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## Reconfiguring Knowledge: Making the Digital Humanities Visual - SECAC 2015 VRA Affiliate Session

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## Reconfiguring Knowledge: Making the Digital Humanities Visual - SECAC 2015 VRA Affiliate Session

### **Abstract**

The 2015 SECAC VRA affiliate session highlighted the issues surrounding the support, development, dissemination, and preservation of Digital Humanities projects in the arts and humanities. The presentations addressed the transformational changes brought about by introducing digital technologies into the arts and humanities disciplines. This article summarizes the session with information about how each speaker addressed ways to make the Digital Humanities visual.

### **Keywords**

Southeastern College Art Conference, SECAC, Visual Resources Association, VRA, digital technologies, cultural heritage

The Southeastern College Art Conference (SECAC) is one of the Visual Resources Association's (VRA) formally affiliated organizations (<http://vraweb.org/about/affiliations/>). This reciprocal relationship has been in place for almost 30 years.<sup>1</sup> Currently, John Taormina is VRA's appointed affiliate representative to SECAC. As such, he organized the following session for SECAC's 71st annual conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which took place from October 21<sup>st</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> in 2015.

**Abstract:**

How do digital technologies allow us to look at knowledge production differently in the arts and humanities? New technologies allow us to interrogate and disseminate visual information from multiple vantage points. Digital Humanities in the cultural heritage environment includes such activities as curating online collections, mining large cultural data sets, data visualization and representational technologies, information retrieval, digital publishing, gaming, multimedia, peer-to-peer collaboration, and GIS and cultural mapping. In this new collaborative, interdisciplinary, digital environment, visual resources specialists and librarians work side-by-side with faculty and students to develop and support Digital Humanities projects for teaching and research.

The use of digital technologies as a means to synthesize, present, and communicate large amounts of information challenges the instructor and researcher to incorporate different ways to investigate works of art or develop new visual support tools.

This session seeks to highlight the issues surrounding the support, development, dissemination, and preservation of Digital Humanities projects in the arts and humanities. Papers should address the transformational changes brought about by introducing digital technologies into the arts and humanities disciplines.

**Speakers:**

**Sarah Falls, The Ohio State University**

"How Will We Know It When We See It? The Need for Image Analysis Tools for the Digital Arts and Humanities"

Arts scholarship relies on deep contemplation of the formal aspects of a work and the ability to contextualize that work within its historical moment. Both of these phases of research have been heightened and expanded upon by recent advances in digital toolsets within the expanding discourse of the Digital Humanities. Concurrently, institutions worldwide are digitizing and freely making available digital versions of their collections. Yet, the notion still remains that Art and Art History are behind the curve in regards to new forms of scholarship. A disconnect exists between the tools available and large image repositories. What is needed is the ability to search across large image data sets, pool images together as subsets for study, and use tools that focus on new kinds of image analysis, allowing researchers to see images as they relate to one another, in new ways. Many strides are being made toward this future inside the arts community and in adjacent disciplines. This paper will explore those initiatives, discuss their relevance to arts scholarship, and suggest paradigms for the future of digital research in the arts. Themes

that will be touched on include image analysis and recognition, content retrieval, image discovery, and interoperability.

Sarah Falls is an Assistant Professor and the Head of the Fine Arts Library at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. She holds an M.A. from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, in Art History and her M.S.L.S. is from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She comes to the Digital Humanities from an interest of where the future of research in the arts is taking us and how the digital world intervenes in our understanding and reading of images. She is currently a participant in the University of Rochester's year-long cohort program called "21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills Institute" for mid-career librarians and the Digital Humanities, working on a tract to explore methods for pedagogy.

**Timothy Shea, Duke University**

"Digitizing Athens: Reconstructing the Urban Topography of Athens with GIS"

Scattered across publications spanning 200 years of continuous piecemeal excavation, the archaeological remains of ancient Athens are difficult to understand for modern scholars. As one studying the cemeteries and settlements of Athens (750-300 BCE), I have started to compile the archaeological plans and the locations of tombstones and burials into a digital spatial database in ArcGIS. As I will show in the course of this paper, the ability of archaeologists and art historians to understand the cultural production in a long urbanized environment like Athens is optimized by using software that is capable of storing and managing various sorts of spatial data. I will discuss the difficulties of compiling and managing the compiled spatial data and the rewards for doing so. My project is part of a larger one: the Digital Athens Project, directed by Professor Sheila Dillon, and part of the Wired! Group at Duke University, the goal of which is to visualize ancient Athens and understand its relationship to the modern city using digital means.

