

MICHAEL Culture service

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The main aim of the MICHAEL project is celebrating the richness and diversity of the European cultural heritage by opening up worldwide access to digital collections from European museums, libraries, archives and other cultural and scientific organisations.

The MICHAEL project builds on the results achieved by the former WP3 (Inventories and multilingualism) and WP4 (Interoperability) of the first MINERVA project. MICHAEL was presented and approved in the framework of the eTEN programme and began its activities in June 2004. Work started with the design of a single data model and a set of terminologies for cataloguing European digital cultural collections. Implementation in the MICHAEL software platform was based on a technical approach that supports interoperability with other services and which provides a working methodology for establishing inventories of the digital cultural heritage.

National cataloguing programmes started in France, Italy and the United Kingdom in 2005, but the initiative immediately attracted the interest from several other countries from across Europe and worldwide. In June 2006 the MICHAELplus project was approved by the eTEN programme and the activities extended to include Germany, Greece, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. More recently partners from Bulgaria, Estonia, the Flemish community of Belgium, Israel, Latvia and Slovakia have joined the project.

When the first edition of the MICHAEL Culture European service (<http://www.michael-culture.org>) was launched, alongside national portals for France Italy and the UK, in December 2006, it offered its audience opportunities to find and explore digital collections from the three countries.

The European Service also offered editorial articles about aspects of the European heritage, user stories and details about the MICHAEL project and its results. The second edition of the MICHAEL European Service offered access to digital collections and online resources from 15 European countries. When the project officially closed, at the end of May 2008, the European service was giving seamless access to almost 10.000 digital collections and services from over 3500 institutions - museums, libraries, archives, heritage

offices, universities and all other cultural and scientific institutions.

The multilinguality of the MICHAEL Culture Service has also expanded. The first version supported 3 languages. By May 2008 16 languages were supported, including Greek and Bulgarian. The languages are supported in the site navigation, editorial content and in the browsing terminologies. The MICHAEL Culture service enables free-text based search and browsing by multilingual standard terminologies related to period, subject or spatial coverage of the collection, type or location of the institution, audience or access type of the service, or a combination of those.

The MICHAEL Culture European service has a special relationship with the European Digital Library Europeana. It is contributing a Europe wide catalogue of digital collections covering every sector of the cultural heritage to Europeana (the mapping and harvesting of the MICHAEL European database is currently ongoing). MICHAEL will also contribute to the vision of establishing the European Digital Library as a single access point to all sectors of cultural heritage, covering the largest number of institutions (national and local, large and small).

Activities are still going on both on the European portal and in all partner countries. Activities at European level are coordinated by the MICHAEL Culture AISBL and will lead by early 2009 to the harvesting of 4 more national databases (from Israel, Latvia, Malta, Slovakia). Contacts are also ongoing to affiliate other European countries (both EU members states and outside the EU) with the initiative.

The MICHAEL Culture Association was established in June 2007 under Belgian law to sustain and develop the MICHAEL Culture service and network beyond the lifetime of the projects funded by the European Commission and to maintain and develop the MICHAEL software platform. Every partner who is maintaining, or interested in installing, a MICHAEL instance is invited to join the Association as full or associate members. In this way, members are able to contribute to plans for maintaining and developing the service. The MICHAEL Association is also cooperating with other projects to share and disseminate experience and,

more generally, provide services to access cultural digitised resources. The Association is represented in the board of Europeana, is a partner in the EDLnet project and also in the new ATHENA project. Thus by joining the MICHAEL Association positions partners at the core of Europeana developments.

Through the newly funded eContentplus project ATHENA, the network of thousands of European cultural institutions that contributed to MICHAEL so far will become actively involved in the process of creation of the European Digital Library. The ATHENA Best Practice Network will specifically target bringing the museums sector into a more tight cooperation with the European Digital Library and will also cover cross domain services and portals. Thus the MICHAEL AISBL will contribute to the technical developments that are enabling Europeana to ingest content from cross domain initiatives. Coordination with the other eContentplus project targeted on bringing cross domain content into Europeana, EuropeanaLocal, is already ongoing to share solutions about metadata and terminology standards, semantic interoperability, mappings and cataloguing guidelines.

In fact, joining the MICHAEL initiative is very easy. We have put in place measures to enable new partners to join our initiative to create the inventory of European digital cultural assets and provide one of the building blocks for The European Digital Library. Joining the MICHAEL Culture initiative involves new partner countries or regions installing the MICHAEL software platform, customizing it as appropriate and initiating a programme to catalogue the digital collections (text, images, sounds, databases, websites, elearning resources, electronic services...) created by cultural and scientific institutions in their territory.

The MICHAEL software platform is now fully open sourced and is available in the well-known Sourceforge repository for open source code and applications <<http://www.sourceforge.net>>. Detailed documentation has recently been produced in order to help new partners in installing and customizing the platform. The software platform includes a cataloguing system that supports remote data entry through the Web. This enables partners to establish networks of locally based cataloguers who contribute details of the collections of

digital assets created by their institution or by institutions in their area. Information about the digital collections is complemented with details about the institutions in charge, the services or products giving access to the collections, the physical collections digitised and the digitisation projects or programmes. Online help and a best practice manual for cataloguing in MICHAEL are provided in English for support and can easily be adapted to different national contexts.

The software platform includes a toolkit to enable partners to build a national website and also to establish a MICHAEL OAI-PMH repository for their inventory database. In this way the details of local digital collections that are captured using the MICHAEL cataloguing system may be published on national portals and simultaneously being made available to the MICHAEL Culture European Service and other cultural information services via OAI-PMH.

National portals that have been established by the partners based on the MICHAEL software platform:

- Bulgaria: <http://www.michael-culture.cl.bas.bg>
- The Czech Republic: <http://www.michael-culture.cz>
- Estonia: <http://www.michael-culture.kul.ee>
- Finland: <http://www.michael-culture.fi/>

- France: <http://www.michael-culture.fr>
- Germany: <http://www.michael-portal.de>
- Greece: <http://www.michael-culture.gr>
- Hungary: <http://www.michael-culture.hu>
- Italy: <http://michael-culture.it>
- Latvia: <http://www.michael-culture.lv>
- The Netherlands: <http://www.michael-culture.nl>
- Poland: <http://www.michael-culture.pl>
- Spain: <http://www.michael-culture.es>
- Sweden: <http://www.michael-culture.se>
- United Kingdom: <http://www.michael-culture.org.uk>

Partners are able to publicise the results of their national digitization initiatives through these national portals to audiences within their own country. They can also tailor-make services to meet the specific needs of their users.

The ease with which the details of locally held digital collections may be published on the MICHAEL European Service is also important. It keeps the Service dynamic (as it is continually updated with details of new collections) and helps in promoting our local cultural heritage to worldwide audiences.

Further details are available from the MICHAEL Culture website, <<http://www.michael-culture.org/>> or you can email us on <michaelteam@michael-culture.eu>.