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AlpTextyles

**Digitizing & Making Accessible the
Alpine Textile Heritage:
Challenges & Solutions**

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INTERTWINING CULTURES

> INTRODUCTION

The activity aimed to safeguard and promote textile heritage by transitioning to digital technology, establishing it as a key tool for knowledge sharing and accessibility for both younger generations and industry professionals. It fostered collaboration among communities and public institutions, encouraging dialogue and synergy through the creation of digital archives.

This report builds on case studies and lessons learned to provide cultural institutions and textile enterprises with practical guidance on the digitization and dissemination of heritage textiles. It is structured into several sections, beginning with an overview of the pilot test phase, which involved scouting and evaluating potential partners capable of supporting the digital archiving process. The following section explores the key challenges encountered, including issues related to intellectual property and rights management, which are critical when making historical collections publicly accessible.

The report then outlines the process of defining the most suitable digitalization solution, taking into account technical, curatorial, and strategic considerations. It also presents the specific archives that were digitized during this initiative, offering insights into the methodologies and tools used.

Finally, the report concludes with a step-by-step guide detailing the entire digitization process, providing a practical framework that institutions and enterprises can follow to ensure the effective preservation and accessibility of textile heritage.

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> THE PILOT TESTS

Several Italian companies specializing in the digital archiving of cultural heritage were contacted to gather insights into the procedures, actions, technical requirements, and costs associated with pilot tests on the available collections of the partners. Through these discussions, a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in digitization was gained, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges inherent in the process.

The analysis revealed key distinctions between the mere digitization of collections—using high-quality tools to capture images or scans—and the more advanced process of enhancing these collections through specialized archival description software, databases, and search functionalities. It became evident that simple digitization, while crucial for preservation, is only the first step.

Without a structured archival system and metadata management, the usability and accessibility of these digital collections remain limited.

Another critical aspect that emerged was the importance of determining where and how to publish the collections to maximize their impact. Discussions underscored that ensuring the long-term vitality of a digital archive requires more than just making content available online; it demands a strategic approach to publication, periodic updates, and a continuous effort to engage users. Keeping the digital archive "alive" involves not only maintaining scientific and technical standards but also fostering interactions with researchers, designers, and the broader public.

Throughout the process, strict adherence to scientific quality standards was identified as a fundamental requirement. This included the development of detailed descriptions, rigorous metadata management, and the implementation of advanced research tools to facilitate precise and meaningful searches. Proper classification and documentation were recognized as essential for ensuring that digitized collections serve both educational and professional purposes effectively.

Additionally, a thorough analysis of the composition of the collections was carried out to assess the materials, documents, and products they contained. Special attention was given to identifying connections between different elements within the collections, such as the relationships between a fabric, a garment, a document, a book, or a drawing.



Even if an item was once protected by copyright, institutions must then grapple with the question of whether the copyright term has expired, placing the work in the public domain. The general rule in the European Union is that copyright expires 70 years after the death of the author, although this calculation can be complex with various exceptions depending on the type of work, publication status, authorship (anonymous or pseudonymous), and national legislation which may stipulate longer terms. For works of joint authorship, the term extends 70 years after the death of the last surviving author. Furthermore, individual works contained within a larger collection may have differing copyright expiry dates. Navigating these intricate rules requires significant time and expertise.

A further critical challenge arises in identifying the current copyright holder if the work is still under protection. The original creator may have transferred their rights to another party, such as a publisher or a record company, especially if the work was commercially exploited. Institutions need to diligently attempt to trace these rightsholders to seek permission for online use. This process can be time-consuming, costly, and sometimes ultimately unsuccessful, particularly for older or less well-documented items.

When copyright exists and permission cannot be obtained, cultural institutions must explore whether any exceptions or limitations to copyright law permit the intended online use. European copyright laws provide a series of these exceptions for specific activities and contexts, such as preservation copying by cultural heritage institutions, online publication of out-of-commerce or orphan works, display in a classroom setting, and citation for research purposes. However, these exceptions are often narrowly defined and not fully harmonised across the European Union, meaning institutions must be aware of the specific regulations in their own country. Unlike the "fair use" doctrine in the United States, there is no general exception for broad, unspecified uses in the EU.

For works that are in copyright and where no exception applies, obtaining explicit permission from the rightsholder is necessary. This often involves negotiating licences that specify the permitted uses, such as online display, sharing with aggregators like Europeana, educational use, or commercial reuse. Collecting societies can sometimes grant licences for online access, even if the author is unknown or not directly represented by them.

