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THE WHOLE OF HER SERMON: CONNECTING PEOPLE TO ARCHIVES IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review and share the challenges and successes associated with efforts to bridge the distance between archives user populations and the digital surrogates of archives materials themselves while in a state of remote operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021.

I will examine various online outlets and platforms that allow archival repositories to connect with existing and new user populations and, based on visitor or user statistics, gauge the success or failure of a given vehicle. Approaches will include various social media platforms, web-based technologies, and augmented reality. I will examine in detail the visitorship before and during the pandemic for a singular platform, that being Omeka.

The analysis of various online outreach platforms demonstrates that when planned and executed effectively, digital or virtual archives outreach can increase user engagement by nearly fifty percent.

Even during a global pandemic, archivists can successfully reach a host of archives users, existing and new, and can not only meet their expectations but also exceed them in new and innovative ways.

Keywords: Digital archives; outreach; promotion; web-based technologies; virtual exhibitions

1 INTRODUCTION

Early in my career as an archivist, I adopted a mantra, of sorts; it is a quote from the 1921 book, *Howards End*, by E.M. Forster. Forster declares, "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer."² This quote has guided my archivist ethos for nearly twenty years and I believe that it has served me well. I only hope it has allowed me to serve others in meaningful ways.

This paper is primarily about telling the story of being in service to others -- of providing researchers with answers to their questions by connecting them to digitized archival materials, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic.

If there is one lesson to learn from COVID-19, then it is to leverage multiple, online vehicles, platforms, and channels to effectively promote the archives in our care, to sustain interest in them, and to connect successfully to our desired audiences. Archivists must be more creative than ever especially given imposed remote working operations competing with ongoing researcher expectations. Therefore, the need to connect creatively, consistently, and innovatively is as great as it has ever been. To make connections

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2 The entire quote reads, "Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die."

successfully, archivists must consider outreach avenues beyond the traditional outlets and platforms. This paper will introduce you to platforms ranging from the lesser to the more sophisticated technologies we use in FIT/SPARC and those from the most obvious to the most innovative...all in the effort only to connect.

2 LITERATURE OR THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OVERVIEW

Whether operating on-campus or remotely, the mission of FIT/SPARC remains the same: to foster original research across and beyond the FIT community by acquiring, preserving, and providing universal access to primary research materials including College archival records. Access comes in many forms. Especially exciting forms are via today's online channels.

Online outreach is not a new concept for archivists; while this is true, its development is ever changing and ongoing. As early as 2012, Arjun Sabharwal discussed developmental paradigms for successful virtual exhibitions including the need for "accurate historical representation, adequate descriptions and navigation, and Web accessibility" (Sabharwal, 2012, p. 11). Sabharwal continues to state prophetically that while at the time, virtual exhibitions were not yet part of traditional archives practice, they held the promise to be "cost-effective ways for...institutions to provide access to various artifacts, cultural heritage collections, and historical knowledge to visitors in remote locations" (Sabharwal, 2012, p. 9).

The concept is also discussed quite thoroughly in the 2013 paper by Emily A. Bowden entitled, "Archives Outreach in a Digital World: Promoting Digital Content Through Online Outreach Efforts." Almost a decade ago, Bowden commented that "online outreach efforts are increasingly important to the relevance of digital library and archives collections" (Bowden, 2013, Abstract). Relevance can be measured by many factors, not the least of which is how valuable archival content is to researcher interest. Little did Bowden and other archivists realize just how important such efforts would be less than ten years later during a global pandemic. What was an addendum to and growing trend in our archival practice became mission-critical almost overnight.

Outreach is defined by the Society of American Archivists (SAA) as "the process of identifying and providing services to constituencies with needs relevant to the repository's mission and tailoring services to meet those needs" (SAA, 2020a). Outreach might involve any of various methods of practice including and not limited to mounting exhibitions, conducting information literacy instruction, and engaging in collaborative programming.

