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Shared Heritage: A Digital Collection

Abstract: The National Library of France launched the Shared Heritage collection in 2017, with a series of digital libraries dedicated to France's relationships with different countries or regions, illustrating a new way of engaging with content. The collection has also proved to be a catalyst for networking and capacity building in the field of preservation and digitisation. Shared Heritage continues to be developed technologically and scientifically.

Keywords: Digital Unification – Global History – French History – Digital Humanities – Digital Libraries – Postcolonialism – Content Discovery – Communications and collaboration

Słowa kluczowe: unifikacja cyfrowa – historia globalna – historia francuska – humanistyka cyfrowa – biblioteki cyfrowe – postkolonializm – odkrywanie treści – komunikacja i współpraca

The National Library of France



Header

The advent of digital technologies has opened up a field of possibilities with respect to digital unification as well as creating new bodies of documents based on material held by heritage and research institutions worldwide.

The National Library of France (BnF) has established a manifold international digital strategy as its own collections bear witness both to France's global past and a long-standing tradition of collecting documentary knowledge on a global scale.

Launched in 2017, the Shared Heritage collection¹, with a string of digital libraries dedicated to France's relations with various countries or regions, illustrates this new way to engage with content. It has also proved to be a catalyst in terms of networking and capacity building in the fields of preservation and digitization.

First Attempts

Prior to envisioning a digital collection, the BnF had undertaken a couple of digital unification projects such as *La France en Amérique*² (France in America) together with the Library of Congress, *La France au Brésil*³ (France-Brazil) with the National Library of Brazil (Fundação Biblioteca Nacional) as well as *Europeana Regia*, a European project on three royal collections of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts.

1 Shared Heritage collection, [online] <https://www.bnf.fr/en/shared-heritage> [accessed 25.01.2023].

2 France in the Americas, [online] <https://www.bnf.fr/en/france-americas> [accessed 25.01.2023].

3 France-Brazil, [online] <https://www.bnf.fr/en/france-brazil> [accessed 25.01.2023].

Europeana Regia⁴ set apart, those early attempts considered one foreign partner, preferably a national library, and were undertaken as independent initiatives in no way related to each other and as such not supported by any shared design, or commonality of any sort. Moreover, the narrative was established by a limited number of contributors. The sites were closed spaces and had more in common with online exhibitions or once and for all productions than dynamic digital sites. Last but not least, scan resolution was lower compared to what is available today.

The Birth of a Collection

The idea of a collection took off with the project France-Poland⁵ originally conceived as the first episode of a series of digital libraries dedicated to France's relations with various European nations. It rapidly evolved into a global vision with the advent of Bibliothèques d'Orient⁶ (Libraries of the Middle East), a digital library centered on the Middle East. This is the reason why it was decided to redesign France in America and La France au Brésil. Two sites related to the French-Chinese and the French-Vietnamese relations were then launched and one related to the French presence in South Asia is currently under construction.

The idea of a collection with dynamic, extensible digital libraries now implies a comprehensive approach with an array of commonalities in terms of editorial policy, design, content discovery, technology, organizational principles and monitoring rules. The philosophy of the collection is to reassess and understand a common past together with partner institutions and experts. Opening up to any institution, French or foreign, located in France or abroad, has been a game changer in terms of scope and ambition. The purpose is not to celebrate the past glory of a former great power. Multilingualism is a key dimension for each library.

Each site bears witness to the various relations – cultural, political, scientific, artistic, and more – entertained by France with a country or a region. Partner institutions involved are libraries, archival repositories, cultural institutes, and documentary heritage institutions in a broad sense. Their scope is scalable in terms of partners and content, Bodies of documents of all kinds are introduced by articles written by scholars, curators and other experts.