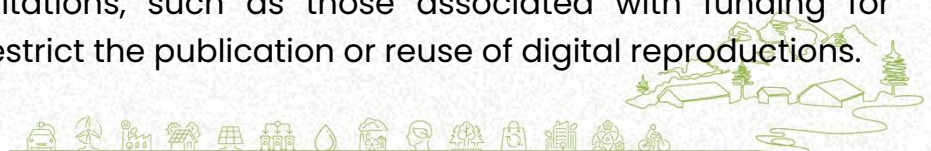


However, for a large number of items or when rightsholders cannot be identified or located (orphan works), this process can become practically unmanageable. While exceptions exist for orphan works, relying on them often requires a diligent search and can still be unfruitful.

A particularly important consideration for cultural institutions relates to works that are already in the public domain. The Europeana Public Domain Charter strongly encourages institutions to never claim rights on digital reproductions of public domain materials. Digitization processes, such as scanning or photography, generally do not create new copyright unless the digital replica meets a high threshold of originality, representing the digitizer's own intellectual creation. In most cases, standard digitization does not meet this threshold. Claiming rights on public domain reproductions deprives users of the opportunity to use the material freely and goes against the public interest mission of cultural heritage organizations. Europeana advocates against any attempts to re-establish control over public domain materials through technical or contractual measures.

To effectively communicate the copyright status and reuse possibilities of their online collections, cultural institutions must utilize accurate rights statements. Europeana, for instance, mandates that all digital objects submitted to its platform include one of its 14 standardized rights statements, which include Creative Commons licenses and tools, as well as statements from the Rights Statements Consortium. Choosing the correct rights statement is crucial; incorrectly stating that a work is in copyright when it is in the public domain (copyfraud) restricts legitimate uses, while incorrectly claiming public domain status for a copyrighted work infringes rights and misleads users. Institutions must carefully evaluate the copyright status of the physical object and any other legal or contractual conditions that might apply when selecting a rights statement. They are encouraged to treat the rights of the 'physical' object and the digital object as one, generally by not claiming additional rights resulting from digitization, especially for public domain works.

Beyond copyright, cultural institutions must also consider other legal and ethical implications when publishing collections online. Data protection and privacy concerns may arise, particularly with items containing personal information. Existing contractual limitations, such as those associated with funding for digitization, might also restrict the publication or reuse of digital reproductions.



Furthermore, even when copyright has expired, ethical considerations may dictate whether sharing certain digital objects online and encouraging their reuse could have negative consequences for specific individuals or communities.

In situations where the copyright status is unclear or obtaining permission is impractical for a vast number of items, some cultural heritage institutions may adopt a risk-managed approach, carefully weighing the potential risks against the benefits of online publication, considering factors like the work's commercial availability, age, and intended use.

In conclusion, publishing collections online presents cultural institutions with a complex web of intellectual property challenges. From the initial determination of copyright status and ownership to navigating exceptions, obtaining permissions, understanding the nuances of the public domain, and applying accurate rights statements, institutions must invest significant resources and expertise to ensure they are operating within the bounds of the law while fulfilling their mission of providing access to cultural heritage. The principles espoused by initiatives like Europeana, advocating for a healthy and accessible public domain and providing guidance on rights identification and management, offer valuable frameworks for cultural institutions striving to make their collections available to the world.

For a comprehensive overview of copyright and related rights in the digital environment—particularly as they pertain to the cultural heritage sector—institutions may refer also to the World Intellectual Property Organization’s publication *“Managing Intellectual Property for Museums”* (WIPO Publication No. 1049), which offers useful legal frameworks and case studies to support informed decision-making (WIPO, 2018).



> THE IDENTIFIED SOLUTION: EFHA AND EUROPEANA

After evaluating various options for the digitalization and dissemination of heritage textiles, the decision was made to collaborate with the **European Fashion Heritage Association (EFHA)**, a non-profit organization established in 2014 that brings together and engages fashion institutions—including GLAMs (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums) and creative industries—in the valorization and exploitation of fashion heritage online, acting as thematic aggregator for **Europeana** and the **Common European Data Space for Cultural Heritage**.

Europeana was identified as the most suitable platform due to its comprehensive approach to digital content aggregation, enrichment, and curation.

By serving as an open-access point for fashion heritage, EFHA facilitates the sharing of digitized archives, making them accessible to a broad audience while ensuring the long-term preservation of cultural assets. The platform also plays a key role in building consensus and raising awareness on best practices in digitization, metadata management, and digital curation.

