

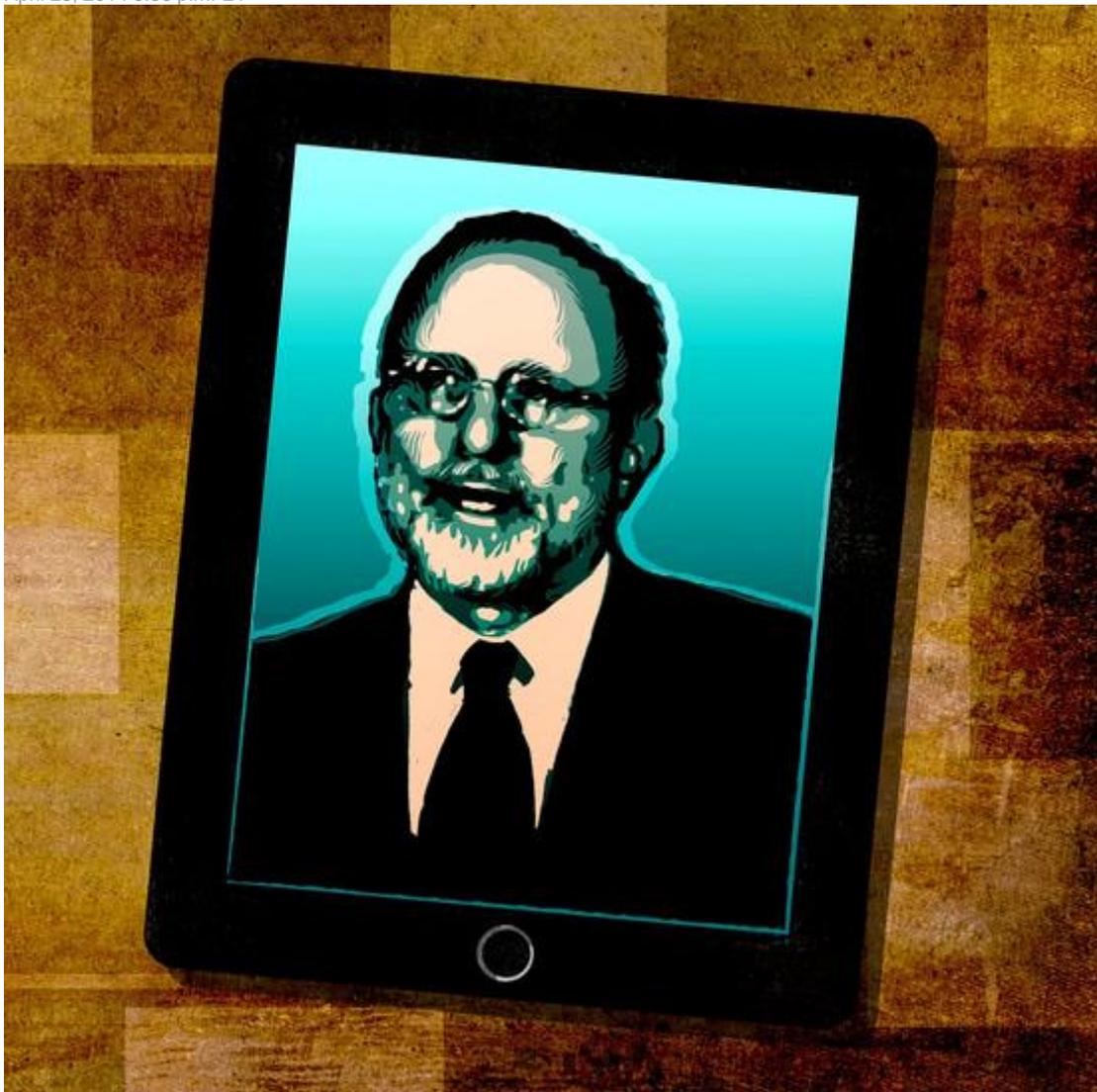
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## Modernizing Art History

By  
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*Zina Saunders*

*New York*

James Cuno, the president and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust, presented a rather unlikely picture when I met him here one early spring day at the Harvard Club. Trim and bearded, he was wearing jeans, which stood out in the sea of dark-suited alums in the Grill Room.

In some ways, Mr. Cuno is also an unlikely evangelist for the subject of our meeting: pushing art historians into the digital age. As he cheerfully admitted, "I'm not a tech guy. I just use it." Nevertheless, he grasps the potential of exploiting digital technologies in ways that go far beyond the current norm to create and disseminate new knowledge about art—and is outspoken about it.

