Connecting Museum Collections with the Rest of the World

**Interview by Gill Crabbe**, *FNG Research*

As the Finnish National Gallery prepares to launch a new integrated website for its collections, artworks, objects and archival material, Gill Crabbe asks the key people behind the project about the implications for researchers and other users

The days when an art historian's first port of call in accessing an art museum's materials would be to walk through its doors and spend hours leafing through indexes, letters and artefacts, are fast disappearing. In today's globalised, digitised world, the research community expects rapid accessibility, through interactive channels, both online and via social media. In fact one might even posit the question to the art research community, does an object exist if it is not available online? For institutions like art museums these issues present a huge challenge, simply because the vast volume of objects and related material they hold in their archives and collections means that a gargantuan effort is involved in transforming even a selected part of it into digital material.

The Finnish National Gallery's recent release of more than 12,000 images of copyright-free artworks into the public domain as open-data has not only opened up the dissemination

Artworks need metadata to support research into them. Nineteenth and 20th-century plaster portraits from the Finnish National Gallery Collections displayed in the exhibition 'I am not I – Famous and Forgotten Portraits' at the Sinebrychoff Art Museum, Helsinki, in 2017
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Riitta Ojanperä
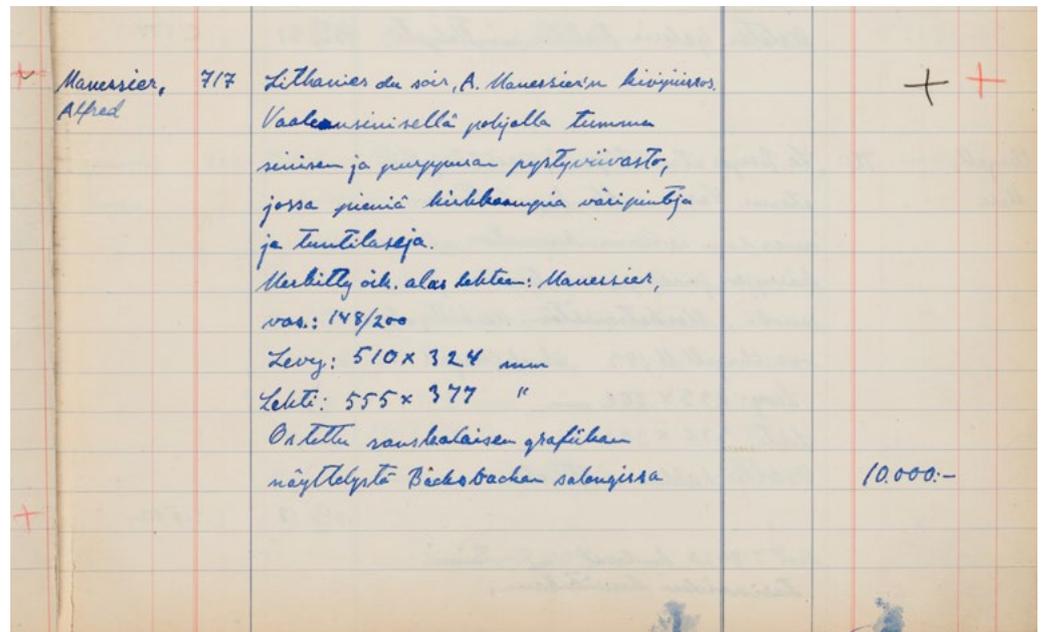
Art museum metadata before the days of the internet: a page from the inventory book C IV of the Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, 1953
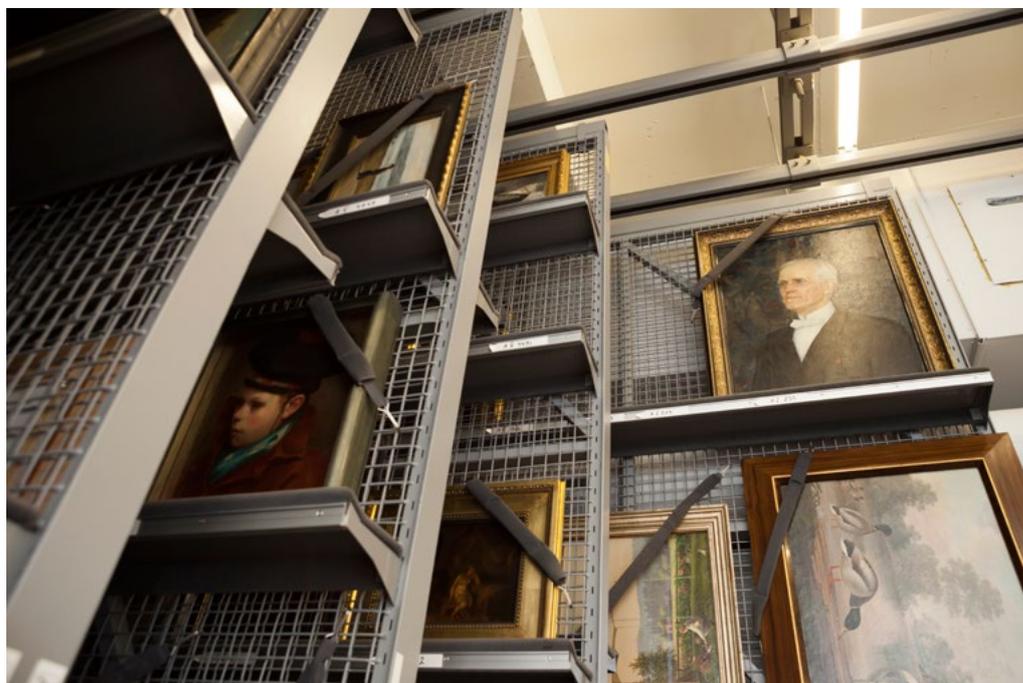Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Kirsi Halkola

