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Bits and Bytes: A Thirty-four Volume Opus Hits the Web.

by Tom Gilson (Head, Reference Services, College of Charleston) <gilson@cofc.edu>

On its well-coming Web page, the online *Grove Dictionary of Art* lauds itself as "the most comprehensive online reference resource for all aspects of the visual arts from prehistory to the 1990s." While this sounds a bit overblown, it may be one of those rare cases where the hyperbole is on target. Like its print counterpart, the online version of the *Dictionary of Art* gives the reader access to 45,000 articles on all aspects of the arts, worldwide. In addition, there is online access to the index of 720,000 entries as well as the 500,000 bibliographic citations contained in the thirty-four print volumes. The online version also offers things not available in print like links to images provided on selected museum Web sites, not to mention the 30,000 images available from the *Bridgeman Art Library*. There is only one question left to ponder: Does all this great content make the online *Dictionary of Art* a great database?

The Print Forerunner

Unfortunately, there is no quick and easy answer to that question. Any database that tries to deliver so much content can fall prey to being complicated and difficult to navigate. But before we get to that, I would like to comment further on the content. For those not familiar with the original *Dictionary of Art*, it is a comprehensive and scholarly encyclopedia of the arts with a definition of art that is highly inclusive. Not restricted to fine arts like painting and sculpture, the range is broad and includes decorative arts, architecture, graphic arts, photography, performance art and even fashion. The international scope is also a strong point with the articles on the arts of individual countries and cultures, offering remarkably thorough coverage. In addition, there are over 17,000 biographies of painters, sculptors, silversmiths, cabinetmakers, graphic designers, architects and other types of artists. There are also articles on art movements, art theory, criticism, collecting, materials and techniques as well as articles on topics like environmental art, feminism and religious art. In short, when it relates to content, the original 34-volume *Dictionary of Art* has no peer. The online version matches this content in all but one category. While the maps, charts and site drawings original to the print set are included, many of the illustrations are not. Grove does not own the copyright to many and they are not available in digital form. In order to compensate, Grove is utilizing the linking capability of the Web and imbedding hot links to museum Web sites that have illustrations from their collections. They have also established a partnership with the *Bridgeman Art Library* to access the "fore-

most collection of fine art images currently available online." The *Bridgeman* has 30,000 images but will be updated and expanded with the ultimate goal of providing over 100,000 images.

Navigational Stress

But as with many Web products that try to deliver a content rich database, the navigation can be complicated and require patience. I encountered this problem immediately at the home screen that welcomes you to the database. There is a search box at the top of the page and being impatient by nature, my instinct was to try there without any further ado. So I typed in my search "Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts" (it's the art school my wife went to). The search led me to an article on the "Association of Ottoman Painters," obviously not where I wanted to be. After taking a closer look at this search box, I realized that it defaulted to an article search in which only main article headings are searched. Since there is no separate article on the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in the *Dictionary*, it found nothing directly relevant to my interest. And since I did not enclose my search in quotations, it looked for articles with any of the words I had typed in, not the full phrase. Hence the resulting "Association of Ottoman Painters" which contained the words "fine," "arts" and "academy" (having the highest relevance ranking, 35%). After prowling around a little more, I realized what I should have done. On the same welcome screen, there is a menu bar on the left (underneath the search box) that offers the option of going to another search screen. This is where I should have started. On that screen I was able to do a keyword search with quotation marks around the phrase and it led me to a number of articles. The first articles listed related to artists associated with the *Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts* but after scrolling through a few pages, I got to information about the Academy and its place in American art education. (I was prepared to do some scrolling, because as Grove admits, rankings are "a very rough guide, —and you should browse through all the search results for articles that best meet your criteria.") Interestingly, the same search without the quotation marks led me directly to the article on the Academy and its place in American art education, no scrolling necessary. Evidently, because of the multiple appearances of words like "academy," "fine" and "arts" the ranking algorithm rated this article higher than the search for the bound phrase "Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts." In any case, for my money, users should be directed to this search screen immediately. While others may disagree, I found the search box on top of the home page more of a hindrance than the help it is intended to be.

