

Expanding the Scope of Digital Collection Development for Heritage Preservation: The case of the Odin Oyen collection

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Abstract

With the potential of digitization as an alternative form of donation, institutions must more often weigh the importance of physically owning an object versus only digitally capturing that object. This post-custodial approach may run counter to some library donation prerequisites and traditional collection development policies, instead focusing on the cultural and intellectual benefits that such a compromise may bring. This approach is not without potential obstacles, including issues of copyright, ownership, and reproductions. However, this paper aims to reinforce the benefits of the post-custodial model through the evolution of the Odin Oyen digital collection – a collection comprised of physical materials owned by public and private entities reunited through digitization for the purpose of preserving local and cultural heritage.

Introduction

Digital collections often reflect an institution's physical holdings [1]. However, encountering patrons interested in having materials digitized, but not necessarily donating those materials, is a likely known scenario to many working in digital collection environments. Although growing in popularity, non-custody as it relates to the post-custodial model approach is not universally accepted [2]. An example of post-custodial opposition may include institutional policy that prohibits digitizing materials unless owned by that institution. Such a stance would serve to prevent patrons from bringing in materials that may be of immeasurable value to them, but possess little relevance to the offerings or mission of an institution or its digital collections. Similarly, some institutions embrace physical ownership as being essential to ensure authenticity, security, and stability [3]. Furthermore, when working with items owned by that institution, questions of copyright, digital image ownership, and timeline remain internal conversations.

This paper aims to use the Odin Oyen digital collection at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse as an example of a successful implementation of the post-custodial model at a mid-sized public university library. Of significance is not just the potential for other similarly sized institutions with limited funding to capture local and regional histories, but also how the model's application included the community, a state historical society, a regional arts center, and an additional campus department. The resulting digital collection relied on adjusting normal protocols for library donations. This included reevaluating what constitutes a donation, using digitization to create new access to previously hard-to-find or inaccessible materials, and utilizing a digital environment to reunite historical materials created at the same place and time.

Background

Murphy Library Digital Collections

The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (University) is home to a student body of roughly 10,000. In 2014, the University's

library, Murphy Library (Library), launched the Murphy Library Digital Collections (MLDC) consisting of several hundred items of local, historical, and intellectual interests. In 2020, the MLDC now offers access to over 10,000 digital objects – a collection comprised of over 150,000 individual images managed by one full-time employee. Using the open-source content management system ResCarta, all of these items are stored in preservation formats, including TIFF, WAV, and MP4, and employ embedded MODS and object-level METS formatted XML metadata. The digital collections offer free access to a variety of media, most of which reside in the Library, including photographs, maps, newspapers, books, manuscripts, and oral histories.

In its beginning, the MLDC was equipped with two Epson 10000XL flatbed scanners with transparency units. Identifying the necessity to expand the MLDC's digital conversion options, and working within a very tight budget, the MLDC was able to purchase a full frame Canon 6D DSLR camera, Sigma 50mm F2.8 macro lens with flat field front lens element, copystand, and lights, thereby allowing the capture of materials well beyond the flatbed scanners' capabilities. By 2018, with the help of several campus offices and donations from external organizations, the Library was able to purchase an Indus BookScanner 9000. This new scanner provided a scan area of 18 x 28 inches, and it was able to produce a much higher resolution capture than the copystand-mounted DSLR camera, further increasing the MLDC's capabilities for handling large format items. However, a needed increase in capacity became apparent in order to accommodate the materials included in the Oyen collection. As a result, the Contex HD Ultra i4250s large format scanner was acquired, enabling the digitization of materials up to 15 millimeters in thickness and a maximum width of 42 inches.

Who Was Odin Oyen?

