

Open Access Art Collections: Past, Present, and Future

Rachel Hoster, M.S. · The University of Michigan



Background

Art museums in the United States have historically adhered to a “gatekeeping mentality,” controlling images of objects in their collections by protecting them under copyright and charging fees for their use. As museum administration has shifted focus away from revenue gain and refocused on collection accessibility, there has been an increase in digital copies of works made available online for public viewing and scholarly research.

The move towards open access policies came along with the realization that licensing fees bring very little revenue to a museum. In most cases, profit is minimal to non-existent, especially since the digital age has removed many financial burdens of taking and mailing photography. Open access is not synonymous with revenue loss, nor are fees synonymous with profits.

In addition, making collections available online was a way to promote a museum’s holdings. On average, less than 5% of an institution’s total collection is on public display in the galleries, and the selection often does not rotate. Digitization functions as a kind of advertisement, helping museums assert their value and draw more visitors into both physical and digital spaces.

Methodology

The open access policies of nine American art museums were reviewed to identify general trends. The policies of three museums - the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the Cleveland Museum of Art - were examined in more depth.

Trends and Patterns

Public service motivation. Part of a museum’s mission is to make art freely accessible to the public, and this has motivated many institutions to make OA images available.

Licensing model type. A Creative Commons Zero license is a popular choice, but not all museums use this, or even specify which license they use.

File types offered for download. All museums supply JPEGs, and some supply higher-quality TIFFs.

“Believe to be in the public domain.” Users are responsible for identifying any third-party rights. Museums hold no responsibilities for unidentified copyright infringements.

Looking Forward

- 1** A field-wide standard licensing type for open access images.
- 2** Offering metadata downloads for all works of art, both public domain and under copyright.
- 3** Technical, financial, and human resources can be challenges for OA implementation. Each museum has different needs.

For a full list of museums included in the study, and for further reading resources, please use the QR code to reach the accompanying website.

