

The Digital Transition of Museums

by Guido Guerzoni*



The transition to digital can offer Italian museums the possibility of both a more interactive management of spaces, exhibits, and collections, and to reach a broader population of visitors and users of their contents. A digitally-based offer, far from substituting the pleasure of live experience, offers smart solutions to enrich the cultural offering, reach otherwise unreachable targets, promote knowledge of collections, and provide rewarding opportunities for training.

Constructing a museum is an act of courage, that denotes a profound sense of civic responsibility, in one of the most critical moments of national and international history, in which the border between truth and lies is increasingly weak, history is annoying and the din of social media covers the voices of those who – with the moderation and calm that distinguish civil persons – defend elementary ideas and principles, almost forgotten legacies of the battles of the 1900s, for whose success and defense millions of people sacrificed their lives.

A museum is not simply a type of building or an elite space that requires healthy injections of more or less jolly populism, but an institution that symbolizes fundamental values for any advanced society: respect, transparency, intellectual honesty, listening, sharing, participation, inclusion, dialogue, sustainability, and the ability to distinguish facts from opinions, and to interpret them correctly.

THE SENSE OF AN INSTITUTION

For this reason, as happens for the inauguration of a school or university, founding a museum has a deeply symbolic meaning for the community that hosts it, uses it, and brings it to life, given that it expresses the collective faith in the values of education and civility, since education and knowledge make us better.

Indeed a museum is not a business, nor a space conceived for amusement or leisure, but – literally –

a house in which to learn and train, mold values of citizenship, and celebrate with gratitude the benefits of a permanent education. It is a mission that can be pursued in many ways, that can be engaging and fun, while paying the maximum amount of attention to the requests from different segments of the public, but that any serious institution never loses sight of, since respecting this mission represents the deepest sense of its reason for being.

This meaning is threatened by the growing contempt for historical truth, intellectuals, professionals of memory and the institutions that protect and promote it, in a moment in which more superficial self-learning (“I read it on the internet”) believes it can compete with knowledge developed over decades of study, a post on Facebook has the same value as an academic article, experts are insulted as unbearable know-it-alls, and “official media is corrupt and lies.”

It is no coincidence that, as an antidote to the poisons of ignorance and bad faith, in the last twenty years the number of museums has exploded globally, touching entirely new issues and areas, and without avoiding sometimes lively debates on the risks of manipulation and the traps inherent in partial and ideologically strained interpretations.

Museums remain bulwarks for the defense of order, truth, the scientific method, seriousness, and hierarchical values, however tedious the exercise of this task may seem to the new digitally democratic masses.

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The excess of poor information, or systematic disinformation, the spread of functional illiteracy, the liberating mystification of new technologies, rampant superficiality, the inability to hierarchize sources and distinguish between truths that have been established for decades and cock-and-bull stories from the day before yesterday, find an antidote in the establishment of independent institutions, neutral spaces in which to silence the outside chaos, calmly study, interpret complex phenomena, explain things to everyone with appropriate language in a climate in which dialogue, discussion, and pluralism find the necessary strength to counter rudeness, presumption, and the aggressiveness of the incompetent.

We live in fact in a singular moment, in which technologies, far from having made us better and more free, have produced an unprecedented phenomenon in human history, splendidly addressed by Tom Nichols in one of the most illuminating and decorated works of the last five years, *The Death of Expertise. The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*¹ (2017), that marked a point of no return with respect to the masterful portrait of the fool sketched in 1976 by Carlo Maria Cipolla in *The basic laws of human stupidity*.²

Never before, therefore, has the world had such a need for museums and the skills they develop and spread: whether it regards vaccines, migration, authoritarian populism, infrastructure, or workers' rights, we are seeing the cancellation of historical evidence, the negation of progress that has saved billions of lives, and the removal of memories that just a few decades ago saw us victims of hateful prejudice and shameful discrimination, that today we obviously reserve for those who have taken our place as the next-to-last of the earth.

THE CHALLENGE OF DIGITAL

In a pained context such as that described above, an additional factor of complication has emerged: the advent of digital.

The progress of digitalization processes – that are increasingly cheap and rapid – has in fact accelerated the generation of new digitally-based cultural institutions, that bring together under the same roof the functions of museums, libraries, and archives.

Billions of scanned papers, millions of photographs, and thousands of audiovisual media not only clutter the storage areas of these large warehouses of knowledge, but feed on-site and online centers of production, interpretation, and dissemination, whose digitalized contents are used daily to construct and drive programs able to satisfy the needs of the most varied audiences across different media, and to respond to fundamental needs: the transmission of traditional knowledge, the education of digital natives, the conscious use of new technologies, social, ethnic, and re-

ligious inclusion, intergenerational dialogue, accessibility, digital democracy, the quality, contextualization, and independence of information, social responsibility, the mediation of the desiderata of the producers and consumers of contents, etc.

