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Beth Harris PhD
Smarthistory

Steven Zucker PhD
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Making the Absent Present: The Imperative of Teaching Art History

Beth Harris, PhD and Steven Zucker, PhD

Abstract

Since its emergence in 2005 as a free and open online resource for instructors, students, and the general public, [Smarthistory](#) has made numerous groundbreaking changes and advances for better teaching and more engaged learning. Playing upon the theme "making the absent [art work] present," we explain how Smarthistory's lively dialogic pedagogy combined with a rich variety of image views, reconstructions, google street views, diagrams, and essays has successfully replaced the traditional dependence on an art history text for many instructors. The result is an enhanced experiential and contextual experience for the student. For a discipline whose works were often accessible only in textbook photographs, Smarthistory has made art history literally come alive for students. We also discuss how Smarthistory has encouraged collaboration from hundreds of art historians, nurtured open online publishing opportunities, and broadened our ability to address a broad range of non-western art.

Absence and presence

Teaching art history is a great joy, and making it accessible to the greatest number of people is, we feel, a moral imperative. Those of us who teach art history know how easily students fall in love with our discipline, and that it has the power to increase respect for distant cultures and enhance critical thinking about the images students confront everyday. But we face significant challenges when we teach art history (and publish art history). As Stephen Murray noted, "The paradox in the enterprise of the professor of art history is that we spend most of our time as teachers in the classroom talking about what is not there—the absent work of art, represented by a surrogate image projected onto a screen."¹ This is no small challenge to face each week of the semester. While it's relatively easy to read Dickens just about anywhere, a work of art is best seen in person. Every time we enter the classroom, as Murray suggests, we attempt the impossible—to conjure a work of art and the culture that once surrounded it.

Smarthistory ([smarthistory.org](#)) was created to help with this somewhat absurd activity—to make the absent present. In 2005, Smarthistory began as an effort to support students in the Western art history survey courses we were teaching. As our content, roster of contributors, and audience grew, Smarthistory began to receive both awards and funding. From the outset, we wanted Smarthistory to support global art history. A grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the years 2015 and 2016 to accelerate content creation, with an emphasis on art from Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Islamic World, and Oceania, allowed us to

¹ Stephen Murray, "The Crisis in Art History," *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation*, 27:4 (2011), 316.

significantly broaden our content and contributors and to demonstrate our commitment to supporting global art history.

To make the “absent work of art” present, we use just about every tool at our disposal. Smarthistory videos start with an audio recording of a conversation that takes place on site and includes ambient sound (the muffled voices in a museum, the echo of a cathedral, or the birds at a hilltop shrine). Art historians describe not just the art and its history, but the experience of viewing. Smarthistory includes, wherever possible, digital reconstructions, embedded Google Street-views, Photospheres, custom-made diagrams, and dozens of high-resolution images (some annotated)—made available, wherever possible, with a Creative Commons license via [Flickr](#). See, for example, the essay on the [Lakshmana Temple](#).² Utilizing multiple views and details of an object (in a video or essay) allows art historians to model the process of close, extended examination of an object. Rika Burnham, Head of Education at the Frick Collection, has written about close looking and the unfolding of time in the museum:

Looking at a work of art involves a series of actions—scanning its surface, grasping it as a whole, focusing on details, thinking and reflecting on them, pausing to look again, reconsidering the whole in relation to its parts, and so on. In the end, everything should come together, with the experience of the artwork unified in an expanded whole.³

As Burnham suggests, this process is perhaps the most important skill we can teach our introductory students, whether that’s in a classroom, a museum, or online.

Audience and effectiveness

So what do we know about who uses Smarthistory and about its effectiveness? We know that, while Smarthistory is a resource for many informal learners, it is primarily used by students and their instructors in undergraduate art history surveys and more specialized courses, as well as in high school Advanced Placement art history and history courses. These students often find the resource on their own via a Google search but might also find Smarthistory on their syllabus or in the instructions for an assignment. Some instructors play the videos during class time as a prompt for discussion. Numerous college and university libraries, including those like the [University of South Africa](#) outside the United States, feature Smarthistory in their research guides. Graduate students rely on Smarthistory to study for their comprehensive exams. And we also know, from what we hear in the field, that it’s not just students who use Smarthistory; instructors also use the resource to refresh their knowledge and to identify potential teaching strategies, which is critically important when

² Cristin McKnight Sethi, "Sacred space and symbolic form at Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho (India)," in *Smarthistory*, May 15, 2016, accessed September 29, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/lakshmana-temple/>.

³ Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee, “The Art of Teaching in the Museum,” in *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*, Getty Publications (2011), 16.

teaching outside of one's own specialty. As Dr. Bryan Zygmunt wrote, "I believe Smarthistory is as profound of a benefit to art history professors and teachers, too. We just pretend we don't need it."⁴ This large base of users is evident from weekly and seasonal fluctuations in pageviews. Summer and late December/January are significantly slower periods than September–December and February–May. Weekly usage peaks Monday–Thursday and is slowest on Fridays and Saturdays.

Surveys taken by a faculty member at a large California State University campus in 2015 and 2016 of two introductory art history sections—and shared informally with Smarthistory—found that 22 out of 25 students preferred Smarthistory over the textbook, one had no preference, and two preferred the textbook. When asked about their experience with Smarthistory, students mentioned that, in comparison to the assigned textbook, Smarthistory content offered a more in-depth experience and conveyed more information. One student wrote:

Personally, I did not enjoy having to use the course textbook. I thought It was kind of a waste, because I didn't get much out of it, because of how brief the summaries were. I would like something more in-depth with the subject. Plus, it was pricey, and [it] felt more like a chore having it around.

This same student went on to say of Smarthistory, "I liked the fact I could listen to the visual analysis and history that was narrated by the two speakers." Then added that Smarthistory "...improved my grades after using it."

Over the years we have received hundreds of similar comments (and even a [video](#)). Comments provide evidence of a student's perception of their own learning, and what emerges, unmistakably, is that most students and instructors who comment find that Smarthistory helps them learn and makes the experience of learning more pleasurable.

Key themes that emerge from an analysis of student and instructor comments include:

1. Enhanced focus while studying and a perception of increased retention (Smarthistory is consistently described as enjoyable, helpful, effective, and interactive)
2. A higher level of interest in the subject matter
3. A deeper understanding of the subject (students regularly noted that Smarthistory provided more information than the textbook)
4. Improved grades

Students also consistently express appreciation that Smarthistory is free and point to the value of videos in combination with essays and quizzes as being particularly helpful. One student wrote, "There is a lot of information to learn and remember, and I feel as if the videos were a great way to break that information down, step by step...." Our own analysis of user analytics

⁴ Bryan Zygmunt, "Smarthistory is for professors and instructors too..." *Smarthistory blog*, July 26, 2015; <https://smarthistoryblog.org/2015/07/26/smarthistory-is-for-professors-and-instructors-too/>

shows, though, that essays are accessed just as frequently as videos—based upon the number of views—and learner comments indicate that one reinforces the other.

A comparison of a Smarthistory video with its equivalent entry in a textbook may explain these perceptions. A transcript of Smarthistory's video on [the Erechtheion on the Acropolis in Athens](#) is more than twice the length of the entries in *Janson's History of Art* and *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*—roughly 1300 versus 550 words.⁵ But perhaps more importantly, the Smarthistory video uses over fifty high-resolution photographs and diagrams—and this doesn't count an additional Smarthistory video that focuses on [the caryatid and Ionic column from the Erechtheion in The British Museum](#).⁶ The most recent edition of the textbook, *Janson's History of Art*, represents the Erechtheion with a single image, and *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* uses three images.⁷ Given the complexity of architecture in general, and of this monument in particular, such minimal coverage can not possibly do the monument justice. For most students, this is likely to be their only exposure to such an influential building. Smarthistory doesn't have the space limitations that hamper print publications, and the video format accommodates many more images, allowing Smarthistory to include multiple details and supporting visual materials. Nevertheless, longer entries and extra images do not alone account for students' positive perceptions.

