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# Creating a Unified Web Site for The Getty

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## **Abstract**

AM+A designed the current look and feel of the J. Paul Getty Trust Web site (getty.edu).

## **Keywords**

Website unification, museum, art exploration, online art exhibit, redesign, information architecture, user profile, persona, visual design, user interface, user experience, branding, subsites, color coding

## **Industry/category**

Cultural institution, museum, education, public website

## **Project statement**

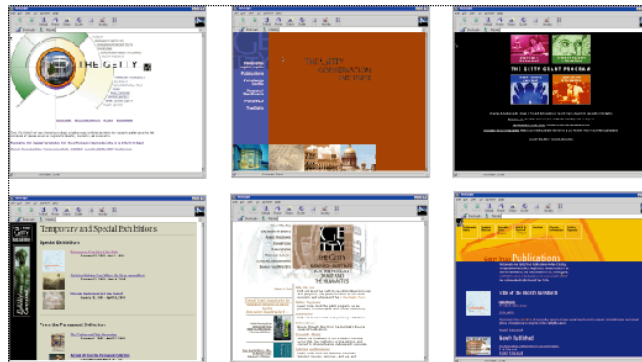
The J. Paul Getty Trust is an international cultural and philanthropic institution devoted to the visual arts. While most people are familiar with the Getty Center museum in Los Angeles, the Trust is in fact composed of several institutes, including the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Research Institute, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Getty Grant Program.

Besides hosting more than 3000 works of art, the Getty Web site presents event information, professional reports in conservation and art history, job listings, grant information, research tools, videos, and more. The Getty Trust came to AM+A to help design their first-ever unified website.

The project was a challenging exercise in large-scale information architecture. Prior to the launch of the re-

designed getty.edu, the various institutes had each controlled and developed their own sites with no standards or centralized efforts. Over the course of many years, more than 54,000 largely hand-coded pages had been created. **Figure 1** shows the variety in design, quality, and complexity of these sites.

At this point, the information architecture was totally organization-centric. These sites were loosely integrated via a home page gateway (top left of Figure 1) that simply linked to the site of each institute. On the gateway, works of art (of interest to the general public), grant information, and the trust annual report (accessed by a much smaller and more select group) were all presented equally on this home page, due to a sense of political fairness. In as little as one click, users could find themselves on a totally different site with completely different navigation schemes. Some of these sites did not even offer a link back to the gateway page. The individual sites presented different identities of the Getty, used inconsistent logos, and generally presented the Getty institutes as “silos” rather than departments of an organization with a single mission.



**Figure 1.** Images of various Getty web sites before AM+A design and integration

While the existing website surprisingly contained only a small sampling of the art collection, the Getty Center museum itself hosted a kiosk system, called ArtAccess, that contained thousands of art objects along with educational information. Another goal of this project was to port all that content to the new website.

The goals of the AM+A’s redesign were to:

- present one coherent brand and navigation for all Getty content
- bring to the surface, content that would be most interesting and compelling to the majority of public visitors. This was primarily related to the Getty Center museums art objects.
- allow easy access to content managed by the individual institutions and place them in context with each other
- make a much more substantial amount of the Getty’s art collection accessible via the web
- provide better museum visitor information, including integration of an online parking reservation system and calendar of events
- encourage exploration and discovery of all the Getty’s resources, art and otherwise. As stated by the Getty, the strategy of the website was to “deliver Getty resources with less regard to the originating program”

### **Project participants**

- Vicki Porter, Project Lead, J. Paul Getty Trust
- Aaron Marcus, Principle Designer, AM+A
- Samuel Ackerman, Project Manager, AM+A



**Chris**  
Swedish sophomore in college, age 18.

Chris needs a mental vacation from three straight hours of engineering homework, and has stumbled on to the Getty site to look at some nice pictures while he takes his break.

- Eugene Chen, Overall Creative Direction and Information Architecture, AM+A
- Kent Miller, Visual Design Lead and designer of the collections and exhibits subsite, AM+A
- Junghwa Lee, Designer of the Visitor Information subsite, AM+A
- Larry Guan, Designer/Analyst, AM+A
- Alison Martin, Designer/Analyst, AM+A

### **Project dates and duration**

6 months: March — September 2000.

### **Process**

Integrating all of this legacy content and creating a coherent information architecture was no small task. AM+A's first task was to meet with representatives from many Getty stakeholder groups. In particular, AM+A met with each of the Getty institutes to explain the mission of the redesign and to reconcile their differing needs. Many strategic decisions that could have become political were grounded by a user-centered approach.

