

# CONFERENCES

## Europeana and Digital Access to Cultural Heritage. Brussels (Belgium) January 19, 2011

On 19 January 2011, ATHENA, EuropeanaLocal and the Agency for Arts and Heritage organised the conference *Europeana and digital access to cultural heritage*.

The European Commission wishes to improve access to (digital) European cultural heritage in archives, museums, audio-visual collections and libraries located in Europe by means of the Europeana single access point.

The Europeana Flanders Consultation Platform wishes to promote knowledge exchange about (European) digitisation projects between cultural heritage institutions. It is a meeting place where the participants in various projects in the context of Europeana (and of related projects at Flemish level) can exchange ideas and experience.

### ATHENA and EuropeanaLocal

ATHENA and EuropeanaLocal, two European projects, have brought Europeana one step closer to Flanders. ATHENA (Access to Cultural Heritage Networks) encourages the participation of museums in Europeana and has developed tools, guidelines and recommendations to this end. PACKED vzw is in charge of national coordination and the supply of content from Flanders. The Royal Museums of Art and History coordinate the supply of data by the federal institutions. The Royal Museums are also partly responsible for all work in terms of standards, while PACKED vzw focuses on copyright.

In the context of ATHENA, the LIDO (*Lightweight Information Describing Objects*) data model, an event-based model for the exchange of data from museum collections, was developed. The XML export from databases of the

participating institutions will be mapped to LIDO and from there to ESE (Europeana Semantic Elements) in the ATHENA ingestor. From April 2011 'Linked Heritage' will continue to build on the achievements of ATHENA.

EuropeanaLocal supplies content to Europeana and specifically focuses on local and regional heritage collections. [Erfgoedplus.be](http://Erfgoedplus.be) along with MovE participates in this project on behalf of Belgium. EuropeanaLocal is not building its own repository, but instead is supporting the project partners in setting up their own repositories in accordance with the specifications and protocols as required under Europeana. In this context EuropeanaLocal acts as the main test partner for the technical specifications and procedures of Europeana such as the ESE data model, the guidelines for conversion, aggregation, OAI-PMH repositories, harvesting and the content checker.

### European projects as a catalyst for digitisation

Participation in European digitisation projects is subject to strict deadlines which require the participating institutions to deliver results on time. As a result it is possible to make rapid progress. The examples of the Royal Museums of Art and History and AMSAB-ISG show how ATHENA, MIMO and HOPE respectively provide a significant incentive.

To be able to participate in Europeana through ATHENA, institutions require a museum catalogue and an XML export of data. The Royal Museums of Art and History adapted the (Zetcom's) MuseumPlus software package to this end. An online museum catalogue, Carmentis, was built, which provided for an export as well as a multilingual public interface. LIDO is the standard for export in this context. This required the Royal Museums of Art and History to focus on programming as well



as on thorough preparation: analysis, restructuring, and addition to the MuseumPlus data and mapping to LIDO. The museum worked with Zetcom and with an in-house programmer. A comparison shows that the second option is more interesting because of the speed, the direct communication, and the independence of the software supplier. Unfortunately, the in-house programmer is often a temporary, project-related employee, who leaves after the project has been completed.

AMSAB-ISG (Institute for Social History) makes digital material available at different levels: through the Adlib OPAC on its own website, through project websites and networks and portals such as MovE, Archiefbank Vlaanderen, ABRAHAM, CaGeWeb, Labour-history.net, and Europeana.

HOPE (Heritage of the People's Europe) develops specific profiles for the metadata of archival, library, visual and audiovisual collections, which are used to map the collections of project partners. These, in turn, are also converted to the EDM data model. For archival material HOPE adheres to the specifications developed by APENet, which translates specific needs such as hierarchically structured descriptions (as used in EAD) to Europeana standards.

### **An integrated view of digitisation**

Digitisation should not be a parallel activity. In addition to important stimuli such as making information available online and conservation, digitisation can be embedded in a policy in an integrated manner. For example, for the House of Alijn (Ghent) the digital collection is an integral part of its vision, mission and operations.

It is impossible and also absurd to digitise the entire collection. Institutions that manage collections need to think strategically about the

place and function of digitisation and they also need to make clear choices. Criteria and choices need to be motivated, a digitisation plan needs to be drawn up, and digitisation should be the basis for a wide range of basic activities such as collection management, research, and public activities. Only then does digitisation become an investment in the future. It becomes part of daily practice and is the common thread between collection and public.

### **Key themes throughout the digitisation process**

During the afternoon portion, short case studies discussed aspects of the digitisation process based on everyday practice.

#### *Flandrica.be: the virtual Flemish Heritage Library*

The Flemish Heritage Library is launching Flandrica.be, which will give an overview of the corpus "Flandrica". The project is a collaboration of six major libraries in Flanders and was launched in March 2011. It promises to be a valuable addition to existing portals and is aimed at enriching the user experience.

The project partners are responsible for digitisation. Flandrica.be aggregates this information, first and foremost for the libraries themselves, and secondly for umbrella portal sites, such as Europeana.

Flandrica.be will develop a method based on existing standards, guidelines and good practices. The aim is to apply CEST's seven commandments, a series of recommendations aimed at improving the quality of digitisation projects.

#### *From data sheet to Europeana*

The collection of Stadsmus in Hasselt consists of 7 000 objects that were originally registered on paper on individual data sheets, which were

subsequently digitised with IMC and Adlib. The data were published online on Erfgoedplus.be and from there they were supplied to Europeana. The entire project took ten years from start to finish and had two large milestones: the transition from data sheet to IMC and the transition to Erfgoedplus.be.

The first transition mainly raised the issue of keyword management. To this end the museum drew on multiple sources (in addition to the AAT also on Van Dale and Mardoc), and choices were justified and documented. The participation in Erfgoedplus.be prompted the museum to reflect on criteria for publication and a stricter implementation of thesauruses.

The Stadsmus experience shows that smaller institutions can also participate in big projects such as Europeana, provided they take great care when administering their own content data and provided they can work with an intermediate aggregator, which provides technical support.

#### *Sur les traces du Hainaut*

"Sur Les Traces du Hainaut" gathers digital records from archives, libraries, museums, audiovisual and private collections. Bringing together data from different sources always creates problems in terms of standardisation and migration. A critical examination of Europeana shows that consistency and the comprehensiveness of data is very difficult to achieve, especially in the case of larger aggregators where it is practically impossible to control content.

For portals it is crucial that the information is standardised because otherwise it is impossible to provide collective access to different sources and to make them searchable.

## Conclusions

### *Standardisation and migration*

Standardisation is necessary to facilitate the exchange of digital data and to make them searchable using umbrella aggregation platforms. Digital access through an institution's own website or through aggregation platforms such as Europeana requires time-consuming checks. But this also is a strong incentive. The data have to be of high quality, both technically and in terms of content. The intrinsic accuracy of the data can only be guaranteed by the specialists in these institutions and not by aggregators such as Erfgoedplus.be or Europeana.

Cultural heritage institutions which manage collections therefore have a duty to supply their data in a correct manner. Overarching levels can provide technical support and resources such as the Move book

([www.museuminzicht.be/public/musea\\_werk/invulboek/index.cfm](http://www.museuminzicht.be/public/musea_werk/invulboek/index.cfm))

- which indicates how to interpret fields Adlib) and the management of thesauruses. The general public can also play a role in the description of the content of collections. CEST (Cultureel ErfgoedStan-daarden Toolbox) also offers a tool to facilitate standardisation.

### *Semantics*

There is much talk about the Semantic Web, also in the context of Europeana, but good examples are still limited. A good thesaurus is an indispensable tool if one does indeed wish to realise the Semantic Web.

The Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) and its Dutch translation AAT-Ned, is the most widely applicable thesaurus for the cultural heritage sector. The AAT is not the only one and does not cover all needs, not even in the museum sector. It is however the most



suitable central reference tool, e.g., for making comparisons, in the context of aggregation projects, and more specifically, in the context of the Semantic Web. The thesaurus should therefore become a dynamic document, which is continuously developed through collaboration among content specialists, the collection managers.

### *Copyright*

A major stumbling block to realising digital access is copyright. This matter requires a solution at European level. In April 2010 a Committee of Wise Men was established. Their report gives advice about public domain materials and also includes opinions on materials subject to copyright, more specifically on the subject of orphan works and works that are out-of-print. The opinions are constructive, but the copyright debate is far from over. In Flanders, FARO, VKC, MovE and PACKED vzw recently founded a user group in the cultural heritage sector, which focuses on this issue.

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