On the "real" search screen you also have a number of other useful enhancements. There are

three different search modes including concept searching, which allows matching words that are synonymous or related in meaning or form (e.g., plurals), pattern searching, which looks for words similar in spelling to those entered and of course, the familiar Boolean searching. There is also an expert search function that can be combined with any of these modes that allows you to assign weights to each individual word you are searching.

Because there are so many related sets of information in this database, frames are a necessary evil. Besides the menu bar mentioned above, the typical article display consists of a frame with the text of the article and a frame that defaults to the table of contents where the article appears. This "table of contents" frame also offers the option of linking to related external images, the *Dictionary's* maps, charts and diagrams, as well as a list of abbreviations. Because many of the articles are so extensive, users need to be careful and keep track of where they are relative to the table of contents. This is particularly important if you are tempted to scroll through the table of contents and use it to link from section to section. While each section of text is labeled with the main entry and its correct section, unless the user is paying attention, it can get confusing. But more serious is the disconnect resulting from text references to figures and images that are only available in the print set. Beginning searchers, and those unaware that these references are to the print version will be confused and those without access to the print, frustrated.

On the plus side, the database offers users the ability to search the entire index of 720,000 entries and then link to the relevant text immediately. (This avoids some of the problems I noted with the index in my review of the print version of the *Dictionary* that appeared in the Sept. 1997 issue of *ATG*.) Using the A-Z browse function, searchers can also view the headings of all the articles in the *Dictionary* alphabetically. With a database as complex as this, help is essential and there are links to related help screens throughout the database. There is also access to the entire help table of contents from the home screen. As befitting the database, the help is extensive, (in fact Grove could publish it as a booklet).

Nuts and Bolts

This is a Web product and Grove recommends your browser be at least Netscape 4.0 or Internet Explorer 4.0. For best visual results, a minimum screen resolution of 800 x 600 pixels is a must. Although the hope is to update the database monthly, no firm schedule has been set. Support is provided via a 24-hour e-mail response system for technical questions while for customer service questions you can reach assis-

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Adventures in Librarianship: The Wilberforce Diaries

by Ned Kraft (Order Librarian, Ralph J. Bunche Library) <Kraftno@state.gov>

[What follows are excerpts from the daily journals of **Dr. Harold Wilberforce**, Acquisitions Librarian for the **New York State Library** from 1889 until 1906, where he worked with **Melvil Dewey**. A total of five journal volumes were discovered three months ago by graduate student **Jerry Slacker**, **Darkmound University**, while searching for an alternative (unguarded) entrance to the closed-stacks area of the New York State Library. Darkmound's Professor **Stan Steel**, who is preparing the journals for publication by D.U. Press, believes there may be four more volumes still undiscovered. He has applied to the **National Endowment for the Humanities** for a grant to fund his search for the missing volumes. Prof. Steel released the following for the benefit of scholarship and as a gesture to the NEH application review committee.]

20 October 1890: Large crate arrived from France today. Could not get the blasted thing open short of calling the carpenter. Inside said shipment, books bruised by the sea's tossings. Consider recommending to French shipper that he cushion [sp] all parcels by using exploded kernels of corn.

5 December: Hired Miss Henley (of the Richfield Henleys) to transcribe orders. Quite a specimen. Hope MD does not spirit her away for one of his famous "special projects." Should I ask him how he would propose classifying "lechery?" Would that be Arts—Performing? Or would it be Philosophy—Corruption Thereof?

17 January 1891: This accursed explosion of information! Last year we purchased fifteen new texts—this year, almost twice that! Where will it end?

2 March: MD cannot be turned from his obsession with subject parsing. I expect he will parse me before a fortnight. Will explore the possibility of hiring hooligans to scatter his notes.

4 March: Purchased two copies of T. Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* to replace the two stolen last week. A sure sign that "fiction" is fast becoming the lair of layabouts, drunkards, and dope fiends [sp]. Will we ever return to our ancient and rooted morals?

25 April: I believe it was I who said it best when I said: "If libraries were meant to serve the unwashed, the creator would certainly have given librarians infinite patience. He did not, hence, we should not."

