

Making Malaysian modern visual arts visible through MyMAOVA

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ABSTRACT

This study was motivated by reports that indicated even though Malaysian art resources are abundant, access to these information are scattered, incomplete and not easily accessible to students, researchers and people who are less skilled in searching for information. The objective of this study are: (a) to explore the opinions of selected persons in the arts industry about their perceived usefulness of an online archive for Malaysian visual arts resources; (b) to use a matrix to compare three sets of art gallery websites; and (c) to compare the performance of the prototype archive in terms of usability and design with the three sets of art gallery websites in order to gauge the performance of the prototype. The methods used to collate data were interviews with selected art personalities and viewing selected art gallery websites to identify best practices. The Interviews confirmed the prevailing 'disconnection' between content existence and content provision on the web. Findings indicate positive receptivity towards a web-based repository. In developing the prototype, a set of 'best practice' principles was identified. A customized Attributes Evaluation Checklist based on the Olsina Web-QEM steps was used as a tool to compare the designs of several sets of art repository websites. Findings indicate that the prototype (MyMAOVA) performs well against other similar art-related websites and the digital surrogates would be able to complement original resources presently available nationally and regionally. MyMAOVA would thus afford the public, access to Malaysian art resources at both national and international levels.

Keywords: MyMAOVA; Web-Enabled modern archive; Malaysian visual arts; Greenstone; Art museums web design; Art repositories

INTRODUCTION

The field of visual arts is vast and diverse. For this study, the research focus is on archived visual arts items. The reasons being archived items are rare materials and to replace them is difficult and costly. Banks and Pillette (2000) opined that archiving art resources was an imperatively urgent matter to give attention to. An archive repository also struggles with two opposing objectives, which are; on one hand preservation and the other giving access. As mentioned by Ding (1995), archivists have a real challenge to maintain the physical conditions of the items whilst also making sure that the item will be available for access and resource utilization. Echoing this polarity is the usage of items in archive repositories which differ to those from libraries, where an archive item according to Banks and Pillette (2000) will need to be used for a longer period of time and requires closer study. The advances in ICT and digitization technology makes archiving repositories of visual arts a viable option to facilitate greater access to visual arts archive surrogates while maintaining the quality of the original resources.

A cursory observation of the provision to digitized visual art information indicated that access to archiving art-related items on the web within the South East Asian region is very limited. This study proposes a solution to fill the gap by providing content through a system that is called the 'Malaysian Modern Archive of Visual Art' (MyMAOVA). MyMAOVA is an archiving system that embraces the new technology readily available in the form of open access digital library software. It promotes preservation of Malaysian visual art resources through digital archiving that could provide round the clock access to resources. This study seeks to identify guidelines and attributes that will contribute identifying all facets of the system, and this mainly relates to designing and publishing of content specifically for the web environment. In this context an open source program will be the viable option which, allows the archivists to build and customize, support and sustain the special needs of art collections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As culture embraces technology and digital contents bring added value experience to web users, resources becomes more readily available to the masses. Szarina and Mohd Sharif (2001) explored the opportunities afforded to users to view and explore art through a system that is convenient and accessible from galleries, museums and library websites. The system would be able to link scattered resources, support research and promote art. Marty (2007), who studied web visitors to museum websites pre and post visitation, remarked that both online and in-house resources collectively will encourage more museum visits and stronger relationships between museums and their visitors.

Banks and Pilette (2000) emphasized the important element in a modern archive preservation programme which would stabilize and protect collections. An online modern archive would provide a modern archiving platform to facilitate access and make collections more visible and at the same time preserve the digitized resources.

Designing an online modern archive is not achieved just by providing pictures on cyberspace. Design is seen as an attempt to give users the experience to be as close to reality as possible. There are a number of issues that need to be considered in a design. The first is the issue of content preservation and making them accessible to the most number of people. The proposed system should be able to hold and present art resources. The W3C (World Wide Web Consortium, 1999) organization that sets the standard for web design advocates that website design and usability should be assessed in terms of download speed, content look that provide users with a wholesome experience and careful flow of the delivery of information being communicated. The look-and-feel of the site is important as it is the greeting point between the user and the system. It must therefore exude a feel of overall ease of use. In this study, the guidelines laid out by W3C will be considered to establish the quality criteria in the evaluation checklist.