Born in Trondheim, Norway, in 1865, Odin J. Oyen began molding his career as an interior designer at an early age after he and his family immigrated to the United States, eventually settling in Madison, Wisconsin. Oyen served as an artist apprentice in Madison until pursuing training at the Art Institute of Chicago, after which he removed to La Crosse, Wisconsin [4]. By 1892, and after a previous business partnership failed to achieve success, Oyen founded his own design firm. Leading up to World War I, the firm was in demand across the upper Midwest, employing up to two dozen artisans specializing in interior design for churches, libraries, courthouses, schools, theaters, and breweries, among others. Still today, murals produced by the firm can be found on the ceilings and walls of buildings throughout the upper Midwest. Although not all murals remain, noteworthy examples at the time of creation included public libraries in La Crosse and Mankato (Minnesota); courthouses in La Crosse, Aberdeen (South Dakota), and Sibley (Iowa); and numerous theaters for the Finkelstein and Rubin chain. After Oyen's death in 1926, the firm continued under the management of his brother Louis and son Leighton, until Louis' death in 1931 [5]. The firm then continued under Leighton's management, but the Great Depression, coupled with changing tastes in interior decoration,

caused the business to fold a few years later. In the decades to follow, many of the studio's design proposals and even some loose finished murals were separated and dispersed among collectors near and far.

The Project

Phase One

In late 2018, The Library was approached by a community member who had recently purchased a lot of water color designs by the Oyen firm. Originally part of a larger grouping of designs, some of which had been sold to or acquired by the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS) and an unknown number going to private collectors, the lot consisted of roughly 100 large format water color interior designs. The community member was aware of other Oyen materials housed at the Library and made the offer to allow his items to be digitized and included in the MLDC; however, he would retain ownership and keep the physical items after digitization.

The concept of digitization without donation is not new [6] and may be more commonly recognized as an adaptation of F. Gerald Ham's 1981 collaborative-focused post-custodial model [7]. Greater access to scanners and digital capture equipment further enhances individuals' personal capacity to create digital content, creating an option to donate an aspect of personal collections without forgoing the physical connection. However, this creates pause for some libraries, archives, and museums that generally otherwise prefer, or insist, that physical items be owned prior to digitization. The Library had abided by this framework until the last several years when unique patron-owned historical materials have surfaced, but were only offered to the library in digital format. When the Oyen materials were presented, with explicit permission to digitize and host online indefinitely, it came down to a single question: should the Library create digital surrogates that would be made available to anyone with the internet, but *not* acquire the physical items, or should the Library acquire neither the digital nor physical items? The Library chose the former, focusing on heritage preservation and the feeling that providing some level of access was better than providing no access at all.

Shortly after accepting the community member's offer, two stacks of oversized watercolor works arrived on campus. The items ranged in size from roughly 12 x 12 inches up to 30 x 40 inches and consisted of over 100 works, many of which were mounted on thick cardboard backing. Although the MLDC had several digital capture techniques and equipment, it quickly became clear that additional technology would be required to provide images of adequate resolution, allowing users to immerse themselves in the designs and experience the rich detail presented in the Oyen collection. As a result, the decision was made to purchase a Contex HD Ultra i4250s large format scanner through the Library's endowment fund, accommodating both the width and length as well as the thickness of the watercolor designs (see Fig. 1). Learning the scanner and the required finesse to use it, the next several months produced a digital collection that reunited items that were created in the same studio a century earlier.

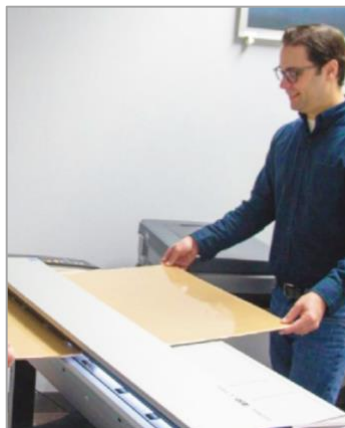


Figure 1. Using the Contex HD Ultra i4250s large format scanner

Phase Two

Inspired by the success of the community member's digitized items, it seemed appropriate to investigate expanding the Oyen digital collection's offerings to include other Oyen designs housed in the Library. As a participant in the state-wide collaboration as an Area Research Center (ARC), the Library houses geographically relevant materials that are owned by the WHS. Among the ARC materials housed at the Library are roughly 300 Oyen interior designs and additional artwork. Under normal circumstances, the ARC network allows for loans between ARC branches; however, due to the physical size of the Oyen designs, such an option is not available. With this limited access in mind, and using the success of digitizing the community member's Oyen materials, the Library and the WHS agreed to allow the additional Oyen designs to be digitized and included in the MLDC. This arrangement increased the Oyen digital collection from just over 100 designs to nearly 560 digitally reunited objects, providing the public with free online accessibility regardless of location.

