A Question of Practice: The Gernsheim Photographic Corpus of Drawings in the ARTstor Digital Library

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What concerns the artist first and foremost is the capacity to invent, not to execute; and to become a vehicle and aid to invention the drawing has to assume an entirely different character—reminiscent not of the craftsman's pattern but of the poet's inspired and untidy draft.

Ernst Gombrich[1]

To be able to access and study drawings is often a rare privilege since these works on paper are light-sensitive, fragile, and cannot usually be exhibited for long periods of time. In the age of digital technology, enabling online access to drawings is of critical importance to scholars in the field; and if greater numbers of scholars, curators, and researchers could view and examine these works, even "virtually," it could very well transform the nature of research in the fields of art history and related disciplines.

The best evidence for this proposition—and the best opportunity to test it—is the Gernsheim Photographic Corpus of Drawings (or Corpus Photographicum). For more than half a century, art historians Dr. Walter Gernsheim and his wife, Dr. Jutta Lauke Gernsheim, photographed Old Master drawings at more than 125 institutions (archives, libraries, and museums). Through their passion for drawings, photography, and scholarship, the Gernsheim Photographic Corpus of Drawings, comprising 189,000 extraordinary black-and-white photographs of European drawings from the fifteenth century to the early twen-

tieth, was born. To this day, the Gernsheim Corpus provides the most comprehensive documentation of Old Master drawings available through a single, unified collection—transcending the boundaries of individual cabinets, institutional walls, and geographical distance.

As a subscription service, all (or most) of the Gernsheim Corpus is available only at a small number of scholarly photo archives and museums in Europe and North America, including the Biblioteca Hertziana, Rome; the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorisches Documentatie [R.K.D.], The Hague; the Witt Library and the British Museum, London; the Cleveland Museum of Art; the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles; the Frick Art Reference Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. The Hertziana is the official repository of the Corpus, holding a complete set of prints, as well as the negatives and other accompanying research material. However, this remarkable resource has never been readily accessible to the majority of scholars, teachers, curators, and students who live outside the Western world's largest cities and who would benefit from consulting its riches.

The ARTstor Digital Library (*www.artstor.org*), a non-profit image database of more than one million images in the arts, architecture, humanities, and social sciences, has partnered with the
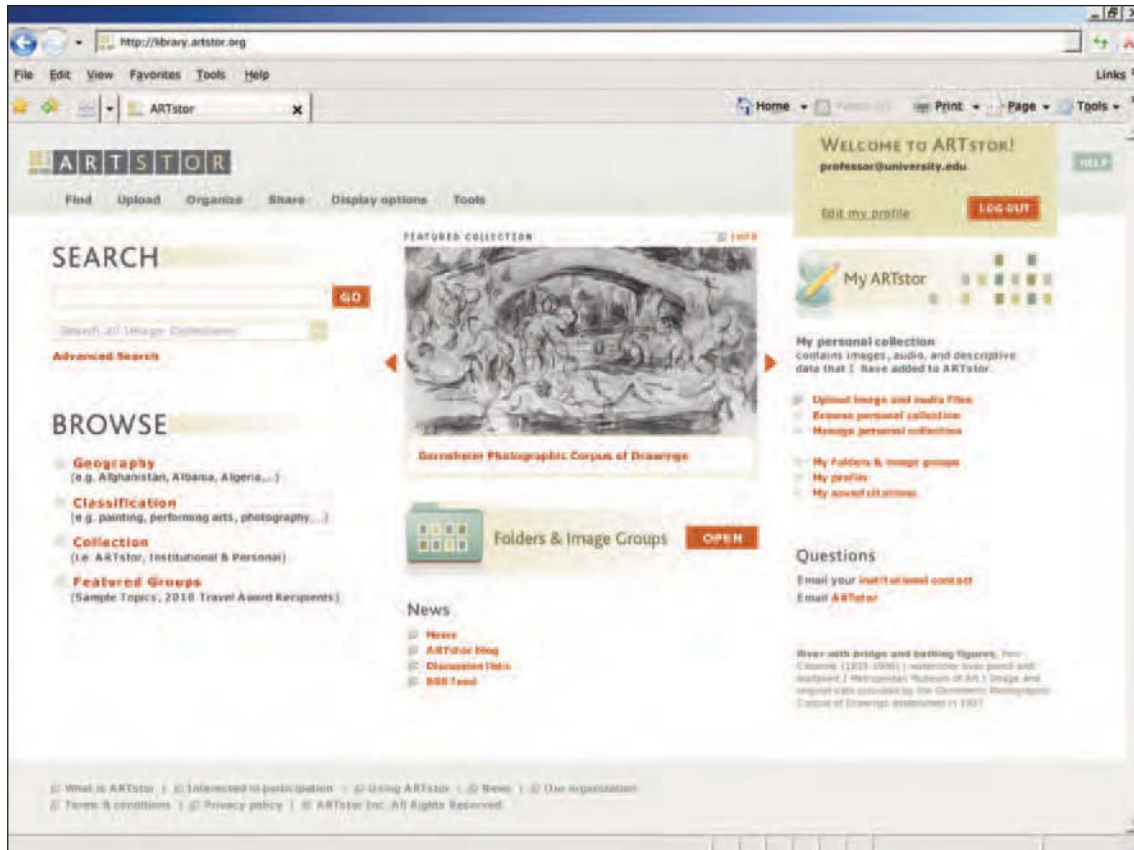
Figure 2

