



Fig. 1. Thomas Eakins (American, 1844–1916). *Landscape with a Dog*, c. 1874 (unfinished). Oil on canvas, 17 7/8 x 32 in. (45.4 x 81.3 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Seymour Adelman, 1947-96-3. <https://philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/50431.html>

SETTING THE SCENE

An Environmental Scan for the Art Information Commons
Initiative at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

ABSTRACT

The Art Information Commons Initiative at the Philadelphia Museum of Art aims to create a sustainable, institution-wide information culture that will benefit data creation, access, and preservation, and ultimately make our data more accessible to the public. Initial research for the initiative consisted of gathering together relevant projects and resources in the form of a flexible inventory. In the spirit of the commons, it is shared here to benefit the cultural heritage community at large, as well as to invite additional contributions.

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In 2018 the Philadelphia Museum of Art submitted a proposal to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to plan for what is currently known as the Art Information Commons. The goal is to “undergo an organization-wide transition to the holistic management of its collections related to data and . . . create a sustainable information culture . . . that spans the entire organization and will benefit data creation, access and preservation for years to come.”¹ This proposal came at a time when the Mellon Foundation was seeing a “pressing sector health concern,” that of “the lagging capacity within the museum field to build and sustain robust twenty-first-century knowledge management cultures.”² The foundation awarded the grant to “support a first-of-its-kind pilot effort to examine data integration potential across the museum’s various digital information resources—library and archives, curatorial and registrar files, collections and image databases, conservation records, and time-based acquisitions.”³ In essence, the museum is building a common space for the sharing of art information and resources.

A Brief History of Commons: Clapham Common



Fig. 2. Joseph Mallord William Turner (English, 1775–1851). *View on Clapham Common*, c. 1800, Oil on wood, 12 5/8 x 17 1/2 in. (32.1 x 44.5 cm). The Tate Gallery, London: N00468. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-view-on-clapham-common-n00468>



Fig. 3. John Thomson (Scottish, 1837–1921). *Photography on the Common*, 1877–78. Woodburytype, 2 1/4 x 3 5/16 in. (5.7 x 8.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Harvey S. Shipley Miller, 2014-199-2(3a,b). <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/332633.html#>

In England and the early colonies, a “commons” was a tract of land owned and used jointly by all the residents of a community. It belonged equally to and was shared alike by everyone. J. M. W. Turner’s *View on Clapham Common* depicts one of the rare locations where a local society for the preservation of a common was formed, in 1796.⁴ This is unusual because guidelines and protections for common spaces were not officially codified in England until the Commons Act of 1876. Up until that point, regulation of commons was based on undocumented practices and tradition. In the case of Clapham Common the “townspeople increasingly recognised the need

¹ Philadelphia Museum of Art, “Proposal for the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation,” June 20, 2018, p. 2.

² Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, “Report 2018: From January 1, 2018 through December 31, 2018,” p. 42, accessed July 18, 2019, https://mellon.org/media/filer_public/6b/6d/6b6d2f3f-8f85-42bd-a0df-957a9701475e/awmf_ar_2018.pdf

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ian Waites, *Common Land in English Painting, 1700–1850* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2012), p. 121.

for creating green recreational spaces”⁵ that would foster a “deepening consciousness of belonging together.”⁶ This notion that the creation of common spaces was important to the needs of the community is shared by most historians and common land activists, such as Silke Helfrich, who defines commons as the “managing and sharing collective resources which were given to us by nature, or which were produced collectively and not by only one person. That means that at the very heart of the commons is the notion of social relationships.”⁷

Through a gift from Harvey S. Shipley Miller in 2014, the Philadelphia Museum of Art acquired twenty-one unbound pages bearing twenty-two woodburytypes from the 1877 book *Street Life in London* by photographer John Thomson and journalist Adolphe Smith. Included in this gift is the image *Photography on the Common*, which depicts Clapham Common almost three-quarters of a century after Turner’s painting. It shows one of the many photographers working in the Common selling portrait sittings and is proof of the longevity of commons as a hub of community and industry.

Common Ground: Art Information Commons

How does this idea of common land principles relate to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Art Information Commons (AIC)? The creation of Clapham Common generated a space for sharing community resources, greater access to opportunities for recreation, and an atmosphere of invention as new fields of industry were encouraged. Thus, when we speak about the concept of an *Art Information Commons*, we are imagining a community forum, a laboratory space, and collective relationships that further the museum’s knowledge management, data strategies, best practices, and tools. We hope to create connections across our disciplines that will allow everyone, both internal and external to the museum, to make new discoveries and gain new understanding of our collections.



