

IMAGE FIRST: OPENING UP THE RIJKSMUSEUM WITH RIJKSSTUDIO

Linda Volkers
Manager, International and Digital Marketing,
Rijksmuseum

The Rijksmuseum is the national museum of the Netherlands. It tells the story of eight hundred years of Dutch art and history through its collection of one million objects. As of the end of 2012, the collection was made digitally available too – in high resolution on the museum’s website, freely available, without limitations. In this digital application, or online gallery, called Rijksstudio, over 300,000 pictures can be examined in close detail. Even the finest brushstroke technique or a precious material is revealed – allowing users a closer look than would be possible in the museum. In addition to this, users are encouraged to interact with the images: download them into their own collections, share them with others, and use them in any way they wish to. Inspired by trends in the digital world like Pinterest, the emerging use of tablets and mobile devices, Rijksstudio gradually took its current shape. It is a super user-friendly responsive interface, where the images are available full screen. More than 317,000 users have since created their own Rijksstudio.

The Rijksmuseum took this initiative in the firm belief that its collection belongs to the public, and the museum itself is the custodian. By opening up its collection digitally, the museum intends to attract new audiences – wherever they are, 24/7.

Apart from reaching new audiences and enhancing its brand awareness, the Rijksmuseum invites the public to make their own masterpieces for the international design competition Rijksstudio Award. Launched in 2014, the Rijksstudio Award places the museum in a leading position in the world of digital image culture and open design. **What were the choices that we made and what was the impact on the museum?**

Reinventing the museum

In anticipation of its reopening on April 13 2013 the Rijksmuseum undertook various initiatives to satisfy the needs of its 21st century visitors. The building was thoroughly modernised, while at the same time, restoring more of the original interior designs. Paintings, applied art, and history are no longer displayed in separate parts of the building, but form a single chronological circuit that tells the story of Dutch art and history. The Rijksmuseum took the opportunity to reclaim its role as the national museum, reinstate Dutch pride in their museum, and give international museum lovers a reason to travel to Amsterdam. The Rijksmuseum redefined its brand vision, its ambitions, and its distinctive power. We asked

ourselves “What difference can we make to the lives of our visitors?” It is in this process that the development of Rijksstudio first came into focus. We developed new core values, a visual identity, and web design; concentrating mainly on simplicity, clarity, and a personal approach.

Our renewed stakeholder approach is based on customer journeys of museum visitors and their varying needs at different occasions, in line with the model of the English consultancy firm, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (Meynen 2015). The segmentation in groups is based on knowledge, motivation, and behavior; and one person can fall into different segments. They may visit the museum as a cultural tourist on one occasion and as part of a family on another. We do not only focus on art lovers or professionals, but explicitly on first-time visitors who only occasionally go to a museum. The reopening resulted in worldwide media coverage, making the news in more than 120 countries. Visitor numbers have tripled; half of the visitors are international and 25 per cent of the national visitors are not regular museum-goers.

Rijksstudio: image-based online collection

Our digital presence, founded in a crisp and radical e-strategy, has proven to be key in opening up to our stakeholders and in the success of the museum. Following the rules of contemporary image culture, the Rijksmuseum introduced Rijksstudio (Fig. 1), a digital application integrated into our new website – inspired by Pinterest. With Rijksstudio, the museum offers downloads of high-resolution images of the collection at no cost (for both personal use and commercial purposes), copyright- and royalty-free, encouraging the public to collect the Rijksmuseum art digitally and transform them into new creations.

So far, 300,000 objects have been uploaded and the aim is to add 40,000 images each year – until the entire collection is available digitally. The museum decided to make its collection downloadable for free and without any restrictions in the firm belief that it is its duty to make our heritage available to all. As Taco Dibbits (General Director of the Rijksmuseum and founding father of Rijksstudio) puts it:

Now in Rijksstudio

Browse 610,225 works of art and 558,643 Rijksstudios



Hendrik Willem Mesdag

RIJKSMUSEUM



The First Day of School

JAN BAPTIST VAN DER SCHUER, ca. 1720 - ca. 1757



Arco Dieleman

16th-century art, 17th-century art, 18th-century art



Fig 1. Visual timeline of Rijksstudio with personal collections of users and the Rijksmuseum, 2016.
Image courtesy of Rijksmuseum.nl/Rijksstudio.

