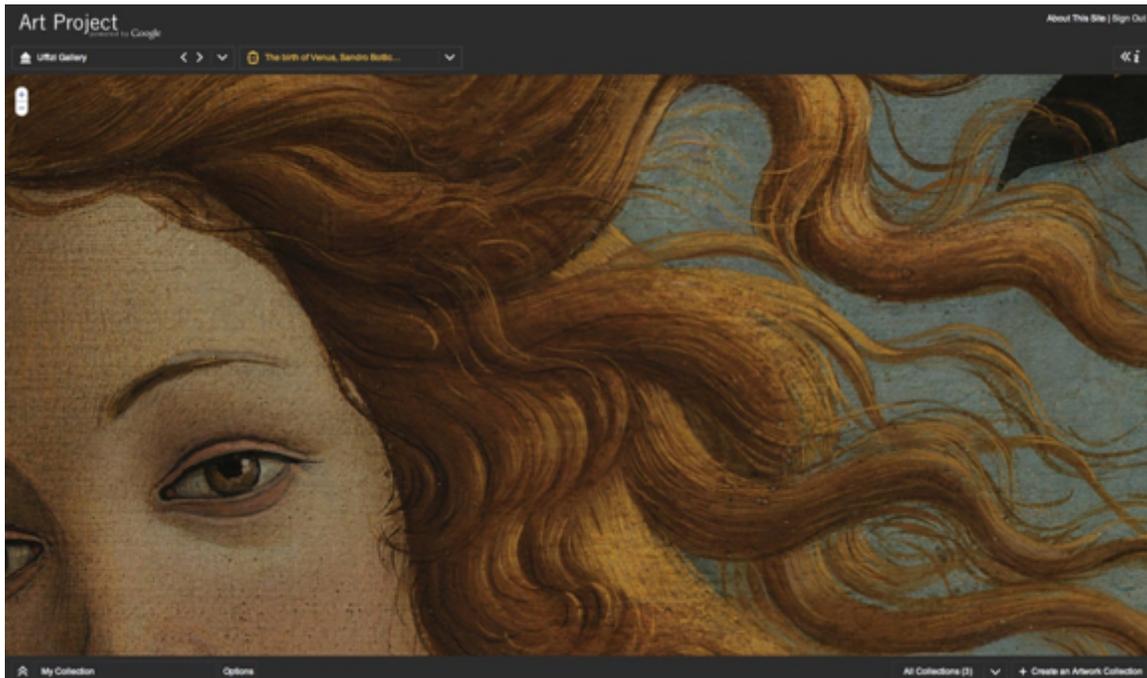


The Work of Art in the Age of Google



On Art Project, you can look closely at the details of works like Botticelli's "Birth of Venus." Credit...Uffizi Museum/Google Art Project

Roberta Smith
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If art is among your full-blown obsessions or just a budding interest, Google, which has already altered the collective universe in so many ways, changed your life last week. It unveiled its Art Project, a Web endeavor that offers easy, if not yet seamless, access to some of the art treasures and interiors of 17 museums in the United States and Europe.

It is very much a work in progress, full of bugs and information gaps, and sometimes blurry, careering virtual tours. But it is already a mesmerizing, world-expanding tool for self-education. You can spend hours exploring it, examining paintings from far off and close up, poking around some of the world's great museums all by your lonesome. I have, and my advice is: Expect mood swings. This adventure is not without frustrations.

On the virtual tour of the Uffizi in Florence the paintings are sometimes little more than framed smudges on the wall. (The Dürer room: don't go there.) But you can look at Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" almost inch by inch. It's nothing like standing before the real, breathing thing. What you see is a very good reproduction that offers the option to pore over the surface with an adjustable magnifying rectangle. This feels like an eerie approximation, at a clinical, digital remove, of the kind of

intimacy usually granted only to the artist and his assistants, or conservators and preparators.

