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Places to Go: New York Public Library Digital Gallery

by Stephen Downes

Imagining the number of artifacts humans have created throughout history is an overwhelming prospect. Even before the digital camera or the printing press, we were producing art, documents, clothing, and jewelry. With creativity increasingly affordable, our cultural output has exploded. And yet, for all that, it is still difficult to find artifacts of value online.

This trend is beginning to change as public institutions, libraries, and museums put their collections online. One example is the New York Public Library's (NYPL) recently opened [Digital Gallery](#). Containing more than 275,000 images digitized from primary sources and printed rarities, the Digital Gallery offers unparalleled access to the past for educators and interested visitors alike.

Organization and navigation present a challenge with any resource of this type. As pleasant as it is to simply browse (and this option is, of course, available on the [Browse](#) page), you'll become exhausted after several hundred images, and browsing 275,000 images would take a lifetime. Not knowing exactly what is in the collection, however, poses a challenge to the less casual visitor. One hopes for serendipity, but simultaneously seeks guidance; it's a fine balance.

The NYPL Digital Gallery makes a good effort to achieve that balance. The [front page](#) of the site features several modes of navigation. Dominating the view is a large graphic leading to two featured portions of the collection—at the time of this article's publication, for example, the graphic included links to Japanese color woodcuts by Kitagawa Utamaro and New York photographs by Berenice Abbott. This format introduces repeat visitors to new and sometimes surprising material.

Hover your mouse over the Explore links to the left of the front page images, and you'll discover seven major collection categories: [Arts and Literature](#), [Culture and Society](#), and [Nature and Science](#), among others. Moving the mouse over any of these titles brings up new graphics that highlight two of many collections within each category. Navigation like this makes the Digital Gallery more than just a repository; these resources from the NYPL are a destination.

Directly below the Explore section is a box labeled "Curators' Choice," where you'll find yet another guided resource; at the time of publication, the selection was [Turn of the Century Posters](#). The material is not merely displayed but presented with a short essay introducing the background and history of the collection alongside (unfortunately unlinked) reading resources. Again, the desire here is not merely to show, but to elucidate and educate.

More directed readers will want to look at the "Gallery at a Glance" section of the home page. This area quickly directs you to information about how to [search](#) and [browse](#) the collection, as well as to a [user's guide](#) and [conditions of use](#) statement. On this last page, you'll learn that the Library "provides free and open access to its Digital Gallery and images may be freely downloaded for personal, research and study purposes." However, it also stipulates that a "usage fee"—which is somehow not a copyright fee—applies to any public (including Internet) display of these materials; this end-run around copyright law is required because much of the material is in the public domain.

Following the directions in the [user's guide](#) will lead you to the menu bar at the top of the page. Containing navigation features common to the entire site, this bar allows you to browse by subject or author, or to access the Library's search engine. An advanced search is also available. You can expect to eventually be presented

with a vast array of thumbnail images. And then the fun begins.

When browsing or searching, you can click on a particular image or "view image details" in your search results—say, for example, the image of [Palm Avenue, Port Antonio](#) (Jamaica)—to display a larger thumbnail along with bibliographical information (what we would these days call "metadata"). Some of the metadata is also hyperlinked, allowing for searches through collections or by author. You can click on the image or "enlarge image" to view a full-size reproduction in a pop-up window. At any point, you can add the resource to your selections and retrieve your search results or selections via the "My Digital" section of the menu bar. These selections, persistent across sessions, do not require a login but are recorded using cookies (so don't depend on them being there if you use another computer or clear your cookies).

Additional navigation is neither offered nor required. This simple access—it takes only a few minutes to become very familiar with the site—allows for a rapid search, a casual browse, or a quick tour. The organization of the material supports, but does not intrude upon, navigation. Designers offering access to similar repositories of learning materials could learn from this simplicity.

The NYPL Digital Library is one of numerous collections of this sort that has been offered online in recent years—others include [American Memory](#) from the Library of Congress and the [Cornell University Library Digital Collections](#). Each stands as a formidable resource, and yet we cannot help but wonder what an aggregation of these resources would look like.

Few of these sites offer lists of the content metadata in a syndication format such as Dublin Core or RSS; hence there is not yet an opportunity for a third party to provide access to numerous collections at once. And this is unlikely to develop so long as libraries take a proprietary attitude toward their holdings. But at the same time, the prospect is so tantalizing that we cannot expect but to see a linking of these resources in the future. At that point, site visitors might never emerge from the wonders of the past!

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