Digital Technologies and the Museum Space: Should They Co-Exist?

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With every generation, every year, every moment, there are new technological advances that emerge and change how we experience life — how we experience identity. As identity is closely linked to museums, we can expect changes in the museum experience. No more like the "traditional" or "orthodox" museum walkthrough with all objects in cases and visitors snaking through them, museums have been revolutionized with the help of digital technologies. From AR to VR to tactile screens and online websites, a myriad of new inventions has been embedded and embellished in museums. I argue that digital technologies expand the museum experience — pushing the boundaries of an orthodox place, rather than impairing its functionality. In this article, I will outline the different advantages of incorporating digital technologies in the museum.

Lamps turn on when touched at teamLab Borderless: Digital art exhibition in Tokyo.

(Photo via https://borderless.teamlab.art/ew/forest_of_resonating_lamps_metropolis/)

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1.   Let's talk about "immersion"

You could argue that immersive technology is different from a museum space, but I think that they are interconnected. When art meets technology, there is an explosion of the possibilities, opportunities, and the scope for the 'new'. Moving from the 'human' technology of a piece of art or that of a museum building, digital technology simply adds a new innovative and creative dimension to the experience. One example of this is the Van Gogh Immersive Experience (I bet you have come across an advert for the exhibition in some way or form!).

Projection at The Van Gogh Immersive Exhibition (Photo by Ilina Rughoobur at Van Gogh Exhibition in New York)

The Chief Information Officer at the Cleveland Museum of Art once said: "The best use of digital is not to make you aware of the technology, but to make you aware of the art." (Source: Charr. 2020. How technology is bringing museums back to life. Museum Next)

The Van Gogh Immersive Exhibition takes experiencing art to a new level. It is compelling, exciting, but most importantly: it is immersive. With a silent non-talking meditative space, music accompanying the projection and every single stroke in the painting animated, visitors feel more connected and closer to the paintings. It opens a new world, where the tiniest details in the paintings are noticed and appreciated. With accompanying imagery and designed space, it feels as though you stepped inside the painting itself and therefore creates a similar experience that you would expect in a museum. Claiming to "reinvent"

the experience in a museum, the Van Gogh exhibition put forth an excellent show, and this is proven through the "Best 2021 immersive experience" Award by USA Today and ranking among the 12 best immersive experiences in the world by CNN. Moreover, they have had over 5 million visitors since their opening and tour in 2017.

Using cutting edge technology like VR sets, a revolutionary way of storytelling is created. Van Gogh Immersive Exhibition is one of the many exhibitions that have recently been using digital technologies to engage their visitors. Immersion, a key factor of the museum experience, is an essential part that is enhanced through virtual walkthroughs, tactile games, VR sets or simply auditory technologies.

2. Increasing accessibility

The new wake of anthropology lies in making information accessible for everyone, irrespective of age, language, gender, disability and so on. Therefore, renovating museums to accommodate for everyone is a must for the benefit of this ideological change from scientific colonialism to accessibility to all. Digital technologies have a great hand in making this change possible, especially when it comes to increasing accessibility. Museum websites, virtual tours, and technological tools like visual and auditory guides make it easier for all different types of visitors to make the most of their museum experience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual tours and workshops allowed museum goers to experience the museum from the comfort of their homes, and still be entertained. It also allowed workers, intellectuals, and academics to access information and carry on with their research and work.

One example of increased accessibility is the Smithsonian's Latino gallery, "¡Presente! A Latino History of the United States," in the National Museum of American Latino. The gallery's aim is not only to tell the story of American Latinos but to also make the exhibition better and accessible for everyone.

From text, closed captions, and audio descriptions in both English and Spanish, the team also made sure that there are legible print fonts, colour schemes and an easy physical layout. QR codes are spread throughout the exhibition and interactive technology to learn and explore visual data, as well as oral histories are incorporated for an immersive but accessible journey throughout the gallery.

