New Ways of Seeing

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As a society, ever-changing digital technology plays varying roles in almost all aspects of our lives. In the world of museums and art historical study, it is opening new doors. Museums now have the ability to provide visitors with a greater understanding and level of engagement with their collections. The digitization of objects facilitates documentation, research, and education. My independent project, New Ways of Seeing, explores the use of photogrammetry and 3D modeling of art objects in the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.

3D modeling that digitally replicates objects is an expanding practice in prestigious institutions such as The British Museum and the Smithsonian Museums. I argue that it is easily accessible to smaller institutions, even to a student like myself with little prior training and a small budget. Photogrammetry is a modeling technique that does not require expensive equipment and can be scaled back, or up, depending upon one’s means. It is an available technique that, with some patience, one can learn within a matter of weeks.

The ability to freely study and discover an object from all sides virtually, without the dangers of handling fragile materials, is priceless. “Gems” tucked away in storage or lodged in plexiglass cases in a static museum display take on a second, digital life. With the glass removed, anyone in the world can interact with it and manipulate it in a way that is impossible with the original object. There is no threat of damage or loss from environmental changes, or, as seen recently at the Mosul Museum, from political events.

The potential for exploration and the freedom to discover art from all over the world on your smartphone heralds a bright future for collection digitization and accessibility. Everyday objects from the ancient world that are seen out of context in a gallery can be weightlessly “handled” and investigated by students and historians alike.

The use of 3D models of art objects benefits a museum in countless ways, but I would argue that these benefits can be summarized in three major categories: interactivity, conservation, and accessibility.