

# Enriching Exhibition Scholarship

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The co-exhibition of artworks has been part of cultural context for more than 250 years. Exhibitions, physical and digital, make art relevant and accessible to artists, scholars and the general public in a managed and directed environment. This engagement influences emerging trends in style and the art market, but information on objects that were exhibited together, nor their reception from the audience, have been made available for art historical or digital humanities research.

The Linked Art collaboration (Page et al. 2020) has developed a modern Linked Open Usable Data (Sanderson 2019) set of specifications to describe and publish art-related knowledge, including which objects were shown during which exhibitions. For this data

to be truly connected, enabling scholars to seamlessly traverse institutional silos, descriptions of exhibition events and art objects must be "reconciled": the descriptions of the same object should be connected together by matching identifiers in different systems at different institutions.

The Enriching Exhibition Scholarship project is developing methodology to align socially-based textual and structured data, such as exhibition catalogues, newspapers and social media, making reconciliation easier and more effective. Aligning and enhancing records requires art history domain expertise, specific cultural heritage metadata knowledge, and advanced computational research in text analytics, machine learning, and information retrieval. This methodology includes a pipeline consisting of pre-processing, named entity recognition, and retrieval. Queries, generated by isolating and combining data are used to search extracted texts. Fuzzy matching scores for pairs of queries and texts are computed, those that meet retrieval and fuzzy matching score thresholds are considered matches. Such techniques help the pipeline address retrieval problems caused by variations in object and artist names.

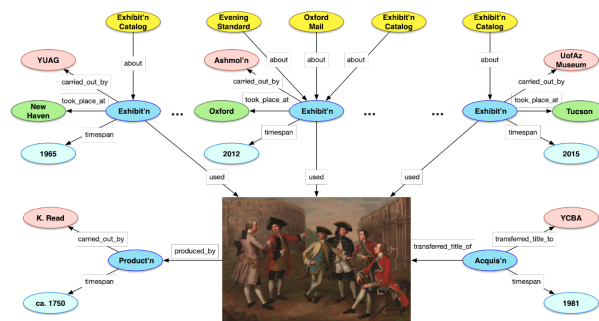


Figure 1. The production, acquisition and exhibitions of British Gentlemen in Rome, by K. Read

As an illustrative example, the Yale Center for British Art lent the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford 19 artworks for the exhibition *The English Prize: The Capture of the Westmorland* in 2012, including the painting *British Gentlemen in Rome*, by Katharine Read from circa 1750. That object was also lent to the Yale University Art Gallery for an exhibition in 1965 and most recently to the University of Arizona Museum of Art for their 2015 exhibition *Rome: The Legacy of an Eternal City*. Newspaper articles, such as in *The Evening Standard* and *The Oxford Mail* describe the exhibition and reference other works that were present, including *Batoni Pompeo's* painting of *Francis Basset*, in the Museo del Prado. The exhibition catalogue is available from Yale University Press (ISBN 9780300176056), containing content and references.

By mining social texts (in yellow, figure 1), and connecting with the Linked Art structured data from across institutions, we bring together both quantitative and qualitative information about objects presented and responses to them. This assists with provenance research, style transmission, patterns of lending, interactions between museums via network analysis, and trends in exhibition themes over time and venue.

Exhibitions discussed in contemporary social texts provide the context of these exhibitions and their works as described at the time they were held, which is not otherwise easily available to researchers. Continuing the example, the *Oxford Mail* described the Grand Tour Exhibition held at the Ashmolean as a “a multi-layered show” and “a unique snapshot of the Grand Tour: what these British tourists aspired to, shopped for, in order to show off their good taste and erudition once home; what sights affected them”.

These procedures are being conducted in an open and documented manner, and the alignment of objects from the lenders' catalogues with the borrowers' exhibition descriptions will allow enrichment of existing structured data. This project will publish the enhanced and transformed data as openly as possible, allowing additional research using the aggregated collection data. We hope that the results will incentivize museums to publish their data more openly, allowing exhibition descriptions to link across institutions.

In September 2022 we held a workshop to establish useful sources of exhibition information and define possible research questions. This consultation highlighted the importance of determining the context and contents of an exhibition to analyse the movement of objects within and across institutions, the differences between physical and digital exhibitions and their catalogues and promotional material, and whether exhibitions are more inclusive than permanent displays. We will have future workshops to demonstrate project findings and generate further engagement across communities.

This combination of theory, practice and digital tools allows us to rethink ways of working together and illustrates new opportunities enabled through that collaboration, including potential avenues for research and scholarship as well as developing museum practice.

## Bibliography

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