

# Europeana's digital promise:

Centuries of culture just a mouse click away

## Europeana — Europe's digital library — is the database of databases for Europe's cultural treasures.

Linking and cataloging cultural databases from the European Union's 27 member nations, it contains more than 4.6 million digital items accessible through an Internet site. The database is an example of how EU nations are working to preserve their cultural heritage.

A core team from the National Library of the Netherlands runs the project, which launched in November 2008. The team works with 100 representatives of heritage and knowledge organizations and information technology experts throughout Europe. The goal is to expand to 10 million digitized works online by the end of 2010. Anyone can access the database and conduct searches in all official EU languages at [www.europeana.eu](http://www.europeana.eu).

The online multimedia portal has image, text, audio and video files from European museums, galleries, libraries and audiovisual collections. These include works from acclaimed collections such as France's Louvre Museum, the British Library, the Swiss National Library and even obscure mountain monasteries, to name a few. The collections include incunabula (books printed before 1501) from Spain, prints of Belgian villages from the early 20th century, children's books from Poland, audio of Mozart's works from Austria, and Romanian art.

One obstacle Europeana faces is that many cultural treasures aren't available in digital form, so they can't be displayed on a computer. The EU noted in an August 2009 news release that less than 1.5 percent of the items in Europe's national libraries are in a digital format. Other cultural institutions also have a long way to go.

"It is unacceptable that a huge part of cultural heritage remains inaccessible to EU citizens, while, technically, it could be just 'one click away,'" Viviane Reding, EU commissioner for information society and media, said on [thebookseller.com](http://thebookseller.com) in October 2009. "We should create a modern set of European rules that encourage the digitization of books."

The main priority for expanding Europeana is funding digitization to provide more content. This is a responsibility of EU countries, and several use money from EU funds for specific digitization projects.

The EU set aside more than \$179 million to organize the system and find technical solutions to improve accessibility in a multilingual environment. Future funding from the EU and member states has yet to be coordinated.

"We have to find means to encourage member states to provide more funding for digitization," said Helga Trüpel, vice chairwoman of the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education, in an October story on the Penki news Web site. "My big political goal is to achieve the balance between making books available and rewarding the authors." Since EU member countries have different copyright laws, a method for compensating participating authors must be worked out.

The basis for selection of database content is cross-border relevance and its contribution to Europeana. France has contributed 47 percent of the items, and Germany 15.4 percent. All EU nations have contributed to the database, but content for many is low. Slovakia has rehabilitated an old

military complex as a large-scale digitization facility using page-turning robots. The country has contributed less than 1 percent of content.

The database could serve in other capacities, like helping partner nations better understand each other's cultures. Knowledge of the cultures of other nations may even lead to "providing assistance in troubled areas of the world, which can help diminish the risk of asymmetrical threats," states a 2008 NATO report.

The Web site was an instant hit. On its first day online, the Europeana system crashed from heavy use. Now restructured, and with a fourfold

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European culture ministers attend the launch of the Europeana digital library in Brussels, Nov. 20, 2008.

server capacity upgrade, the system can withstand the heavy traffic. Officials said they can add more capacity if peak-hour requests exceed 10 million hits per hour.

To access the site, visit [www.europeana.eu](http://www.europeana.eu). □

Editor's note: Additional information from European Union Web sources appears in this article.