SmARThistory

Website is like a virtual art history book

Artists, being creative by nature, always have been early adapters of new technology. From the first Neanderthal who used charcoal from the fire to draw on cave walls, to Renaissance painters who used a camera obscura to capture the likeness of their subjects, to contemporary artists using computers to create images, visual artists always have used new technology in ways that it wasn't designed for.

This blending of art and science has been especially dramatic in the age of computers. Graphic design, photography, moviemaking, animation and even fine art have been transformed by digital tools.

The impact has spread beyond the artists to virtually everyone. Television, movies, books, magazines, mobile phones and devices, the Internet, and the software and apps used to interact with them are all shaped to a large degree by visual artists.

Industry leaders, like the late Steve Jobs, teamed engineers with artists to create devices that could not only perform amazing feats but also look and feel good while doing it.

Art and technology

It seems only fitting that since modern technology owes a lot of its success to artists, it should be used to teach people about art. That's just what **smarthistory.org** does, billing itself as a free, nonprofit, multimedia, art history textbook.

The site is a nice resource for students, teachers or anyone who has an interest in the history of art. Using modern technology, the site explores art ranging from seashell jewelry created nearly 100,000 years ago to dissident artist Ai Weiwei's Internet postings criticizing the Chinese government.

An interactive timeline of art history is the main element on the homepage. Clicking on a period, such as the Medieval Era or the Age of Post-Colonialism reveals a series of thumbnail images of art of that time. Clicking on an image takes you to a page with a larger version of the picture, as well as information on the artist and the significance of the work.

Moving pictures

Many of the pages also have videos featuring art historians discussing the works of art. Some pages have only a video with no written decription, which I find annoying. With text you easily can skim it or re-read a section, something that's a little more difficult with video.

There are four tabs at the top of the site that allow you to search for artwork based on time, style, the artist or themes. There's also a search field that allows you to type in specific queries.

Other areas on the site include an "About" section, a blog and a complete list of the site's videos. An iTunes link takes you to Smarthistory podcasts. An RSS link allows you to subscribe to the podcasts.

Smarthistory encourages user participation and actively seeks contributions from artists, art historians, critics and fans. Contributions can take the form of text, audio, video, photos or just suggestions. Photos will appear on Smarthistory's Flickr group page. There are prominent links to it throughout the site.

Another section is geared toward teachers. There are tools and tips, such as sample syllabi and study groups, educators can use to create content for their classes.

Smarthistory also has an app, with more under development, available at Apple's App Store. The apps are designed to act as tour guides that deliver art analysis to travelers.

Not quite a masterpiece

The site has a mostly clean design, with the exception of a cluttered area at the bottom of the home page. A subtle color palette, good typography and simple, logical navigation combine to make using the site a mostly pleasant experience.

There are a few glitches on the site that keep it from feeling polished and professional. I came across numerous typographical errors in the text, mainly in the form of missing spaces between words.

Some of the writing could use some tighter editing as well. An article on Caravaggio's painting depicting the entombment of Christ was full of exclamation points, bolded words, phrases written in all capital letters and italicized "Ewwww's" and "Ick's" which tended to diminish its scholarly credentials.

An inconsistency in the amount and caliber of information available for different works of art prevents the site from being a replacement for a good art history textbook. But Smarthistory is still engaging with lots of good information.

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