We are a public institution, and so the art and the objects we have are, in a way, everyone's property. ... With the internet, it's so difficult to control your copyright or use of images that we decided we'd rather people use a very good high-resolution image of the "Milkmaid" [by Vermeer, around 1660, LV] from the Rijksmuseum than a very bad reproduction. ... If they want to have Vermeer on their toilet paper, I'd rather have a very high-quality image ... than a very bad reproduction (Cushing 2013).

Image culture and the culture snacker

We are living in an image-heavy culture. Every cell phone has a camera and every image can be manipulated or uploaded to the internet at the click of a button. We have reached a level of reproducibility and democratisation of art. The Rijksmuseum decided to embrace it and to make radical choices: the museum would put its entire collection online and make it as user-friendly as possible – enticing website visitors to browse through its collection, to come as close to it as possible, and to share and use its art. With the online collection, we can also reach people who are not ardent museum-goers and people who are not able to visit the museum physically.

The Rijksmuseum identified a new target group for the Rijksstudio: the "culture snacker". The culture snacker is a digital native who enjoys viewing images and sharing them with friends and followers through social media. By disclosing its collection digitally, the Rijksmuseum wants to mobilise today's art lover, professional, and culture snacker alike and help people to get the very best out of its art – whenever they like, wherever they are, and on any device. Contact with the museum is not limited to a visit to the museum, but extends before and after a visit as well. Anyone with an internet connection can study or enjoy the

collection of the Rijksmuseum in-depth, with an intimacy that in previous eras was reserved only for the wealthiest collectors.

Results of Rijksstudio

Launched in late 2012 (a few months before the reopening of the museum), the results of Rijksstudio have far exceeded our expectations. The entire concept was described as "revolutionary" by the national and international press. In the first three months of its existence, over 32,000 Rijksstudio portfolios were created and more than 112,000 artworks from the Rijksmuseum's collection were downloaded. The number of website visits increased dramatically and the average duration of a visit went from three minutes to ten minutes (Gorgels 2013). Now, after four years, over 317,000 Rijksstudios have been created and over 1.5 million images have been downloaded for free. Every day, users share images or pictures of their own creations through social media channels like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The number of followers on the museum's social media channels has grown significantly; posts with images of the collection invariably have the highest engagement ranks. Further, the press now also uses a wider variety of images in articles about the museum.

***Make your own Masterpiece:* Learning by doing**

The Rijksmuseum has gone one step further than just sharing content with everyone. The museum aims to stimulate the creative use of its collection too. Driven by emerging technologies and devices for reproducing and manipulating images, it encourages users to be creative. Once you start making your own masterpieces you will experience the beauty, magic, and wonder; and ultimately appreciate our art and history even more. The museum believes that people will look a bit closer and a bit better, get a

better understanding and a deeper, more lasting experience by actively using the images rather than just collecting them.

This principle of “learning by doing” forms the pillar of the Rijksstudio’s *Make your own Masterpiece* concept, and also of the museum’s educational programmes and campaigns, such as the drawing campaign #startdrawing with the conviction that new creations will give the old masters a new relevancy in present-day society. A crucial aspect is that there are no restrictions on the creations – every form of art, design, or creativity is allowed. Just the fact that people enjoy the collection or are actively using it suffices. Everybody can use the Rijksmuseum collection – as long as they do not use its brand name. The Rijksmuseum still often gets asked whether it is not afraid that the originals will lose their “aura” while being disclosed digitally and reproduced. We believe that allowing art from our collection to become part of today’s visual culture adds a new chapter to their lives. Apart from that, reproductions are not new. Roman sculptors copied the bronze statues of their Greek predecessors in marble, and Rembrandt re-used etch plates from Dutch artist Hercules Segers. (Diercks 2016).

The power of our partners

During the launch of Rijksstudio, several partners were asked to produce new artworks inspired by the collection. Studio Droog made a tattoo and a dining table inspired by works of art, fashion designer Alexander van Slobbe created a dress and a shawl, and sponsor Heineken (Fig. 2) produced a special set of art bottles. In a collaboration with Etsy, an exciting set of creations was made and offered on the global online peer-to-peer marketplace. In doing so, the Rijksmuseum not only kept bringing Rijksstudio to public attention, it demonstrated the power of the concept at the same time – showing that real, new, and high-quality creations can be made.

