

Gallery gadgets help Mona Lisa keep her smile

New technology will protect valuable art and explain its significance to gallery visitors, writes **Clare Morgan**.

THE would-be art thief thinks he's cracked it. The gallery's security guard is patrolling elsewhere, perhaps investigating a disturbance staged as a distraction. The thief begins to unscrew the old master, planning to slip it into a bag or under his coat before melting into the weekend crowds. He knows the gallery's front door has no security scanner.

But security staff are already onto him. Motion detectors installed in the painting will detect the slightest movement. And even if they fail, a radio frequency identifier (RFID) attached to the back of the frame will help track a painting that has been removed from the wall. A signal sent every 15 seconds reveals the painting's exact position. Before he knows it, the thief is confronted, the painting saved and a gallery's reputation remains intact.

As we know, the Art Gallery of NSW had no such high-tech security when the diminutive *A Cavalier (Self-Portrait)*, by the 17th-century Dutch artist Frans van Mieris, was stolen the Sunday before last. There wasn't even a security camera in the small room where it hung. Before long, however, such technology will not only improve gallery and museum security, it will transform the experience of visitors.

Julian Bickersteth, the managing director of International Conservation Services, a Sydney museum consultancy, says Australian cultural institutions will inevitably follow the overseas trend.

"Take-up in Australia has been slow because it is not a cheap system to put in place," he says, noting that a bar code for a paint-

ing, for example, costs about five cents whereas the cheapest radio identifiers are still 60 or 70 cents. "Like all these electronic things, it needs a lot of effort. And it then has to be tied into your overall security system.

"Essentially you'll have a system that is electronically checking the location of every painting in the gallery every 15 seconds, a far cry from the traditional system of guards wandering around to check they're all there.

"The sad thing about the [Art Gallery of NSW] theft is that it's not been a problem in Australia - it's been much more one in Europe and the US. But it means that here we'll have to start looking more at security," he says.

from the RFID to your PDA showing him making the work and slapping paint all over the place," Bickersteth says. "Clearly there's a whole new level of visitor experience which we are going to be quickly encountering."

Traditionalists might splutter at the thought of such high-tech add-ons and ask what's wrong with just standing in front of a painting and looking at it. It is a question Bickersteth has considered. "The interesting issue, of course, is when are you starting to detract from the visual experience? An awful lot of people would go and stand in front of *Blue Poles* and just soak it up and not be distracted by all these other things.

"I think the answer is that

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JULIAN BICKERSTETH, International Conservation Services

These advances in security technology are also transforming the gallery experience, particularly in the US. Information stored on the identifier mounted on a picture can be accessed by hand-held devices, such as PDAs, that are lent to visitors when they enter the gallery. The data can range from basic catalogue information to a video interview with the artist, and even interactive games for school-aged visitors.

"If you're standing in front of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* at the National Gallery, for instance, you can have video streaming

we're moving into a new generation, and it's certainly the case with my children, where they say they want more. We have the ability to provide the gen Ys with a lot more contextual information at the touch of a button, and I think it's great, actually.

"You don't have to do it - you can just stand there and look at it - but at the same time you can find out the context: How did he paint this work? Where does it fit in? You get all those different levels."

Changes are already happening in Australia, with online collections, podcasts and other digital

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Illustration: John Shakespeare

resources, and Bickersteth says the evolution of web-based communities and hosted services has significant implications for cultural institutions.

"No longer is content king; now the user is king," he says. "That's the paradigm that we in the museum world are coming to, that people are choosing what they want to look at and what information they want rather than just being fed the information we think they should have. We can't do anything to stop that.

"At some level, I think it's quite exciting. There's a big movement

at the moment to what's called co-creation, whereby it is not just the curators who have the knowledge, it's the ability of the public to also feed them knowledge."

He cites the example of the Australian War Memorial's photographic collection, which is available online. "They encourage you to go and look at that, and if you see Uncle Fred standing on the wing of a Lancaster bomber in 1944, please tell us. They then feed that information back into the collection."

With fine art, however, things get murkier. "Do we really want

to know what Miranda from Bondi thinks about Edmund Capon's latest acquisition? Do we want an amateur providing her views on things? But then that's when blogs are useful."

The biggest hurdle in Australia is its relatively slow broadband speed, especially when compared with the US. "We've been slow in getting our cultural content onto the web, so until we've got better web content I don't think we'll see better take-up of technology in terms of contextual information provision in museums and galleries," Bickersteth says.