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What Jane Saw

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What Jane Saw

Abstract

Review of Professor Janine Barchas' "What Jane Saw?" a website that reconstructs Joshua Reynolds's 1813 retrospective art exhibit, which Jane Austen attended, with particular attention to the Regency social and cultural history depicted in Austen's novels.

Keywords

Joshua Reynolds, Jane Austen, digital humanities, digital pedagogy

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Barchas, Janine, ed. *What Jane Saw*. The University of Texas at Austin, 2013. Web. 24 July 2013. <http://www.whatjanesaw.org/>.

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As digital projects increasingly become the avant-garde of humanities praxis, the *What Jane Saw* electronic exhibition has surely made its splash both in academic circles and the public at large. Shortly after its release, the website, featuring an interactive reconstruction of painter Joshua Reynolds's first retrospective show, garnered reviews by both [*The New York Times*](#) and [*The Guardian*](#). According to these articles, and at the suggestion of the website itself, such a sliver of early nineteenth-century celebrity culture provides us with another peak into the Regency history that has so fascinated scholars, Austenites, and Jane Austen herself. The 1813 exhibit marked an important cultural moment for the art world and a high-profile social event. The gathering of 141 portraits, moreover, collected an archive of important cultural representations that reflected the *ton*'s history back to itself. What may be most provocative about *What Jane Saw*, however, is its ability to produce a virtual embodiment of what Jane experienced when she visited the exhibit. Advances in digital technology have furnished us with a quintessential new historicist experience: we can—almost—be where Jane was and see what she saw as she saw it.

More than refashioning a blockbuster cultural moment, the website stands as a testament to an intensely experiential, sensory form of scholarship and pedagogy. Viewers can enter the virtual exhibit space through any one of three portals: the Rowlandson print of the British Institution's Pall Mall gallery that serves as the main image on the site's splash page, a clickable catalogue listing the paintings by room, or the floor plan with links to paintings on the walls of each of three gallery rooms. Once a viewing choice has been selected, the viewer arrives at a two-dimensional representation of a room, with one of its walls covered in paintings available for clicking. Select a painting, and the site produces a pop-up box with a larger view of the painting alongside a placard containing an engraving, information about the title, and a blurb of historical and artistic context.

Such an interface is alluring for its interactive presentation and its pleasing representation of the exhibit's original curation. Even more inviting, the nearly three-dimensional navigation of museum walls and rooms affords a dynamic haptic visuality to the museum experience. The Pall Mall galleries are not only transported into our homes but into our hands as well. This interface surely speaks to the current vogue for geo-spatial mapping technologies (GIS) and even newer attention to three-dimensional modeling—those 3D printers that create and circulate everything from maps to miniature models of the Parthenon. These digital tools, including Google SketchUp used for this site, have produced a multi-sensory experience of museums where visual culture is augmented by the intimation of an object's physical presence. We may not be able to experience the crowds of viewers that necessitated the installation of a railing in May of 1813, but we do have the sense of moving through the exhibit space and even touching the pictures to elicit additional insights.

Both the site's "About What Jane Saw" page and Professor Janine Barchas's longer [project report](#) (published in *ABO*'s March 2012 issue) candidly detail the historical intricacies and pitfalls of attempting to construct an accurate model of the 1813 exhibit. Several editorial choices needed to be made—for example, the placement of the paintings on the walls reflects the editors' "educated guesses about relative placement, balance, and alignment." Because the "cold model" generated by Google SketchUp was deemed too modern, it was isolated into specific wall views, which were then frozen and substituted with hand-drawn renderings, replete with more accurate color palate and frames. The site reproduces only the Catalogue's list of pictures, not the entire twenty-page pamphlet, with its membership list and preface. Finally, the gallery does not include the June 1813 reorganization and expansion of the exhibit to add late arrivals—the digital museum only models one iteration of the exhibit. These caveats addressed in the site information serve to remind us of the tentative nature of historical research and digital reproductions.

Undoubtedly, such a playful, experiential reproduction has pedagogical benefits, and Barchas reports that the website will be "a focal point for a planned 'big tent' undergraduate course on Austen open to all majors." This "practical aspect" helped to garner institutional support, and the project's wide appeal even more powerfully signals the aegis of public humanities. This wider frame, though, does not come without its losses. While the site provides plenty of physical context for the museum as a cultural space and event, that investment comes at the price of slightly less scholarly contextual information about the inner workings of the art world, public entertainment in the nineteenth century, or—given the number of military portraits—even the politics of the Napoleonic Age.

Here we come to the site's major provocation—a gallery reproducing Joshua Reynolds's first posthumous, retrospective show is named *What Jane Saw*. Austen, a perceptive portraitist in her own right, clearly serves as a provocation for Austenites and as the representative of a particularly acute visitor. Yet such conflation between Reynolds's production and Austen's consumption of his paintings may limit, as well as open up, interpretive possibilities for the exhibit. Many of the contextual labels contain asides that pertain to Austen's biography or her works. These references certainly bring the Regency's social history to life by reminding us of familiar discussions about, for example, lawyers in *Pride and Prejudice* (see no. 7). Yet at times such information seems vaguely metonymic to the paintings themselves. Much of the contextual material has been taken from the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, David Mannings's descriptive catalogue of Reynolds's works, and books such as *Jane Austen in Context*. It might be useful for the more precocious student to have an even more expansive list of references for further reading.

Students looking for additional information—scholarly or more general—might like to be pointed to other resources on the Royal Academy, the British school of art, museum culture, and the interrelations between these aesthetics and the period's developing class mobility. Some information about Reynolds is available in the placards alongside his self-portraits, but students will have to go elsewhere for additional information on his importance to the art world. Aside from Austen, Byron, and the royal couple, the site provides slightly less description of the museum-going public. Surely Austen speaks to these issues, yet by privileging Austen's life and

novels as a framing context, the site risks placing her as a historical source rather than a purveyor of representations, just as subject to interpretation as the paintings.

When evaluating these choices of content and technological modeling, we do well to remember that even digital archives and tools direct us toward specific types of interpretation. What the gallery walls do offer are nodes of information that encourage students to draw networks of relations between paintings. In contrast to textual scholarly editions that surround a text with a bulk of related, primary materials, this site places contextual material within each painting's e-placard. These labels link together—through juicy historical narrative or observations about proximity—portraits of military men, prominent aristocrats and their children, authors, lawyers, actresses, and clergy. The legends likewise note common tropes of portrait painting such as the inclusion of household pets, theatrically costumed sitters, and scenes from Shakespeare and Classical mythology. The recognition of these tropes amid gallery walls and rooms help the museum visitor to build historical narratives and interpretations. For example, the placards suggest a relation between the portraits of King George III and King Lear, both with their mental illnesses, while repeated topics (such as Cupid and Psyche) suggest meaningful themes. We can certainly learn much about the possible affinities and tensions between members of the *ton* who were well off enough to garner a memorial through oil and canvas. Their poses, more dramatically, allow students to trace such lines of influence for themselves, recoloring social distinctions, sexual mores, and cultural relations with their selection of paintings that become increasingly visible through their own meanderings.