

# MOAC II User Evaluation: Making Museum Content Useful

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**Museums and the Online Archive of California II User Evaluation (MOAC II) examines digital museum content for use in education and research. MOAC II is an advancement of MOAC (1998-present), a major collaboration involving integration of collection descriptions and images. The evaluation targets four user constituencies: K-12 teachers, university students, academics in the humanities and social sciences, and museum professionals, librarians and archivists. MOAC II examines why users use digital museum objects, what users need to understand about museum objects as sources of information and evidence, and how digital museum objects might be used to enhance classroom teaching at K-12, undergraduate, and graduate levels. MOAC II collaborators will report on progress made in the first year of this collaborative research project.**

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Museums and the Online Archive of California II User Evaluation (MOAC II) is a two-year research project funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. MOAC II is investigating the complexity of issues associated with providing access to digital museum content. The project is an advancement of MOAC (1998-present), a major collaboration involving a library and several museums to build permanent collections of online descriptions and images.<sup>1</sup> This digital content is integrated into the Online Archive of California (OAC), a core component of the California Digital Library (CDL) and a digital information resource that facilitates and provides access to materials such as manuscripts, photographs, and works of art held in libraries, museums, archives, and other institutions across California. MOAC content, positioned within the OAC, provides the basis for MOAC II collaborators to investigate its use by different audiences.

Museums produce text, images, and audio to describe, document, and explain objects in their care. Select digital products are then distributed—through collection databases, institutional websites, kiosks, and wireless applications in museum galleries. Museums consider many issues when disseminating content, from identifying subject coverage, preparing descriptions and presentations, to tracking ownership of text, images, and sounds. Like libraries and archives, museums are implementing standards to ensure accessibility, interoperability, and persistence of their digital content over time. Gauging the usefulness of digital content for the public, however, is a relatively new area of investigation for *museums*.

Research is available about the effectiveness of museum exhibition design and programming for onsite visitor learning.<sup>2</sup> Library and information professionals can refer to user studies related to bibliographic description as well as online public access systems.<sup>3</sup> But there are few widely available or publicized reports related directly to evaluating use of digital museum content, let alone museum content integrated with library and archive collections.<sup>4</sup> MOAC II will contribute to this important area of research by investigating and reporting on the use of integrated digital content by current and potential users. This evaluative work will provide benchmark data upon which future evaluations may draw. One expectation is that the project will make recommendations for best practices regarding how to evaluate the use, usage, and usability of online information systems like MOAC over time.

The MOAC II project is examining and comparing four cross-over, or complementary, user constituencies in education and research: K-12 teachers, university students, academics in the humanities and social sciences, and museum professionals, librarians and archivists. These user groups are typically responsive to what cultural content offers and may be interested in physical access to objects after discovering descriptions and surrogate images online. MOAC II collaborators expect the evaluation to cull broad

issues of concern associated with providing online access to cultural content, as well as detailed information about the relevance of MOAC, how people want to use descriptions and images in their work, and the effectiveness of current online presentations. MOAC II is guided by the following research questions:

- Why do users use MOAC and how do they use what they retrieve? In what ways does this vary across different user constituencies and disciplines?
- What do users need to understand about the nature of museum objects as information resources and to what extent does MOAC support and enhance that understanding through both description and presentation?
- In what ways can MOAC be used to enhance classroom teaching at K-12, undergraduate, and graduate levels?
- Do the existing structure, representation, and presentation of MOAC privilege certain users, needs, and search strategies over others? If so, which ones, and in what way?
- Do user search strategies focus on MOAC, or do they extend across all of OAC and other CDL resources?
- What types of search strategies are users attempting and how successful are they? To what extent can failure be attributed to user error or system failure?
- What instructional needs do users have in order to maximize successful use of MOAC and how should this instruction be best provided (e.g., online, in the classroom, in repositories).

MOAC II museum and library partners want to discover if their decisions—about those many issues considered before dissemination—are playing well in use, and partners will take steps to integrate what is learned in evaluation into their work. Evaluation will be the basis for collaborators to recommend strategies to the broader museum, library, and archives communities for improving the value of digital resources and encouraging their sustained use. Such strategies might include making subject coverage more closely tied to curricular requirements, ensuring the adequateness of collection and digital object description for different user needs, and designing task or community-specific navigation and retrieval mechanisms and presentation interfaces.

This poster session details progress made in the first year of this collaborative research project. Collaborators will provide an overview of the integrated digital content, discuss the triangulated research design,<sup>5</sup> and report preliminary findings about the academic and information professional user constituencies, in particular. The research questions will provide a point of departure for discussing

how digital museum content, its packaging and presentation might be improved for education and scholarship.

We will describe the roles of museum and library partners in data collection and analysis and their assessments of the practicality of integrating what users want into routine production and distribution activities. Lastly, collaborators will suggest how user studies, such as MOAC II, are informing web services, and how such studies might inform the museum profession. While the content evaluated in this project is specific to MOAC, the OAC and CDL, the research model and analysis should be of interest to the broader cultural heritage community, especially in planning access and content integration projects.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>MOAC is a partnership between the California Digital Library (CDL), the UC Berkeley Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Japanese American National Museum, Oakland Museum of California, UC Berkeley Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, UCLA Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCR/California Museum of Photography, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The CDL leads a subset of these partners in MOAC II. The UCLA Department of Information Studies leads the MOAC II research team.

<sup>2</sup>See for example: Falk, John H. & Lynn D. Dierking. *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000.

Gay, Geri, Michael Stefanone & Emily Posner. *Perceptions of Wireless Computing in Museums*. Retrieved May 26, 2003 from [http://www.cimi.org/public\\_docs/ps1\\_write\\_up4.html](http://www.cimi.org/public_docs/ps1_write_up4.html).

<sup>3</sup>See for example: Bates, Marcia J. *The Getty End-User Online Searching Project in the Humanities: Report No. 6: Overview and Conclusions*. *College & Research Libraries* 57 (November 1996): 514-523.

<sup>4</sup>See for example: Besser, Howard & Robert Yamashita. *The Cost of Digital Image Distribution: The Social and Economic Implications of the Production, Distribution and Usage of Image Data (A Report to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation)*, 1998.

See also papers related to digital museum content delivered at the *Museums and the Web* annual conferences. Available online at <http://www.archimuse.com/>.

<sup>5</sup>The triangulated approach is similar to one previously employed in the Online Archive of California Evaluation Project. See Gilliland-Swetland, Anne J. *Evaluation Design for Large-Scale, Collaborative Online Archives: Interim Report of the Online Archive of California Evaluation Project*. *Archives & Museum Informatics* 12 nos. 3-4 (1998): 177-203.