Tagging in Museums: The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *One Met. Many Worlds.*
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**Abstract**

The topic that will be explored is on the issue of tagging on museum websites. The case study chosen is called *One Met. Many Worlds.*, a feature created by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2014 for exploring highlight objects from its collection. Though the site provides pre-defined tags, users themselves cannot enter tags, preventing the crowdsourcing of their inputs. In addition to this, the museum’s online catalogue currently lack user tags. Tagging features in the Powerhouse Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, and a website called Your Paintings Tagger all garner a tremendous amount of input from users, and so museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art may benefit from including user tagging on their websites if they desire contribution and engagement from online visitors.

**Keywords**

tagging, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Tumblr, folksonomy

Since the mid-2000s, museums have become more involved in fostering online user interaction through activities like comments and tags (Fletcher & Lee, 2012, pp. 510-511). One instance of this is The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *One Met. Many Worlds.* (OMMW), an online project launched on June 11, 2014. After selecting a pair of object parts, users compare and contrast these parts by creating two one-line texts. This pairing could then be posted to OMMW’s integrated Tumblr gallery. The rationale for the project was to create a simple but interesting way for users to make connections between seemingly unrelated objects (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014a).

While the activity was meant to be casual, requiring only single-line phrases about objects, the texts could have been used as tags as well. These tags would benefit the users by asking them to think about object descriptions in a brief format, while also benefitting the museum, which can use tags to understand trends about its users’ ideas and can also accept them as crowdsourcing for a large collection in need of metadata. OMMW comes preloaded with tags on its main page, but users cannot enter their own tags. This decision by the project creators indicates the choice to exert their own control over knowledge, since the format precludes users from contributing their own tags. Other museums, like the Powerhouse Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Public Catalogue Foundation in Britain, do allow user tags, and there is therefore potential for the Metropolitan Museum to have some form of tagging project in the future.
Project Background

Thomas Campbell, CEO of the Metropolitan Museum, reported in 2014 that up to 44 million people from 233 countries visited the museum’s online site in the previous year, compared to the significantly smaller figure of 6.3 million people who visited the museum in person. Based on the museum’s immense online popularity, Campbell emphasized the need for the museum to deliver a quality online experience, including projects like OMMW (Campbell, 2014). He also stressed that the goal of OMMW was to allow users to think about objects in a playful manner. To market the project, he announced that large advertisements would be placed around New York in the months leading up to OMMW’s launch (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014b).

After the launch, Amy Liebster, the museum’s coordinator of online publications, revealed that 500 objects were featured, allowing for a wide range of comparisons. She explained that the pairing of images encouraged the online visitor to think about the relationship between two unlike objects, and to share his or her pairings on the integrated Tumblr page for others to see. (High, 2014).

One Met. Many Worlds.

On the main page of OMMW, a grid of randomized objects is displayed (Fig. 1). To start the pairing activity, the user clicks on an object from the grid. This brings up a new window with a larger image of the object, with parts of the object now highlighted by clickable boxes. Clicking on a box will set it as the first image of the selected pair. Repeating these steps to locate a second image completes the image pairing. The user is then prompted to enter a short one-line description for each image (Fig. 2).

Figure 1. OMMW webpage.

Figure 2. Example of the pairing activity.
The user may share the pairing on the Tumblr gallery. To see the gallery, the user clicks on the “Visitor Gallery” link on the top of the main page. One pairing in this gallery shows a Joshua Reynolds painting on the left, and a Thomas Lawrence work on the right, with both subjects sharing a similar hairdo, facial complexion, and three-quarter turn (Fig. 3). The user’s messages were “btich [sic]” and “stole my look.” Combined, they form a sentence, a comedic statement on the similarity between the British paintings’ styles.

In additional to whimsical entries, some pairings reveal more descriptive ways of looking at objects. For instance, one user compared building materials by labelling a wooden American farmhouse with “planks,” and a Roman-era Egyptian temple as “blocks.”

Within its 500-object collection, OMMW elicited interesting connections and contrasts from users. Its integrated Tumblr gallery also provided an opportunity for users to share their postings on the popular social media site. The descriptions, which were meant to be short one-liners, could also have worked as tags for the different objects. As the descriptive texts for the American farmhouse and Egyptian temple show, some users may well have been aware that their entry could doubly function as appropriate tags for the image’s object.

Accepting User Tags

User tags of objects are known as a form of social tagging or folksonomy (a Web 2.0 neologism, portmanteau of folk and taxonomy) (Cairns, 2013, p. 109). By accepting user tags, a museum acknowledges that its online visitors are capable of contributing descriptive meanings about its collection (Fletcher & Lee, 2012, p. 508). When tagging activities are encouraged and well regulated, a museum is capable of attracting greater usage of its online website.

Within online communities, where every post is published instantaneously without prior approval, a museum needs to make sure that there is a system in place to ensure civil and productive discourse among the users (Russo et al., 2008, p. 24). As museums are responsible for the interpretation of the objects, their staff must decide whether the knowledge implicit in tags is acceptable or not, and how that knowledge affects their own system of interpretation (McLean, 2011).

