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Israel's National Museum Digitisation Project

The Department for Museums and Visual Arts, the Ministry of Culture Directorate for Culture

Interview with Ram Shimony by Susan Hazan

"When I first joined the Ministry of Culture," Ram explains, "coming from the private sector I was surprised to discover that the culture industry suffers from tight budgets, modest salaries, and sparse resources at their disposal in order to maintain and build upon national collections. Even more surprising, considering the typical salary, was the impressive intellectual level of the average employee and their high level of expertise, devotion, and motivation."

Ram, could you please describe, in a few sentences, the Israeli approach toward "Going Digital?"

Our primarily goal was to digitise the collections from museums from all around the country and consolidate them in a single location. Once this task was accomplished we set ourselves the goal of making the nation's patrimony accessible to our local public in our own language of Hebrew, and ultimately to the whole world, once translated into English.

Where did the budget come from?

The budget procured for our project came from the Ministry of Culture, The Prime Minister's office and the museums themselves, and we eventually started the project in 2007 with completion date planned for 2016. This challenge seemed formidable at first but once we had broken up the tasks into manageable milestones and paced them over a multi-year plan, we were able to take off.

6 milestones were set out as the following

1. Cataloguing and digitising the museums' collections, including their archives, to include more than 1.5 million items with approximately 20 million archival items;
2. Building an infrastructure and platform to store the digital assets and guarantee their long term preservation;
3. Designing and launching our national portal focusing on an enhanced user experience;
4. Supporting the curators' creativity using a specially designed platform and set of tools to produce virtual exhibitions;
5. Creating and maintaining a single national heritage vocabulary built on dispersed and varied vocabularies, in order to facilitate the sharing of knowledge among the museums, international knowledge bases and the public;
6. Linking museums' collections with national and international portals and cultural heritage platforms.

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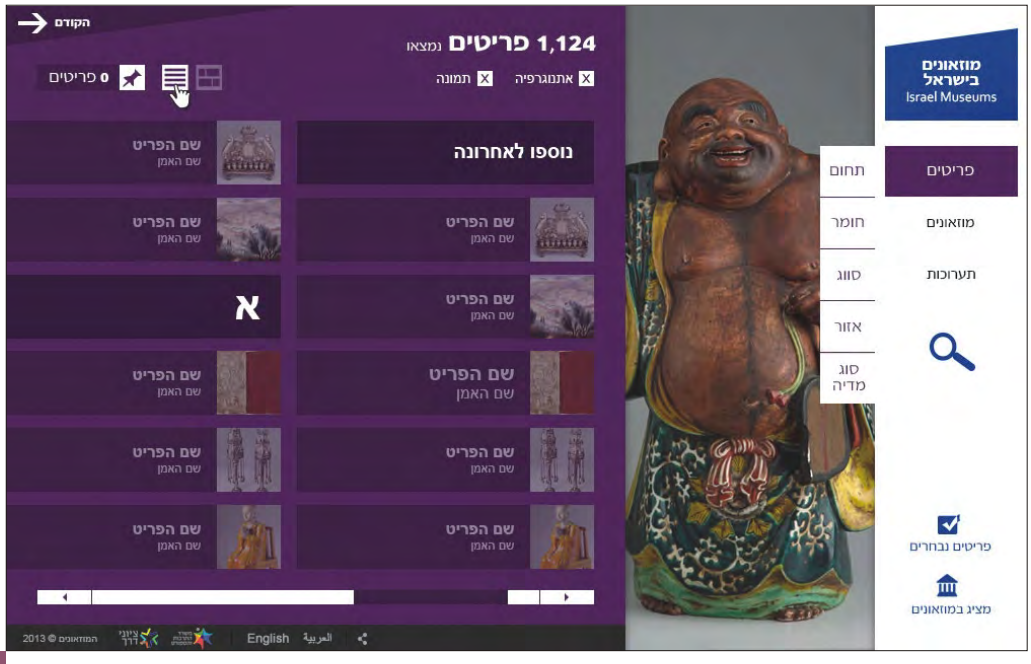
Ram, what is the current status of the project?

