

Hi! I'm Courtney Tkacz and I'm the Archivist at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. I've been at the VMFA for 14 years but we have only begun digitization work in the past 18 months. As someone now working on digitization while also serving as the technical lead for the project to launch all of the museum's collections online next month, accessibility is something that I have been thinking about a lot recently. I titled my presentation "Beyond Alt Text" because I think that we do all need to think about moving past traditional web accessibility initiatives and committing ourselves to providing greater access to our digital collections.

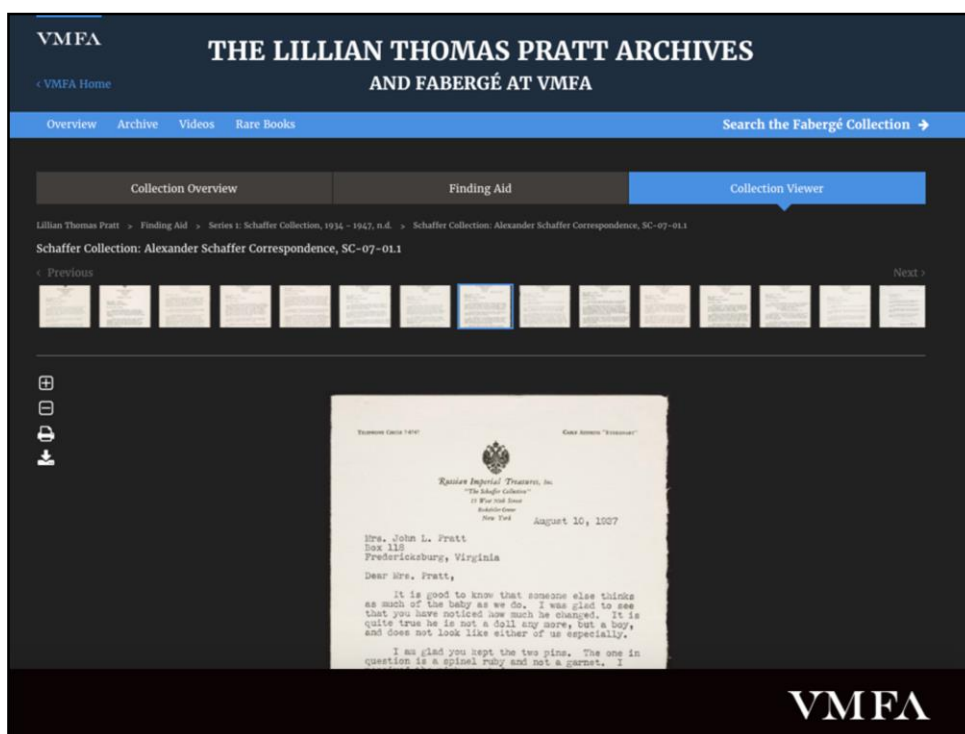


I want to start by talking about the word “accessibility.” We all use that word a lot – making collections more accessible, providing access to hidden collections, etc. – but in reality, I think that we’re talking about “discoverability.” Through digitization, we are allowing users to discover the content on our shelves and in our drawers on their computer screens. And while that means that fully sighted and fully hearing people can then access what those letters say, what those images look like, and what those audiovisual resources contain, we are not addressing the needs of the 253 million visually impaired and 360 million hearing impaired people worldwide. Our collections are still hidden from them.

I don’t believe that any of us are doing that on purpose – our mistakes were certainly unintentional – but once you have an awareness of the problem, I believe that we all need to commit to remedying it. And just as we are very intentional about our digitization strategies, we need to be intentional in our accessibility strategies.