Mr. Cuno believes that art historians must emulate the researchers in other disciplines who have, for example, plotted the rise and fall of words and phrases in historical texts to discern cultural trends or combined computer analysis of massive text databases with mathematical modeling to discover the influence of 19th-century authors on other writers. And why, he asks, isn't face-recognition technology being used in portrait analysis? Why not data-mine auction records to produce sophisticated analyses of the art market?

"And I'm pretty simple-minded about this," he said. "There's got to be even more interesting things to do." Mapping techniques, network analysis and visualizations are among the tools he cites that could lead to breakthroughs in art history that are impossible, or very slow going, using traditional study methods.

About 18 months ago, Mr. Cuno issued his clarion call in *Daily Dot*, an Internet newspaper. "The history of art as practiced in museums and the academy is sluggish in its embrace of the new technology," he wrote. "Of course we have technology in our galleries and classrooms and information on the Web; of course we are exploiting social media to reach and grow our audiences. . . . But we aren't conducting art historical research differently. We aren't working collaboratively and experimentally."

When we spoke, he brought up museums' permanent collections as an example. Typically, he said, "curators won't even release their catalog entries until the entire collection is completed. They want to show a body of work." That makes little sense when catalogs can be "born digital," created to be published online, presented in multimedia and updated at will—a model the Getty has been advocating since at least 2009. Academia is even worse, said Mr. Cuno, who has spent most of his career teaching and directing university museums. There, the long, solitary road to a print publication is virtually required for getting tenure.

With \$9 billion in assets and four different arms—a grant-making foundation, a research institute, a conservation institute and a museum—the Getty Trust is well-placed to midwife the use of digital methodologies in the art realm; one of its five priorities stresses "leadership worldwide in art history." So when Mr. Cuno arrived to lead the Trust in 2011, "the ambition was there," he said, and "a lot of things were happening." Still, he began holding meetings to encourage collaboration and sharing, and he set goals to speed things up.

Mr. Cuno said he's prepared to spend "millions" in the next three or four years on this—most not on research projects, but to create tools anyone can use. For years, for example, the Getty Research Institute has offered four "vocabularies," databases that detail linguistic and historical art terms along with their equivalencies—the "Mona Lisa" and "La Gioconda" are one and the same, for example, as are "andiron" and "firedog." And there are many terms for landscape, portrait and so on. The vocabularies list them all, in many languages.

In February, the Getty Research Institute published one vocabulary—its art and architecture thesaurus, which includes more than 250,000 terms on art history, technique and styles—as "linked open data" on the web. In this form, related data from all over the web are more easily found, queried and shared. The data can be read by a computer and easily exported, so that scholars can combine them with other data and mine or manipulate them, leading to new discoveries.

In the next 18 months, the three other Getty vocabularies—of geographic names and descriptions; titles and attributions for cultural objects and artworks; and artists' names and biographical information—will be published as linked open data.

The Research Institute is also creating the "Getty Scholars' Workspace," an open-source software package, plus technical and methodological manuals, that will allow scholars to work in a common digital space. To illustrate its possibilities, a team including Murtha Baca, the head of digital art history at the GRI, and European art historians, has started a project centered on a digital facsimile of an unpublished 1681 rhyming inventory of artworks in the Mellini collection in Rome. The scholars are, for example, using textual analysis to mine it for provenance, taste and collecting patterns. When they finish, the annotated "Digital Mellini"—password-protected now—will be published online, with their resulting articles for all to see, as well as the collaborative dialogue that took place among the researchers.

Over at the Getty Foundation, director Deborah Marrow discovered in conversations with curators and academics that nearly everyone needs technical training simply to understand the possibilities, let alone design research projects; so this summer the Foundation is sponsoring three institutes, at George Mason University, Harvard and University of California, Los Angeles, where art historians can learn about the tools, methods and potential of digital art history. Applications have flowed in, Ms. Marrow said.

The Foundation is prepared to fund digital art-history projects, but Ms. Marrow said it seems to be too early to ask for proposals against a deadline. Instead, staffers will listen to people who approach them with interesting ideas and then decide funding case-by-case. Meantime, it too is financing the development of online tools: For example, the Indianapolis Museum of Art is building a tool kit of reusable open-source web components that can be tailored to any museum's online publishing projects.

Other Getty initiatives will also help. The Getty Research Portal provides access to digitized art-history texts published before 1920, and thus in the public domain. "And it will grow," Mr. Cuno said. The Foundation also photographically captured Jan van Eyck's famed Ghent Altarpiece in more than 100 billion pixels and put up an innovative website that allows people to zoom in on any part of the altarpiece and to inspect beneath the paint surface via infrared reflectography and X-radiography images. The Getty Conservation Institute, meanwhile, has helped develop an open-source geospatial database app that allows countries to inventory and monitor cultural heritage sites over the web.

There will be more, Mr. Cuno said. "I'm convinced this is something the Getty has to enable," he added. "We have the means to push the needle."