

ON THE NET

Virtual Museums on the Web: El Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

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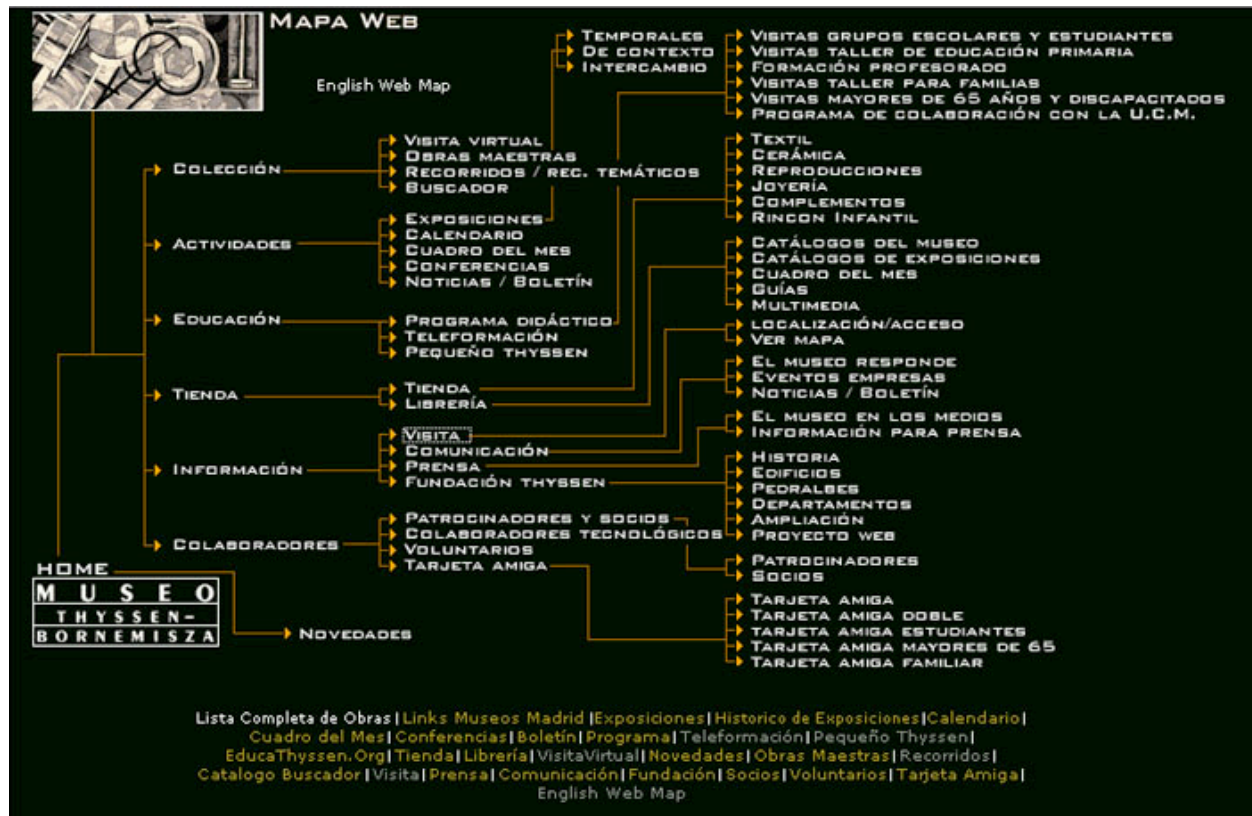
Museums and Culture

Big "C" culture is an essential component of the foreign language classroom in so far as it helps students better understand what is important to native speakers from their cultural perspective. The national standards for foreign language encourage us to focus on this perspective, through its cultural triangle highlighting the relationships among Products, Practices, and Perspectives, while avoiding an approach that reduces culture to a kind of "Trivial Pursuits" where artifacts are learned in isolation rather than explored as part of a path to understanding the people. What are the qualities of an online museum that help students explore this cultural perspective instead of just memorizing names and dates associated with works of art? The [Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza](#) in Madrid gives us an example of the best of virtual visit Web sites for the foreign language classroom.



Navigating the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza Site

This museum site is extremely well designed to provide a broad overview of painting from the 13th century to the 20th, with a comprehensive Web map to assist the viewer with initial navigation.



Additional pull-down menus on the home page make the site very user-friendly and inviting. The site is available in Spanish but most features are also online in an [English version](#). Below, we will take a look at some of the interesting features and offerings of this site, which serves as an excellent example of virtual museums, and whose features may be found in a variety of museums from many different countries.