PAUL CÉZANNE (1839–1906)

River with Bridge and Bathing Figures

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure 3

FRANÇOIS
CLOUET
(*c.* 1516–1572)

Portrait of Johann
Philipp, Wild und
Rheingraf, Graf
von Salm (1520–
1566)

*London, British
Museum*

Gernsheims to share this unparalleled collection with an international community of scholars, curators, educators, students, and librarians.[2]

As of 2009, ARTstor had digitized all 189,000 prints in the Gernsheim Corpus (at a cost of several million dollars). But currently ARTstor has permission to share—within the Digital Library's password-protected online environment (Fig. 1), which is restricted to non-profit educational institutions—only 40,000 images (e.g., Fig. 2)[3] fromthe following ten institutions: the Ashmolean Museum (University of Oxford); the British Museum, London (Fig. 3);[4] the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA; the Cleveland Museum of Art; the Harvard/FoggArt Museum, Cambridge, MA; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Fig. 4);[5] the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. More than 11,000 of these images are currently "live" in the ARTstor Digital Library; more will become available as electronic cataloging informationis prepared for release.

Why is ARTstor unable to release to educational and scholarly users more of the drawings in the Gernsheim Corpus? The Gernsheims wished for ARTstor to release only the photographs from museums who have agreed to participate in this endeavor. This project, to digitize and disseminate images from the Gernsheim Corpus for scholarly and educational use, raises some of the most fundamental questions of art-historical practice that scholars and institutions face in the digital age. It surfaces and encapsulates complex issues of access, ownership, attribution, provenance, photography, digitization, aggregation, knowledge-sharing, and—most importantly—scholarship itself. Some of the cataloging information (attributions, dates, etc.) is now considered by experts to be out-of-date, questionable, or simply wrong. While the digitized Corpus could potentially enable thousands of illuminating discoveries, not only in the field of drawings, but in all areas of the visual arts and related fields, and thus further cement the critical importance of the study of drawings in the

history of art, certain concerns have so far prevented the entire Corpus from being made accessible to its intended audience online.

Barriers to the release of the Corpus in ARTstor include the following:

- Some institutions do not wish to relinquish "control" of images in the online environment.
- Some curators wish to verify the accuracy of attributions and other data associated with the drawings represented in the Corpus.
- Some holding repositories prefer new color images of the drawings to be made available online.
- Some experts fear that non-experts will misinterpret the drawings and related data if they were available online for untutored use and study.
- Some institutions feel uncomfortable about their holdings being mixed with collections from other institutions.
- Some institutions and scholars worry that if outdated information is perpetuated, this new method of digital reproduction and dissemination of the Corpus will do harm to the study of drawings rather than advance it.

And yet, the Corpus exists, of course, and it has been consulted in its analog form for decades by specialists and non-specialists alike. The ARTstor endeavor to share the Corpus, in its essence, reaffirms and reasserts, not only the original mission of the Corpus, but also a form of professional praxis that has characterized the study and teaching of the history of art from its inception. Early connoisseurs and art historians such as Bernard Berenson, Aby Warburg, Federico Zeri, and others knew that amassing photographic reproductions of art was essential for the purposes of effectively analysing works of art. It is through the study of black-and-white photographs aggregated in photo archives throughout Europe and the United States that the field and practice of drawings scholarship has flourished.

Erwin Panofsky wrote in *Reflections on Historical Time*: "...every attribution of a work of art represents a judgment process by which a temporal attribution and a spatial attribution are made

all at once, without giving the one precedence over the other. ...All that is given is the artistic object, and the primary order that we can impose upon this endless multiplicity is actually based on nothing more than meaningful connections and frames of reference. ...Every historical phenomenon, however, must necessarily belong to a multitude of frames of reference."[6]

By making the Corpus accessible online to educational and scholarly users, ARTstor allows each drawing to be investigated within just such "a multitude of frames of reference." In the ARTstor Digital Library, the Corpus becomes discoverable not only on its own, but also in the context of more than one million other images from approximately fifty museums and a hundred special collections. It is now possible to compare the Gernsheim photograph of a Cézanne drawing of a plaster *Cupid* from the British Museum collection (Fig. 5)[7] alongside two paintings based on that drawing, one in the Courtauld Gallery, London (Fig. 6),[8] and the other in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm; to see Canaletto's drawings in the context of his paintings and new digital photographs and QuickTime Virtual Reality

(QTVR) panoramas of Venice; and, to search by iconography and themes, such as "Adam and Eve," across thousands of images of drawings, prints, paintings, sculpture, and architecture. The myriad possibilities for research and serendipitous discovery stand only to be augmented by the release of more of the Corpus.

Of course, the reason the Gernsheims photographed 189,000 drawings and chose to collaborate with ARTstor to make the photographs more readily accessible is the knowledge that the Corpus has demonstrated its power to advance scholarship on drawings. Enabling scholars to browse through the entire collection online, from anywhere in the world, and to search easily by artist, title, date (and/or any other keywords provided in the inventory data) far surpasses the inefficient and tedious limitations of rifling through boxes and drawers organized by subject matter or creator, or repository.

Equally important is the opportunity for analog and digital photographic documentation to help extend the life of these drawings for present and future generations of researchers and students. By reducing the physical handling of these delicate works, while still providing access to them online, we aid in both their dissemination *and* their preservation. Making images of drawings available for study and teaching is, in itself, one of the keys to generating continued and renewed interest in, and resources for, preserving these irreplaceable collections. In the recent flood of the Albertina's computerized depot (in June 2009), which houses 65,000 drawings and one million prints, one is reminded of the substantial role digital archives can play in helping to preserve and document works of art.[9]

As the Gernsheim project proceeds, we welcome the participation of the 115 museums whose drawings collections are represented in the Corpus, but who have not yet agreed to permit ARTstor to share these images. Each museum will receive high-resolution scans of its own drawings from the Gernsheim Corpus as part of the collaboration that authorizes the release of these same images in the Digital Library on a non-exclusive

basis and for purely non-commercial, educational, and scholarly use. ARTstor is currently working with the Biblioteca Hertziana to normalize, enhance, and convert to electronic form the cataloguing data associated with parts of the Corpus over time.

ARTstor is also able to replace old image records with new image records from museums, as we have already done with the records for the drawings from the British Museum, when those records are made available to us in a fielded electronic format. Because ARTstor is an online workspace, not a static "publication," the collections and data are continually evolving. As scholars study these drawings, we can introduce changes, corrections, and additions to the image records on an ongoing basis. We are also investigating tools (similar to Wikipedia, but focusing on expert users) that would allow specialists to annotate the Gernsheim images and to share these annotations with all—or selected—users of the ARTstor Digital Library.

The important and extraordinary benefits of digital access to the Gernsheim Corpus and its long-term preservation are surely preferable to the loss of knowledge, research, scholarship, and education that would result from continuing to suppress the online availability of these materials. As stakeholders in the future of art-historical scholarship and as caretakers of cultural heritage materials, we must be willing to allow the practice of art history to move forward in the twenty-first century and to take advantage of all the tools and resources modern technology provides. As more of the original repositories whose holdings were photographed by the Gernsheims follow the example of the museums cited above by permitting, and even encouraging, the images from the Corpus to be made accessible in the ARTstor Digital Library, so many more of the fruits of scholarship will be just within our grasp.

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NOTES

1. See E. H. Gombrich, "Leonardo's Method for Working out Compositions," *Gombrich on the Renaissance*, 4 vols., London, 1994, vol. 1, p. 60.

2. Digital images from the Gernsheim Corpus are available alongside more than one million images in the arts, architecture, humanities, and social sciences through the ARTstor Digital Library. The Digital Library is available by subscription to non-profit educational institutions and serves the teaching and research needs of hundreds of thousands of individual users at nearly 1,300 universities, museums, libraries, and schools in thirty-four countries (as of June 2010).

3. Inv. no. 55.21.2 (Maria DeWitt Jesup Fund, 1951). Watercolor over pencil and leadpoint; 209 x 272 mm; source image and original data provided by the Gernsheim Photographic Corpus of Drawings established in 1937 (no. 54,973).

4. Inv. no. 1910,0212.68. Black and red chalks; 322 x 225 mm; source image and original data provided by the Gernsheim Photographic Corpus of Drawings (no. 49,992).

5. Inv. no. 87.12.83 (Gift of Cephas G. Thompson, 1887). Red chalk, heightened with white; 281 x 301 mm; source image and original data provided by the Gernsheim Photographic Corpus of Drawings (no. 55,734).

6. See Erwin Panofsky (Eng. trans. by Johanna Bauman), "Reflections on Historical Time," *Critical Inquiry*, 30, no. 4, 2004, pp. 691–701 (esp. pp. 696–98).

7. Inv. no. 1935,0413.2 (Gift of the Art Fund). Graphite; 505 x 322 mm; source image and original data provided by the Gernsheim Photograpic Corpus of Drawings (no. 50,671).

8. Inv. no. P.1948.SC.59 (Bequest of Samuel Courtauld). Oil on paper on board; 70.6 x 57.3 cm; source image and original data provided by Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Art Archives/ART RESOURCE (no. 40-12-12/61)

9. See Martin Bailey, "Flood Forces Evacuation at Albertina," *Art Newspaper*, 205, September 2009, p. 18.