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**Digital Age**  
Archive

## How fares the digital revolution: A look at the Corbis Corporation

We assess the benefits that have accrued to museums and publishers so far

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As their financial difficulties grow ever more alarming, museums must harken to the siren song of digital reproduction and, inevitably, to that loudest of electronic lorelei, the Corbis Corporation.

About a dozen museums have granted non-exclusive rights that authorise Corbis to distribute digital reproductions of their most important works within a multidisciplinary image archive that since January 1995 has been available for a fee to traditional and electronic publishers.

A year and a half after entering the electronic market, how is Corbis doing? Are museums realising any income from their new-age partnerships, or is the digital archive a rocky shore on which their hopes will be dashed?

It may be too early to tell. Although it was established in 1989 by Microsoft Corporation's chairman Bill Gates, who still owns the business, the company took its current shape only a few years ago. Originally called Interactive Home Systems, its mission was to research multimedia systems that would combine visual images, audio, motion video, and animation, all in digital form.

In 1992, as Continuum Productions, the company focussed on content rather than the medium itself, then again changed course, dedicating itself to creating an interdisciplinary bank of digitised images for delivery to home, business, and institutional markets. The archive has only been made available to commercial customers in the last two years in its renamed form as the Corbis Corporation.

## **The competition**

At present, the competition is still stock photo agencies using traditional transparencies. But Corbis believes the wave of the future will be digital, and that although income is negligible today, they are ahead of the industry curve.

Corbis seems to have no serious challenger in terms of content. Their archive numbers more than half a million images relating to all areas of human endeavour from fine and applied arts (less than 10%) to architecture, travel and geography, famous people, history, popular culture, science and technology "to a depth satisfactory for secondary school or undergraduate university curricula." To amass this resource, Corbis has entered into non-exclusive licensing agreements with photographers and photo archives, libraries, science institutions, and museums in the United States, Europe, and Russia.

Participating museums include the National Gallery of London, the Hermitage, the State Russian Museum, Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Barnes Foundation, the Kimbell Art Museum, Detroit Institute of Arts, the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Seattle Art Museum, the Seattle Flight Museum, the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia, the Library of Congress, and photo archives such as the Hulton Deutsch Collection in London, the Roger Wood Collection of ancient sites, Dorling Kindersley scientific photos, the Starlight Collection of space, science and technology, the Francis G. Mayer Collection of architecture and public monuments in New York, and the huge omnibus Bettmann archive.

One of the newest partners is the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust which has given Corbis the exclusive rights for twenty years to license in digital form 2,500 photographs by the famous

nature photographer. The future profits from royalties of the hugely popular imagery will far outweigh the \$25,000 signing bonus and the expense of digitisation. But Bill Turnage, managing trustee of the Adams Trust, is extremely pleased with a relationship that will “enable Ansel’s vision to continue into the 21st century.”

## **The deal**

Corbis offers museums and other clients such as the Adams Trust an expanded audience, new markets for relicensing activities, the opportunity to collaborate on future editorial products, and an invitation to join the electronic club. Corbis covers all costs of digitisation, including necessary original photography, scanning, and colour correction. And although cheaper or better viewing technology and new forms of access may render digital files obsolete, (like Beta-format videotape), for the time being, there is no more stable form of reproduction, and no other way to post images on the information superhighway.

Museum licensing agreements authorise Corbis to act not only as distributor of the digitised pictures, but in some cases as publisher, drawing on the archive to create their own multimedia products. Corbis publishing has issued a number of well-received CD-ROMs on subjects like the Barnes Foundation as well as non-art topics, and others on Cézanne and Ansel Adams are forthcoming.

In any case, every usage must be sanctioned by the museum. Contracts vary based on the size of the museum’s advance, the percentage of future royalties, the amount of existing copy photography available, and the complexities of underlying rights. Deals are typically ten-year and non-exclusive, allowing museums to make and market their own products, such as CD-ROMs of exhibitions and collections, and to sell digitised images through other channels.

