

After the Apocalypse: Museums in a Post-COVID-19 World

“MASKS REQUIRED FOR ENTRY.” “PLEASE KEEP A SAFE SOCIAL DISTANCE.” “LET’S WORK TOGETHER TO KEEP OUR COMMUNITY HEALTHY.” Signs exclaiming this and many more euphemisms are plastered on virtually every storefront and public place since the emergence (and apparently, long-term residence) of the COVID-19 global pandemic. COVID-19 has undoubtedly changed the way in which society interacts with its public amenities, museums included. Because of the pandemic, museums have suffered greatly in the last year, especially those in large cities like New York, and especially in their funding and their visitor turnouts. This essay will look at the impacts of the pandemic on museum function in New York and other large cities, as well as how they have adjusted to the new normal of a post-pandemic world.

After the onset of COVID-19 in the U.S. in March 2020, society all but shut down for months on end. Only essential businesses were open to the public, and museums were, understandably so, not considered to be essential. Many other important culturally important sites like historical landmarks and libraries were forced to shut down to aid in the prevention of the spread of this deadly virus. It was not until later in the year did museums and public places start to open again. And when they did, many adjustments had to be made in order for the public’s visit to be deemed safe. In many cases, visitors were required wear masks throughout their visit, more social distancing guidelines were introduced, visitor’s temperatures were checked, and timed tickets were implemented to limit the amount of space being occupied at once¹. In New York City, the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened her doors again in August

¹ Carter, Ilise S. “How Do You Open an Interactive Museum in a Pandemic? Very Carefully.” The New York Times. The New York Times, September 3, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/03/nyregion/coronavirus-makeup-museum-nyc.html?searchResultPosition=11>.

2020 but operating only at 25% capacity. According to the New York Times, they had approximately 91,500 visitors in September 2020, compared to 381,500 in same month during the previous year². Similarly in Paris, the Louvre's annual visitors dropped about 72% from 9.6 million in 2019 to 2.6 million in 2020³. Many museums even face the prospect of permanent closure. The American Alliance of Museums suggested that one-third of the country's museums could close permanently because of the pandemic⁴. All around, like many public amenities, visitor turn out in museums took a heavy hit in the wake of the pandemic.

Less visitors means less revenue for many museums. Museums make their money from four key sources: earned revenue (which includes money from admissions, gift shops, restaurants, or other means); through endowments from wealthy patrons; contributions from other donors; or fundraising⁵. The money earned goes to two main sources: staffing, and care for the items in the museum's bequest⁶. As a result, many museums had to lay off or furlough their staff to make up for loss in revenue. Museums items continued to be care for by experts, who worked quietly and safely despite the echoing of the empty halls in which they worked. Museums in large cities like New York City or Paris, who largely depend on tourism-driven profits, have suffered tremendously since that source of income has all but vanished. Many museums have had to turn to other means to bring money in to keep afloat. Online education programs, as well as virtual tours and seminars have helped many museums generate income. For example, the New Orleans Museum of Art, after rolling out its new pandemic-ready website

² Jacobs, Julia, and Zachary Small. "How Long Can N.Y.C. Museums Survive at 25 Percent Capacity?" The New York Times. The New York Times, October 26, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/26/arts/design/nyc-museums-covid-capacity.html?searchResultPosition=12>.

³ Abrams, Melanie. "Watch Museums, Waiting out the Pandemic, Manage to Keep Busy." The New York Times. The New York Times, April 12, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/12/fashion/watches-museums-pandemic.html?searchResultPosition=6>.

⁴ Haimerl, Amy. "Hanging in the Balance: What Keeps American Museums Running--and How Might the Pandemic Change That?" *ARTnews* 120, no. 1, February 2021.

⁵ Haimerl, 47

⁶ Haimerl, 48

in just a day, began to focus on newly created virtual tours, as well as curator talks and exhibitions, and in April found its YouTube channel procuring about 7,000 hours of viewing time⁷. Director Susan Taylor, like many others, would eventually like for these online resources to generate income to offset the losses from fundraising and other areas⁸.

Additionally, some museums have had to turn to the deaccession of their items in an effort to bring in revenue. The Brooklyn Museum in New York put twelve of its paintings up for auction in August of 2020 to raise money for the care of their current collections⁹. For a long time, the deaccession of artwork has only been used in order to acquire more artwork or items, and the practice of using the funds gained from deaccession for anything but has been deeply frowned upon. However, The Association of Art Museum Directors has recognized that museums have had a difficult time gaining access to funds in other ways and allowed museums to use the revenue from deaccession to support key museum functions, but only from April 2021 to April 2022¹⁰. The Brooklyn Museum is the first major U.S. institution to take advantage of this exception¹¹.

After re-opening, museums have had to adapt to the times, either adjusting their interactive exhibits or taking them down all together. Many self-service hubs like touch-screen monitors, have also been taken away. At the Brooklyn Museum's open storage space, the touch screen catalogue of the stored items has been disabled, limiting the viewer's enhanced understanding of what is on display. Museums have had to try and find creative ways to make up for this, by handing out physical flyers, or making these resources available online and accessible

⁷ Haimerl, 54

⁸ Haimerl, 54

⁹ Pogrebin, Robin. "Brooklyn Museum to Sell 12 Works as Pandemic Changes the Rules." The New York Times. The New York Times, September 16, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/arts/design/brooklyn-museum-sale-christies-coronavirus.html?searchResultPosition=4>.

¹⁰ Pogrebin, Robin

¹¹ Pogrebin, Robin

via QR code. Additionally, museums that mainly function via the interaction of visitors had to rethink the way in which they presented their exhibits. Before its grand opening, the Makeup Museum in New York City planned on having many hands-on experiments and experiences, like mixing make-up or applying different cosmetics on visitors or models¹². The museum had to rethink their entire execution in order for visitors to have a safe but still engaging and interactive experience. Masks and social distancing measures were implemented (as has become the norm) but also things like an interactive station where guests could make their own elixirs, were cut out from the exhibit entirely, and replaced with a touch-less digital aspect instead¹³.

So, where do we go from here? How can museums continue to function in a society where public interaction is so strongly limited? Museums have had to implement important safety measures in order for guests to feel safe during their slow but sure return. Museums have faced the difficult decision of letting go of some of their important artwork and artifacts but see this as a means to an important end. Museums continue to strive to educate the public by turning to online resources, while also making their exhibits more accessible to people who are unable to travel due to the pandemic. Public amenities have had to adjust to serve a newly functioning society, but museums will continue to do just that—serve and educate the public in the best way they can.

¹² Carter, Ilise S

¹³ Carter, Ilise S

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