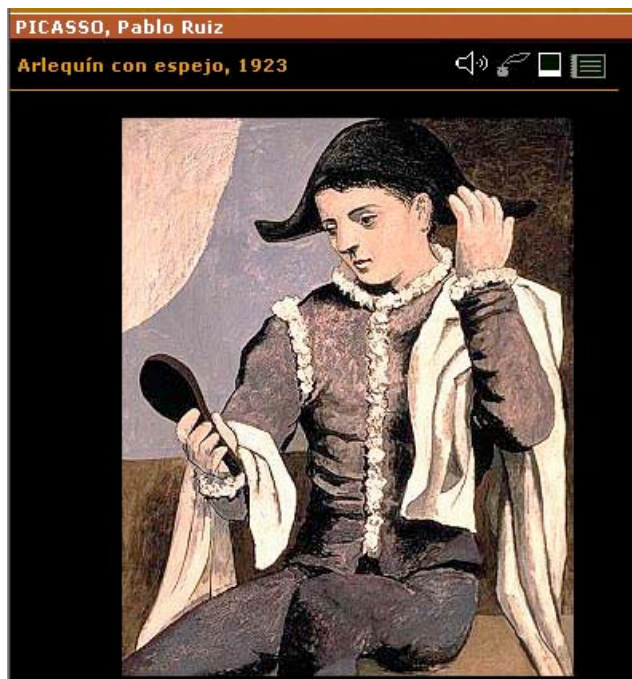
Museum Areas of Interest



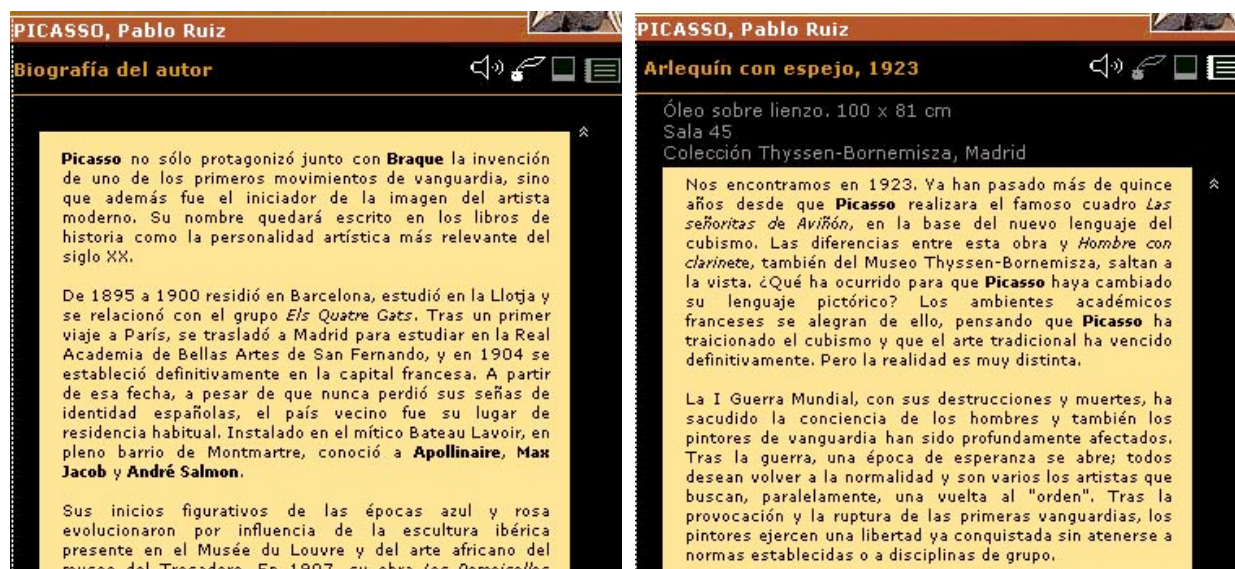
Beginning with the *Colección* (Collections) menu, the visitor has a choice of the following selections: "*Visita Virtual*" (Virtual Visit), "*Obras Maestros*" (Masterpieces), and "*Recorridos*" (Thematic Visits). In the Virtual Visit, the viewer may select from three of the museum's four floors and then proceed through each room on that floor, displayed in a 360° Virtual Reality (VR) format with zoom capabilities. The 48 rooms in the museum all are accompanied by an audio text describing the room, the contents, the period and its characteristics. The audio commentaries constitute a mini-art history course in themselves.



The visitor can navigate the site by clicking on the rooms in the accompanying floor plan or can move through the rooms in the virtual reality view by clicking on the doorway into adjacent rooms. This combination allows quick access to the art via a visual map of the building or lets the viewer remain in the VR mode as if we were in the building itself. Thus the paintings and accompanying information can be viewed in their architectural setting as displayed by the museum staff allowing the student not only to develop a visual image of the museum as it exists in the real world, but to experience moving through the space that itself helps to organize the art. Clearly, any computer-based representation of these works of art can only be a distant approximation to the real thing, but by creating an experience that approaches reality, the computer can help us to make this approximation into a richer experience.