In particular, user portraits helped to clarify the design strategy. AM+A interviewed members of the Getty to understand the needs their users would have for various parts of the site. In a series of workshops we asked questions that focused on users' motivations and context. From this, we created a set of five target user models. These user models encouraged lively discussions that drove many key design decisions.

Different sub-sites would have different main user models. For instance, the target user for the art collections, "*Chris*", was seen as someone who would

be exploring the web site with little intent or direction. Thus, the design was focused on offering many paths of exploration and avoiding dead-ends. AM+A capitalized on cross-indexed data from the Getty about artists and subject matter to provide users a means of easily traveling between areas of interest. Detail-views allow users to see many different perspectives on a single piece. (See **Figure 5**). Future discussions would often refer back to the user models. For instance when we were tempted to put in certain "bells and whistles", our client would say things like "I don't see Chris doing that"—helping to draw the line between educational and academic.

Two other users of the art collections, "*Jennifer*" and "*Louise*," were created to refine the intended use for particular features of the art collection (see sidebars).

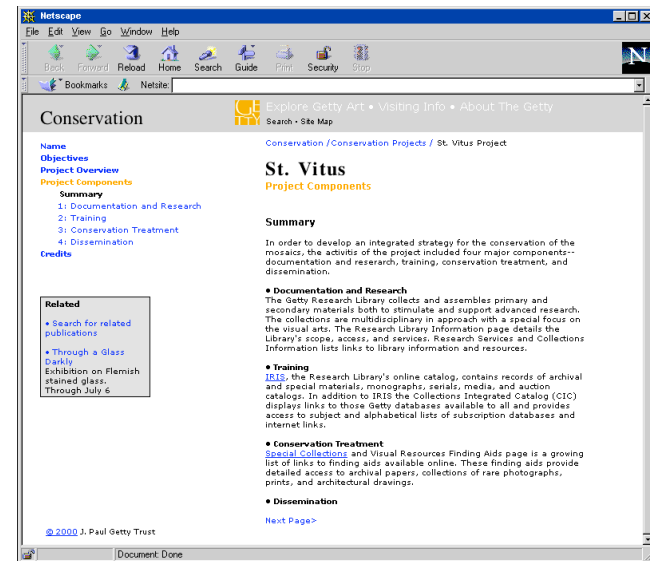
"*Thelma*" was a professional art historian with need to access many of the Getty's more technical resources. Through detailed discussions, it became apparent that Thelma would be an unlikely user of the website's Art Collection—as we had initially assumed—since as a professional, her needs would be very specific and technical. This steered us clear of trying to provide excessive educational information in this section.

"*Brian*", the user portrait for the Visitor's Guide sub-site was imagined as someone who might visit the Getty one day and Disneyland the next. Hence, this section was given a very pragmatic focus and filled with logistical aids such as wheelchair access and parking information.

With this work completed, we were able to move on to designing a navigation system that would

accommodate the full breadth and depth of content. **Figure 9** shows the high-level site map for the Getty site, indicating access to major types of content, structural versus shortcut links and composition of subsites. As seen in **Figure 8**, institutional subsites were still accessible from the home page (under the About Us link), but these links were deemphasized.

Schematic designs such as those shown in. **Figure 2** and **Figure 3** were created, focusing primarily on details of the browse and search navigation systems. In order to create simplicity, the global navigation bar for pages below the home page only provides access to Explore Art, Visitor Info, and About The Getty, rather than all of the institute subsites. The "About The Getty" page is a hub page that provides indirect access to all of those sites.



**Figure 2.** Navigation study schematic. Local navigation within an area is provided with a left-hand navigation bar that provides for two levels of hierarchy. To encourage synergy of content, links to related content are also provided, but these are visually separated to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic links.



**Figure 3.** Search results study schematic. Because the Getty offers so many different types of resources, the type of information being returned is indicated by an icon.

### Solution details – Site Architecture

After analyzing the content structure of many of the institute sites, we defined a robust "toolkit" of page types and navigation devices (such as sub-sites, sections, subsections, breadcrumbs, see-also links etc.) that could handle any kind of content situation. To handle content of this scale, we chose to divide the entire site into eight sub-sites (Explore Art, Visitor Guide, About Us, Museum, Conservation, Research, Grants, Bookstore). These sub-sites each held enough content to warrant their own "home page" and local navigation system. This approach works well when a section of content has a distinct set of users or uses.

