



Resource Review

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Name of reviewed item:	Futures Past: Thirty Years of Arts Computing
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Review:

This is the second volume of the stimulating *Computers and the History of Art* series. It again covers a wide variety of issues on this ever expanding, and sometimes overwhelming, subject of the digitisation of art and its teachings.

Volume one, Digital Art History, was a selection of presentations made at the CHArt (Computers and the History of Art) Conferences of 2001 and 2002. *Futures Past: Thirty Years of Arts Computing* continues the theme of highlighting the developments that information technology has afforded the study and practice of art. The featured papers put forward an argument for a greater and deeper understanding of digital culture in the twenty-first century.

Whilst, due to the ever evolving technology, it is difficult to declare that the relationship between art and computing has truly come of age, the papers in this book go some way to illustrating the history of the mixed interactions that the art world, and its teachings, have had with computers and its associated technologies.

Futures Past is a 144 page paperback containing eleven conference papers, accompanied by a small collection of black and white illustrations. It is well suited to subject areas such as: the computerisation of education, art history, archiving, and extending the gallery space. It has a few papers that will be of interest to academics studying computer art.

The eleven papers have been well chosen as they come from a varied background of experience and practice. The list of contributors ranges from a Ph.D. student, to an image archivist, through to a director of new media resources for the Open

University, and a practicing artist and research fellow. There is little narration linking the subjects of the papers, but the introduction does give some overview of these varied works. The addition at the end of the book of paper abstracts and a brief background on CHArt is beneficial for further reading.

The first half of this book feels as if it is at the cutting edge of art and technology. Readers unfamiliar with the medium of technology-based art may feel as if it is being thrust towards them like a dangerous weapon. Exciting, if not a little unnerving. However, by the fourth paper the mood has shifted towards a very historical stance on the computerisation of teaching art history and archiving.

Whilst the papers *Sourcing the Index: Iconography and its Debt to Photography*, and *The Medium was the Method: Photography and Iconography at the Index of Christian Art*, are well researched, they do not cover the most exciting areas of computing within art. They do, however, make the subject of the implementation of the Index of Christian Art accessible. They are appropriately related to one another, and the subject of the book, while still presenting varying perspectives on its uses.

There is a strong sense of hindsight throughout this book. The papers show that it is now possible to look at practices that were once uncertain, and only possible futures, as well mapped histories. As the disparities between earlier visions of the future and contemporary reality are assessed, there is a reassuring sense that even as technology is constantly developing, only the users can really drive what is required, and that is from what works in practice. These issues are particularly pertinent in the relay of art history within education.

These papers are clearly influenced by the 2004 CHArt conference where most of these papers were first presented. With this in mind the papers *Painting Digital*, *Letting Go*, *Microanalysis as a Means to Mediate Digital Art*, and *Indexed Lights*, serve as enlightenment and a glimpse of where this medium is heading. This is particularly useful for readers with more of an art history or educational background as opposed to digital art.

The book finishes with a look at the desires for the future of information and knowledge. *Towards a Semantic Web: The Role of Ontologies in the Literary Domain*, by Luciana Bordoni, is perhaps the most theory-based paper in this book. A prior knowledge of web technology, such as meta data, would be a definite advantage to grasping the issues in this paper. This piece is effective in providing an in-depth reference to the developing use of the web, in terms of accessing art through a shared vocabulary, a refined ontology based index, and the wider sharing of knowledge. In this ever-evolving field, it is possible that this subject may become as "old-hat" as some of the theories the writers here have discussed. However, it will always be of interest to anyone reading around the dissemination of information through new technology.

This resource is perfect for researchers and practitioners of varying levels and requirements. The papers are brief, but that is because on the whole they are frank at presenting and discussing the issues at hand. This makes it a very accessible book as the reader can access individual chapters at their convenience. At one hundred and forty four pages in length, it is also possible to cover a wide breadth of debate in a matter of hours.

This book would be of particular interest to anyone researching educational methods in general, but specifically within art history. It is also full of case studies and histories that will be of benefit to anyone wishing to plot the development, and ensuing effects, of information technology on the processes of the professional world. Of particular

interest here are the detailed accounts of how the V & A gallery sought to update their web site, on-line exhibition and database.

This book is primarily for anyone interested in the digitisation of art collections and art history teaching. From the cover you might expect *Futures Past* to open up the kinds of debate that are constant thorns in the side of a medium, that as a result, often feels like the poor relation in art history. It is less suited to readers expecting a cutting edge look at the use of computers in contemporary art practice. Although, the first couple of papers do give some very interesting illustrations that readers may not have seen before. With its retrospective feel, this book serves to give any reader with modern computing experience a sense of "it all seems so obvious now". It is also a reminder that modern teaching and archiving methods can constantly be adapted to new technologies. A constructive addition to any learning resource centre, but will probably appeal to a niche selection of bibliographies. Whilst being brief, this collection is a worthy addition to any art history, digital art, or teaching practice collection.