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A Collaborative Approach to Designing Digital Exhibits
at the University of Dayton

By Kayla Harris, Marian Library, University of Dayton

In August 2021, the Marian Library at the University of Dayton physically welcomed public visitors back for the first time since March 2020 with the opening of the exhibit *Journeys of Faith: Shrines, Souvenirs and Catholic Tourism.* Catholic shrines and festivals attract millions of visitors each year, ranging from pilgrims on spiritual journeys to casual tourists. The exhibit, featuring items from the Marian Library and the US Catholic Special Collection, explored the motivations for Catholic travel; what visitors do at these sites; and the souvenirs they bring back—from handcrafted devotional objects to quirky mementos. After the physical exhibit opened, a team from across the University Libraries developed a companion digital exhibit while also outlining a process for these types of collaborative digital projects in the future.

Pilgrims at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City, Mexico

Pilgrim banner from Bolivia

The University of Dayton (UD) is a Catholic and Marianist institution and has three special collection units within the University Libraries, including the Marian Library, the US Catholic Special Collection, and the University Archives and Special Collections. The US Catholic Special Collection holds books and archival materials that preserve records of the Catholic Church and Catholic life in the United States, while the Marian Library documents diverse expressions of popular devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, through books,

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archival collections, and religious artifacts. Although the Marian Library is located within the University of Dayton's main library, Roesch, it also has its own gallery space, which has been traditionally used to feature curated exhibits of Marian artwork. *Journeys of Faith* marked one of the first times that an exhibit included artifacts from both the Marian Library and the US Catholic Special Collection, such as posters, books, photographs, relics, statues, and other souvenirs. The variety of material types made selecting a platform for the digital exhibit more complicated.

Poster advertising a 1947 Marian festival in Hasselt, Belgium, celebrating the Virgin Mary under the title Virga Jesse (Root of Jesse). The festival, held every seven years, includes a procession through the city with the fourteenth-century statue depicted on the poster.

Different Platforms for Digital Exhibits

The University Libraries has access to several different digital exhibit platforms but has not had a consistent workflow for the development of digital exhibits or clear criteria for selecting a particular tool over other options. This has partially been caused by short deadlines to complete exhibits or changing personnel within the libraries who could provide the technical support needed for certain options, such as Omeka.

When the Marian Library had to physically close in March 2020 due to COVID-19, the exhibit *Mary in Miniature: Books of Hours in the Marian Library's Collections* had only been open for a few weeks. The exhibit text and digital scans of select pages from books were converted to a website page as part of a remote work project (https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/b/books-of-hours-exhibit.php) that could be completed quickly and without access to any new tools. Later that same year, the Marian Library curated an exhibit titled *On Paper: Nativity Imagery from the Marian Library* using Scalar (https://scalar.usc.edu/works/on-paper-nativity-imagery-from-the-marian-library/index). Developed by the University of Southern California's Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, Scalar (https://scalar.me/anvc) is a free, open-source publishing platform for digital scholarship that can be used to tell stories in linear or nonlinear formats. Scalar has also been used at UD for student-curated projects, such as a digital paper by historycapstone seniors and a multimedia exhibit from a religious studies class.

