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## Library Home Page Design: The Artist-Librarian Perspective

Virginia C. Feher

*University of North Georgia, [virginia.feher@ung.edu](mailto:virginia.feher@ung.edu)*

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# COMO WHITE PAPER



## Library home page design: The artist-librarian perspective

by Virginia C. Feher

**B**ecause the Web is a vital tool for the delivery of information and services to library users whose high expectations include seamless and fast access from anywhere, effective library home page design is essential to meeting their needs. But choosing the elements to include on a home page, in addition to combining them skillfully and attractively, can be a challenge. One practical approach to library home page design is to apply basic principles of art. Similar to a work of art, the composition, color and imagery of a home page affect how the viewer will scan the page, determining focal points and areas of lesser interest, while prioritizing and emphasizing content on a home page can be achieved by proper use of the visuals. The visuals, as a result of the Web's transformative influence on information delivery, have attained more prominence in the presentation of knowledge, increasing the importance of following the principles of art. A library home page designed from the perspective of the artist-librarian, this paper will explain, is more likely to be a successful one.

The mechanics of information delivery by a library are becoming increasingly more complicated because of the enormous amount of resources available both in print and online. Weintraub (1980), in

speaking of the abundance of print resources, posed this question: "Is there a necessary relation between more information and more meaningful knowledge?" (p. 38). Considering that the Web was not invented until a decade later, he was indeed prophetic in proposing a vision of the future librarian:

*...a knowledgeable sluicemaker, a most sensitive filter, a wise cicerone who knows where what knowledge is available, how to get its essential parts, someone who does not block access but also someone who does not drown us in an unsorted morass of information.* (Weintraub, 1980, p. 38)

In their efforts to be comprehensive and thorough on a home page, librarians may be drowning their users by offering too many avenues to information, overwhelming them with multiple links plus navigational tools such as tabs and drop-down boxes, therefore blocking access by making it more difficult to find what is needed. If Weintraub's advice is to be considered, library home page design should not just be about including as much information as possible but also about carefully filtering which elements to present along with combining them coherently and attractively so that a

user can easily find what is needed. An example of design practices that do not overwhelm the user with too much information is illustrated by Riley-Huff's (2009) examination of museum Web sites, which found that academic library Web sites tended to be text-based while museum Web sites were more visual (p. 80). She recommended using text prudently by "resisting the tendency to place a [link] to everything available on one page" (Riley-Huff, 2009, p. 86). Even though examining museum Web sites is useful, the works of art exhibited in museums can be a primary source of inspiration for library home page designers.

Before an academic library home page is designed, though, it is a blank canvas, and several highly recommended features to include should be considered. While home pages may differ based on the precise mission of an academic institution, basic information about the library including location, hours of operation and contact information should be provided as well as access to information about the library's collections and services. Duncan & Holliday (2008) found that users particularly looked for information about services such as interlibrary loan (p. 305). The popularity of Google implies that a search box is

the preferred method for information seeking, and it would be advantageous to the user for a search box to be more prominent and not just wedged in a far corner of the page. It can also be argued that a noticeable search box is necessary since many users find it preferable to using links for navigation (Nielsen, 2000, p. 168). A federated search box should be considered as a way to offer fast access to scholarly resources, and an interactive chat box such as Meebo could be a useful tool for helping users (Mathews, 2009, p. 25). Unfortunately, not all libraries have the resources to offer continuous chat reference; nonetheless, it is an efficient method for assisting users who are comfortable with technology. Aside from informational tools, promotional features should be included on a home page to advertise not only resources available from the Web site but also sponsored events such as guest speakers and film series. A home page is the perfect place to promote a library's events, services and resources; moreover, the promotional area itself can improve the appearance of a home page if attractive images are used. Ultimately, the appearance of a home page has a great effect on the users' experience, and a skillful presentation of features is necessary for effective information delivery.

Once these features for a home page are selected, they are combined, and this combination, like in a work of art, determines the composition of the page. Put simply, composition is the arrangement of the elements on the page, and, when arranging these elements on a home page, applying the basic principles of art such as emphasis, balance, harmony and movement is essential for a successful composition. Henri Matisse, the famous artist known for his use of pattern and color, in "Notes of a Painter," defined composition as "the

art of arranging in a decorative manner the diverse elements at the painter's command to express his feelings" (as cited in Flam, 1994, p. 36). A library's home page is similar to a painter's canvas in that both are rectangular in shape with well-defined boundaries, and the library Web designer, similar to an artist, arranges "diverse elements" in addition to emphasizing areas that they feel are more important. The challenge for library Web designers is defining which areas to emphasize. Holtze (2006) stated "Web designers in libraries face a particularly difficult challenge: selecting only a few salient pieces of information to highlight since each patron's desired outcome differs" (p. 97). Selecting which pieces to highlight is dependent on the library's user base, and usability testing may help in the final determination; even though areas should be emphasized, a cohesive arrangement is also desirable. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, a 19th century French painter who "was indisputably the greatest portraitist of his age" (Shelton, 2008, p. 190), is known for his remarkably beautiful portraits that, despite areas of intricate detail, are successful in their composition because the viewer's eyes move across the whole canvas, finding enjoyment in the areas of detail, but, in the end, focusing on the area of emphasis, the subject's face. A successful composition is achieved by the proper application of the principles of art, and a home page, similar to Ingres' portraits, is successful when the viewer's eye comprehends the entire home page while at the same time recognizing areas of importance.

