



PICTURE COLLECTION ONLINE

PROJECT ABSTRACT

The New York Public Library requests funding to digitize and make available on the Internet 30,000 out-of-copyright images in its Picture Collection, a circulating and reference archive of approximately one million images—illustrations clipped from books, magazines, newspapers, and catalogues, as well as postcards, prints, photographs, linecuts, steel engravings, chromolithographs, and images produced by many different processes—selected for their informational value and organized under nearly 12,000 subject headings. One of the most expansive, publicly accessible picture collections in the world, it is a treasure trove of information for 60,000 visitors annually, who use, free of charge, the eclectic, topic-oriented collection for research and inspiration. The images will be selected from the Reference File, which contains some of the oldest and most heavily handled materials. Selections will be made from the most frequently sought-after subjects, among them: Costume, American History, New York City, African American History and African American Life, Pioneer Life, Exploration, Slavery and Slaveships, and Personalities.

Unlike other picture archives, the Picture Collection compiles images not for use by a collector or an institution, but by the general public. The Collection's images are united and organized in a comprehensive and contextually significant way, and librarians select and cross-index them in a manner that facilitates their use by many different user groups. A single image can prove useful to many, yielding information on, for instance, geography, nature, customs, architecture, social conditions, and dress during a specific period. Integral to the construction of the collection was the recognition that pictures are powerful tools with which to document and make accessible information about contemporary culture. An advisory board of representatives from user groups such as designers, artists, historians, school librarians, curators and librarians of special collections, researchers, teachers, publishers, and illustrators will contribute to the design and implementation of the project from the start. The project will contract with a digital imaging vendor to digitize the 30,000 images. Existing and new project staff will create metadata and collection-level catalog records for the images; perform programming and web design to place the materials on-line; and develop collection use guidelines to illustrate how to navigate and utilize pictorial and primary source materials for study and instruction. The project will open the materials to universal audiences, with varying interests, research needs, and usage patterns. The project will place a particular focus on introducing the collection to teachers and students as a complement to classroom instruction. The Library's research shows that primary and secondary school educators consider graphic materials highly important in eliciting student response and interaction. College educators and scholars consider graphic materials very meaningful in many disciplines, citing the importance of iconographic research for social history and the history of the visual and performing arts.

Librarians, advisory committee members, and other representatives of user groups will participate in an evaluation that addresses the needs and expectations of different users in interacting with image-based and other digital information resources, including presentation, navigation, and organization issues. The Branch Libraries system of The New York Public Library has a long tradition of public service and will contribute valuable insight into user needs. The wide and varied usership of the Picture Collection will extend this project's impact beyond the typical digital project's research audience. The experience gained will help The Branch Libraries plan future digital efforts for a general audience. By illustrating new ways of using the pictorial materials, the project will also assist other picture libraries in their own digital efforts. The project will be publicized to mainstream as well as industry audiences, and results of the project will be disseminated to the library, museum, and research communities.