An Assessment of the National Gallery of Art's NGA.gov

Searching for Van Gogh

UX Candidate Assignment

Ted Randler
10-17-2022

Searching for Van Gogh

National Gallery of Art

https://www.nga.gov/

The gallery collection of more than 150,000 paintings, sculpture, decorative arts, photographs, prints, and drawings spans the history of Western art.

363 days a year, the National Gallery offers a full spectrum of special exhibitions and public programs.

*Image 1: National Gallery of Art Landing Page*

Amazon

https://www.amazon.com/
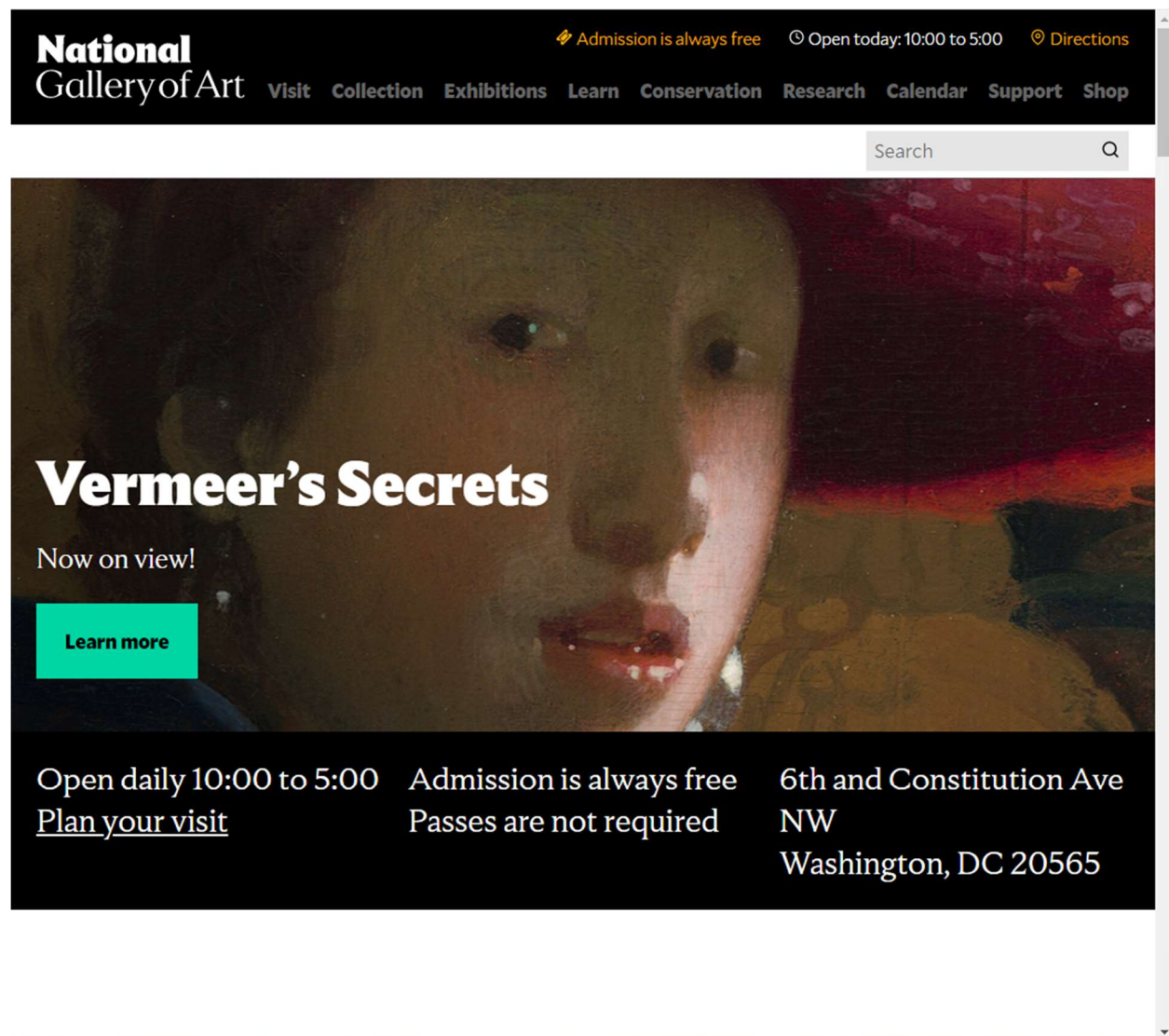
Amazon.com is an ecommerce platform that sells many product lines, including media (books, movies, music, and software), apparel, baby products, consumer electronics, beauty products, gourmet food, groceries, health and personal care products, industrial & scientific supplies, kitchen items, jewelry, watches, lawn and garden items, musical instruments, sporting goods, tools, automotive items, toys and games, and farm supplies and consulting services.