Phase Three

After campus became aware of the Oyen digital collection, rumors of original Oyen murals residing on campus began to surface. Pursuing these rumors resulted in the rediscovery of three original murals hanging in a department storage area. The size of these murals ranged from 12 to 20 feet in width with heights from 4 to 7 feet, presenting the intimidating and exciting prospect of digitally capturing these pieces. Before embarking on this third component of the Oyen digital collection, establishing a clearer provenance for all three murals was necessary. With the help of the Library's Special Collections, some of the questions surrounding these century-old murals began to be answered. Two of the murals had been acquired by the University in 1975 and 1980, while the third mural is owned by a regional arts center and had been on loan to the University for at least the last ten years. While two murals picture classical symbols of law and order, of particular interest was the mural acquired in 1975, which depicts Norse gods in a scene from Valhalla (see Fig. 2). This scene is among those interior designs digitized as part of the larger Oyen digital collection (see Fig. 3).



Figure 2. Original 1911 Oyen firm "Valhalla," oil on 5 x 20 ft. canvas mural



Figure 3. Magnified view of the watercolor design for the 1911 Valhalla mural owned by the Wisconsin Historical Society

Originally commissioned in 1911 after a fire destroyed much of a nearby town, the mural hung in a Nordic-themed bar for decades. Eventually, the establishment sat empty for years and in 1975 the mural was moved to the University and hung in the student union until 1982. In time, the mural found its way to the departmental storage area until the Oyen digital collection created a virtual space for the digital mural to live indefinitely. Carefully photographing the murals required use of MLDC's full frame DSLR and 50mm lens, and a tripod, tape measure, ladder, and a rolling cart on which the tripod was set. Each mural required roughly 30 images taken four feet from the murals' surfaces and carefully stitched in post-processing to create a 400-500 megabyte image for each mural (see Fig. 4). Utilizing ResCarta as the MLDC's content management system, users have the ability to interact with the murals in detail using the image viewer's zooming capabilities (see Fig. 5).



Figure 4. Photographing one of the three original oil on canvas murals on the University campus, owned by the Pump House Regional Arts Center

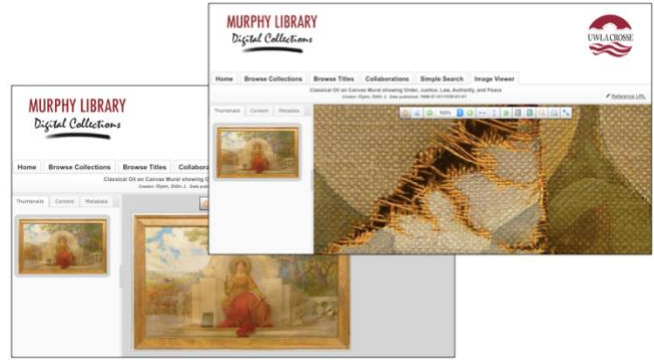


Figure 5. Comparison view to demonstrate ResCarta zoom capability. Users can view canvas fibers in damage on the original 7 x 12 ft. mural

The Results

The materials in this collection have broad appeal including to patrons who have ties to the geographic area, are looking for turn-of-the-century interior designs, are interested in the artistic element of the original watercolor pieces, or are concerned with architectural and historic restoration.

Several benefits have been demonstrated through the digitization of the Oyen materials. First and foremost, this project reunited two independently owned collections of Oyen materials in a digital environment (see Fig. 6). Although the ideal circumstances would have resulted in the physical donation of the privately owned items, the MLDC seized the opportunity to acquire quality digital renderings of the physical materials. It was this initial phase of the project that led to seeking permission to digitize other holdings of Oyen materials, and it is the hope that as this digital collection becomes known, other institutions or collectors will offer additional Oyen materials, physically or digitally. Through such efforts, these materials and the story they tell have achieved a new level of accessibility, not possible in solely physical format. This, in essence, creates another layer of preservation while at the same time increasing access.

