

December 2023

Capstone Innovation: Supporting Art History Students' Digital Projects at American University

Samuel Sadow

American University, ssadow@american.edu

Melissa Becher

American University, mbecher@american.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://online.vraweb.org/>

Recommended Citation

Sadow, Samuel, and Melissa Becher. "Capstone Innovation: Supporting Art History Students' Digital Projects at American University." *VRA Bulletin* 50, no. 2 (December 2023). Available at: <https://online.vraweb.org/index.php/vrab/article/view/237>

Capstone Innovation: Supporting Art History Students' Digital Projects at American University

Abstract

In 2019, the art history program at American University gave its masters students a new option for the capstone project that is the culmination of the degree: create a digital project on an art historical topic using Omeka S or WordPress. Initially, only a single student chose to complete a digital capstone over a traditional thesis but within two years, there was near parity between the two options, meaning seven digital capstones for the 2021 cohort. To support these projects, a close partnership quickly developed between the University's Library, the Visual Resources Center, and the archives.

This paper covers how three campus units coordinate that support for these innovative digital humanities projects, including administration of the platforms, instruction, technical support, preservation, and access to the final projects. The paper also showcases examples of student work to demonstrate the variety and creativity of projects that can be accomplished using these platforms, as well as their contributions to the field of art history. The outcome of this initiative is clear: the best of digital humanities, weaving design and technology with rigorous art historical research, and finished projects that have already resulted in successful job applications in the field.

Keywords

Digital curation, technology, instruction, collaboration, mentoring, digital humanities, web design, pedagogy, art history, information presentation, Omeka S, WordPress, EdSpace.

Author Bios

Samuel Sadow has been the Visual Resources Curator at American University since October 2016, and is also an Adjunct Professorial Lecturer in the Art History Program.

Melissa Becher is the Associate Director for Research, Teaching, and Learning as well as the Subject Selector for Art at American University Library.

The following article is adapted from a presentation that the authors delivered at the VRA Annual Conference in Baltimore on March 29, 2022.

Introduction

American University (AU) in Washington, D.C. has long claimed an innovative and vibrant program in art history. The long-time presence of Mary Garrard (faculty from 1964-2003) and Norma Broude (faculty from 1975-2011) established AU as a pioneer and enduring center of feminist art history and the study of women, gender, and culture. That legacy remains visible today in the program's bi-annual Feminist Art History Conference, which brings together the foremost scholars to present research that embraces feminist practice in the visual arts and their histories.¹

AU's art history program also maintains a vital place in the discipline through its masters students. As a requirement for the Master of Arts (MA) degree, the capstone projects that students produce every year contain original research and analysis and represent valuable contributions to the field. Until 2018, these theses all took the form of conventional research papers, with tables of contents, chapters and subchapters, footnotes, and bibliographies. They are bound and shelved in the Art Department's Visual Resources Center, and electronic versions are added to ProQuest and made accessible through the University Library's catalog.

However, with the 2018 cohort, the MA program began giving students an entirely digital option for their thesis project. Students would still conduct a focused and original research project under the supervision of a faculty advisor, but rather than the final form being a paper thesis, students would embed their research, analysis, and writing into a dynamic and multimedia website. The digital capstone option recognizes the increasing prominence of technology and the "digital humanities" within the cultural sphere and arts industries. The projects support and demand high quality, rigorous art historical inquiry while also allowing students to build skills in web design and apply a degree of creativity that is absent from a conventional thesis format. In doing so, the digital capstones effectively orient the program's graduates to careers in the communications, community engagement, education, and marketing departments of museums, as well as opportunities in galleries, auction houses, arts foundations, and publishing. Already as of writing this, three graduates of the program have said their projects led directly to successful job applications in cultural institutions.

In the following article, we will offer a brief history of this unique initiative at AU, an overview of the workflow that leads students from choosing which capstone path to pursue to finished, archived, and accessible projects, and a comparison of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two platforms that students choose between for their projects, WordPress' EdSpace and Omeka S. We will also include links to and screenshots from two exemplary student projects.