Additionally, this allows for some independence of content development and maintenance, while still providing users an "umbrella" framework of consistent navigation. Once within a sub-site, a user generally has to return to the home page to access other areas. These sub-sites were each given their own color identity and header to help the users maintain a sense of place. **Figure 4** shows several pages of the new design system.



**Figure 4.** Color-coding and organization of J. Paul Getty Trust sub-sites.

The Getty will frequently develop new content for exhibitions and other features. We wanted to be able to let these features have their own identity and also to be more immersive than normal types of content. For this reason a minimally branded page type was created that

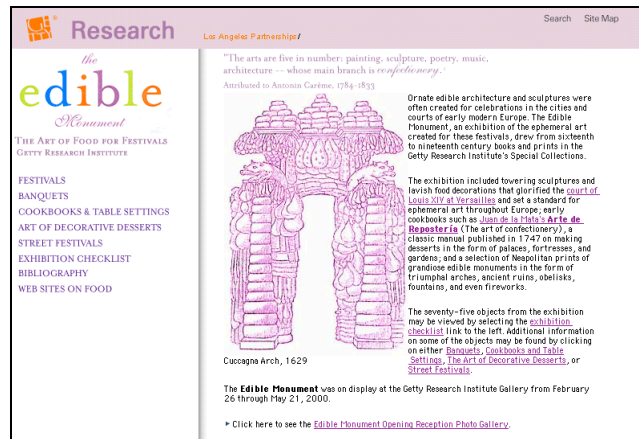


### Jennifer

Jennifer is a 17-year-old high school senior who has a lot invested in being “arty.”

Unlike Chris, she knows what she wants to look at. She’s a bit of a goth, and maybe a bit of a loner, and tends to like dark or “mystical” paintings from the Renaissance. Jennifer wants to learn, and to increase her authority and sophistication, so she’s interested in detailed information about artworks, biographies of artists whose work she admires, and the curator’s viewpoint. She also might want to look at a painting for a long time, perhaps as a desktop image, or email an image to a friend.

would contain a simplified header with a link back to the originating page (See **Figure 11**).



**Figure 11.** Exhibition and feature pages have simplified headers and minimal branding.

### Solution details – Interaction Design of Art Collections

After organizing the major content groups, AM+A focused on enabling useful and engaging interactions. The redesigned web site was to include more than 3,255 works of art from the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. AM+A had to ensure an easy, pleasurable, and educational browsing experience for even the most casual of users. In the “Explore Art” section of getty.edu, shown in **Figure 5** and **Figure 6**, AM+A capitalized on cross-indexed data from the Getty about artists and subject matter to provide users a means of easily traveling between areas of interest. Users could view a painting of horses and then easily access all paintings by the same artist, or view all objects

(paintings, sculptures or any media) that depict horses. Subject based categories were given intriguing “teaser” headlines like “See the gardenias and freesias in our flowers collection”. Detail views allow users to see many different perspectives on a single piece.

Our user models were particularly important in the design of this section; each one helped to inspire particular features or attributes of the design, as shown in the following user model details:

### Chris

*Art Access is primarily for Chris. Chris comes to Art Access with no particular preferences but tends to start with works that are familiar. He’ll need to see images right away. He doesn’t go the collections to learn (he might be enticed into doing so), and probably won’t be interested in object descriptions, but he might like a guided tour.*

*The ideal scenario for Chris: He clicks on a “rich” picture, follows the links to other pictures, and views a couple of presentations. Stickiness comes from the possibility of a long and varied online experience by following Art Access’ connections: down into detail, across in breadth, around the spectrum.*

*Chris’ interaction metaphor: flipping through a coffee table book (or a glossy magazine) until something catches the eye, and then focusing in.*

### Jennifer

*Art Access is for Jennifer, too, but she’ll use it differently than Chris, in that she’ll read the descriptions and biographies, study “The Making of” presentations, listen to an audio interview in its*



### **Louise**

The 10<sup>th</sup> grade history teacher, age 34.