Call to be creative with Rijksstudio Award

To be open and accessible to everyone, and not just to a restricted number of professionals, the Rijksmuseum in 2014 launched its design competition – Rijksstudio Award. This competition is an invitation to the public to draw inspiration from the Rijksmuseum collection. An example is the “book bracelet” based on dozens of etches by Rembrandt (Fig. 3). Anyone can



Fig 2. Heineken’s art bottles and dining table by Studio Droog, 2014.
Image courtesy of Heineken, Thijs Wolzak/Rijksmuseum.



Fig 3. Book Bracelet “Rembrandt’s hands and a lion’s paw” by Lyske Gais and Lia Duinker, Winner of Rijksstudio Award 2015.
Image courtesy of Lyske Gais and Lia Duinker, Rijksmuseum.

take part in the competition as long as they use images from Rijksstudio. The entries are judged by an international team of leading experts in arts, design, and the digital fields. Projects of finalists will be exhibited in the Rijksmuseum. Where possible, the Rijksmuseum will facilitate the actual production of the designs.

The first two editions were a great success, each receiving nine hundred entries from all over the world. The help of a private benefactor enabled the Rijksmuseum to award prizes for the winning designs. Inspired by 17th century still life paintings, one of the winners of Rijksstudio Award 2015 created a line of confectionery and preserved foods (Fig. 4). These products are available at the Rijksmuseum shop and the web

shop. The reasons behind this are strictly not commercial; making a profit is not a goal in itself. The Rijksmuseum is doing this to stimulate and facilitate new talent. The Award has become an important tool for the Rijksmuseum to get closer to its digital community and enhance brand awareness. At the same time, it helps to anchor our position in the world of digital image culture and open design.

Success factors of Rijksstudio

Even after four years, the Rijksmuseum is regularly asked to explain the origin of the Rijksstudio project and the choices that have been made. We see a few reasons for Rijksstudio’s success.



Fig 4. “Still life with a Silver Jug and Porcelain Bowl” (1655-1660) by Willem Kalf (left); Rijks Conserve by Alexandra Schijf and Birgitta van Langeveld, 2015.
Images courtesy of Alexandra Schijf & Birgitta van Langeveld.

1. A radical approach of sharing and engagement

The decision of literally giving away the images of our entire collection for any purpose has been key to the success. Although this idea was not created overnight (in fact, it was a gradual process that took several years), it helped the Rijksmuseum to create genuine digital engagement. By disclosing its collection online, the Rijksmuseum believes it can enhance relevancy, allow more people to enjoy the collection, and in the end attract more people to visit the Rijksmuseum to see the originals. The radical choice of sharing it all through Rijksstudio also gave room for other activities that help to leverage the brand and create engagement: enhancing creativity with the Rijksstudio Award, offering broad possibilities to share content through social media, and allowing the public to decide for themselves what to do with our images. Had there been constraints on the use of the images, Rijksstudio would not have been this successful.

2. An overarching e-strategy with clear choices

Rather than jumping into new technological tools, the Rijksmuseum has chosen to define an integrated approach for its e-strategy, based on the simple objective of bringing the collection closer to the public. This led to a number of strategic principles, amongst others: the website should be lean and mean like an app, it must be possible to share content easily, and existing platforms should be used rather than building new ones. An important starting point is to focus on the image and not just on text (as museum websites tend to do). All digital initiatives must be evaluated against these criteria before they can be unrolled.

3. Changing user needs as a focal point

The responsive Rijksmuseum website and Rijksstudio are inspired by different trends in

the digital landscape: the way we have used computers since the introduction of the iPad, or the way users started collecting images on Pinterest, usability conventions, and sharing initiatives like Airbnb, Uber, etc. Only by following these trends and transforming them into leading starting points was Rijksstudio able to make a true impact.

4. Close to our core business

Bringing the collection to the public is our daily business as a museum. Staying close to this goal helps us to stay relevant – as it is our daily practice and it helps to keep focus. Like every organisation, we have multiple stakeholders, all with different wishes and needs. By keeping this primary goal in mind, the Rijksmuseum was able to stick to its overarching goal: connecting people, art, and history; and touching people's hearts and minds.

5. Ability to adapt

Museums usually move from one project to another in a linear way. The Rijksmuseum used the agile method to create its website, working in sprints with multidisciplinary teams. As Rijksmuseum's Digital Manager, Peter Gorgels puts it: “[It] relies on cooperation, communication and team spirit. ... Agile is also about realising that the web is never finished. You don't redesign your website once and it is done...” (Dodge 2016)

The Rijksmuseum sees it as its duty to keep evolving Rijksstudio to stay open and attractive to all, and invent new ways of reaching its audience through its collection.

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