

Omeka for Art History and Art Museums

Need and Rationale

Art historians and art museums suffer no shortage of visual materials suitable for online presentation. Like all humanities scholars and museums, however, they do suffer a notable lack of easy-to-use, standards-based web publishing tools to aid them in making their collections and expertise available online in visually and interpretively compelling ways. Omeka was built to fill this gap.

Created by the Center for History & New Media and its partners at the Minnesota Historical Society, along with a robust community of volunteer developers, Omeka is a free and open source web publishing platform designed specifically to meet the needs of scholars and cultural institutions. Omeka is easy to install and modify and facilitates community-building around collections and exhibits. It is designed with non-IT specialists in mind, allowing users to focus on content rather than programming and relieving them of the costs of high-priced web design vendors. By making professional-grade, standards-compliant, sustainable web publishing available to even the smallest institution or individual scholar, Omeka aims to make the research collections and associated expertise of curators, educators, and academics more visible and more useful to a wide range of audiences.

Designed as a generalized tool for scholars, museum professionals, librarians, archivists and cultural enthusiasts of all kinds, Omeka is also designed to be highly customizable, allowing different groups to modify the software to suit their particular needs and audiences. Omeka does this through a well-developed theming and plugin architecture. The theming system allows users to very quickly and easily—at the touch of a button, in fact—change the design of their websites without changing the content. A growing directory of publicly downloadable and easily modified themes is available at omeka.org. Similarly, the plugin architecture allows users to add new functionality to their Omeka websites by downloading and installing a diverse assortment of “widgets,” small snippets of code that are relatively simple to program and hook easily into Omeka’s core code base. Among the more popular plugins available today are a Google Maps plugin, an audience contribution plugin, a Flash document viewer, and the “MyOmeka” plugin, which allows end users to “favorite” and add notes to items within an Omeka collection and create their own small exhibits for sharing with teachers, colleagues, and friends. The fact that these themes and plugins are modular and separated from the main mass of the Omeka code base means that community developers—even those without large amounts of technical skill or programming experience—can build their own plugins or themes and donate these back to the community if a suitable plugin or theme doesn’t already exist.

This extensible architecture means that Omeka can, with relatively little work, be customized to suit the demands of very specific communities. This proposal requests \$25,000 to build a set of plugins to meet the particular demands of art historians and art museum staff interested in using Omeka to publish their research, collections, and exhibitions. These plugins will greatly expand the usefulness of Omeka for these users, bringing them closer to the kind flexible, low-cost, low-barrier web publishing solution they need.

Plan of Work

We have identified three plugins in particular that will be of immediate use to the art history and museum community:

1. CDWA-lite migration tools: In recent years, museum professionals, librarians, archivists and digital humanists have moved closer to agreeing on a basic set of data exchange standards for digital objects, notably through the work of the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative and the Open Archives Initiative (OAI). Omeka supports these generalized standards, but to serve the needs of the art museum community more completely and provide seamless and lossless integration with existing collections management systems, Omeka must also support the refinements and extensions to these standards particular to art museums. To this end we will develop a set of plugins that will allow Omeka to import and export data according to the emerging CDWA Lite (Categories for the Description of Works of Art Lite) standard being developed by the Getty Museum and its partners. With the CDWA Lite import plugin, an Omeka user will be able to request data from an art museum repository and import the CDWA Lite records directly into Omeka. The CDWA Lite export plugin will work in the other direction, allowing a collections management administrator to query Omeka for output in CDWA Lite. These plugins will allow art museum professionals to move easily between their existing systems for collections management and Omeka for web publishing.

2. Cooliris (formerly PicLens) slide show and 3-D search integration: Increasingly museums are coming to see the usefulness of online tools and web services designed for more general purposes for their own work. The new Flickr Commons initiative is one example of this trend, which has seen institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, and the Brooklyn Museum make use of Flickr's photo sharing services to help disseminate their collections and collect audience feedback on particular images. Another service ripe for museum use is Cooliris (<http://www.cooliris.com/>). PicLens is a powerful extension for the increasingly popular open source web browser, Firefox, that allows users to view image galleries from Cooliris-enabled websites in either a high-gloss, full-screen slide show or a spectacular three dimensional image wall. Visitors to art collections stored in Omeka would surely benefit from these immersive viewing options. The Cooliris plugin we are proposing here would utilize Omeka's built-in RSS feeds to allow any visitor to an Omeka website to view either an entire collection, any curator designated sub-collection, or any set of search results in slide show or 3D mode.

3. Image annotation tool: Introduced above, the MyOmeka plugin allows visitors to Omeka websites to label chosen items in a collection as "favorites," to add their own "tags" (keywords) to these items, to add personal notes on these items, and to create and share their own small scale online exhibitions and label texts from these items. The MyOmeka plugin has already received wide use and recognition as implemented in CHNM's Object of History project (<http://objectofhistory.org>), a material culture-based online teaching resource produced in partnership with the National Museum of American History. Yet, in its current incarnation, the MyOmeka plugin isn't fully usable for collections of artwork and images. As it stands, the MyOmeka plugin only allows visitors to add notes below a given item. Visitors cannot highlight particular areas or aspects of an image or, for example, tag specific notes to a particular subject in a painting. To use the MyOmeka plugin fully in the art history classroom and art museum, administrators of Omeka sites will want to afford their visitors this increased interaction with images themselves. A new and improved MyOmeka plugin will incorporate this image annotation functionality for the image-centered collections and exhibitions of art historians and art museums.

Timetable

October-December, 2008: Expert consultation, development of detailed technical requirements, data architecture modeling, design mockups and wireframes.

January-March, 2009: Iterative programming, testing, beta release.

April-June, 2009: Outreach and dissemination, user feedback, technology refinements, final deployment, end user support.

Staff (CVs and budget attached)

Tom Scheinfeldt (Project Director) will have overall responsibility for project vision, budget management, staffing, quality assurance, and long-term sustainability.

Jeremy Boggs (Project Manager and Lead Developer) will oversee all technology development, including system and user interface design, testing, and final implementation and deployment.

Jim Safley (Lead Information Architect) will develop the CDWA Lite migration and interoperability tools and will provide data architecture assistance to other team members.

Dave Lester (Developer and Community Lead) will develop the PicLens and image annotation plugins, coordinate open source community involvement in the project, and assist museum and university IT staff interested in adopting the Kress products.

Sheila Brennan (Outreach Coordinator) will lead dissemination efforts amongst the art history and art museum communities, collect feedback and field questions from these communities, and develop system documentation and user support products.