History and Process

The digital capstone initiative started slowly but built quickly, as the MA Art History students saw the initial projects and imagined the possibilities for their own research. In 2018 and 2019, the first two years that the digital capstone was an option for students, only one student chose it each year. However, in 2020 that increased to 3 students, and in 2021, 7 students – or fully half of the graduating cohort – chose to create a digital capstone. The numbers for the 2022 and 2023 cohorts are similar, with the two options – conventional and digital – splitting the students roughly in half. From the very first project, which became the pilot that allowed all of the participants to establish and sort out the guidelines and processes described below, the finished websites have been extremely successful. Over the first six years' worth of completed projects – encompassing 24 in total – one of the most rewarding developments has been to observe how, as each new cohort learns

¹ The most recent Feminist Art History Conference – the 8th – was held at American University from September 29-October 1, 2023.

from the last about how to best take advantage of the platforms offered by AU, the websites are becoming richer, more complex, and more beautiful.

For students, the process begins during their first year in the MA program, which they spend primarily immersed in art historical coursework and in discussion with their faculty advisors to identify a topic for their capstone project. They begin research and even some writing on their topic before they select the modality of the final capstone, and that preliminary work, along with their particular career interests and backgrounds, helps to inform the decision. Students must commit to the digital or conventional capstone in the spring semester of their second (and final) year in the program. At that point, students register for a course that is tailored to their choice, and for those who opted for the digital capstone, the course is led by a faculty member who will guide them in designing and building a website that fulfills the requirements of the MA degree. This work parallels the research and writing that students conduct in close consultation with their thesis advisors and adds a layer of critical thinking about how the information they are compiling might be presented most effectively in an online environment.

While the individual students – in concert with faculty advisors – certainly do the lion’s share of the work, the digital capstone initiative at AU has required a high degree of collaboration between the Art History Program and the University Library in order to meet the needs of the projects and the academic imperatives of the MA in art history. The Library hosts, maintains, and offers instructional support for EdSpace and Omeka S, the two web platforms to which students are introduced early in the capstone course and from which they will select one for their project. The platforms differ in terms of characteristics and how they are administered at AU and have distinct advantages and limitations that students must consider that go beyond their suitability for scholarly websites.

EdSpace

EdSpace is American University’s unique WordPress installation. It is a proprietary platform that cannot be hosted on the Library’s server. EdSpace is hosted by a third party with limited server space. This creates storage challenges for the art history digital projects, which need to be removed three years after students graduate. However, the projects remain accessible long-term through the archiving process described below.

WordPress remains the most used content management system (CMS) on the Internet. It has a robust design environment and user interface. Students can employ pre-made templates and special effects that can make their exhibits engaging and compelling. Since WordPress is a global standard, there are many career opportunities for students who gain experience with it through creating their projects.

Omeka S

Omeka S is different from other versions of Omeka (Omeka Classic and Omeka.net) in that it allows individuals to have subsites under an umbrella institutional site. This means that each art history student can have their own individual exhibition site as part of the institutional site. American University Library began supporting Omeka S in the fall of 2018. The Library stores the platform on its own server and the Library’s Academic Technology unit is in charge of updating and maintaining it. Because it is on a server that has adequate space and low demand, there are no storage issues with the Omeka S art history digital projects. They can remain live on the server indefinitely.

Omeka S is open source, making it a flexible platform that can be highly customized if one has coding skills. There is an active developer community that regularly turns out new features and add-ons. However, more developer attention is focused on Omeka Classic and Omeka.net than on

Omeka S, and it therefore does not have many “bells and whistles.” There are currently eight basic templates in Omeka S, and modifications may require advanced knowledge of html or knowledge of CSS. This is not necessarily a disadvantage for students who are trying to develop marketable skills, and some students choose Omeka S specifically to build technical expertise that can be used in a wide variety of job positions. As students figure out new ways to modify Omeka S code, they share with each other and document them for future cohorts.

Omeka S comes pre-loaded with Dublin Core, Bibliographic Ontology, and Friend of a Friend vocabulary templates, which can be used to assign metadata to images loaded in the system. It should be noted that vocabularies in Omeka S are not the same as having controlled vocabularies or authority files, but the templates help students think about metadata and its importance to discovery and, since fields are included to acknowledge rights-holders, ethical digital image use.

Completion, Preservation, and Access

Once students have selected a platform, they dive into the design process and the integration of images, text, and other multimedia features. Through weekly class meetings, students gain access to instructional support from the Library’s Associate Director for Research, Teaching, and Learning and the Art Department’s Visual Resources Curator, who can help them as they learn the basic functionality of the platforms. However, their best resource by far for pushing the boundaries of what the platforms can accommodate, offering suggestions for improvement, and troubleshooting problems has been each other. As shown in the examples below, the finished projects are highly sophisticated and showcase both rigorous scholarship and innovative design. Furthermore, because they exist on the internet and are thus indexed by search engines like Google, they make the students’ scholarship publicly accessible in a way that the conventional capstone projects are not.

