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Review of MHz Curationist

Abstract

This review provides a brief summary of the online digital curation platform Curationist. The principal project of the MHz Foundation, Curationist publishes visual and cultural materials found in the Creative Commons and public domain with the intent to expand and diversify the histories of art and culture found online.

Curationist is an attractive and easy-to-use platform that offers viewers the ability to explore individual works as well as collections and feature articles compiled by a global team of editors. As a whole, the platform appears to be in its nascent stage and does not yet offer the ability for users to zoom in on images, note works, or arrange favorited images into collections of their own choosing. Curationist is planning a public release set for 2023 that will allow users curate their own collections and perform advance searches through an updated database.

Keywords

Visual resources, digital curation, Creative Commons, public domain, open access.

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

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Launched in 2019 by the MHz Foundation, the online platform Curationist collects and shares Creative Commons and public domain art and cultural content. Platforms for digitally curating the public domain are not new. In fact, they are incredibly popular and growing more popular still with the continued rise of social media applications like Instagram that are primarily visual activities. The online journal and project *The Public Domain Review*, for instance, has a staggering 500,000 followers on Instagram (@publicdomainrev) and has produced over 300 long-form feature essays and articles on public domain works. It is clear that there is an overwhelming audience for exploring visual materials that are available digitally and outside of the typical confines of galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. Describing itself as “an ecosystem for framing the world we share,” Curationist seeks to aid in this exploration by centering a diverse array of perspectives and content from around the world.¹ The individual works, collections, and feature articles on the website are curated by a team of media professionals, artists, writers, and community organizers who have set themselves apart with the commitment to curating digitally in a way that addresses cultural accessibility and the need to amplify underrepresented voices.²

The easy-to-use, sleekly designed, and mobile-friendly website organizes content into categories, collections, and features. The categories denoted by Curationist are topic, form, material, time period, and location. Each of these has prominently displayed subcategories that encourage users to filter and browse the more than 49,000 collected resources. Once selected, the collected works are presented and arranged simply with reference to the creator, year, and location of the resource. Tags that reference the platform’s predefined categories are clearly displayed – as are the Creative Commons and public domain designations.

The works are also linked directly to the open access institution of origin. This is particularly helpful as Curationist does not allow for zooming and expanding images on their website. If visitors have a registered account, the platform has the option to save works to their account that appear together in a favorites list. Unfortunately, users do not yet have the functionality to notate works or further arrange them into collections of their own choosing.³

In terms of collections, Curationist has a selection of sixty curated collections that users can browse as of October 2022. These groupings are thought-provoking and the works in them range in material, geographic location, time period, and theme. Some of the collections – like “Looking for a pet dog? Inspiration from the Met’s collection” – outwardly reference the content’s source institution, while others, such as “Puppets, Puppets, Puppets” and “Outfit Goals” take on more whimsical and open-ended guiding principles. The effect is an approachable demonstration of how one might casually piece together visual resources for a contemporary audience from a myriad of cultures and time periods. Missing is any kind of overarching or thematic explanation of the collections. Instead, users are left only with the collection titles and resource summaries for individual works, when available.

Despite this lack of context, notable collections include “Worn: Clothing and Accessories from the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter” and “Animating Cultural Heritage: A Collection from GIF IT UP.” While these carefully organized groupings demonstrate the global and diverse aims of the platform, other, more vague collections such as “Eyes,” “Rococo,” and “Vases” feel incomplete and out of place.

¹ MHz Curationist, “Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ),” accessed October 14, 2022, <https://www.curationist.org/faq/>

² MHz Foundation, *2021 Annual Report*, accessed October 14, 2022, <https://www.mhzfoundation.org/download/annual-report-2022>

³ MHz Foundation, “Expanding Cultures Together,” accessed October 14, 2022, <https://www.mhzfoundation.org/> MHz Foundation has stated that their next public release, set for 2023, will provide users with the ability to advance search through a database of cross institutional open access works and curate their own collections.

This is remedied by the section of Curationist that is dedicated to feature articles. The articles, the most captivating of which take the form of interviews and conversations, are the highlight of the platform. Instead of simply presenting content, the twenty-seven feature articles compiled or moderated by Curationist's contributors activate the material being shared and the collections they originate from. It is in these features that the diversity and freshness of the platform comes alive. Features not to miss include "Exclusion: How Immigration Policy Racialized the U.S." and "Why is access to biodiversity knowledge so important? The Biodiversity Heritage Library has answers." Curationist's willingness to invest in an interdisciplinary approach to exploring open access sources provides a different perspective on cultural materials, particularly visual resources.

In summary, there are many platforms that celebrate and explore the seemingly never-ending depth of the public domain. Curationist is a thoughtfully designed and engaging platform that has the potential to advance the ways in which curating from the public domain can educate viewers and promote diversity of thought in the digital age. As a whole, the feature articles are the most successful element of Curationist – fully highlighting the diversity of contributors, topics, time periods, and geographical areas that the platform champions.

Curationist may not demonstrate the most critical mining of open access collections to date, but it does provide a refreshing take on the possibility of engaging resources with the same guiding principles that many galleries, libraries, archives, and museums seek to represent and exemplify. In a world where diversity statements and land acknowledgements are becoming not only expected but commonplace, it is inspiring to see how a team of independent contributors that claim to be dedicated to geographic diversity, anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-ableist, feminist, and queer practices might choose to represent and share visual and cultural resources.⁴ It is even more inspiring to see clear actions that directly support this aim. Last year, Curationist announced a Critics of Color residency that pairs guest contributors of color with editors and archivists from the platform to develop new feature articles.⁵ It is this framework – one centered on global diversity and equity from the beginning – that sets Curationist apart from platforms that provide a similar product.

Curationist is not a platform that would be largely recommended for scholarly research. The platform could be well suited for academic and teaching environments that hope to expose students to a network of open access collections in an approachable way. Curationist showcases the potential for meaningful discourse that images and creative works have when set free in the public domain. Ultimately, however, while the aims of the platform seem fully realized, the content and delivery of material does not. This reviewer looks forward to seeing if, and how, Curationist will mature and suggests that the platform remain on the radar of any interested visual resource or information professional.

⁴ MHz Foundation, "Expanding Cultures Together."

⁵ Virginia Poundstone. "Open Call: Critics of Color Residency." June 1, 2021. <https://www.curationist.org/article/open-call-critics-of-color-residency/>