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This essay examines the pedagogical benefits of implementing a semester-long digital curation project using the open-source web-publishing platform Omeka Classic. It discusses the importance of teaching students to critically analyze the role of images in society as well as how to develop skills for evaluating various forms of digital media and resources. By using experiential learning pedagogy to establish connections between Japan studies and visual studies, this article explores the significant value of teaching visual literacy as well as encouraging students and scholars alike to consider the possibilities and limits that result at the intersection of art and technology.

**Keywords:** Digital curation; virtual exhibition; Japanese art; technology; Omeka
Introduction

In our increasingly globalized digital world, students’ daily lives are completely immersed in the visual. Social media has, for better or worse, empowered students to become “every day curators” (Rohan 2010) of digital content with sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest awash in visual assemblages of their hobbies, interests, and aspirations. Yet, no matter the form of exposure—via internet, television, film, video games, etc.—students do not always walk into the classroom with a clear sense of how to interpret and analyze the visual world they inhabit. Thus, teaching students how to investigate their place in the 21st-century global system of images through the critical evaluation of digital media and resources is extremely important.¹

In an effort to address this pedagogical concern I developed the curatorial seminar Japanese Modernism Across Media, which seeks to expose students to the critical and creative responsibilities of being a digital curator. This course investigates the evolution, adaptation, and display of modern and contemporary Japanese art and visual culture by examining the impact of technology within the context of 20th-century Japanese history and society. Drawing upon a variety of “modern media” such as oil painting, film, digital and performance-based art, and photography to name a few, we also explore how Japanese artists wrestled with issues of identity, self-expression, and nationhood as they attempted to embrace foreign materials and modes of representation.

The major form of assessment for this course is a semester-long curatorial project that offers students the opportunity to engage with Japanese modernism on a deeper level by developing a critical language for looking at images, articulating their ideas, challenging cultural assumptions, and making intellectual discoveries. Through the curation of an on-line exhibit, students have the opportunity to utilize a variety of digital materials and artifacts as a means of exploring the various ways in

¹ In the last fifteen years this type of information literacy has become an important pedagogical principle within higher education. See the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) “Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education” which is a guiding document for Haverford College’s Library program and its approach to digital scholarship.
which technological shifts and cultural transformations have shaped Japan’s artistic production and visual consumption within modern and contemporary exhibition practices.

This digital curation project also seeks to emphasize the study and interpretation of Japanese art and visual culture through assessment strategies informed by Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as well as experiential learning projects that engage with critical making. Through the virtual curation process, students are introduced to digital modes of research, exhibition, and archival practices while also learning how to research, write about, analyze, and display Japanese art and visual culture materials to a broader audience.

**What is Digital Curation?**

The term ‘digital curation’ refers to the act of selecting, preserving, and maintaining a collection of digital media. It is not unlike the curatorial practices that occur in a museum or library setting with regard to the management, oversight, and preservation of more tangible assets. However, within the realm of digital curation there are increasing opportunities to: create new representations of media related to data visualization and 3-D modeling; manage the rapid growth of digital content that we produce and consume, as well as; convert existing non-digital resources into a format that allows for greater opportunity to preserve and share media content.

Within the space of my classroom, digital curation is used as a form of assessment that exposes students to various approaches to open-source online exhibition and archival practices. It also introduces students to current web-publishing and archival platforms (such as Omeka Classic) which are becoming increasingly important in sharing digital collections, creating media-rich online exhibits, and finding best practices for the use and re-use of digital imagery, content, and information.²

A key component of digital curation is the development of a digital repository of images that are catalogued and recorded in such a way that anyone interested in

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² Omeka Classic was the original iteration of this open-source web-publishing and archival platform. It was developed at George Mason University’s Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media. A more recent version called Omeka S has been released for institutions interested in connecting digital collections with other online resources.
using or contributing to the archive is able to successfully identify and collect digital and non-digital materials of value, preserving and expanding upon the existing archival records. Thus, selecting the right type of technology to support digital curation is essential.

While there are many web-publishing platforms such as Tumblr, Wordpress, and more recently, Squarespace, which are strong on digital exhibition, they are more limited in their capacity for digital archiving and collections management. That is to say, these sites do not provide a well-developed mechanism for supporting the collection-building and metadata-creation commonplace within museum archives, libraries, and special-collections settings.