After the projects have been revised and approved by faculty advisors, students send the final URL to the Visual Resources Curator, who batches them and forwards them to the University Archivist. American University has an obligation to preserve the Art History digital projects just like any other master’s thesis. The format is a challenge, however, both because of the necessity of using a third-party storage option for EdSpace projects in which projects must be eventually removed from a server and the fact that links used in the projects tend to become outdated over time. The Library’s solution to these challenges so far is to archive a copy of all digital projects in Archive-It.

Archive-It is a service whereby partner institutions can preserve their own websites. It is a program of Internet Archive, a nonprofit that also maintains the Internet Wayback Machine. Archive-It allows AU Library to take a static capture of a website, which has its own stable URL that then can be stored and accessed on the Archive-It site. The Archivist is responsible for this process and conducts a thorough review of each archived version in comparison to the original in order to ensure fidelity. Viewers may experience slower loading times with the archived version and may find the occasional minor discrepancy in how the sites are rendered, but overall, Archive-It is able to generate nearly perfect facsimiles – including any complex multimedia elements – that should remain accessible beyond the expiration of the EdSpace or Omeka S instances.

From the archiving process, the URLs – original and Archive-It – are sent to the Library’s Resource Description team for cataloging. This is the final step in the process, and once cataloged, the sites become discoverable through the Library’s online catalog (in addition to web-based search engines).

Sample Projects

Showcasing research in a web exhibit has a number of advantages for the scholar. The researcher must consider how a viewer will move through an exhibit and must think about narrative, organization of themes and images, chronological presentation, and audience engagement. The

process gives the researcher a different perspective that can spark connections and ideas perhaps not as easily seen in a traditional text format. Web projects may bring increased visibility to research because they are more accessible through widely used online search engines. Finally, the format broadens the audience for scholarly research. An online project gives the scholar the opportunity to explain the importance of the research to nonacademic audiences.

This section takes a closer look at one sample project from each platform in order to give a sense of how EdSpace and Omeka S features enhance the students' scholarship and how the two platforms differ. Esther Rodríguez Cámara used EdSpace to complete her project, entitled *Maruja Mallo's "Heads of Women": A Pictorial Response to Racial Inequalities in Latin America*, in 2021.² The Omeka S project, entitled *Ideals of Femininity in the Dutch Republic: Analyzing Systems of Class, Gender and Power in Caspar Netscher's "Lacemaker" (1662)*, was completed by Jennifer Wendler in 2022.³

EdSpace: *Maruja Mallo's "Heads of Women"*

Esther Rodríguez Cámara took advantage of EdSpace's features to create a very compelling project. EdSpace has the capability to blow up an image to create a landing page (Fig. 1). Esther's positioning of Mallo's image emphasizes the eyes of the woman depicted to dramatic effect.

