When the People are the Context
Putting the "Minor" Picasso- Arias Collection and its "Major" Context onto the Web

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the experience promoted by the Directorate General for Museums and Libraries under the Madrid Regional government's Department of Arts when publishing the Works of Pablo Picasso included in the Arias Collection on exhibit in Buitrago del Lozoya's Picasso Museum.

Both the collection and its publication on the Net are merely minor anecdotes considering their respective contexts.

The collection comprises few more than 60 objects bearing testimony to the long, warm friendship between Picasso and his barber Eugenio Arias, born in the village where the museum stands. And it is precisely this anecdotal nature that makes the Picasso Museum a veritable museum of the story of a friendship, an exile and a shared passion for bullfighting, instead of just a modern art museum.

This is precisely why the biggest effort in the creation of the Web site was geared towards documenting the two protagonists' lifestyle, their friends in common and the sites in the south of France serving as the backdrop for this small story. While the objects are exhibited in the museum rooms, it is on the Web site where we aim to document the context.

This paper discusses the experience promoted by the Directorate General for Museums and Libraries under the Madrid Regional government's Department of the Arts when publishing the Works of Pablo Picasso included in the Arias Collection on exhibit in Buitrago del Lozoya's Picasso Museum[1] on the World Wide Web.

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The collection comprises few more than 60 objects bearing witness to the long, warm friendship between Picasso and his barber Eugenio Arias, born in the village where the museum stands. And it is precisely this anecdotal nature that makes the Picasso Museum more than just a small museum of modern art, but a veritable museum of the story of a friendship, an exile and a shared passion for bullfighting,

Making Sense of a Digital Exhibit Design

The making of the Museum Web site offered the opportunity to develop an alternative exhibit design which complements the way in which the pieces of the physical collection are presented.

Like many other art museums, the Picasso Museum displays unique pieces of work. Far from competing with Madrid's great galleries, the exhibition of Picasso's Works, often merely "minor", takes on its full meaning in the context of a small village in the mountains north of Madrid where it comprises one of the major tourist attractions.

The Web site's "digital exhibit design" is just a few clicks away from the greatest centres of art around the globe, and this is why the anecdotal aspect of the collection's origins become a true point of interest when browsed from a global perspective.

Driven by the desire to complement rather than to replicate the experience of the museum visit, we came to the conclusion that a virtual walk through the exhibition, elegantly set in a limited amount of space with artificial lighting in the basement of the Town Hall, was not appropriate.

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Making the Collection a Part of the Whole

The core section on the site serves to document each of the pieces in a reproduction of the catalogue put together and digitalized according to the standards drawn up at the beginning of the 1990s by the Spanish Ministry of Culture. This enabled its potential inclusion in wider general database.

Figure 1 and 2 The digital library: a record

In the layout of the catalogue cards, a particular accent was placed on the photographic reproductions of the works, doubtlessly one of the site's most enticing facet, while the rest of the graphic and navigational elements took a discrete back seat.
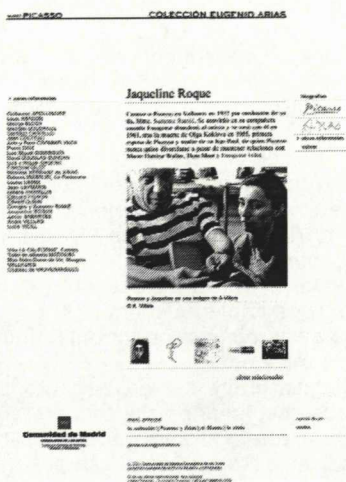

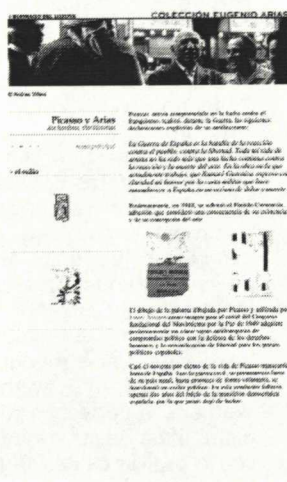Figure 3 Relationships and friendships: Jacqueline Roque

Figure 4 Itineraries: the exile

ONE PLACE, SEVERAL ITINERARIES

Cataloguing each object with its own card provides a useful tool for both researchers and demanding users. But it also tends to focus attention on each individual object rather than on readings of the collection as a whole.

One of the digital exhibit's advantages is that it can offer several itineraries by "packing" the same collection into alternative, thematic views.

The museum's web site came about with the intention of offering itself as a place where a host of different itineraries can be traced out by topics related to the collection's origin rather than by other criteria usually used by contemporary art museums or for Picasso's work.

MAKING SENSE OF THE COLLECTION

The invention, evocation and documentation on the Web site of the thematic threads was of the keys to provide meaning to the historic and geographical context of the events that gave rise to the collection. Most of the pieces in this collection come from or are related to Vallauris, a village in the south of France where Picasso and Arias met and lived for several years.

Eugenio Arias had fought in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side and, after the war was lost, he was able to flee to France where he fought in the resistance against the Nazi occupation. In 1946, he set up his barber shop in Vallauris where he remained an anti-Franco activitst in exile.

Picasso's years in Vallauris were characterized by several ceramic works, comprising one the most interesting parts of the collection. Picasso learned various pottery techniques in George and Suzanne Ramié's Madoura pottery shop.

