

# How the Pandemic Affects Museums and Heritage

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## *Museums and Cultural Heritage*

The field of cultural heritage studies is a relatively new branch of anthropology. It is broad and interdisciplinary, focusing on the studies of heritage and our engagement with it.<sup>1</sup> In modern society, one of the primary ways we engage with culture is through museums—the embodiment of cultural heritage, from historical artifacts to works of art.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected museum operations globally. With the need to quarantine and social distance, indoor public places like museums saw a drop in attendance. Reports from late 2020 show that, on average, museum attendance dropped to 35% of the pre-pandemic numbers.<sup>2</sup>

However, like all facets of life, museums have shifted the way they operate in response to the pandemic. Most notably, museums have taken a more virtual approach. Places like the Smithsonian are offering virtual tours, and places such as the Philbrook Museum now share images of the museum's collection through social media.<sup>3</sup> In a digital age fast-tracked by a global crisis, one might argue this shift to a virtual format is almost necessary.

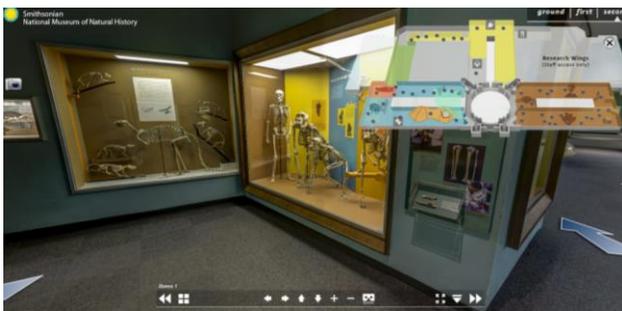


Figure 1. A look inside one of the Smithsonian's many free virtual tours offered from their website. ("Rotunda: South, Virtual Tour", Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History,

Accessed March 29, 2022, [https://naturalhistory2.si.edu/vt3/NMNH/z\\_tour-022.html](https://naturalhistory2.si.edu/vt3/NMNH/z_tour-022.html))

Museums have made it clear most, if not all, of these virtual additions are here to stay.<sup>4</sup> Virtually viewing an object, however, fundamentally changes its context. Context is one of the most important concepts in all of anthropology. It is the idea that an object's placement and surroundings directly affect its meaning. It is only fair to note that, by nature of a museum's relocation of artifacts and items, some context has already been lost. However, museum exhibits are specifically set up to retain and recapture some of that context. Digitally viewing an object adds a further degree of separation from the original context.

As described by Harrison, "Its [a historical object's] relationship with humans is changed fundamentally by its mode of exhibition... even though the fabric of the object itself is not changed."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, viewing an object through a screen changes nothing about the object itself; however, it fundamentally alters our engagement with and interpretation of it.

## *Göreme Valley: A Case Study*

An important question to ask is: does context matter? Does recontextualizing an object have any significant effects? Some cases have proven this to be true. I believe Göreme Valley illustrates the importance of context and presentation, even if museums shifting to a digital format is on a somewhat smaller scale than Göreme Valley.

Located in central Turkey, Göreme Valley contains a large amount of churches dating back to the Byzantine period. For some, the valley is of high religious importance. Church groups would take pilgrimages through the valley. However, the Göreme Valley over time became heavily marketed towards international tourists. Signs were placed

outside the churches forbidding photography, smoking, and shouting within the churches. Guards were stationed in each church to enforce these rules. While this valley held high religious importance, many church groups take alternative routes to less visited churches.<sup>6</sup> By framing Göreme Valley as a tourist attraction, its religious significance was permanently altered.



Figure 2. Tourists at an outdoor area of Göreme Valley. (Photograph by Zafer Yazici, *Tour Groups in Front of a Cave Church – Cappadocia, Turkey*, March 4, 2007, Urban Adventures, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/41179876@N05/4709492062>.)

Göreme Valley illustrates an important point; heritage is *fluid*. Artifacts and monuments remain mostly unchanged throughout time materially. A static and unchanging object grants an idea of permanence. But rather, the truth is the heritage, importance, and meaning of an object is fluid.<sup>7</sup> This importance and meaning can be shaped by the very culture it is in.

