So you want to reuse digital heritage content in a creative context? Good luck with that.

Melissa Terras

Although there is a lot of digitised cultural heritage content online, it is still incredibly difficult to source good material to reuse, or material that you are allowed to reuse, in creative projects. What can institutions do to help people who want to invest their time in making and creating using digitised historical items as inspiration and source material?

Introduction

We live at a time when most galleries, libraries, archives and museums are digitising collections and putting them up online to increase access, with some (such as the Rijksmuseum[2], LACMA[3], The British Library[4], and the Internet Archive[5]) releasing content with open licensing actively encouraging reuse. We also live at a time where it has become increasingly easy to take digital content, repurpose it, mash it up, produce new material, and make physical items (with many commercial photographic services[6] offering no end of digital printing possibilities[7], and cheaper global manufacturing opportunities at scale being assisted with internet technologies[8]). What relationship does digitisation of cultural and heritage content have to the maker movement[9]? Where are all the people looking at online image collections like Europeana[10] or the book images from the Internet Archive[11] and saying... "Fantastic! Cousin Henry would love a tea-towel: I'll make some Christmas presents based on that!"?

The British Library[12] is currently tracking their Public Domain Reuse in the Wild, looking to see where the 1 million images[13] they released into the public domain, and on Flickr, end up being used, manually maintaining a list of creative projects[14] of what people have done with their content. People are using digitised material: visit a commercial fabric printing service like Spoonflower[15] and you can see people reusing creative commons images such

as those from Wikipedia[16] as a design source and inspiration, although many don't quote the source of their images used a basis for fabric design[17]. On Etsy[18], an online marketplace for handicrafts, you can see historical art and culture turned into material for sale, such as coasters, corsets, bangles, pillows, phone cases, jewellery, etc.[19] – although, again, where the source images came from is not usually made clear. Overall, though, the question is why more creative use isn't made of online digital collections. Why haven't we seen the "maker's revolution" where everyone is walking around going "this old thing? I cobbled it together from public domain images on Wikimedia and had a tailor on Etsy run it up for me!" – or even see more commercial companies start to use this content as the basis for their home and fashion collections on the high street. There are now funding programs and efforts to help try and help the exchange between the "multiple sub-sectors of the creative industries and the public infrastructure of museums, galleries, libraries, orchestras, theatres and the like[20]" and funds for "collaboration between arts and humanities researchers and creative companies[21]". In this this new "impact" world, allowing reuse of digitised content will have on-going benefits, but what can institutions be doing to make sure the digitised content they spent so much time creating is used, and reused, further? Institutions who have made their out of copyright images freely available for reuse should be applauded: it's absolutely the right thing to do (there are, of course,
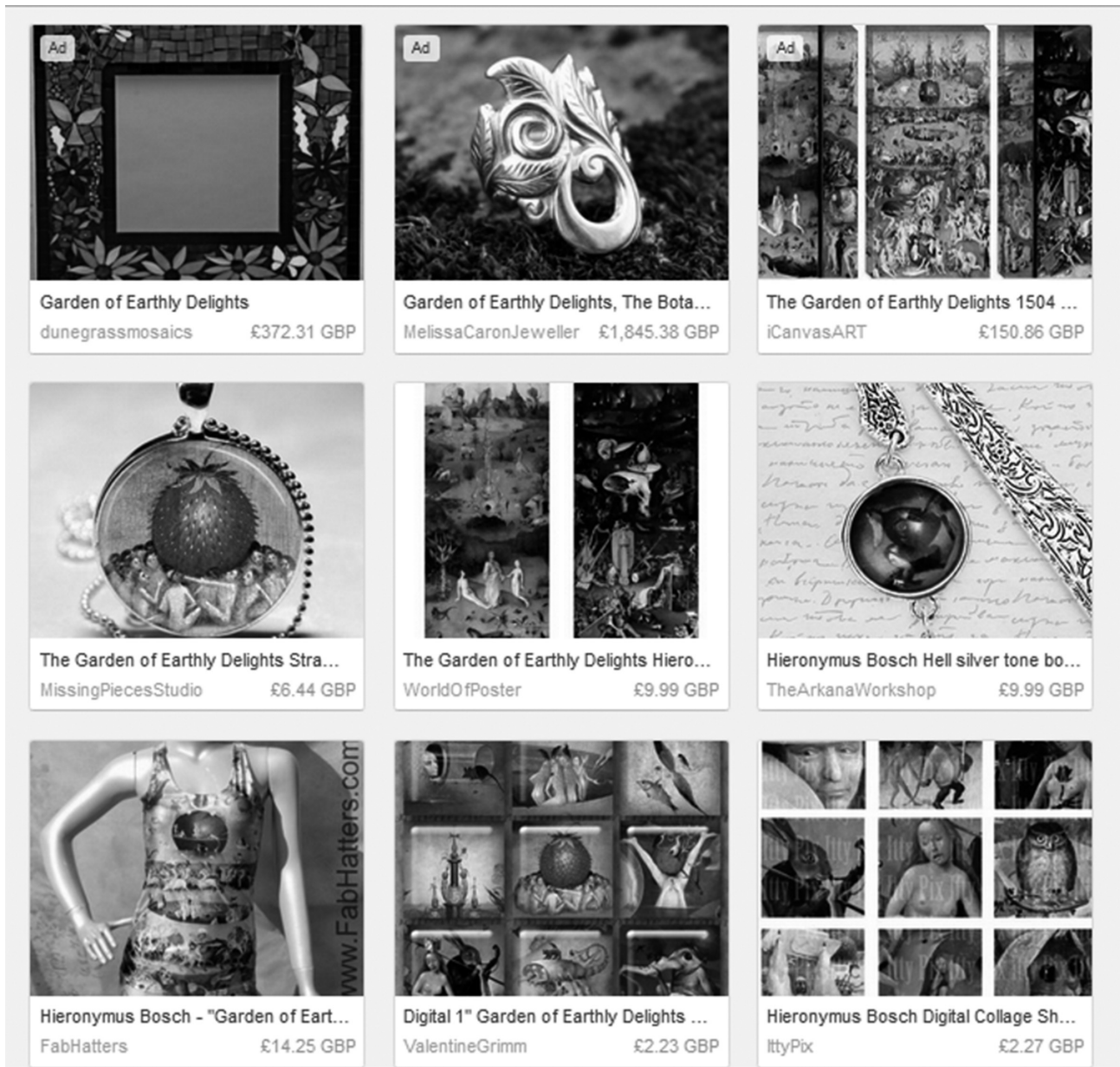
33

