Why Digitize?

Before embarking upon the creation of a digital image collection, it is wise to be aware of the costs and commitment involved and ask, why undertake such a task, and for whom? Digital surrogates can almost never be considered replacements for analog originals, which have intrinsic value and compared to which even the best-quality digital image represents a loss of information—inevitably failing to convey the unique feel, scent, weight, dimension, and patina of a physical object. Moreover, the creation of digital image collections can be arduous and expensive, their maintenance can impose a long-term obligation upon institutions, and their management may well throw into question many established procedures.

The issue of whether such a commitment is worthwhile can only be resolved by considering the mission and resources of any particular institution. A digital image collection can increase awareness of, and facilitate access to, analog collections and thus serve both an educational and a promotional function. It can support the management of resources by providing, for instance, a straightforward way of identifying different assets. It can indirectly facilitate the conservation of original artifacts, because use of a digital surrogate can decrease wear and tear on the original, although it should be noted that, conversely, the additional awareness created by the availability of a digital surrogate can actually increase demand to view the original. High-quality or specialized imaging can reveal previously indiscernible details that might be useful in the conservation and/or analysis of original artifacts. Aside from all such considerations, it may be that the expectation of all cultural heritage institutions to offer digital surrogates online has reached a point where both target audiences and funding sources require its fulfillment at some level.

These incentives must be balanced against the time and expense involved in establishing and maintaining a digital image collection-factors that are all too easy to underestimate. While funding is often available for digitization projects, costs frequently go beyond the actual scanning process to include, for instance, conservation of originals, cataloguing of originals and surrogates, photography, salaries, training, and investment in the technical infrastructure to facilitate management, preservation, and access. Because image files are so large compared to text files, the construction of a networked image repository is likely to affect system resources significantly, and system architecture and **network topology** are therefore likely to become significant concerns. License fees may be required to reproduce the chosen material and offer it over the World Wide Web or in any other digital form. Even if various tasks are outsourced to either commercial vendors or collaborative nonprofit consortia, the creation of a digital image collection will inevitably consume resources that might have been spent on some other task.