Image 2: Amazon.com Landing Page
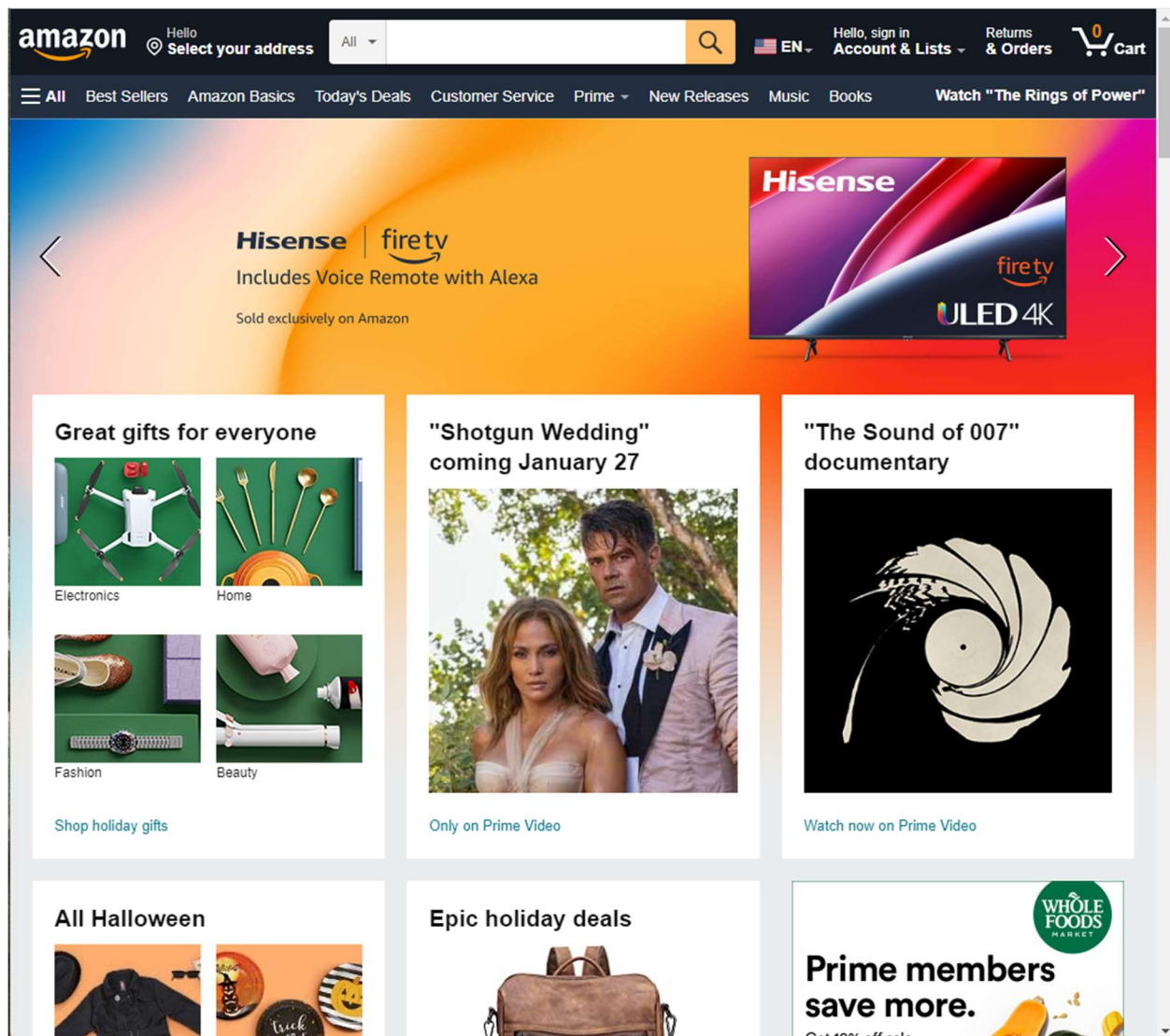
To evaluate The National Gallery of Art's website that has a large art collection, changing exhibitions and ongoing educational services to promote to the public users, I decided to compare it to Amazon.com — another entity with an expansive inventory, services, and a similar user base.

I used the search term "Van Gogh" to focus on UI elements that comprise the user experience of both sites.

In comparing both landing pages, it's interesting that NGA.gov [*image 1*] takes a straight-on marketing tactic of a Hero page — a commercial site staple featuring a large central image of the Vermeer detail with the single call to action with the "Learn more" button. This a static image and the only image above the fold.

In contrast, Amazon.com offers six regions promoting electronics, home, fashion beauty products as well as on-demand videos and holiday deals above the fold [*image 2*]. Also, the top quarter of the homepage offers a clickable slide show that continues to promote three additional electronics advertisments. The site is following the trend where landing page slide show features are moving away from animated experiences.