Gemma Cattel goes further to say that "outreach is a vital component of any archive or library service's strategy, and this applies as much to digital archives created via digitisation as it does to physical ones" (Cattel, 2015).

Conceptually, outreach is adjacent to the notion of advocacy; SAA defines advocacy as "activities in which archivists and their allies engage to gain support for archival records, the institutions that manage these records, archivists, and the archives profession" (SAA, 2020b). By reaching out to myriad constituencies, archivists have the added opportunity to cultivate support of many types beyond that of visitorship and use of archival material.

Indeed, with the onset of the pandemic, many institutions found themselves also facing a new or exasperated economic crisis. Battle, Mobley, and Gilbert convincingly argue that "virtual outreach strategies are particularly crucial for these institutions at a time when operating budgets are often stagnant or shrinking, despite increasing demands for accessing greater and more diverse audiences" (Battle, Mobley, and Gilbert, 2016, p. 35).

Cultural institutions, including archival repositories, must always be at the ready to employ ever more engaging technologies to cultivate a following of visitors and supporters, financial and otherwise. To achieve this goal, archivists must be willing to test and explore uncharted technological territories. It appears they have been doing just that. In their chapter, "Experience Design for the Humanities: Activating Multiple Interpretations," Ruecker and Roberts-Smith stated that to "enhance the experiences of their audiences, cultural and educational institutions have been leaders in adopting emerging technologies to provide context for the cultural content they offer" (Ruecker and Roberts-Smith, 2017, p. 3). This bodes well for both the institutions and their supporters, regardless of their physical proximity to one another.

As recently as February 2020, the importance of online advocacy and outreach was the subject of a substantive paper from the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries of Illinois or CARLI; the paper entitled, "Guidelines for the Promotion of Digital Collections: Best Practices for Promotion and Marketing" focuses in-depth on social media outlets as means of digital archives promotion and outreach. What is especially valuable about this source is its emphasis on the audience(s) for various platforms and the sustainability of the tools themselves. CARLI also states an important point, that being, "attempting to promote all collections to a general audience on a single platform, however, is not the most effective approach" (CARLI, 2020, pg. 4). Therefore, employing multiple vehicles and considering their specific appeal to targeted audiences is recommended.

Even more recently, and right in the middle of the pandemic, Clerkin and Taylor note that physical inaccessibility gives closed institutions' digital apparatuses "a sudden, out-sized importance: seeking to maintain public access to their intellectual and collections resources, [cultural institutions] scrambled to go remote, relying on existing digital infrastructures, accelerating in-process digital projects, and trying new online behaviors" (Clerkin and Taylor, 2021, pg. 165).

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

While it is clear that virtual and/or online endeavors are now mission-critical, it is not enough simply to reach out; archivists can make a best effort day and night but to what effect? Archivists must also gauge the success and effectiveness of their efforts. Because of the sophistication of certain platforms, varied and detailed analysis can be cultivated by using analytical mechanisms built into online outreach tools.

Below, I wish to share the example of FIT/SPARC's analysis of its Omeka instance's use, which we employ for online images, collections, and exhibitions, all hosting digitized or born-digital archives assets. Collectively, these online resources are what we call SPARC Digital.³

We are able to analyze visitorship to SPARC Digital via Google Analytics (GA). GA can be manipulated in dozens of ways to display a variety of data. My interest for the purpose of this paper is to get an overall sense of visitorship to the site before and then during COVID-19 remote work operations. GA allows one to display myriad data points and with beginning and end date parameters.

My first date range for the purpose of analysis was 17 March 2019 through 16 March 2020, the last calendar year my unit was operating under normal circumstances. The second date range was 17 March 2020 through 18 January 2021, the date I am writing this part of my paper. During this range, my unit operated almost completely remotely.

