

Museum Loan Network

From 1995 to 2007, MIT's Museum Loan Network (MLN) encouraged museums to collaborate on interdisciplinary projects that would make objects of cultural heritage more accessible and understandable to the public. More than a decade of innovative partnerships in 51 states and territories resulted from the awarding of approximately 400 grants and \$6 million to institutions throughout the United States. Through research and discovery on the MLN directory of nearly 20,000 objects, museums improved their relationships with the public, creating relevant exhibitions drawn from objects representing more than 1,000 cultures and hundreds of museums.

MLN supported projects intended to widen the ways in which museums interpret artifacts. "Collecting Stories: Connecting Objects" and its accompanying website, created with MIT's technological resources, is an initiative designed to engage communities with museums by connecting oral histories with cultural objects. "Energizing the Study of Early American Art" supported the cataloging of hundreds of artworks and trained students in museum techniques. MLN publications *Museum as Catalyst for Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Beginning a Conversation* and *Sharing Connections: A Decade of the Museum Loan Network* continue to inspire educators, scholars, museum staff, and trustees throughout the globe with stories of successful and ground-breaking partnerships.

Initiated in 1995 by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts, MLN was administered by MIT from its inception to 2007. Additional funds from the Henry Luce Foundation, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Program Chase, and the Kress Foundation allowed and encouraged MLN to foster a spirit of generosity, creativity, and learning between museums and communities throughout the US.

Program Development and Transition

After more than a decade facilitating the work of museums in communities around the country, MLN is taking the next step to influence future generations of museum professionals by combining its resources with those of the John Nicholas Brown Center for the Study of American Civilization, Brown University's center for public humanities. MIT provided the ideal home for MLN's first decade, and Brown University is perfectly matched for MLN's future challenges. MLN will be based at the John Nicholas Brown Center, and its database will be administered by the Brown University Library Center for Digital Initiatives. This new relationship represents a continuation of the ground-breaking partnerships for which MLN has been recognized since its beginnings. The dynamic partnership between two major foundations, the Knight Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts, combined with the extraordinary resources of MIT, allowed MLN's impact and influence to develop rapidly. Combining the organization created at MIT with the potential of Brown University attests to the generosity and vision of both academic institutions and their understanding of the power of partnership.

The process for deciding on Brown University and the implementation of the transition were thorough and involved MLN advisors, MIT administrators, noteworthy museum professionals, grantees, and funders. Although the original funders no longer support

MLN, they were an important part of the dialogue. The funders were gratified to learn that the work so superbly initiated at MIT would be sustained. As Knight Foundation president Alberto Ibargüen remarked, “Lee Hills, the late chair of Knight Foundation’s board and the visionary leader who inspired the Museum Loan Network, would be pleased to see it find such an appropriate new home at Brown.”

Brown University’s Public Humanities Program, directed by MIT alumnus Steven Lubar, trains students in interdisciplinary methods of work in cultural organizations. MLN and its directory will connect the Brown program with museums and other graduate training programs in cultural heritage by providing a shared set of resources for study and exploration. Along with the MLN Directory and other virtual assets, the MLN archives have been transferred to Brown so that scholars and researchers can study the network, which represents a snapshot of the museum world from 1995 to 2007.

For more than a decade, MLN has benefited from MIT’s technological expertise and supportive arts environment. At Brown University, MLN will be able to expand its mission and influence the next generation of museum professionals while continuing its vital work with the museum community.

Conferences, Publications, and Lectures

Director Lori Gross attended and was a member of the planning committee for the international symposium *Museums Matter: A Tribute to Steven Weil*, held in Victoria, Canada, in September 2007. Also, she attended the American Association of Museums conference and was a member of the planning committee for the Grantmakers in the Arts conference held in Boston. She lectured on the Museum Loan Network at the New England Museums Association conference for university museums and galleries, to graduate students at Brown University’s public humanities series, and at the annual Council for the Arts meeting at MIT.

Personnel Changes

Lori Gross, founding director of the Museum Loan Network, resigned from her position on June 30, 2007, and was appointed to the position of director of arts initiatives and advisor to the associate provost at MIT effective July 1, 2007. She will remain as an advisor to MLN after its transition to Brown University.

Lori Gross
Director

More information about the Museum Loan Network can be found at <http://www.brown.edu/mln/>.