New Ways of Searching For—and With—Images

Way back in 2007, I wrote a column here about ways of searching for images online. I wrote, “So much information that’s hidden in an image cannot be searched by modern search engines, but that will likely change with time and new technology.” How very true—today, you can use the image itself to search and not have to rely on just using words that describe that image. It is truly an amazing thing.

There is still much to be said for the “old-fashioned” way of searching for images. Go to http://images.google.com to start, and simply type in a few words describing what you seek. If you search for “cape hatteras lighthouse,” you’ll see pages and pages of the black-and-white-striped lighthouse. But there’s much more available if you look carefully.

On the left side of the screen, Google presents several options. “Sort by subject,” offered since last May, sorts all of Google’s images into different categories: inside the lighthouse, the lighthouse at night, at sunset, moving the lighthouse away from the eroding beach back in 1999, drawings of the lighthouse, and more. Clicking “more like this” in the top right corner of each of these sections will lead to more similar-looking photos. You can also sort by color—clicking on the brown button causes the brown National Park signs near the lighthouse, plus brown timbers, red-brick buildings, and brownish sands to sift to the top. Google offers some searches by time, though the limits reflect when Google found the page in question, not when it was written.

All these features are very interesting and fun to play with. What’s truly remarkable, however, is Google’s new ability (as of June 2011) to accept an image and then tell you what it “sees.” If you find an image online and want to know more about it, you can just drag the image onto the Google Images search box (it doesn’t currently work on the standard google.com site; you need to be at the “Google Images” site) and put Google to work. You can use your own images, too: if you forgot the name of a lighthouse in a vacation photo you took or the title or artist of a work you photographed, just click on the camera icon in the search box, and select “Upload an image.” Locate the image on your desktop, and let Google do its magic.

Yes, other search engines exist. Yes, they have image searches, too. Yes, if you’re searching with terms it’s probably worth seeing what Bing (http://www.bing.com/images) or Yahoo! (http://images.yahoo.com) have to offer, though these two sites try to guess what you want to see before you type anything, and apparently it’s all celebrities. Google, on the other hand, waits to hear what you really want. And, only Google lets you use images to search for text or more images.

Four years ago I noted http://shipspotting.com, which now claims over one million images of individual ships. Other ship-specific photography sites have now appeared, including http://grosstonnage.com, but this site requires registration, and a subscription after five days. The site at http://www.shipphotos.co.uk has photos from around Britain and Europe, and http://www.photoship.co.uk has over 100,000 images of older vessels. At http://fotoflite.com, you’ll see aerial marine photographs; however, these are for sale and thus have a “Fotoflite” watermark on the website samples.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at peter@shipindex.org. See http://shipindex.org for a free compilation of over 140,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals.