Europeana Exhibitions: A Virtual Trip through Europe’s Cultural Heritage

Interview with Anna van den Broek by Eva Coudyzer
Since its establishment in 2008, the Europeana has continuously invested in digital e-infrastructure to promote Europe’s cultural heritage. Currently, the online portal Europeana contains over 30 million objects from more than 2300 European cultural institutions in 36 countries. In 2010 the Foundation released a new platform to attract attention to the rich digital collection it showcases: Europeana Exhibitions [http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/](http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/). The Europeana library has proven to be a gold mine for the reuse of content in creative applications, such as dynamic and often interactive exhibitions accessible through the Internet. Combining text, image, sound, and video, Europeana Exhibitions takes your cultural resources to a new level.

Anna van den Broek, content marketing specialist at Europeana, explains: “At the moment you can browse through sixteen uniquely curated virtual exhibitions hosted on our exhibition platform. From Art Nouveau to peculiar pictures from the past, from uncommon musical instruments to the culture around weddings in Eastern Europe, we have a very diverse collection of virtual exhibitions highlighting Europe’s cultural materials.”
You coordinated the first virtual exhibition on Art Nouveau in 2010. Why did you choose this theme and how was the first exhibition created?

The theme Art Nouveau was chosen because it gave us the opportunity to showcase the historical context of the items. We created our first exhibition ourselves in collaboration with a professional curator who knew all the ins and outs of Art Nouveau. For creating a virtual exhibition, we needed someone who could implement the virtual exhibition in our exhibition system and a developer who could launch it. The latter two are employees of Europeana.

There are many advantages of digital exhibitions, such as permanent accessibility and low cost as opposed to physical exhibitions. What, in your opinion, are the main advantages of digital exhibitions?

For partners and projects, it is a great opportunity to showcase the most interesting items from their collections in a new and highly visible format. Giving users valuable curated information in the accompanying narrative allows people to see the featured content in a context, and engaging features such as our interactive map bring the exhibition to life.
What is the relation between Europeana Exhibitions and Europeana Digital Library?

Our virtual exhibitions highlight material that is currently available on Europeana or will be available in the future. Our exhibitions are uniquely curated and the displayed content is carefully picked by an expert.

Is it possible to introduce hypermedia such as film, sound, 3D, etc.?

There are different types of media that can feature in our virtual exhibitions. Images are one, but also sound files and videos can be highlighted. It is also possible to implement multi-paged documents as books or manuscripts. These will be converted into a .pdf file-reader embedded in the exhibition so you can read the full document.

What are the copyright rules for images and texts displayed in Europeana digital exhibitions?

All items in our virtual exhibitions require rights clearance before we can use them. We prefer however to use objects that have an open licence. This means that they are in the public domain or
are licensed with a cultural commons licence. We like to inspire and motivate people to share and re-use the content, and this is only possible when highlighting cultural materials with an open license. All texts written for our virtual exhibitions are licensed under a CC-BY-SA licence [share and adapt for any purpose – Ed.] , making it possible for people to share and re-use the information we provide via our exhibitions. The featured metadata is in the Public Domain.

**Which e-infrastructure is behind Europeana Exhibitions?**

The platform on which we host our virtual exhibitions is called Omeka. Omeka is a free, flexible, and open source web-publishing platform for the display of collections and exhibitions from libraries, museums, archives, and scholarly content. We currently use version 1.2 with many adaptations to suit our specific needs, so we can have multiple exhibitions in one Omeka installation. We recently also published a virtual exhibition on the site of the Google Cultural Institute.

Indeed, I noticed on the site that Europeana has a partnership with the Google Art Institute in Paris. How was this partnership established? Does it mean that exhibitions will feature on both websites?

Europeana has been in contact with the Google Cultural Institute for quite a long time already. For a new virtual exhibition about the First World War, which was curated by the Austrian
National Library, we decided to make use of Google’s virtual exhibition platform for the first time. Not only would we get a better understanding of the possibilities and features of their platform, we also wanted to experiment with the linear storytelling structure of the Google Cultural Institute’s website. In addition, Google added some marketing value and outreach by featuring the To My Peoples! exhibition on their homepage for a while.

After contacting Google, we collaborated with one of their representatives who helped us with some of the technical issues we faced and assisted with the publication process. In the future we will definitely consider working with Google again for publishing certain exhibitions, but it is not likely that new exhibitions will be featured on both Google’s platform and on our own virtual exhibition website, given the different nature and structure of the two platforms.

How are the exhibitions organized on the site and can I search for specific keywords or metadata?

All virtual exhibitions are listed in our exhibition foyer. The newest ones are featured on top, and some are highlighted by displaying them more prominently. In our foyer, we also present exhibitions from our partners. Currently we link through to eighteen partner exhibitions, such as the exhibitions from the EUscreen-project, which provides access to thousands of television programmes and related items.

Are you planning to include user-generated content, such as crowdsourcing material?

In total, we have three virtual exhibitions that highlight content that was crowdsourced. Our exhibition Untold Stories of the First World War – photos, letters and other memorabilia features content that was solely contributed by the public. The user-generated content was collected during our Family History Roadshows organised by Europeana 1914-1918 or uploaded via the website Europeana1914-1918.eu

Our other two user-generated exhibitions were created in collaboration with Wiki Love Monuments. In 2012 and 2013, we sponsored a category in the worldwide contest Wiki Love
Monuments. During this competition, people were invited to submit photographs they took of a monument. In 2012, we sponsored the category Art Nouveau and in 2013, the category WW1 monuments. People submitted pictures from all over the world. We made a selection from all the submitted photographs. Then we asked the public to vote for their favorite photograph. The forty most popular items were selected for the exhibition.

You mention the family history roadshows to create the content for the Europeana 1914-1918 exhibition. How was this practically realised?

At the Family History Roadshows, members of the public are invited to bring their documents, artefacts and stories from the First World War to be recorded by the project staff. The stories and scanned or photographed images of the objects are then added to the archive. Our Family History Roadshows began in Germany in 2011, and since then we have visited many more countries.

How do I proceed if I want to publish a virtual exhibition on the site? What do I have to provide myself, and what does Europeana provide?

In order to showcase the most interesting content, we ask the partner or the collaborating institution to act as a curator and to find items from their own collection. The content can also come from the Europeana library. For the best user experience, we always display high-quality
content in our exhibitions. Therefore we ask for high-resolution JPG/TIFF images (300DPI), and high-quality sound (MP3)-or video (MP4) files. We also ask for the accompanying metadata listed in an Excel sheet and if necessary, the items need to be cleared according to their rights statements. As the partner or institution is the expert on the theme of the exhibition, we ask them to give us the exhibition texts in a Word file.

Once the material for the exhibition is collected we start creating the exhibition in Omeka. Depending on the size of the exhibition and the number of languages, this process can take up to three weeks. After the implementation is complete, we promote the exhibition through all our channels, including social media and blog.

**What can we expect next from Europeana Exhibitions?**

There is one more exhibition planned for this year. As this year marks the Year of the Book, we will celebrate this with a virtual exhibition curated by the National Library of Latvia.

**You have coordinated many digital exhibitions. Do you have a favourite?**

It’s hard to just pick one exhibition, as they are so diverse and each theme is very interesting. In general, I always like best the most recent one we launched, just because it’s new! I still really like our first exhibition on Art Nouveau, as it highlights amazing items from across Europe. As a vintage and historical photography enthusiast, I also really like our photo exhibition The Past, But Not as You Know It: This is actually a virtual exhibition I curated myself, featuring many items that were used during the collaboration between Europeana and Retronaut [a site devoted to the exploration of historical photos—Ed.].

**Thanks for the interview!**