3 <https://sparcdigital.fitnyc.edu/>

4 RESULTS

Results of my Omeka instance analysis are meaningful and illustrated by Figs. 1 and 2 below. The number of visitors increased a total of 56.56 %. Visitors are defined as those who have initiated at least one session during an established date range. The total number of new users was a nearly identical 56.55%. New users are defined as those who are first-time visitors during an established date range. Also pleasing was the increase in the number of sessions, which rose by a very healthy 57.97%. A session is defined as a period time a user is actively engaged with a website or any similar tool. Also noteworthy is the fact that the date range in the first analysis was twelve months or an entire calendar year. The second analysis is for a mere ten months, which were worked in nearly complete remote operations.

Fig. 1: Screenshot of FIT/SPARC Digital/Omeka analysis for March 17, 2019-March 16, 2020 (photo: Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY)

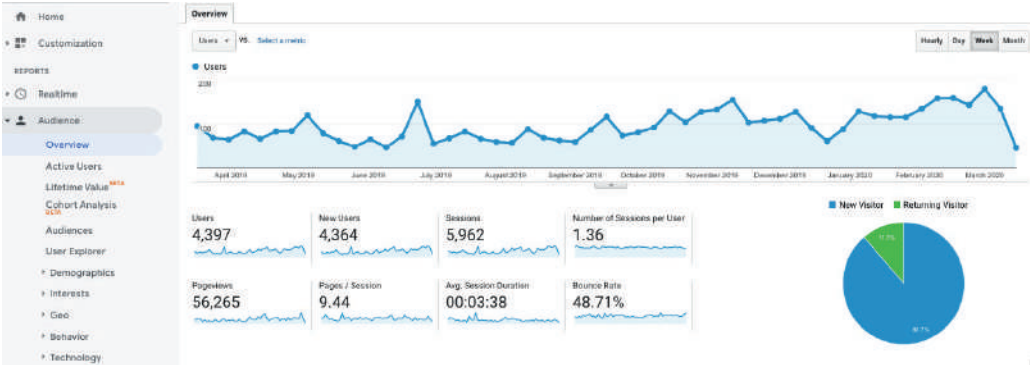
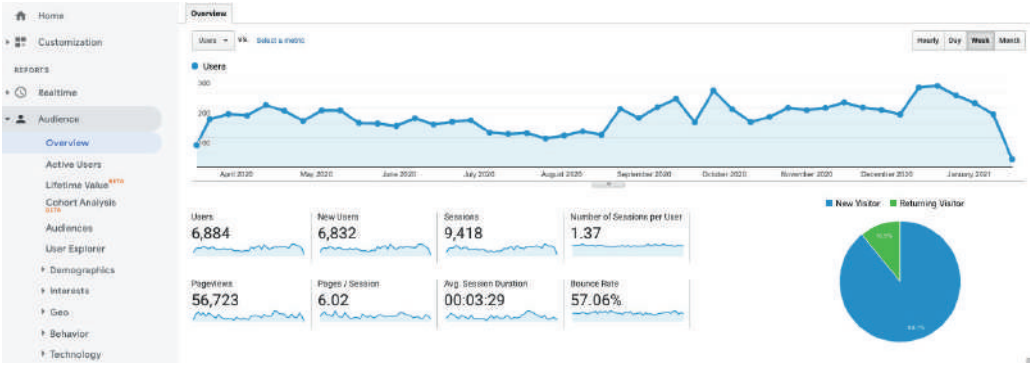


Fig. 2: Screenshot of FIT/SPARC Digital/Omeka analysis for March 17, 2020-January 18, 2021 (photo: Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY)



5 DISCUSSION

While the channel I have discussed thus far demonstrates to be very effective when attempting to connect to researchers, "it is worth noting that an outreach strategy employing a mix of complimentary channels will deliver the best [outreach] results" (Catel, 2020). I will discuss these in the following sections.