Fig. 1: The Garden of Earthly Delights, repurposed over at Etsy[1]

many institutions who haven't made their digitised content available). But with that caveat in place, unfortunately, the remainder of this article is an expression of sheer frustration at the current state of play of delivering digitised content online to users.

So much stuff, such poor interfaces

There is now a vast amount of digitised content online: Europeana[22] now has over 30 million items online from 2000 institutions. Flickr is now being used, independently of the commons, to host tens of millions of digital cultural heritage objects, by thousands of institutions. But for a user, browsing through this content, it is nigh on impossible to navigate or search in any meaningful way, simply because interfaces are so poor (and often the content isn't tagged very well, so isn't very findable). What if institutions have their own content management system? "User friendly" interfaces, such as Aquabrowser[23], or Digitool[24] are often anything but. Unless you know exactly what you are looking for, it's incredibly difficult for a user to browse and view image content. Finding images that are interesting from a design perspective is a time consuming, utterly frustrating task, as users try to navigate (mostly unsuccessfully) what the cultural heritage sector has spent millions of pounds putting online.

Suggestion: Institutions should use employ graphic designers to sort through their thousands of images and present to their users a curated collection

of a few hundred really good things which are ripe for using. In amassing some downloadable packs of images of art, logos, boats, trains, Halloween, Christmas, etc. you will encourage reuse. At the moment institutions are making users work too hard to sort through the digital haystack to find the interesting, usable needle. No wonder much of the content isn't used or even viewed: people simply can't find it, or they walk away from horrible interfaces before finding that digitisation diamond.