of its art collections internationally but also goes hand in hand with a much larger development of its entire collections management system that will see all of the collections – artworks, objects and archive collections – brought into a single database for the first time. This new updated database will feed into the FNG's new collections online web pages to be launched next year. At present there are several ways to access various parts of the FNG collections and improving their online availability is a pivotal way to enhance research related to them.

Towards a dynamic contextualisation

Three people who are key players in this development are Riitta Ojanperä, Director of Collections Management at the FNG, Hanna-Leena Paloposki, Chief Curator and Archive and Library Manager, and Siina Hälikkä, curator in charge of the data migration project. Together they are exploring the issues raised in the process of navigating such a momentous development. These issues range from the philosophical to the technical, from exploring what defines an art object, to how to develop parameters for creating metadata. Through this process they aim to develop an online presence that is alive and dynamic in the art research community, a presence that is able to evolve with evolution of its users' research methods.

Riitta Ojanperä takes the example of an archaeologists' dig to explore how an object is defined. 'When you find an object in an archaeological dig, you document where you found it, how it was placed in the ground, what other objects were found with it. All that information becomes the metadata and even if you have just a fragment of ceramic it's basically nothing unless you know about the metadata. So the metadata is context. Even if you have no object, there can be metadata.'

Hanna-Leena Paloposki agrees. 'This also applies to our museum's archival material, if you don't know about the context, it can be difficult to say what it's about – there may be a written document but if you don't know the context in which it arose, you can't say much about it.'

**A depository containing some of the artworks from the Finnish National Gallery's
holdings of 40,000 works.**
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen

Linking data and objects connected with data to other objects and their data is the
basic thing historians are doing but it requires critical insight and something to connect
the facts to other facts. 'If this is the essence of research, constructing new patterns of
knowledge,' says Ojanperä, 'this is one of the core ideas we want to explore, which links us to
the role of museums when we talk about the question of research. We are not responsible for
developing an academic field of research in the same way as universities but instead we can
explore how to show the different ways of collaborating in creating new knowledge, because
it necessarily overlaps.'

Ojanperä thinks there are additional obstacles to collaborating between museums
and the wider research community. 'Personally I think there are many reasons, such as the
tradition of thinking about humanistic research as something very personal, almost like an
artistic process, with the idea of authorship as the artistic individual's work. With scientific
research it is common for research papers to be multi-authored, but with art-historical
research that kind of collaboration is still rare. Our research intern programme at the Finnish
National Gallery is one way in which we are attempting to address the issue of boundaries
between academia and museums.'

