

Objectives

Acquiring History attempts to explore how the acquisition of design objects by cultural institutions reflects larger changes in society's values and prevailing interests. In what ways does accession indicate a piece's significance to collective history, an institution's philosophy and mandate, or an individual choice on the part of a curator?

Drawing from the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum's collection, *Acquiring History* filters the metadata of its objects to look closely at the relationship between the year a piece of design is created to when it is acquired to when it is exhibited. Furthermore, the project attempts to uncover trends when comparing the temporal data with the categorization of these design objects - such as medium, place of origin, artist/creator, acquisition by department, change in leadership, etc.

Additionally, the project proposes a new form of digital engagement with museum collections. Many cultural institutions are currently exploring their role in digital storytelling and online interaction.¹ However, this is largely limited to users filtering a collection through different categories to explore singular objects. While documenting its current transformation and expansion, The San Francisco MoMA acknowledges this tendency,

*"Much of the rhetoric around online collection presentations continues to assume that by placing images of and information about its collection online, an institution can immediately provide access to a collection. Over the past several years, many museum professionals have acknowledged the deficiency of this approach. In 1997 Kevin Donovan argued that simply allowing users to search through extensive lists or to use a blank search box does not equate to access, and that cultural institutions should focus on facilitating learning rather than just providing information. Though technology has advanced, this problem of nominally providing "access" to a collection without offering ways to learn more persists in the dominant single-object approach."*²

The Cooper Hewitt online collection functions in this way and relies on its users to discover "unexpected connections among objects and designers."³

1 List of cultural institutions with APIs and open data services: <http://museum-api.pbworks.com/w/page/21933420/Museum%C2%A0APIs>

2 Winesmith, Keir and Flora Grant. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "How Do Institutional Philosophies Manifest in Online Collections?" http://www.sfmoma.org/about/research_projects/lab/philosophies_of_online_collections

3 Cooper-Hewitt's Collection Database. <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org>

Beyond simply providing access to the collection digitally, how can museums continue to curate, present compelling narratives and prompt discourse online? *Acquiring History* proposes that by providing a focused framework or story through which the user can interact with the collection, the museum can extend its role of presenting compelling perspectives and creating human connections to the objects and artwork online.

Scope

The Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum has recently released an API allowing developers to interact with the museum's collection. Approximately 75% of the Museum's collection data is available through this resource.⁴ Ideally, the project will use the entire collection data set. But depending on what further research is required – gathering information about when objects are exhibited elsewhere and within the Cooper Hewitt – the data set may be scaled back. Perhaps the project will only examine objects with complete data, or the project may focus on objects acquired within a distinct time frame, i.e. the last 50 years.

Experience

Acquiring History will be an interactive data visualization to be viewed on screen. Anticipating that there will be a large amount of information to present, small-format mobile devices may not provide the desired experience. The data visualization will allow users to sort by a variety of parameters: date of creation, date of acquisition, date of exhibition(s). Attempting to further understand what these relationships the data can be filtered medium, museum department, place of creation, where the object is from, group objects by exhibition. Furthermore, the project will operate at two scales of examination: the Object -- when a single object is acquired, created, and exhibited -- and the Collection -- total number of object created, acquired, exhibited in a single year.

4 Cooper-Hewitt's Collection Database. <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org>