No one disputes that the Digital Revolution has profoundly changed human existence, but some areas—such as communications or the sciences—have been quicker than others to embrace its transformative possibilities. Within the humanities, art history is one of the disciplines that has yet to fully explore the latest digital tools and techniques, which offer tremendous potential for scholars to process visual materials and historical data in new and exciting ways. Computer programs can be used to analyze large volumes of data quickly and easily, tracing patterns and connections formerly hidden from view. They can also allow researchers to approximate the physical past through virtual environments. In addition, art historians have an increasing number of digital data sets to draw on as museums, libraries, and archives around the world continue to make more and more images and information about their collections available online.

So what is holding these scholars back? The digital world is constantly evolving, and very few opportunities exist for art historians to gain the technical know-how to engage with unfamiliar technologies.
In addition, there are special challenges for art history related to the frequent issues with its Digital Art History initiative. For the field to advance in the digital realm, training is key. Since 2013 the Getty Foundation has been working to address these issues with its Digital Art History initiative. The term “digital art history” has become shorthand for the application of computer technologies to interpretive research in the history of art. Through grants that support training workshops and related convenings, the Foundation has assumed a leading role in preparing and related convenings, the Foundation grants that support training workshops and related convenings, the Foundation has assumed a leading role in preparing and related convenings, the Foundation grants that support training workshops and related convenings, the Foundation has assumed a leading role in preparing.

Deborah Marrow, director of the Getty Foundation, “Building on our long history of support for digital such as the Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative (OSC), we are committed to supporting the use of digital technologies to advance interpretive research.” This summer, training institutes will take place at three United States universities and one international campus, bringing together art historians at diverse career stages for intensive workshops. All of the programs emphasize skill-building and group learning led by experts, each has its own unique approach based on the expertise of the hosting organization.

“We launched this new initiative to prepare more art historians to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the digital age,” said Deborah Marrow, director of the Getty Foundation. “Building on our long history of support for digital such as the Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative (OSC), we are committed to supporting the use of digital technologies to advance interpretive research.”

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Digital Bootcamp
George Mason University’s Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media is hosting "Building a Digital Portfolio," a digital art history “bootcamp" that arms emerging professionals with the basic skills needed to advance their own scholarship. The course was open to art historians at all levels for its inaugural year in 2014, and this summer the program will focus exclusively on graduate students.

“Recent studies document how historians and art historians are reluctant to engage in digital methods, and to integrate those methods and related tools into their teaching,” said Sheila Brennan, associate director of the public projects division at the Rosenzweig Center. “The cycle perpetuates itself as these established scholars are then unable to mentor graduate students or even to point them to appropriate training opportunities.”

Teaching art historians digital fundamentals at the outset of their professional lives is one way to break this cycle, so that digital practices are better integrated into art historical research going forward. Participants will begin with the basics, such as registering their own personal web domain, and proceed by examining tools such as Zotero and Omeka that help scholars organize and share their research, and completing thematic workshops that tackle every thing from how to build digital collections to how to map data.

Beautiful Data
Also returning this summer is the “Beautiful Data” workshop hosted by Harvard University’s metaLAB. Here the emphasis is on storytelling with digital collections and exploring how art historians can use the growing mass of information that museums make publicly available about collections objects on their websites. The program starts with an introduction to existing tools to work with data visualization, interactive media, and online publishing, and it concludes with participants developing prototype digital projects that utilize data available in online collections. Projects developed in the 2014 workshop ranged from a computer program that pulls together the online art collections of several museums and allows users to search objects by color to a visualization tool that helps users navigate through revisions of Wikipedia articles.

The Big Questions
At the workshop hosted by the University of California, Los Angeles’s Digital Humanities program, participants ask the big questions: “What is digital humanities? What is digital art history? What is digital historical data?” The program stresses basic digital literacy and the larger theoretical framework through presentations by digital humanities practitioners, with a special emphasis on project-based learning.

The first summer of Digital Art History workshops supported by the Foundation was successful in training over fifty art historians, librarians, and technologists to work with digital technologies, and participants have begun to integrate these skills into their research. They have also shared their thoughts generously on social media and have presented their work at professional forums. It can also have a ripple effect as they share what they have learned with their colleagues and students. Going forward, the Foundation will continue to look for ways to help art historians embrace the digital age and break new ground in the use of technology to facilitate their research.

Visualizing Venice
This summer the Foundation adds an international program to the training slate using the unique art, architecture, and culture of Venice, Italy as a case study. Visualizing Venice: The Biennale and the City, is a collaboration between Duke University, Università Iuav di Venezia, and Venezia International University that brings together art and architectural history scholars, digital media specialists, and engineers to explore the history of the Venice Biennale and its impact on the distinctive architectural environment of the city from different perspectives. Participants will complete research using tools such as digital mapping and 3D modeling of buildings that allow dynamic ways to visualize change over time in built environments.

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