For the digital version of *Journeys of Faith*, a cross-divisional team of the University Libraries was established to decide on goals and audience, select an appropriate platform, and divide the tasks of actually creating the exhibit. The team included exhibit curators from special collections, the communication and creative coordinator, the digital projects manager, the director of information systems and digital access, and a student employee from the Marian Library.
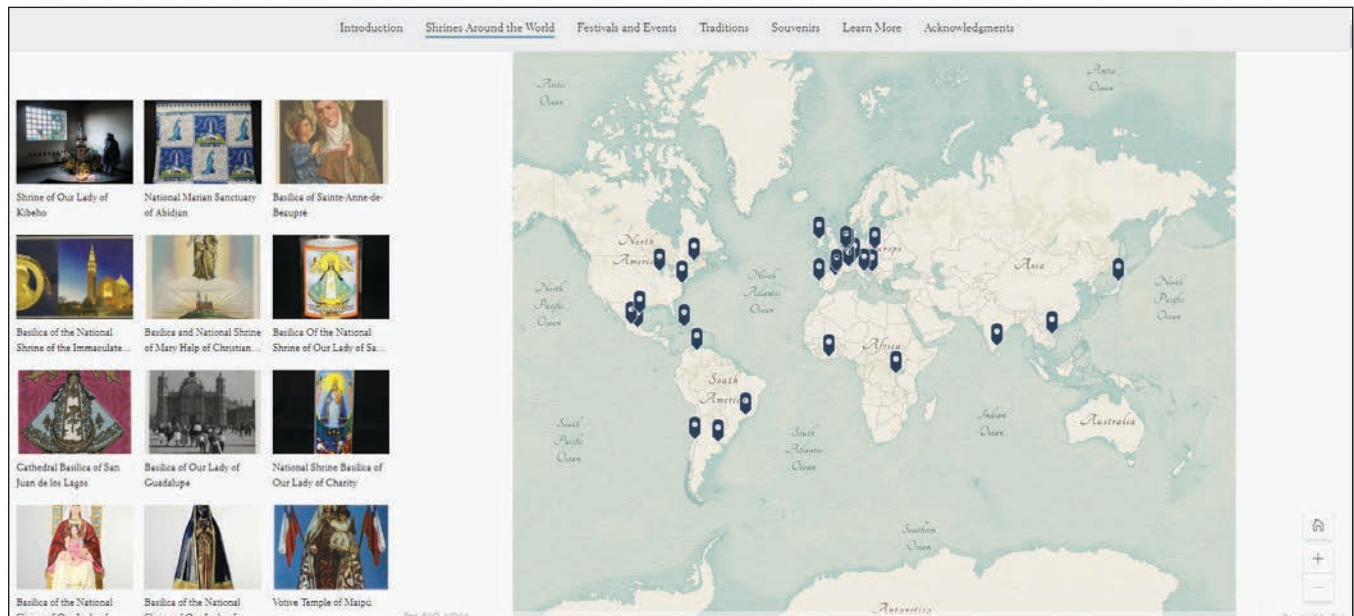
Shrines around the World

Shortly after the physical exhibit was installed in August, the digital exhibit team met to outline goals. The team decided that the digital exhibit would not be an exact replica of the physical exhibit but would feature a selection of the items and mirror the thematic outline. In the physical *Journeys of Faith*, the story is not told chronologically but instead focuses on particular themes.

First, visitors are greeted by a world map indicating locations of famous Catholic and Marian shrines around the world that are destinations for pilgrims and tourists. Next, the exhibit discusses some of the reasons why travel to Marian shrines became especially popular in the mid-twentieth century. With objects such as rosaries and relics (the physical remains of a saint or pieces of their clothing), the exhibit explores the traditions and practices that visitors participate in at these shrines. Finally, glow-in-the dark statues, fans, alarm clocks, and pressed flowers illustrate the varied souvenirs that travelers take home with them from these sites.

After the initial planning meeting, the team created a short list of potential platforms that might work well for this exhibit, given that the story was nonchronological and included artifacts from locations around the world. The director of information systems and digital access, Ben Daigle, created brief mock-ups of exhibit layouts in StoryMapJS by Knight Labs, Omeka, and ArcGIS StoryMaps for the team to explore together. Both StoryMapJS and ArcGIS StoryMaps use a map layout, but the team selected ArcGIS StoryMaps because of its enhanced functionality, such as scrolling narratives and the option to embed videos and interactive HTML5 files.