5.1 SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS

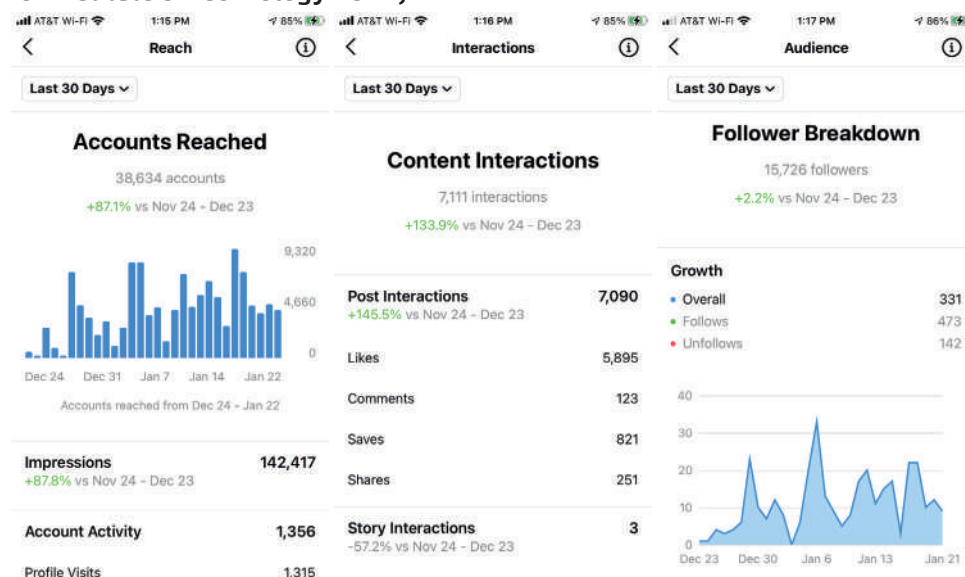
Perhaps the most obvious and traditional outlets for online outreach are those of the social media sphere. "Social media is an effective way to promote digital collections" and

engage many new and different audiences (CARLI, 2020, p. 8). However, the question for archivists is less a matter of if you employ these, but rather more a matter of how active, effective, and strategic you are with these channels. "Social media platforms allow you to build an audience through a variety of interactions" (CARLI, 2020, p. 4). Therefore, archivists are only limited by their imaginations when employing these online vehicles to connect to their use populations.

As for FIT/SPARC, we use, from the most to the least active: Instagram, [fitspecialcollections](https://blog.fitnyc.edu/materialmode/); WordPress/Blog, <https://blog.fitnyc.edu/materialmode/>; Facebook: @SpecialCollections; and Twitter: @SPARCFIT.

Our **Instagram**⁴ instance is the most active of all our social media platforms. We deliver a new post nearly every day and to date, we have posted 1,088 times. At the time of this writing, we have 15,700 followers. Instagram provides rich analytics (which it calls "Insights") so we can learn various points of statistical interest including and not limited to accounts reached (Fig. 3); content interactions (Fig. 4); and follower breakdown (Fig. 5).

Figs. 3-5: Screenshots of FIT/SPARC Instagram Insights for January 23, 2021(photo: Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY)



