

Are Superstar Artworks also Digital Superstars? Online Popularity of World-famous Artworks

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Background

World-famous artists, artworks and museums are known by all art lovers and most tourists following the *must see* lists. The reason behind the high popularity has been attributed to quality, intermediaries, visibility and even luck (Rosen 1981, 1983; Adler 1985; Towse 1992; Frey 2000; Schulze 2003). As the presence of artworks populates the Internet, new intermediaries emerge, including the large online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which has been ranked among the top 10 most visited websites worldwide¹ and receives over 16 million visitors monthly.² Currently, there are close to 130,000 artworks in the Wikidata repository feeding Wikipedia articles, including 117,000 paintings, 7,000 sculptures, 1,300 prints, and 3,000 drawings. Does the Internet allow for a greater diversity among the superstars or are old listings being transferred to the online environment unchanged?

Data

Using Wikidata as starting point, a query was made to identify all the paintings (N=117,000) of which a selection was made of those files that included an image, date of creation (inception date) and at least one keyword (N=64,700). Based on the selected files, a query was made on Wikimedia to enrich the dataset by adding title (description) and creator (name of author) to the Wikidata id. The selected files were queried in Wikipedia to find those present in Wikipedia articles (N=28,613). As of January 2016, 44% of Wikidata files identified as paintings containing an image are used in a Wikipedia article. The following analysis is based on 28,613 paintings used in 160,174 Wikipedia articles.

Popularity

The painting set was sorted by frequency, revealing the most popular paintings used in Wikipedia articles. Figure 1 shows the 20 most frequently used paintings.

¹ <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>.

² <http://reportcard.wmflabs.org/>.



Figure 1: Top 20 paintings used in Wikipedia (visualization by Srushti Jadhav)

The top used painting turned out to be Delacroix’s Self Portrait from 1837, followed by an Italian cross from the 12th Century, the allegory of Liberty by Delacroix from 1830, and an official portrait of Mao Zedong from the 1970s. All artworks are depictions of people, mostly portraits. The ranking further illuminated on the use of paintings in Wikipedia, where the top used paintings are all superstars and are used as icons.

Table 1 shows the ranking of the top 20 paintings, which revealed a language preference where paintings were highly popular in one or two languages but hardly used in all the rest. Upon further investigation of the specific Wikipedia articles, it turned out that the images were used as icons for a category, portal or notice (placed in a box at the top of the Wikipedia article). Some images, such as the Declaration of Independence, had several versions, of which only one was highly popular. This popularity was partially gained after the image was featured as Artwork or as Picture of the Day.

Rank	Artist: Painting title (date)	Most used language	Iconic use
1	Eugene Delacroix: Self Portrait (1837)	French	Stub of French painters

2	Unknown: San Damiano Cross (1100)	Portuguese	Portal Catholicism
3	Eugene Delacroix: La Liberté Guidant le peuple (1830)	Spanish	User that favors liberty
4	Zhang Zhenshi: Mao Zedong Portrait (unknown)	Korean	Stub of Chinese people
5	Leonardo da Vinci: Mona Lisa (1503-1506)	French	Portal Painting
6	Raphael: Self Portrait (1506)	French	Raphael category
7	Albert Durer: Self Portrait (1500)	English	Stub of German painter
8	Antonio del Pollaiuolo: Ercole e l'Idra (1475)	French	Stub of Mythology
9	John Trumbull: Declaration of Independence (1817-1819)	English	User interested in American Revolution
10	France Hals: Portrait of Rene Descartes (1649-1700)	Chinese	User is a rationalist
11	William Hogarth: The Painter and His Pug (1745)	English	Stub about a UK artist
12	Jean Louis Gericault: The Raft of the Medusa (1818-1819)	French	Portal Romanticism
13	Sandro Botticelli: La Nascita di Venere (1483-1485)	English	User is Italophile
14	Pierre-Auguste Renoir: Dance at Bougival (1883)	French	Stub of Dance
15	Francisco de Goya: El Tres de Mayo (1814)	Portuguese	Stub of History of Spain
16	Ilya Repin: The Zaporozhian Cossacks (1880-1891)	Ukrainian	Category Cossack era
17	Emanuel Leutze: Washington Crossing the Delaware (1851)	English	Portal American Revolutionary War
18	Cosimo Tura: Saint John the Baptist (1474)	Polish	Portal Archdiocese Wroclaw
19	Francisco de Goya: Self Portrait (1815)	French	Stub about Goya
20	Raphael: Pope Julius II (1511)	English	User interested in Roman Catholicism

Table 1: Paintings used in Wikipedia, top 20

It can be noted that out of the top 20 images, 7 have been adopted by the French Wikipedia as icons, suggesting a francophone culture of using paintings as icons. Aside from the portrait of Mao Zedong, the rest of the images are Western European artworks highly recognizable. The image depicting Cossacks is most popular in the Ukrainian Wikipedia, while Mao Zedong is most popular in the Korean Wikipedia, reflecting a cultural identity based on geographical structures that have been translated online into linguistic digital geographies.

Conclusions

Based on this initial analysis, it is evident that artworks have an iconic presence online. Visibility offline may have granted such status, as popularity has been associated with familiarity and understanding. This analysis is a snap shot in time, which prevents the making of any causal statements. However, it is clear that all paintings had a superstar status before they were adopted online: they are made by superstar artists, are located in a superstar museum, or depict a superstar (the case of Mao Zedong). This suggests that quality of artworks (identified by being a superstar) is an important determinant of online popularity. Wikipedia plays an important role as intermediary for its 6 monthly million online users, which may impact popularity of certain artworks in the future. The Francophone editors excel in their use of paintings as icons, the 20 most frequently used artworks depict people (mostly portraits) and certain geographic differences can be observed in the use of artworks per language.

In short, the digital environment does not appear to give a democratizing forum for alternative superstars to emerge – at least not at this point.

Following this initial close-up analysis, future analysis may further categories of languages and usages (e.g. user characteristic, stub, portal, category), or increase comparison among other art forms (e.g. buildings, sculptures).

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