One of EFHA's key strengths is that it offers institutions and content partners the opportunity to publish already digitized collections free of charge.

In addition to providing basic guidelines for the preparation of materials, EFHA offers optional services to help maintain a standard level of quality across published content. However, it is important to note that the organization does not directly handle the technical aspects of digitization—such as photography, scanning, and metadata drafting—but rather provides a structured framework and general support for users navigating the process.

Beyond functioning as a digital repository, EFHA also enables content partners to increase the visibility of their collections. Institutions can apply to showcase their materials through EFHA's communication channels, including blogs and magazines, and even request the creation of dedicated thematic galleries. This feature enhances the reach and impact of digitized archives, connecting them with researchers, designers, educators, and the wider public. Moreover, EFHA actively fosters innovation by supporting the development of new ideas and business models for the exploitation of digital fashion heritage.



This aligns with the project's goal of not only preserving textile history but also enabling its reuse in contemporary design, research, and creative industries.

Through this partnership, the digitalized collections gain both historical relevance and future potential, bridging the past with emerging opportunities in digital fashion and cultural heritage management.

Moreover, acting as thematic aggregator for fashion and textile in Europeana, the European flagship initiative for digital cultural heritage, EFHA offers the opportunity to directly publish the digital content of its partners to Europeana and the European Data Space for Cultural Heritage, amplifying the outreach and visibility of the digital collections.

> THE DIGITIZATION AND PUBLICATION PROCESS – GUIDELINE

Digitizing cultural heritage collections is a transformative endeavor that bridges the past with the future, enabling institutions to preserve fragile artifacts while unlocking their potential for education, research, and creative innovation. This chapter outlines a brief, discursive guide in five steps to navigating the digitization and publication process, emphasizing the interconnectedness of technical, legal, and curatorial considerations.

1. Content Selection: Defining Purpose and Priorities

The foundation of any successful digitization project lies in thoughtful content selection. Begin by articulating clear objectives: Is the goal to safeguard deteriorating textiles, enhance public access, support academic research, or inspire contemporary designers? These aims will shape the selection criteria, ensuring alignment with institutional missions and stakeholder needs.

Cultural Significance and Audience Relevance

Prioritise items of historical, artistic, or regional importance. For example, a 19th-century Alpine traditional garment might hold cultural value for local communities while offering insights into textile techniques for researchers.



Consider audience needs—educators may seek high-resolution images for classroom use, while designers might value pattern books for reinterpretation.

Condition and Urgency

Fragile or deteriorating materials, such as fading dyes in historic fabrics or brittle paper in pattern books, should be prioritized for digitisation. This not only preserves their legacy but mitigates risks from repeated physical handling.

Navigating Intellectual Property Rights (IPR)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, IPR complexities require meticulous attention. Start by verifying the copyright status of each item. For instance, a 1920s embroidery design may still be under copyright if the creator died after 1953 (under EU law). Tools like the Europeana's Copyright Checklist can aid this process. For orphan works, document diligent searches for rights holders as mandated by national regulations. Ethical considerations are equally critical: avoid publishing materials with unresolved privacy concerns (e.g., garments linked to identifiable individuals) or culturally sensitive content (e.g., ceremonial textiles with restricted access).

2. Digitisation: Balancing Precision and Ethics

Digitisation is not merely technical replication but an act of stewardship. Adhering to Europeana's guidelines ensures fidelity to the original while enabling broad usability.

Technical Standards for Imaging

High-resolution imaging (minimum 300 DPI) captures intricate details, such as the weave structure of a linen cloth or the stitch density of embroidery. Use lossless formats like TIFF for archival masters, preserving data integrity, and compressed formats like JPEG for online access. For 3D objects, photogrammetry can recreate the drape of a historical garment, offering researchers a dynamic view unobtainable through flat scans. For the publication on Europeana, follow the quality standards defined in the [Europeana Publishing Framework](#).



Ethical and Legal Frameworks

Digitisation ethics extend beyond technical execution. The [Europeana Public Domain Charter](#) underscores that digitising public domain works (e.g., a 19th-century pattern book) does not confer new rights. Avoid restrictive claims on such reproductions, fostering open access. For copyrighted materials, secure explicit permissions—for example, negotiate licenses with a fashion house to digitize mid-20th-century designs.

3. Metadata Generation: Crafting Context for Discovery

Metadata transforms digital assets into discoverable, interconnected resources. The Europeana Data Model (EDM) provides a robust framework for structuring this information.