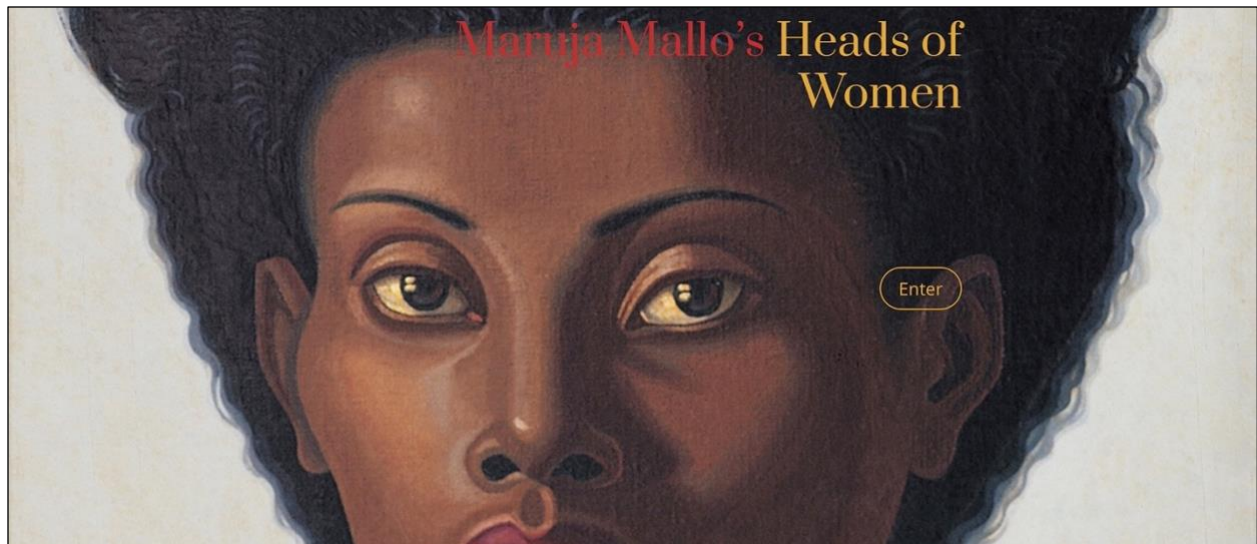


Figure 1: Screenshot of the landing page of "Maruja Mallo's 'Heads of Women.'"

EdSpace's horizontal navigation bar with drop-down menus allows the visitor to easily move to a particular section of the site (Fig. 2). Readers may click on any of the images throughout the site in order to zoom in for closer study (Fig. 3).

² Original URL: <https://edspace.american.edu/marujamalloheadsofwomen/>; Archive-It URL: <https://wayback.archive-it.org/1435/20210603190101/https://edspace.american.edu/marujamalloheadsofwomen/>

³ Original URL: <https://omeka.library.american.edu/s/netscherlacemaker/page/welcome>; Archive-It URL: <https://wayback.archive-it.org/1435/20230120213656/https://omeka.library.american.edu/s/netscherlacemaker/page/welcome>

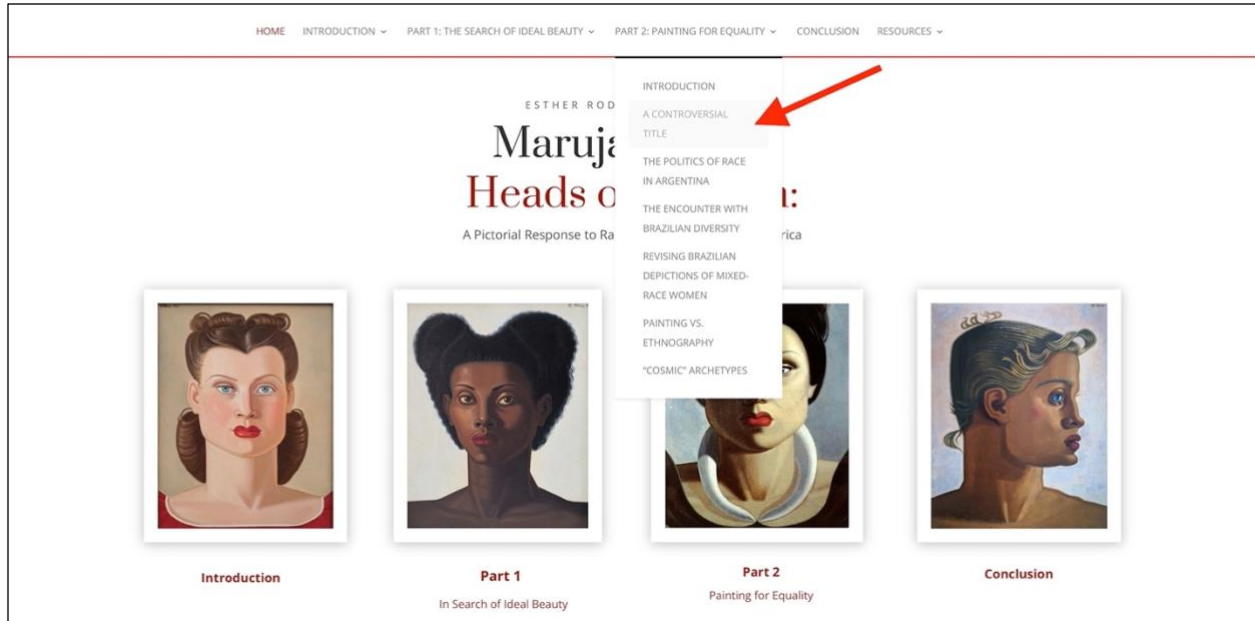


Figure 2: Screenshot depicting the horizontal navigation bar with drop-down menus.