### **The Impact**

A museum shifting to a digital format is not necessarily anywhere near the scale of what happened to Göreme Valley. Museums at their core, however, are places of cultural heritage. A place to remember the past and reflect on the future. As our primary vessel for appreciating cultural heritage, no doubt the effects of changing the presentation of museums will have an effect on the dynamic concept of cultural heritage.

Our interpretation of cultural heritage and engagement with it has already changed because

of a shift to a virtual format. Whether these changes are positive or negative is a matter of interpretation.

How we engage with digital heritage, however, is vital. A point should be made to see digital versions of items not as an equal, but as a complement. The digital image of an artifact does not substitute for the physical item, but rather exists alongside it.<sup>8</sup>

Digital heritage also provides large amounts of accessibility. By offering access to a museum's knowledge online, one bypasses any spatial and temporal restraints for engagement otherwise present.<sup>9</sup> One could then argue that this removes much of an object's meaning and importance. As previously stated, context is crucial. Bypassing spatial and temporal restraints also bypasses the spatial and temporal context. In this sense, much of the information and significance of an item is lost.

Some make the argument that this not only changes the way one views an object, but also directly removes importance from the object itself. Digital reproduction is seen by some as a threat. The physical collections of a museum become forgotten. The replica of an object takes as much meaning as the physical object.<sup>10</sup>

Much of this stance however is rooted in the idea of what museums are. The view that museums become obsolete with a digital approach reinforces the idea that museums are storage. Museums act as an archive of cultural heritage. This assertion does not give the full credibility of what a museum is. One can view museums not as a storage unit, but rather as a place of education. It can then be argued that virtual engagement makes museums *less* obsolete. It increases outreach and creates opportunities for education. In the context of cultural heritage, this creates an opportunity for heritage to be engaged with.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, virtual museum attractions are simply a new medium by which to be educated about heritage.

### **Conclusion**

Heritage is an abstract concept. It lacks a concrete definition and there is no one right way to engage with it. As museums shift to a more virtual outreach,

there is no doubt a change in how we engage with heritage. But change is simply that: change. It is not always quantifiable as good or bad.

The results of a digital shift are left as primarily speculative. Heritage itself is a vague concept, ethereal and undefinable. How we interpret it is both cultural and individual. Museums as a vessel

of cultural heritage impact the way we view cultural heritage. With a shift to a digital format, our ideas and views of heritage will no doubt change. This can be interpreted as a case of losing context, of existing as a complement to existing heritage, as a threat to physical heritage items, or as a method for new engagement with cultural heritage.

### Notes

1. Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.
2. "National Snapshot of COVID-19 Impact on United States Museums (October 2020)," American Alliance of Museums, November 17, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/11/17/national-snapshot-of-covid-19/>.
3. "Facing Challenge with Resilience: How Museums are Responding During COVID-19," Institute of Museum and Library Services, Accessed February 28, 2022, <https://www.imls.gov/blog/2020/04/facing-challenge-resilience-how-museums-are-responding-during-covid-19>.
4. Lukas Noehrer, Abigail Gilmore, Caroline Jay, and Yo Yehudi, "The impact of COVID-19 on digital data practices in museums and art galleries in the UK and the US," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 236 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00921-8>.
5. Harrison, 38.
6. Hazel Tucker and Elizabeth Carnegie, "World Heritage and the Contradictions of 'Universal Value'," *Annals of Tourism Research* 47 (2014): 63-76, [10.1016/j.annals.2014.04.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2014.04.003).
7. Susan Alcock, *Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscape, Monuments, and Memories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 28-34.
8. Fiona Cameron et al, *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage : A Critical Discourse*, (London: MIT Press, 2007), 28-32.
9. Cameron et al, 10-11.
10. Cameron et al, 50-51.
11. Tiziana Russo Spina and Francesco Bifulco, *Digital Transformation in the Cultural Heritage Sector*, (Naples: Springer, 2021), 186-188.