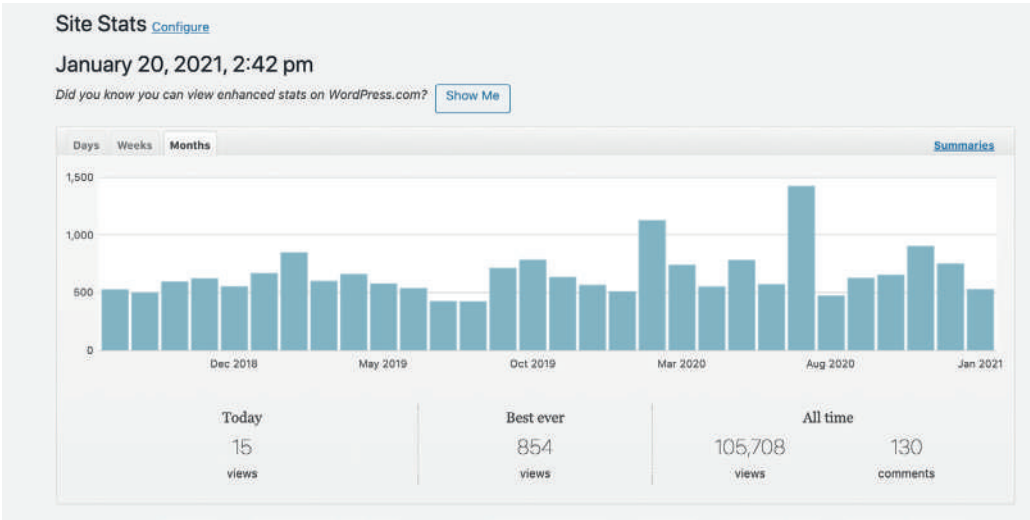
Our **blog**, entitled, "Material Mode,"⁵ is hosted by Wordpress⁶ and is very well received. Most contributions are offered by FIT/SPARC Associates, who are fashion historians and/or digital archivists. This platform allows our Associates' writing to shine as it provides for lengthier and more robust content per post. As of this writing, "Material Mode" has been viewed by nearly 106,000 community members.

⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/fitspecialcollections/>

⁵ <https://blog.fitnyc.edu/materialmode/>

⁶ <https://wordpress.com/>

Fig. 6: Screenshot of FIT/SPARC “Material Mode” analytics for January 20, 2021(photo: Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY)



Our **Facebook** and **Twitter** instances are the least active online outreach channels; however, I would like to see greater momentum with their use in the future. Currently, we have 2,604 Facebook community members and 1,672 Twitter followers. Due to our inactivity with these platforms, the number of impressions, visits, and follows have remained relatively flat over time.

5.2 WEB-BASED TECHNOLOGY: OMEKA

An original endeavor to plan and install a physical exhibition on the FIT campus was sidelined with the onset of the pandemic. So, in response, I planned and coordinated an online exhibition that incorporated still and dynamic content as well as augmented reality, which I will discuss more in-depth in a moment. Prior to the pandemic, FIT/SPARC staff already employed an Omeka-supported online, digital content delivery space. With the postponement of the aforementioned physical exhibition, I decided to push Omeka's limits with the installation of the exhibition entitled, *Max Meyer and A. Beller & Co.: Interpreting a Hidden History of NYC's Garment District*.⁷

According to its creators, "'Omeka' is a Swahili word meaning to display or layout wares; to speak out; to spread out; to unpack...it signifies the practices that Omeka helps its users to do with digital content and through building digital projects for online communities" (Corporation for Digital Scholarship, 2020).

From 27 February through 01 December 2020, online exhibition planners, designers, and otherwise contributors met on a weekly basis to consider all aspects of what the show should deliver to visitors. This exhaustive exhibition was launched on 07 December 2020. What do I mean by exhaustive? With the aid of faculty-librarian colleagues, Prof. Joseph Anderson and Prof. Miyo Sandlin, I requested as much performance as technology at our disposal would allow for a complete online exhibition experience.

7 <https://sparcdigital.fitnyc.edu/exhibits/show/meyer-beller>

As one navigates the exhibition, one finds an immersive online environment enhanced with augmented reality; it also will eventually offer a 3D component as well. The coat in Fig. 9 will be captured with 3D rendering technology via a series of cameras. This capture's resulting image will allow visitors to experience the coat fully in the round and from dozens of vantage points. Again, using augmented reality, one will be able to view the 1920s coat as if it were in the same space as the visitor. I discuss these technologies in more detail below.

5.3 WEB-BASED TECHNOLOGY: VOICETHREAD

When COVID-19 first began its devastation, sending my colleagues and me into fully remote operations practically overnight, all FIT Gladys Marcus Library unit leaders, including me, were charged with creating online tutorials and orientations to be sure that even while operating remotely, the library, its faculty-librarians, and its staff would remain relevant to our user communities within and beyond the university. I opted to use VoiceThread⁸ technology given its inherent collaborative nature.