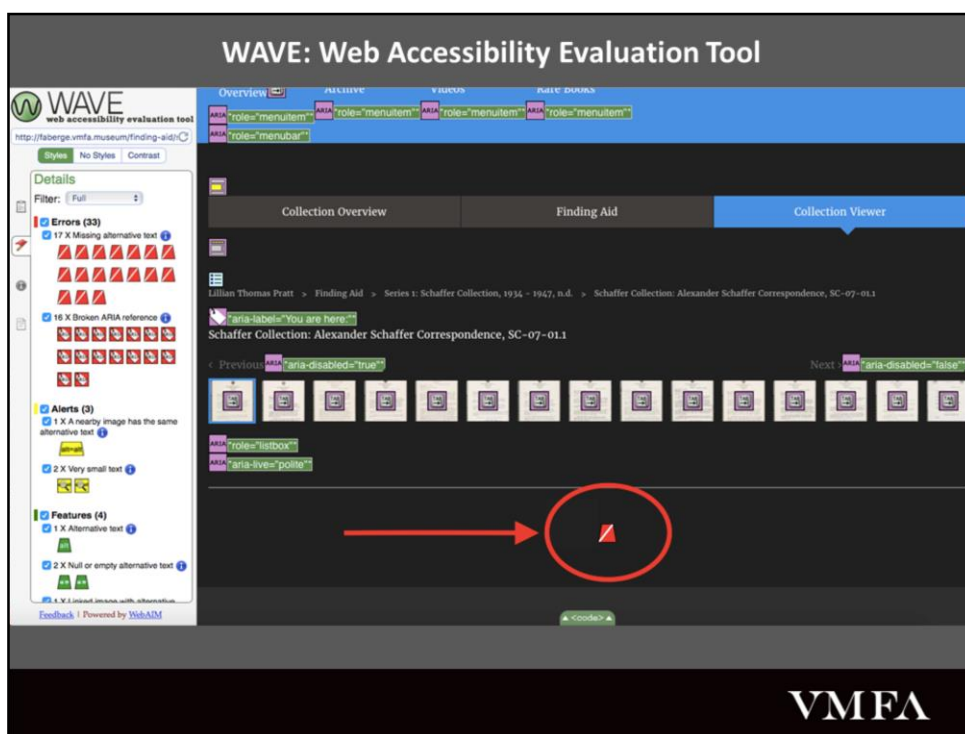
Even if you’re not moved by the moral imperative for accessibility, we all invest a LOT of money in our digitization projects, so we should be capturing the largest audience possible to maximize that investment.

Finally, before we start talking about the specifics, I wanted to make one comment. We recently completed our pilot digitization project and are embarking on a much larger one, both of which were funded by NEH grants. Maybe someone here can enlighten me, but I’m very surprised, and frankly disappointed that federal funding sources like the NEH do not require accessibility measures for digitization projects.



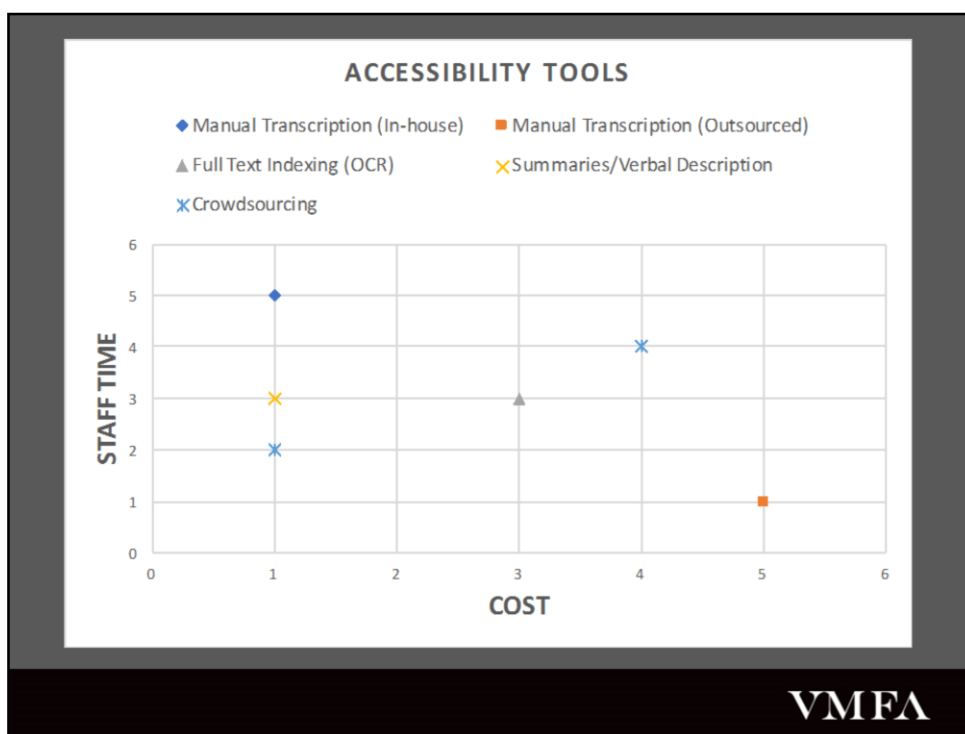
In our case, we launched our first digital collection last October. We had received an NEH grant to digitize the Lillian Thomas Pratt archives, which documents the creation of our renowned Faberge collection in the 1930s and 1940s. I was not the technical lead for the user interface, but our staffer who was assured me, when I asked, that our developer followed current Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (or WCAG) which are published by the W3C. I have since learned that our developers did not.

What I thought would happen would be that a screen reader or other assistive technology could verbalize all of the elements on the screen so that a visually impaired user could understand this digitized document.



Here is a screenshot of the report from WAVE (the Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool). It's a wonderful, quick, and free way to see how your websites are complying with accessibility standards. You can see we did terribly. The good news is that a lot of the problems are with navigation, which can be remedied globally pretty quickly. However, most importantly, the error that I circled on the bottom is saying that there is no alt text for the actual digitized document. Ouch. Again, I assumed that one of the metadata fields would be copied to the alt text field, and I made a bad assumption. We also didn't have any information in the long description field to help if alt text wasn't included.