The shackles of Copyright, part 1: aesthetic

Copyright free images which are put online with free to use licenses are out of copyright (of course) which means they are from a particular time period: generally pre-1920s (depending on international copyright laws). There's a lot of stuff, but an incredible amount of it is Victoriana, which has a particular aesthetic. This is great if you are into Steampunk[25] (a look at the first few pages of the Internet Archive book images Flickr stream[26] will explain that fashion) but this doesn't suit all users, particularly those who are interested in 20th Century Design.

   Suggestion: Institutions should cherry pick a few in-copyright items that are really very reusable, and pre-emptively clear copyright under various licenses. Here are 10 fabulous 1950s illustrations which we have arranged for you to use under a creative commons license! (There are some examples of this on Flickr Commons, but it is in the minority). There are resources which are required for this, but really, institutions could be leading the way in making images of selected in-copyright items available and usable for people, to encourage uptake and creativity. Or – at the very least – institutions could make processes for chasing copyright clearance clearer to users. It is often impossible to even find out who to email in an institution about rights clearances.

The shackles of Copyright, part 2: cowardice

Let's address the majority of institutions who do not make material available for reuse. For example, if you'd like to make some of stationery, visiting Europeana to find some interesting images of old envelopes, to print up some notecards with those on (not to sell! just for your own use!). 6563 images are labelled "envelope" in Europeana[27]. The licensing for these – what you can and can't reuse – is incredibly confusing. Only 60 of these items have been put into the public domain[28]. A quarter of these digitised items have licenses which allow access but no further reuse of the images[29]. Why not? What are institutions scared of? That someone is going to pop over to Photobox (other commercial photo printers are available) and make up some notelets? That someone will make a corset out of images and sell it on Etsy? If material is out of copyright, and an institution does not have the nous or can't afford to employ a graphic designer to turn images of envelopes into going commercial concerns, why shouldn't anyone else? Why are you putting images online if your message to user is "You can't use it. At all". What are institutions afraid of? (We must not presume that users will not use digital images when they don't have permission to do so: they will take them and use them anyway[30]).

   What would happen if we just let people reuse (out of copyright) digital content? What is the worst that could happen? That something archival takes off and becomes another "keep calm and carry on[31]" meme? Wouldn't institutions love to be the source of one of those, for perpetuity? All over the world, institutions are digitising cultural heritage content and putting it online with restrictive licensing which means that users cannot do anything at all with it (at least not without jumping through lots of begging hoops, or using it illegally). This is a complete waste of limited resources in the sector. What "access" are institutions actually providing, if it's only of the "look but don't touch" variety?

   Suggestion: if institutions are not going to monetise an out-of-copyright digitised item themselves, they should make it available for others to reuse, with a generous license.

Image quality

For creative reuse, a clear 300dpi (or higher) image of the digitised item is needed. It is no use saying "this is in the public domain!" if you only provide 72dpi: nothing can be done with low resolution images, except putting them on other webpages. So much of the "public domain" material is low resolution, which stops people from using the images for creative purposes (which is perhaps deliberate: that'll thwart those corset makers!) Institutions should allow access to reasonably high resolution images, and let users play with them. Additionally, maintaining white space around images (without cutting off subject matter) ensures images are reusable.

Suggestion: Provide at least 300dpi images to users.

A thought on makers

Some digitised content may be made freely available, but it remains quite costly for people to do anything creative with it where digital printing is concerned, especially in small print runs, or making individual items. It takes significant investment of time and resources to take an archival tiff and turn it into, say, a cushion (or a corset). This should offset the feeling that institutions are giving content away for nothing. It becomes co-creation, rather than mere duplication, taking skill, resources, training, and talent. This maker activity should be respected, as well as the source of the inspiration: love the provision of high quality digital heritage imaging online, but love the people who have the sewing chops to make the corsets.

Suggestion: Wonderful things can happen when individuals work with institutional digitised content: we should be celebrating this form of public engagement, and doing all we can to support it.

