# Accessing Russian Culture Online: The scope of digitisation in museums across Russia

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Although the rate and coverage of digitization throughout Europe is monitored and understood (Europeana, 2016; Minerva EC, 2016, Navarette 2015) there has been little work done on understanding the reach of digitization across Russia. In this paper, we build on previous work (Kizhner, Terras, Rumyantsev, 2016) by using Russian Ministry of Culture statistics to calculate the percentage of museum collections that have been digitized across Russia. We show regional variations and demonstrate that although many Russian museums have digitisation programs, this is not carried out to the same extent as across Europe. We suggest that studying non-European digitization practices can lead to further understanding of the digital canon upon which analysis of culture is based (Limb, 2007; Warwick et al, 2008; Price, 2009; Earhart, 2012).

Digital visual collections from national and regional museums can be a rich source of data for digital humanities but the first step in these studies might be to discover the existence of digital images on national levels. Do non-European digital collections exist? Do non-European museums provide the same amount of data as European museums? Is this amount equal for the centre of the country and for provinces? How many images are posted online?

This paper aims to find out the current scale of digitization in Russian museums. We discuss Russian digitization as an example of real life messy collection of data where the situation is hardly related to «post-modernist utopia» (Sartori 2016) or the wishful thinking of moving images across interfaces (Robinson, 2013; Kizhner, Stankevich, Terras, Rumyantsev 2016), all of them quite distant perspectives.

Starting from the 1970s, the rationale for museum digitisation practices in Russia was quite similar to that in many other countries. It was informed by a need for information and collection management so that museum objects would not be lost and were properly conserved (Navarette, 2014; Sher, 1983; Williams, 1987; Chenhall and Vance, 1987). Russian government policy related to that need from 2008 onwards was aimed at building The National Catalogue of Museum Objects posted online (Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, 2016) and currently including images for 1,2 million museum objects, 1,5% of total number of Russian museum objects (slightly over 80 million), and 2% of the collection of unique objects (about 60 million).

The National Catalogue is an initial access point in finding out the scale of museum digitization in various parts of the country including its remote regions. Our previous paper (Kizhner, Terras, Rumyantsev, 2016) demonstrated preliminary results of a survey estimating the percentage of digital images for Russian museum collections. The study also included web site exploration results on the percentage of museum collections posted online. However, it only covered 1,2% museums in the country for the percentage of digitized images and 6% for the images posted online and its results gave initial estimates.

The present paper studies the percentage of digital images through the statistical reports submitted to the Ministry of Culture from 2,367 museums in 2015. The annual statistical reports are mandatory for all museums reporting to local municipalities, regional administrations and the RF Ministry of Culture, in fact for all non-private and non-corporate museums. We provide the average results for the country and and the average results for its 8 major geographical regions.

## Methodology

The data of the RF museums' statistical reports for 2015 were received from the RF Ministry of Culture in summer 2016. Museums return these mandatory reports in January and provide statistical data for the

preceding year. The data were related to 2,635 museums from every region of the Russian Federation.

The data were received as an Excel spreadsheet from which the parts were removed that were not related to the digitization of museum objects and the data on galleries that were for temporary display and did not store any objects. This left us with 2,367 museums. The data in the spreadsheet were sorted on the total number of objects for every museum, the number of unique objects, the number of database records with digital images, and the number of images posted online.

Russian museum collections tend to consist of two parts: the main collection of unique objects and a smaller 'research collection' including duplicates and supporting documentation. While the total number of objects in Russian museum collections slightly exceed 80 million objects, the number of unique objects is 20 million fewer and equals 60 million objects. The results of statistical surveys obtained for the study reported the number of digitized objects as related to the total number of objects in a museum including their 'research collections'. This did not create a methodological problem when comparing the results with those from the Enumerate project which is a study of the outage of digitisation across Europe, funded by the European Union which happened between 2011 and 2015 (Europeana, 2016) where the survey asked to provide the percentage of digital images for museums' analogue collections.

The percentage of digitized objects and the percentage of objects with images posted online was calculated for each geographical region of the Russian Federation and mapped to show the differences. The total percentage for the country was also assessed.

## Results

The percentage of digital images as related to the total number of museum objects across Russia was 13,5%. The percentage related to the number of objects in the main collection (roughly corresponding to the number of unique objects) was 18%.

The percentage of images posted online as related to the total number of objects was 1,5%, this figure was somewhat larger if compared with the number of objects in the main collection (2%).