Omeka Classic is a free open-source content management system used to create online digital collections. It is also a web-publishing platform that allows users to create online exhibitions and display visual and textual materials related to the digital archive they have built. As a web-publishing platform, Omeka Classic fosters the kind of user interaction and participation that is central to the mission of public scholarship and education. Omeka has become an incredibly important resource for many liberal arts institutions seeking to develop digital teaching and archival strategies that allow them to share a range of digital media from a variety of disciplines, including images, video, audio recordings, and textual documents.

**Virtual Exhibition Project**

The primary objective of the virtual exhibition project is to provide students (majors and non-majors alike) with an introduction to modern and contemporary Japanese art making and exhibition practices through the lens of technology. In order to achieve this objective it was necessary to develop a method of assessment that

3 Squarespace is one of a category of “drag-and-drop” website builders along with Weebly, Wix, and others.
4 This is perhaps best exemplified by the ASIANetwork’s Image Database to Enhance Asian Studies (IDEAS) project, which is committed to cooperative sharing of ideas, expertise, and resources among liberal arts institutions by using Omeka Classic as its digital archival platform to build a robust online image collection.
integrated the concepts of UDL and also allowed students to focus on the following five learning goals: 1) to experience the critical and creative responsibilities of being a curator; 2) to understand how exhibition practices impact aspects of artistic production, audience reception, critical interpretation, and the display of art; 3) to examine issues involved in understanding and appreciating art and visual culture from East Asia; 4) to gain an introduction to digital modes of research, exhibition, and archival practices; and 5) to consider the possibilities and limits that result at the intersection of art and technology.

Within this framework, the virtual exhibition project consisted of three significant components; 1) an online exhibition; 2) a visual essay; and 3) a guided tour (presentation) of the online exhibition. First, the virtual exhibition project tasked students with developing and curating an on-line exhibition whose topic engaged with an aspect of modern or contemporary Japanese art and visual culture. To facilitate selection of research topics, students were required to submit a one-page research proposal with an additional annotated bibliography of ten sources that outlined their topic of research for the virtual exhibition project and engaged with the relevant scholarly content related to their topic.

Once an appropriate topic was determined, students began conducting research and selecting relevant objects of study from museums, libraries, art galleries, film and/or music archives, and public works. The objective was to teach students how to build an archive by selecting appropriate and meaningful works of art and adding them as items to our Omeka site (Figures 1 and 2). Part of building an art collection that speaks to individual student research and exhibition topics, as well as the larger course content as a whole, is the responsibility of collections management, which consists of the administrative responsibilities associated with collection development. Therefore, as a group, students in the course were required to develop a standard set of metadata points for the objects they archived, such as artist’s name, title of artwork, date, materials, size, provenance, etc. The goal was developing a set of relevant criteria and identifying resources for all of the art objects in the collection.

Figure 2: Item #637: “Keeping Up the Pureness,” for the exhibition *Trauma and Pain in the Art of Matsui Fuyuko*. Created October 4, 2016. See: https://ds-omeka.haverford.edu/japanesemodernism/exhibits/show/matsui-fuyuko/kus-zu.
Metadata is an extremely important tool for organizing art objects, providing digital identification, and supporting the archiving and preservation of resources.

Once students selected and archived twenty to thirty items in Omeka, they were then ready to begin building upon their existing digital archive of items to create an exhibit that combined text (scholarly written and researched content) and image (items) into a coherent visual narrative that examined artistic production and consumption within modern and contemporary Japanese art and visual culture. Depending on the individual student, the exhibit explored a specific artist, artistic medium, or artistic collective and engaged with issues concerning the exchange, adaptation, and/or display of modern art in Japan (Figure 3).

![Japanese Modernism Across Media](image)

**Figure 3:** Item and text layout for the exhibition *100 Views of New Tokyo*. Created December 10, 2016. See: https://ds-omeka.haverford.edu/japanesemodernism/exhibits/show/new-100-views-of-tokyo.
The second component of the virtual exhibition project was the visual essay (Figure 4). The visual essay is the textual backbone of the exhibition project that serves to contextualize, historicize, and theorize the research topic of each student’s virtual exhibition. The visual essay is meant to address a set of research questions that pertain to the themes and content of the virtual exhibition. Additionally, it must include an overarching argument, bibliography and footnotes, and be integrated directly into the virtual exhibition (much the same way an exhibition catalogue essay complements the larger body of work in an exhibition.)