There are currently 40 museums registered in the system with some 600,000 items ingested over the last 30 months. By the end of 2013 we plan to grow the system with 3-5 new museums, bringing the total to 43-45 museums with over 1,200,000 items. Meanwhile we have just completed our contribution to Europeana through the Linked Heritage Project where we successfully aggregated and uploaded more than 1,170,000 items via MINT.

This sounds really impressive! Will you tell us more about your 2013 plan?

2013 is our transition year. By the end of 2013 we hope to have launched the full portal in both Hebrew and English. It is an important milestone of the project since it changes the focus of our workflow from cataloguing to engagement. You could describe it as the stage in which the pregnancy is over and the newborn baby starts its life.

Moreover, 2013 is the year in which we begin to concretize our concept, producing tools and templates for the virtual exhibitions. We plan to start with "1914-1918 Collections" in conjunction with the Europeana project, with other ideas in the pipeline as well. Meanwhile we are moving forward with our multiyear program and are about to run 25-27 projects concurrently through which we hope to reach 2013 target figures.

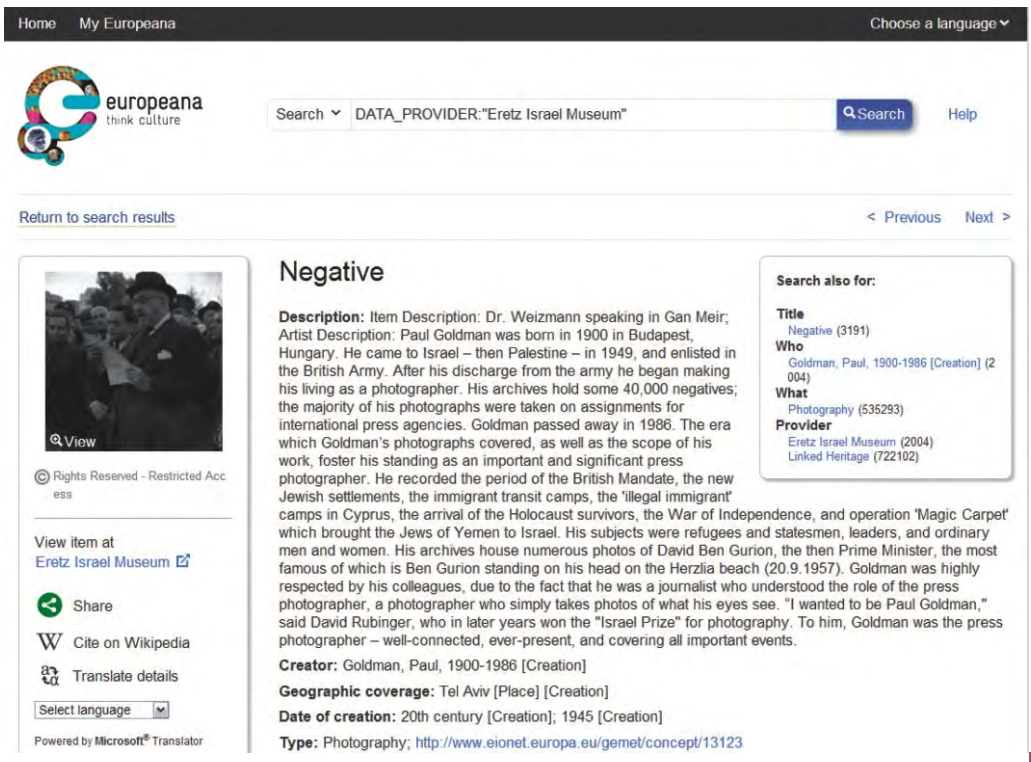


From a national perspective, who else is working with you on the project?

