Museums at Home: Digital Initiatives in Response to COVID-19

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As governments across the world introduced a variety of social distancing rules in early 2020 in an effort to stop the coronavirus pandemic, many public spaces closed their doors. Both travelling and large gatherings are understood as vectors for infection, and as a consequence, cultural attractions and tourist destinations were particularly hard hit by virus prevention measures. The response of many museums was to take their collections online, resulting in a variety of digital initiatives which showcased the creativity, diversity and community of the heritage sector. Some institutions began pandemic collections to document the impact of the virus, while others shared their already digitised collections with the public through a multitude of platforms. Social media, increasingly respected in the sector, buoyed up visitor communities, and even the museum industry itself was affected, with annual events such as the Museums + Heritage Show moving their programming online.1

This review surveys three types of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, from attempts to replicate the museum visit experience, to alternative replacements making use of online platforms, to initiatives that envision radically different relationships to their audiences. The selection is not intended to be representative, but instead draws into dialogue the experiences the authors had during lockdown, reflecting a small sample of international and Norwegian museum locations, exhibitions and engagements that were increasingly available throughout the pandemic, while commenting on wider trends. Visiting such a cross-section of museums offers us fresh insight into digital tourism in the age of the coronavirus.

1. https://show.museumsandheritage.com/
Touring the Virtual Museum

If you picked up a (digital) copy of a newspaper during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is entirely possible that you came across one of the many articles listing virtual museum tours. Along with being easily publishable content under unprecedented circumstances, it was presumed that visiting a museum from the safety of one’s own home while the physical collections were closed to the public would be a desirable lockdown activity. Prior to COVID-19, some museums had already launched virtual tours, which attempt to replicate the physical experience of being in the museum. They were designed before COVID-19, but the pandemic forced visitors to experience material culture exclusively through a digital medium.

The Google Arts and Culture platform, a non-profit initiative that partners with cultural institutions around the world, allows museum staff to upload a virtual tour, and digital visitors to undertake a 360-degree virtual walk through their chosen venue using Google’s Street View technology. Available content on Google Arts and Culture varies enormously: Musée d’Orsay has one ‘story’, 278 items and 1 Street View tour, whereas London’s Natural History Museum has 14 ‘stories’, 298,857 items and 2 Street View tours. Other institutions such as the Louvre and Musei Vaticani host bespoke tours on their own platforms.

In the physical museum, exhibition narratives have been carefully refined using the location’s architecture, the development of a connecting theme or story, and the order or context in which artefacts are arranged. One challenge faced by virtual tours is that they do not incorporate a digital alternative for this structure; even highlighted artworks are experienced largely as individual images, without the connecting interpretation situating them within an exhibition narrative. The opportunity to create new connections through digital interactions is rarely intuitive, and the virtual visitor cannot deviate from the limited amount uploaded (the Van Gogh Museum’s own curated tour only has the ability to zoom in or view interpretation on specific artworks, for example). Although visitors benefit from the ability to digitally dodge the frustration of crowds and visit regardless the institution’s opening hours or their own location, difficult navigation systems and slow internet speeds are potential pitfalls; a reminder that although virtual tours are vital in making museums more accessible, not all persons have equal access.

Virtual tours seem to work best when they diverge from the instinct to provide a 1:1 replacement for the in-person museum visit. The most rewarding tours we surveyed provide content which would otherwise be too costly, divergent or fantastical for an institution’s limited space or budget, and provide vital texture to the overarching themes or chronological displays dominating national collections. The Google Arts and Culture page for the Natural History Museum (London), for example, extends its in-person offerings via slide-show exhibitions on women in science history, biodiversity and architecture, and has made tours of ‘hidden’ spaces accessible to a wider audience. Other institutions, such as the Smithsonian, have 360-degree virtual tours of past exhibitions within the museum space, enabling the digital visitor to travel not just through space, but also time. More meta offerings include the British Library Simulator, an experience which mimics an early Nintendo game aesthetic, using the game’s NPC interaction to explicitly acknowledge that the virtual tour is a smaller and constricted experience of the British Library. Such attempts often provide a more engaging encounter while knowingly allowing the player (a more appropriate term than ‘visitor’ in this context) in on the potential limits of digital tourism.