Conversation and expertise

We believe Smarthistory's dialogic approach and the emphasis on experiential and contextual understanding explain these positive student perceptions. Smarthistory videos are unscripted conversations that almost always take place between art historians onsite as they examine an original work of art. We believe that the unscripted and conversational nature of Smarthistory's videos demystifies the art historical process and actively engages a student's attention. Many students reported a sentiment similar to one that wrote, "I liked the fact I could listen to the visual analysis and history that was narrated by the two speakers." Smarthistory essays are written and edited with this same conversational and experiential style in mind and begin with a narrative hook to draw in the reader. Photographs include views that place the work of art in a broader context and include people—whether museum visitors or worshipers—for scale and as an important corrective to the isolated object so often reproduced in art history publications. Isolating the image from its frame, from its gallery, from its chapel, and from the people who have come to visit it divorces the work of art from its meaning and the world our students recognize.

While the dialogic and experiential are key values for Smarthistory content, openness is at the very core of our mission. Art historians emerge from graduate school, Ph.D. in hand, highly

⁵ Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker, "The Erechtheion," in *Smarthistory*, December 16, 2015, accessed September 29, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/the-erechtheion/>.

⁶ Beth Harris and Steven Zucker, "Caryatid and Ionic Column from the Erechtheion," in *Smarthistory*, November 25, 2015, accessed September 29, 2016, <http://smarthistory.org/caryatid-and-ionic-column-from-the-erechtheion/>.

⁷ See Penelope J.E. Davies, et.al, *Janson's History of Art: The Western Tradition*. 8th edition (2011), 140; and Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*. 15th edition (2016), 136-7.

skilled in research and the ability to interrogate an object, but often poorly prepared for the breadth of understanding required to teach the introductory survey. The solution, it seemed to us more than ten years ago, was to open our classrooms. As we observed our colleagues as part of our college's peer-review process, we saw teachers describe for their students their experiences of examining works of art in person—for example, the frescos by Giotto in the Arena Chapel. Students were transported with them to Padua, and the absent work of art was made present. We began to wonder why the opportunity to experience extensive work in Padua with a *trecento* specialist should be limited to the thirty students in that classroom. What if it were possible to use the web to open our classrooms, share this experience and expertise, and offer our best teaching strategies to one another? Smarthistory is modeled on this ideal.

Publishing and platforms

While Smarthistory began as a self-published learning resource, it has developed into a collaboratively authored anthology with hundreds of contributors. Although collecting essays was not initially a goal in itself, Smarthistory has now acquired, edited, and distributed short essays by more than 200 art historians, curators, and archaeologists, and has become a de facto art history publisher. Today, Smarthistory's content is curated by its executive editors with oversight by its twenty contributing editors. All academic contributions are donations, in keeping with Smarthistory's mission—to make high-quality global art history freely available to learners around the world. As a result, labor is broadly distributed, which helps to make Smarthistory scalable, cost-efficient, and sustainable. Over the next two years, we envision Smarthistory, a not-for-profit, more fully embracing the role of a new kind of art history publisher that creates and distributes entirely free and open content. Given the cost of art history textbooks and the sizeable profits made by commercial publishers, open content can make a significant difference for students and faculty.

Our guiding philosophy regarding technology is to avoid building complex functionality, which requires investing significant resources over time to keep pace with rapidly evolving browsers and programming languages. Smarthistory focuses instead on content by creating, editing, and publishing written and multimedia learning resources from our growing community of academic contributors. This strategy has led Smarthistory to take advantage of existing free distribution channels with wide reach. Our presence on [YouTube](#), [Khan Academy](#) (which averages 12 million visitors a month), and [Flickr](#) (where we offer more than 6,000 high-resolution images for non-commercial use) has contributed significantly to the organization's sustainability. In total, Smarthistory's content on Smarthistory.org, Khanacademy.org, and YouTube had 25 million page views in the past academic year (July 1, 2015–June 30, 2016) and Smarthistory's openly licensed photographs on [Flickr](#) have been viewed more than 6,775,000 times as of August 1, 2016. Open publishers like Smarthistory may offer a partial solution to the questions our discipline has been asking about the future of academic publishing.