Fig. 4. William Britton (American, active c. 1820). *Market Square, Germantown, Pennsylvania*, c. 1820. Oil on canvas, 12 1/4 x 19 7/8 in. (31.1 x 50.5 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Collection of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1965-209-2. <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/60679.html>

Setting the Scene: Gathering the Environmental Scan

With the idea of commons in mind, the AIC team began by creating an environmental scan to examine projects, tools, and resources that other institutions were researching, exploring, successfully implementing, and using. We were curious about the lessons learned during those projects, at the same time we sought to identify guest speakers and others willing to act as

⁵ Ibid. p. 122.

⁶ Alan Everitt, ‘Country, Country and Town: Patterns of Regional Evolution in England’, in Peter Borsay (ed.), *The Eighteenth-Century Town: A Reader in English Urban History 1688—1820*, London: Longman, 1990. p. 112

⁷ Silke Helfrich, quoted in “An Interview with Silke Helfrich,” by Rob Hopkins, *Transition Culture*, October 2, 2012, accessed July 18, 2019, <https://www.transitionculture.org/2012/10/02/an-interview-with-silke-helfrich-we-have-to-reformulate-the-role-of-the-state-as-enabler-of-the-commons/>.

trainers and collaborators with whom we would share a common goal and resources. The information gathered is recorded as an inventory and loosely categorized. This scan is purposefully a “living” document intended to be in a state of flux as we learn more and as new resources are found and added. It is our hope that as the inventory is shared with a wider community, additional resources will be suggested and included for the benefit of the whole. The environmental scan is presented without analysis of the inventory, as our goal is to make these resources available to any institution, whether or not they are thinking about cultural transition and data integration. Internally, the initiative’s goal is to more deeply categorize the inventory to allow for filtering and sorting in order to help answer questions related to the AIC and the museum specifically. All members of the AIC team and consulting groups have contributed information to this scan. It should be noted that common schema and vocabulary are not listed in the survey, as most institutions are familiar with resources such as the Library of Congress Name Authority file and the Getty Authorities.

State of the Field: Environmental Scan

The environmental scan is a spreadsheet-type workbook divided into three tabs. Each sheet varies depending on the content, but all are organized alphabetically.

The first tab, *Purpose and Approach*, is the cover page. It briefly defines our intended goal and resource collection process, as well as repeats the call to action.

The second tab, *Projects and Resources*, gathers information about many relevant projects and toolkits. For example, the IIIF (International Image Interoperability Framework) is not just an API (Application Programming Interface) specification for interoperability, it is a collaboration among many institutions to help produce that framework and thus it is included in this section as a project. Each project name is listed along with a project summary, topic, technology, and focus keywords, people and/or institution(s) involved, and a URL if applicable.

The third tab, *General Resources and Readings*, lists resources not necessarily tied to a project but that are deemed relevant to our needs for future development. For example, several annual conferences for the benefit of professional development, articles referencing aspects of similar projects, and tools we might want to investigate for the future implementation stage are included. The resource name is listed along with the people who are associated with it, as well as two note fields and a URL if applicable. Each resource is labeled with keywords, one for *Category of Resource* and one for *Type of Resource*. *Category* keywords include, article/website, professional development, professional



Fig. 5. Maurice B. Prendergast (American, 1858–1924). *The Breezy Commons*, c. 1894–97. Color monotype on tin, cream, wove paper, 6 3/4 x 5 in. (17.1 x 12.7 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of the Friends of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1964-205-3. <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/246174.html>

organization, system/platform, or webinar/tutorial. *Type* keywords break down those categories further into conference/symposium, reading, research, resource, schema, and technology/tool.

Gathering at the Commons: Call to action

There is a wide range of expertise in our cultural heritage community and we welcome additions and updates to the scan.

To add projects, sources, readings, professional development opportunities, and other related topics email the details to Bree.Midavaine@philamuseum.org with the subject line <<**Environmental Scan Addition**>>. Include your name and preferred method of contact if you feel comfortable being contacted for more information regarding your submission.

View the Commons: Art Information Commons Environmental Scan

[Environmental Scan Documentation](#)

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