In OMMW, every object part is associated with a tag. For example, in a Renaissance painting of Madonna and Christ by Filippino Lippi, the box over Virgin Mary’s head was tagged as “pure,” while the one for the Christ child was tagged as “youthful” (Figure 4). These tags carry over to the Tumblr gallery.

Clicking on the tag button near the upper right of the page brings up a list of all the tags used (Figure 5): the larger the tag’s font size, the more frequently they appear in the images. Some of these tags are “patterned,” “gentle,” and “smiling.”
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The tags were pre-established by the project creators, without the option for users to create any tags in OMMW and its Tumblr gallery. As Amy Liebster explained, OMMW creators chose the tags as universal concepts. She explained that the “universal [tags] bolster[ed] [the] alternative views” of the user pairings (High, 2014). Ideally, both “alternative” views and the creators’ universal views should be included in a tagging system to achieve mutualization—the production of user-generated and curatorial knowledge alongside one another. In practice, however, mutualization is hampered by the fact that the universal concept tags are permanent; there is no place for the users to enter their own. Moreover, the strong connotation of the word universal implies that no more tags are needed.

User-generated tags benefit users by encouraging them to think carefully about the description of objects, rather than passively remaining a mere reader of the tags that already exist (Cairns, 2013). As Smith (2008) has argued, users who are able to create tags will have a more responsive and productive relationship to others, by seeing what tags have been produced already (p. 18-19). Furthermore, by examining user tags alongside their own, museums can enrich their own understanding of how users think about objects and how their own tags compare (Ridge, 2013). Though one could argue that 500 objects in a short-term online project do not warrant a large array of tags, having users contribute their own tags would nevertheless be a worthwhile experiment if the Metropolitan Museum wants to implement user tags in the future—for example, in its online catalogue.

By allowing users to make pairings without enabling them to insert their own tags for objects, OMMW limits the ability of users to collectively make a system of short object descriptions. Though the users may see and then respond to other users’ Tumblr pairings with their own, there is no tag system that aggregates their most common words to be parsed as tags.

Three Cases of Tagging Projects in Museums

Significant tagging projects have already taken place in the field of museums. In 2006, the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney launched an online tagging program for users, which was then incorporated into its catalogue search engine. A study of this project reported that this user tag assisted searching system aided the “navigation and discovery” of its online catalogue, and worked best alongside tags entered by the museum, which would ensure that both the museum and its users were involved (Cairns, 2013, pp. 110-111).

In 2009, the Brooklyn Museum implemented a points-based tagging system. Built as a challenge for their users, the system awards game-like points for each tag a user creates, so that there is an incentive for competitive users to contribute as many tags as they can. As a self-correcting policy, tags are deleted if two users agree to remove it, but can be restored if three users agree to do so. In the first 10 months, users entered more than 58,000 tags, which would have been a daunting task for the museum staff to do alone (Cairns, 2013, p. 112-113).

In a similar project in Britain, the BBC-supported Public Catalogue Foundation (PCF) started a tagging project for paintings, called Your Paintings Tagger. As with the Brooklyn Museum, users of Your Paintings Tagger were given points for tags. A leaderboard on the main page showed the top 10 taggers out of 12,000 users. The first place tagger is currently credited with more than 35,000 tags. More than 6 million tags for 23,000 paintings have been entered in total so far (Public Catalogue Foundation, 2015).

These recent projects indicate the huge potential for the development of tagging projects in more museums. For instance, the OMMW project could have made use of both a points system and their social media gallery, by using Tumblr’s preexisting tagging system (Tumblr, n.d.) as a source of user tags. Museums that are willing to implement tags represent a belief in radical trust—a belief that online users can be trusted to voluntarily contribute content like tags by themselves, and can be counted upon to flag inappropriate and contentious messages when they do occur, as they did with the deletion mechanism in the Brooklyn museum (Russo et al., 2008). According to Cairns (2013), most user tag systems in museums have been well run, without overt issues of unwanted or problematic tags.
Conclusion

Given the Met’s strong promotion of and enthusiasm for OMMW, as well as Campbell’s emphasis on thoughtful ideas of the user and the use of Tumblr, it is surprising that user tagging was missing from OMMW. In choosing to limit the project to predetermined tags, the Met may therefore have lost a valuable opportunity to conduct an interesting experiment with user tags.

As these three cases have shown, tags can be very useful in engaging users, and in creating a large pool of tags that would be difficult or costly to achieve for an institution alone. To move forward with such a project, the Metropolitan Museum needs to consider how to implement user tags, and to determine a policy based on “radical trust.” With millions of people using the Met’s website each year, the museum’s online visitors may certainly be up to the challenge—and duty—of creating tags for the museum’s immense collection.

Author’s Note: There are understandably instances where museums may object to tagging on the grounds that it could cause problems for culturally sensitive collections like indigenous objects. A museum should therefore carefully consider the cultural context of its collections, as it may not always be wise to implement user tags.

After writing this article, I learned that the Metropolitan Museum did in fact carry out user tags testing between 2004 and 2005. This was done in collaboration with a multi-institution tagging project called steve.museum. The website for steve.museum no longer exists, which implies that, in the end, the project was not implemented. This test may explain why OMMW did not attempt to implement user tagging (Trant, 2006).

References


