

DIGITAL RESTITUTION OF ICONOGRAPHIC HERITAGE: DIGITIZATION AS A PORTRAIT OF COLLECTIONS

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Abstract

Ideally, the digital representation of a collection should allow for an objective perception of the originals through substitute files. By providing easy access to high-quality digital reproductions, the main goal is to offer an immersive and detailed experience of the original object, allowing the public and current/future researchers to visualize distant or overly sensitive objects that cannot be displayed or handled directly and for which conservation optimization is necessary.

In reality, achieving complete objectivity in restitution is, of course, impossible. Digitizing a heritage collection cannot capture all the historical, cultural, and contextual aspects of the collection. While metadata and descriptions can be associated with the digitized images to provide additional information, all of this data cannot replace the experience of the original object.

The technical limitations and economic constraints specific to mass digitization projects demonstrate how complex digital restitution can be. The digital representation can deviate significantly from the direct perception of the originals, as is often the case with iconographic collections, where digitization sometimes prioritizes function over fidelity.

These projects can thus present multiple challenges in terms of image, communication, preservation of originals, and management of digital data. Regardless of the typologies involved and the available resources, it is essential to assess the needs properly, in order to implement a coherent digitization strategy that respects the integrity of the representation.

Considering these subjective factors, digitizing a heritage collection could be seen as creating a portrait of the collection. In this case, the importance of the aesthetic representation and the preservation of the original must be agreed upon, as the original then appears more than ever as the best back-up for the file representing it.