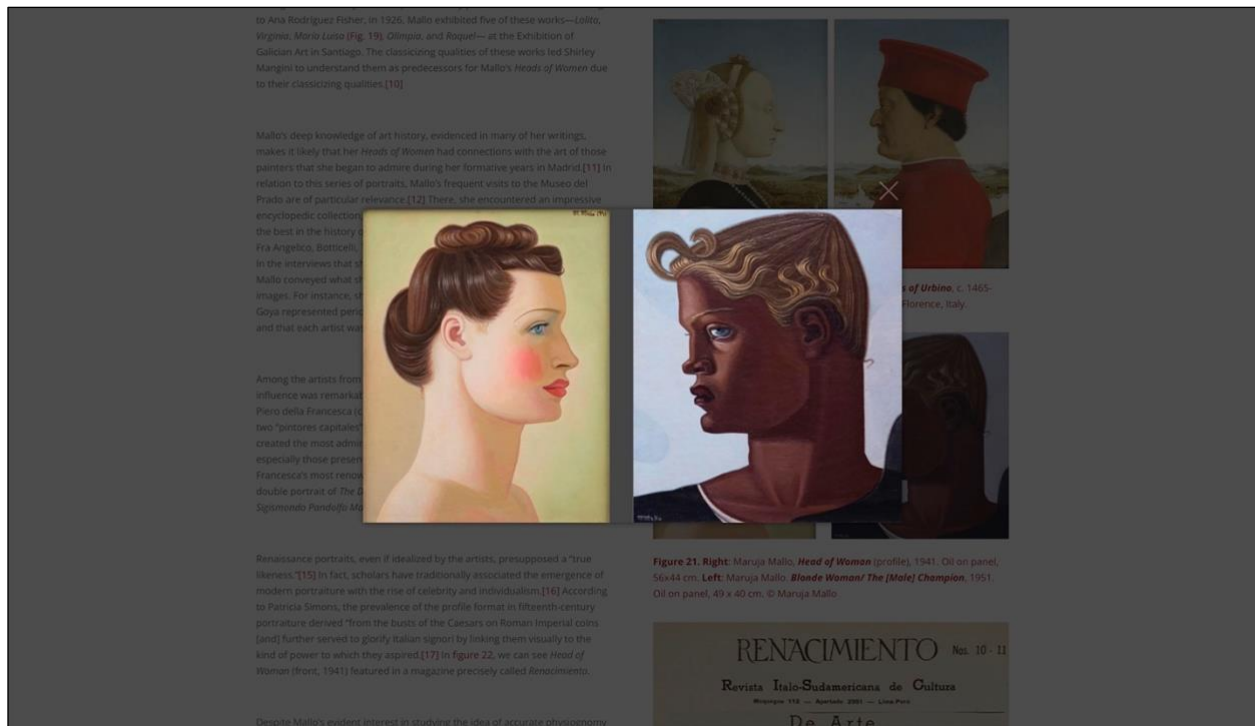


Figure 3: Screenshot depicting the zoom feature with enlarged portrait profiles from a section of the site.

All of the students documented the images in their projects with an image list linking back to the original owning institution. The digital projects, besides being good practice in adapting scholarship for wider audiences, also provide students with an opportunity to learn about maintaining rights to works in the digital space (Fig. 4).

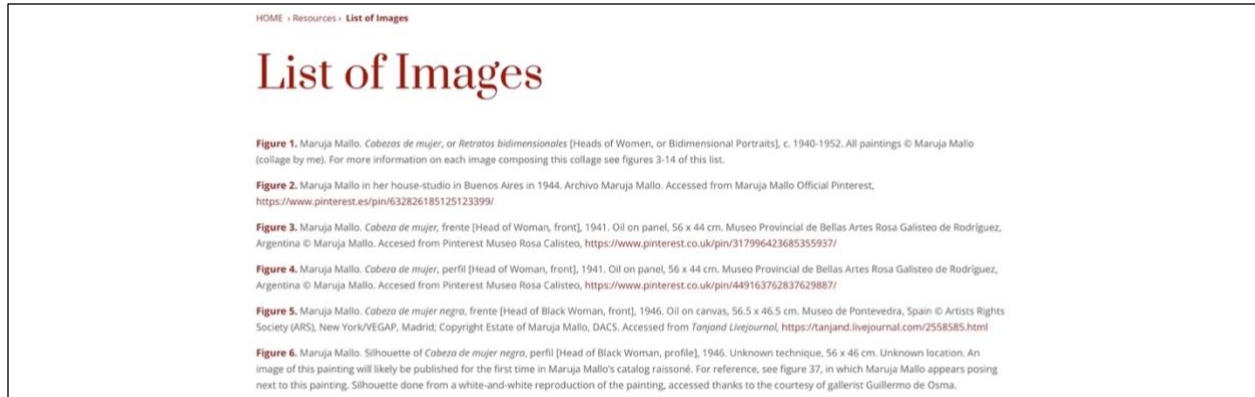


Figure 4: Screenshot depicting the “List of Images” page from the project.

