

Digital Humanities for art history 2022: A snapshot

Andrew Hopkins

The Summer School dedicated to Digital Humanities (DH) for Art History, held between 27 June and 1 July 2022 at the Department of Excellence of the Department of Human Sciences (DSU Scienze Umane) of the Università degli studi dell'Aquila, represented a singular opportunity for a snapshot of a discipline that, *de facto*, has only recently managed to carve out a defined space for itself within academia. This, all the while for decades having been a fundamental component of many research institutes' activities and at the same time acquiring a predominant role in the vast world of protection, enhancement and dissemination of cultural patrimony. Yet, a fundamental primary consideration regarded an obvious direction for the future of the DH in the context of striving for carbon neutrality: the necessity for institutions to push forward with mass digitisation so that scholars do not need to fly around the world to study unique objects such as manuscripts, and the move to exclusively digital publishing in order to avoid generating carbon footprints for books and journals: cfr. 'COVID, CO², and the future of the Digital Humanities 2022'.

The possibility for ten scholarship holders to participate in a high-level summer school dedicated to the possibilities that DH offers to the study of art history was ideal to deepen understanding by up-and-coming practitioners of the potential of technologies in research contexts *tout court*, and in this case spearheaded by an authoritative and international parterre of presenters.

The choice of speakers with different backgrounds was also productive, because their skills gave the participants a detailed and clear picture of the products resulting from the intersection of their various knowledge bases. The presentation by Silvio Peroni and Francesca Tomani (UNIBO), for example, provided – in a concise but effective way – an explanation of how digital information is structured and related to each other within platforms and which ones are the most suitable mechanisms to make these products usable in terms of user experience: 'Approaching Digital Humanities at university: A cultural challenge'. The functionality and potential of data banks were illustrated through the work of the DH.ARCH- Digital Humanities Advance Research Center of the University of Bologna. The project presented was Zeri & Lode run in collaboration with the foundation of the same name and was an exceptional example both for the amount of data and for the management of the same.

The presentation by Teresa Nocita (DSU, UNIVAQ), focused on digital philology, which was useful for highlighting the first major consequence of digitisation, that is, the disappearance of the material data and the challenges that this phenomenon creates, together with the ability of technologies to facilitate perception and learning of texts, as demonstrated by the Hypertextual *Decameron* (later Web) project presented: 'Between visual art and visual text. Intermediality and hypertext: A possible combination for twenty-first century philology'.

Several speakers' presentations dealt with topics relating to DH in the cultural heritage sector, according to an order that paved the way to understanding the state of the art of research. Focused on the development of design data (BBA) and Computer Aided were the interventions of Alessandro Adamou (Digital semantic, Web development, Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome) 'Shout LOUD on a road trip to FAIRness: experience with integrating open research data at the Bibliotheca Hertziana', which focused on making the output of prior research readily available to humanists in their interaction with digital resources; and by Elisa Batianello (Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome): 'Digital Editions at the Bibliotheca Hertziana', setting out how the institution is investing lot of resources in order to improve the offer of digital publications, with the support of new technologies such as neural text recognition. Crucial points include the use of shared standards such as TEI XML and open-source platforms such as TEI Publisher to ensure long-term accessibility and preservation.

The opportunities offered by new technologies on a cognitive and scientific level for what concerns the historical-artistic, architectural and urbanistic sector were analysed by Cristiana Pasqualetti (DSU, UNIVAQ): '*Monumenti storici e artistici della città dell'Aquila e suoi contorni* by Angelo Leosini (1848) as a digital semantic *corpus* online'. This had important parallels with another project referred to during the Summer School, that by Rafael Brundo Uriarte (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence) who, over the past five years, has been running the DH project creating a digital platform for Venetian Music and the digitisation of the seventeenth century choir books of St. Mark's (Cà Foscari University, Venice).

The same was true of the ERC funded project by Ludovica Galeazzo's (Università degli studi di Padova), 'Venice's Nissology: Renaming the Lagoon City as an Archipelago (VeNiss)' which addressed the reconstruction of the artistic, architectural and urban history of the city. The presentation of this project has identified and brought into the light the fluid identity and participatory character of Digital Humanities as a discipline, since it described step by step the process of elaboration of the platforms, starting from research of a traditional system up to the creation of 3D models of registered emergencies and georeferenced mapping. This was given extended consideration by Remo Grillo (Villa I Tatti, Florence), 'Representing change: User interaction and data modelling of an identity paradox', whereby the challenge of representing historical data, especially true for objects whose identity undergoes several changes – both physical and functional – over time, such as historic buildings, is in the context of the VeNiss project, subjected to a technical conceptualisation of the philosophical problem of identity over time through the lens of the Cidoc-CRM, providing an outline of a data model and a UX/UI solution, both adopted to represent knowledge about the nuanced historical changes of buildings over time.