A "VoiceThread" is defined as "a collaborative, multimedia slide show that holds images, documents, and videos and allows people to navigate slides and leave comments in 5 ways - using voice (with a mic or telephone), text, audio file, or video (via a webcam)" (State University of New York-Polytechnic Institute, 2021).

Depending on one's delivery method, VoiceThread visitors can be very participatory and offer comments or even be given editing privileges. I make our final version VoiceThread slide shows available via my unit's YouTube channel⁹, which, as yet another social media platform, extends even further the reach of content to ever more and diverse researchers.

5.4 WEB-BASED TECHNOLOGY: SPRINGSHARE

Another web-based platform we use is provided by the source Springshare.¹⁰ The online outreach tool we employ from them is LibGuide.¹¹ At this site, visitors can locate instructions for navigating nearly all that FIT/SPARC has to offer including answers to frequently asked questions, many of our online archives finding aids, and more. In short, it serves as a primer to the unit's operations, services, and products.

Springshare helps information professionals, including archivists, operate more strategically in what it refers to as a "digital-first world" by empowering them to provide enhanced service to users (Springshare, 2020a). With the LibGuide mechanism, information professionals can curate resources, share content, provide answers to most often asked questions, engage a larger community of users, and, even better, analyze the use of various tools and services (Springshare, 2020b).

In Fig. 7, readers will see view count statistics for our FIT/SPARC LibGuide from September 2019 through September 2020.

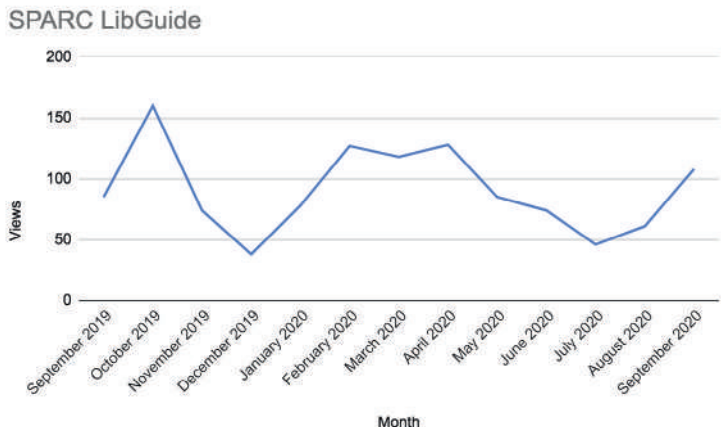
8 <https://voicethread.com/>

9 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCR0yYv90yF6thjr1nQVfhnw>

10 <https://www.springshare.com/>

11 <https://fitnyc.libguides.com/sparc>

Fig. 7: FIT/SPARC LibGuide view counts, September 2019 through September 2020 (photo: Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY)



