



REACH FOR REFERENCE

AMICO Library: Bringing Art to Young People Everywhere by Barbara Ripp Safford

This new, growing, and exciting database includes almost 80,000 works of art from a consortium of more than thirty important museums in the United States and Canada. It is available from WilsonWeb and the digital images are searchable in the same manner as other subscription databases. Although the use of *AMICO Library* is in no way limited to K-12 schools, the images are licensed to educational institutions so that students can use them in assignments and teachers can use them in lectures, presentations, and even in password-protected web courses. This is one of the best new products available and every library media center should consider it.

First, a disclaimer of sorts. It is pretty presumptuous for someone to review an art database whose entire art education, before becoming a library media specialist, consisted of a first grade teacher who told her to color inside the lines, and a college western civilization professor who thought his students should be able to identify Ionic, Doric, and Corinthian columns. But perhaps it is the arts-deprived who can really appreciate what *AMICO Library* could have done for this rural Ohio child—and can do for a contemporary rural Iowa child or for any child for that matter. When, in my first job in Maryland, my art teachers gently suggested that an art-literate library media specialist might be more helpful, I did take some art history courses. My best art history professor always required us to see the actual paintings we were researching, because there is no substitute for seeing the original art work, so we had to research paintings from “local” museums—Washington, Baltimore, New York, Boston.... While I learned to agree that this was an im-

portant requirement (and of course, it got us into museums), it made me only sadder that so many American children don't have the opportunity to see quality original art, if their schools even pretend to care about the arts. All of this long introduction is to establish the significance of this wonderful new art database that makes it possible for every child to have a virtual experience of seeing “the real thing.”

Because the collection is from libraries with a wide geographical distribution, it permits children to see objects beyond the museums where they live. Because it is a searchable database, it allows children to identify a wide variety of objects that connect, in some way, to their learning. *AMICO Library* thus goes beyond the important museum collections on the Web, and the video disc collections that were generally limited to the works from one museum, although it shares with the latter the ability to sort for specific kinds of items.

Of the many fine features of this database, two especially stand out for me. The first is the incredible quality of the reproductions in their high-resolution formats. A search of the database brings a page of explanatory information and a thumbnail of the art object, and in some cases a table of thumbnails of details or parts of an object. Each thumbnail then has a link to bring up the high-resolution version. I never fail to experience a little gasp as the art work appears on my screen. Three-dimensional objects appear three dimensional. Flat pieces are stunning in their color and detail. Even black-and-white photographs seem to allow the light to filter through. This is as close to seeing original art as possible.

The second quality that appeals to me is

Barbara Ripp Safford is Associate Professor at the School Library Media Studies, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls. She has been a middle school and elementary school library media specialist in Maryland, a high school media specialist in Ohio, and a public library director in Pennsylvania.

the possibility for students to use the database to make meaning from the art. Children need to see art in the context of the lives of people. Although I have enjoyed museum visits with children, it is difficult for them to see work after work and gallery after gallery in any sort of meaningful context. Great museum programs designed especially for school groups try to create this kind of context and *AMICO Library* does this as well. Gifted students will use *AMICO Library* to browse and make their own connections—going from item to related item, crossing boundaries of medium and artist and subject and time, learning much about beauty and its production as they wander. All students will benefit from teacher guidance that will direct them to meaning through art. Students can look at pieces from specific cultures, by specific artists, by specific media, and by themes and subjects. The database is not just for art classes, but for literature, history, and world culture classes as well.

Art teachers can use the database for studio art as well as art history. Because the works are searchable by medium (painting, sculpture, costume and jewelry, photography and so on), examples of art techniques are easily at hand. The photography examples are quite striking and illustrate techniques and effects that will enhance student understanding of that art form; indeed, that can be said for any of the media.

AMICO Library has search capacities for limiting by date, so history students can identify the art created during any time period being studied. This would be useful also when students try to match intellectual developments in science, technology, literature, and music with art from the same time period.

The obvious use of the database that must occur to any creative library media specialist or teacher is the opportunity it provides to make art works the center of interdisciplinary units. Here, I recommend that teachers and library media specialists browse to see what is there, waiting for inspiration. A painting with a window recalled for me James Cross Giblin's wonderful book *Let There Be Light: A Book about Windows* (Crowell, 1988). There are 215 hits in the database of art works about windows! Add these resources to other books, Jeannie Baker's *Window* or even *The Wide Window of Unfortunate Events* fame, and to all of the poetry and music about windows, the geometry and physics about windows, the architecture and symbolism of windows, and an exciting unit unfolds.

Cultures with art works in the database include Native American (both as subjects of works and as creators of art), North American, Chinese, Japanese, African, and both historical

and contemporary European. The scope of art works is impressive. Painting, drawing, and printing predominate in included objects, but sculpture, photography, mixed media, architecture, and even installations are represented. The depth of the database for schools is increased incredibly by the inclusion of costume and jewelry, decorative and utilitarian arts and other objects, and textiles. There are ancient cloths, tapestries, American samplers and quilts, and 20th-century designs in the textiles collection. This breadth of chronological coverage is typical of all the media in *AMICO Library*.

Each work of art in the database is accompanied by information about the object. Title, artist, nationality, date of creation, materials, and dimensions are given. The museum that owns the work is listed, along with its location and any special details about the work's acquisition. Some of the works have fuller descriptions; for example, about a third of the paintings have this feature. This useful information tells about the artist or the work, and the *AMICO* staff say that more works in the future will have these descriptions. Because the details come from the owning museums who currently prefer to use their own language and descriptors, there is not really a controlled vocabulary, which leads to some confusion and complexity in searching the database. One field that I appreciated in the video disc art collections—style or movement—is not currently applied to the *AMICO* collection. Thus, one can search Picasso, but not Cubism. A good library media specialist can assist students through these minor search problems. The usual WilsonWeb search documentation is attached to the database.

WilsonWeb's vending of the independent *AMICO Library* means that the richness of the art image database can be combined with the wealth of existing Wilson art and biography databases in simultaneous searches to create a powerful Web-based learning and teaching tool. Pricing for *AMICO Library* from WilsonWeb follows the practice of charging per pupil, so even smaller schools can afford to make this exceptional resource available to teachers and students. More information about the database can be found at both the *AMICO* site (<http://www.amico.org>) and at WilsonWeb (<http://www.hwwilson.com>). Whether used alone, or with the other Wilson databases, *AMICO Library* opens the meaningful world of fine and decorative arts to children, whether they live in a large metropolitan area with many museums, or in rural areas and small towns with limited opportunities to experience quality original art. This is an exceptional reference product. 