The WebQual model (Loiacono, Watson and Goodhue, 2000) proposed the following web quality attributes when designing websites; the information should fit the task, communications that are tailored, the feel of trust, the response time, ease of understanding, intuitive operations, visual appeal, innovativeness, emotional appeal, consistency of image, online completeness, and relative advantages. Lynch and Horton (1999, 2009) claimed that contents need to be framed in the who, what, when and where guideline. Information such as the title, creator, creation or revision date, links to home pages, and a home page URL should be apparent on web pages. The Computer Arts Special

(2002) used by web designers points out the essential characteristics of a good interface design. These include clear navigation aids; no dead end pages; direct access which minimize steps through menu pages; bandwidth and interactions which retains users' attention span; simplicity and consistency in terms of layout grid; graphical theme; editorial information and hierarchy which are simple, familiar and logical; design integrity and stability providing high editorial standards; feedback and dialogue linking users to the webmaster; graceful degradation which relates to content layout that fits well in the monitor screen; provision for going back and forth to previous pages; providing button bar; and fixed versus relative links which allow users to follow the sequences of pages laid out easily. This study hopes to use this multimedia content matrix in the design of MyMAOVA.

Nielson (2006) who studied user interface design found that eye tracking visualization shows that users often read web pages in F-shape pattern: two horizontal stripes followed by a vertical stripe. The horizontal stripe refers to reading in a horizontal movement across the upper part of the content area and the second horizontal bar refers to user eye movements down the page and then reading the second horizontal movement. This is done in a shorter area or movements. The vertical movement refers to the slow and systematic scan with eye tracking a solid stripe. Web pages are usually design using this knowledge.

Olsina (1999) identified six steps that would enable a quality evaluation and comparison study to be undertaken. These are: (a) selecting a set of sites to compare; (b) specifying goals from the user point of view; (c) defining the website quality characteristics and attributes; (d) defining the criterion functions for each attributes and applying attribute measurement; (e) aggregating the preferences to yield website quality preference; and (f) analyzing, assessing and comparing the outcomes. This study identified and adopts the steps especially those from stage (d) of Olsina's six steps guide. The Matrix Centre for Human Arts, Letters and Social Science On-line (Re-envisioning, 2006) also provided useful guidelines for web evaluation and usability.

A search on Google for art resources websites in Malaysia found two databases. The first is *The Malaysian Art Database* by Lydia Chai who created a website to collate her compilation of articles, interviews and artist profiles on the Malaysian contemporary art scene. The website links to external resources to art groups and societies, online magazines and gallery websites. Apart from this, the National Art Gallery (NAG) also puts resources on their website (Malaysian National Art Gallery). NAG only publishes selected images of its collections. No usage of metadata was provided to facilitate searching. Nevertheless, there is a positive move towards the digitization of Malaysian visual arts resources. The dearth of visual arts resources available on the web motivates the current study's move to provide a possible solution, however limiting the situation may be.

OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to achieve the following objectives: (a) to explore the opinions of selected persons in the arts industry about their perceived usefulness of an online archive for Malaysian visual arts resources; (b) to use a matrix to compare three sets of art gallery websites; and (c) to compare the performance of the prototype archive in terms of usability and design with the three sets of art gallery websites in order to gauge the performance of the prototype. The expected outcomes would be: (1) a prototype that supports the storage, retrieval and access to archived visual arts resources; (2) the

integration of Malaysian visual art resources from different repositories in a collaborative environment; and (3) providing access to national and global art users and researcher.

METHODS

This is an exploratory study which aims to design a modern archival system that would serve as a platform to support disparate resources of visual arts in Malaysia. A prototype in the form of a system (MyMAOVA) was developed and embedded in this prototype are various art-related contents to simulate the capabilities of the system. Data for this study is collected by using two approaches: (a) interviewing art related persons to elicit the art community's perceptions and information needs; and (b) reading published literature to derive the design quality, usability and evaluation matrix for art websites.