Once visual and textual components of the virtual exhibition have been organized into a coherent narrative using the exhibition templates on Omeka’s back end, students have permission to publish the material on-line. The front end of the published virtual-exhibition projects consists of individual student

![Image](https://ds-omeka.haverford.edu/japanesemodernism/exhibits/show/the-female-image-in-shin-hanga/visual_essay)

exhibitions displayed on the main page of the course exhibition website. Users with an interest in modern and contemporary Japanese art and visual culture can access the site and take virtual tours of each individual exhibition (Figure 5).

The third and final stage of the virtual exhibition was the guided tour. Upon the completion of the virtual exhibition project students gave a guided tour of their virtual exhibition project through the form of a public oral presentation. Within the context of the guided tour, they discuss the major thematic, critical, and theoretical aspects of their exhibition topic as well as how it relates to the larger themes and content of the course.

Pedagogical Challenges

Integrating a semester-long digital curation project into any course can be challenging due to the technical nature of this assignment as well as the need to provide students who are unfamiliar with modern Japanese art and visual culture.

Figure 5: Japanese Modernism Across Media Virtual Exhibition Project. Created March 2015. See: https://ds-omeka.haverford.edu/japanesemodernism/home.
with additional information regarding the historical, cultural, aesthetic, and political context surrounding the development of modern and contemporary Japanese art making and exhibition practices. When conceiving this project I sought to facilitate student work in the classroom through library-faculty partnerships with our Digital Scholarship program, which supports a variety of digital projects and teaches skills needed for digital research. This partnership was crucial to the success of the project by allowing me to have a digital scholarship librarian embedded in the classroom to support the course in a number of significant ways. The most important support was to help students develop their information literacy skills by learning how to evaluate digital media and sources in a world where that is becoming increasingly harder to do. Within this context, the librarian assists with Omeka Classic training and helps students build technical capacity through the progression of assignments and stages related to the project.

Because there were a number of moving parts that necessitated a balance between the course content and technological requirements of the digital curation project, it was crucial to develop an effective rubric for assessment. My assessment of this project needed to evaluate the textual and visual content of the on-line exhibition as well as reflect upon how this multi-dimensional digital curation project facilitated student analysis, interpretation, and writing about modern and contemporary Japanese art and visual culture. As a result, the assessment rubric was divided into three sections that reflected the different components of the digital curation process: 1) visual content and archive; 2) visual essay; and 3) exhibition design. The requirements of the visual content and archive section consisted of research and selection of art materials and the creation of a digital archive that adheres to and takes full advantage of Omeka's digital archival platform. The visual essay section consisted of a well-researched and well-argued textual content that served to directly support and engage with the visual content and art objects. Finally, the exhibition design will serve to support visual and textual content through rigorous attention to and organization of the visual field of the digital material as well as a creative visual presentation. The grading of each phase of the virtual exhibition project was assessed based on the following criteria:
**Visual Content and Archive**

1) Project proposal submitted by the deadline
   - Selection of an appropriate topic for the virtual exhibition project
   - Articulation of the thesis statement and primary research questions
   - Annotated bibliography of relevant primary and secondary sources related to the virtual exhibition topic

2) Selection of 20–30 art objects for exhibition
   - Research and selection of relevant art objects of study from museums, libraries, art galleries, film and/or music archives, and public works
   - Critically evaluate the on-line sources of the objects in question to confirm their appropriate and fair use

3) Creation of 20–30 art object items in Omeka for exhibition
   - The development of a standard set of metadata fields for all of the art objects
   - Adding the art objects to the Omeka class digital archive in the form of “items”

**Visual Essay**

1) Thesis and research questions
   - The thesis statement and research questions will support the visual content of the exhibition with rigorous attention to the visual field of the objects
   - Depth and relevance of the cultural and historical context provided for the objects in the exhibition in relation to the thesis statement and research questions

2) Visual Analysis
   - Address the artwork’s formal elements—visual attributes such as material, format, composition, technique, color, line, light and shadow, volume, texture, shape, size, etc.
   - Discuss the visual choices the artist made in creating the works of art in the exhibition
Exhibition Design

1) Overall presentation of information
   • Presentation of text and image in a well-organized and creative visual presentation
   • Adherence to the design structures and formats of Omeka software
   • Offering a thoughtful reflection on the process of producing and presenting this virtual exhibition

