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CASVA
Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

Digital Matters

The first CASVA fellows to move into the East Building in 1980 were supplied with telephones and typewriters, and they explored the newly expanded library through a card catalogue. Since then, research has undergone a technological revolution. The "digital turn" has altered modes of communication and the dissemination of knowledge. It has changed our social hierarchies, influenced our styles of writing, and altered our sense of time.

The Gallery has been keeping up with exciting developments as the pace of change has accelerated. The recent redesign of the Gallery's website (*www.nga.gov*) and the establishment of NGA Images (*images.nga.gov*) both mark a great leap forward in the consolidation and amplification of the Gallery's mission. Whether cataloguing the Lessing J. Rosenwald papers in the archives, contributing to the Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative in the European paintings department, or turning lectures into podcasts in the education division, colleagues throughout the Gallery are meeting the challenges of the digital age, and many of the barriers between our activities are dissolving.

Fig. 1. Luca Ciamberlano, *Print from Drawing Book*, c. 1610/1620, engraving, Gift of Arthur and Charlotte Vershbow

The Center's mission is to promote advanced study in the visual arts. As we consider what the digital turn might mean for CASVA specifically, and for the history of art more generally, one thing seems clear: no matter how powerful the Internet may be, a commitment to the direct, complex, and sustained personal exchange of ideas in real time and place remains strong. CASVA's residential fellowships attract scholars from around the world to participate in a program of intergenerational learning and research in a collegial setting. The resources of the Gallery are valued increasingly by those who come here. However, the questions of what might constitute digital research in the history of art and how CASVA might foster it are more difficult to answer.

The Center participated in several pioneering database projects in its early years, especially in collaboration with the Getty Research and Getty Information Institutes. This tool-building phase of digital research set the stage for current creative expansion. Debate over the "digital humanities" has been vigorous in universities and libraries, but often less so in museums. There are many reasons for this: digitized text remains closer to its origins than does an "image" of an original work of art; copyright restrictions have inhibited digital publication involving images; and there has been a shortage of funds for interdisciplinary work involving the visual arts. In addition to the Getty Foundation, the A.W. Mellon Foundation and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation have supported digital scholarship and teaching in art history with conviction. CASVA's leadership in the expanding field of digital research has been exemplified in the sponsoring of digital colloquia to present new work from around the world; supporting staff participation in digital "boot camps"; and regularly visiting digital research centers including those at George Mason University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Maryland. These efforts have been summarized in annual Center reports, which have been made available online at *www.nga.gov/casva*.

A more hesitant approach to digital research in the history of art was identified in a report commissioned by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, published online in June 2012 (*www.kressfoundation.org/research/main*). "Transitioning to a Digital World: Art History, Its Research Centers, and Digital Scholarship" specifically addresses the place of art-historical research centers in fostering digital scholarship, concluding that institutions such as CASVA have an important role to play, but should not necessarily support digital work exclusively as some humanities centers have done. The report also notes that digital research is seen by some art historians as a threat to established research paradigms and, consequently, to conventional structures for professional advancement. As a result, support for the infrastructure needed to sustain digital art history projects, advance art-historical training, and, especially, promote electronic publishing, has been insufficient. CASVA's experience supports some of these findings, but also refutes the report's much-cited criticism of

what it characterizes as the backward nature of art-historical research. The Center actively encourages collaborative work. The risk-averse, solitary art historian described in the report—one who relies on serendipitous discoveries and protects his or her work until published—does not fit our experience.

As often happens, CASVA's homegrown digital projects relate to bodies of scholarly material that have been years in formation. Well-organized data make digital exploration irresistible: the hard decision lies in determining value and relevance. One project that will soon celebrate its first decade (almost a century in digital terms) has taught us much about sustainability. The research database (*www.nga.gov/casva/accademia*) for the history of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome (c. 1590–1635), directed by Associate Dean Peter Lukehart, includes hundreds of documents that illuminate the activities of this early academy for painters, sculptors, and architects. The digital format allows new material to be added, obviates the need for appendices in future print publications, and enables scholars to use both free and guided searches of the records. The Accademia di San Luca website also links to hundreds of works of art created by members of the academy now in the Gallery's collection. Many of these, such as the rare and beautiful copy of Luca Ciamberlano's *Drawing Book* (c. 1610/1620), have been specially photographed for the project, making them widely accessible (fig. 1). Additionally, the artists' bibliographies on the site link directly to books and periodicals found in the Gallery's library. This project could not have been launched without grants from the Getty Foundation, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, and Robert H. Smith.

Equally compelling has been a project undertaken by Associate Dean Therese O'Malley. In compiling her encyclopedic *Keywords in American Landscape Design*, published in 2010, O'Malley became fascinated by the work of Lewis Miller (1792–1882), an itinerant Pennsylvania carpenter who filled his journals with annotated watercolors. Miller's work has often been viewed as an unmediated representation of everyday life in the folk art tradition, yet, mining the Internet, O'Malley has identified many visual sources for Miller's images in the popular pictorial press of late nineteenth-century America. The Henry Ford, Dearborn, possesses an illustrated guide to Central Park by Miller that shows the park around 1860 (fig. 2). The images in Miller's album pose challenging questions about the history of a familiar designed landscape and American culture at midcentury. Once the museum generously gave permission for the images to be digitized and placed on the Internet, the way was open for an exciting experiment in the production of a piece of scholarly research that was "born digital," including its publication in the electronic journal *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* (NCAW) (*www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/spring13*). The article produced by O'Malley and her team provides a digital facsimile of Miller's entire guide and transcriptions of accompanying texts. Elements within the guide can be linked to textual sources, related databases and websites, and even sound clips of music performed in the park. A mapping function allows each of Miller's views to be linked to the actual location, as well as to the history and evolution of the park's design. The A. W. Mellon Foundation provided funds to NCAW to publish a series of such original digital articles online. The journal's website developer, Emily Pugh, is currently the Robert H. Smith Research Associate at CASVA, with special responsibility for digital research.

Fig. 2. Lewis Miller, "Guide to Central Park," 47 and 48, watercolor and ink on paper, The Henry Ford, Dearborn, MI

As medium and message grow closer, so too do the cultures of humanistic and digital scholarship, though specialization necessarily remains strong. In an inspiring presentation this year, Visiting Senior Scholar Paul Jaskot spoke about his research on the Nazi regime's architectural construction at Auschwitz. The vastness and accuracy of the archival data allowed Jaskot to deploy the tools of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and three-dimensional rendering to great effect. Jaskot worked with digital specialists in an ambitious collaborative project, but he urged every member of the Center to find a way to take a personal "digital turn."

These projects raise important questions about how digital resources might add value to what we already do, enable thinking about questions previously unimagined, and how they can be supported in the long term. CASVA remains committed to meeting the digital challenge, and to providing leadership in the fields of digital research, teaching, and publication. • Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*