Omeka S: Ideals of Femininity in the Dutch Republic

Omeka S supports Jennifer Wendler’s scholarship for her project, *Ideals of Femininity in the Dutch Republic*, in several ways. The templates in Omeka S include several different ways to wrap the text around images (Fig. 5). Images can thus be displayed next to the text that discusses them, and the reader can click on any image to view an enlarged version for closer study and additional metadata (Fig. 6). While the students did not go so far as to catalog images, they made use of Omeka S’s pre-loaded Dublin Core templates to record basic metadata for images while uploading them to the image library.

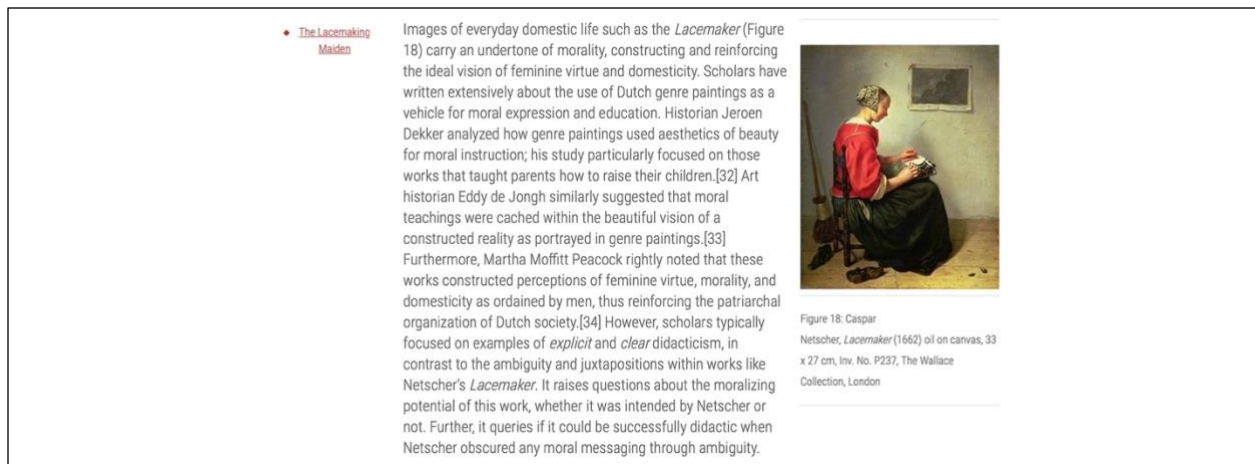


Figure 5: Screenshot depicting the text wrapping capability in Omeka S.

