

**Explore Chicago Collections**<http://explore.chicagocollections.org/>

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*Explore Chicago Collections* is an online portal and linked database to digital collections, finding aids, and online discovery resources from Chicago Collections Consortium members and their participating institutions. Participants include the Art Institute of Chicago, the Chicago History Museum, the Chicago Public Library, the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and sixteen other libraries, museums, and cultural institutions in the Chicago area.<sup>1</sup> The online portal provides a free and open option for searching a wide variety of collections from participating organizations in one place. As is listed on the portal, “Explore Chicago Collections lets researchers, teachers, and students search many locations at once. Our unified search lets you locate thousands of archival collections and digital images at member institutions all over the Chicago area.”<sup>2</sup> This online portal combines an advanced software structure and high-quality user experience to facilitate the use of collections throughout an entire region.

The primary function of the online portal is its ability to enable users to search across collections which pulls together and combines results from all of the participating institutions in one easy-to-use display. The landing page for the portal provides a jumping-off point for exploring collections that pertain to certain geographic areas, historical events, or broader historical topics, such as education, recreation and leisure, sports, family and home life, and many others. If you choose to enter a search term, you quickly see a variety of digital images and descriptions of collections resulting from your query. You can filter these results by neighborhoods, institutions, topics, and the libraries and archives from which they originate. Search results are incredibly easy to understand and have clear tags with different categories and locations. If you select a digital image, you go to a catalog entry page that includes a link to a high-resolution file and details about the item, the institution it comes from, and a link to the finding aid. The website is laid out with care for user experience, displaying images in a gallery viewer with finding aids listed below the results. Facets are listed on the left side of the page. If you select one of the listed collections, you are provided with a descriptive summary, preferred citation, archival inventory, and scope and content information pulled directly from

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<sup>1</sup> “Libraries & Archives,” *Explore Chicago Collections*, accessed June 3, 2017, <http://explore.chicagocollections.org/members/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Homepage,” *Explore Chicago Collections*, accessed June 3, 2017, <http://explore.chicagocollections.org/>.

the institution's website or database. For example, when searching for resources about the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, I was quickly presented with images, collections, and other information from multiple institutions. I was also able to limit results to images from the Art Institute of Chicago, and to browse them via the digital gallery. This format is easy to use and is a definite strength of the online portal. Its accessibility and ease of use make it a useful tool for young students as well as advanced researchers. In addition to an effective and usable design, the web portal also provides a guide for tips on using the service, complete with search recommendations and visual aids.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike other online portals which might struggle with compatibility when combining resources from so many different sources, *Explore Chicago Collections* utilizes the eXtensible Text Framework (XTF) to manage the search and browse capabilities. This tool can index metadata from a variety of sources and standards into one searchable package. The tool used to deposit materials into the database is called the "Metadata Hopper," software developed at the University of Illinois at Chicago with the support of an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant.<sup>4</sup> This tool allows users to add and tag materials that utilize a variety of metadata standards. The design and structure of the online portal are exceedingly well done and should serve as a model for other consortia or organizations who wish to pursue projects of the same scope.

The *Explore Chicago Collections* portal builds on this technological sophistication by also providing a usable interface for researchers and for those organizations which participate in the endeavor. The project lists a variety of "design principles" that guide its purpose, including providing access to full finding aids, not requiring institutions to alter their metadata standards to submit files, and the ability to expand and support new types of media and metadata.<sup>5</sup> On top of these guiding principles, the website is beautifully designed and easy to use; even after searching for materials in many ways and utilizing filters to find what I was looking for, I never had any issue locating relevant results.

The importance of this web portal and consortium project is two-fold. First, this is an exceptional trove of materials, finding aids, digital images, and accompanying information that can be used quickly and easily by a wide variety of researchers with varying levels of expertise to learn more about one of the most diverse and interesting cities in the world. This undertaking is an outstanding digital project in and of itself. Second, this online portal can serve as a technological and cooperative model for other consortia or organizations that wish to pursue this type of project. The strengths of this project are amplified by the unique and valuable collections it

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<sup>3</sup> "Search Tips," *Explore Chicago Collections*, accessed June 3, 2017, <http://guides.chicagocollections.org/help-guide/search-tips>.

<sup>4</sup> "Technical Background," *Explore Chicago Collections*, accessed June 3, 2017, [http://explore.chicagocollections.org/tech\\_background/](http://explore.chicagocollections.org/tech_background/).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

provides access to, and the tool stands out for its ease of use, design, technical backing, and content. The platform's weaknesses are very few and will be remedied as more materials are made available online and more facets are added to its search functionality. For some topics and research subjects few collections or items exist, but this is simply due to the fact that the portal is bound by the breadth of the collections that participating organizations possess and make available. It would be extremely valuable to both the project and researchers if the portal could branch out to smaller community organizations throughout the city of Chicago to add a level of community archives and more grassroots ownership to the project.