As has often been noted, publishing image-rich art history texts has become increasingly difficult for academic presses.⁸ In *Art History and Its Publications in the Electronic Age*, published in 2006, Hilary Ballon and Mariet Westermann outlined the challenges for art history publishing and noted that while “Traditional solutions are failing...we do not see a crisis. In our view, digital technology is opening new opportunities and posing transitional problems that are soluble.”⁹

Museum publishing, online, is one potential solution. Museums offer excellent online resources, including exhibition catalogues, exhibition subsites, and teacher resources. We firmly believe that a broad understanding of art’s history, art history’s methods for analysis, and museum education strategies for visual inquiry are important tools for museum visitors. However, museums have not, for the most part, helped to create content and a structure for that content that supports learning that is more than episodic.¹⁰ Important learning resources are developed for K-12 teachers but are generally not used by a broader public that could otherwise benefit. Exhibition subsites too often remain isolated and detached from a broader chronology, and they can get lost on a museum’s website when the exhibition has closed.

Smarthistory’s main peer in the field of providing online learning content for art history is [The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#). According to the Museum’s recently published annual report, the Timeline had approximately 12 million page views during fiscal year 2015.¹¹ As a point of comparison, that is less than half the views Smarthistory culled from its main channels as mentioned above. It is also worth noting that the Timeline’s excellent content tends to be more formal, where Smarthistory seeks to maximize the engagement of the learner. Smarthistory, with a staff of two and a small budget, has an outsized impact, with more YouTube subscribers than The Metropolitan Museum of Art and every other art museum in the world except Tate and MoMA—an indication that museums could do more to help the public learn. Making art history broadly accessible can make for more fulfilling museum visits, more students taking art history courses in college, and a public with a greater appreciation for our discipline, leading to a new generation of philanthropy that is sympathetic to the missions of the university and the museum. Perhaps most importantly, accessible and engaging open art history content can enhance cross-cultural understanding and respect for cultural heritage across borders.

Obstacles and opportunities

⁸ See, for example, “Publish or be damned,” in *The Burlington Magazine*, 158:1362, (September 2016); <http://www.burlington.org.uk/archive/editorial/publish-or-be-damned>.

⁹ Hilary Ballon and Mariet Westermann, *Art History and Its Publications in the Electronic Age*. OpenStax CNX. Dec 1, 2006 <http://cnx.org/contents/33c57596-5e5b-4081-ae62-9ee978e188c3@1.6>.

¹⁰ Important exceptions include [The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#), [MoMAlearning](#), and online education resources at the [Asian Art Museum](#) and the [Freer|Sackler Gallery](#).

¹¹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art Annual Report for the Year 2014-2015 (Nov. 2015); <http://www.metmuseum.org/-/media/Files/About/Annual%20Reports/2014-2015/Annual%20Report%202015%20Entire%20File.pdf>

As Max Marmor, President of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, and others have recently noted, there is every reason to be hopeful about art history's future.¹² Digital art history seems to be advancing in a meaningful way, and images are easier to use for teaching, learning, and scholarship than ever before. Nevertheless, we all know significant obstacles remain—especially for art historians working outside of the Anglo-European tradition. Efforts to control images (both what is said about them and their reproduction) remain a troubling problem, and image rights can take months to obtain and can be very costly. The chilling effect these issues continue to have on the discipline can not be overstated. Before the eighteenth century, of course, most of what is studied in art history was seen (and in many cases is still seen) as sacred, and as a result, reproducing (and sometimes just viewing) these works is often difficult. From the outset, Smarthistory has sought to support not just Western but also global art history. In spite of this uphill battle, significant headway is being made. Since January 2014, we have added 37 videos and 153 essays on works of art outside of the Anglo-European tradition.

We, as art historians, need to do everything we can to make the “absent work of art” present for our students and for the general public. This effort is necessary to develop a new generation of art historians excited by the questions our discipline asks and the objects and sites it studies. This means using the most beautiful, high-resolution images available. Museums, libraries, colleges, and universities also have a responsibility, since they constitute an ecosystem that has historically supported the study of art. Much work remains to be done in thinking creatively about the art history classroom, given new image and mapping technologies and the ability for students themselves to create multimedia. We must rethink our syllabi, our assignments, our lectures, and our discussions. If institutions continue to embrace greater openness and become more willing to work together to educate students and the global public with inexpensive tools such as short-form video, then art history will indeed have a bright future.

¹² See Max Marmor, “Art History and the Digital Humanities,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 79:2 (2016): 155-158;
http://www.kressfoundation.org/uploadedFiles/news/Marmor_ZfK_2_2016_FINAL.pdf