The peripatetic virtual tour comes in a variety of forms, each with its own challenges and benefits, and many of them showcase the ingenuity and imagination of the museum sector’s approach to online heritage. Tours which replicate a visit to physical collections can show-
case the breadth of an institution’s objects, help a potential visitor plan their visit, and are what we usually first think of when we consider the ‘virtual tour’. Yet while Street View-style visits provide important insights into the architecture and experience of the physical institution, digital tourism comes into its own when it provides an experience alternative to that of the original, commenting on how we experience collections in such a format, or allowing new and original encounters to take place.

Moving Clouds to the Cloud

In early 2020, many museums were poised to open up new temporary exhibits, but the museums had to close their doors instead of welcoming visitors. Because temporary exhibits are designed to run over a short period of time, and that time would be partially or even completely lost to building closures, museums had to rethink how to bring the temporary exhibits outside of their museum walls.

One such exhibit was “In the Clouds”, which should have opened at Stavanger Art Museum in March 2020. The museum responded, as many others have done during the lockdowns, by moving activities online. On 20 March 2020, Stavanger Art Museum held a live launch event on Facebook. Museum director Hanne Beate Ueland and curator Gudmundson walked almost 400 live viewers around the exhibit in a half-hour live video stream. Gudmundson also briefly presented the book *Silver Linings: Clouds in Art and Science* (Museumforlaget 2020), which was the result of an ArtScience event in 2019 organized by Dolly and Finn Arne Jørgensen in cooperation with the museum. Since the exhibit installation had been interrupted by the lockdown, the livestream gave viewers a backstage view of the museum’s activities. This included a view of the exhibition installation processes since several artworks had not yet been installed or were incomplete.

When restrictions were eased in May 2020, the Stavanger Art Museum could finally open the “In the Clouds” exhibit to a small group on May 12. Opening talks from meteorologist Siri M. Kalvig and Gudmundson were recorded and placed on the museum webpage, along with the video from the online opening in March. In the period that followed, small groups with pre-booked tickets could be given tours of the museum.

“In the Clouds” demonstrates how a museum could use online tools to bring visitors to the exhibit from their homes, while still maintaining a focus on the physical installation. The digital version of the exhibit became a stopgap solution while the museum waited for better times, when they could again welcome visitors to the museums. Stavanger Art Museum was able to open again for the summer season to positive acclaim.

Around the same time, another cloud-related exhibit chose to go online in an entirely different way. At the Royal Society in London, UK, “Stormy Weather: From Lore to Science” was supposed to open in March 2020. Unlike the “In the Clouds” exhibit in Stavanger, “Stormy Weather” has still not opened physically. The original physical exhibit, which was developed as a collaboration between the Royal Society and the Met Office, was installed and subsequently taken down, with the intention of putting it up again in the future. The original calendar entry for the exhibit simply states that the exhibition has been postponed and has no link to the online version.²

They had planned to make a digital version of the exhibit from the beginning, but the COVID lockdowns made this digital incarnation much more extensive than planned. In

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² “Stormy weather – from lore to science – POSTPONED,” [https://royalsociety.org/science-events-and-lectures/2020/02/stormy-weather/](https://royalsociety.org/science-events-and-lectures/2020/02/stormy-weather/)
fact, since the physical exhibition never opened, the digital version is the only one that has been available for visitors.

The exhibit took a different route to reach a digital audience than “In the Clouds” did. “Stormy Weather” was remade on the Google Arts & Culture platform. Six out of seven topics in the original exhibit became digital exhibits. Moving to the Google Arts & Culture platform allowed curators to mix materials from the originally planned physical exhibit with other material that they couldn’t fit into the original, including material held by other Arts & Culture contributors.

Presented as a “six-part online series”, the online “Stormy Weather” exhibit takes viewers on a journey from early weather lore to modern scientific ways of knowing and predicting weather conditions. Using paintings, documents, images, photos of artifacts, and embedded video, combined with brief interpretive text, the digital exhibit has few references to ever having been a physical exhibit, beyond a brief statement in the end credits that “The digital and physical exhibits were curated by Dr Catherine Ross (National Meteorological Archive, Met Office) and Dr Louisiane Ferlier (The Royal Society).”