Secondly, this project brought together four parties, one of whom is a community member. Reinforcing relationships with the community is often a central pillar of academic, cultural heritage, or similar institutions. Fostering such "symbiotic relationships" [8] may someday lead to additional donations, a positive reputation, and a potential avenue to engage the community and improve its access to information. Furthermore, such relationships can help to ensure "that a more full and fair digital record of individuals or a community is preserved for the future" [9].

Finally, this collection served as a catalyst for the MLDC to purchase a new scanner, increasing its capacity to take on future large format visual material projects.

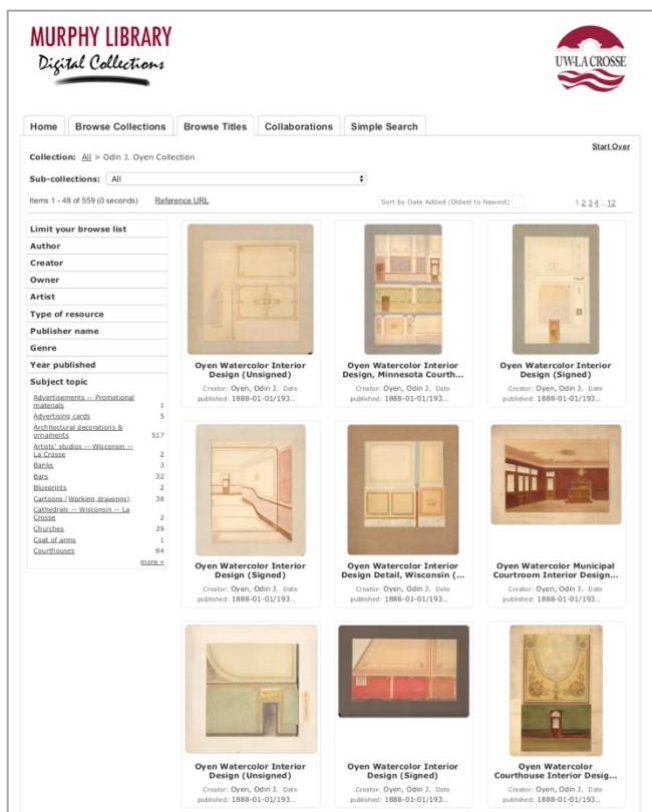


Figure 6. First page of gallery view of the 559 items in the Oyen digital collection.

Expanding Digital Collection Development

At the center of this project lies the concept of cultural heritage preservation. In the case of the Oyen digital collection, the end justified the means in terms of prioritizing the digital acquisition over the physical acquisition. In the words of John Whaley, Jr., “access over ownership” [10]. As cultural heritage institutions have already expanded digital collection development to often include both analog-to-digital and born-digital content, collections of materials that have been separated over time and are owned by different entities require a varied approach to ensure those materials are not lost to history. The “all or nothing” approach to collection development for digital collections risks missing out on preserving aspects of history and heritage by otherwise requiring physical acquisition prior to digitization. There are certainly examples of cultural heritage institutions that have been utilizing the post-custodial model, including the University of Texas Libraries [11] and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Special Collections [12]. Building on their and others’ success, the Oyen collection aims to demonstrate the importance of and ability for smaller institutions to do their part in preserving their own regional heritage, even if that means some items will reside only in digital format.

Alternatively, although this conversation deals with digital and analog materials, it is unfortunately far from being black and white. Major issues exist surrounding digital and physical ownership, preventing potential dissuasion of physical donations, understanding cultural heritage value and when to employ this approach to digital collection development, and ensuring that clear

policies are created to protect against an influx of irrelevant “digital donations.”