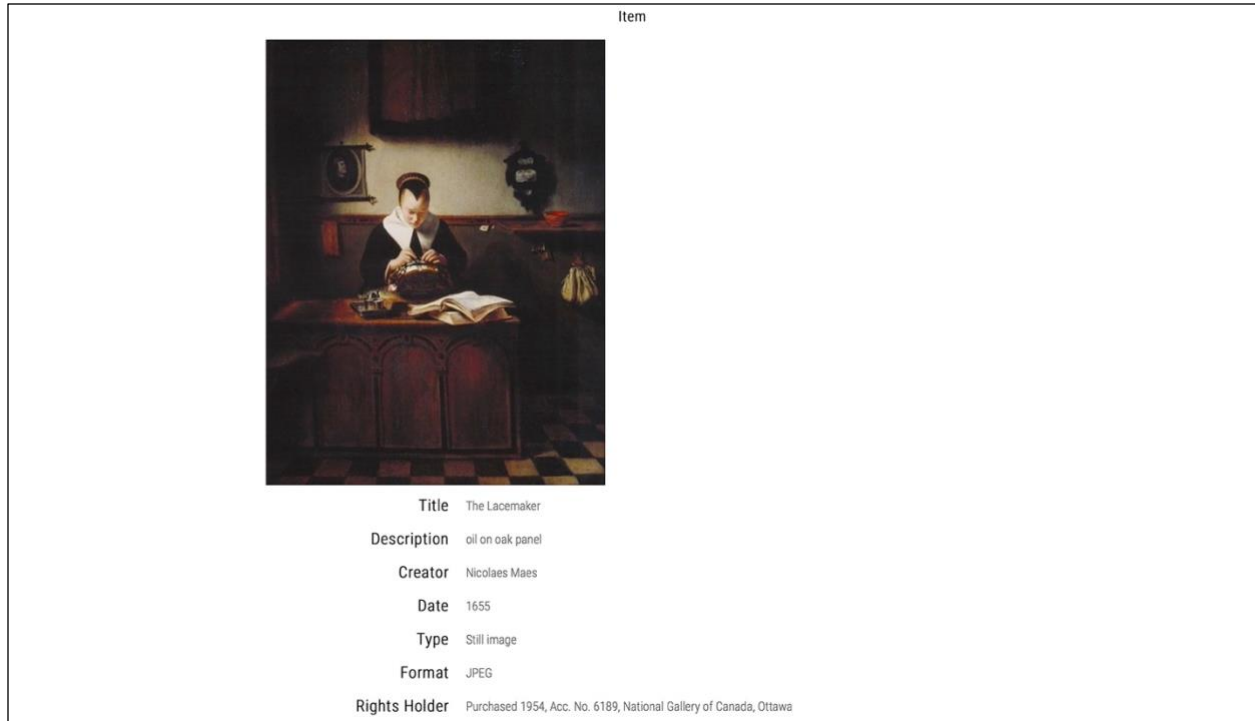


Figure 6: Screenshot depicting an enlarged image with its metadata.

Omeka S has a browse feature that allows the viewer to see a list of all the images in the project at once (Fig. 7). Images for all projects are stored in a communal library in Omeka S, and each image can be associated with more than one site. The image storage and description features are well developed, making it useful for long-term research in which images may be used for multiple projects.

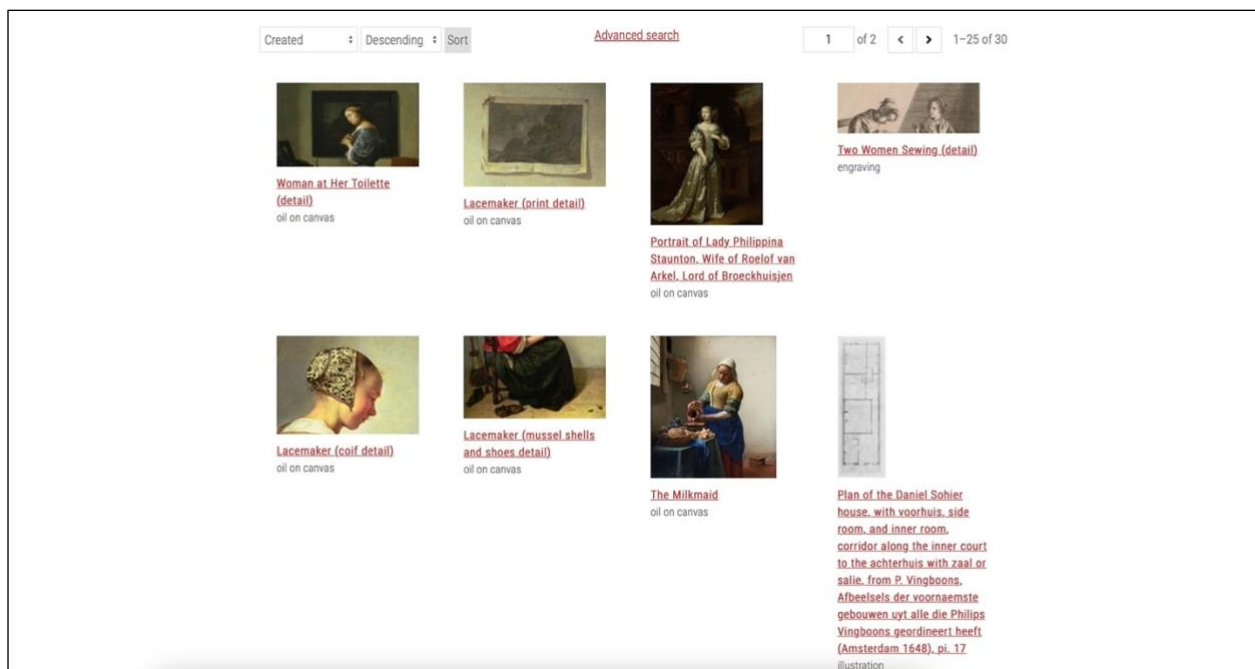


Figure 7: Screenshot depicting Omeka's image browse feature.