Ojanperä and her colleagues agree that it is vital for the task in hand to find a common
ground for collaboration between the museum and other research institutions. As Paloposki
points out: 'In previous times we have talked about collections research and academic
research as different things but I don't know if it can still be divided in that way because we
provide information for academic researchers that has already involved some research in
order to create the metadata for our material.'

So what is the difference between the research function in a university and the
research function within a museum and how that connects to the creation of the metadata?
Paloposki thinks it's about taking the museum as the starting point for research so that
academics continue that process and then that produces new knowledge, information and
interpretations. 'Academic researchers can dig deeper than us because the museum has to
focus on its function as a provider of metadata.'

Siina Hälikkä points out that the challenge for the museum is to be able to bring that
process full circle back to the metadata. 'So with our new website, we need to consider how

After publishing photographs by the Finnish artist Hugo Simberg online, the Finnish National Gallery was contacted by a transport history enthusiast, who said that the railway in this photograph was situated in a different location to that given in the metadata. With the introduction of a new collections management system and in planning a new collections website, the FNG is looking for good ways to process this kind of new information for its metadata.
Hugo Simberg Archive, Archive Collections, Finnish National Gallery
CC BY 2.0

to enrich our own metadata, capture something from the research carried out outside the museum, and then create even richer metadata.'

Paloposki illustrates this point with the example of a photograph of Hugo Simberg in the Archive Collections. 'Someone contacted us to say they recognised the railway in the photograph but that it was at a different location to that given in the metadata, so one question for us was, how could we verify that? But then how do we update the metadata systematically? We had to leave that information out, not only because of verification issues but also because of technical issues – there seemed to be no consensus about a practical way to integrate it into the existing system.'

Ojanperä continues: 'Starting a new collections management system forces us to look at the ways in which we produce metadata. Taking up the question of the railway in the Simberg photo, we should be able to elaborate ways in which to deal with the expectations and questions coming from outside sources to create enriched knowledge. Perhaps museums still have rather exclusive attitudes – of course we have to be sure of the core of our knowledge and what we are doing and why we are doing it. But it doesn't mean we should build impenetrable walls between our knowledge and our intellectual identity and the rest of the world.'

Valid metadata for the changing world

This area prompts a wider question exploring what is the exact nature of knowledge in the museum sphere. 'Museums must take care that they are a source of reliable information but I think this fact makes it even more important to think about why and how and on what grounds the information we have created is considered to be the exact knowledge,' says

Ojanperä. 'It's a hot topic at the moment in museums' discourses to discuss what museum collections are about, who collected them and what's the story. Museums historically have strong connections with ideas of national identities. Obviously you can't change a collection's history. But what you can change is the metadata, the way the objects are connected to the rest of the world beyond those often white male individuals who started them. The whole conversation about museums opening up to the current societies around them has to have a connection with collections management and the construction of knowledge through metadata.'

'One way to enrich our metadata would be to include the stories of the collectors in it,' Hälikkä suggests, 'to provide the context as to how these objects come to be here.' For example, in positioning the knowledge about the Seppo Fränti Collection of 800 artworks by Finnish contemporary artists, which was recently donated to the FNG, the new system could take account of what the users would like to know and try to offer something in a different way, with more dynamic angles and provide more data about the collectors. It's also about a change in our attitude,' she adds. Paloposki says that is a challenge to integrate that kind of thing into the metadata because metadata is highly structured and it often comprises very basic information because the collections are so big. 'What should we do to offer more points of view and still maintain the basic metadata?' Hälikkä says it's a matter of linking the object to the collection and the collection to the collector. 'Maybe we also need other kinds of professional input, producing text, for example, about the collector – this would require co-operation between art historians and communications professionals.'

Structuring of the metadata is an important part of the FNG's strategy in developing the new website. 'With a given art object there are around ten pieces of information in the basic metadata, such as its date and author, the title of the work, measurements etc.,' explains Ojanperä. 'But then we have articles, critiques, research papers, and metadata that is not verified, like Simberg's photo showing a railway. After we have agreed the basic metadata, we should consider whether we are going to process these things or document them and we should understand the status of this kind of knowledge connected with the basic data. Focusing on the things we consider to be most important here is the issue. If we think we have 40,000 artworks and hundreds of thousands of archival objects and related material, we can't treat every object in an equal way, so we have to select and that is part of the professional intellectual work of the museum. It's always about making choices, so collections management and metadata are never neutral.'