Navigation

Image 3: Amazon Total Menu
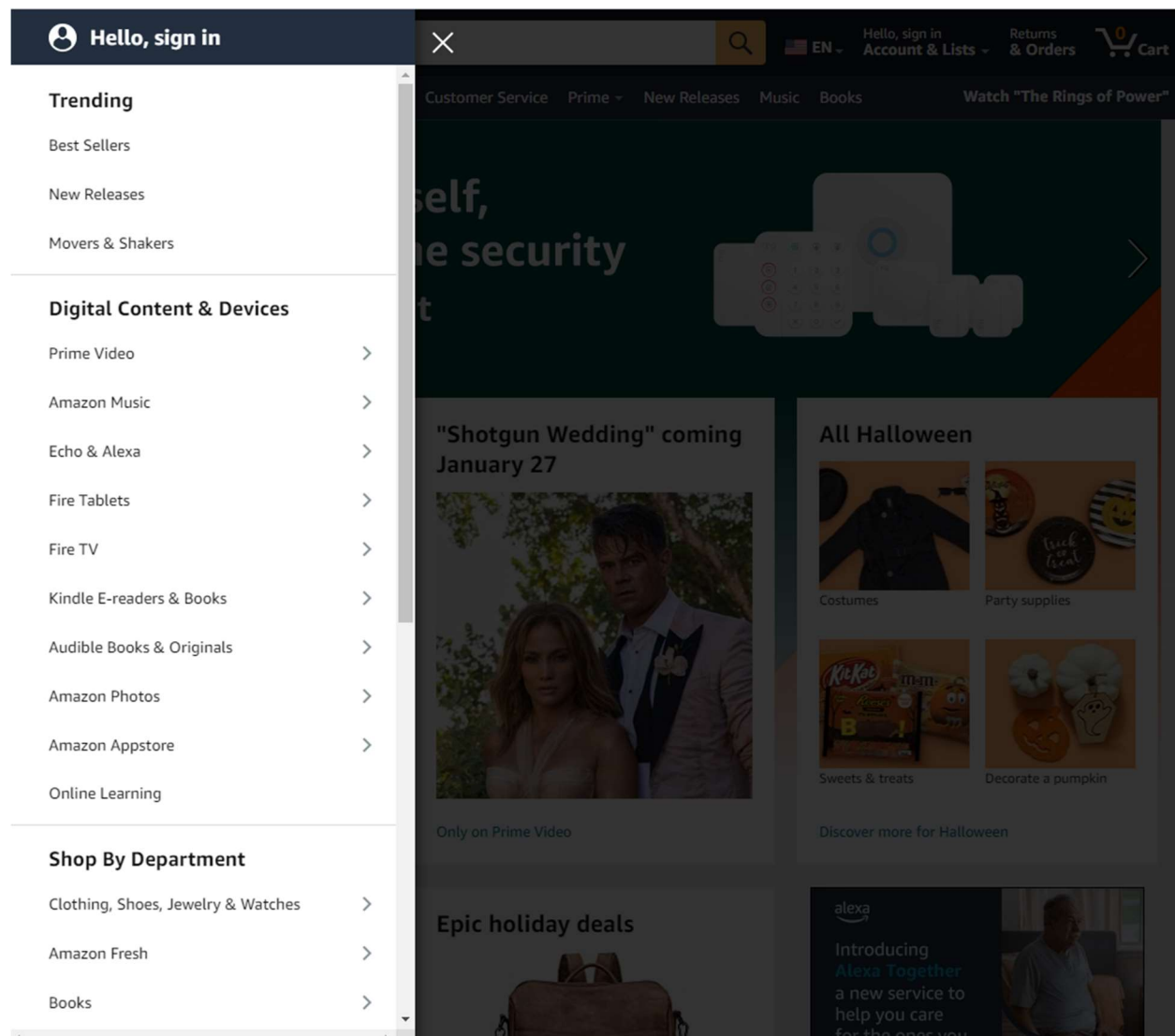
While both sites offer the standard banner top navigation, Amazon provides the hamburger icon that presents the entirety of the site within a categorized menu of departments and sub-tiered subjects within a consistent black font and white background [*image 3*]. In contrast, I had to collapse the browser to approximately tablet dimensions to bring up NGA.gov's hamburger menu. It would be great if this resource was available at the browser level.