There are high-resolution images of more than 1,000 artworks in the Art Project (googleartproject.com) and virtual tours of several hundred galleries and other spaces inside the 17 participating institutions. In addition each museum has selected a single, usually canonical work — like the Botticelli “Venus” — for star treatment. These works have been painstakingly photographed for super-high, mega-pixel resolution. (Although often, to my eye, the high-resolution version seems as good as the mega-pixel one.)

The Museum of Modern Art selected van Gogh’s “Starry Night,” and you can see not only the individual colors in each stroke, but also how much of the canvas he left bare. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s star painting is Bruegel’s “Harvesters,” with its sloping slab of yellow wheat and peasants lunching in the foreground. Deep in the background is a group of women skinny-dipping in a pond that I had never noticed before.



Bruegel’s “Harvesters” from the Metropolitan Museum. Credit... Metropolitan Museum of Art

In the case of van Gogh’s famous “Bedroom,” the star painting chosen by the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, I was able to scrutinize the five framed artworks depicted on the chamber’s walls: two portraits, one still life and two works, possibly

on paper, that are so cursory they look like contemporary abstractions. And I was enthralled by the clarity of the star painting of the National Gallery in London, Hans Holbein's "Ambassadors," and especially by the wonderful pile of scientific instruments — globes, sun dials, books — that occupy the imposing two-tiered stand flanked by the two young gentlemen.

Google maintains that, beyond details you may not have noticed before, you can see things not normally visible to the human eye. And it is probably true. I could make out Bruegel's distant bathers when I visited the Met for a comparison viewing, but not the buttocks of one skinny-dipper, visible above the waves using the Google zoom. Still, the most unusual aspects of the experience are time, quiet and stasis: you can look from a seated position in the comfort of your own home or office cubicle, for as long as you want, without being jostled or blocked by other art lovers.

At the same time the chance to look closely at paintings, especially, as made things, really to study the way artists construct an image on a flat surface, is amazing, and great practice for looking at actual works. And while the Internet makes so much in our world more immediate, it is still surprising to see what it can accomplish with the subtle physicality of painting, whether it is the nervous, fractured, tilting brush strokes of Cezanne's "Château Noir" from 1903-4, at the Museum of Modern Art, or the tiny pelletlike dots that make up most of Chris Ofili's "No Woman No Cry" from about a century later at the Tate Modern in London (the only postwar work among the 17 mega-pixel stars).

The Ofili surface also involves collaged images of Stephen Lawrence, whose 1993 murder in London became a turning point in Britain's racial politics; along with scatterings of glitter that read like minuscule, oddly cubic bits of gold and silver; and three of those endlessly fussed-over clumps of elephant dung, carefully shellacked and in two cases beaded with the word No. Take a good look and see how benign they really are. (You can also see the painting glow in the dark, revealing the lines "R.I.P./Stephen Lawrence/1974-1993.")

Another innovation of the Art Project is Google's adaptation of its Street View program for indoor use. This makes it possible, for example, to navigate through several of the spacious salons at Versailles gazing at ceiling murals — thanks to the 360-degree navigation — or to get a sharper, more immediate sense than any guidebook can provide of the light, layout and ambience of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. It also means that if your skill set is shaky, you can suddenly be 86'ed from the museum onto the street, as I was several times while exploring the National Gallery.

Keep in mind that usually only a few of the many, many works encountered on a virtual tour are available for high-res or super-high-res viewing. And those few aren't always seen in situ, hanging in a gallery. The architectural mise-en-scène is the main event of the virtual tours in most cases, from the Uffizi's long, grand

hallways to the gift shop of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the modest galleries of the Kampa Museum in Prague, where the star painting is Frantisek Kupka's 1912-13 "Cathedral," the only abstraction among what could be called the Google 17.

The Art Project has been hailed as a great leap forward in terms of the online art experience, which seems debatable, since most museums have spent at least the last decade — and quite a bit of money — developing Web access to works in their collections. On the site of the National Gallery, for example, you can examine the lush surface of Velázquez's "Rokeby Venus" with a zoom similar to the Art Project's. Still, Google offers a distinct and extraordinary benefit in its United Nations-like gathering of different collections under one technological umbrella, enabling easy online travel among them.