Thus mainstream and underground, divas and shooting stars, single copies and unlimited series, best sellers and unpublished works, geniuses and misfits, masterpieces and amateur programs, cult works and trash, official sources and clandestine materials, global and very local, thanks to the apparent democratic nature of digitalization (that offers any product/author/commentator a second chance for resurrection) can finally be consulted, studied, reproduced, published, revised, disseminated, and presented to an audience that is increasingly interested in the gossip from the last few days.

However, processes of digitalization have not only expanded the range of issues that can be addressed in a museum setting, but have also revolutionized the way of designing, managing, and using museums themselves. While studies on traditional visitor experiences indicate that visitors follow an organized sequence within a museum for a period of time of between one and two hours – with a constant drop of the level of attention – studies on the use of some digital contents demonstrate that they spark interest for a period of less than five minutes.

At this point, the true challenge is to find the room inside museums for longer digital experiences, with slower use, dedicated to a public that is not only hurried and superficial. It is no coincidence that during the conference “The Museum of the 21st Century” held at the London School of Economics on July 7, 2009, Sir Nicholas Serota, the former director of the Tate Gallery, prophetically predicted that “The future



of museums may be rooted in the buildings they occupy, but they will also need to address audiences across the world. Museums must be present in the places where people from around the world meet to converse. Institutions that respond to the opportunities of the Internet will be the ones that have the authority in the future.”

EXPANDING BORDERS

In this sense, what digital culture can offer museums is not only the more or less interactive management of spaces and collections, but the possibility to reach an increasingly broad population of visitors and users of content, that are not limited to physical visitors, but extend to communities that collect and exchange information in networks on the same themes.

Thanks to digital, museums become everted and come out of their traditional space-volume constraints; they become publishers and producers of high-quality, authoritative contents.

This transformation has entailed the shift of the strategic axis from preservation to production. Today digital museums are always oriented towards production, seeing a clear continuity between the values of those who operate in the era of the knowledge economy and the creativity of those who characterize the world of contemporary cultural and intellectual production.

That tendency has triggered deep changes in the logic of investments, with a sharp shift of resources from traditional activities to those that result in the production of new content, meanings, and interpretations.

This is not a barbaric act, but the response provided to the radical change of the concept of culture that has occurred in the past twenty years, with the abolition of hierarchies, the disappearance of disciplinary borders, and the often misunderstood mixtures between expressive genres, that have profoundly changed the tastes, inclinations, and expectations of the latest generations of visitors, who are more inclined to contamination and sensitive to novelty, temporary exhibits, training initiatives and conference events, and the production of flow.

THE DIGITAL TRANSITION DURING COVID-19

In a framework of change that has shaken the foundations of certainty for museums established – sometimes placidly – even centuries ago, the Covid-19 emergency has ultimately revealed, with all of its funereal drama, how important the degree of digital maturity of cultural institutions is, and specifically of museums.

In fact, only those that made adequate investments in technological infrastructure and human resources succeeded, in the most acute phase of the crisis, in maintaining the relationship with their public and producing smart contents and engaging activities.

In this sense, the digital transition, far from substituting the meaningfulness, emotion, and pleasure of the live experience, offers smart solutions to enrich the cultural offering, reach targets that are otherwise unreachable, promote knowledge of the museum’s collections and activities, test the reactions of the public, and offer rewarding educational opportunities.

Digitalization has thus proved to be a strategic lever able to broaden and pursue the fundamental mission of any museum and whose operational influence was not limited to a restricted area of practice, but affected all of the museum’s activities and processes, spurring institutions to carefully draw up digital transition plans that establish the goals, priorities, actions, times, and investments necessary to adopt the necessary innovations.

Innovations that, making use of new digital technologies, devices, and products, improve the activities of protection, management, and promotion of artistic heritage, translating into international best practices that can be summarized in various points.

INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

An interactivity that is more intelligent than muscular, a solid narratological basis, the presence of game-based learning mechanisms and a significant ability in storytelling – and integration among them – represent the critical success factors for the most important digital projects carried out in the world of museums. In particular, the keyword is “story”: in digital it is fundamental to tell stories, overcoming the remote dimension and acting directly on the visitor’s imagination, immersing him in a new world through a work of narration that establishes a relationship between the cognitive space of the museum and that of the user, offering engaging and recognizable experiences.