Both the Stavanger Art Museum and the Royal Society, who were scheduled to open cloud-themed exhibits at the same time, chose different strategies for going online during the COVID-19 lockdowns. One chose to use digital media to open windows into the physical exhibit, encouraging visitors to come as soon as the museum could open its doors again. The other chose to create a fully digital representation of the physical exhibition, subsequently dismantling the physical version. Going online allowed museums to show off their content and stay engaged with their audiences – as well as reaching new potential visitors.

COVID-19 and the crowdsourced museum

Whereas virtual online tours and digital exhibit replacements provided museums with a delivery mechanism for museum-curated content, other initiatives mobilized visitors sitting at home as creative contributors to the museum. Shortly after its museum doors were

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3. “Royal Society Summer Science Exhibition goes digital for Summer Science Online – 13–17 July 2020”
https://royalsociety.org/news/2020/06/summer-science-online/
shuttered on 14 March in response to California’s ban on large gatherings and later stay-at-home orders, The Getty issued a social media challenge to recreate their artworks based on things people had at home. The “Getty Museum Challenge” sparked tens of thousands of people to make their own versions of The Getty’s artworks, which were available in the Getty digital catalogue, and post their creations to Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram social media platforms. The Getty provided links to their online collection and let virtual museumgoers do the rest. The results revealed creativity, humour, and fun in spite of the ongoing crisis.

One of the most in-depth responses globally has been by the Black opera singer Peter Brathwaite, who began by posting his version of a painting of a Black servant dated c.1770 (although it is not held by The Getty) on 10 April 2020. By the end of July Brathwaite had recreated 75 images from the late fourteenth century onward that included Black subjects, most of which are held by museums. His contributions to the Getty Challenge, which he labels as “re-imaginings, disruptions and a re-empowering,” have received widespread media attention as a timely intervention given both the disparities of the COVID effects on Black communities and the simultaneous #BlackLivesMatter uprisings. Brathwaite’s contributions have revealed that when museum art is made accessible, it can inspire and empower.

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4. Sarah Waldorf and Annelisa Stephan, “Getty Artworks Recreated with Household Items by Creative Geniuses the World Over,” 30 March 2020. https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/getty-artworks-recreated-with-household-items-by-creative-geniuses-the-world-over/
5. A small sampling of these can be seen on the Getty’s twitter thread: https://twitter.com/ GettyMuseum/status/1242845952974544896
6. That painting is not held by a museum. It was sold by Philip Mould & Co. gallery and is available for viewing in their Historical Portraits Image Library, http://www.historicalportraits.com/Gallery.asp?Page=Item&ItemID=6188&Desc=A-Servant--Colonial-School
7. His gallery of reworked portraits is online http:// peterbrathwaitebaritone.com/rediscoveringblackportraiture
8. Kerry Sinanan, “Heterogeneous Blackness: Peter Brathwaite’s Eighteenth-Century Re-portraits,” The 18th-Century Common, https://www.18thcenturycommon.org/blackportraiture/
The Getty Museum Challenge was taken up as an opportunity to do art education from a distance, reaching beyond the geographical limits of a local audience. For example, all eighth graders at Kristianslyst middle school in Stavanger, Norway, were given a list of famous portraits, such as van Gogh’s *Self Portrait with a Straw Hat* (Metropolitan Museum) and da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (Louvre), that they could choose among to re-create at home for an art assignment. Like Brathwaite’s stretching of the Getty Museum Challenge to move beyond the Getty’s collection, these students were also reaching into the collections of other museums to recreate responses to their holdings.