Bruggel DETAIL - A detail of the Bruegel's "Harvesters" showing swimmers in a pond. Credit...Metropolitan Museum of Art via Google Art Project

Despite the roster of world-class museums, there are notable omissions: titans like the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the Prado in Madrid and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, not to mention most major American museums, starting with the National Gallery in Washington. Without specifying who turned it down, Google says that many museums were approached, that 17 signed on, and that it hopes to add more as the project develops.

This implies an understandable wait-and-see attitude from many institutions, including some of the participants. The Museum of Modern Art, for example, has made only one large gallery available — the large room of French Post-Impressionist works that kicks off its permanent collection displays — along with

17 paintings that are all, again, examples of 19th-century Post-Impressionism. (Oh, and you can wander around the lobby.)

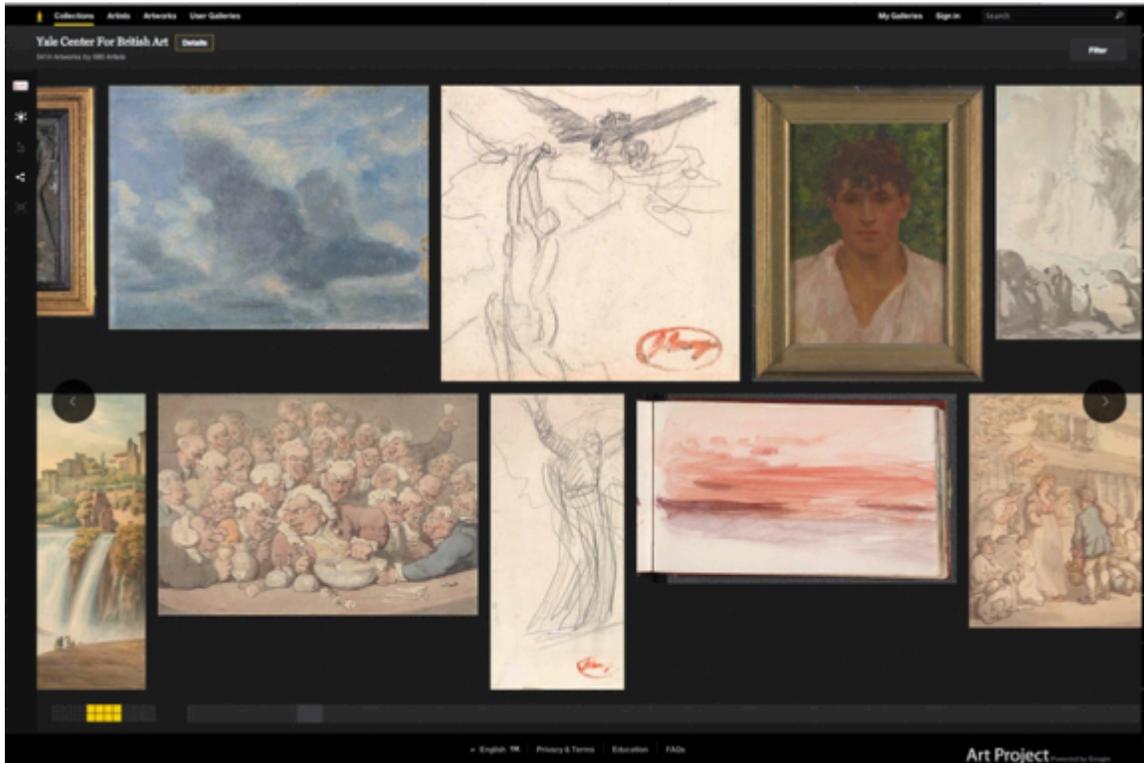
On first glance this seems both unmodern in focus and a tad miserly, given that several museums offer more than 100 works and at least 15 galleries. But MoMA is being pragmatic. According to Kim Mitchell, the museum's chief communications officer, the 17 paintings "are among the few in our collection that do not raise the copyright-related issues that affect so many works of modern and contemporary art." In other words, if and when the Art Project is a clear success, the Modern will decide if it wants to spend the time and money to secure permission for Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon" and the like to appear on it.