The NGA.gov menu is initially presented on black background that completely covers the website. Each menu item changes to a different color when the cursor hovers. On clicking the item, the background changes to bright a yellow, magenta, turquoise and other colors corresponding to different categories and the main menu is replaced by the submenus.
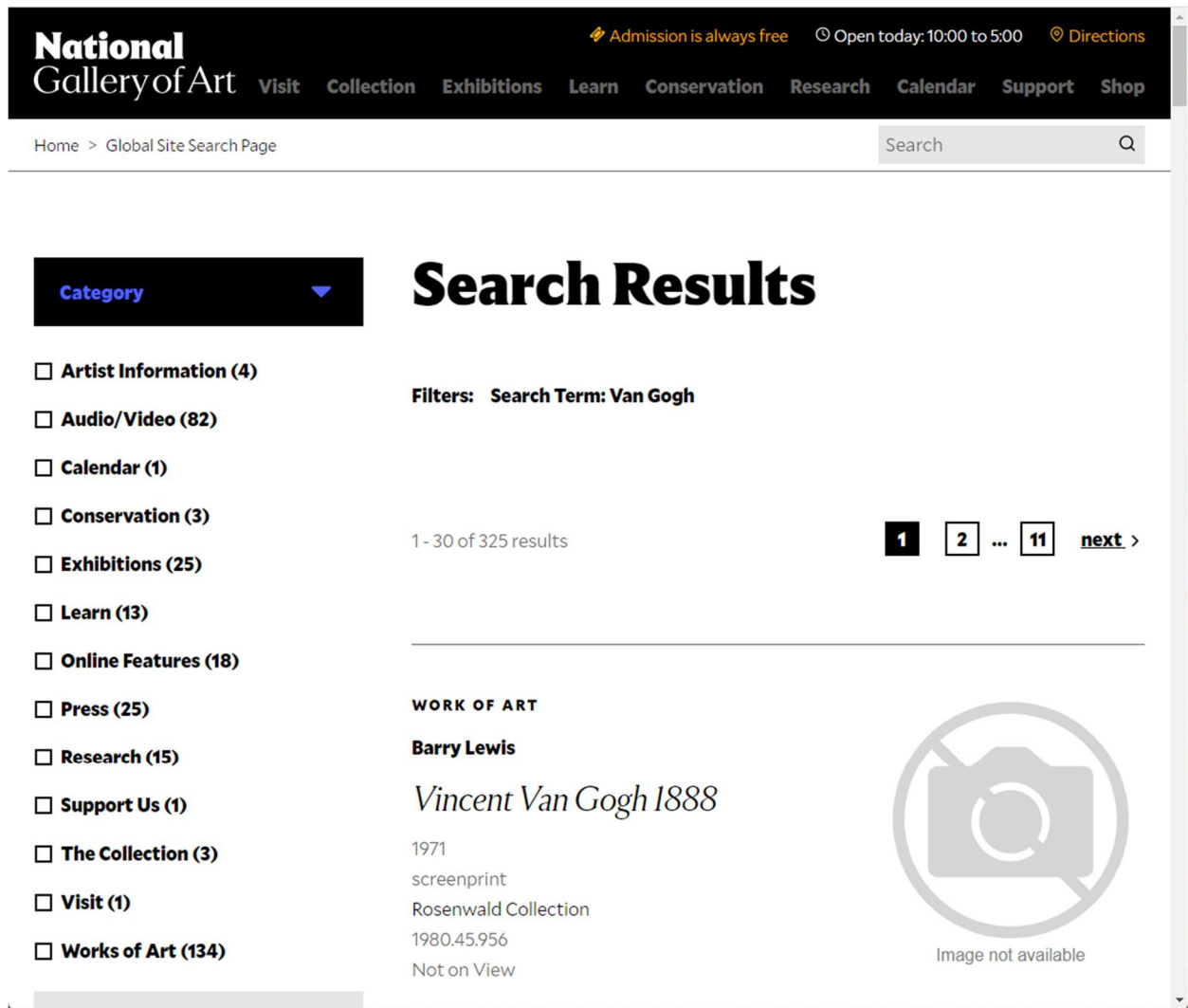
Image 3: NGA.gov Total Menu

Search

Entering "Van Gogh" into the search inputs brought me to the following two pages:

*Image 4: NGA.gov Search Results for "Van Gogh"*

This is an unfortunate use of white space. The Bootstrap-like format has permeated most of today's websites and does provide a unified clean presentation. But here it plays against the webpage. Note the needless three-row expanse just beneath the breadcrumb and search input. Had it not been there the "Advance Search" button would be available to user above the fold. Additionally, there are a lot of results but because of the excessive padding, they are also pushed beneath the fold.

Image 5: NGA.gov the hidden Advance Search

*Image 6: Amazon.com Search Results for "Van Gogh"*
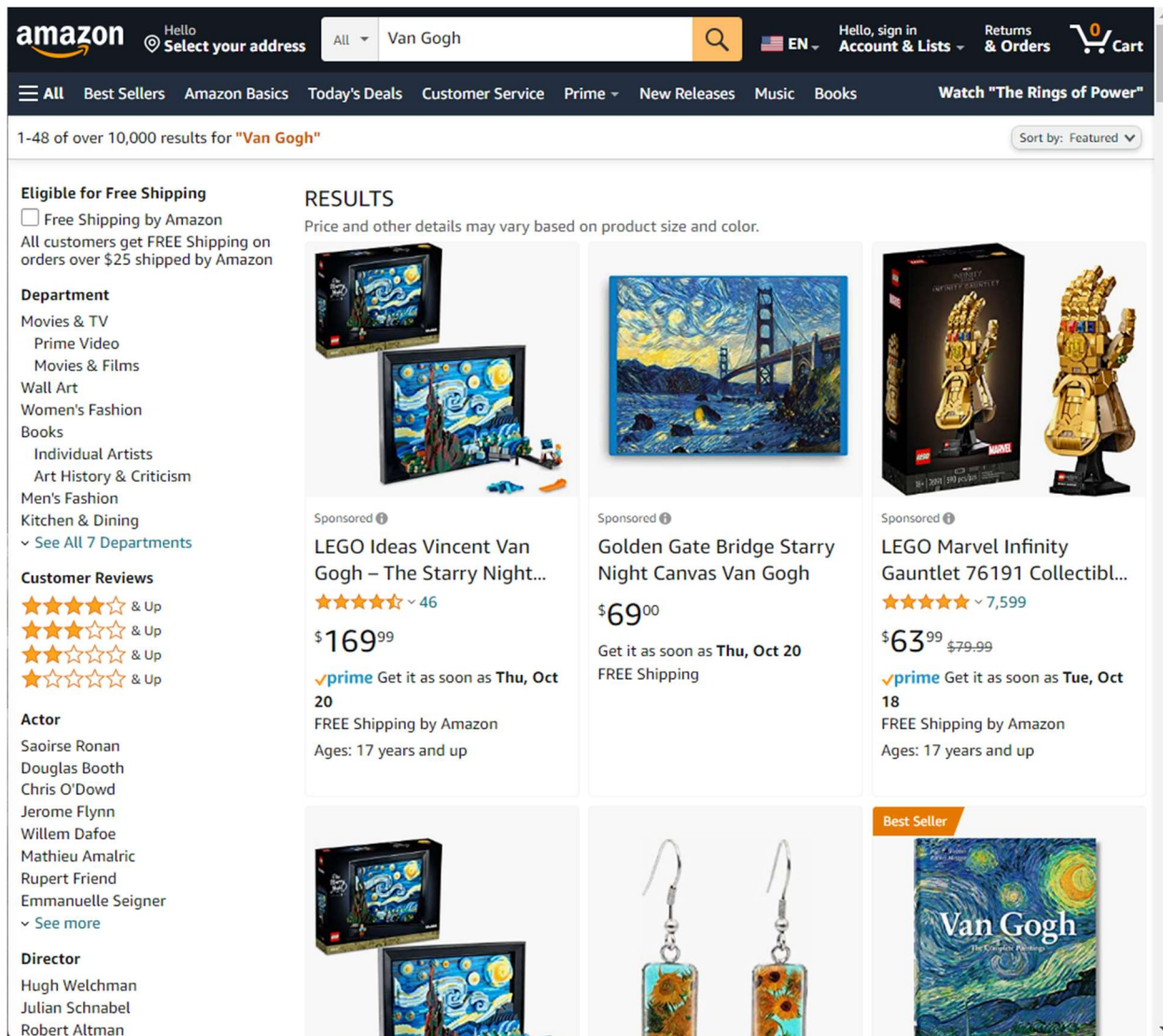
In a bit of a startling contrast, Amazon.com populates the search results in a grid format that — while also essentially employing the Bootstrap look in the presentation — manages to display six items above the fold as well as ways to filter the search in the top banner of the page.