These kinds of considerations also raise issues of nomenclature. Developing basic metadata involves constructing keywords. 'Whose words? Key for whom?' asks Ojanperä. 'It's very culturally influenced. And we need to take account of the layers of cultures.' Paloposki agrees. 'For example, the Finnish National Gallery's museums recently arranged guided tours of its collection from a Queer point of view, which was very popular.'

How do you make metadata relevant to researchers? What comes to mind is the actual searching process,' says Hälikkä. 'We have a lot of silent knowledge so how can we turn it into something we can reveal through online searches? How can we create good keywords so that researchers can find the information they want? With the new website it's important that we can have statistics to see what people are searching for so we can enrich our metadata. With the old system we haven't been able to analyse activity on it.'

Crowdsourcing key words

'When talking about ontologies it's important to remember they are part of a meta world that has been created historically, but if you are thinking about making it relevant to the contemporary art world, we would need, for example, to be able to respond to hashtag language in our metadata,' adds Ojanperä. 'So we have to go beyond outmoded ontologies.' Hälikkä agrees. 'For example, you could have a keyword "selfie" that could connect you into self-portraits in the collection from the 19th century.'

There is also the issue of delivering metadata in different languages on both the database and on the new website – in this case, Finnish, Swedish and English. Hälikkä says

when it comes to keywords, the existing onotologies for creating these in three languages don't cover all aspects of the art world, so the FNG has been creating its own term lists in its database. A term list is what is used when cataloguing an object in a specific field – say a painting technique – and this helps maintain coherent terming. This autumn, in an inspired experiment, the FNG is inviting its entire staff to take part in a crowdsourcing event in which the staff will have access to the database and be able to add keywords for specific artworks in order to enrich the metadata. 'In this way we can find out what people are interested in and learn to make things more accessible. We can also add the translations in the other languages so when you open the database it will be in the language you choose, say English.'

As well as coherent terming, there is the question of updating data. What happens, for example, if an artwork is reattributed, how do you alter the basic metadata? 'In that case we would change the artist's name in the metadata, then we could document the process of the change as part of the background information stored in our database, but the public will see the actual reattribution on the website even within just one day,' explains Hälikkä.

What kind of team is involved in these processes at a day-to-day level? The FNG has a data migration team consisting of three people who are training 50 other staff, including technicians, conservators, and registrars, to input specific knowledge and updates to the database, which is not shown online. In addition, there are 10–15 staff whose work includes cataloguing acquisitions for the art collections and collections archives. Photographers who are documenting artworks and other material also add some data. Around 60–70 per cent of the artworks are digitised, and currently all new acquisitions are automatically digitised.

This has significant resource implications. 'In the case of cataloguing the recently acquired Seppo Fränti Collection which comprises more than 800 artworks, the amount of work involved is beyond the capacity of existing staff so for example an extra photographer is being hired for five months to do it,' says Hälikkä. Might such resource implications affect the museum's collections policy in terms of its ability to accept large donations in future? 'With every object that gains the status of being included in the collections, we commit to a great deal of work and processes which the object undergoes to fulfill the requirements of professional collections management' says Ojanperä.

How much is the FNG viewing its new website project in terms of responding to a particular demand and how much does it aim to create new areas of demand for its material? 'People want data and websites and digital worlds which are interactive,' says Ojanperä. 'A very static website doesn't serve today's purposes. That they can find information easily is a very basic demand but to be able to participate is also expected, so that means offering interactive processes. For example users might want to create image galleries or save records of filtered data whenever they want.'

It is clear that the process of developing the FNG's new online presence has raised wide-ranging questions, and finding solutions will be an ongoing process. But that is what keeps a system alive and participatory. Just how far will it change the research methods of its users remains to be seen. Will it lead, for example, to less physical contact with art objects and archival material, and if so, how much does that matter? Hälikkä thinks more people will want to visit the FNG's collections when they have found out about the existence of the material within them online. Paloposki agrees. 'It might also increase enquiries from researchers about our Archive Collections because the metadata will be more integrated.' Of course a serious researcher who knows they need to see the original will still come, but as Ojanperä points out: 'The worst scenario is not to tell the world what we have.'