This might also hold true for the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, which owns Picasso's "Guernica," but has so far limited its participation primarily to 13 paintings by the Cubist Juan Gris and 35 photographs from the Spanish Civil War. Needless to say, the works and galleries that each museum has selected for the first round of the Art Project makes for some interesting institutional psychoanalysis.

From where I sit Google's Art Project looks like a bandwagon everyone should jump on. It makes visual knowledge more accessible, which benefits us all.

In many ways this new Google venture is simply the latest phase of simulation that began with the invention of photography, which is when artworks first acquired second lives as images and in a sense, started going viral. These earlier iterations — while never more than the next best thing — have been providing pleasure for more than a century through art books, as postcards, posters and art-history-lecture slides. For all that time they have been the next best thing to being there. Now the next best thing has become better, even if it will never be more than next best.

An Online Art Collection Grows Out of Infancy



The expanded second iteration of the Google Art Project was unveiled last week. Credit...

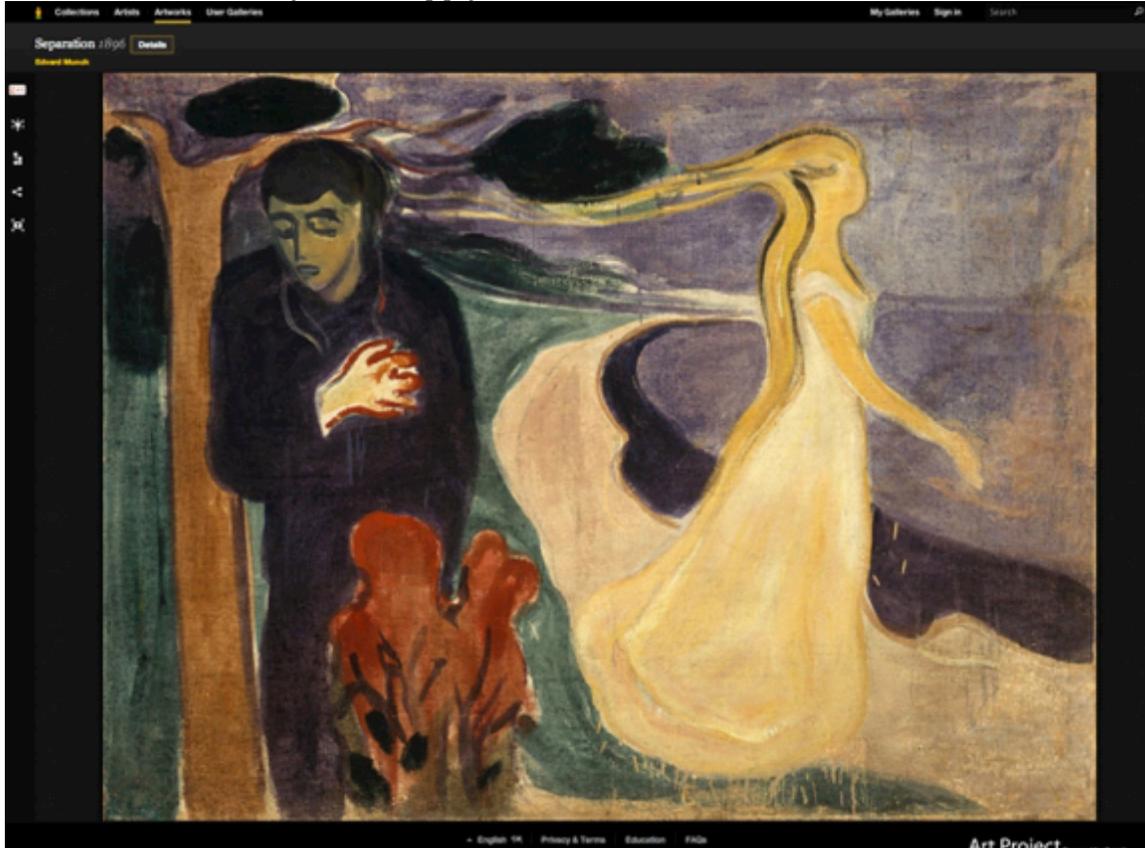
By Roberta Smith
April 11, 2012

I don't know how many wonders of the world there are by now, but it is possible that the Google Art Project will someday join the list.

The greatly expanded second iteration of this online compilation of self-selected art museums and artworks was unveiled last week. It makes available images of more than 32,000 works in 31 mediums and materials, from the collections of 151 museums and arts organizations worldwide, forming a broad, deep river of shared information, something like a lavishly illustrated art book fused with high-end open storage.

But world-wonder status will not happen tomorrow. The project has plenty of limitations and some bugs to work out. Numerous important museums have remained aloof, for one thing, including the Louvre, the Prado, the Centre Pompidou, Stedelijk in Amsterdam, Topkapi Palace in Istanbul and every Swiss museum of note.

Others, having joined, participate grudgingly, whether protective of their own Web sites or unwilling to deal with copyright permissions that apply to art not yet in the public domain; this includes vast quantities of 20th-century Modernist material, which remains in very short supply here.



Edvard Munch's "Separation" (1896), which the Munch Museum in Oslo has placed in the Google Art Project. Credit...Google Art Project/The Munch Museum, Oslo

