

BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART

TRANSITIONING TO A NEW COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM



The University of Texas at Austin. Ellsworth Kelly, Austin, 2015 (East façade), Artist-designed building with installation of colored glass windows, black and white marble panels, and redwood totem, 60 x 73 x 26 ft. 4 in., ©Ellsworth Kelly Foundation, photo courtesy of the Blanton Museum of Art.

The Blanton Museum of Art recently took a step up with its collections management. As long-time users of EmbARK and EmbARK Web Kiosk, the team members decided to upgrade their collections management to TMS Collections and their online collections to eMuseum. Motivated by the expanded functionality and freedom the upgrade would bring, the Blanton Museum of Art staff took this project in stride.

Part of The University of Texas at Austin, the Blanton stewards a permanent collection of over 19,000 objects, making it the city's primary art collection. Upgrading a collection of this size, within a short six-month timeframe, was a significant undertaking—and ultimately a successful one.

To learn more about the Blanton's experience, Gallery Systems spoke with Robin Mygatt, Blanton Database Manager. Robin shared the museum's migration objectives, what motivated the staff to adopt TMS Collections, and how everyone is enjoying their new collections management system.

"With TMS Collections being built on top of TMS, we had a lot of trust that the application would be robust."

ROBIN MYGATT, DATABASE MANAGER

OVERVIEW

- 19,000-object university museum collection, known for being the primary art holding in Austin, Texas

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

- Migrated successfully to a web-based collections management system and online collections software
- Provided remote database access to users, allowing staff to securely work from anywhere
- Improved departmental workflows by transitioning a CMS with enhanced functionality

PRODUCTS

- TMS Collections, collections management system
- eMuseum, online collections publishing toolkit
- Managed Hosting, Gallery Systems hosts, monitors, maintains, backs up, and updates your software

OBJECTIVES

In early 2020, the Blanton Museum of Art, together with The University of Texas Libraries and the Harry Ransom Center, received a \$500,000 grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. This grant was later supplemented by additional support from the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost. Collectively, this generous funding was allocated to assist these university institutions in increasing digital access to their collections.

“Our reason for migrating to TMS Collections and eMuseum when we did was because of a major cross-campus initiative,” Robin explains. “We were awarded funding to address technological debt, which had accrued at these three partner institutions, and to bring us into the next generation of databases for our collections and create a unified search portal.”

To achieve these objectives, the Blanton Museum of Art decided to revamp both its collections management system and its online access. “We needed to modernize our database to participate in this initiative,” says Robin.

SOLUTION

As long-time EmbARK and Web Kiosk clients, the Blanton Museum of Art opted to build on its deep working relationship with Gallery Systems by transitioning to TMS Collections and eMuseum.

“We were really happy to stay with the same company that was already managing our EmbARK database,” Robin relays, “TMS has a long history of being a leader in the collections management sphere. So, with TMS Collections being built on top of TMS, we had a lot of trust that the application would be robust.”



Installation View of European Art galleries, Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the Museum.

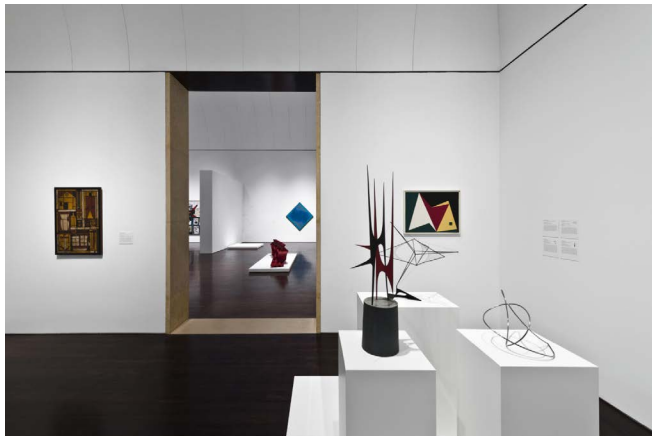
“Since so many other institutions use TMS,” she continues, “we knew it would be simpler to collaborate on exhibitions, joint initiatives, and collection shows, as we would easily share data with TMS Collections’ great import/export utility—no need to recatalogue everything.” For the final decisive push, several members of the curatorial and registrar teams were already familiar with using TMS.

After selecting TMS Collections, the Blanton team prepared its legacy collections information for transitioning. Robin describes this process: “There was an initial data export, which we sent over to Gallery Systems. The Professional Services team analyzed the state of the information, the completeness of our fields, and the extent of the customizations. They then compiled a list of issues to flag.” For instance, an issue could arise if a field was missing for a set of objects that would be required once the data migrated into TMS Collections.

Next came the data import. “We did two iterations of the data import, one mapping with the same data set and then, after about a week, we refined the mapping and reloaded the data. The final production data load was after about a month of testing.” Robin recommends taking ample time for testing before the final migration. “It was useful to see where the data started and where it ended up. Understanding that process is of upmost importance,” she says.

Training for all Blanton staff was delivered over Zoom. “We broke the training into tiers for different user groups. General users received four half-days of training on the core application from Gallery Systems, while the database system administrators were given additional training. Our TMS Collections training sessions went well, and I haven’t received any requests for refreshers since our implementation.”

From start to finish, the Blanton Museum of Art took only six months from selecting TMS Collections in May and going live in November. “There was a real appetite for change,” Robin says, “Everyone approached this migration with so much trust and excitement about switching to TMS Collections.”



Installation View of Latin American Art galleries, Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin. Courtesy of the Museum.



OUTCOMES

At the Blanton, the reception to the new TMS Collections system has been overwhelmingly positive. “TMS Collections is much more dimensional than our previous database. There are so many complex and robust parts of the software, and we could have structured our database in numerous ways. With Gallery Systems, it was great to talk through all the different options we had for reformatting the data,” Robin tells us.

One of the outstanding features of TMS Collections is its powerful reporting options. “The staff appreciates how easy it is to run reports using Crystal Reports,” Robin says. “It’s a very functional reporting software and easy to push changes to everybody, so we’re not dropping report files into a shared folder.”

When asked what sets TMS Collections apart from other collection management systems, Robin states: “TMS Collections adds new dimensions to our work. For instance, the option of having component records that are nested under a single object record—that level of complexity was not previously available to us. We appreciate having a stronger representation of our collection.”

She adds, “We also have many more places now to track data in stages, particularly in accessioning, rights and reproductions, and loans workflows.”

Gallery Systems is providing the Blanton with managed hosting services for both TMS Collections and eMuseum, allowing the Blanton staff to access the database online. Robin notes that this web access has been invaluable. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the Blanton team is working remotely. “We have the freedom to work from anywhere. You don’t have to come into the museum or connect to TMS Collections via a VPN,” she says.

 FUTURE

Going forward, the Blanton Museum of Art will continue expanding its use of TMS Collections. “We are planning to get more robust with our loans workflow,” Robin shares. To achieve this, the team members will be expanding their use of the Events module and report building.

“Another thing I’m excited about with TMS Collections is the ability to plan out collection rotations,” she adds. “Being able to track every iteration of a rotation within the same Exhibition module is going to be great for us.”

The Blanton’s eMuseum site will also be live soon, permitting the public to browse a new online collections site. Syncing with TMS Collections, eMuseum provides a versatile, user-friendly platform to engage digital audiences, fulfilling one of the funding’s objectives.



Thomas Glassford, *Siphonophora*, 2016, 41 ft., 9 in. (height), Rebar, polyurethane foam, base coat cement, and paint, Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Purchase through the generosity of The Moody Foundation, 2017. Photo courtesy of the Museum.