are probably of most value to the general public, rather than life-long learners and researchers.

Search services provided within the museum
There are no computer facilities in the public areas of the museum.

Information available alongside the collection
There is a limited audio guide which focuses on the background to the historic rooms. The captions are very limited, with no dates or descriptions.

Publications
The Collection has an excellent range of publications, including detailed catalogues and a number of artist guides, such as one about Bonington.

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
The Fitzwilliam Museum includes works by Delacroix (Le Bagage de Campagne, c. 1816, Odalisque Reclining on a Divan, c. 1827), Bonington (Bridge Builders at Rouen, c. 1822, Venice: the Piazza San Marco, 1826) and Constable (Hampstead Heath, 1820) *(Fig. 4)*.

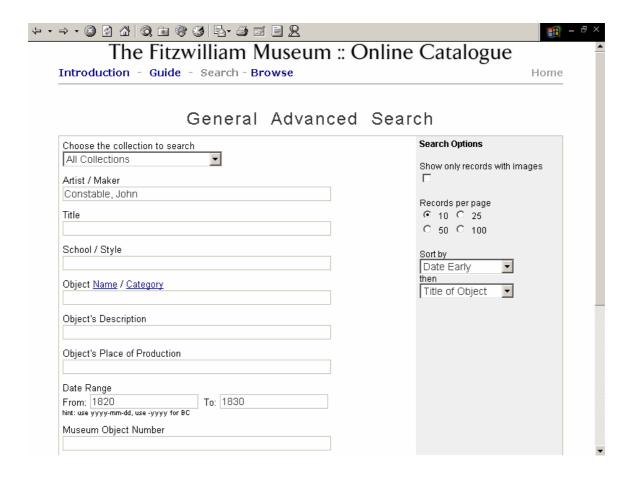*Web resources (www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk)*
Access to the collection is through a highlights guide (Pharos), departmental summaries and online catalogue.

The catalogue has over 110,000 records, accessed through a number of search screens, including simple and advanced versions *(Fig. 4)*. The user has some control over the style of the results, such as sorting by date then title. Groups of retrieved records are displayed as a checklist, with thumbnail images, artist, title, date, medium, ID number. Individual records include thumbnail and full screen images and structured text, including provenance and publications but no description. The overall approach has the flavour of being aimed at the student or researcher rather than the general public or life-long learner, but is straightforward to use.

Search services provided within the museum
There is a search area within the main part of the museum, with four terminals accessing the same information as on the Web. There are no location details and the staff on the reception desk are not able to access the internal database for this information.

Figure 4. Advanced search screen (Fitzwilliam Museum)

Information available alongside the collection

The museum has been developing a personal digital assistant (PDA) system, a pilot version of which has been available since 2005. This is interesting, but limited to a small number of works and no substitute for an audio guide. The captions alongside each work are limited to artist, title, date, acquisition information and ID number, but there is a folder in each gallery with fuller description details.

Publications

The Museum has a concise guide, specific collection guides and leaflets for a number of galleries.

National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh

The National Gallery, Edinburgh, includes works by Bonington (Venice: the Grand Canal, 1826) and Constable (The Vale of Dedham, 1828) *(Fig. 5)*.

Figure 5. Catalogue screen (National Galleries of Scotland)

Web resources (www.natgalscot.ac.uk)

Users can access parts of the collection through an artist A-Z, subjects and simple and advanced searches. This is well designed, but currently includes only 1200 of the 70,000 works in the collection.

The site includes a list of artists displayed under each letter of the alphabet, with the artist name being followed by a note of how many works are included in the database. At present, there is no entry for Bonington and only one work listed under the entry for Constable. The initial display of the works by an artist incorporates a thumbnail, title, date and ID number. The display for an individual work includes a larger image (with access to a full-screen version) and brief description

(Fig. 5). There is no information about whether the work is on display. Some of the artist entries include biographies.

The subject search option has a number of broad categories, with further subdivisions.

The advanced search facility has options for name, title, date range and artist nationality. The results of a search are displayed as a checklist of works.

Search services provided within the museum
The Gallery has an IT gallery, with six touch screen terminals accessing information about the collection. The artist search screen leads to a list of the artists represented on the system, which currently omits Constable. The application is less complete than the partial information on the Web site. When there are a number of works listed for a single artist, it is not clear how the entries are ordered. The information about individual works includes text, a zoom facility, location and access to subject and timeline details.

The nearby information desk can provide information about works omitted from the IT gallery, but the restricted scope of the public system is a major constraint.

Information available alongside the collection
There are good descriptive captions alongside individual works. There is no audio guide.

Publications
The Gallery has a printed catalogue of the main works.

4. Portfolio of information resources
The following notes summarise the most effective features of an information system for a museum with an art collection. They are focused on the perspective of a life-long learner and influenced by the services provided by the five museums.

Web resources

The Web resource should ideally include records and images covering the complete collection. It should be regularly updated from the museum's internal database, so that gallery location details are current. It should incorporate the following features:

- an outline of the collection and its main schools, periods, themes, etc.

- a basic search facility, with a single box for the search criteria, drawing on artist, title and subject information

- an advanced search facility, with separate boxes for each of the search criteria, including artist, title, earliest date, latest date and subject

- an easy to navigate A-Z checklist of artists

- facilities to browse through the works by an individual artist, in the style of a checklist with a thumbnail image, title and date and a note of whether the work is on display, linked to an artist biography

- a full catalogue display, including image, description, historic details, administrative information and gallery location, also linked to an artist biography

- artist biographies, including a list of works by the artist

- details about each display area, including an outline of the theme and a list of works currently in the area

- glossary of terms relevant to the collection, linked to works which illustrate the term

- user control over searching (such as to limit the search to works that are on display), sorting (by title, by date, by gallery location), selection of works from the current set and different display options (concise list, fuller list, light box)

- facilities for the user to define groups of works which match their interests (select works to add to group, use this for research, gallery trail, etc.)

Search services provided within the museum

The visitor to the museum should have access to:

- a number of work stations with good ergonomics and printing facilities

- a search system incorporating a tailored internal version of the Web resources, including facilities to create personal selections and map these onto the layout of the gallery, to establish a tour

Information available alongside the collection

Within each display area the visitor should have access to:

- an summary of the theme of the display

- a caption alongside each work, including artist, title, date, brief summary, context, ID number, audio guide number

- ideally, an audio guide with fuller information about the artist and each of the works on display

Publications

In addition, there should ideally be published versions of the information in:

- a concise guide

- one or more full catalogues