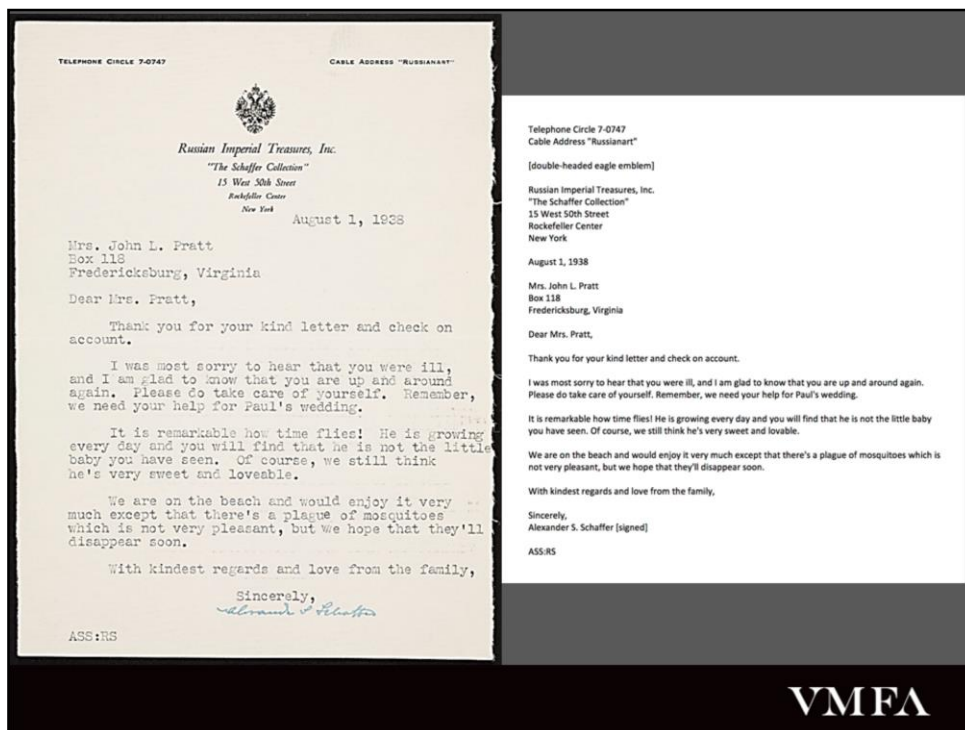
On the other hand, the fact that we archivists have a long tradition of creating quality structured metadata is great for screen readers. You can't see it on this screenshot, but there are about 12 metadata fields below where the digitized image would be, and I've tested screen readers on the site and was very pleased with the results.



So now let's talk about that idea of moving beyond alt text and look at the various tools that can be used to increase accessibility of our digital collections. What you see here is a chart that compares the trade-offs in staff time and cost for the various tools. Now, of course, this is a gross generalization, because we all differ greatly in personnel, budgets, and IT support. But this at least gives us a starting point. This kind of graphic could also be helpful to help your institution when determining your accessibility strategy – maybe you need to add project staff, or apply for a grant, or work a donor to fund this important work.

- Manual transcription (In-house) is cheap (generally free), but requires the largest investment of staff time
- Manual transcription (Outsourced) is the most expensive option, but requires the least amount of staff time
- Full text indexing (OCR) is about the midpoint of cost and staff because you can buy OCR software somewhat cheaply, but you will need to perform quality control on the outcome
- Summaries/Verbal descriptions can be written rather quickly and cheaply (it's a great volunteer or intern project!) but does not provide full and complete access to the content of an asset
- Crowdsourcing is very popular and appears on the chart twice. That's because it's often quite costly in both money and staff time to develop or implement a user interface to do that, however, once it's in place, it falls back down on the cost and staff-time scale. However, remember that if you are using crowdsourcing for tagging or keywords, instead of full transcriptions, you're not gaining complete access to the content.

One final note about accessibility strategies. Just like we take hybrid approaches to processing and digitizing our collections, including MPLP, I believe we need to do the same with accessibility. And I'll show you several examples of that with different media from the Pratt collection.




This is an example of a letter that needs transcription to be fully understood. A simple summary statement or description such as, "Alexander Schaffer writes to Mrs. Pratt about family life and a trip to the beach," doesn't do justice to the sentiments that are expressed here. Lovely sentences such as, "I was most sorry to hear that you were ill, and I am glad to know that you are up and around again. Please do take care of yourself. Remember, we need your help for Paul's wedding." Paul was only about 1 year old then.

Transcriptions of these letters have since been done by volunteers and then manually pasted into the records in our Digital Asset Management system for users of our new website.