Louise likes to make history “come alive” for her students and is planning a class field trip, if it is feasible, to view works of art depicting life at the time of the Hundred Years’ War. She also wants to see if there is any content at the Getty that she can translate into classroom materials or assignments. For these online tasks, she is also considering visiting other museum or art-related sites

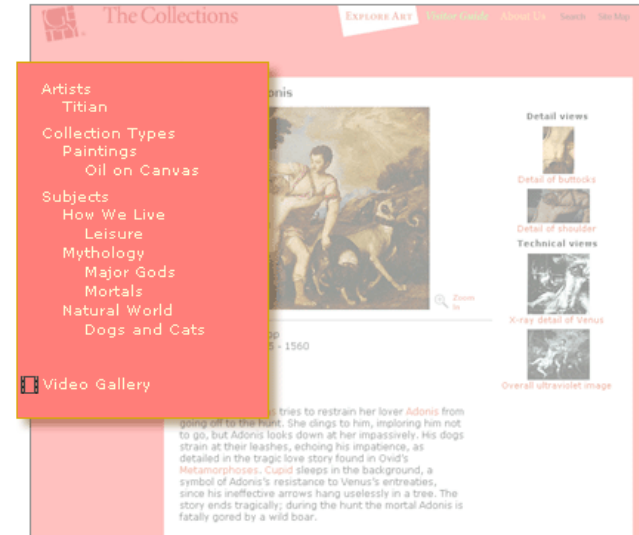
entirety. Prompts and questions might make Art Access even more compelling for Jennifer: “Things to Do and Notice,” or issues to ponder.

*Jennifer’s interaction metaphor: getting a library book on Renaissance paintings*

### **Louise**

*Louise could use the art collections, but she’s more likely to want the kind readymade curriculum materials available in ArtsEdNet. For projects she has more than the usual amount of free time to plan, she might use the Time & Place index to find and download images depicting life during the 14th and 15th centuries. For another kind of project, she might direct her students to the Subject index in order to research and interpret the way families have changed over time.*

*Louise’s interaction metaphor: a good library*



**Figure 5.** The side navigation of each "Explore Art" page allows users to browse by artist, medium, and subject



**Figure 6.** On many pages, users are exposed to detail or alternate views of a piece.

### Solution details – Branding and Visual Design

Finally, after developing the site's architecture, navigation, and interaction, AM+A was still faced with the challenge of creating a visual design worthy of presenting the works of art—the challenge of design a digital museum. The architect Richard Meier had created a highly modernist world-class museum to physically house the Getty's collection of classical works and antiquities. A strong visual brand had already been created around the museum's white tiling units and elegant signage. To our surprise, our client did not want to simply extend that identity to the website

Our visual brief was to retain the juxtaposition of showing classical works within a framework of modernist design, but to avoid adding to a growing perception of the Getty as austere. AM+A designers explored many different visual directions. Some of these are shown in **Figure 7**.

Rather late in the process (after rounds of visual exploration), the client introduced a requirement for the design to have a sense of “whimsy” that would be warm and welcoming to the local Los Angeles population. The original logo for the Getty was one of the last projects of Saul Bass. Usage guidelines created at that time did not include guidelines for web media. To make the design more lively, we arrived at two solutions: the Getty logo would be tilted to create a more dynamic, playful image and the three main subsites (Explore Art, Visit Us, About the Getty) were given friendly highly saturated colors. It proved to be particularly challenging to find appropriate sets of colors (background, text, link, visited link etc.) that would work well with themselves as well as between subsites. AM+A invested a great deal of time experimenting and showing the clients sets of colors, particularly for the critical art collections subsite, where the colors had to be selected carefully to not overpower the art objects.

In retrospect, conducting a “mood board” exercise at an early stage could have helped to target this emotional attribute and to allow the concept of “whimsy” to have more influence over the information architecture. One failing of our project process was that in the beginning of the project, so much attention was placed on unifying the architecture that an official

branding document had not been created, although formal meetings had been held to discuss brand goals.



**Figure 7.** Home page variations created during visual exploration

## Results

The site was launched in February of 2001. One obvious failing of the project process was that it was unfortunately not possible to include primary user research during the time frame. However, post-launch usability tests were conducted by an independent company. Positive results included that users appreciated and were able to use the site's cross-linking features. One negative finding was that many users did not think the large type links on the home page (e.g. Visitor Guide) were clickable.

The website developers at the Getty have continued to find new possibilities within the extensible design. For instance, **Figure 8**, a recent snapshot of Getty.edu's home page features a whimsical insect that crawls across the Getty logo via dHTML animation to promote a current exhibition.



**Figure 8.** A dHTML insect crawls across the Getty logo on the home page to promote Devices of Wonder exhibition.

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