Mapping and Enriching Metadata

Existing metadata must be mapped to EDM fields. This might involve:

- dc:title: "Women's Festive Jacket, Gorenjska Region, 1890"
- dc:creator: "Unknown artisan (attributed to the Knific Collection)"
- edm:isRelatedTo: Link to a historical event or regional textile technique.

For a complete guide to EDM, visit the [Europeana Data Model Documentation](#). Controlled vocabularies, such as the Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT) and the [Europeana Fashion Thesaurus](#), standardize terms like "embroidery" or "linen," enhancing cross-institutional searchability. Multilingual metadata (e.g., providing descriptions in English, Italian, French and German) broadens accessibility across Europeana's diverse user base.

Rights Statements as Trust Signals

Accurate rights labeling builds user trust. A public domain garment should carry a CC0 mark, permitting unrestricted reuse, while a copyrighted 1960s fabric design might use "In Copyright – Educational Use Permitted." Mislabeling risks legal disputes or stifling legitimate reuse. For a reference on the accepted rights statement on Europeana, see rightsstatements.org.



4. Publication via EFHA: Collaboration and Amplification

The European Fashion Heritage Association (EFHA) serves as a conduit to Europeana, amplifying collections through its thematic focus and technical infrastructure.

Preparing for Submission

EFHA's spreadsheet template simplifies data preparation. For instance, a museum uploading 18th-century Montafon textiles would simply populate fields in the template with metadata aligned to EDM, ensuring seamless ingestion into Europeana. Validate submissions against the Europeana Publishing Framework, which emphasizes metadata richness (e.g., including provenance data) and legal readiness.

Leveraging EFHA's Ecosystem

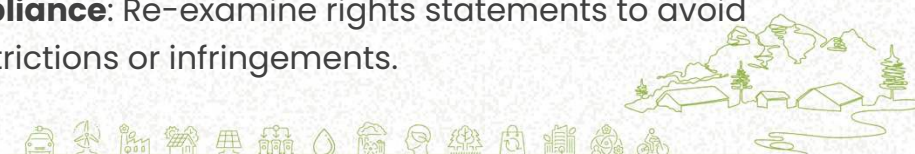
EFHA's optional services, such as metadata enrichment or thematic gallery curation, can elevate a collection's impact. A regional archive might collaborate with EFHA to highlight its Alpine lace patterns in a virtual exhibition, attracting students, designers and historians. By publishing their collections through EFHA, institutions also contribute to the European Data Space for Cultural Heritage, fostering cross-border research and innovation.

5. Quality Control: Ensuring Excellence Before Launch

The final, often underestimated step is rigorous quality assurance. A staging environment in the EFHA aggregator allows institutions to identify and resolve issues before public release.

Comprehensive Validation

- **Metadata Accuracy:** Confirm that a search for “19th-century Slovenian embroidery” retrieves relevant items with correct dating and geographical tags.
- **Asset Integrity:** Check the quality of the digital content (e.g., that zoom functionalities reveal textile details without pixelation).
- **Rights Compliance:** Re-examine rights statements to avoid inadvertent restrictions or infringements.



Engaging Stakeholders in Testing

Invite curators, researchers, and even community members to test the staging site. For example, a historian might flag missing contextual links between a garment and its cultural significance, prompting metadata revisions.

Conclusion: From Preservation to Participation

Digitisation is not an endpoint but a gateway. By following these guidelines, institutions can transform static collections into living resources. A digitised 1920s pattern book, once confined to a museum vault, can inspire a modern fashion line or inform a university thesis. Through partnerships with EFHA and adherence to Europeana's frameworks, cultural heritage becomes a collaborative, borderless endeavor—preserving the past while nurturing future creativity.

> THE DIGITIZED ARCHIVES

The following are examples of archives that have been digitized, showcasing the variety of materials and the outcomes achieved through the digitalization process.

ZRC SAZU Collection

This collection is part of the ZRC SAZU (Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts) archive, a renowned institution dedicated to advancing scholarly research across a wide range of disciplines. ZRC SAZU is a leader in the study of Slovenian cultural heritage, with particular emphasis on the preservation and promotion of traditional practices, including folk culture, history, and material heritage.

Dr. Bojan Knific, a curator and researcher specializing in clothing culture, has generously contributed to the archive with his private collection. This collection includes over 300 unique pieces, mostly clothing dating from the 19th to the early 20th century, with a particular focus on garments from the Gorenjska



region. Dr. Knific, who has authored numerous monographs and articles on the subject, provides invaluable insight into the evolution of local sartorial traditions.