It should also be noted that a number of in-class lab sessions for Omeka training and technical support were built into each phase of this semester-long curation project. While Omeka is designed for ease of use with no IT experience necessary and offers many ready-made themes and plug-ins, it was helpful to have our digital scholarship librarian attend some classes to run a lab session forum that allowed students to go over the basics of the software system when progressing through each stage of the project. This was particularly important at the beginning of the project when students were learning how to create and add items to the existing archive, provide relevant metadata for each item, and establish common search tags for ease of front-end navigation. The first time I administered this curatorial assignment in cooperation with the library we offered an “office hours” model for students to seek additional support regarding the technical aspects of the curation project. However, the weekly office hours were not well attended with most students instead requesting individual meetings at times that fit more readily into their schedules. Therefore, in the second iteration of the project we opted for a “lab time” model that was built into the class schedule, allowing our digital scholarship librarian to attend class every two weeks for 30–45 minutes to touch base with students, answer questions, provide training, and provide feedback during each stage of the project.

I am fortunate that Omeka Classic is supported by my college library’s digital scholarship and research services. This level of institutional support afforded my students and me access to instructional training sessions and web-support for Omeka by our digital scholarship team.
Final Results

The most immediate results of this digital curation project were the creation of eleven virtual exhibitions that examined the revolutionary transformation of Japanese artistic practice from the late nineteenth century through the present day. Drawing upon a variety of media ranging from prints, photography, oil painting, textiles, cinema, and time-based art, these students curated virtual exhibitions exploring how Japanese artists wrestled with issues of identity and nationhood, as they attempted to embrace foreign methods and modes of representation, while also translating universal conceptions of individualism and self-expression into a local vernacular. See examples: https://ds-omeka.haverford.edu/japanesemodernism/home.

I approached evaluating the students' exhibition from two perspectives. The first focused on the technological aspects of the project and the success with which students used a content management system such as Omeka to create a virtual exhibition that demonstrated best practices of digital research, archiving, and exhibition. The second aspect focused on the strength of each individual exhibition's visual and textual content in relation to the curation process. For instance, did the artistic content and associated visual essay support the exhibition's primary argument and themes with rigorous attention to the visual field? Did the content of the exhibition provide compelling cultural and historical context to help situate the overall argument? Was the exhibition well-organized? Did the exhibition offer a thoughtful reflection on the curation process from conception, to production and presentation?

This experiential digital curation project successfully foregrounded the historical, theoretical, and cultural aspects of modern and contemporary works of Japanese art that the students studied through the semester. They also learned how to research, write, analyze, and display Japanese art and visual culture materials to a broader audience. By experiencing the critical and creative responsibilities of being a digital curator, the project also provided students with a greater understanding of the various components required in developing and producing an exhibition. Student feedback regarding the virtual exhibition
project was mostly positive. They all expressed a sincere sense of personal investment in the project and pride in its completion. They found Omeka easy to learn and the format was flexible enough to adapt through the addition of plugins for image annotation and basic html coding to create more interesting visual display templates. They enjoyed using a variety of media in the form of images, videos, audio clips, and text to present their exhibition topics and arguments in a coherent and compelling way. Over all, students appreciated the opportunity and exposure to learn about online web publishing and digital archiving. Beyond this course, the eleven student-curated virtual exhibitions have contributed to a growing archive of digital material and visual content here at the college which is used as a visual resource by my East Asian studies colleagues in classes they teach.

Conclusion
Over the past three years of teaching Japanese Modernism Across Media, this curatorial project has offered new opportunities for student assessment in relation to studying key aspects of modern Japanese art and visual culture; developing critical and analytical tools for looking at, reading, and writing about modern art; and understanding how the introduction of new visual media and modes of representation transformed artistic production, consumption, and reception in Japan. This project has also offered new methods of experiential and active learning through the hands-on participation in curating an on-line digital exhibition. By using Omeka to curate an array of virtual exhibitions, students displayed their technical understanding of on-line content management systems through the act of web-publishing and digital archiving. They also learned how to more effectively participate in a globalized digital world by critically evaluating different types of visual content and sources they come into contact with. While the individual topics of the student exhibitions engaged with critical issues and topics specific to modern Japanese art and visual culture, this type of curatorial project can be used in a variety of humanistic and social science disciplines within Asian studies contexts.
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Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

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