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Google's New Art Camera

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The Google Cultural Institute unveiled its newest development last week, a camera designed to help museums digitize their collections by taking extremely hi-res images of individual art works. It's called the Art Camera.

The camera is said to be extremely fast and user-friendly, requiring only that it be set up opposite a work of art on a wall (the technology does not yet work on 3D pieces) and shown the edges of the work. The camera takes care of the rest, moving on its own to record its subject inch by inch in less than an hour, a process that used to take a team of hired specialists hours to complete. Producing images of over a billion pixels (gigapixels), the Art Camera is capable of revealing details otherwise invisible to the naked eye.

Google has now made 20 of these state-of-the-art machines, and plans to loan them to museums in exchange for their allowing the Google Art Project (under the umbrella of the Cultural

Institute) to archive the images the cameras collect. Any non-profit museum is eligible to use the camera, so long as it has 50 or more images already up on the Art Project platform.

This digitization of artworks is nothing new, and the Google Art Project itself has been around since 2011, when it launched with the goal of providing a platform for institutions all over the world to show their collections in ultra-high quality digital form. To date, it has more than 1,000 participating institutions, and provides over 6 million images, and has been praised for its democratizing dissemination of museum-owned art, allowing art-lovers, students, and researchers all over the world to marvel in the details of works they might never have the means to visit. Moreover, the project is making it possible for artworks on loan, in storage, or undergoing conservation to remain digitally accessible.

But the quality and ease of use afforded by the Art Camera also moves us one step closer to downside of the Art Project's more-real-than-real imagery becoming the new norm for representing art. It's easy to imagine a time, probably soon, when any museum but also any gallery or even Instagrammer has access to something like the Art Camera, and we all come to expect hyper-vivid experiences of art on our screens and in our VR headsets — to the point where we don't see much value in visiting the real thing.

This idea, of course, is always countered by the argument that great art needs to be *experienced*, meaning in person. But as museums continue to steer into the skid of digitization — devoting more resources to mobile-device content and staging increasingly “sharable” programming, and finding themselves overrun by crowds of selfie-takers and audio-guided tourists — that personal experience with art is getting harder to come by. It's tempting to wonder whether their likely embrace of the Art Camera might be another small step toward the end.

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