Conclusion

Overall, here is what institutions can do if they want people to *really* use digitised content:

- Put out of copyright material in the public domain to encourage reuse. Go on! What are you scared of?
- Provide 300dpi images as a minimum. Make sure the image quality is good before putting it online.
- Curate small collections of really good content for people to reuse. Present them in downloadable "get all the images at once" bundles, with related documentation about usage rights, how to cite, etc.
- Think carefully about the user interface you have invested in. Have you actually tried to use it? Does it work? Can people browse and find content?
- Make rights clearer. Give guidance for rights clearance for in-copyright material, and perhaps provide small collections with pre-cleared rights, to allow some 20th Century Materials to be reusable.

What do we want! Curated bundles of 300dpi images of cultural heritage content, freely and easily available with clear licensing and attribution guidelines! When do we want that? Yesteryear!

Institutions can be doing so, so much more to help those wanting to use digitised content creatively, and to unlock the potential of our large scale investment in digitised cultural heritage content. With the simple measures described here, we could open up access to a whole range of activities which could transform engagement with digital cultural heritage, which can only be a good thing for both users, and institutions.

References

1. https://www.etsy.com/uk/search/handmade?q=garden%20of%20earthly%20delights&order=most_relevant&ref=auto2&explicit_scope=1
2. https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/explore-the-collection
3. http://collections.lacma.org/
4. http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/digital-scholarship/2013/12/a-million-first-steps.html
5. http://blog.archive.org/2014/08/29/millions-of-historic-images-posted-to-flickr/
6. For example, http://www.photobox.co.uk/ and http://www.snapfish.co.uk/
7. http://www.bagsoflove.co.uk/
8. See http://www.alibaba.com/showroom/digital-printing-silk-scarves.html for an example of where you can organise foreign suppliers to create materials.
9. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maker_movement
10. http://www.europeana.eu/
11. https://www.flickr.com/photos/internetarchivebookimages/
12. http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/digital-scholarship/2014/03/tracking-public-domain-re-use-in-the-wild.html
13. http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/digital-scholarship/2013/12/a-million-first-steps.html
14. http://blpublicdomain.wikispaces.com/Creative+Projects
15. http://www.spoonflower.com/welcome
16. http://www.spoonflower.com/fabric/3226754
17. For example see http://www.spoonflower.com/fabric/2059533, http://www.spoonflower.com/fabric/1152417, http://www.spoonflower.com/fabric/3027271, http://www.spoonflower.com/fabric/1151298, http://www.spoonflower.com/fabric/3157505, http://www.spoonflower.com/fabric/795835.
18. https://www.etsy.com/
19. http://etsy.me/1zcB8tU
20. http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/What-We-Do/Strengthen-research-impact/Knowledge-

.art libraries
journal

Exchange-and-Partnerships/Pages/KE-Hubs-for-the-Creative-Economy.aspx
21. http://www.react-hub.org.uk/about/
22. http://www.europeana.eu/
23. http://www.proquest.com/products-services/AquaBrowser.html
24. http://www.exlibrisgroup.com/category/DigiToolOverview
25. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steampunk
26. https://www.flickr.com/photos/internetarchivebookimages/
27. http://www.europeana.eu/portal/search.html?query=envelope&rows=24
28. http://www.europeana.eu/portal/search.ml?query=envelope&rows=24&qf=RIGHTS%3Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fcreativecommons.org%2Fpublicdomain%2Fmark%2F1.0%2F*
29. http://www.europeana.eu/portal/search.html?query=envelope&rows=24&qf=RIGHT
S%3Ahttp%3A%2F%2Fwww.europeana.eu%2Frights%2Frr-f%2F*
30. http://mw2013.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/where-do-images-of-art-go-once-they-go-online-a-reverse-image-lookup-study-to-assess-the-dissemination-of-digitized-cultural-heritage/
31. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keep_Calm_and_Carry_On

Melissa Terras
Director of UCL Centre for Digital Humanities, and Professor of Digital Humanities, Department of Information Studies at University College London (UCL)
Foster Court
University College London
Gower Street
WC1E 6BT
m.terras@ucl.ac.uk