The use of color in a painting can provoke feelings of awe and inspiration in a viewer, and, just as color can bring a canvas to life, using color appropriately on a home page can result in a page that is stunning

and vibrant while supportive of information delivery. In the foreword to *Interaction of Color*, a monumental work on color theory by Josef Albers, a 20th century abstract painter and educator, Weber (as cited in Albers, 2006) concluded that Albers' experimentations with color "sought to engage rather than merely inform" (p. xi). The purpose of a library's home page is to inform; however, in order to inform, the viewer must be engaged, and a Web designer who knows how to use color can maintain the viewer's attention. Nonetheless, the library is the heart of the community, whether a small town or a large university, and using colors on a library home page related to the community will help in communicating to the user the academic library's role in serving the university. Even though school colors are often associated with sports and football, and a university library may want to emphasize academics over athletics, branding a Web site by using school colors can affirm the library's importance for, and attachment to, the university. Because the color palette for an academic library's home page is predetermined, using colors properly and harmoniously on a home page may be difficult, especially if the school colors are harsh, acrimonious and better suited for the visibility of a football jersey. In such cases, variations on school colors may be a good alternative, although the overall effect should fit with the school's color scheme.

Without imagery, a home page is not complete. Photographs and icons, for example, not only add decorative features but also provide a visual illustration of services in addition to creating the illusion of three-dimensionality. A home page that appears one-dimensional will less likely hold a viewer's attention than one with aspects of three-

dimensionality. Photography is an art form in and of itself, and including high-quality photographs on a home page can be a simple way to achieve depth and add color. Even so, it is not enough to include a pretty picture; the images should represent the library by promoting resources or services. Skillful use of subtle gradients, the gradual movement from dark to light, can imitate form and decrease flatness, while overuse of textured backgrounds, which are created by the repetition of small graphical files, can be distracting. When designing an academic library home page, a style suitable for information delivery, rather than one defined by the latest trend in Web design, is recommended. Styles of painting, created by major movements in art, can provoke varying reactions from the viewer. Picasso's cubist mural *Guernica*, a disconcerting geometric interpretation of the horrors of war, may inspire awe coupled with dismay, while the subtle beauty of impressionistic paintings, such as Monet's *Water Lilies*, may inspire quiet contemplation. Because the style, or look, of a home page can initially engage the user or cause them to lose interest, using a style that clearly communicates the purpose of the Web site, including the mission of the library, is vital. The style of an

academic library's home page should reflect the scholarly pursuits of the campus, namely its teaching and research activities, presenting information in a way suitable to this purpose. The style should be appropriate to the organization and its user base because as Riley-Huff (2009) stated, "engaging users starts by getting their attention on the site in ways that cater to the community" (p. 89).

To illustrate the argument for the combination of an artist-librarian, Marcel Duchamp might be considered. Duchamp, an early 20th century French painter, sculptor and writer, had a brief but unsuccessful stint as a librarian, which he explained as "a sort of grip on an intellectual position, against the manual servitude of the artist" (Cabanne, 1971, p. 41). Before the existence of the Web, there was little opportunity for the artist-librarian to effectively combine their skills as applied to librarianship; subsequently, Duchamp's resulting body of work, specifically sculptures composed of found objects, "decisively altered our understanding of what constitutes an object of art" (Naumann, 2009), redefining, in essence, what is, and isn't, art. The Web, while not a work of art, could be considered a visual

universe supplemented with textual information, greatly altering how libraries and librarians provide information services to their users. Because of the Web, the visuals have gained prominence in information delivery, and the importance of the visuals supporting information delivery on a home page and the effect on the users' experience in navigating the Web site cannot be overstated. Gibbs (2005) emphasized that "if users are to reject the pages at the home page because the visuals fail to stimulate an interest in them, then the quality and appropriateness of the content and ease of use become irrelevant" (p. 43).

In the current economic downturn, the academic library, like all libraries, is being asked to justify its relevance, and, in this environment, a successfully designed library home page becomes even more important. A library home page that is designed from the perspective of the artist-librarian — who knows how to apply the basic principles of art — will better serve the academic community by delivering information quickly and efficiently to its users. ►►

*Virginia C. Feher is interlibrary loan borrowing supervisor and graphics coordinator for the University of Georgia Libraries Web Advisory Group in Athens.*

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