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Digital Work with Nontextual Objects

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(Review)

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when the final product is created.¹ At this point, those students who want to collect and care for the documents, material culture, and other physical manifestations of history and those who want to tell stories and engage with audiences realize that every step in the complex process of producing history has consequences.

It is far easier to critique a book than write one, and I want to conclude by acknowledging the courage it surely took to write both books. It is a daunting task to inaugurate a textbook project for an academic field that has skirted the definition question since its inception. The final product is almost destined not to please everyone. If both books fall a bit short of the mark—in my estimation; others may disagree—both are nonetheless solid first editions, and revised editions will appear in due course.

1 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 26–27.

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Digital Work with Nontextual Objects

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Textile Collections: Preservation, Access, Curation, and Interpretation in the Digital Age by Amanda Grace Sikarskie. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. vii + 161 pp.; illustrations, notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, \$90.00; paperbound, \$42.00; eBook, \$39.00.

Digital Giza: Visualizing the Pyramids by Peter Der Manuelian. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 1-256 pp.; notes, illustrations; paperbound, \$25.00.

For a digital historian interested in preservation, nontextual collections pose unique challenges. Although a digital copy of a physical object is never the same as

the physical object itself, three-dimensional objects exacerbate the difficulty of representing physical objects digitally. These two books take on digital representations of objects that range from fairly small (clothing and accessories) to massive (an entire network of pyramids).

The first, Amanda Grace Sikarskie's *Textile Collections*, explores the importance, benefits, and challenges of working with textile collections in a digital medium. Born from Sikarskie's work on the Quilt Index and other online textile collections, the book uses case studies to demonstrate how textiles can benefit from a digital as well as physical presence. Using commonalities between weaving and computer code, Sikarskie addresses questions of preservation, access, curation, and interpretation. Chapter 1, "Preservation," focuses on the Quilt Index to explore how and what to preserve in both digital and physical form. Sikarskie argues that digital preservation facilitates physical preservation, as a digital surrogate means less handling of a physical textile. She also addresses how to digitally represent a textile with three dimensions, many colors and textures, and medium-specific techniques. The Quilt Index employs an extensive custom metadata scheme in order to describe the textiles in the digital collection. Although these detailed descriptions and photographs have opened the study of quilts to a vast new audience, something is lost in the quilts' digital preservation. Sikarskie ends the chapter with a discussion of how digital preservation changes the meaning of the quilts, drawing from Walter Benjamin.

Chapter 2 enters the realm of "what if?" Here, Sikarskie argues for greater access to online textile collections by allowing for broader and varied ways of using them. She argues that there are three levels of access: simple access to data and information, access to discussion, and access to collaboration. In the first section, she discusses "what if" more collections were open access—not copyright restricted or hidden behind barriers such as paywalls or licenses. Her best practices for tagging objects are more prescriptive than descriptive, as only the very best of images available on Flickr, the service she uses as an example, are tagged skillfully. It is difficult to see how access to data and access to discussion differ, as Sikarskie discusses a form of social tagging in both sections. For access to discussion, she examines women's roles in both textile and web design (an interesting excursus but an odd placement). For access to collaboration, Sikarskie follows a similar pattern, discussing very briefly the "what if" of visual stylometry as a search method and then returning to questions of gender in physical and digital labor.

In chapter 3, "Curation," Sikarskie addresses the democratization of the digital curation of physical collections. She points specifically to Polyvore and Tumblr, two online locations for user-curated textile collections. Sikarskie offers suggestions for how museum professionals can work with visitors by giving user-curated collections a voice in official museum channels. Museums can also maintain their own social media accounts to allow for more online connections between these institutions and their patrons. User-curated content allows for the democratization

of interpretation and knowledge about the collections and makes users feel like active participants in the arts they encounter.

Whereas chapter 3 suggests that professional historians ought to open themselves up to crowd-generated content, Sikarskie argues in chapter 4 that in interpretation, historians should take the fore. Sikarskie describes her work for WGBH, a public television station in Boston, to catalog and interpret an off-air TV show about crafts, specifically textiles. Her knowledge of textiles and textile history allowed Sikarskie to creatively describe each episode and write an interpretive essay on the show as a whole. She explains how she could contextualize some of the choices of the host, Erica Wilson, in both projects and in set design. Sikarskie also addresses giving people an interest in collections that harnesses their commercial interest in the objects (where can I buy that?) while emphasizing their noncommercial value. Sikarskie closes the book with a discussion of how the online community treated Kate Middleton's wedding dress, a final note on how "women's interests" such as textiles are downplayed in both physical preservation and digital humanities projects.

Textile Collections is a valuable book for considering how to deal with the digital lives of physical objects. In many places, it feels like two different books, however—a manual for how to work with digital collections of almost any kind (not limited to textiles), and a treatise on how gender and postmodern theory interact with textile collections (not necessarily digital). Since each of these two themes appears multiple times in each chapter, it is difficult to follow the flow of the argument. Nevertheless, the sections on metadata in particular are quite valuable for anyone who is trying to describe unusual objects.

