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Selfie mania

Laura Rutkowski takes a snapshot of the history of the self-portrait, and how it is being used (and abused) in museums now

The act of taking a photo of oneself – a selfie – can be traced back to 1839. The American photography enthusiast and amateur chemist Robert Cornelius set up his camera, removed the lens cap and positioned himself in the frame – sitting for about a minute before covering the lens again. On the back of the photograph he wrote: “The first light picture ever taken. 1839.”

The word “selfie” made its way into our lexicon swiftly after it was coined in 2002. It was then chosen as Oxford Dictionaries’ word of the year in 2013.

Embracing selfies

So while selfies are nothing new, what has changed is the way museums and galleries are embracing the trend of the photographic self-portrait.

For starters there is #MuseumSelfie Day, which began as a bit of fun in 2014 when museum consultant Mar Dixon posted a tongue-in-cheek tweet that read: “I always feel so bad for those people who don’t get #museumselfie or any fun in museums. I just want to hug them and tell them it’ll be ok.”

Now it is an annual event and the hashtag has racked up more than 43,000 posts on Instagram. Museum-goers can also take part using other social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. The next #MuseumSelfie Day is on 17 January 2018.

Fine art, which is viewed as inaccessible by some, has

become increasingly accessible – and even funny – via the medium of the selfie. A perfect example of this is the Instagram account @museumofselfies. It showcases photos from across the world in which users superimpose phones into works of art to make it look as though the people depicted in the artworks are taking selfies.

The selfie as art

Using the video and photo-sharing app Snapchat, 24-year-old Jake Marshall achieved internet fame after a trip to the British Museum, London. Using the face swap feature, he morphed into ancient sculptures and statues, with their expressions replaced by Marshall’s.

Museums have followed suit. Bolton Library and Museum has introduced an Egypt selfie station for visitors to step into a face swap with the ancient Egyptian queen, Nefertiti, or a mummy. Visitors can use the hashtag #BoltonsEgypt on Twitter to share their interactive experience while promoting the museum.

With so many people engaging with selfies, can we treat them as an art form in their own right? The Saatchi Gallery thinks so. The From Selfie to Self-Expression exhibition ran from March to September at the London gallery in association with consumer business group Huawei. The show displayed interactive, digital and user-generated content from and about artists, including Tracey



Daydream in Blue, the winning entry by Paola Ismene from Mexico City for the Saatchi Gallery's #SelfExpression competition

Emin, Van Gogh, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Rembrandt and Cindy Sherman.

To coincide with the show, the Saatchi Gallery and Huawei held the #SaatchiSelfie competition for members of the public, which received more than 14,000 entries from 113 different countries. This was followed by the #SelfExpression competition, which turned the gaze to the outside world rather than to the self.

When it all goes wrong

But while museums are encouraging selfies that are no danger to objects and enhance the visitor experience, there is evidence that not every kind of selfie is welcome. In an online poll by Museums Journal in 2015, 38% of Museums Association members voted for UK museums to ban selfie sticks. These extendable devices that allow selfies to be taken with a wider view can be seen



Museum visitor Jake Marshall used Snapchat's face swap feature to project himself onto ancient statues at the British Museum

being used by visitors at museums and galleries all over the world.

Selfie harm

Before we get too snap-happy, it is important to remember what can go wrong while caught up in the pursuit of a selfie.

This February, a selfie-taker damaged one of artist Yayoi Kusama's trademark spotted pumpkins that was part of her work *All the Eternal Love I Have for the Pumpkins*, which was on show at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC.

And in July, a woman in Los Angeles knocked over an entire row of artworks on plinths while bending down to try to get the perfect angle for a selfie at the Hypercaine exhibition in the 14th Factory space. Some have speculated that one or more of the artists, which included Hong Kong-based Simon Birch and international collaborators, staged the \$200,000 (£151,600) mishap.

Another ill-timed photograph at the Prittlewell Priory Museum in Southend, Essex, saw an 800-year-old coffin knocked off its stand when a child was lowered into it over a protective barrier for a picture.

Are visitors practising self-expression or just seeking attention? Either way, selfies are shining a spotlight on museums and encouraging people to visit, but they can be risky business.

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