

Museum Loan Network

The goal of the Museum Loan Network (MLN) is to foster a sense of interdisciplinary collaboration between institutions of all sizes and types in communities across the United States, thereby invigorating the country's intellectual and cultural resources. MLN encourages museums to loan objects of cultural heritage over extended periods of time, making them more accessible and understandable to the public. With the help of MLN's grant programs, intellectual resources, and online directory of nearly 20,000 objects, museums can improve their relationships with the public through innovative and relevant exhibitions, foster collaborations across disciplines, and strengthen the cultural community as a whole. Initiated in 1995 by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts, MLN is administered by MIT's Office of the Arts.

Program Development

MLN continues to spearhead creative collaborations and construct an ever-widening network of resources for cultural and scholarly institutions. Energizing the Study of Early American Art, a recently completed initiative funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, has made available to museums close to 500 early American portraits online through the MLN Directory. Initiated in the winter of 2004, the project has awarded 21 grants to various museums, university galleries, and historical societies to research, catalog, and present online information and images for long-term loan and comparative study. The expanded directory, designed for use by academics, researchers, independent scholars, curators, students, and educators, will facilitate the study of early American art, promote sharing of collections, strengthen existing museum networks, and foster new long-term relationships between colleagues in the field. Funding for the project has also made possible 13 internships at participating institutions, including a number of university museums, thus increasing opportunities for emerging scholars and professionals to focus on early American art. In July 2005, MLN and the Metropolitan Museum of Art jointly hosted a meeting at the museum for interns, MLN staff, the project advisors, and the funder to discuss the project.

Collecting Stories: Connecting Objects, another project carried out via the MLN website with technology assistance from MIT's Academic Media Production Services, is designed to engage communities in cataloging by connecting oral histories with cultural objects. Funded by the Nathan Cummings Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Collecting Stories has encouraged museums to play a vital role in the life of communities by helping to contextualize and enhance the meaning of the cultural items in their care. The project was initiated in June 2005 in Cambridge with a panel session titled "Connecting Stories to Objects: Inspiring Ways of Working." Session presenters were Gordon Yellowman, cultural preservation director, Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribe of Oklahoma; Cassie Chin, program director, Wing Luke Asian Museum; Vas Prabhu, deputy director of interpretation and education, Peabody Essex Museum; and Ron Grele, former director, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University. In addition to providing a toolkit, methodology, and resource links to encourage community-museum participation in cataloging oral histories, Collecting Stories includes an audiovisual

component consisting of demonstration projects from the African American Museum in Philadelphia, the Field Museum, the Judah L. Magnes Museum, the Japanese American National Museum, the National Civil Rights Museum, and the Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center. These demonstration projects provide innovative models for other institutions to replicate in their own communities.

Publications and Lectures



MLN's 10-year-anniversary publication, *Sharing Connections: A Decade of the Museum Loan Network*.

In April 2006 MLN published *Sharing Connections: A Decade of the Museum Loan Network*, which reflects on and celebrates MLN's 10 years of work. The 103-page book, dedicated to the memory of Stephen E. Weil, noted museum scholar and MLN Advisory Committee chair from 1995 to 2005, is filled with stories from museums, universities, and cultural and historical institutions that have benefited from the collaborations engendered by MLN. By retelling the program's history, the book demonstrates the impact MLN has had in terms of transforming museums and communities throughout the country. With support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, *Sharing Connections* was unveiled and distributed at a 10-year anniversary celebration held at the Stata Center. The event brought together national funders and museum professionals from throughout the United States along with members of the MIT community. The book was

also distributed at the 2006 annual meeting of the American Association of Museums, held in Boston, and to nearly 3,200 institutions and individuals nationally as well as internationally, including funders, museums, universities, historical societies, cultural centers, art galleries, libraries, and museum studies programs. The MLN projects illustrated in *Sharing Connections* serve as a resource and source of inspiration for others to collaborate creatively across disciplines. In fact, MLN has been discussed as a model for British museums to emulate in the strategic plan of the British Museums Association, *Collections for the Future*. A pilot plan based on MLN will begin in Great Britain in 2006. Furthermore, the Knight Foundation featured a story about MLN, "How the Museum Loan Network Changed the Art of Museums," in its spring/summer 2006 newsletter.

MLN was represented at a number of prestigious international and national conferences during 2005–2006. Among them, MLN director Lori Gross spoke in Nafpoli, Greece, in October 2005 at the International Committee of Ethnography conference *Can Oral History Make Objects Speak?* At the annual meeting of the American Association of Museums in April 2006, Gross chaired a panel of presenters from institutions throughout the United States on *Collecting Stories: Connecting Objects*, the MLN project focused on preserving and sharing the memories and oral histories associated with cultural objects for the benefit of communities and future generations.

Special Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita Travel Grants

In the past, MLN has awarded three types of grants to eligible nonprofit institutions of varying sizes and disciplines throughout the United States: travel grants, survey grants, and implementation grants. Since its inception in 1995, MLN has awarded almost 400 grants totaling nearly \$6 million to institutions in 51 states and territories. At the beginning of 2006, however, MLN focused on helping institutions affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Special emergency travel grants of \$4,500 each were awarded to 10 museums in Louisiana and Mississippi to provide staff a much-needed opportunity to focus on long-term goals and potential collection-sharing opportunities. The 10 museums were the African American Museum, St. Martinville, LA; Amistad Research Center, New Orleans; Imperial Calcasieu Museum, Lake Charles, LA; Louisiana Children's Museum, New Orleans; New Orleans Museum of Art; Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans; Delta Blues Museum, Clarksdale, MS; Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson; Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art, Biloxi; and the Museum of Mississippi History, Jackson. Through these grants, MLN brokered partnerships between the grantees and a wide variety of institutions, including Boston's Museum of Afro-American History, the Peabody-Essex Museum, the Boston Children's Museum, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, the African-American Museum in Philadelphia, and the Smithsonian Institution. Articles concerning these grants appeared in the *New York Times* and in MIT's *Tech Talk*.

Personnel Changes

Mark Wright, MLN program associate for nearly seven years, left MLN to become director of partnerships at the National Children's Museum in Washington, DC.

Lori Gross
Director

More information about the Museum Loan Network can be found at <http://loanet.mit.edu/>.