Secondary school and university students, teachers, researchers and the general public are the main target audiences. Beyond the obvious purpose

4 Europeana Regia, [online] <https://pro.europeana.eu/project/europeana-regia> [accessed 25.01.2023].

5 France-Poland, [online] <https://www.bnf.fr/en/france-poland> [accessed 25.01.2023].

6 Libraries of the Middle East, [online] <https://www.bnf.fr/en/bibliotheques-dorient-libraries-middle-east> [accessed 25.01.2023].

of dissemination, Shared Heritage is also a catalyst for skills transfer and capacity building. The collection opens up the possibility for cooperation programs with a comprehensive approach encompassing staff training in the fields of document restoration, cataloguing and digitization. This leads to the establishment of a strong and lasting network of collaborating professionals.

The Digital Libraries

The purpose of this section is not to provide a thorough description of each digital library but to describe key features for each one of them.

Bibliothèques d'Orient (Libraries of the Middle East) is a trilingual (French, English and Arabic) collaborative digital library focusing on the relations and exchanges between France, in its European environment, and the Middle East from the late 18th to the mid-20th century, with some forays into previous centuries. The area covered goes from Egypt to Turkey and includes Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. It currently displays over 10,000 documents from the BnF and fifteen heritage and research libraries and archival repositories located in France and the Middle East. Libraries of the Middle East is also an international solidarity program implementing concrete actions to preserve the Middle East's documentary heritage. *Bibliothèques d'Orient* benefits from sponsors and implementing partners such as The Mellon Foundation and the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH).

The founding partners are: the French Institute for Oriental Archaeology⁷ (Cairo), the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies⁸ (Cairo), the Centre for Alexandrian Studies⁹ (Alexandria), the French Institute in the Near East (Beirut, Damascus and Amman Libraries), the Oriental Library at Saint Joseph University¹⁰ (Beirut), the French Biblical and Archaeological School¹¹ (Jerusalem), the French Institute of Anatolian Studies¹² (Istanbul), and SALT¹³ (Istanbul and Ankara).

7 French Institute for Oriental Archaeology, [online] <https://www.resefe.fr/en/institut-francais-d-archeologie-orien> [accessed 25.01.2023].

8 Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies, [online] <https://www.ideo-cairo.org/en/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

9 Centre for Alexandrian Studies, [online] <http://www.bibalex.org/hellenisticstudies/home/Index.aspx> [accessed 25.01.2023].

10 Oriental Library at Saint Joseph University, [online] <https://bo.usj.edu.lb/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

11 French Biblical and Archaeological School, [online] <https://www.ebaf.edu/en/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

12 French Institute and Anatolian Studies, [online] <https://www.ifea-istanbul.net/index.php/fr/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

13 SALT, [online] <https://saltonline.org/en/home>, [accessed 25.01.2023].

More recent partners are the libraries of the Catholic University of Paris¹⁴ (France), BULAC – The University Library of Languages and Civilisations¹⁵(France), the Collège de France¹⁶, the Antonian Order of Saint Ormizda of the Chaldeans¹⁷ (Iraq), the Zheen Centre for Documentation and Research¹⁸ (Iraq), the Custody of the Holy Land¹⁹ (Jerusalem), and the Institute of Arabic Manuscripts²⁰ (Egypt).

France-Brazil²¹, a bilingual (French and Portuguese) digital library, tells the history of Franco-Brazilian relations from the 16th to the 20th century through more than 2,000 documents of all kinds from the collections of the BnF, the National Library of Brazil and Brasiliana Library, the Bibliothèque Sainte-Genève and the digital library Manioc. It focuses on public figures, knowledge and ideas.

France-China²² is a bilingual (French and Chinese) digital library which recounts the cultural, religious and scientific interactions between France and China from the 16th century until 1945. It gives access to some of the BnF's sinological collection, one of the richest in the world. Over 7,000 printed documents, manuscripts, maps, photographs, artifacts and sound recordings (both in Chinese and French) are on display.