Received very well by the media, the exhibition is one of its kind to make such great progress towards increasing accessibility. Digital technologies open avenues for inclusion and representation in museums, and that would not necessarily be possible in a more traditional setting.
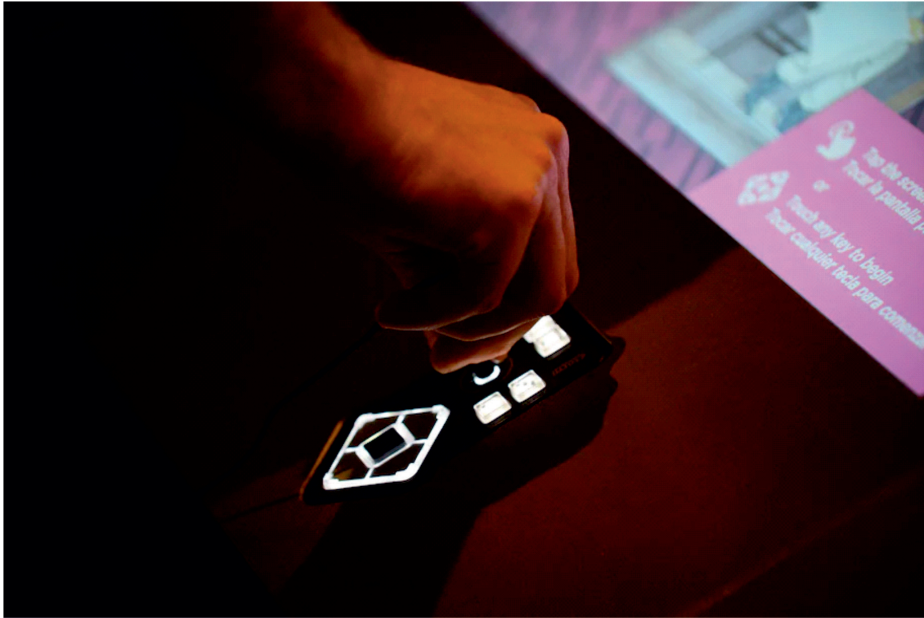
Instead of reading, visitors can navigate through audio descriptions of the artifacts and displays. (Photo by Astrid Riecken for The Washington Post)

3. Conservation and Preservation

Online storage is yet another digital tool that is essential for historical preservation in current world events. There are many acquired objects displayed in museums, but there is a limit to how many objects can go on display due to space limitations. The disparity between the number of objects a museum possesses, and the number of objects displayed can be solved by having an online inventory system for all objects, as is being adopted by most museums, with the British Museum as an example. Having a free online resource and access to all objects allows people from all over the world and from different backgrounds to have a museum experience and feel connected to the objects.

Moreover, with ongoing strife, there is a tendency for important historical landmarks, monuments, or objects to be destroyed or vandalized. Recently, in Ukraine, there is a movement to digitally scan the hundreds of cultural sites, monuments, and historical landmarks to preserve them digitally (and thus, indestructible by the Russian forces). Using a mobile phone, civilians can scan the objects and the app, called Backup Ukraine, will convert it to a 3D model and store it in a digital archive. The hundreds of scanned items can then be accessed by all users of the app.

Scanning a putt-putt course with Polycam (Photo by Max Funknervia 3DWithUs)

New possibilities for technological restoration of destroyed churches and buildings from the past have now emerged. With novel digital tools, the realm of opportunities keeps pushing its boundaries and start conversations on conservation and preservation.

Time Machine immerses users in a recreation of the Städel's galleries as they would've appeared in the 19th century. (Photo by Städel Museum via https://jingculturecommerce.com/stadel-museum-digital-strategy/)

The way forward

There are people who still think that technology does not belong in the museum. Museums are an escapism from modern living and an opportunity to reconnect with more social behaviours and experiences. Traditional museum goers would argue that digital technologies in a museum space are jarring, too demanding, too interactive, or less meditative. However, the possibilities and opportunities that digital technology provides for a museum and the visitors outweigh the drawbacks. With an immersive experience, increased accessibility, and better preservation practices, these are only the starting points for technological advancement in the museum. I'd say that yes, museums and digital technologies should absolutely coexist in the same space. In the future, I would expect better and smarter museums with digital integration, websites, virtual activities, and accessible gadgets — expanding the museum experience.

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