

A-HED

# Museums Launch Covid-19 Exhibits: Virus-Shaped Piñatas, ‘Happy Hour’ Masks

Curators are acquiring homemade face coverings, empty vaccine vials and other pandemic memorabilia to show future generations how we coped

By [Scott Calvert](#)

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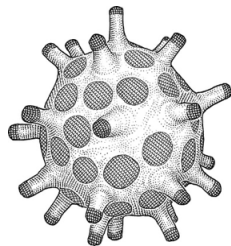


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In South Florida, the pandemic is already history.

On display at HistoryMiami Museum in downtown Miami are a first-grader’s virtual homework log with Zoom links; a high school mortarboard marked “I survived Quarantine and Graduation”; and a black Grim Reaper suit a lawyer wore to beaches last year to warn visitors about the deadly virus. Recently, the museum added two empty Pfizer vaccine vials.



Covid-19 piñata:  
Swing hard.

The artifacts memorialize ways the coronavirus pandemic upended American life, a disruption still in progress. Florida is among 10 states with the highest rates of new Covid-19 infections, and officials worry about a new spring break surge.

While many people might prefer to forget all that, the HistoryMiami display of Covid-related objects is drawing a stream of visitors, in masks and spaced 6 feet apart. “Where else are you going to see that in 10, 15 years, when they’re all gone?” said Jorge Zamanillo, the museum executive director.



HistoryMiami Museum display includes an empty Pfizer vaccination vial, and mortarboard.

PHOTO: DOUGLAS LANCE/HISTORYMIAMI MUSEUM

Other museum curators in the U.S. and abroad have started gathering similar objects to give future generations a firsthand look at how people coped with Covid-19.

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., didn’t collect objects from the 1918 flu pandemic because a century ago many museum directors didn’t put much stock in everyday objects, said Alexandra Lord, chair and curator of the museum’s medicine and science division. Also, she said, “People wanted to forget it.”

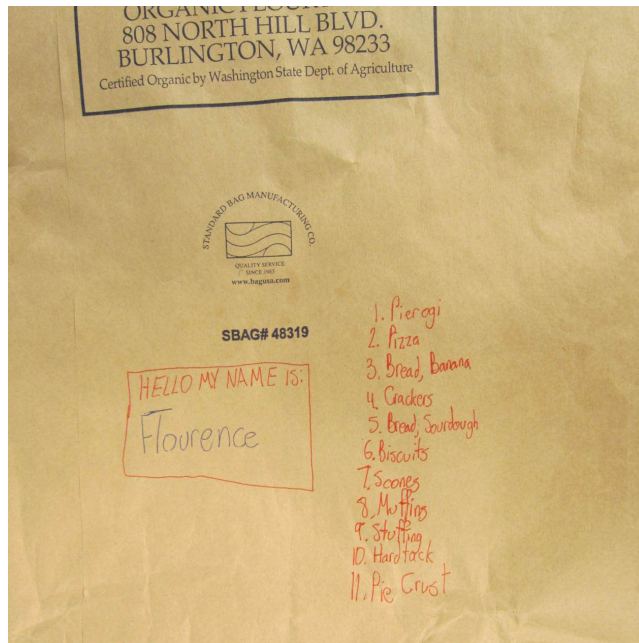
That was a mistake the institution won’t repeat, she said. It hasn’t yet collected anything—its offices have been closed for a year—but curators are asking people to keep hold of pandemic-related things. Anthony Fauci, chief White House medical adviser on Covid-19, donated his personal 3-D model of the virus this week.



Mask earrings and a pair of toilet-paper earrings, one empty roll, one full, made by a New Mexico artist and collected by Albuquerque Museum.

PHOTO: ALBUQUERQUE MUSEUM

Museums have found such day-to-day items as the junior hockey league coach's letter informing his team the season was canceled; a pair of earrings depicting toilet-paper rolls, one full, one empty; and a list of 11 pandemic baking projects, from pierogi to pie crust, jotted on an empty flour sack.



A list of 11 pandemic baking projects written on an empty flour bag, donated to the Museum of History & Industry in Seattle.

