Website analysis: Seattle Art Museum

Seattle Art Museum (SAM) is the largest art museum in its home city, finding its roots in the early 20th century as the Seattle Fine Arts Society and only later growing into the sizable institution we know today. The museum is a single institution in three locations: SAM downtown, Seattle Asian Art Museum, and the Olympic Sculpture Park at Volunteer Park. These three locations are governed with the intention of connecting art to life, and house a collection of approximately 23,000 objects. SAM’s website (seattleartmuseum.org) is an excellent example of a content rich, poorly navigable arts organization website.

On the whole, SAM’s website is relatively inviting and visually appealing, easily navigable, and intuitively designed. The logo is consistent from page to page, as is the color scheme. Typefaces and headings are similarly consistent and generally clear, and color choices are appropriately contrasting. The background color-choice for the subpages is subdued without being weak, and compliments the general color scheme. The aspect ratio of subpages is rather compact, making writing somewhat hard-to-read and content rather cramped.

The homepage is clear, easy to read, and the most visually effective page of the site. Its white background really makes the museum’s branding pop, and allows buttons and program logos to stand out. All pertinent information is on the homepage, as is a search function, though the search function is available on this page only. The central navigation system on this page is simple, straightforward, and comprehensive: art, visit,
programs, calendar, get involved, members, and about SAM. It provides links to the tree separate museum campuses, as well as SAM’s talks and film series, special events, seasonal news, and ticket sales. All of this appears uncluttered just below a slideshow of current and up-coming exhibits.

The subpages are less clear than the homepage but no less informative. On the subpages the colors are brighter and there is more text. The main navigation bar disappears when navigating away from the homepage. Navigation of further subpages is through a left-hand menu that, depending on the page, ranges from a few options to a laundry list. While this navigation tool is certainly effective in delineating content, it is not particularly user-friendly; the type-face is too small, the color not contrasting enough, and there are too many choices. Also, in order to return to the homepage, or to any other subpages, the user must use their back button, making navigation somewhat awkward and repetitive.

Despite some design shortcomings, SAM’s website content is comprehensive, both in its institution and program descriptions, and its collection. There is readily available information on children, adult, outreach, and seasonal programs, as well as current and upcoming exhibits. Visitors to the site can become members, donate to the museum, buy tickets, register for programs and camps, and coordinate gallery rentals all with the click of a button. This makes the site not only informative but absolutely useful for both the institution and the patron.

The site’s strongest feature is its collections content. The collections are comprehensively cataloged online, from renaissance paintings to modern Asian sculpture, and can be referenced and cross-referenced by era, artist, genre, medium, content, and
gallery location. Each entry includes photographs of the piece, an expert description, how to locate it in the collection, and notes on its condition and display schedule. In this respect, SAM’s website is an excellent resource for academics, and lends itself well to research. Despite this, the site lacks an on-line interactive learning component for children—something an art museum website lends itself to well. In the end though, the art content is the site’s saving grace, making up for its many shortcomings in navigation and content accessibility.

On the whole, Seattle Art Museum’s website is visually appealing and content rich, but the poorly laid out navigation limits the site’s usability. The website could be vastly improved by unifying the site’s navigation system: provide a central navigation system on every page (including a “home” button!), use larger-text, simpler and more concise sidebar menus with rollover menus for further options, and generally increase text size.