

‘What are we afraid of? Why have many museums been slow to embrace the digital?’

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Stating the Obvious...

Of course, an obvious response would be that museums are run and organized by staff who are not the most naturally digital-savvy individuals in society. Instead, they are more used to dealing with the conservation and acquisition of physical artefacts.

But if we delve more deeply into this issue, I think there are many more hidden and deep-seated fears and concerns that are holding museums from digitizing and making access to their collections, which go way beyond their seeming lack of tech knowledge and skills capacity.

Why are there concerns overall...

I think museums are afraid because digital art and digital cultural heritage questions everything, including the fundamental assumptions of: What is an artwork? How do you collect it? What is preservation? What is ownership? All of these aspects – the qualities that museums are based upon and structured upon - are put in jeopardy.

Fear of Losing ownership of objects

Museums are, firstly, fearful of losing ownership of their objects. Museums will no longer be the sole custodians of artworks and pieces of cultural heritage. They will then lose control of their objects in their collections. They want to be in charge of their objects, which means having sole rights as to how they are displayed, how a piece is reproduced and sold as postcards for instance. Alongside this, museums are also worried about copyright and authorship, especially for pieces whose ‘authors’ have died and families may not wish to make them digital. Hence, they fear that there will be a lot of work and potential disputes about the authorship of artworks if they are published online. Alongside this, they fear that anyone can copy these works online and then state them as their own. Of course, in response to this last point, they feel that this will degrade the object’s value.

Loss of authenticity of artefacts, a work of art, and aura of museum

Museums are, secondly, fearful of the loss of authenticity of artefacts and the aura of the physical museum. Museums are afraid because it puts into question the value of the real objects and real physical museums, which could eventually put their jobs in jeopardy. There is also the possibility of losing the aura of the artwork itself. We saw trepidation with the introduction of the mechanical reproduction of art. For instance, this was documented by Benjamin (1935), who explained how the mechanical reproduction of art can destroy the aura of art and destroy its uniqueness or one-off-ness. Now, we see the trepidation around the digitization or AI production of art. We see people worried about how the audience may forget the original, as is mentioned by Schweibenz (2019), who argues that we might confuse the digital image and the original. Schweibenz questions whether the increase in digital objects and digital art will result in a ‘crisis of the original’ and a ‘culture of copies’ that could devalue the original. However, we have to remember that every generation goes through this process of trepidation towards the new

technology of that day, whether it be the TV, radio, or internet, and then it gradually becomes normalized. There is the fear that museum collections, with digital spaces, are becoming too gamified or too technical, and moreover, the loss of the museum aura and experience.

Loss of income and money

Thirdly, museums are fearful of losing income from this shift to digital. They will not be able to get visitors to come to the physical space, so they will lose out on admission fees, gift shop revenue, and café revenue. There is a fear that they don't know how to earn income from digital space and that this would just involve too much staff time to develop the skills and know-how. And they know that digital technologies change and get updated all the time, so they stress that they would have to keep on learning new digital skills in order to keep pace.

Fear over digital repatriation of museum objects to their 'original home'

Fourthly, museums fear digital repatriation. There is a fear that communities are now increasingly asking for their artefacts back. There are now many examples where museums are having to create digital copies of originals in response to the 'home country' asking for it back. If more of the countries of origin have the digital versions, maybe people will start to visit the digital version in the original location. As a result, we would then have to question the role and purpose of museums. This would surely overturn the whole concept of 'the museum'.