In a side-by-side comparison [*see image 7*] while scrolling both pages down a full window height, it is striking visually how much more information is being provided in the Amazon.com results than with NGA.gov.

Where NGA.gov abandons the real estate of the first three columns to populate the remaining nine columns with nearly a half page in height entry for each result, Amazon.com capitalizes on the same space of the left column with additional filters. Thanks to the use of the grid, six Amazon.com items are presented to the NGA.gov's two.

What's interesting is that Amazon.com and NGA.gov are using approximately the same image size and lines of text with each entry.
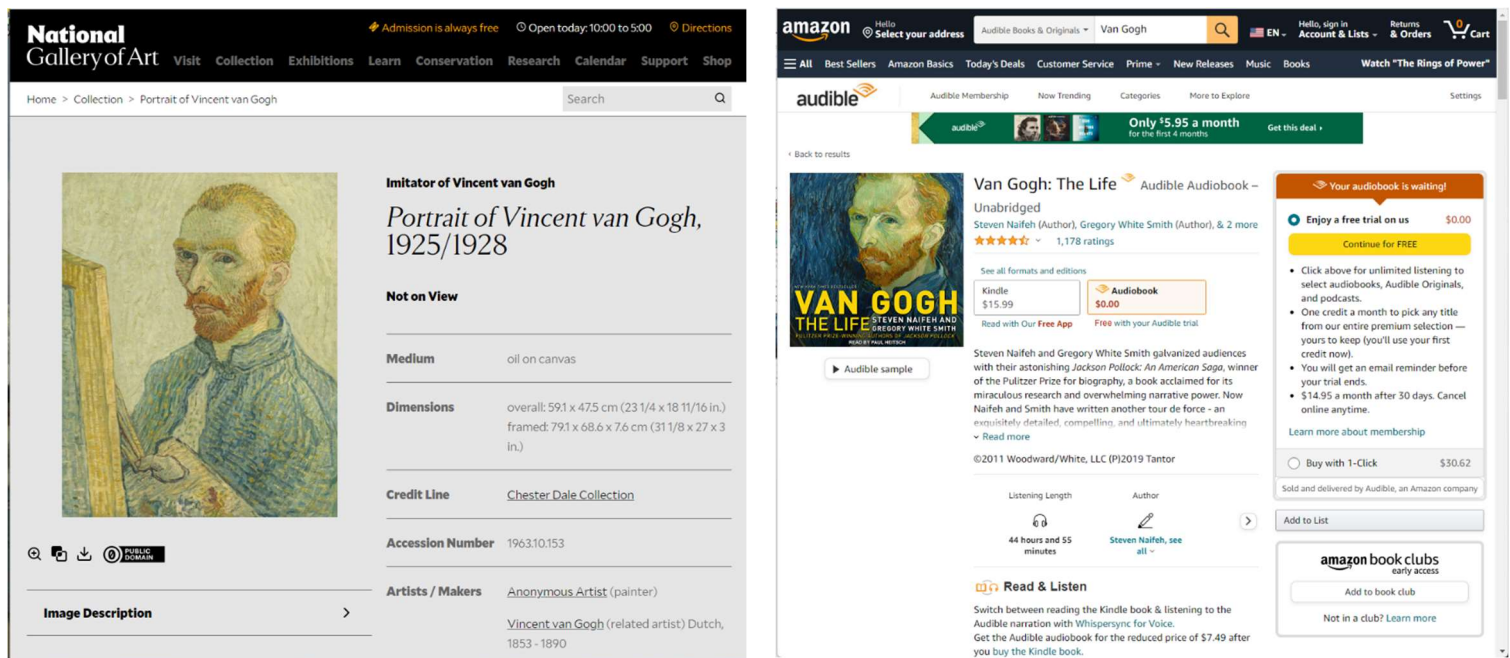
Image 7: Side-by-side comparison of NGA.gov and Amazon.com search results.
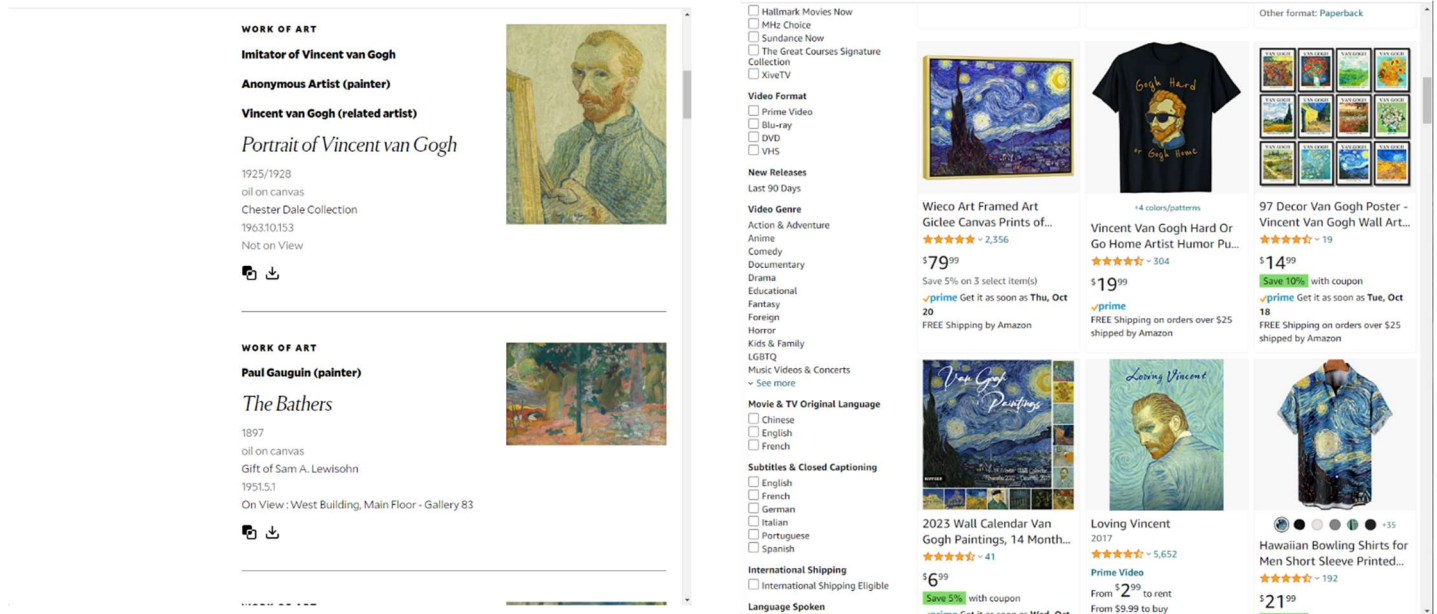
Okay let's go to one more page in the results listing.