France-Poland is a bilingual (French and Polish) collaborative digital library dedicated to the relations between the two nations from the Renaissance to the Second World War through 4,000 documents. This digital library stems from a partnership between the BnF and the Biblioteka Narodowa – National Library of Poland²³. In addition to the two historical partners, the following institutions have joined: La Contemporaine²⁴, Bibliothèques de Nancy²⁵, Institut

14 Libraries of the Catholic University of Paris, [online] <https://bibliotheques.icp.fr/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

15 BULAC – The University Library of Languages and Civilisations, [online] <https://www.bulac.fr/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

16 Collège de France, [online] <https://www.college-de-france.fr/fr/bibliotheques-et-archives> [accessed 25.01.2023].

17 Antonian Order of Saint Ormizda of the Chaldeans, [online] <http://www.gcatholic.org/orders/150.htm> [accessed 25.01.2023].

18 Zheen Centre for Documentation and Research, [online] <https://zheen.org/en/home/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

19 Custody of the Holy Land, [online] <https://www.custodia.org/en> [accessed 25.01.2023].

20 Institute of Arabic Manuscripts, [online] <https://www.malecso.org/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

21 France-Brazil, [online] <https://www.bnf.fr/en/france-brazil> [accessed 25.01.2023].

22 France-China, [online] <https://www.bnf.fr/en/france-china> [accessed 25.01.2023].

23 National Library of Poland, [online] <https://www.bn.org.pl/en/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

24 La Contemporaine, [online] <http://www.lacontemporaine.fr/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

25 Bibliothèques de Nancy, [online] <https://www.nancy.fr/culture> [accessed 25.01.2023].

National de l'Audiovisuel (INA)²⁶, Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration (MNHI)²⁷, Musée National de Varsovie²⁸, Institut Littéraire Kultura²⁹, and Université de Lille³⁰.

France-Vietnam³¹ is a bilingual (French-Vietnamese) digital library exploring the cultural, historical, colonial and scientific interactions between the two countries from the 17th century to 1954. The Vietnamese partner institution is the National Library of Vietnam.

France in the Americas³² is a bilingual (French-English) collaborative digital library bringing together the National Library of France and eighteen French, Canadian, US, and British cultural institutions and universities. The first phase, dedicated to the French presence in North America between the 16th century and 1900, will be complemented in 2023 with a second phase dedicated to the Caribbean. Along with the Library of Congress (LOC)³³ and the National Library of France, the two founding partners, the following institutions have joined the project: Archives nationales d'Outre-mer (ANOM)³⁴, Bibliothèque et Archives Canada/Library and Archives Canada (BAC/LAC)³⁵, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BANQ)³⁶, Bibliothèque municipale de Versailles³⁷, Bibliothèque municipale de Bordeaux³⁸, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève³⁹, The British Library⁴⁰, Columbia University Library⁴¹, Dictionnaire biographique

26 Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, [online] <https://www.ina.fr/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

27 Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, [online] <https://www.histoire-immigration.fr/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

28 National Museum in Warsaw, [online] <https://www.mnw.art.pl/en/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

29 Kultura Literary Institute Association, [online] <https://kulturaraparyska.com/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

30 Université de Lille, [online] <https://www.univ-lille.fr/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

31 France-Vietnam, [online] <https://www.bnf.fr/en/france-vietnam> [accessed 25.01.2023].

32 France in the Americas, [online] <https://www.bnf.fr/en/france-americas> [accessed 25.01.2023].

33 Library of Congress, [online] <https://www.loc.gov/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

34 Archives nationales d'Outre-mer, [online] <http://www.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/anom/fr/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

35 Archives Canada/Library and Archives Canada, [online] <https://library-archives.canada.ca/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

36 Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, [online] <https://www.banq.qc.ca/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

37 Bibliothèque municipale de Versailles, [online] <https://www.versailles.fr/55/culture/reseau-des-bibliotheques.htm> [accessed 25.01.2023].

38 Bibliothèque municipale de Bordeaux, [online] <https://bibliotheque.bordeaux.fr/patrimoine/collections-patrimoniales> [accessed 25.01.2023].

39 Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, [online] <https://www.bsg.univ-paris3.fr/iguana/www.main.cls> [accessed 25.01.2023].