The persons interviewed are those active in the visual arts industry. They were asked about their usage of the Internet to find art information in general and Malaysian visual arts in particular, their thoughts about locally hosted online arts resources currently available, and their opinion on the concept of an e-archive for visual arts resources. Permission was given by an artist group, MATAHATI, whose head gave the researcher permission to carry out short interviews with various persons involved in the arts scene during the filming of a documentary produced by the Group in early 2008.

Published literature helps point to good practices when evaluating the design and contents of visual arts gallery websites. From the literature, required attributes of a usable and credible website for visual arts resources is identified in terms of contents, browsing ability, searching ability, narration pages, multimedia contents, user interface, integration of technology, and reputability. The matrix used is mainly adopted from Olsina's (1999) Web-QEM's checklist. For this study, all attributes suggested were adopted except for portability. The comparable websites identified for comparisons are divided into 3 sets:

- SET 1 - Locally identified archive websites (comprising three websites). In this set the sites chosen were the *Malaysian National Art Gallery*, *Senicast* and *Kakiseni*.
- SET 2 - Regional modern arts archive websites (comprising six sites). The websites chosen were *Asia Art Archive (AAA)* based in Hong Kong, *Queensland Art Gallery (Brisbane)*, *Vitamin Creative Space (Guangzhou, China)*, *IVAA (Indonesia)*, *Institute of Contemporary Art (Singapore)* (IPRN, 2006) and *A little blah blah (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam)*.
- SET 3 - International art gallery websites (comprising five websites). The websites chosen were the *National Museum of Australia*, *Le Louvre (France)*, *Museum del Prado (Spain)*, *National Gallery (United Kingdom)*, and the *Museum of Modern Art (United States)*. These websites were chosen because the countries they are located in are culturally strong in terms of their support for galleries and museums and the availability of arts professionals as well as the galleries are internationally recognized as "must see" sites in the region.

In total, 13 websites were compared using the matrix derived from the literature. The evaluation was done using the pencil and paper approach based on the evaluation checklist. Finally, comparison was made between selected libraries in the set and the MyMAOVA prototype. This was carried out to determine where MyMAOVA compares in terms of contents, usability and design.

The open source Greenstone, developed at Waikato University in New Zealand, was chosen to support the archive because: (a) it is downloadable and free; (b) it has been used in other archive initiatives (Greenstone Digital Library, 2009); (c) it is able to support various file types (HTML, PDF, Word, Powerpoint slides, Excel, image, sound and multimedia files; and (d) its ability to support individual and cross institutional collections.

RESULTS

The Interviews

Seven individuals were interviewed to solicit their opinion about their use of the Internet, the search for web resources on visual arts in general and Malaysian visual arts in particular. The individuals interviewed and their feedback are listed below. All individuals have been involved in the visual arts industry for more than ten years. Time constraints on the part of the interviewees allow for only five to ten minutes interview time which was carried out between the 17th and 20th February 2008. The profiles of and feedback from the individuals are as follows. To maintain confidentiality, the names of respondents are withheld.

- (a) **An art gallery owner** who is an art collector, a serious poet and publisher.

Feedback: The respondent did not use the Internet to search for resources on Malaysian visual arts. However, he admits that he has just started using the Internet very recently. He is very supportive to the idea of an online arts archive with the following comments, "fantastic! ... It might not be useful for me but it might be useful for a whole generation of people out there".

- (b) **The art patron** is an art enthusiast who passed away recently. He was widely respected for his knowledge and vision, impacting various developments within the Malaysian visual arts industry. He was an ex-owner of the first art gallery in Shah Alam and also had a gallery adjunct to the Central Market building in Kuala Lumpur. He worked as a part time lecturer at the Fine Arts Faculty in Universiti Teknologi Mara Malaysia.

Feedback: The respondent used the Internet regularly to find out about art. He subscribed to Tate Modern, Tate Gallery and National Art Gallery (UK). He mentioned that there too little information about Malaysian arts available on the web. His comments, "If I am interested to know about an artist, I'd go to the National Art Gallery Website" where he said that he obtained pictures and biodata about the artist. If he wanted to know further, he would contact the gallery. The respondent observed that most artists are influenced by the things or ideas they see on the Internet. He also opined that there are currently no resources available on the Internet that focuses on understanding the painting through the painters' profiling and felt this type of content would be useful and unique. He also observed that there was no site that support artists' intellectual discourse on art. He commented that, "The whole thing is about understanding art. Its like, you don't try to win an argument, but try to understand it ... once you understand art you can appreciate it better". He also believed that an artist must give credit to other artists who have done similar types of work and this rarely happens in the Malaysian arts scene. Very few young artists would say out right that they were inspired by senior artists. Integrity in art is therefore important to him. He said that he knew about the website *Kakiseni* but found the coverage about art was rather limited.