An interesting and unexpected result was the difference between the scale of digitization in two major cities, Moscow and Saint Petersburg (Table 1). The percentage of objects with digital images was much higher than the average across Russia in Saint Petersburg and somewhat lower than the average in Moscow. The scale of digitization across major geographical regions varied between the minimum of 6% in the Far East and the maximum of 25% in the regions adjacent to Saint Petersburg (Figure 1, Table 1).

Interestingly, the percentage of images posted online was slightly lower than the average across Russia for museums in Moscow and twice lower than the average across Russia in Saint Petersburg (Table 2).

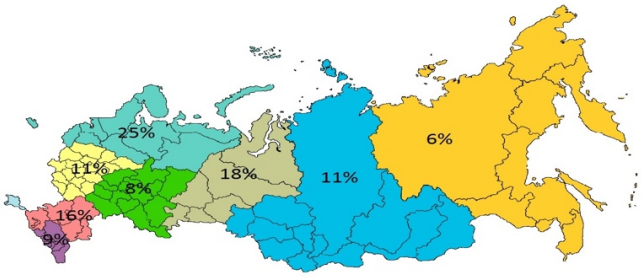


Figure 1. The percentage of the analogue collections digitally reproduced across geographical regions

| Places | % as related to the total number of objects | % for the main collection (unique objects) |
|---|---|---|
| Saint Petersburg | 36 | 44 |
| Moscow | 10 | 12 |
| The average across Russia | 13,5 | 18 |
| Centre (Central Federal District) | 11 | 14 |
| North-West (North-Western Federal District) | 25 | 33 |
| Southern Federal District | 16 | 23 |
| Caucasus (North-Caucasian Federal District) | 9 | 12 |
| Volga Federal District | 8 | 11 |
| Ural Federal District | 18 | 25 |
| Siberian Federal District | 11 | 16 |
| Far Eastern Federal District | 6 | 8 |

Table 1. The percentage of the analogue collections digitally reproduced in the museums of Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and across Russia

| Places | % as related to the total number of objects | % for the main collection (unique objects) |
|---|---|---|
| Saint Petersburg | 0,9 | 1,1 |
| Moscow | 1,2 | 1,5 |
| The average across Russia | 1,5 | 2 |

Table 2. The percentage of digital images posted online

## Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that digital collections in Russian museums do exist across the country but we cannot say that their online display is representative enough to cover the culture, considering the variety in geography and ethnography.

We can roughly confirm our previous results on the percentage of digitized images (Kizhner, Terras, Rumyantsev, 2016) to be around 18% as our present data show the level of digitization to be in the range of 13,5 - 18%. However, our previous results might have a sampling bias as the museums answering the questions of the survey could be interested in digitization per se and work towards obtaining more financial and administrative support to keep it going. This might result in a higher percentage. Even so, the results of the present study can only demonstrate a range of digitization scale as the percentage of images related to the total number of objects may include a significant number of duplicates and supporting materials (e.g. library books).

This is not an obstacle to comparing our data with those from the Enumerate project 'which aimed to survey the extent of digitization across Europe' (Europeana, 2016) where the survey questions were about the percentage of the analogue collection digitally reproduced, but given the range of 13,5 - 18% we can say that the results for 2015 are much lower than the results of the Enumerate project for 2015 when the percentage of digitized collections in European museums was 31%. However, the results for Saint Petersburg collections are higher than the European average

(Table 1).

The percentage of images available online across Russia as related to the analogue collection is 1,5 - 2% which is lower than the percentage reported by the Enumerate project (24% of digital collections and 7,5% of European analogue collections). However, the Enumerate results included digital collections and digitally born objects available online, which complicates the comparison (Europeana, 2016).

Recent criticism of digitization without proper contribution to building knowledge in the humanities (Hitchcock, 2013, Gregory et al., 2016) requires developing these studies further towards exploring how Russian museum web sites arrange images for searching and browsing and developing projects discussing the issues of open access and digital canon.

This paper opens up the space for studying Russian digital collections on a national scale. It also reports on the results of looking at the scale of digitization for major geographical regions within Russia, and it will discuss the results of calculating simple correlations of digitization percentage with population density, the level of education, funding, and the number of museum goers in the regions. By doing so we can challenge the concept of the digital canon, and ask difficult questions regarding which types of culture are being digitized and made available worldwide.

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