We are lucky to be able to work with our local branch of ICOM who is cooperating with the Ministry in several areas. They purchased 15 digital cameras and accessories on our behalf, in addition to lighting and studio facilities. All of our partner museums are invited to use the equipment on a loan basis for the duration of the project. This kind of centralized effort has proved extremely efficient and rewarding.

How is the National Portal unfolding? When do you plan to launch?

Several months ago we set up a bidding process to outsource the work required to build the national portal. The local company who won the bid has since completed the design of the site to our satisfaction and is about to build the platform. The development is steered by The Concept Committee, (chaired by you) together with stakeholders from the museum community. We now look forward to the launch which is planned for next November at the annual EVA/Minerva 2013, the Xth Annual Jerusalem Conference on the Digitisation of Cultural Heritage. Everyone is cordially invited to celebrate with us!

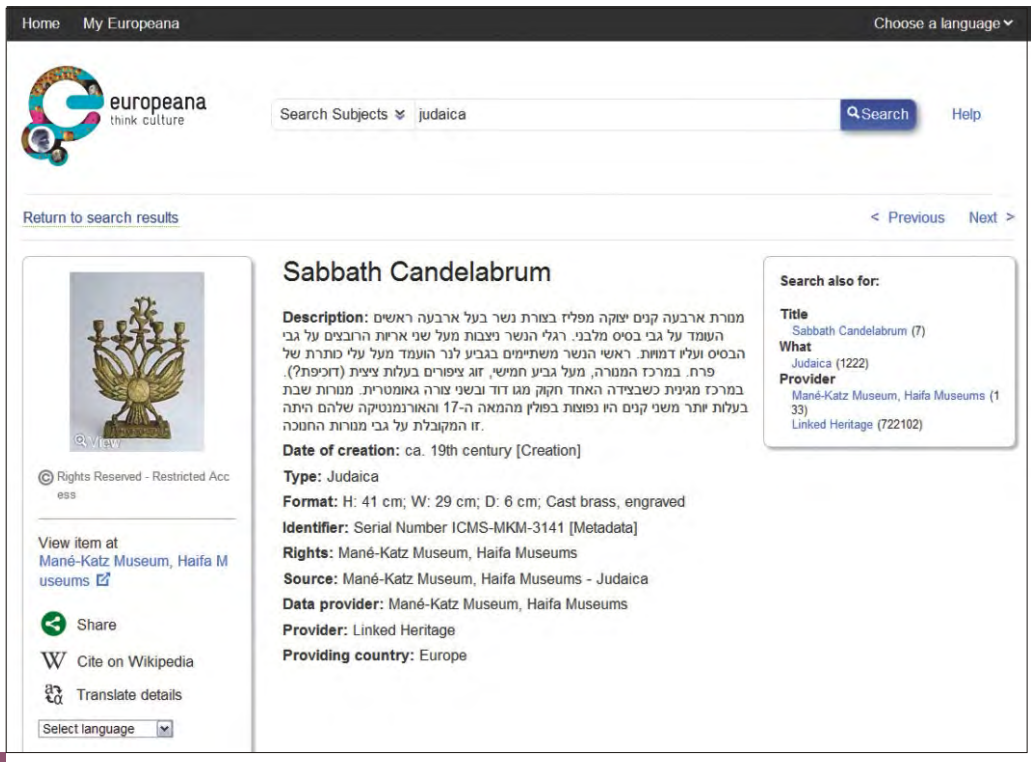


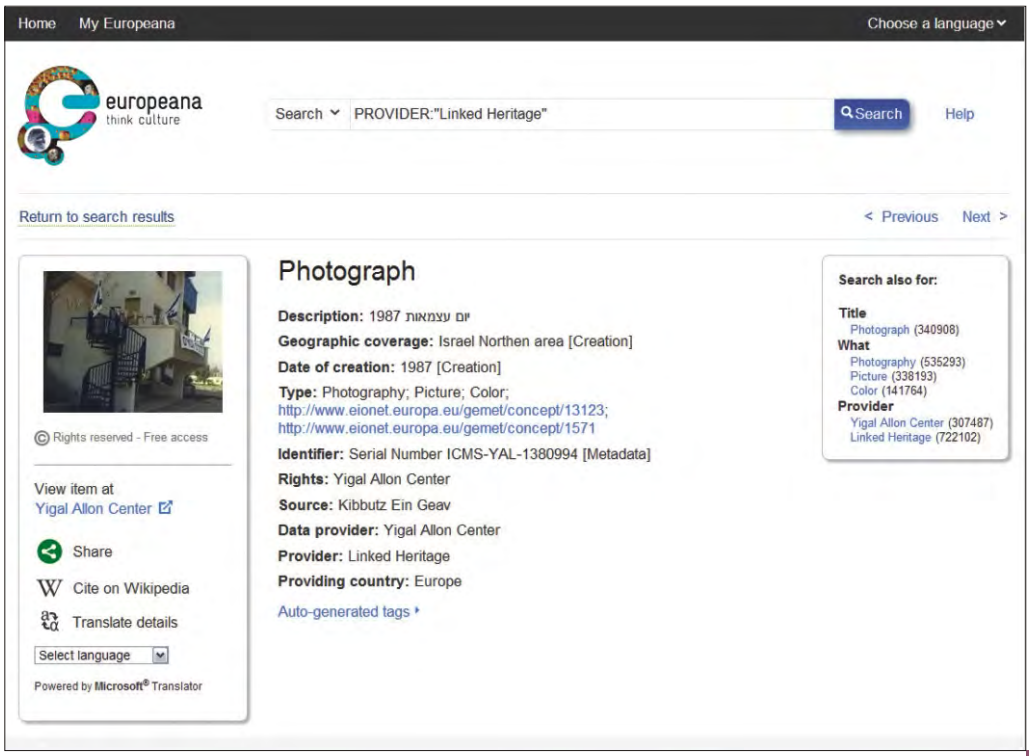
opening up the national patrimony in ways that makes it intuitively accessible, engaging, and inspirational for local and international communities.

What do you hope to accomplish by 2016

According to the Ministry of Culture's directive, the long term goals are the following:
1. By 2016 the system will store around 1 million items and more than 10 million archival items, including video cassettes and DVDs, documents and scanned slides, 3D visualized items, digital voice items, and more;
2. Altogether, we plan to upload more than 3 million items into Europeana;
3. Europeana APIs will be integrated to our national website;
4. Our catalogue will be linked to the Israeli National Catalogue, managed by the Israeli National Library;
5. Our system will offer a technical level of web services, enabling easy import/export by the museums' experts.

Now that you are committed to your career in the cultural heritage sector, how would you describe your vision for Israel's national cultural heritage?



Israel's national culture map is currently undergoing a major transformation. The impressive work carried out both by Dov Winer and yourself in the various Europeana projects; including Minerva, Michael, and Athena and the many Israel experts involved in the different projects has set the agenda and has guided the way we have been able to conceptualize, and implement the national museum project.

We are lucky that we have many experts here in Israel in the cultural heritage sector. Their professional knowledge and experience not only has benefited the local cultural industries but also, through their active participation in numerous pan-European projects, has benefited the European drive and commitment to the digitisation and dissemination of Europe's cultural heritage. The experience and knowledge derived from Europeana partnerships has been both inspirational and informative, and with this expertise, together with our own, we look forward to making our vision come true. We also look forward to continuing these kinds of partnerships in the future and strengthening the bonds between Israel's cultural heritage and those of our sister institutions across Europe in terms not only of fruitful colleagueship, but also the benefits of working together to develop information infrastructure and creative platforms for the real winner from these kinds of synergies, the end user.