

Visual Arts

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How digital media are transforming art collections

While high-tech strategies attract big sponsors, engage visitors and enrich artists' work, is there a need for caution?



Virtual reality headsets used at the Tate Modern's Modigliani exhibition © Tate Photography

Melanie Abrams
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In today's high-tech museums, virtual tours and experiences, interactive touchscreens, downloadable apps and more are flourishing. Take the British Museum's new virtual reality tour of its popular Egyptian galleries or Tate Modern's virtual reality recreation of Modigliani's last atelier-come-living space in Paris. Then there's New York's Cooper Hewitt design museum, in which visitors can use a smart pen to curate a selection of their favourite objects for their mobile or laptop. Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum is geotagging through film its exhibition on Dutch artists in Paris 1789-1914, to show where the artists lived, worked and socialised as the city evolved.

Curators now do whatever they can to make their displays appealing to younger and more diverse audiences; many of whom "live their lives through their phones and with talking, moving imagery", says Barbara Tannenbaum, curator of photographs at the Cleveland Museum of Art. The museum includes an interactive multi-touch, 40ft digital wall that brings alive the 4,500 works on display, as well as 3D touchscreens and a state of the art ArtLens app that links visitors to other works in the permanent collection.

Zarth Bertsch, theatre director at the Smithsonian, remarks on the excitement surrounding new technologies such as the rolling virtual reality ride at the Institute's National Air and Space Museum that mimics astronauts' journeys in space. "With the headset giving a 360 degree experience, feeling the movement and looking at a three-dimensional screen, you're sensing the whole environment," he says.

"People now have options in how they learn about the works," says Yana Peel, chief executive of the Serpentine Gallery, which introduced download-able exhibition tours via smartphones last year. The Serpentine is also planning a virtual reality addition to next year's summer pavilion.



ArtLens Gallery digital wall

With all this tech on offer, people's experiences of museums are expanding beyond the actual visit. They can research information before they arrive and take information home on their phones; once in the museum, curators agree, people spend more time looking at objects with related technology.

"Digital and 3D elements bring the collection to life and make the experience more dynamic," says Jacqui Strecker, head of curatorial at Sydney's Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences. Curating the *Icons* exhibition at its Powerhouse Museum, she introduced 3D rotating models of 18th-century samurai armour and a range of other objects.



John Latham exhibition 'A World View' at the Serpentine Gallery © Serpentine Galleries

"When displays include technology I remember the experience longer," says Australian sound artist, Lawrence English, citing Ryoji Ikeda's retrospective at the House of Electronic Arts in Basel in 2014. "I was immersed in the way the exhibition was integrated in the gallery space and how it

was installed.”

High-tech gizmos also relax visitors. “By using phones, which are a close part of our identity, the exhibition seems more intimate,” says Neil Wilkin, the British Museum curator of the European Bronze Age collection. The recent show of a relief from India’s Great Shrine of Amaravati was accompanied by smartphone technology that activated a touchscreen display and talking figures on an interactive wall. “People’s body language was different: they made eye contact with the on-screen figures as if they were real,” he remarks.

Nancy Ireson, curator of the Modigliani show at Tate Modern, used the virtual reality experience to maintain visitors’ interest to the exhibition’s end. “The last room is always a challenge because people are tired,” she says, “so we placed the virtual reality gallery just before the last room, with works yet to appear, so visitors are newly engaged.”



Cooper Hewitt design museum © Matt Flynn/Smithsonian Institution

While technology does attract a younger set, other new audiences are appearing too. According to Ireson: “People in the technology industries have come to see the [Modigliani] exhibition for the high-quality virtual reality experience rather than the art.”

Digital strategies also attract deep-pocketed tech sponsors: Peel has been able to lure companies such as Google and Bloomberg as partners to help meet the Serpentine’s annual £9.5m target.

New technologies in museums have enriched artists’ work, too. “Now we can present surround sound, surround video and even the body to be activated by sound,” says English, citing his 2015 work, *Audition*, for Brisbane’s Gallery of Modern Art, which tuned a room with a sound wave so visitors could feel the sound as they walked through it.

Historic and new art will be integrated next year at the Queen’s House in Greenwich, as British artist Mat Collishaw experiments with automation robotics to mechanically recreate the face of Elizabeth I in the famous Armada Portrait. “Facing each other, the works will contrast old and new art, making 16th to 18th-century portraits more accessible and reflective of modern culture and make people look at the portrait for the first time and look again,” he says.

Strecker adds a word of caution for museums rushing headlong into technology as, she says:

“There is a fine line between not overwhelming the visitor with the digital experience and keeping a balance with the traditional objects.”

A further word of warning comes from Neal Spencer, keeper of the British Museum’s ancient Egypt and Sudan collections: “Technology can date quickly, and introducing anything too showy can seem like a fancy gadget rather than a natural part of the display.”

As the speed of technology can clash with the slower pace and need for permanence in a museum, Phil Stuart, creative director of Preloaded, which has developed content for games and virtual reality experiences in the Science Museum, National Museum of Scotland and the Tate’s Modigliani VR atelier, foresees a move towards more informal, pop-up spaces where the technology can feed into the permanent spaces and allow them to be flexible. As English concludes: “There will always be a role for physical space; virtual reality and the other tools simply expand it.”

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