ArcGIS StoryMaps allows collaborative editing of projects, which was helpful to divide up the work of loading content into the digital exhibit. Although the University Libraries had not yet used ArcGIS StoryMaps for an exhibit, the University of Dayton did already have institutional access to ArcGIS used by the Geology and Environmental Sciences Departments. Public accounts do not include branding and access to all of the immersive components. More information about the differences between a public account and a licensed account can be found on the ArcGIS StoryMaps help page (https://doc.arcgis.com/en/arcgis-storymaps/reference/licensing.htm).

Before loading any content into the exhibit, the team used a whiteboard to decide on the narrative layout and what component within StoryMaps would best display the content. For example, StoryMaps has an image gallery where multiple images can be displayed together in different configurations, while a slideshow is an immersive element that allows full-screen images with text that can be displayed in a carousel that the user can swipe across. The multitude of options is exciting but can also be daunting, and so the advanced planning of the layout made this a smoother process.

Screen image of the Shrine Map showing souvenirs from Catholic and Marian shrines around the world

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While planning the layout, the team determined that the digital exhibit might offer better interpretations for certain items and that new content could be created specifically to do so. For example, one artifact featured in the physical exhibit is something known as a recording rosary. The rosary is meant to be mounted to a car or tractor and the user clicks a button as they pray the rosary. Digital Projects Manager Ryan O'Grady created a video demonstrating use of the rosary that provided greater context than text alone could.

Lessons Learned

While the exhibit and collaborative approach has been largely successful, the digital exhibit team will do a few things differently for subsequent projects. The digital exhibit was planned to be completed at the end of January 2022 to coincide with the closing of the physical exhibit. The rationale for that date was that the Marian Library didn't want to discourage visitors from coming to see the physical exhibit because they had a digital option available. Unexpectedly, the physical exhibit's closing date was extended through March, and it actually proved beneficial to have both available at the same time.
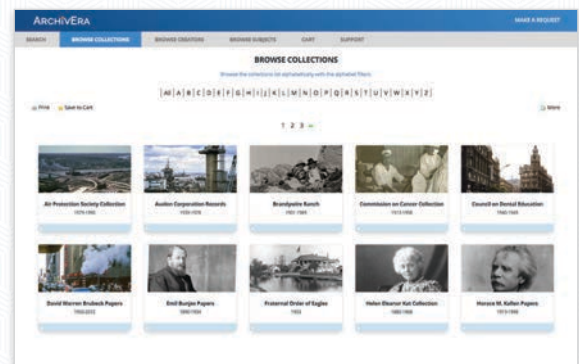
A teacher education course, Education and World Religions, scheduled an instruction session at the Marian Library using the digital exhibit for an assignment. Students had to use items from *Journeys of Faith* to explain how they could teach aspects of religious literacy using those items for K–12 classrooms. Because most of the students were not familiar with the subject matter, the digital exhibit was shared in advance with the class. Students were able to read some of the content online before the class visit and then also refer to the digital exhibit while completing their assignments. This use case made the team rethink timelines for future digital exhibits that coincide with physical ones.

Another lesson learned is that it would have been easier to complete all of the digitization before the opening of the physical exhibit or after the closing. While many of the flat items, such as posters and photographs, had already been scanned in summer of 2021, most of the three-dimensional objects were not. This meant careful coordination to "check-out" items from the physical exhibit cases for the creation of 360-degree scans and short video clips. The coordination was even trickier when accounting for class visits to the exhibit or group tours that expected to see certain items. Some of the content created solely for the digital exhibit, such as the rosary video, could have

been shown alongside the item on an exhibit kiosk if the timeline had been different, but the team didn't know they were going to create a digital exhibit until the planning for the physical one had been completed.

Going forward, the University Libraries will use this team-based approach to develop any future digital exhibits. Exhibit platforms will be evaluated and selected for each new digital exhibit based on the established goals for the exhibit and the characteristics of the content to be featured.

View the digital exhibit for *Journeys of Faith: Shrines, Souvenirs and Catholic Tourism* at go.udayton.edu /journeysoffaith.