

Museum Loan Network

The Museum Loan Network (MLN) facilitates the long-term loan of art and objects of cultural heritage among US institutions as a way to enhance museums' installations and enable them to better serve their communities. With the help of MLN grant programs, museums can improve their response to the increasing public demand for installations that are relevant to a broad range of age groups and cultural heritages and can provide better artistic, cultural, and historical contexts for works on display. MLN's programs also foster collaboration between institutions of different sizes and disciplines throughout the United States through the sharing of objects among various types of museums. Initiated in collaboration with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts, MLN is administered by MIT's Office of the Arts.

Program Development

The program continues to emphasize collaboration and the building of networked resources, and it continues to reap benefits from a meeting series it hosted in 2000 called "Museum as Catalyst for Interdisciplinary Collaboration." Museums, Composers, and Communities (MCC), a collaborative program with the American Composers Forum, afforded museums an opportunity to work with composers and create new music for their communities. The most recent MCC project was completed in fall 2004 in Cedar Rapids, IA, in conjunction with the exhibit *Art in Roman Life: Villa to Grave*, as Andrew Simpson's composition *Four Views of Pompeii* was performed by members of the Cedar Rapids Symphony.

Through MCC, MLN created new models for interdisciplinary collaboration and enhanced the quality of MLN projects involved in those partnerships. Continuing in the same vein, in spring 2004 MLN launched a pilot program to facilitate and support partnerships between museums and public television stations. The initiative was developed in tandem with the National Center for Outreach (NCO), an entity funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The program made it possible for public television representatives to travel with MLN travel grantees from Atlanta, GA, and Fresno, CA, as they visited institutions to identify objects for possible loan. The values shared by museums and public television stations create unique opportunities for these institutions to develop innovative ways to blend museum and television assets to better serve their communities.

In winter 2004, MLN initiated a project entitled Energizing the Study of Early American Art. Funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, the goal of the initiative is to facilitate study of early American art, promote collections sharing, strengthen existing museum networks, and foster new long-term relationships between colleagues in the field. This unique opportunity will allow scholars in early American art to study hundreds of examples and to clarify the direction and focus of their research with the aid of the dependable and functional MLN Directory. Through the directory and scholarly dialogue, the project will create a new locus of activity for the study of early American art.

In January 2005 MLN launched an initiative entitled *Collecting Stories: Connecting Objects*, funded in part by the Nathan Cummings Foundation. The goal of this initiative is to develop collective strategies and promote the practice of museum-community collaboration by connecting communities with collections. This project will allow museums to play a vital role in the life of the community and to expand the experience and understanding of cultural heritage, energizing both the communities and the exhibiting institutions. The project will result in the development of an online toolkit and methodology to encourage a community-focused cataloging process, which MLN hopes will deepen the community's understanding of a museum's objects, their meaning, and their relationship to the issues and experiences of the people and cultures they represent.

Website

The online MLN Directory provides a practical means of identifying objects of cultural heritage available for long-term loan to eligible museums throughout the United States. It now contains 14,266 objects, of which 10,451 have visuals. MLN continues to keep track of the number of hits on the directory and on specific object entries, as well as the number of times each museum with a password has accessed the directory. Since January 2000, these 402 museums have logged on to the directory 1,983 times, and approximately 20,224 hits have occurred on over 6,804 individual records.

MLN continues to develop virtual exhibitions on its home page. Designed in conjunction with MIT's Academic Media Production Services, these virtual tours not only provide visual models that help museums understand how to utilize MLN creatively, but also stimulate public interest in the arts and provide greater access to museums' hidden permanent collections. One new online exhibition has been established on the website in conjunction with *Art in Roman Life: Villa to Grave*. MLN maintains a feature on the website that allows users to search and sort the 380 grants MLN has given since 1996 by grant type, institution, location, date, and award amount.

Press and Promotion

MLN continues to distribute a newly formatted and designed general brochure that was created in summer 2003. The brochure, *Looking to the Future*, which outlines the program's vision for the next years, was produced and distributed in fall 2004, and a publication documenting the first 10 years of MLN, entitled *Connecting: Ten Years of Lessons Learned through the Museum Loan Network*, is in development and will be published in 2006.

The MLN director and/or a program associate attended and in some cases lectured about the program and related issues at the following meetings: the American Association of Museums annual conference in Indianapolis, IN; the NCO annual conference in Boston, MA; the Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums annual meeting in Philadelphia, PA; the American Association for State and Local History conference in St. Louis, MO; the Corporation for Public Broadcasting annual development conference in Orlando, FL; and *Museum Collections on the Move*, a conference organized by the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage and cosponsored by the European Union, in The Hague, Netherlands.

Grants

In previous years MLN has awarded three types of grants to eligible nonprofit institutions in the United States: travel grants, survey grants, and implementation grants. In 2005, however, it began focusing exclusively on travel and survey grants. Since its inception in 1995, MLN has awarded 380 grants totaling nearly \$5.8 million to 229 institutions in 51 states and territories. MLN grants have been awarded to institutions of all sizes, ranging from a museum with a budget of \$25,000 in a county with a population of 2,600 to an institution with a budget of \$52 million in a county with a population of 5.4 million. At the April 2005 Advisory Committee meeting and the May 2005 Luce-funded meeting on Energizing the Study of Early American Art, 38 grants totaling \$293,857 were recommended for approval by MIT to provide funding to museums throughout the country, six of which are located at universities. These awards will facilitate the sharing of a diverse array of objects among museums that differ in size and discipline.

Survey grants will allow for a variety of objects to be added to the MLN Directory. These objects include American 19th and early 20th century drawings and watercolors from the National Academy Museum, New York, NY; objects documenting Japanese American life during World War II from the Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles, CA; glass-plate negatives of Charleston photographer George W. Johnson (1858-1934) from the Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, SC; English earthenware and stoneware dating to the colonial and early federal periods in America from Winterthur, An American Country Estate, Winterthur, DE; Yoruban objects from the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California–Berkeley, CA; and Woodlands Indians beadwork from the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, Evanston, IL.

Travel grants enable museum personnel to travel to other institutions to investigate objects for long-term loan. A grant to the Anchorage Museum of History and Art in Anchorage, AK, will allow staff from that institution to travel to the New Bedford Whaling Museum (New Bedford, MA) to explore objects relating to the history of whaling. Staff from the Museum of Anthropology, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC, will travel to the Regina Quick Center for the Arts at St. Bonaventure University (NY), the Field Museum (IL), and the University of Pennsylvania Museum to explore the loan of ancient Mayan materials. Personnel of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis, IN, will travel to the National Museum of the American Indian to survey objects to be integrated into Eiteljorg's Native American galleries. Two travel grantees participated in the MLN/NCO pilot program described above by inviting local public television representatives to their institutions to initiate collaborations.

Future Plans

Following up on the June 3, 2004 meeting in which MLN brought together key leaders in the fields of art, culture, and philanthropy for a forum entitled "Collaborating with Communities: Connecting through Collections," MLN will continue to work with consultants Wolf, Keens & Co. to ensure future sustainability and diversify its funding base. Priorities for the next year include further development of the two new initiatives

described above, Energizing the Study of Early American Art and Collecting Stories: Connecting Objects.

Personnel Changes

Michael Houlihan was hired as administrative assistant in February 2005.

Lori Gross

Director

More information about the Museum Loan Network can be found online at <http://loanet.mit.edu/>.