To cite one glaring gap: Although there are now more than 6,500 names on the list of artists (cumbersomely alphabetized by first name, with no option to reconfigure by last name), the site still does not include a single work by Picasso. There is also apparently nothing by Georges Braque, Marcel Duchamp, Kazimir Malevich or Max Beckmann and only a single painting by Matisse, thanks to the Toledo Museum of Art. Postwar American and European art fares no better; none of the main Abstract Expressionists are represented. No Beuys, Fontana or Manzoni. Nothing notable by Johns, Rauschenberg or Warhol (although the Art Institute of Chicago has managed put up a very nice 1961 painting by Twombly).

But that will undoubtedly change. One of the glories of the Google Art Project is that it is a collective, additive work in progress that allows any museum or art-related organization to join and upload as many — or as few — high-resolution images of artworks as it chooses. At some point some museum somewhere is going to tackle the Picasso rights problem.

In the meantime the grand potential of the project and of its collaborative structure is fully evident in the new version. In all, it ranges through several millennia of art history and also across actual space in ways that boggle the mind, and it ushers in a new era of interconnected access both to world art and among the institutions that preserve it. It is light-years beyond the first version, which had its debut early last year and featured 17 participating museums from Europe and the United States and a selection of just over 1,000 works in a single medium — painting — that represented but a few centuries of Western art.

At the time the air was thick with wait-and-see caution. Now museums large and small from around the globe have jumped aboard, joining early adopters like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin and the National Gallery, London.

Some newcomers are similar in stature and location, including the Kunsthistorisches in Vienna, the Art Institute of Chicago, the National Gallery of Scotland, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



“The Fortune Teller” (1630-39), a work by Georges de La Tour that was uploaded by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Credit...Google Art Project/ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Others are much further afield in terms of geography or mission. There are major museums from Mexico City, Australia, Japan, India, Taiwan, Australia and Israel, as well as the new Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar. There are several artist museums, including those dedicated to Edvard Munch (Oslo), Frida Kahlo (Mexico City), Norman Rockwell (Stockbridge, Mass.) and Fernando Botero (Bogotá, Colombia). And there are definite moments of weirdness. The Ayala Museum in Makati, the Philippines, has uploaded 15 images of painted dioramas depicting scenes from Philippine history. The 20-year-old Olympics Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland — the single Swiss participant — is displaying lots of fairly awful statues of athletes.

