

Mellon Pilot Project on Technical Documentation: Paintings by Raphael

This project will begin formally on recruitment of a Mellon Fellow in digital documentation (an appointment will have been made by the time of the meeting in London). As proposed in New York, the Gallery will develop a pilot project that will compile technical material on paintings electronically, build and assess an initial database framework for presentation, and then develop the levels of interpretation required for two different audiences. In order to test such a system, a subject initially limited in scope but rich in existing data has been chosen, and the pilot project will be centred around the Gallery's remarkable and diverse group of ten paintings by Raphael. As a result both of long-term research and of recent reassessment arising from the exhibition held in London in 2004, there is extensive primary material on Raphael, much of it already interpreted in various publications. The finished database will be made accessible to scholars on the Internet via a dedicated website, and in a more simplified and interpreted form to the general visitor on the Gallery's website and other information systems.

The main features of the project are as in the application for funding to the Mellon Foundation, of which the following is an edited extract:

1. The first step will be initial gathering and digitisation of data on Raphael from a wide range of Gallery sources, including colour and black- and-white images of the paintings at various levels of detail and magnification; x-radiographs and their digitally-processed versions; infrared reflectograms and mosaics, paint cross-sections and other micrographic images, SEM micrographs and the results of analytical study of the paintings, including work on paint media (recorded at a level of interpretation that will enable enquirers to make direct use of the information in their research). The database will also contain text from National Gallery publications, including scholarly catalogues, relevant bibliographic material, and internal conservation, curatorial and scientific dossiers. The system (database) needs to be developed in such a way as to both archive the material and allow for easy retrieval at each of the proposed levels of interpretation and access. Any user of the system would be allowed full access to all stored data and search capabilities, irrespective of the level of their experience and knowledge, although it would seem advisable to alert potential users that they will move through structured levels of depth of access to data. A Web-based system is the likely technical solution for access to the database.
2. Once an experimental system has been applied provisionally to two or three selected works by Raphael, it will be demonstrated in a consultation phase with other institutions holding Raphael material and with potential users, both professional and general public. At that stage, the Gallery intends to work with one or more sister institutions to host material on Raphael held by those institutions in order to establish methods for integrating information from a variety of sources.

3. The third stage will include:

- Response to the feedback from other institutions
- Compilations of the remaining National Gallery data, taking into account the views and recommendations of other interested parties
- Integration of data on Raphael paintings held by other institutions

It will be a fundamental requirement that the database be designed in a way that will facilitate additions of future research and shared information; as a result it will become a living resource for Raphael studies as scholarship develops and deepens.

While Raphael has been chosen as the subject to explore the architecture, flexibility, operation and accessibility of the database, the intention is to develop a system and template suitable for handling data on any painter. Expansion of the content to a wider range of artists is seen as an essential future direction to take.