In addition to the clothing collection, ZRC SAZU has digitized several significant books on traditional ornaments, now accessible online. These include *Narodne vezenine na Kranjskem* (1918) by Albert Sič, which examines folk embroidery in Carniola, and *Narodni okraski na pirhih in kožuhih* (1922), which explores national ornaments on Easter eggs and furs. These resources are now available for public viewing, offering a deeper understanding of regional crafts and traditions. Additional works on ornamental decorations found on tools and domestic items in Gorenjska have also been digitized, further enriching the archive.

The full collection is available through the digital archive, offering a valuable opportunity for research and exploration of Slovenian folk culture.





Two-piece dress in red wool fabric, consisting of skirt with sewn-on bodice and upper bodice.

This item is provided and maintained by [ZRC-SAZU](#).



Montafon Museum Collection

The collection of the Montafon Museum is a significant repository of textile heritage, encompassing over 1,200 items, primarily traditional clothing and components of regional costumes, dating from the 18th to the 20th century. This diverse collection includes 120 breast cloths, 26 pattern books from the Loden factory in Schruns, as well as 9 fabric patterns and embroidery designs, which provide valuable insight into the textile traditions of the region.

In addition to the textiles, the museum's archive houses an impressive array of historical documents and artifacts. This includes 40 votive images, 30 lithographs, and a substantial collection of 300 books and archival documents. These materials serve as essential resources for understanding the cultural, religious, and artistic developments in the Montafon region.

The Montafon Museum's collection is an invaluable resource for those interested in the history of regional costume, textile craftsmanship, and the broader cultural landscape of the area, offering a glimpse into the rich heritage of the region.





Façon X

EFHA
fashionheritage.eu**Men's coat**

A promotional black and white photograph of a man in a coat labeled with "Façon 2". Material: loden.

This item is provided and maintained by **Montafoner museen**



Musei Valposchiavo Collection

The Musei Valposchiavo (Switzerland) have digitized a collection that showcases the region's deep-rooted textile traditions, family histories, and sustainable culture.

Valposchiavo, an Alpine valley in the Italian-speaking Canton of Graubünden, is recognized for its pioneering sustainability model, known as the “Smart Organic Valley.” With 96% of its agricultural production certified organic, the valley integrates local food systems and sustainability practices.

A highlight of the collection is a dish rag from Casa Tomé, a preserved medieval farmhouse, which inspired a new product line by Tessitura Valposchiavo. This range, which includes placemats and table runners, blends traditional motifs with modern aesthetics, exemplifying heritage-sensitive innovation.

Casa Tomé, dating back to 1350, provides a glimpse into rural life over the centuries. The collection also includes clothing from the house, such as a pullover, skirt, and dress, showcasing how the Tomé sisters mended garments over time, promoting sustainability and circularity long before fast fashion.

Another focal point is the “Coperta Poschiavina,” a traditional wool blanket with unique family-specific variations. Local weaver Anna Maria Foppoli documented over 120 blankets, highlighting the emotional and cultural significance of this textile.

The museum also digitized historic fabric catalogues from Pozzy department store, founded in 1747, illustrating the textile trade in the region and its connections to broader Alpine production. This collection reflects Valposchiavo's rich cultural heritage and its sustainable, innovative future.





Peasant dress made by hand using a man's cotton shirt. Mended and adjusted, modified in several parts with pieces of fabric similar to the original and with almost invisible stitches.

This item is provided and maintained by [MUVA Fondazione Musei Valposchiavo](#)



CONCLUSIONS

The digitization and dissemination of textile heritage stand at the intersection of preservation, accessibility, and innovation. This initiative has demonstrated that digital technologies, when combined with rigorous curatorial practices and strategic collaboration, offer a powerful means of safeguarding historical collections while unlocking their potential for research, education, and creative reuse.

Throughout the project, the importance of a structured and methodical approach emerged as a guiding principle—from the careful selection of content and the resolution of intellectual property rights to the choice of reliable partners and platforms, such as EFHA and Europeana. The experience highlighted that digitization is not merely a technical process but an ongoing commitment to cultural stewardship, requiring institutions to balance scientific standards, ethical responsibility, and public engagement.

By providing both a practical framework and a tested methodology, this report aims to support cultural institutions and enterprises in navigating the complexities of textile heritage digitization. The hope is that this work will contribute to fostering a sustainable digital ecosystem where heritage collections are not only preserved but also continuously reinterpreted, shared, and integrated into the contemporary cultural landscape.



