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Museum fees are killing art history, say academics

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British Museum is among institutions that charge scholars to reprint historic artworksZAK HUSSEIN/PA

Historians say that they are abandoning academic projects because of a “tax on scholarship” imposed by museums.

The Tate and the British Museum are among institutions that charge scholars to reprint historic artworks in journals, books and lectures, even though the originals are out of copyright.

Dozens of art historians have written to *The Times* to say that the “unjustified” fees “inhibit the dissemination of knowledge” and must be abolished.

Historians face bills of thousands of pounds to illustrate academic books with little commercial potential, the 28 signatories say. “We urge the UK’s national museums to follow the example of a growing number of international museums and provide open access to images of publicly owned, out-of-copyright paintings, prints and drawings so that they are free for the public to reproduce,” the letter says.

Bendor Grosvenor, the art historian and host of the BBC Four series *Britain’s Lost Masterpieces*, said: “I’ve had so many people contacting us and saying that to publish this book we’ve had to cut our intended number of images from 25 to six, and even that was expensive. What the current charging system has led to is scholars having to abandon research because they can’t afford to publish it. When you’re faced with thousands of pounds just to publish a journal article, it’s prohibitive.”

Dr Grosvenor said that museums had become more aggressive about enforcement as they faced their own financial pressure.

Fees for individual pictures can be as low as £25, but increase depending on the size of the image and the nature of the publication. Academics are concerned about the inflexibility shown by the Tate, he added.

Copyright generally expires 70 years after an artist’s death, but galleries say that digitally scanning an artwork creates a new copyright. However, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York do not charge.

Dr Grosvenor added: “These are publicly owned artworks and the public should be allowed to see them in any context and any capacity. The principle of free entry has worked well for our museum and it now needs to be extended into the online world. These fees are a tax on scholarship.

“You’ve got public institutions charging public employees — universities — to do research into artworks that the public owns. It’s a complete waste of time.”

The Tate said that it allows free non-commercial use of low-resolution images, and offers subsidised rates for high-resolution images for non-commercial use. “There are significant costs to Tate for creating authoritative images of works in the collection, both in the preparation of artwork to be photographed and in post-production of the photograph,” a spokeswoman said. “We recover some of these costs through our licensing activities but not all.”

The British Museum said that its fees reflected the “significant cost” of making more than a million images from its collection available online. A spokesman added: “We do understand the financial constraints faced by authors and some publishers. Charges for any commercial publications are kept as fair as possible and vary according to circulation.”