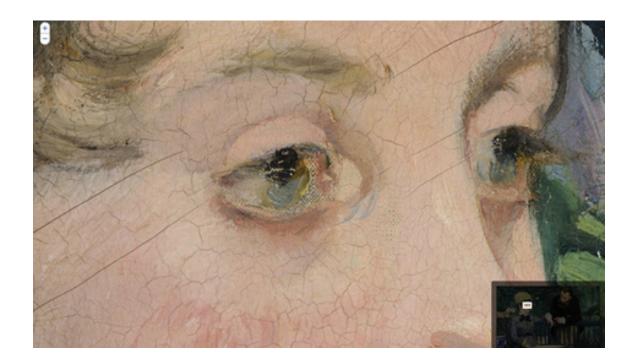
Hype and Hyperreality: Zooming in on Google Art Project

by <u>Ben Davis</u> 10/02/11 11:44 AM EST



Only a technology company could launch an art story as big as the one Google did last week with its <u>Google Art Project</u>. News that Google had uploaded whole wings of the world's most famous museums onto the Web had gadget freaks everywhere suddenly caring who <u>Juan Gris</u> and František Kupka were.

For myself, the obvious thing to say is that the Google Art Project — or GAP, as I like to call it — actually consists of two relatively autonomous parallel initiatives. One involves Google's effort to apply its Street View technology to the 17 participating institutions, which include New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art; London's National Gallery and Tate; and Madrid's Museo Reina Sofia and Thyssen-Bornemisza. This feature is, well, a lot like being able to look at a museum using Google Street View. Everything has that kind of woozy, warped look that makes me think of flashbacks in crime movies. I keep waiting to catch the image of a body in the reflection of one of the paintings.

The second feature of the GAP is a library of hundreds of zoomable, high-resolution images of paintings (and a few sculptures) from the various participating collections. These you view by clicking a little "+" icon that appears when you mouse over the paintings in Street View, which then switches you over into an entirely separate viewing mode. As Roberta Smith pointed out in her thoughtful exploration of the GAP, online zoomable images are not really so new or novel for museums. But the new standard set by the sheer amount of zoomable surface in the ultra-detailed "gigapixel" renderings of 17 spotlighted paintings — one from each of the participating institutions — is the game-changer here.

It's not just that zooming allows you to pick out details that you would have missed otherwise, though this is definitely true. You can discover the powdery orange dots Manet puts into the irises of the woman populating his "In the Conservatory" (at Berlin's Alte Nationalgalerie), or dive into the scaly waves behind Botticelli's "Venus" (from the Uffizi), or even inspect the cracks in the paint that mar Marie Antoinette's perfect face in Vigée-Lebrun's famous Versailles portrait.

At about half of the magnification allowed for by the gigapixel versions, the new intimacy already brings to mind Maurice Denis's proto-modernist maxim that "a picture — before being a war horse, a nude, or an anecdote of some sort — is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order." Even the most detailed realist work rendered at this level of zoom reads as a collection of painterly tricks and feints. You can see, for instance, that the junction where a flower stem passes into the water of a glass vase in Hans Holbein's "Merchant" is far from photographic, suggested by a few ingenious dashed white lines.

But that is at just 50 percent magnification. Continuing to zoom in, you pass through modernist aesthetic self-consciousness and into full postmodern aesthetic disintegration. At total zoom, in effect, you are gazing across the surface not just as the painter himself might have gazed upon it, but actually at a level at which *not even the artist himself could have experienced his own work*. You don't just look at Whistler's stylish signature up close in the Freer's "Princess from the Land of Porcelain"; you can gaze through it, to the spots of the canvas peeking through beneath. These images aren't just surrogates for the real thing; they actually give you access to more detail than a casual encounter with the real thing might (without the assistance of a good magnifying glass, of course).

In this sense, you might say that the GAP's virtualized paintings offer up a textbook case of the "hyperreal," a term popularized by thinkers Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco to describe representations that are more vivid than the things they represent. For both Baudrillard and Eco, this notion had a negative overtone, associated as it was with these European philosophers' sense that the American love affair with science and technology, amplified by the U.S.'s global hegemony, was breaking down some older sense of stable cultural value. Disneyland's imaginary landscapes — or even the Getty's art conservation practices — became a target for their vaguely apocalyptic musings.

A hint of the uneasiness about "hyperreality" recurs in the way that the <u>first flood of reaction to Google's art initiative</u> has focused on the question of whether or not it might replace the need to go to a museum. Such preoccupations say more about contemporary insecurities about art museums as degraded cathedrals of tourism than they do about what Google is up to here — though there is something touching about the idea of critics heroically defending the honor of the actual object against its technological clone. (Speaking on a <u>Sotheby's panel about art and technology</u> alongside a Google VP — shortly before the GAP launched — Met chieftain Thomas Campbell himself engaged in a spirited defense of the virtues of inthe-flesh art experience.) Obviously, nifty digital simulations of famous art are first and foremost a great ad for the artworks themselves. They are bound to expand interest, not dim it.

The question to explore is not whether the GAP replaces the experience of seeing real masterpieces, but how it alters it. Having seen <u>Salvador Dali</u>'s iconic melting clocks blown up across the walls of a thousand college dorm rooms, fans are often stunned to discover that the real "Persistence of Memory" at MoMA is actually quite tiny, almost a miniature. Widespread photographic reproduction has granted Dali's clocks a stature that has arguably amplified the image's tremendous psychic power, thereby transforming our relation to the original. In the future, our expectations of our non-virtual Old Masters will be affected too if the hyperreal level of detail of the Google Art Project becomes the standard. We will be trained to see totally new things in them, and likely experience the originals altogether differently. Yes, in the future, we will all have to mind the GAP.

Interventions is a weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis@artinfo.com.