## **Copyright problems**

But unresolved intricacies plague the field. For example, the US Copyright Office has recognised Corbis’s copyright claims for digital files, as if reproducing an image digitally entails a new level of originality. Thus, Corbis permits a museum to use digital files for independent projects like a World Wide Web site or CD-ROM, but should the museum decide to place the digitised reproduction of their own picture with another licensing agency, they must lease the file back from Corbis.

The notion of a separate copyright for a digital reproduction seems even more dubious than a

separate copyright for a photograph of a two-dimensional artwork. Neither process constitutes a new level of originality. Fortunately, the Clinton administration's Working Group on Intellectual Property Rights has convened a subgroup on Visual Image Archives whose members include various museological, art historical, and cultural organisations. This body is advising the government on how best to revise US Copyright Law to intelligently accommodate electronic publishing. Until then, museums are wise to worry about losing control of their collection.

## **The payoff**

In any event, the potential for profit is negligible at this point. After four years, the Philadelphia Museum of Art has reaped royalties of less than \$5,000, plus a signing bonus of \$25,000 worth of computer work stations. According to Conna Clark, manager of rights and reproductions at the museum, more than 1,000 paintings were digitised, but customers have mainly shown interest in a handful of major works.

“It exposes us to new electronic markets”, she confirms, citing several non-art CD-ROMs as well as Corbis products, such as their WWW site. But there has been limited use by print media, and only one notable commercial design application, for a soap package. This seems to be the story throughout the field.

Corbis are keen to draw attention to Renoir Galleries, a San Francisco wholesale distributor of reproductions of prints, sculptures, and limited edition ceramics after Renoir. The company licensed several images from the Barnes Collection from Corbis, all in the public domain. A spokesman said: “It's a fabulous tool. You go directly from the computer to the image, you put the image on the page without a scan, and do your own typesetting right onto a laptop computer. “It's the way of the future”, he concluded, noting that the price is “very comparable with the old way. It's mostly just very convenient”. And, he added, there is no worry as with a museum that a lost transparency will cost a couple of thousand dollars.

## **Art book publishing**

Some publishers are not convinced that digital will be superior to traditional processes in terms of colour correctibility. Whereas advertising agencies, magazines, and trade books may make the transition, arts publishers in particular are reluctant to trust the speedier medium.

Frances Harkness, US production manager for Harry N. Abrams, Inc., one of the nation's leading

producers of art books, has yet to lease a single museum image from Corbis.

She deems digital images suitable only for mock-ups and promotional material, but for artbooks she sticks with conventional transparencies, even for black and white images. “We’re working towards it, but we’re still not convinced that colour correction is adequate”, she explains. “There are too many questions: first, do you have the museum-approved files? Then, is your monitor the same as the museum’s? Is the digital proof going to reflect the final product? How do you colour-correct the digital file?”

Moreover, at this point it is unlikely that all the images needed for an artbook or exhibition catalogue will be available in consistent digital format. Nonetheless, Ms. Harkness senses the inevitability of the transition. “It’s a question that keeps coming up, and someday we may not have a choice”, she says. Indeed, museums will probably only provide digital files, rather than transparencies.

Ms. Harkness anticipates that cost savings will accompany the switch to digital format. The current process entails costs all along the way, from image copyright fees to the photographer’s fee, to duplicating the transparency, and colour separation (which can cost from \$120-175 and might have to be repeated for colour correction). A high resolution scan could be less expensive than colour separation, and single-step digital photography will cost even less, perhaps as little as \$40-70. But, at this point, Corbis fees are no better than for traditional formats, ranging from around \$200 to several thousand dollars per image, depending on the nature of the usage.

With revenues so modest, at this point, it would seem that the archive needs museums more than museums need the archive. To offer a market-leading product, Corbis requires a diverse array of usable images. With this in mind, museums should be able to negotiate big bonuses as well as extremely favourable royalty percentages, at least for the next few years, before the volume of electronic- and print-media usage really grows.

In establishing a licensing agreement, museums should recognise their positions of strength, as well as the caveats with regard to copyrights and technological change. They would do well to make sure their contract has an “out clause” that permits them to end the relationship whenever they wish.

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**COOKIE SETTINGS**