Tim Shea is a Ph.D. Candidate in art history At Duke University. Since 2013, he has been a member of the Wired! Group, a collaborative Digital Humanities lab at Duke University. Currently, he is working as the Project Manager of the Digital Athens Project, which is creating a spatial database of the archaeological remains of ancient Athens hidden beneath the modern city. In the same vein, his dissertation, entitled "The Art and Archaeology of Classical Attic Cemeteries," focuses on tombstones with a documented archaeological context and studies them alongside the structures that occupied the same space as these cemeteries. He has worked for three years as a trench supervisor at the Azoria excavations in Crete and has volunteered at the Agora Excavations in Athens and the Morgantina excavations in Sicily, where he hopes to return this summer.

**Alison Langmead and Aisling Quigley, University of Pittsburgh**

"Sustaining MedArt: Assessing the Persistence and Longevity of a Pioneering Digital Humanities Project"

Over the past two decades, digital scholarly projects have accreted at a rapid rate, and yet there is a surprising paucity of analyses on their sustainability over time. This study

begins to address this analytical gap by investigating the applicability of contemporary user analysis to the creation of ongoing digital preservation strategies for historical digital objects. The direct object of inquiry is a scholarly website, “Images of Medieval Art and Architecture” (<http://www.medart.pitt.edu>), created in 1995 at the very dawn of the World Wide Web. This site continues to serve the global community of scholars who investigate the art and architecture of Western Europe between the eighth and fourteenth centuries. Although the web presence has benefited from some minor updates, the digital object's time capsule, really has remained more or less untouched since its creation. Using a usability analysis survey that examines the intellectual, aesthetic, and technical elements of this project, this early-stage study reveals the ways in which contemporary functional and aesthetic interactions can identify crucial preservation criteria for long-term preservation strategies. In a digital environment, this study argues, usability is fundamental to sustainability. Without analyzing this former element, successful and responsive digital preservation cannot occur.

Alison Langmead holds a joint faculty appointment at the University of Pittsburgh between the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences and the School of Information Sciences. For Arts and Sciences, Alison serves as the Director of the Visual Media Workshop (VMW), a humanities lab located in the Department of the History of Art and Architecture that is focused on the investigation of material and visual culture—whether historical or contemporary—in an environment that encourages technological experimentation. For the School of Information Sciences, Alison serves as a faculty member within the Archives and Information Sciences track of the Library and Information Sciences program. Alison is also the Principal Contact for the DHRX: Digital Humanities Research at Pitt initiative, which represents a transdisciplinary network of scholars who use digital methods to study the ways in which humans interact with their environments, whether social or cultural, natural or human-created.

**Clarisse Fava-Piz, University of Pittsburgh**

"Mapping Spanish Sculptors in Paris 1880-1914, or How Digital Technologies Enhance Traditional Visualizations in Art History"

This paper will analyze how digital technologies allow for the production of new visualizations in the field of art history and comprise a new set of art historical methods, by looking at the process of creating a literal and conceptual 'mapping' of Spanish sculptors in Paris at the turn of the nineteenth-century.

My mapping project seeks to reconstruct the artists' professional objectives in Paris by analyzing where they studied, worked, exhibited, and lived; also, whether they constituted a coherent expatriate community and what ramifications, both personal and artistic, that may have had. The over-arching goal of charting the geographical and cultural mobility of Spanish sculptors was to better understand the progression of their careers and the formation of their artistic identity.

From my first attempt to build a map of Spanish sculptors' studios in Paris, at the Conference “Spaces of Art” at Purdue University in September 2012, to the creation of a relational database and the use of digital mapping tools in the context of Alison

Langmead's course, 'Digital Humanities and Art History,' at the University of Pittsburgh, my initial project has been transformed by successive iterations from which I have learnt at each stage.

Clarisse Fava-Piz is a PhD student in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh, where she works under the supervision of Professor Kirk Savage. Her research interests include transatlantic artistic exchanges, the history of the art market, and connoisseurship in the nineteenth-century, with a particular focus on sculpture. She received her M.A. in Art History in 2012 at the Université Paris Ouest Nanterre-La Défense, where she defended her thesis, "En quête de reconnaissance: les sculpteurs espagnols aux Salons de Paris 1880-1914." (In English: "In Search of Recognition: Spanish Sculptors at the Paris Salons 1880-1914). She has interned at the Getty Research Institute (2013-2014), the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC (2012), the Galerie Patrice Bellanger (2013), and the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, Paris (2010-2012).

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<sup>1</sup> For extended information about VRA's involvement in SECAC, see: Christina B. Updike, "Visual Resources Curators Affiliate Organization: 24 Years of Active Involvement in SECAC," *VRA Bulletin* 38, issue 2: 2012. Available at: <http://online.vraweb.org/vrab/vol38/iss2/1>