The aspect that we feel is of most interest in documenting this context lies in the evocation of the closely knit personal relationships and friendships that Picasso and Arias had over those years. We thus discover that the two friends met through a common friend of the Ramiés, who in turn were friends of Jacqueline Roque, later to become Picasso's wife, and that all of them were friendly with people in the French Communist Party, such as Louis Aragon and Jean Cocteau.

We feel that the context of this collection is made up to a large extent by a closely knit web of friends and it is therefore easy to relate the works on display with one or several characters in Picasso and Arias's surroundings during those years.

The production of the web site was therefore the occasion to recover and publish documents and images that are not part of the collection but that can play a crucial role in the understanding of the whole.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

In order to present the collection's context on the site, "low technology" based on the very roots of the WWW were used: hypertext links providing the chance to offer minimum references that the user can complement with information on other more specialized sites.

Both the description of the works and the references to places and persons are systematically cross-linked with hypertexts. The brief bibliographical notes describing Picasso and E. Arias' circle of friends underscore the major traits of their relationship with the collection.

Although the quality of the interaction offered on the site is much more modest than what can be found in most interacti-
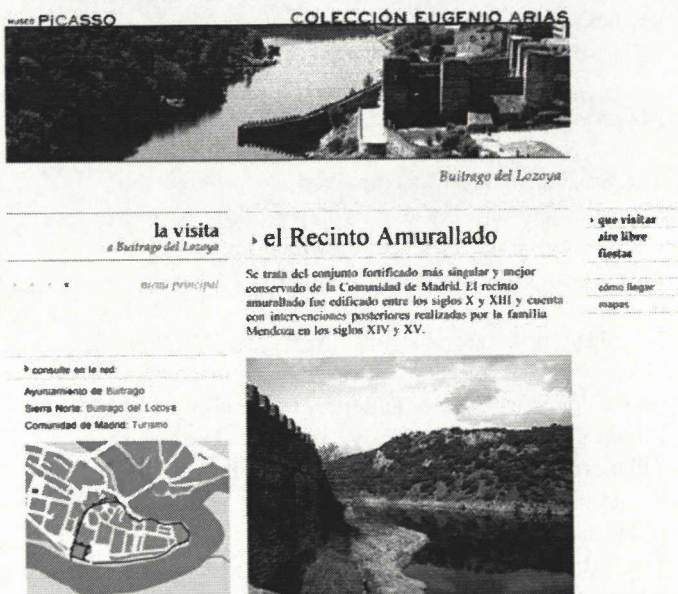

Figure 5 Visiting Buitrago del Lozoya

ve multimedia applications, we feel the overall result meets our initial goal, i.e. to present an interesting testimony of the history of a friendship between two men in exile and their shared passions. On a couple of sections of the site, a greater effort was made in using interactive resources offered by the multimedia publications. We used the shockwave multimedia format to make the biographies of the collection's two protagonists more dynamic and to create a collection browser, an application where users can organize and browse all of the pieces according to several different criteria.

Further efforts could be made in order to more interactively represent the circle of friends that surrounds the collection. Some recent results in conceptual graphic representation such

Figure 6 The collection browser

as Smart Money's Map of the Market[2] or the Plumb Design's Visual Thesaurus[3] may serve as a good starting point.

THE WORLD WIDE WEB ON A SMALL SCALE

Speaking of and using the WWW often leads us to make considerations of a global nature: large scale encyclopaedic data bases, a potential audience stretching out across the globe, international standards for information exchange, and other large scale projects.

We hope that this project will be considered among many other examples of how a site with a local focus can be published without loosing sight of certain global considerations.

CREDITS: THE WEB SITE' S TEAM

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[1] Museo Picasso - Colección Arias: http://www. madrid.org/museo_picasso/.
[2] Smart Money' s Map of the Market: http://www.smartmoney.com/marketmap/.
[3] Plumb Design's Visual Thesaurus: http://www. visualthesaurus.com/online/ index.html.
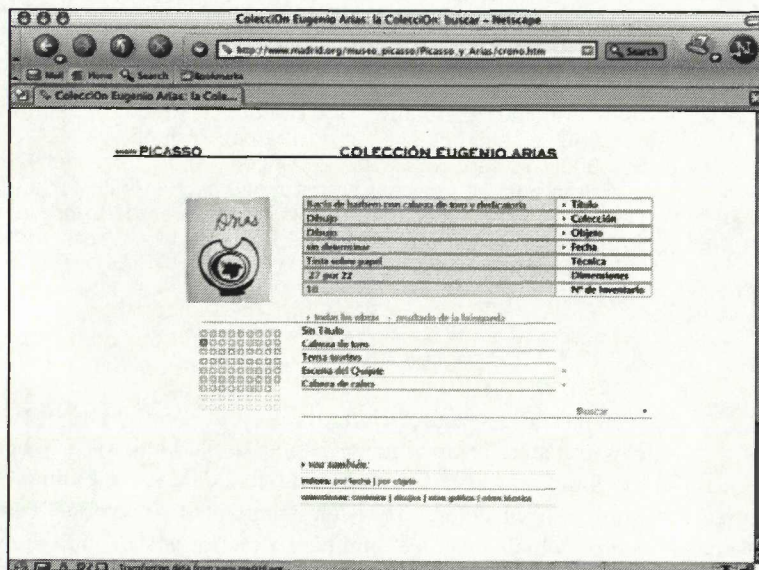
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