40 British Library, [online] <https://www.bl.uk/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

41 Columbia University Library, [online] <https://library.columbia.edu/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

du Canada/Dictionnaire of Canadian biography (DBC/DCB)⁴², Harvard Library⁴³, Historic New Orleans Collection (HNOC)⁴⁴, Howard Tilton Memorial Library⁴⁵, Tulane University⁴⁶, John Carter Brown Library (JCB)⁴⁷, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)⁴⁸, New-York Public Library (NYPL)⁴⁹, Princeton University Library⁵⁰, and Canadian research knowledge network.

Organization

Scientific Advisory Boards chaired by Laurence Engel, the President of the National Library of France, have been established for most of the digital libraries. Boards comprise of representatives of partner institutions, expert panels and key BnF project staff members. Each board defines and validates the tree structure as well as the editorial policy of the library and monitors adherence to the initial vision while vetting needed changes. In ideal conditions, boards meet once or twice a year. Partner institutions play a role in selecting content as well as identifying contributors. The panel of experts provides scientific support, helps select contributors and peer reviews articles and their translations. The project manager ensures the day-to-day running of the project along with the scientific advisor, a BnF curator. Together they make proposals to the Scientific Advisory Board with regards to the collection at large. The webmaster builds up, feeds and maintains each site, anticipating and accompanying technological change. The BnF technical support units ensure document harvesting or digital files and metadata ingestion as well as developments. Beyond the use of Drupal, technical functionalities are also supported by Gallica, the digital Library of the BnF and its partners.

Challenges

Unexpected situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic set apart, challenges of a logistical, technological or philosophical nature may arise.

Preservation considerations ahead of digitization prevail and can be an obstacle to digitization or imply additional costs. Institutions establish digitization

42 Dictionnaire biographique du Canada/Dictionary of Canadian Biography, [online] <http://www.biographi.ca/fr/index.php> [accessed 25.01.2023].

43 Harvard Library, [online] <https://library.harvard.edu/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

44 Historic New Orleans Collection, [online] <https://www.hnoc.org/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

45 Howard Tilton Memorial Library, [online] <https://library.tulane.edu/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

46 Tulane University, [online] <https://library.tulane.edu/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

47 John Carter Brown Library, [online] <https://jcblibrary.org/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

48 National Archives and Records Administration, [online] <https://www.archives.gov/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

49 New York Public Library, [online] <https://www.nypl.org/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

50 Princeton University Library, [online] <https://library.princeton.edu/> [accessed 25.01.2023].

strategies based on effective rationalized large scale digitization processes and this does not leave much space for picking. As it turns out, a digital thematic library is by essence selective, and implies a bespoke approach.

Technical challenges are many. The functionalities of each website have already been redesigned once during a lengthy three-year process in order to improve content discovery and user experience. File ingestion and harvesting, the two modes to deliver metadata are complex and time consuming operations. However, the future looks bright as the upcoming implementation of the International Image Interoperability Framework, aka IIIF, will facilitate content exchange and help convincing new partners to come on board. There is currently a debate about how to describe situations or groups and a strong will to name the world in an inclusive way, to challenge more or less conscious forms of prejudice conveyed by language or assumptions taken for granted. The meaning of words has evolved and is being questioned. Terms can in today's light carry a negative connotation or be considered offensive or unsuitable as in the following example: First nations vs Indians, enslaved vs slave, the naming of people of African descent, the use of the word savage. The use of the « N » word in French is another fitting example: *bateau négrier* (slave ship) has become *navire de traite* (slave trade ship) and *traite négrière* has become *traite transatlantique des esclaves* (Atlantic slave trade). Working with foreign partners entails to name the world from a not exclusively Western European or French perspective. Some issues such as states borders and their representation through maps can be a sensitive topic whose risk factor was not necessarily fully assessed from the very beginning.

Conclusion

Shared Heritage is a relatively new digital collection and still a work in progress from both a technological and scientific point of view. As content grows, each site, especially its tree structure, is bound to evolve. The scientific project of each library has to be constantly questioned and reassessed. The implementation of IIIF is a top priority in terms of partnerships and audiences as it will facilitate metadata transfer and as a consequence the number of documents made available to the public. So far, Shared Heritage is a success with regards to content dissemination and working collaboratively with institutions and scholars.

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