While the Getty Museum Challenge asked those at home to re-create museum art works to share on social media, another initiative asked people to look through their photos of previous museum visits to “unlock” museums that were currently closed. Dan Hicks, Professor of Contemporary Archaeology at University of Oxford and Curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum, launched #MuseumsUnlocked on April 1st, but it was no April Fool’s joke. On Twitter he asked people to become “co-producers” of virtual visits to museums through contributions using the hashtag. Each day of #MuseumsUnlocked, which ran for 100 days, had a different theme spanning from particular museums (such as his own Pitt Rivers on Day 1) to places (such as Australia and New Zealand on Day 46) to object types (such as Gold, Silver and Jewels on Day 80) to themes (such as Childhood and Parenthood on Day 71). Hundreds of contributions were made each day of photos and descriptions of museums and heritage sites that people had visited in the past. Hicks said he wanted to cultivate a “readjustment of the geographies of museums” to work with heritage where people found themselves as a way of “letting go of the curatorial voice”.9 Contributions with the hashtag were collated (with minor curatorial choices to exclude posts using the hashtag inappropriately) into Twitter Moments posted to the @MuseumsUnlocked account.10 Day 99 made active use of this archive, asking contributors to look through prior contributions and repost their favourite.

These two initiatives have several commonalities that curators should keep in mind when thinking about crowdsourcing museums on social media. First, both of these initiatives were based on visual contributions: images of artworks needed to be readily available for people to copy for the Getty Museum Challenge, and visitors needed to have taken photographs in museums previously to be available for sharing in #MuseumsUnlocked. These are not things that could be readily acquired after lockdowns had started—they already had to be available. Second, the initiatives required curators to let contributors take control of content that was generated quickly. The curator was there to “help people join the dots,” as Hicks described it, allowing the community to decide what was included or excluded from a particular theme or framework. Third, the projects reveal a creative impulse among contributors, as well as a mildly competitive spirit, that encouraged them to think carefully about their contributions. Although posts flooded in much faster than curators could have made the content themselves, the distribution of effort did not mean less deliberate crafting of the input; this effort was simply dispersed among contributors.

*(re)Opening Doors*

Social distancing in response to the pandemic has meant rethinking the way we conceptualise institutions which have historically been important for encountering material culture.

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9. Quotations taken from interview with Dan Hicks by Dolly Jørgensen on 8 July 2020.
10. https://twitter.com/museumsunlocked
The virtual museum, in all its forms, has opened doors to visitors who can visit irrespective of time or location, while social media has given institutions a new voice and (at least in part) democratized the use of collections. As noted by Alasdair Travers, head of design at heritage architecture firm Purcell, “this breadth of access to our heritage didn’t exist weeks ago”\(^\text{11}\). The example of Norwegian school children interacting with the Getty Museum Challenge is indicative of how geographical boundaries no longer limit which museums were ‘visited’. In the digital realm, restrictions instead take the form of the language in which content was provided, or whether the experience was an enjoyable one. Our own experiences included the offerings of large national museums and local galleries, and institutions in Norway, France, Italy, the UK and America. Although such institutions have different resources available to them, it was not always the most complicated or expansive options which captured attention, but those which we found to be most enjoyable.

These virtual interactions are vital not only in allowing visitors through the doors while the buildings themselves are shuttered, but also in validating the existence of such cultural institutions when in-person visits are not possible, promoting our heritage as worthy of attention when the doors reopen. Pre-lockdown digital engagement has been proven to drive audiences to seek out the “real deal”\(^\text{12}\), but such initiatives require the investment not just of staff time, but also of appropriate funding. Museums which prior to COVID-19 had invested in their digital and social media presence have had the value of their efforts confirmed. Once doors are reopened and audiences invited back inside, we should remember that our online audiences should not be neglected.

Acknowledgements

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\(^\text{11}\) Alasdair Travers, “Covid 19 will change the heritage sector”, 15 May 2020. https://advisor.museumsandheritage.com/news/covid-19-will-change-the-heritage-sector-now-and-post-lockdown/?fbclid=IwAR3czeW90h2xwrr-qdlXdIaj4hL5a0TYCD6E1aUBeSDsEBp2DcdsoqGQ

\(^\text{12}\) Adam Koszary, “‘Look at this Absolute Unit’ Report”, May 2018. https://merl.reading.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2018/05/Absolute-Unit-report.pdf; Daniel James White, “Rearing an Absolute Unit”, 25 April 2019. https://www.danielJamesWhite.co.uk/digital-marketing-blog/merl-absolute-unit