

Demo and presentation of Digital Mellini Scholar's Workspace

Digital Art History Lab

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1. Background

This paper will present the project *Digital Mellini: Exploring New Tools & Methods for Art-historical Research & Publication*, a joint initiative of the Getty Research Institute (Los Angeles) and the University of Málaga (Spain). This paper shall discuss several aspects and challenges related to the development of digital resources for art-historical research.

The main objectives for the *Digital Mellini* Project are:

1. To explore new methods and tools with which to reinvent the concept of scholarly work and critical publishing in the field of humanities, particularly in the context of art history, in which the convergence of text and image is essential and provides an interesting context for research—a context that has not yet been adequately investigated¹.
2. To create a methodological model for developing collaborative digital publications that incorporate texts, digital facsimiles, images, computational tools for linguistic analysis and visual communication, and forums for exchanging ideas and sharing knowledge. The ultimate goal is that the international community of specialists can utilize this methodological model and apply to a variety of art-historical projects.

These objectives can be seen within the framework of the recent growing interest that many of us in the art-historical community have in response to the challenges offered by the digital society—we need to analyze and reflect critically on the «digital status» of the discipline of art history from both the methodological and epistemological perspectives. We must be willing to open innovative and creative paths in the design of digital resources for art-historical research—paths that will lead to new lines of investigation and new methods of and attitudes toward information-sharing.

¹ Nevertheless, interesting research has been carried out on linking images to text. See Zweig 1998.

Art historians must participate in the development of tools in the Digital Humanities. In an article published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2009, Johanna Drucker pointed out that many of the critical debates that have characterized the development of the humanities in recent decades—subjectivity of interpretation, multicultural perspectives, a recognition of the social nature of the production of knowledge, etc.—are absent in the design of digital resources. Instead, more emphasis has been placed on adapting to the characteristics of digital media than to the epistemological and interpretive exigencies of the various humanistic disciplines.² Lev Manovich made similar observations in a Digital Humanities conference held in June 2009 in Maryland, when he asked, «Is it sufficient to borrow techniques from the fields of computer science, information visualization and media art – or do we need to develop new techniques specific to the humanities?» (Manovich, 2009: xv).

Regarding the hope that Digital Humanities will assume this new role, we perceive the need to build environments that are intellectually productive and will facilitate interpretive and critical studies above and beyond simple information systems designed for the storage and retrieval of data.

The *Digital Mellini Project* is a response to these challenges, as the aim of the project is to contribute to the development of virtual research environments (VRE) to promote critical research in the field of art history.

The *Digital Mellini Project* includes another desideratum that has emerged in recent years: the production of knowledge based on aggregation and collaboration. The culture of open, shared knowledge, which was already being promulgated by UNESCO as early as 2005 as a fundamental way to transition from the information society to the knowledge society, along with the possibilities offered by Web 2.0 technologies, is an essential factor within the evolution of digital scholarship. There are already several projects oriented toward the development of collaborative environments (NINES³, The VRE-SDM Project⁴, The Transcribe Bentham Project⁵, etc.); and there is a burgeoning bibliography on this topic (Deegan and McCarty, 2011). Proof of this interest has also been shown by the high percentage of presentations that dealt with this problem in the last Digital Humanities conference, held at Stanford University in June 2011.

Electronic publications and digital editions are not new in the realm of Digital Humanities; the first reflections on what an electronic edition might be appeared in Finneran (1996) and Bornstein and Tinkle (1998). There are also reflections and proposals relating to collaborative editions of unpublished manuscripts in which a dispersed community of scholars could add annotations, as in the case of

² «Many humanities principles developed in hard-fought critical battles of the last decades are absent in the design of digital contexts (...) For too long, the digital humanities, the advanced research arm of humanistic scholarly dialogue with computational methods, has taken its rules and cues from digital exigencies.» (Drucker, 2009).

³ <http://www.nines.org/> (accessed 15 October 2011).

⁴ *Virtual workspace for the study of Ancient Documents*, University of Oxford. <http://bvreh.humanities.ox.ac.uk/VRE-SDM> (accessed 15 October 2011).

⁵ <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/transcribe-bentham/> (accessed 15 October 2011).

the Peirce Project (Neuman et al. 1992) and the Codex Leningradensis (Leningrad Codex Markup Project 2000).

Nevertheless, as Susan Hockey (2004) states in her summary of the history of Digital Humanities, «The technical aspects of this are fairly clear. Perhaps less clear is the management of the project, who controls or vets the annotations, and how it might all be maintained for the future».

Similarly, the *Digital Mellini Project* intends to continue this line of research, addressing the questions that still remain open and launching new ones, cultivating debate and reflection.

2. Digital Mellini Project: development and intellectual questions

The Digital Mellini Project focuses on a particular text, an unpublished manuscript written in 1681 by Pietro Mellini, a Roman nobleman. This text belongs to the Getty Research Library, Special Collections, found under the title *Relazione migliori di Casa delle pitture Melini*. Pietro Mellini poetically described the best works as he inventoried the collection of his family's paintings. This text carries a self-interest for art historical research due to its uniqueness – it is the only document known to date that has a hybrid composition of ekphrastic description in poetic form with a factual descriptive inventory. In addition, it is an important source for studies related to collecting, the market valuation of art, the provenance of collections, etc. Most of the works are unidentified and to analyze their possible allocations through the descriptions provided by Pietro Mellini is a very attractive task for art historians. Lastly, this text gives us an opportunity to explore the possibilities that digital media offers to deepen the relationships between text and image. One of the objectives of the critical edition is to establish hypotheses about the identity of the works described within the manuscript.

To carry out this critical collaborative edition, the Digital Mellini Project is developing a computational prototype. Exploring the possibilities of Drupal, a digital environment is being designed and conceived specifically to this analytic objective. Currently, the project team has completed an alpha version of the digital workspace. The first prototype of a beta version is expected to be finished by the end of 2012.

This prototype was constructed around the object of the critical edition, Mellini's text, and it includes:

- The text itself - A diplomatic transcription encoded in XML-TEI, translations into English and Spanish, and a digital facsimile – provided in an interface that allows comparative analysis; [fig. 1]

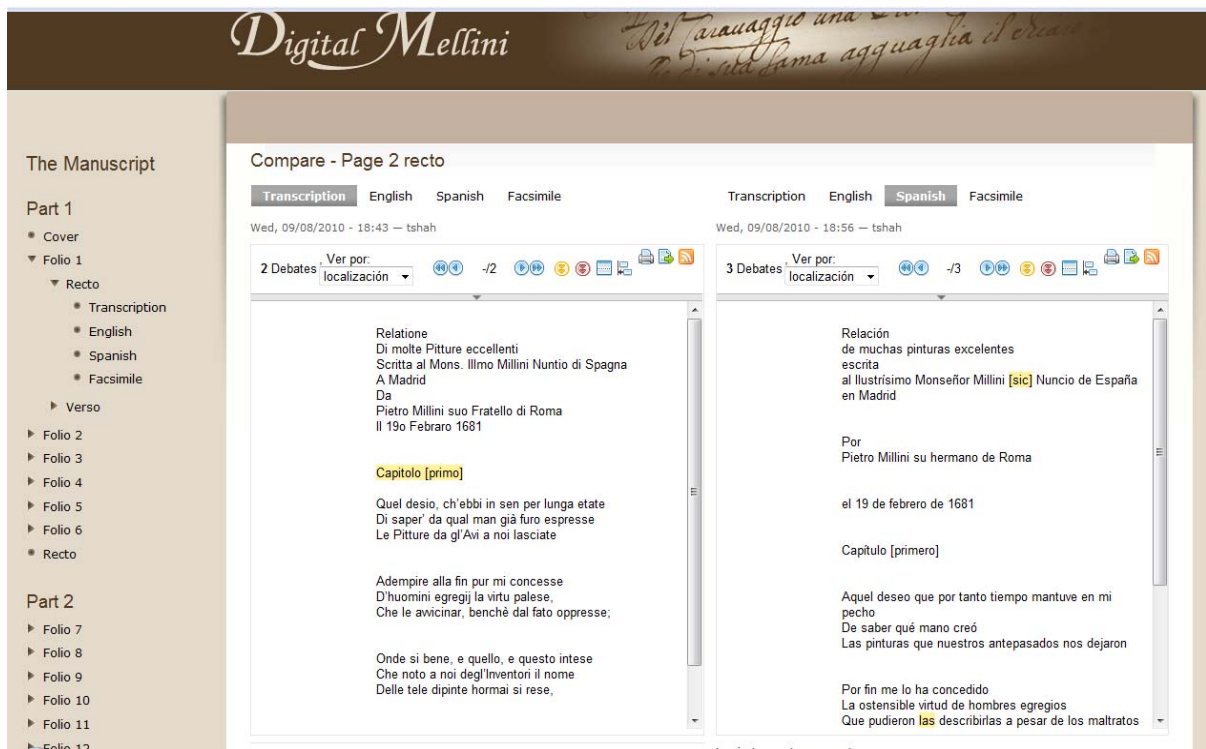


Fig. 1.

- A representative image gallery, consisting of images of works proposed by experts as possible identifications of the paintings described by Mellini. Additionally, provisions within the environment make it possible to establish comparisons between images and with the linguistic descriptions, so scholars can deepen the analysis of the word-image relationship;
- Tools to complement or extend into other areas of research. For example, a repository of thematic texts and/or those structurally related to the Mellini's text.
- Tools for aggregating critical annotations to the text. These annotations can be written by each participating scholar, according to a methodology of action and interaction developed for this purpose. Also, these annotations can be arranged as a response or reply to other entries, thus generating a critical debate among the community of scholars participating. [fig. 2]

The screenshot displays the 'Digital Mellini' website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Research Tools', 'Concordance', 'Forum', 'About', and 'Search'. The main header features the 'Digital Mellini' logo and a decorative background image of a handwritten manuscript page.

The left sidebar, titled 'The Manuscript', lists 'Part 1' and 'Part 2' with sub-items for 'Cover', 'Folio 1', 'Folio 2', 'Folio 3', 'Folio 4', 'Folio 5', 'Folio 6', 'Folio 7', 'Folio 8', 'Folio 9', 'Folio 10', 'Folio 11', and 'Folio 12'. Under 'Folio 2', there are sub-items for 'Recto' (Transcription, English, Spanish, Facsimile) and 'Verso'.

The main content area is titled 'Transcription' and shows a snippet of text from a manuscript. The text is in Italian and includes lines such as 'Posa nel sen della gran Madre, e siede, E de Pastori humil l'alme devote Gli porgono in tributo oro di fede.' and 'Dal Ciclopo crudel ch'altrui si noce Fugge reggendo a suoi delfini il freno Su la conchiglia Galatea veloce.' There are several annotations and comments overlaid on the text, including one that says 'Allusion to Virgin Mary as "la gran Madre"' and another that asks 'Could you give us more details about the features that you would like to explore regarding this characterization?'. There are also references to 'Fig. a mezzana in tela di p. i 5 di larg. a, e 4 d'alt. a' and 'Fig. e al naturale sino al ginocchio in tela di p. i 5 1/2 di larg. a, e 4 1/2 di alt. a'.

At the bottom of the transcription area, there is a 'Login to post comments' button and a language selector for 'Español (España, internacional)'.

Fig. 2.

- Space for debate and reflection on issues related to the text where it can be more broadly discussed.

Note, therefore, that what is proposed as a digital critical edition is far from the conventional academic model of a print publication, which would exist in a static format as the end result of an interpretive study. The result may have been made by one or several specialists, but in the end, what we find is the proposal of one particular interpretation. It is also far from the digital editions that fit this model (eg Van Gogh Letters Project) or electronic repositories focused mainly on the analysis and exploration of texts (The Orlando Project-History of British Women's Writing). The proposed model is multifaceted. Digital Mellini simultaneously integrates multiple and sometimes contradictory and paradoxical views. It is open and dynamic. Due to processing system records and the dialogue between specialists in the critical annotation process, we can reconstruct the interpretive process itself, as aggregation and contributions grow over time. Therefore, the digital edition is not only the end product of a study and/or research, but also the intellectual and interpretive process through which it unfolds.

In the digital edition, in addition to showing this prototype and its performance, we will address in more detail the intellectual and methodological questions that confront us while developing a resource of this kind, taking into consideration the goal of advancing digital scholarship in the field of art history and the Humanities in general. These topics include:

1. How to show different viewpoints contributed by specialists, and displaying through visual means the diversity of interpretations and perspectives that converge simultaneously on a text from different contexts – geographical, ideological, theoretical, methodology, etc.?
2. How to deal with the problem of linguistic variability in a multilingual community of specialists without circumscribing to the most prevalent language?
3. How to face the problem of authorship? How to maintain the legitimate intellectual property rights of each participant in a publication that emerges from the aggregation of many?
4. What are the real behaviors and research practices of art historians using such environments? Do these practices lead to the emergence of a new art-historical knowledge of a digital nature or not?
5. How to develop specific methodologies and protocols for action to guide, assist, and coordinate the participation and interaction of specialists in this type of environment?
6. How to encourage the participation of specialists in the context of an academic system that does not "recognize" the work developed in these digital environments? For example, what kind of scientific production – monographs, articles, papers – are contributions that fit within critical annotations to a digital edition when referenced in an academic CV? Should we think, then, of the incorporation of new categories of scientific production in line with the specificities of digital media?

Finally, the conclusive question: how can the discipline of art history move away from single authorial models toward more open, collaborative models of research and publication?

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