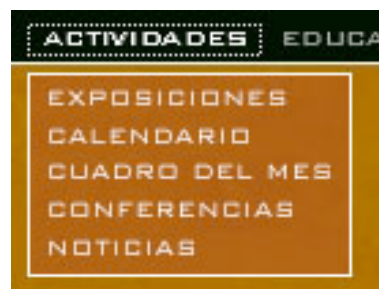
When the visitor clicks on a particular painting, a separate browser window opens displaying the work along with identifying information. The speaker icon in this view plays additional audio commentary about this specific work. Another icon opens a window for biographical information about the artist while a second leads to text commentary about the work.



These various modes for obtaining information are under the control of the visitor, allowing the viewer to navigate through the information and extract what is of interest. The quality of the audio commentary is excellent, even when listened to over a slow connection such as a modem. This gives us not only a Spanish view of art history, but also an extensive sample of language that is interesting, natural, clearly articulated, and not too fast for non-natives. The biographical information and text commentary help place the work in context and help us see what information is important from the point of view of the curators. Indeed, the very idea of a collection of this sort, one put together by an individual, is to open a window on the world of art from a particular point of view. In the example shown of commentary about Picasso's "*Arlequín con espejo*," we find important information that helps us understand the mentality of people in the time period and how the work relates to their way of thinking.

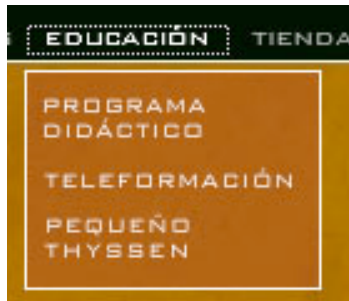
The *Recorridos* (Thematic Visits) organize the paintings into four broad themes: the portrait and the human figure; the city, an urban and human space; the landscape; and the still-life. For each work of art displayed under these themes, the viewer may select icons that give access to an audio summary of the artist and the particular painting; a more detailed account of the artist, life and work; a close-up of the painting; and a brief description of the painting under consideration.

The *Obras Maestras* (Masterpieces) section includes works of art from the old masters as well as works from the 19th and 20th centuries. In addition, an emphasis on works from Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Fauvism, the German Expressionist movements, the European avant-gardes and European and American post-war art is evident in the collection. Again, as with the Thematic Visits, the viewer may select icons that give access to audio and written summaries, descriptions, and commentaries.



The *Actividades* (Activities) menu offers a choice of Exhibitions, Forthcoming Exhibitions, Painting of the Month, Lectures, and News. While the Exhibitions are not necessarily limited to Spanish art, at this writing, two upcoming exhibitions were centered on "Catalan Painting from Naturalism to Noucentisme" and "Andalucia in the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection" -- both of which would be of particular interest to Spanish learners. The "Painting of the Month" is a feature wherein a writer approaches a chosen painting with his or her own particular analysis and interpretation. The writer gives a lecture,

which the public may attend and which is subsequently available in pamphlet form in the gift shop. Student groups planning on stopping in Madrid for a few days may wish to investigate the possibility of attending a pertinent lecture.



The *Educación* (Education) menu has information about tours for primary school, high school, and college students. Also mentioned is the availability of teacher preparation guides for use before the visit. In addition, the menu has a link for e-learning courses, a portion of which is accessible for free and contains interactive games. A really outstanding feature of this section of the museum is that of *Pequeño Thyssen* (Young Thyssen).

Pequeño Thyssen



The "*Aventuras en el museo Thyssen*" section involves an interactive mystery that explores different paintings in the museum and has a didactic bent. The "adventure" is led by Guido, an animated character who poses different questions about the paintings and guides learners to greater knowledge about the world of art. Because it is written for young native speakers of Spanish, the lexicon is accessible to non-native learners of Spanish who are older but at various stages of their language learning process. Other features of the education section are more detail about several works of art in the museum (*Para saber más*); a place for student drawn artwork (*Galería de arte*); and a "laboratory" (*Laboratorio*) with some .pdf files containing projects that learners can work on at home.

Conclusion

The Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza is an excellent site for Spanish instructors who wish to incorporate the big "C" culture component in their lessons. All of the various groupings of the works as well as the different kinds of information about them, especially the integration of audio commentary, may be used in

creative listening, writing, reading, and even speaking activities that enable contextualized language learning and instruction. The English version could easily be used in classrooms of English as a Second or Foreign Language. (NB: The grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are British English.) When using the Internet for such activities, the classroom teacher should also consider contextualizing the Web version with realia collected in the real world such as art books, post cards, posters, museum booklets, and so forth. We can find many excellent online museums with virtual visits (perhaps we'll examine one from a different country in an upcoming column), but this one includes many of the best features available in such sites. Finally, this well-conceived and executed site is a delight for art lovers of any language background and can inspire teachers of all languages with ideas for integrating Culture in the FL classroom. Visit and enjoy.