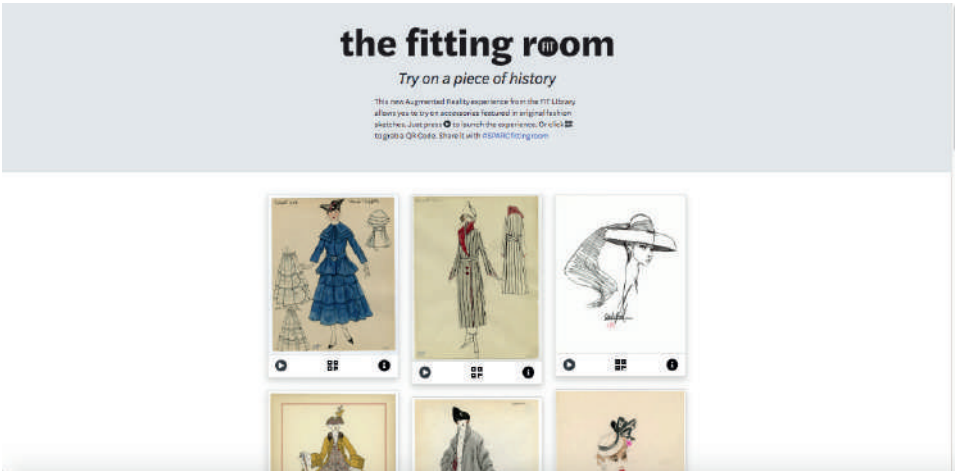
5.5 AUGMENTED REALITY: ZAPWORKS

The FITting Room¹² is an augmented reality (AR) experience that allows visitors to virtually “try on” rare and even unique holdings from the archival material my staff and I care for. The landing page is seen in Fig. 8 below.

Built using the ZapWorks Studio¹³ platform, this AR experience helps to bring historical source material nearly to life. Visitors can virtually try on accessories such as hats, scarves, and/or earrings, which are featured in FIT/SPARC original fashion sketches and illustrations by legendary artists.

ZapWorks Studio enables archivists and others “to create fully-customisable AR, VR and MR experiences across print, product, packaging, retail, events and much more” (Zapworks, 2021).

Fig. 8: Screenshot of FIT-SUNY FITting Room website (photo: Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY)



12 <https://fittingroom.fitnyc.edu/>

13 <https://zap.works/studio/>

5.6 3D-RENDERING TECHNOLOGY: 3DCOPYSYSTEMS

An even more sophisticated technology required me to engage with FIT's DTech Lab.¹⁴ This lab is an extension of FIT's Innovation Center; it is a true laboratory where FIT students, faculty, and external industry partners collaborate to advance new ideas, solve real-world problems, and inspire interdisciplinary research. Its mission is to partner with others, like me, using the most sophisticated and innovative technologies such as those found at 3dcopysystems.¹⁵ The garment you see in Fig. 9 is one of fourteen featured garments in the online SPARC Digital exhibition mentioned earlier.

Fig. 9: Evening Coat, circa 1920s, European or American, silk, metallic thread embroidery, School of Graduate Studies, Department of Fashion and Textile Studies, Garment Study Collection, F.2016.16, FIT (photo: D. Paterson, 2020)



The Big ALICE studio¹⁶ is the largest photogrammetric object-capturing mechanism of 3Dcopysystems' product catalogue (3Dcopysystems, 2021). All told, the studio consists of sixty-four individual cameras; it provides not only enough space for up to 6 people, should your project require such capacity, but also it offers an extremely high resolution of capture. High resolution helps to ensure a high quality of any associated texture, which plays a very important role in capturing textiles and delivering extraordinary and realistic results.

14 <https://dtech.fitnyc.edu/webflow/index.html>

15 <https://3dcopysystems.com/>

16 <https://3dcopysystems.com/big-alice/>

Fig. 10: Image of the Big ALICE studio (photo: 3Dcopysystems, 2021)



Ultimately, the coat's 3D file will be embedded within the online exhibition space for a full, in-the-round experience of the garment for visitors.

6 CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, online outreach via various means, including digital or virtual exhibitions, has a rich history and is mission-critical to our present and future successful archives practice. Almost a decade ago, an ever-growing "demand and support for digitized content...paved the way for local, regional, national, and global collaboration on developing digital collections, metadata schémas, and preservation standards to share content and metadata" across operating units and certainly beyond. "Virtual exhibitions represent one of the outcomes of these trends" (Sabharwal, 2012, p. 8).

Only connect! That has been the whole of my sermon for nearly twenty years and has been my foremost message in this paper. It is worth repeating that it is not enough to make an effort to reach out to and hopefully connect to researchers. Archivists must not only employ innovative online outreach methods but also measure their effectiveness, meaning both those of the archivists as well as the tools at their disposal. With today's tools and their associated analytical means of effectiveness measures, archivists can know with little doubt if they are meeting their online outreach objectives and successfully and meaningfully connecting to researchers.

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