PHOTO: MUSEUM OF HISTORY & INDUSTRY

Albuquerque Museum, in New Mexico's biggest city, has two piñatas from Francisco Rodriguez, proprietor of Casa de Piñatas. Sales hit the floor after the spring lockdown took a bat to children's birthday parties.

“You turn on the TV and everything you see is Covid, Covid, Covid,” he said. “It was getting on my nerves.”

Inspiration struck him one day at his stilled workshop. “I see I have a little bit of glue, and I started making the piñata,” Mr. Rodriguez said. When finished, he had a large blue-and-green sphere adorned with red spikes.

One buyer saw the cathartic potential of whacking the virus look-alike and hung it at an intersection in town. “People could just walk by and smash the heck out of it,” said Leslie Kim, Albuquerque Museum’s curator of history.



Covid creations made by the proprietor of Casa de Piñatas in Albuquerque, N.M.  
PHOTO: ALBUQUERQUE MUSEUM

Word spread. By the time the museum asked to buy a couple of the Covid piñatas in August, Mr. Rodriguez had a waiting list, Ms. Kim said.

In Toronto, the Royal Ontario Museum is collecting masks for a fall exhibit, despite everybody’s Covid fatigue.

“Will they want to come and see a bunch of masks?” said Fahmida Suleman, a curator there. Maybe not soon, she said, but she was confident museum visitors in, say, 50 years would. “We’re going to say, ‘Look at the resilience of humanity, the unity of humanity,’ ” she said.

The museum so far has more than 200 face coverings from 20 countries: from ornate masks fitted with protective cotton inserts, worn by Chhau dancers of eastern India performing in ancient Hindu epics, to a “happy hour” mask with a hole for a straw. Some tie in with last year’s racial-justice protests and Asian hate crimes stemming from the pandemic. One says “Stop the Spread” on top, and in smaller letters below, “Of Racism.”



A face mask donated to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

PHOTO: ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

In Waterloo, Iowa, the Grout Museum District acquired a face shield made with a university's leftover stash of acetate transparencies made for overhead projectors. Do-it-yourself masks show how people at the start of the pandemic used whatever material they had handy, said Dr. Lord, of the Smithsonian.

"I always joke that I'm looking for badly made masks, because a badly made mask tells you the person making this is kind of desperate," she said.

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*Would you go to a museum to see a pandemic exhibit? Join the conversation below.*

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member newsletter and from its staff, which yielded the baking-project flour sack.

Another employee gave full-size cardboard photo cutouts of her dog and another pooch that joined the crowd of faux fans that helped fill seats at Seattle Mariners' baseball games last season.

"People aren't going to come to a lot of exhibits that are just solely downers," Ms. Berg said. "You want people to also smile a little bit, or know that things were difficult, but people still found ways to have fun."

Museums are deciding what to collect and what to turn down, said Clara Berg, curator of collections at the Museum of History & Industry in Seattle. The museum has so far asked for donations through a



A full-size cutout of Isabelle that appeared at a Seattle Mariners baseball game last season, donated to the Museum of History & Industry in Seattle by a staff member.

PHOTO: MUSEUM OF HISTORY & INDUSTRY

Medical disposables are showcased at the Dittrick Medical History Center at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. The collection includes 1930s paper specimen cups, 1970s surgical masks and 1980s alcohol swabs.

Chief curator Amanda Mahoney said she is weighing whether to show a pristine N95 mask or one that a nurse had kept in her locker. “It’s better from a preservation standpoint to collect unused items such as nasal swabs, but then we lose the personal connection,” she said.

Daniel Uhlfelder said he was honored when HistoryMiami asked for his bespoke Grim Reaper get-up. Last March, he unsuccessfully sued Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis to force him to close state beaches. His Plan B was dressing up as the personification of death to warn beachgoers.



Daniel Uhlfelder, dressed as the Grim Reaper, walking the beach near Destin, Fla., last May.

PHOTO: DEVON RAVINE/NORTHWEST FLORIDA DAILY NEWS /ASSOCIATED PRESS

He ordered an off-the-rack costume online, he said, but “it looked cheesy.” So he had a friend make one of linen.

Mr. Uhlfelder, who has visited his costume display, hopes HistoryMiami visitors see in it someone who took the pandemic seriously yet tried, he said, “to bring a little levity” to dark times.

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