5 November: Dreamt last night of MD addressing a mighty crowd, saying that libraries of the world were poised to join hands in a lattice of shared effort, shared texts, and great political clout. Statesmen, he said, would hear our cries and bow to our wims [sp] and no publisher would dare print a word without our imprimatur. The crowd roared for empire and simplified spelling. I woke in a swett [sp].

17 January 1892: For a

week now the ice has kept all patrons from our premises. Though indoors it is nearly too cold to dip ink, the quiet is ethereal. Hammerstein has sent word that a package from Philadelphia will have to wait in Schenectady until the roads thaw. His team cannot pass. Just as well. Blessed peace.

16 February: Publishers of *The Herald*, *The Evening Star*, and *The Post Gazette* claim that though their dailies have risen to eight cents per issue with delivery, this is a temporary measure. The price, they say, will recede to five cents once the current pulp-paper crisis has passed and will likely stay there for the foreseeable future. Librarians must surely hope so. Sustained at the current level, those prices will cripple the nation's libraries.

25 March: MD is on leave to address a conference in Baltimore. Concerning the "metric system," another of his peevish obsessions. Perhaps the denizens of that corrupt place will appreciate his tyranny [sp] as much as we do not. Such thoughts are uncharitable, I know, and would mark me as jealous of his fame. But I cannot moderate my disdain for that gaseous bullfrog.

[Albany police records show that on March 31st, shortly after

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tance by fax, toll free phone or email. Pricing is varied and in flux. Right now, there is a special discount for owners of the print volumes set at \$1,000 for one year's subscription. Non-owners of the print volumes have to spring for a \$1,500 annual subscription. Both these prices are for 1-5 concurrent users. In addition, there is a single user, single-station price of \$500. There is also talk of selling access by the month and in ten-day bundles. Starting in September, individuals can also subscribe by the month or by convenient 10-day 'carnets' (ten 24-hour sessions).

What To Do?

The price for the annual subscription to the online database may come as a relief to those librarians who blanch at the price of the original print set. If the need for the *Dictionary* is obvious, but the budget too tight to meet the \$8,800 asking price of the print set, the online version could be an affordable option. Although it comes without the full complement of figures and reproductions available in the print set, the online version compensates by offering links to

a number of outside image sources. However, keep in mind that the clarity of these images is still not as sharp as those available in print. Admittedly, the online images are improving, and are mostly in color while the majority of images in the print version are in black and white. As stated above, of deeper concern is the possible confusion caused by references in the text to images that are not available online. Another consideration is the need for user instruction. No matter how good the help, a database this complex is a challenge to the user. There is no satisfactory "easy search" and for full mastery the learning curve is steep, requiring more time and effort than the average patron may want to invest. Obviously, the print *Dictionary* is a lot easier to figure out.

Of course, the ideal solution is to have both the print and online version, provided the price is right. And if what I hear from Grove is true, it just might be. The combined price for the 34-volume print set, along with a one-year subscription to the online database is \$5,000. This is a great deal for those libraries that could not afford, or were unwilling to meet the original \$8,800 price tag. If you consider the online subscription being worth at least \$1,000 by itself,

that means these libraries are paying \$4,000 for the print set, a savings of \$4,800. That is remarkable. But what about those libraries that took the chance, made the commitment, and dug deep to find the initial asking price? They are getting a break on the price of the annual online subscription of \$500, but so are those who opt for the combination print-online deal. Many of those libraries may feel like they have been sucker-punched. Grove may owe them an explanation (or in the words of one collection development librarian, a refund).

In any case, most librarians with any interest in the arts will want to take a closer look. You can sign up for a 24-hour individual free trial or a 30-day institutional trial at: <http://www.groverefrence.com/tda/online/Freetrial.htm>. This page also links to information about the license agreement, how to order, and key features and specifications. It's worth a visit.

NB: For another review of the *Grove Dictionary of Art*, with ratings, visit www.charlestonco.com. *The Charleston Advisor*, for October, 1999. —KS

<<http://www.against-the-grain.com>>