Detail Page

Image 8: Side-by-side comparison of NGA.gov and Amazon.com detail pages.

In a web world full of template-driven sites it is not surprising how similar the two detail pages appear. With the use of a two-column format, NGA.gov offers a generous image and lots of padding.

Though beneath the fold are additional tabs for "Provenance", "Exhibition History" and "Bibliography".

Image 9: Detail showing additional resources

Even in maintaining the two columns and with a little less negative space, the hidden resources at the bottom of the page could be well accommodated in the design to more prominent placements.

Recommendations

I'm a huge fan of the National of Gallery of Art. I go there several times a year and have spent a lot of time doing research on the website. It's because I have spent hours as a user accessing the search features that I selected the site to evaluate.

My initial impression is that NGA.gov has had a lot of different designers working on the site. As you page through the various departments there are inconsistencies in formats at the browser level. It's not until the browser window is collapsed to a single column and mimics the mobile presentation that a more unified experience occurs.

Bootstrap's guiding design principle is mobile-first in format. With its use as a standard in a lot of design shops I understand the generous implementation of padding can facilitate a ".container-fluid" style of transition between mobile and browser presentations.

But, as the comparison between NGA.gov and Amazon.com shows, what works in a mobile format might translate to a browser experience but at a cost of efficiently delivering a company's products and resources to the user.

Re-Think the Home Page

No doubt the design of the home page was created by a marketing company. Hero pages are perfect for promoting individual products like cosmetics or cars, but the gallery is closer to Amazon.com in that it is really is a catalog of thousands of products, events, and services. Major shows and events can be prominent without overriding the other resources the gallery has to offer.