- (c) **The general manager of an art gallery** of fine arts. She has extensive experience in organizing art exhibitions and developing standards for art management and

curatorial directions.

Feedback: She does surf the Internet but has not specifically search for Malaysian visual arts. However, she confesses about being directed to view Malaysian visual arts sites by chance. She indicated that what she found on the Internet is currently dull and insufficient. She said that it is up to the gallery to push and play their role in promoting artists. She concludes that currently there are no art resources on Malaysian websites and an online archive would be useful to the research world. From the commercial perspective it would be useful to be able to find out about an artist on the website.

- (d) **The artist** is a pioneer in modern visual arts in Malaysia. He is a senior artist who was awarded the Malaysian artist laureate, and is involved in the development of art awareness and education in Malaysia.

Feedback: The respondent does not use the Internet to find out about art resources. He would be more comfortable using the library. However he is positive about an online archive saying that "Anything for the education of art would be good".

- (e) **The printmaker** has been working his art for about 25 years. He is a committed and influential artist especially in the field of print works.

Feedback: The respondent does not use the Internet to search about art. He would meet the artists he wants to find out about directly or attends their opening shows. He is positive about archiving resources about artists and his artworks on the web. He prefers a site that can provide high quality information and resources. He mentions *Kakiseni* which is an online directory of Malaysian artists and art enthusiasts but laments that support for intellectual discourse was not met. Instead the site is becoming a dumping site containing junks of unnecessary opinions and emotional tantrums. "It has become a mess ... such a sad state".

- (f) **The first artist cum academician** is an Associate Professor and graduated from the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York. He majors in sculpture and has received many awards since 1981. He is currently pursuing his PhD at the Universiti Teknologi Mara Malaysia.

Feedback: This respondent does use the Internet to search for information about art. He searches for contemporary art, sculpture, modern contemporary standards and avant guard initiatives. He uses Yahoo instead of Google and the top sites he visits are the International Sculpture Center and public sculptures. He found searching for information about Malaysian art on the Internet frustrating and would contact the gallery directly or buy the relevant books. He opined that the direction of online archive should be to provide information about Malaysian art including writings and views of collections. "Nobody is interested in anything related to art ... there is nothing for the serious artist". He observes that artists would only make themselves present on the Web when they are about to exhibit their collections overseas. In this instance, the gallery would develop the site pages for them. He stressed that artists and researchers would be looking for serious websites like a scholarly portal. Researchers would also like to put up their papers on the site too. He proposed that the website should provide for a variety of viewing options and a site with strong references and reviews would be trustworthy. Quality to this artist means a resource that is scholarly with references and the quality is controlled. He also proposed that there should be several levels of resources to provide multiple channels of access to information.

- (g) **The second artist cum academician** received his Master degree in fine arts from Savannah College of Art and Design, Georgia, USA. He has exhibited in numerous local and international art exhibitions and has received several art awards and

travel grants throughout his career. He is also pursuing his Ph.D in visual culture and societal influences on Malaysian artistic thinking.

Feedback: This respondent does search the Internet for information about art. He commented that the resources that are available on the web that are published locally are not well designed. He stressed that an online archive of art resources would be useful and important. Even though speed of retrieval of resources is important, the resources provided must be meaningful about art itself and about Malaysian art so that "... other world could know what Malaysian art is all about".