Moreover, there is an evident general tendency towards digitalizing collections, guaranteeing open access or personalized use and creating social tagging and crowdsourcing operations, with the goal of increasing the accessibility of cultural heritage and improving the ease and quality of research activities.

The establishment of virtuous partnerships between museums and businesses is another aspect to take into consideration. In many cases, conscious of the advisability/need to be linked with specialized companies that are leaders in their sectors, institutions have launched important collaborations with the business world, not only for the production of exhibits, but also for e-learning activities (think of the MoMA and Coursera), or the offer of virtual tours and experiences in virtual reality (VR)/augmented reality (AR) (for example Serpentine and Google).

The growing attention paid to social inclusion and the processes of active participation of visitors, that on the one hand are involved in an increasingly effective and pro-active manner in museums’ production pro-

cesses (individual and co-curatorship, crowdsourcing, crowdfunding, and social tagging), on the other are used as marketing tools, especially through social networks, from a standpoint of expansion and enlargement of the target audiences.

It is also very important to adopt interdisciplinary and multidimensional operational perspectives, using instruments of various kinds that must be integrated with each other: the experience of on-site views, interaction and involvement of the online visitor, and the offer of an alternative experience – new and complementary with respect to the real experience – based on the use of technology and digital.

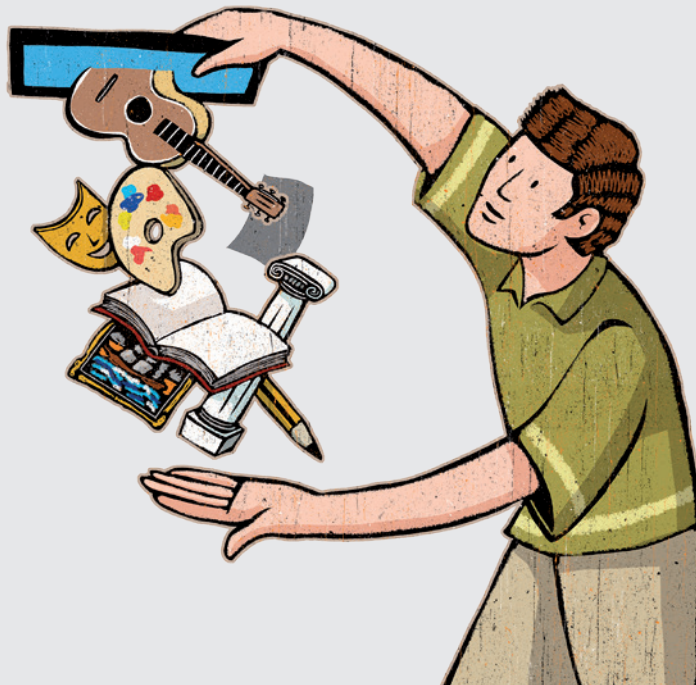
Lastly, the visitor experience must be expanded. The most innovative and interesting digital practices reveal to the public a new world and unprecedented possibilities for action, that cannot be explored through the methods of traditional visits, such as:

- accessing an exhibit operated remotely by a visitor-robot;
- having an interactive experience in VR, virtually manipulating the objects of the collection and interacting with a hologram-guide (Natural History Museum);
- experimenting with an immersive architectural installation in AR, whose use is accompanied by an audio guide that exploits networks to interact with

surrounding physical spaces (Serpentine Augmented Architecture The Deep Listener);

- exploring the most imperceptible details of an iconic work, such as in the Rethinking Guernica project;
- virtually designing exhibit spaces with complete freedom, and at the same time, being inside a multi-player video game (Occupy White Walls);
- interacting via chat to receive suggestions and information on a collection work based on entering a keyword (Send Me SFMOMA).

For these reasons, any digital set-up today cannot ignore the management of all forms of web-based presence and digital activities, through the creation of platforms and social channels rich in content, that are activated to reach new segments of the public, create exchanges between creatives, researchers, and enthusiasts, and maximize opportunities for knowledge of museum collections and environments. The digital experience extends inside and outside the physical spaces of museums with the social aim of increasing engagement of the targets and understanding of display themes, stimulating the creativity and participation of different segments of the public, and encouraging the potential public to participate in museum activities, become users of the same, and purchase products and services, to the point of becoming supporters, members, and funders.



¹ Italian trad. *La conoscenza e i suoi nemici. L'era dell'incompetenza e i rischi per la democrazia*, Rome, Luiss University Press, 2018.

² Italian trad. *Le leggi fondamentali della stupidità umana*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1988.