

Worldwide access

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Rose Ram, curator of local history in a Nottinghamshire museum, makes an important virtual addition to her museum's collection. The lace making machine stays in operation in the factory, but she adds to the museum's knowledge base a complete photographic, video and sound record of the working object. She indexes an interview with the machine's operator, making live links to photographs of the factory from the museum's collection, and to database entries for samples of lace in the collection of the national museum in London. Retired workers from the lace factory have been assembling their experiences as a database in the local library, so Jean adds links to these, too.

In Brussels, Hercule Weber, working on a CD-Rom on the history of lace making, uses the software developed by the CIMI consortium of museum information organisations to run a search across the collections of six museums. He strikes lucky in two museums in England, one in the US, and one in France. Rose Ram's dispersed multimedia catalogue information is just the thing. Hercule selects text that will be printed out and bound for him by a local printer but for which he will pay Ram's museum. He also contacts an international museum copyright organisation about using the video and sound clips. Ram has an agreement to use part of his CD-Rom software and content in a gallery information point.

A local school in Japan has an educational site licence to access collections information from Ram's museum, among others. One class is comparing economic work circumstances in 19th- and 20th-century England. Ram's museum database gives them most of what they need for their lesson.

In Alabama, Bernard B Browser is about to deliver an interactive 'ask the curator' session over America On Line, an Internet service. He sets up live links to the Nottinghamshire knowledge base to illustrate the history of the cotton industry. His parents are reminded that they meant to check what they could visit when they holiday in their ancestral town, and are attracted by the World Wide Web pages of Ram's museum.

The week's electronic housekeeping beckons. The network software tells Jean that there were 2,000 electronic visitors from 40 countries. Knowbot search software agents report nearly 500 questions answered, half of them printouts for payment. The knowbots automatically submit draft additions for the 'frequently asked questions' pages. From their analysis of questions received, the knowbots also recommend new links, to the county databases for sites and monuments records and natural history species distribution, and to Browser's museum in Alabama.

Ram is pleased with the month's copyright payments from the educational site licence organisation and from the International Museum Copyright Organisation. There is also a copyright payment for the commercial use of the museum's textile patterns through the European Commission's electronic market, TISSUS. About four times the number of people had benefited from the virtual collections as had visited the galleries. And Ram reflects that she has made more electronic acquisitions during the last month than she did in a year when space had to be found in the stores. What it is to be a digital museum!