Current Title/Alt Text:


Children looking at Fabergé imperial eggs





Needed Description:

In the 1950s and 1960s, the museum regularly set up publicity shots with children that allowed them to take a closer look at (and often touch!) the Fabergé imperial eggs.



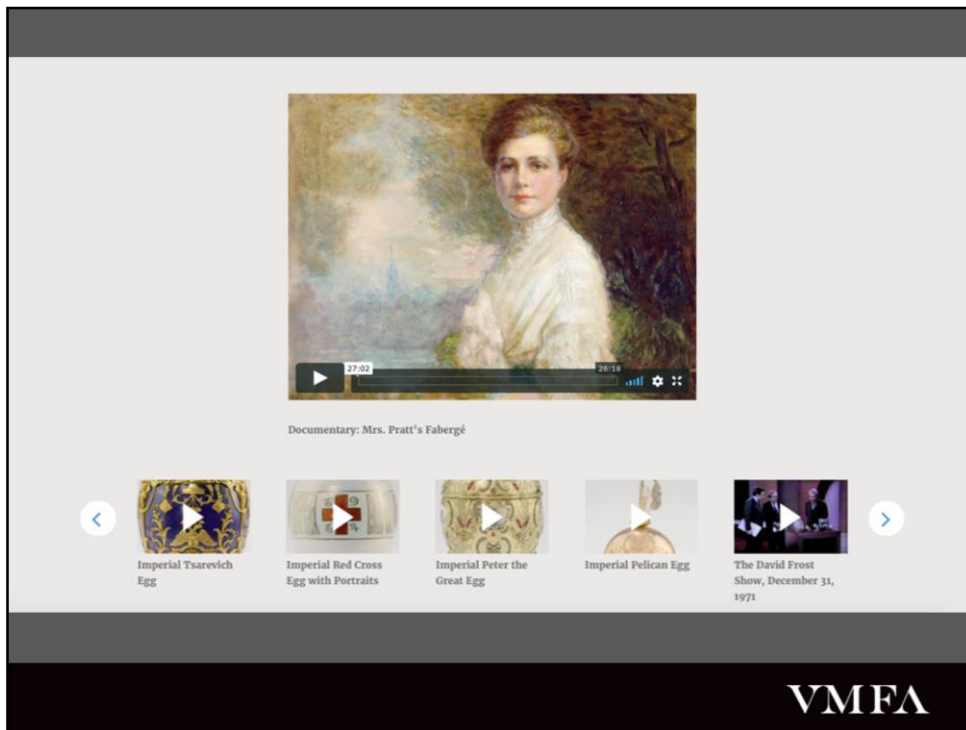
As you can see here, the current title (and what should be the alt text on the site) is on the top left. The bottom right is an example of a better description that tells more about what the image is portraying and the context behind what is being depicted.

This is a step below Visual Description, a technique which has flourished in the art museum field over the last 25 years, and consists of training individuals to describe what they see in a very consistent and neutral way. Visual description includes information about composition, color, form, and light as well as subjects and themes depicted.



The description on that last slide was written by me in about 1 minute. However, describing something like this from our digitized Rare Book collection would take much longer. The decorative elements, the complex iconography, and the Cyrillic writing would all complicate writing a description for this resource that is both textual and pictorial.

This does make it hard to estimate the time needed to write descriptions for pictorial/graphic works, but this work is important. And all of these efforts not only lead to greater accessibility, but will only serve to increase your collections' discoverability.



On the video section of our website, we did everything wrong. There is no closed captioning, no transcripts... not even a detailed description of what you're watching. We have since been working with volunteers and staff to write those descriptions to help users at least have an idea of what the video depicts, and we are again copying that data into our digital asset management system for our new website. But it is time consuming and/or costly work.

I do also think there is an opportunity for soliciting input from our users and creating a "transcript on demand" request button, much like many systems offer a "scan on demand" feature.

RESOURCES

- * Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0
<https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/>
- * Web Accessibility in Mind (WebAIM – Univ. of Utah)
<https://webaim.org>
- * Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool (WAVE)
<http://wave.webaim.org>
- * Art Beyond Sight (Museum Education Institute)
<http://www.artbeyondsight.org/mei/>
- * Describing Visual Resources Toolkit (Univ. of Michigan)
<https://describingvisualresources.org>

VMFA

Finally, here are some of the resources that I have been finding very helpful in understanding accessibility needs and tools, and have helped shape our accessibility strategy.

[Read and describe them extemporaneously.]



If any of you have great ideas or initiatives you'd like to share, I'd love to hear them, so I've included my email here.

But most importantly, don't be me. Don't make assumptions about the design or functionality of new systems or the usage of your data. Keep asking those important questions and make accessibility work intentional and on-going.

Thank you for your time.