

FINE ARTS MUSEUMS OF SAN FRANCISCO

<http://www.thinker.org/index.html>

Date Visited: Saturday, November 1, 1997

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, DC

<http://www.nga.gov/>

Date Visited: Sunday, November 2, 1997

THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

<http://www.echonyc.com/~whitney>

Date Visited: Sunday, November 2, 1997

Browser used to access sites: Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco Web site effectively meets the challenge of providing information about its two museums, the de Young Museum and the Legion of Honor, by structuring information columnar-style. The home page introduces this approach which continues throughout most of the site. Beyond the home page, an ever-present navigation banner provides quick access to both museums and to main topic areas. Unfortunately, the site offers no search facility for locating keywords within the site's documents, but a site map serves as a tree-like picture of the site's contents, providing quick, comprehensive access to the site's contents. The "Internet Resources" area allows a user to perform predefined searches on the Internet at large to find files related to the museums.

The center piece of the site is "The Thinker," the museums' imagebase which will eventually provide access to all 65,000 objects in the collection and now includes 50% of the works. A user is allowed to mix and match terms in the search form, including "keywords," "artist last name," "country," and "period." Keyword searches are run against the "word soup," a prodigious index of all words assigned by museum volunteers who were asked to describe items in "simple, visual" terms. This approach perhaps lessens its usefulness to the art historian and makes searching less focused than if a controlled vocabulary had been used. Artist last name, country, or period provide more predictable access points. Results are clearly presented as thumbnails with short descriptions, and clicking on the image brings up a larger image and detailed record, which can include artist, title, medium, size, acquisitions source, and accession number. A second click on the image brings up a full-screen view, which is necessary to see any detail. In another technological innovation, a user may choose to search just the Japanese print collection using QBIC (Query By Image Content), a new IBM technology that searches images based on color percentages, color layout, or texture. A color layout search using a square each of blue and earth tone yielded results that seemed to match. By doing a customized search combining keywords and color layout / percentages, one can identify, for example, pictures with white cats. This technology demonstrates the potential for searching images, using both keywords and visual elements.

An effective site also takes advantage of technologies unique to the web which are oftentimes interactive in nature. An online visitor to the de Yong Museum is invited to

view its newest acquisition, Thomas Cole's *Prometheus Bound*, using FlashPix (TM), a technology designed to speedily deliver high resolution images. Once the image is downloaded and the FlashPix (TM) viewer is installed, a user can pan, magnify, and even crop an image. Still another example of how the site harnesses user input is through a form which allows information about an object or artist to be added to the imagebase.

Surely among the most elegantly designed and accessible museum sites, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., welcomes online visitors with an beautifully scanned image of a selection from the collection. Beyond the home page, navigation among the main areas of the museum is accomplished via a menu of choices located on the left-hand side of the screen which follow a user throughout the site, though this familiar model is broken when accessing special Web features like virtual tours of past exhibitions.

The site's classic, simple design belies the wealth of resources accessible via the site: information about each of the over 100,000 objects in the museum's collections is available. An online visitor is presented with the most search options on the "expanded search" screen which allows searching multiple fields including "artist last name," "key word in the title," "school" (originating country), "style," "year created," "medium," and "popular subject." If multiple hits are retrieved on an artist's name, a scrolling window is used to choose the appropriate name; also, a complete index of artists represented in the database may be consulted. A handy feature allowing a user to limit results to items with images is available, but doing so may be too restricting since there are quite a few items without images. Results are divided by medium and then listed by title, with works having images clearly marked. Extensive artist biographies, if available, are also accessible from this screen. Clicking a title brings up a detailed description and image which can have as many as ten clickable options including "bibliography," "exhibition history," "location" (which brings up a map of the gallery with the artwork's current location highlighted), "full screen image," "detail images," "provenance," "conservation notes," "narratives," "tour" (if included in a online tour), and "purchase reproduction" (a unique feature that allows a user to order and pay for a reproduction online). Image quality is excellent, and with a sharp monitor supporting true color, most full screen images are breathtaking.

Though not heavy on interactive features, the site does take advantage of RealAudio in select online tours, allowing a visitor to listen to a curator discuss a work. Also, virtual tours of select exhibitions include RealSpace panoramas, which simulate a 360 degree view of the gallery space.

The Whitney Museum of American Art Web site is modest compared to the previous two, especially considering that it lacks any information or imagery about the permanent collection, though a note indicates that plans are underway to offer such access in the future. Still, its imaginative opening screen provides access to basic information about the museum, including current and upcoming exhibitions. Beyond the opening page, navigation is accomplished through simple text links at the bottom of each page.. The library area is the best bet for reference sources. Among its online resources are a history of the museum, a searchable exhibition history, and a historical listing of Annual and

Biennial exhibitions. Beyond the library, users can access "Art on Web" for links to not only art-related outside sources, but also other categories including "poetry" and "political venues."

Those who have observed that many museum Web sites are not much more than superficial online brochures should spend some time exploring the impressive sites representing the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Both sites are exceptional, largely due to the unprecedented collection access offered to online guests. This access, coupled with interactive technologies, makes for a rewarding virtual experience distinct from a physical visit. Though the least of the three in many respects, the Whitney Museum of American Art's site has much to offer, and online guests are encouraged to check in often for future availability of permanent collection information.

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