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“Inventing Digital Humanities through the Index of American Design”

Abstract:

The Index of American Design was a 1935-1942 Federal Art Project that documented early American decorative arts through the production of approximately 18,000 highly detailed watercolors. Some organizers of the project—such as Ramona Javitz and Phyllis Scott—conceived the Index as creating a final product, a series of rigorous scholarly publications on the material culture of early America, while counterparts such as Ruth Reeves envisioned a browsable database of images that could provide inspiration for the creations of others. The Index of American Design is generally understood to have failed both of these aims, but the Index’s aura of failure is more a product of its recent history than its original reception. Drawing on the archives of the National Gallery of Art, where the Index has been housed since 1943, as well as collections at the Archives of American Art, this paper shows how widely accessible and utilized the Index was. Through exhibitions, loans, in-person consultation, and various forms of reproduction, the Index of American Design engaged large numbers of the American public. But the Index is particularly relevant today for the way it anticipated the rise of the digital humanities. Every image in the Index was accompanied by metadata that tracked the production of the watercolor rendering and the historical object it recorded. And throughout its history, the Index has pushed the boundaries of data management technology, from filing systems and microfilming to present-day efforts at digitization. Considering the Index as an early form of digital humanities enables us to historicize a seemingly recent development and illuminates why the questions that plagued the Index—questions of access, inclusion, and engagement—continue to reverberate in scholarly projects today.