

# Sustaining MedArt: Report on Findings from the 2016 International Congress on Medieval Studies

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## INTRODUCTION

In May 2016, a team of graduate and faculty researchers from the University of Pittsburgh conducted more than 106 interviews with participants at the International Congress on Medieval Studies. These surveys, taking about 5-10 minutes each, asked attendees to assess aspects of a pioneering digital humanities project, “Images of Medieval Art and Architecture,” (<http://medart.pitt.edu/>). Our questions provoked reflections on the participants’ experiences with technology and their own assumptions about usability and preservation. Funded by a Research and Preservation grant from the NEH, **the purpose of this research, ultimately, is to examine the correlation between usability and sustainability and to determine recommendations for digital preservation based on these findings** in the form of a socio-technical roadmap.

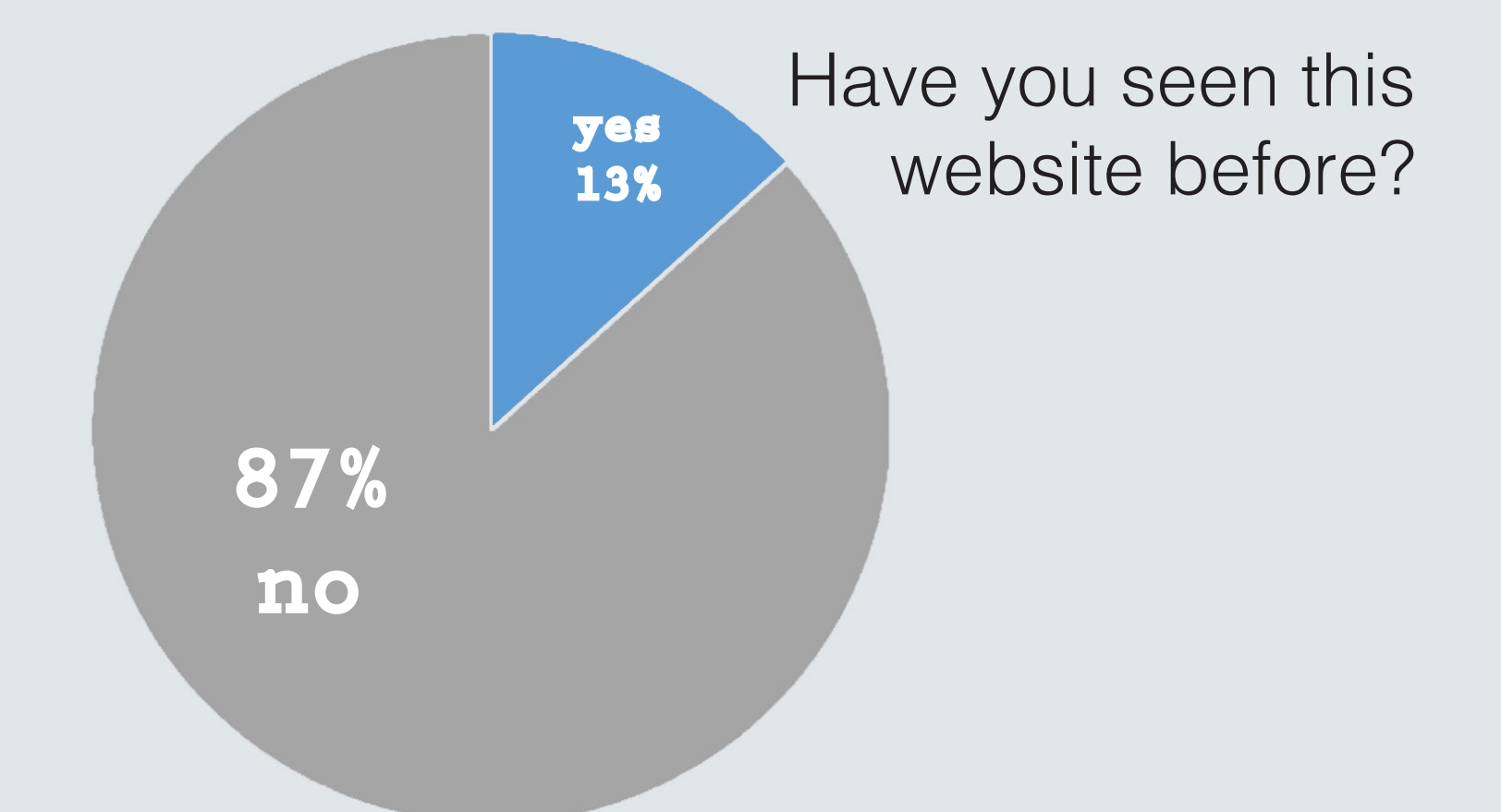
## FINDING # 1

### 1. Authority and Trust

Upon viewing the website briefly and conducting a task (searching for images of Canterbury Cathedral), several interviewees suggested that the website was authoritative, reliable and/or trustworthy for a multitude of reasons. These included:



- the presence of clear indicators of an academic affiliation
- the presence of the name of a recognizable/reliable/or “professional” author
- the inclusion of copyright information throughout the site



## FINDING # 2

### 2. Appearance Matters

The website is from 1996, and its overall appearance has not changed since then. **Is this a problem for users?**

#### NO!

simpler is better

*“I don’t want to spend a long time learning how to use it.”*

it doesn’t have to be beautiful to be authoritative

*“I think there’s a fine line between having it look good and having it look authoritative.”*

#### YES!

the content seems good, but it looks old

*“...you can tell it’s an older website. So the problem might not be in changing how it’s working but maybe just aesthetically.”*

*“I think it’d be great if it could be re-designed.”*



## FINDING #3

### 3. Google Shame

Interviewees expressed concern and embarrassment (through language, tone of voice, and facial expression) about using Google to search for research images. But why?

lack of attribution/copyright information | the results seem unreliable | there are too many results to sift through | having to deal with lower quality images

**99% of interviewees stated that the site should be preserved.**

### Conclusions

Through this research process, we were forced to reconsider the role that personal image collections play in the production of shared image resources, particularly among medieval art historians. Our work on the sustainability needs of this resource has demonstrated that it would be profitable to have an open discussion about the way that medievalists’ research habits and needs have changed due to the demise of film-based image use and the concomitant rise of the use of digital images. Further, such conversations would benefit from addressing the importance of proper attribution in collaborative projects.