The interviewees provided varied views and behavior about using the Internet and finding art resources on the Web. In summary the interviews indicated that:

- The older respondents (d) and (e) do not use the Internet but do agree that a Website like MyMAOVA would be useful for art educators and the public. They all agree that information about artists and their works would be useful.
- Respondents (a), (b) and (c) did foresee that such a website would be useful to the public, academicians, art historians or serious students. Respondent (b) for example would like to obtain information about artists and their background.
- Respondents (f) and (g) use the Internet regularly for searching serious works about art. They proposed that the website should provide serious scholarly information about Malaysian art.
- The findings provide information about the type of contents and modules that MyMAOVA should focus on which are: (a) to support serious resources; (b) to support resources of various format (print, sound, images and multimedia); (c) searchable by single collection as well across collections; (d) contents about artists, their collections, their exhibitions, articles and resources about them; (e) to support authors' forum; (f) to support self archiving by several content providers; and (g) quality control of contents to prevent submission of ephemeral items.

Analysis of Attributes of Comparative Website Sets

This section lists the attributes used to compare the 13 websites listed in Set 1, Set 2 and Set 3. The print screens of the websites in the three sets are given in Figures 1, 2 and 3. The features looked for when evaluating the 13 websites are as follows.

- A. Reliability of information
 - Availability of contact pages (yes/no)
 - Provide link pages (yes/no)
 - Availability of publication date (yes/no)
 - Information about content updates (yes/no)
 - Availability of resource listing / bibliography (yes/no)
 - Website reviewed or ranked (yes/no)
 - Level of text access (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful – Untestable)
- B. Navigation of site
 - Ease of use (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Website loading time (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Free access to information (Yes/no)
 - Some sections requiring fee to view (yes/no)
 - Text only view enabled (yes/no)
 - Graphics off enabled (yes/no)
 - Site map access (yes/no)
 - Button Bar/Text Jump list (yes/no)

- Constant button home (yes/no)
- C. Learnability
 - Clarity of wording (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Menu options in websites (yes/no)
 - Ease of learning to operate the comparative websites (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Help instruction page (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
- D. System Design
 - Readable character on screen (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Presentation of information (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Interface design (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Screen sequences (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - System functions (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Design utilizing the inverted L/E (yes/no)
- E. Search, Browse, Display Options
 - Allow browsing of its resource collections (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Description of its collection using metadata (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Display of images and documents in PDF (yes/no)
 - Display multiple lingual resources (yes/no)
 - Display results of searches (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
- F. Linking Options
 - All links works (yes/no)
 - Links to primarily internally targeted resources (yes/no)
 - Site link to other resources off site (yes/no)
- G. Multimedia Options
 - Special reports/write-ups/highlight contents (yes/no)
 - Audio contents in resources (yes/no)
 - Video contents in resources (yes/no)
 - Transcriptions of resources content (yes/no)
 - Multimedia content (yes/no)
 - Provide audio/video downloads (yes/no)
 - Resources contain audio/video podcast (yes/no)
 - Resources on Archive of contents (Terrible – Bad – Moderate – Wonderful)
 - Provide for download of contents (yes/no)
 - Provide multi-media integration (yes/no)

Set 1 (Local Sites)



1. National Art Gallery
2. Kakiseni
3. Senicast

Figure 1: Set 1 Websites

Set 2 (Regional Repositories)

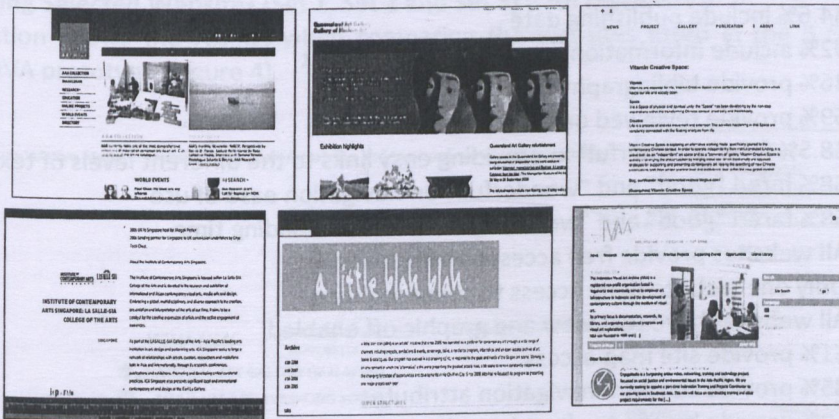


Figure 2: Set 2 Websites

Set 3 (Top 5 International Gallery)



Figure 3: Set 3 Websites

Summary of results

- (1) > 84% include contact information
- (2) 69.2% provide link pages
- (3) 84.6% include publishing date
- (4) 92% include information about updated content
- (5) 46% provide bibliography resource listing
- (6) 69% provide reviewed or ranked information
- (7) 38.5% fared wonderful" in providing easy links to the different levels of text access
- (8) 68% fared "good" and "wonderful" on navigation ease of use
- (9) 68% fared "good" and "wonderful" on website loading time
- (10) All websites provide free access to information
- (11) Only one website deny access to some sections
- (12) All websites have text view and graphic off enabled
- (13) 61% provide site map access
- (14) 85% provide constant navigation attributes
- (15) 69% provide button bar/text jump list
- (16) 77% provide constant home button
- (17) 76% fared "good" or "wonderful" on providing clarity of wording
- (18) 76% fared "good" or "wonderful" on the order of the menu options
- (19) 46% fared "good" or "wonderful" on learnability to operate the system
- (20) 77% did not provide help page
- (21) All fared either "good" or "wonderful" on readability of character on screen
- (22) 69% fared "good" or "wonderful" on their presentation of information
- (23) 76% fared "good" or "wonderful" on website interface design
- (24) 69% fared "good" or "wonderful" on screen sequences
- (25) 61% fared "good" or "wonderful" on function of the system
- (26) 85% uses the L/E design standard
- (27) 53% fared "good" or "wonderful" on the availability of browsing collection function
- (28) 53% fared "good" or "wonderful" on the presentation of resources through metadata
- (29) 53% provide display of images and documents in PDF

- (30) 61% provide display in multi-languages
- (31) 37% fared “good” or “wonderful” on providing information on results of searches
- (32) 77% have all links working
- (33) 78% provide site links to other resources
- (34) 85% provide special reports, write-ups and highlight their multimedia content on their main page and sub-pages
- (35) 23% provide audio contents
- (36) 38.5% provide video contents
- (37) 46% provide multimedia contents
- (38) 23% allow audio/video downloads
- (39) 46% provide audio and video podcast (presentation through a streaming channel)
- (40) 45% fared “good” or “wonderful” on website archiving their contents
- (41) 31% allow special downloads of contents to provide an experience when visiting the visual art gallery
- (42) 54% provide multimedia integration and connectivity of resources held within the websites

Websites are still limited in terms of providing bibliographical listing of resources, links to different levels of text access, availability of audio, video, multimedia and podcast contents, including metadata descriptors to facilitate searches, archiving contents, and giving users visual experiences.

Comparing Selected Websites (Set 1, Set 2 and Set 3) with MyMAOVA.

This section shows the results when comparing the websites listed in the 3 SETS with MyMAOVA prototype (Figure 4).