Digital Giza also comes out of the work of its author, Peter Der Manuelian, with both physical and digital collections. His book is the result of two centuries of work at the Giza Necropolis, including his own research under the auspices of a partnership between Harvard University and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA). Like Sikarskie, Der Manuelian grapples with questions of physical and digital preservation of nontextual artifacts. Perhaps assuming an audience more familiar with digital preservation than with Egyptology (a fair assumption for a book published by metaLAB), Der Manuelian spends his first two chapters providing a thorough history of the excavations at Giza. At first, this treatment seems excessive, but as he begins to explore the difficulties of organizing, cataloging, and interpreting centuries of work, it becomes clear that it is impossible to understand the Digital Giza project without knowing its backstory in some detail.

In chapter 3, Der Manuelian digs in to the problems of making a comprehensive catalog of artifacts and research from Giza. Problems such as provenance and preservation took on even greater significance due to the sheer volume of information gleaned from Giza. In the 1940s, tens of thousands of glass slides and artifacts, in addition to the archaeologists' journals, went piecemeal to various cultural organizations, primarily the MFA. The volume of these research materials only increased as more archaeologists worked in Giza, and research materials and

artifacts quickly started to degrade. Various curators at the museum worked to create a cataloging system for this research, but the variety and scale of the materials meant that a catalog was also difficult to manage.

In 2000, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funded a grant to transform all of the Giza research into a digital project in order to provide more unfettered access to materials that had previously been obscured or unreachable. The goal was to allow scholars to “answer research questions that today cannot even be posed because of the overwhelming number of archival documents, the impractical search requirements and the limited time constraints under which most scholars work” (86). For the next three years, the Giza Archives Project team built a database of artifacts and research, culminating in the public release of the Giza Archives Project website (<http://gizapyramids.org/>).

From the beginning, metadata held together materials widely diverse in location, type, language, and organizational structure. After the Giza Archives Project was established with the MFA’s collections, the project team turned its gaze toward other repositories of Giza research. Nine different institutions across the United States and Europe house most of these materials, and Der Manuelian convinced each of them to join the MFA’s effort to create a comprehensive online research portal with standardized metadata. He ends chapter 3 with a list of lessons learned during this first phase of the Giza project, all of which are valuable for not only sprawling projects like this one, but also other smaller-scale work in museums and cultural institutions.

Chapters 4 and 5 highlight the possibilities of a digital project about the Giza Necropolis that includes more than cataloging. In chapter 4, Der Manuelian describes the Giza Archives Project’s creation of a digital 3D model of the entire Giza area, based on the research done by archaeologists since excavations began. This chapter highlights the potential for partnerships with groups not typically thought of as “cultural organizations.” For example, an oil company’s scientists provided equipment and expertise that allowed archaeologists to explore subsurface Giza. These 3D models gave the project team the chance to do many types of “restoration,” such as re-creating the sites as they stood in ancient Egypt or at the moment when archaeologists first recorded their existence in the twentieth century.

In chapter 5, Der Manuelian uses case studies to explore how digital technology brings opportunities and challenges for interpretation, and also how digital recreations pose unique philosophical questions. How much should be restored, rather than left in the state in which it was found? Can objects ever be fully restored digitally? How can you measure whether it has been done correctly? The case studies answer some of these questions, but Der Manuelian also admits that for many of them, there are no right answers, only interpretive decisions.

Chapter 6 looks to the future. Problems of scale are ever-present in digital collections. For instance, server space and processor limitations confine the quality of 3D models. Not only is scale a problem, but sustainability is a major hurdle. Digital environments degrade exponentially faster than the stone from which the

Giza Necropolis was built. To combat obsolescence, the Digital Giza Project created a comprehensive data management plan, including plans for long-term storage and server locations. The volume of resources available, even in digital collections, means that fully describing or representing every object is virtually impossible, especially for a small team. Der Manuelian offers two possible ways to solve this problem: (1) crowdsourcing for descriptive metadata, or (2) giving up extremely detailed descriptions in favor of a more typological approach to modeling. The team continues to grapple with the problems of abundance and changes in technology.

Digital Giza primarily serves as a history of a digital project, which is a fairly rare form of monograph (though there ought to be more). In 2005, Roy Rosenzweig and Dan Cohen argued that the problem confronting historians going forward will be that of abundance, not of scarcity (Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*, 2005). *Digital Giza* demonstrates the truth of that assertion, illustrating how one large digital project has addressed the opportunities and challenges of physical and digital abundance. Der Manuelian demonstrates that digital reproduction is not neutral; that digital and physical preservation work hand-in-hand; and that digital technology can provide real value to physical collections by allowing researchers to ask questions previously impossible to imagine.

Both Sikarskie and Manuelian ask and answer questions that every public historian ought to consider when approaching digital collections. At the center of both books is metadata, which should provide description of physical objects in a consistent and accessible way. Each book provides valuable insight into the challenges of digital representations of nontextual objects. For public historians, *Textile Collections* offers perhaps more realistic perspectives on what small institutions and individuals can do to work digitally with nontextual objects, whereas *Digital Giza* may be an example of the outer limit of what is possible. Nonetheless, both large well-funded projects and small individual efforts must address the same kinds of interpretive questions, so both of these books are worth a read for a public historian interested in working with digital collections.

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