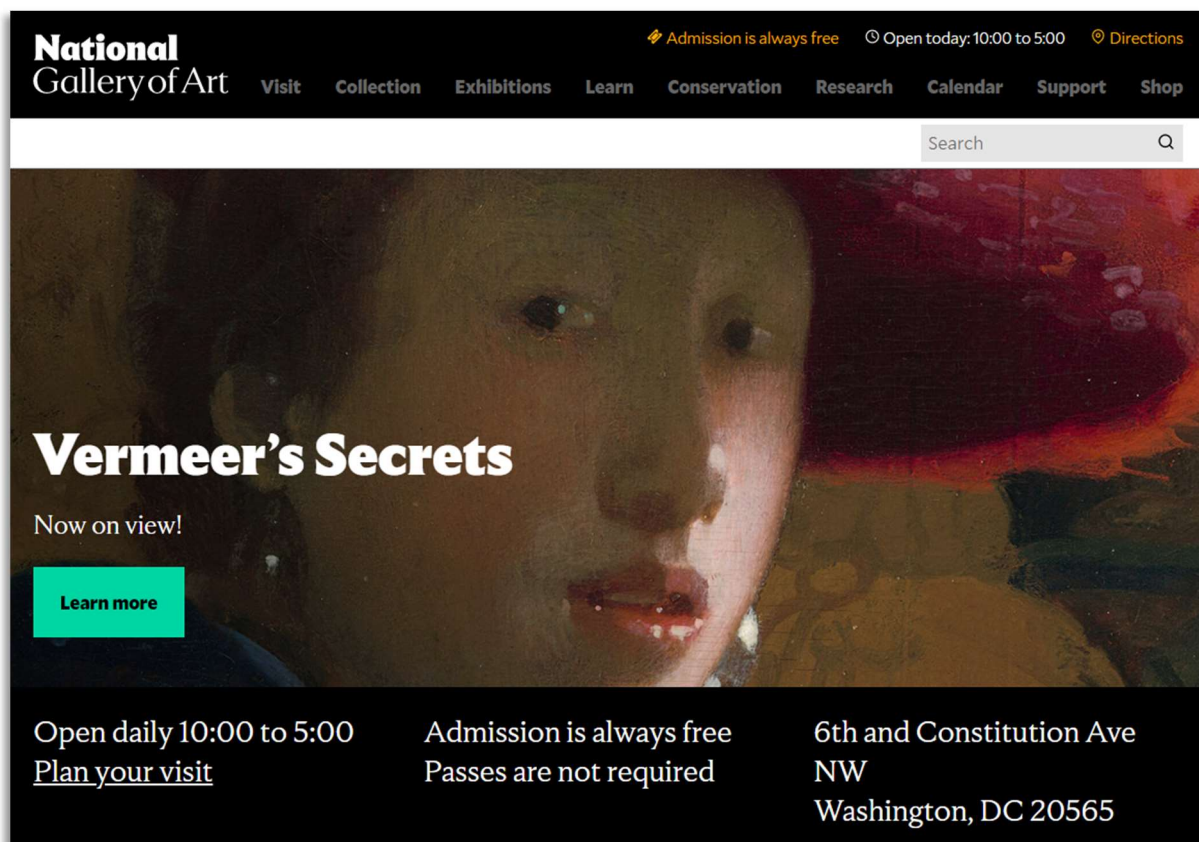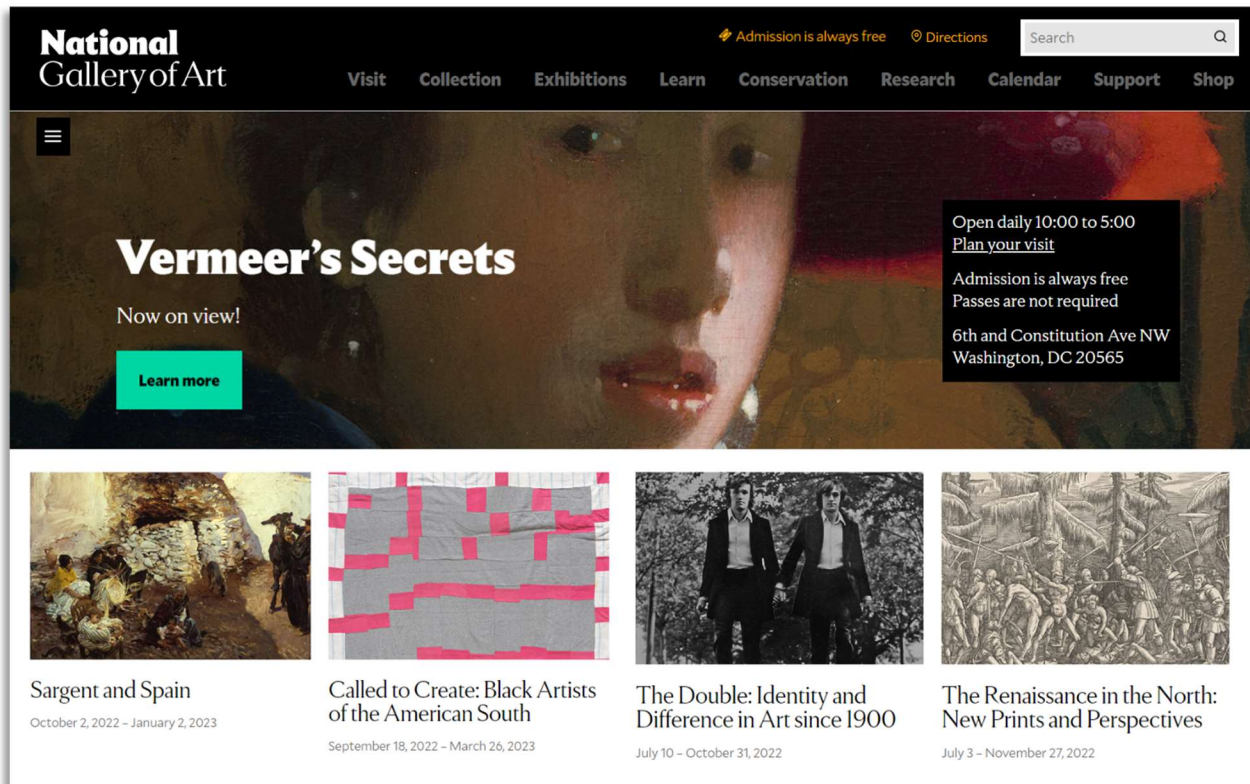*Image 10: NGA.gov Current Homepage in a Web Browser Format*