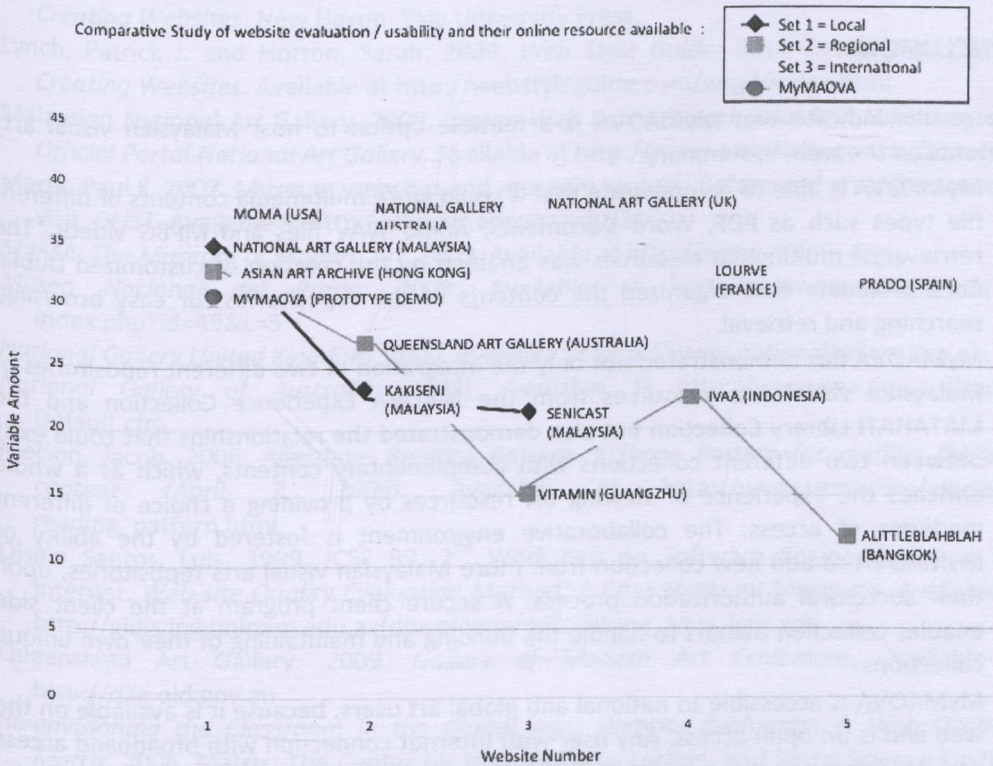


Figure 4: Comparison between Selected Websites and MyMAOVA by Attributes

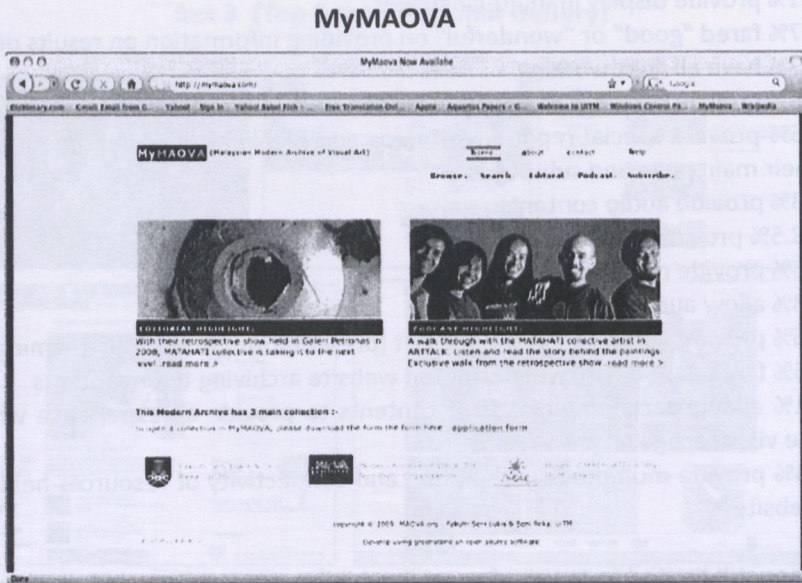


Figure 5: The Main Page of MyMAOVA

The results of the Attribute Evaluation Checklist indicate that MyMAOVA (Figure 5) rates better than six of the 13 repositories compared with. The National Art Gallery (UK) and National Gallery, Australia lead in the attributes and resources availability on their websites.

CONCLUSION

The results indicate that MyMAOVA is a feasible option to host Malaysian visual arts contents on the web. In summary:

- a. MyMAOVA is able to demonstrate that it could store multimedia contents of different file types such as PDF, Word Documents, Audio WAV files and MPEG videos. The retrieval of multimedia resources was enabled by the creation of customized Dublin Core Metadata that organized the contents of the repositories for easy browsing, searching and retrieval.
- b. MyMAOVA has demonstrated not only the integration of two different repositories of Malaysian visual arts resources from the MAOVA Experience Collection and the MATAHATI Library Collection but also demonstrated the relationships that could exist between two different collections with complimentary contents, which as a whole enriches the experience of viewing art resources by providing a choice of different mediums of access. The collaborative environment is fostered by the ability of MyMAOVA to add new collection from more Malaysian visual arts repositories, upon their successful authorization process. A secure client program at the client side enables collection owners to handle the building and maintaining of their own unique collections.
- c. MyMAOVA is accessible to national and global art users, because it is available on the web and is on open access. Any user with Internet connection with broadband access and recommended programs installed in their computer system could utilize the different multimedia resources in the system.
- d. The Greenstone software could be easily customized to suit local needs.

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