There seems to be a general consensus that 50 to 250 images of artworks per museum is the appropriate number, but there are some wonderful, slightly insane exceptions. The top contributor is the Yale Center for British Art, which has uploaded images of 5,414 paintings, sculptures, prints and drawings by 580 artists — about 10 to 12 percent of its entire collection and everything in the public domain that appears on its own Web site — including scores of works by John Constable and J. M. W. Turner. The J. Paul Getty Museum has come close to the number of works it usually has on view at its two sites in Los Angeles, with 3,325 images of works by 713 artists — including a large and dazzling portion of its photography collection and, for some reason, battalions of small terra cotta oil lamps dating from the first to the fourth centuries.

(Curatorial quirks like these may make you pine for the ability to view works in a museum’s collection organized by artist or medium, but that’s still not an option. The option to organize by nationality or culture would also be nice.)

The first time around, the dazzlement of the Google Art Project lay especially in its fantastically magnified mega-pixel images of 17 paintings — one from each museum — and gallery views that enabled visitors to take virtual tours. You either zoomed in on magnified surfaces of paintings and brush strokes or zoomed through galleries.

These options still exist (although not all the partners have them yet), but now it is the sheer plethora of images of art objects that dominates, along with the seamless movement among them. You get to the art much faster than on most museum Web sites, and the images start sliding past like butter. You can choose to unspool them in single, double or triple bands, while proceeding collection by collection or filtering according to medium or artist. (Call up, for example, the 42 works by Manet.)



John Constable's "View at Hampstead With Stormy Weather" (about 1830), shared by the Yale Center for British Art. Credit...Yale Center for British Art, New Haven

As the cursor glides over an image, its title, date, artist and collection appear beside it. Click and you get a larger image of this work, which you can explore with magnification. Click again, on "details," and you get written information about the piece, which will vary tremendously according to institution (though there is a pervasive avoidance of dimensions). Also a link to the museum itself, which can sometimes lead you to delve beneath the lateral stream of images.

At one point in my initial explorations I filtered the artworks according to the medium "silk," and 158 images — including Chinese ink paintings, French tapestries and a ball gown from the House of Worth — popped up. I investigated an embroidered wall hanging from 17th-century China and within three clicks was watching a 14-minute video of curators at the Wilanow Palace Museum in Warsaw discussing (with subtitles) their collection of Asian art and an obsession with the East that began with a Polish king, Jan III Sobieski (1629-96).

Over all the greater number and diversity of participants makes the collective nature of the endeavor much clearer and more exciting. The Google Art Project is a forum for institutional self expression and contrasting artistic values and views of history in which the institutions themselves step out of the picture, at least initially. They make their presences felt not from their own little plots of digital real estate with customized, brand-oriented Web designs but within a single and rather plain format, through bodies of artworks that contrast and can be mingled with other bodies of artworks. It is similar to what happens in the human mind.

That these bodies of work tell us as much about the museums' attitudes toward the Google Art Project, as they do about the history of art, is to be expected. Clearly, some of these institutions are not yet committed to the idea of sharing what they have with the world through this new platform; and of course the fact that it's part of the Google empire would give any thinking curator pause. Still, the Google Art Project looks like a big wave of the future. Resistance may be futile, and even now ambivalent participation seems unbecoming.

For example the Museum of Modern Art's contribution — which jumps from 22 Post-Impressionist works, including van Gogh's "Starry Night," to 86 works dating from the early 1980s forward — seems almost shabby in its omissions. And the Tate Modern in London has uploaded no artworks at all: it offers a barren, museum-view tour of the empty Turbine Hall that virtually sniffs: If you want to see our stuff, visit our site. You want to say: No thanks, I'm busy. I'm swimming in art here, with no end in sight.