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Archival Resources on the Web

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Art and the Web: Finding Images Online

By Stefanie Hiles, Miami University

I was the last generation of art historians to use slides. My undergraduate years were spent in classes with humming slide projectors, and I still remember the distinct sound of a slide clacking down in the carousel as my professor clicked to a new image. I recall taking photographs of the images projected on the wall so they could be printed out and used for flashcards, memorizing artists, titles, dates, and media for an upcoming exam. More important, however, I remember never having to look for an image I needed to complete an assignment. All I had to do was stop by the slide library and ask the librarian to pull the slides I needed. On the off-chance the slide wasn't already in the collection, I could find a hardcopy image of the artwork, often from a book, and take it to the media lab on campus to have it converted into a slide.

I was in graduate school when professors switched from slides to digital images and PowerPoint presentations. Some of the "old guard" professors clung to their slides; I recall one professor went so far as to always have slides in his pockets, much to the amusement of my cohort. However, most had made the switch. I suddenly found myself scanning images from books to complete my projects since a slide library was no longer available. By the time I became a lecturer, the images I needed were usually obtainable online; the problem was finding them.

As the Arts and Humanities librarian at Miami University where I am the liaison to the Architecture and Design Department as well as the Art Department, many of my faculty members are concerned about their students' struggles to locate good quality images of artworks. Students often take poor cell phone photographs of artworks from books, claiming they couldn't find better images online (and not taking the time to scan the books), or failing to understand how Google Images works. Running a search in Google Images will return any image from a page containing the searched-for word(s). For example, if you do a search for Andy Warhol, you also will end up with artwork by fellow 1960s Pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Tom Wesselmann. This can lead to confusion, given that if one did not research the image beyond the search results, the Wesselmann could easily be mistaken for a Warhol.

The good news is that there are numerous art history image databases available for free online.¹ The bad news

is that there are so many of them it can be overwhelming. Where should one even start? There are several types of image databases: museum collections, comprehensive collections, and collections dedicated to a specific style or subject within the history of art.

Almost every major art museum has an online database chronicling its collections. The **National Gallery of Art** (NGA), for example, catalogs its collection at NGA Images (https://images.nga.gov/en/page/show_home_page.html). With over 45,000 artworks that can be searched, browsed, and downloaded, the database is extensive. It also allows users to create, save, manage, and download their own collections of images from the site. Similarly, the **Metropolitan Museum of Art's** database (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search#!?q=&perPage=20&sortBy=Relevance&sortOrder=asc&offset=0&pageSize=0>) contains over 450,000 images. All the public domain works are available for unrestricted use in a new open access policy announced in February 2017.

The main drawback of museum databases is that they only catalog the contents of their institutions. If you know the artwork's location, it is easy enough to find images through the museum's website. But what if you want to search for an artist across collections? **Artcyclopedia** (<http://www.artcyclopedia.com>) is a commercial site, but because its comprehensive database lists artists and their artworks by current museum location, it has enormous value for the art history researcher. Artcyclopedia can be searched by artist name, artwork title, or museum, and browsed by movement, medium, subject, and nationality. Instead of visiting each museum website individually, researchers can discover which museum collections contain an artist's work on one website. The majority of results are directly linked to museum websites that often give further information about the artist or artwork. Unfortunately, Artcyclopedia has not been updated since 2016, the links to external websites are sometimes broken, and the written content lacks depth. Poor graphic design and advertisements also detract from the site.

Google Art Project (<https://artsandculture.google.com>) is another comprehensive database that brings together 250 museum collections and 6,000 artists. This database was used for the incredibly popular "Search for Your



This view of a MOMA gallery shows (left to right) Bleekmen's Huma Bhabha (2010), Zarina's Home Is a Foreign Place (1999), and Dieter Roth's Solo Scenes (1997/1998) using Google Indoor Street View technology.

Selfie” on the Google Arts and Culture app that matched users’ selfies to their art history doppelgangers. The list of museums participating in Google Art Project is impressive and international in scope, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MOMA), the Uffizi Gallery in Italy, the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands, and the Musée d’Orsay in France. Users can either run a basic search or browse by museum collection, themes, artists, media, art movements, historical events, historical figures, and places. In addition, Google Art Project uses Street View “indoor technology” to offer 360-degree views of individual galleries, re-creating the gallery experience where artworks are often in conversation with one another. Forty-five thousand of the images are captured in “extraordinary detail using super high resolution or ‘gigapixel’ technology, enabling the viewer to study details of the brushwork and patina beyond that possible with the naked eye.”²

Europeana Art (<https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/collections/art>) is another excellent resource. Although limited to European institutions, the collection boasts over 1.5 million artworks. As at Google Art Project, the user can either run a basic search or explore the database through a variety of artists as well as themes and topics, an invaluable resource for researchers. I often have students who know what general topic they want to pursue but don’t know the artworks and/or artists that fit into the topic. In addition to artworks, the Europeana database provides access to over 50 million digitized items including books, music, maps, and fashion.

In addition to comprehensive databases, many focus on

a specific subject or medium. Created in 1996, the **Web Gallery of Art** (<https://www.wga.hu>) is one of the original art history Internet databases. It focuses on European art and architecture from the eighth through the fourteenth centuries and contains images of over 44,000 artworks. An advanced search can be performed, although search terms are used differently than in most databases. For example, the Web Gallery of Art uses “author” instead of “artist.”

For researchers interested in Japanese woodblock prints, **Ukiyo-e Search** (<https://ukiyo-e.org>) is a fantastic tool. With over 200,000 images, the site offers a basic search as well as browsing by time period and artist. Ukiyo-e Search also allows for reverse image searching, which would be highly beneficial if one has an image but not a title or artist. Moreover, the database pulls from 24 institutions allowing for multiple images of the same print. Researchers can thus compare and contrast prints of the same edition across collections.

Overall, these are just a small sampling of the image databases that exist online. The sheer quantity of options is overwhelming. Thankfully, the **Image Collections and Online Art** page (<http://umich.edu/~motherha/images.html>) at the University of Michigan’s **Mother of All Art and Art History Links Pages** (<http://umich.edu/~motherha>) has an excellent hyperlinked list of online art history image databases arranged by geographic place and medium. Although it might not list every online artwork database, it’s a good place to start.

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Images of Katsushika Hokusai's The Falling Mist Waterfall at Mount Kurokami in Shimotsuke Province (1832) from various online collections

Over the past 20 years, image collections have moved from the analog slide library to digital databases. However, due to the quantity of those available, it can be difficult to know where to begin. If a researcher knows the museum where an artwork is located, the museum's website is an excellent place to look. Other websites, like Artcyclopedia and Google Art Project, are more comprehensive and allow for searching images across collections. Finally, there are subject- and medium-specific image databases. Ideally, a fully comprehensive online database akin to WorldCat will be created in the future, but until then many excellent resources are available.

Notes

1. This article only discusses databases freely available online. It should be noted that academic libraries often subscribe to art history image databases like ArtSTOR, which is another excellent resource.
2. "The World's Art at Your Fingertips," Google Cultural Institute, <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/about/artproject/>.