Image 11: NGA.gov with Suggested Revisions

The above image has the same information as the current landing page but also includes the addition of several features:

- A hamburger menu icon at the browser level that provides a complete menu of the site.
- A more prominent search input contrasted against the black background. The current one blends too much in the white region.
- Removal of the redundant "Open daily 10:00 to 5:00" tagline at the top.
- The inclusion of the four major exhibitions presented in a grid format.

Lose the Padding and Institute the Grid

By tightening up the white space, NGA.gov could present so much more data in a way that is still very clean in design.

As with the homepage, instituting a grid layout for search results would provide the user with more selections and less scrolling which the price you pay for excessive negative space.

Redesign the Navigation at the Browser Level

Image 12: NGA.gov Navigation with Suggested Revisions
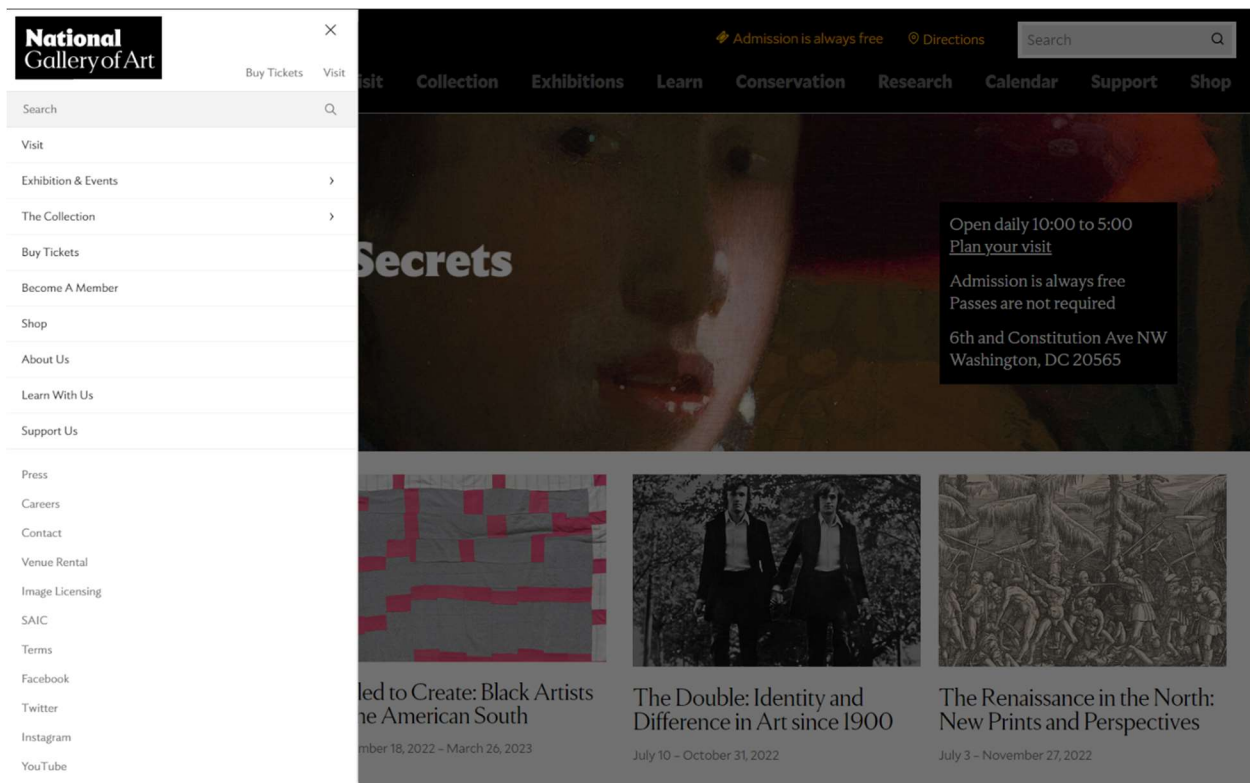
I'm not saying NGA.gov should be more like a massive consumer site. Though the gallery could gain insight from Amazon.com that has invested heavily in user research.

The proposed menu in the above image follows Amazon.com's consistent and concise presentation and doesn't obscure the site when it is called. A user can move back and forth within the menu without losing sight of the current page or in advertently launching a new page while clicking through the selections.

Filters and Additional Resources Should be More Prominent

If you look at the way desktop applications are designed the tools are usually placed at the top as in Word or PowerPoint. The controls generally are in the same location so the that users can learn how to gain access to the tools. The same should be for a webpage of websites that manages a lot of data like NGA.gov.

Filters and additional information resources should appear consistently and minimally within the upper region of the webpage fold.