Ownership

Certainly questions of ownership arise when digitizing materials that are not owned by the institution performing the digitization. For instance, is the owner of the physical materials the creator of those materials and are they under copyright? In the case of the Oyen collection, the physical ownership did not relate to the intellectual property contained within the designs. Furthermore, the materials were created over 100 years ago, Oyen died in 1926, and copyright was either never established or renewed, placing the items in the public domain. Even so, does the University own the digital reproductions because it created the images? Various court decisions, including the controversial *Bridgeman Art Library, Ltd. v. Corel Corporation* and the more recent *Authors Guild, Inc. v. HathiTrust*, address the ideas of copyrightability, infringement, and, specifically with the latter, satisfying the four factors of fair use [13]. Given those various precedents, transfer of ownership of public domain materials through sale or acquisition seems not to affect the continued use of the digital version of the physical items. In any case, ensuring clear written communication between all parties at the time of digital donation is important, even if not required, to limit potential issues that the digital content’s use and ownership could face in the future.

Balancing Physical and Digital Donations

While the Oyen collection was made possible through the concession to accept only the digital version, the Library wants to ensure this precedent does not prevent future donations of physical materials. Just as archives, museums, and historical societies are designed to provide access to and preservation of historical information, so, too, are academic libraries. In the case of Murphy Library, the consensus remains that the Library is better equipped to provide stable access and secure preservation for generations to come, more so than private collectors are able to provide. As such, cultural heritage institutions should continue to actively seek out and physically acquire information, artifacts, and collections rather than pursue only digital donation in order to save space. Although, when the only path to making information available and preserving that information for the future is through a digital donation of analog materials, then an institution should feel obligated to fulfil its mission and accept that donation.

Developing Policies to Protect Institutions

Just as physical collections are guided by collection development policies, with particular emphasis on donations in this context, digital collections should be no exception to having similar guidelines or policies. Standard digital collection development policies may incorporate language regarding digitization requests, born-digital capture, or general digitization activities that support an institution’s mission. Digital donations, on the other hand, have the potential to attract more content than is manageable or that does not align with institutional missions. Ensuring policies are implemented that provide guidance for patrons and information professionals, alike, creates a buffer between some patrons’ desires to have personal unrelated materials digitized and other unique or rare items that may present themselves.

Future Goals

Continued discovery and expansion of the Oyen digital collection is a standing goal, with the hope of adding other privately owned Oyen materials. Such an expansion requires specific

language and policies to communicate the appropriate context for accepting digital donations. In doing so, the goal will be to apply the success of this experience to build other future collections that are uniquely related to the region, its history, and its cultural heritage, but whose physical acquisition otherwise lacks feasibility.

Conclusion

This project opened collection development policies to accommodate materials for digitization that are not physically donated to or owned by the institution performing the digitization. The results of this post-custodial model implementation include improved access and preservation, establishment of positive community and institution relationships, and increased digitization capacity. Despite such positive results, there are still some considerations and potential drawbacks to this approach. Institutions must exercise some caution and develop clear policies that emphasize criteria for digital object selection. This is particularly true in preventing future donors from being dissuaded from donating physical materials, and instead electing to keep the physical items and only have them digitized. Additionally, questions of ownership are worth exploring. For the Oyen materials, which are in the public domain, the ruling in *Bridgeman Art Library, Ltd v. Corel Corporation* [14] provides assurance that the digital renderings are not subject to copyright by either the digitizing institution or the owner of the physical materials. Conversely, materials not in the public domain may require the development of a copyright agreement form and the expressed permission from the copyright holder to make materials publicly available online. Finally, this approach requires information professionals to determine, case by case, if digitization alone sufficiently captures an item's cultural, historical, or intellectual value and adds to the societal record, thereby creating a threshold through which not all digital donations will pass.

In adopting the method of post-custodial collection development outlined in this paper, institutions may be faced with reevaluating standard donation protocol with an open mind. This may lead to accepting items that add to society and possess a value great enough to warrant digitization without donation, thereby further reinforcing post-custodial collection development as a means to create new pathways to information preservation and dissemination, despite the lack of physical presence in an institution's holdings. As a mid-sized academic institution with limited funding, selectively adopting the post-custodial model enables the Library to exercise greater flexibility and reach for collection building through expanding the scope of its digital collection development while at the same time arguably providing enhanced access to and preservation of local history.

The Odin Oyen digital collection can be viewed in its entirety at <https://digitalcollections.uwlax.edu/OdinOyen.htm>.

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