Both national and international projects were presented, aimed at the development of search engines and iconographic recognition, relational databases and geo-localised platforms dedicated to the knowledge of specific episodes of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. One such was by Franziska Lampe (Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich), 'Activate the Archive: Photographic art reproductions from the Bruckmann Verlag and their potential digital futures'. The most significant data that emerged during this presentation of concerned the advantages offered through the

use of technology in the process of collecting and organising the material and its study, which can be translated into enormous savings (obviously for those who use the platforms), as well as time and economic, physical and mental resources given the negligible time to access an enormous amount of information already connected and related to each other, more remotely. To this is added an advantage also on a methodological level, as the products created were developed according to aggregative criteria and different technologies, illustrating the variety of organisation and management systems for data, whose singularity is inscribed in the ability within virtual environments to return data to users in its entirety, even material, through innovative tools, such as that identified by Lampe in navigation by colour and by visual similarity.

Andrew Hopkins (Università degli studi dell'Aquila), in 'Flying to the moon, or flying too close to the sun: Failure in the Digital Humanities', opened Pandora's box regarding the general incapacity or willingness to share hard-won wisdom regarding the DH, even in the context of scholarly and academic institutions. Yet this cone of silence and evasion impedes progress, without question, yet it is not clear at all what can be done about this issue if institutional figures feel they cannot talk about it. A personal timeline about the period in question is recounted in 'Digital Humanities 1981–2021: A personal timeline', which perhaps can serve as a reference in the future for historiography as experienced by an art and architectural historian.

It is useful to close with what one interlocutor, Gail Feigenbaum, emerita of the Getty Research Institute, had to say about what she described as wondrous experiments or notes on the cultural life of the Digital Humanities:

The crucial challenges of the Digital Humanities may be cultural, rather than technical. Based on two decades of involvement with digital endeavours at the Getty Research Institute (GRI), this argument can be made with confidence. Successful integration of the digital into the research environment of an arts institution, and even the outcome of any individual project, hinge on cultural and social factors, not technical ones. This is a red thread that surely resonates with more experienced colleagues. This observation was made two decades ago by a pair of pioneers in digital scholarly publishing, Ron Musto and Eileen Gardiner, founders of Italica Press. At the time they were launching a series of history monographs as EBooks for the American Council of Learned Societies. Progress was proving difficult. The challenge was not technological, they explained, the problems were with people. Twenty years later this remains relevant. Digital art history, in particular, plays out in an environment made unstable by shifting theoretical perspectives and fast-changing trends. The outcome of any digital undertaking, whether it be a single project, or a policy of institutional integration, depends less on coding than on professional formation and attitudes, workplace culture, on sociological factors. Certain attitudes and dynamics may be systemic rather than specific to any particular endeavor. Alertness to these can help in navigating complicated waters. It is a firm conviction that now, and in the future, the digital plays an incalculably valuable, exciting, and important role in the study of art and architecture.

A few years ago the digital took on a renewed vitality when the Getty's board of directors mandated a policy of "digital first," definitively signaling an institutional priority. New energy was injected into some excellent projects already underway. Among these was the Getty Foundation's Online Scholarly Catalog initiative, (OSCI) – to my mind one of most consequential experiments for the field, involving ten museums. OSCI was one of the rare projects to grapple productively and explicitly with the cultural challenges of the digital alongside the technical. Valuable outcomes resulted from this carefully and thoughtfully conceived initiative, and basic lessons were learned. For me one critical lesson was that sustainability is a major and pervasive challenge. Another obvious lesson was that the digital seems to jump ahead most noticeably when spurred by injections of capitol. The "digital first" imperative declared at the Getty smoothed the path to support for projects, grants, staff, and training. New projects were quickly brought on, such as the Getty Research Portal, which succeeded beyond expectations. The Portal was the brainchild of GRI director Thomas Gaeghtgens, who forged an international partnership of art history libraries to provide access to hundreds of thousands of digitised books on art history no longer protected by copyright. The Portal offers one-stop shopping to consult or download in full text multiple copies and editions of books from Bellori to Wölfflin, held by the Getty and by a consortium of partners such as Heidelberg University. During the pandemic huge numbers of scholars found that the Portal made it possible to find and search inside seventeenth-century guidebooks to Rome, or an array of early twentieth-century books on art history.

Andrew Hopkins holds the chair in architectural history at the Università degli studi dell'Aquila and is the author of several studies to do with Baroque architecture and historiography.

Email: andrewjames.hopkins@univaq.it



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)