Students had to learn about and grapple with the legal ramifications of using digital images in scholarly research. Projects contain a copyright and fair use disclaimer that justifies the use of images under the fair use guidelines (Fig. 8).

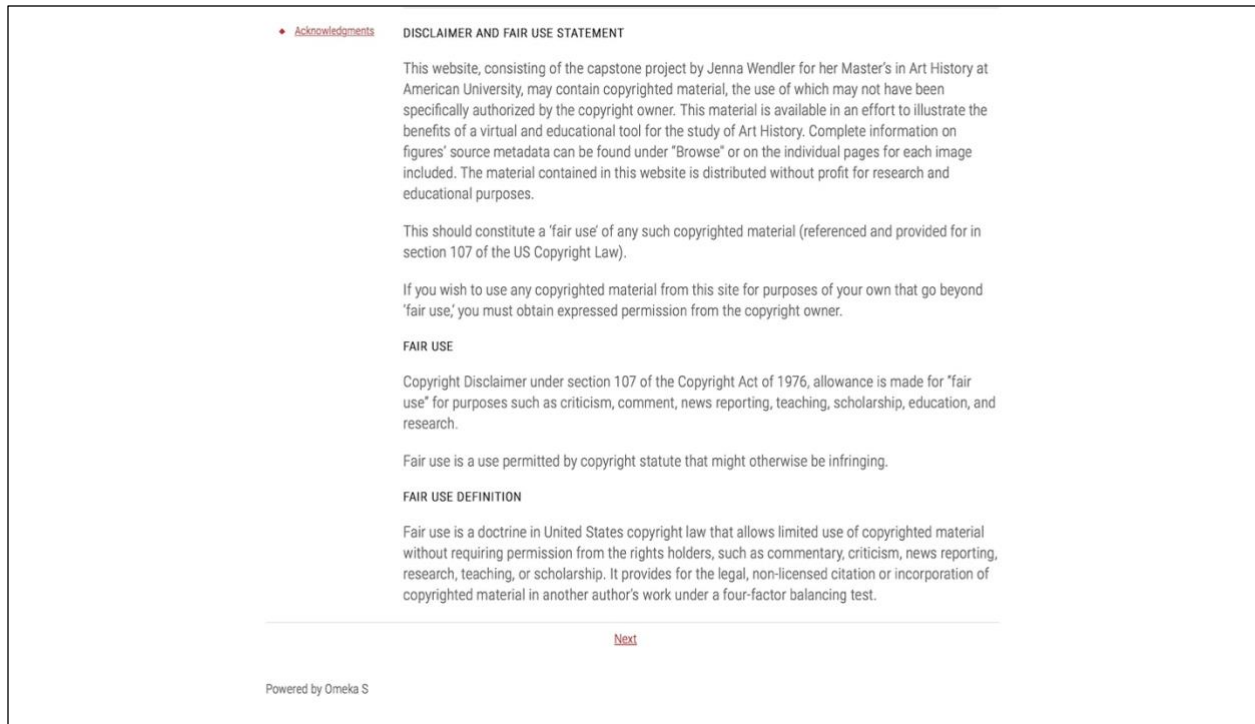


Figure 8: Screenshot depicting the website's "Disclaimer and Fair Use Statement."

Conclusion

The digital MA thesis initiative is the latest in a long history of innovative programs developed by American University's Art History department. The projects created in EdSpace and Omeka S allow students to gain marketable skills such as communicating research to wider audiences, web design, working with metadata, and digital ethics. Students have used their digital capstone projects as the basis for successful job searches, which in turn has provided visibility for the art history program. The Library and Visual Resources Center have each played a role in supporting the digital MA by providing tools, instruction, resources, and ongoing preservation and discoverability. We hope that our experience might prompt readers to consider how their institutions and programs might expand the horizons for learning and skill-building in similar ways and how such initiatives offer opportunities for effective collaboration between librarians, visual resources professionals, archivists, faculty, and students.