

Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden in the time of COVID-19

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During and after lockdown, the internationally renowned Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden found ways to turn the crisis into opportunities, such as experimenting with working models, driving digitalisation efforts, finding new means of audience engagement, rethinking exhibitions and events with significant tactile and participatory elements, and reflecting on the ways forward for cultural institutions.

This year has been an emotional roller-coaster for us at Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD): On 28 and 29 January 2020, after seven years of extensive refurbishment works on the Semperbau section of the Zwinger¹, we opened the world famous Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (Old Masters Picture Gallery) and Skulpturensammlung (Sculpture Collection), with an impressive, re-imagined design. Following this prolonged period of restoration, the masterpieces had only been accessible to our visitors for two weeks when we were forced to close our 15 museums in mid-March due to the coronavirus pandemic. In the German federal system, this step had to be taken in accordance with the regulations issued by the Saxon State Ministry of Cultural Affairs and Tourism and the health authorities to slow the spread of the virus and protect our visitors. After many long weeks, we started to reopen gradually, museum by museum, on 4 May 2020. The challenge now is to re-evaluate the post-reopening situation in these volatile times. As Germany's second-largest network of museums after Berlin, what did we learn during this time, which measures did we take, and what is our outlook for the future?

Ensuring safety for all

Where the German language has just one word *Sicherheit*, English is more nuanced, distinguishing between “safety” and “security”, both of which were foremost in our thoughts throughout this period: How do we protect our collections? How do we protect our visitors and staff? SKD were closed to visitors from 14 March until 4 May 2020. Our first step, as soon as lockdown was imposed, was to allow our staff of almost 420 to work from home, equipping them with the required technology where our capacities permitted. During these weeks, our priorities were immanent crisis management, realigning responsibilities with the new requirements and adapting safety and security protocols. We communicated with personnel via staff e-mail and updates. We introduced new software tools for collaboration (e.g., Microsoft Teams) and communication (e.g., DFNconf, Skype or Zoom). As a public-sector company in Germany, this represented a major paradigm shift, which we consider a great opportunity.

As it soon became clear that the lockdown orders would remain in place beyond 19 April 2020—the date initially predicted for the easing of restrictions—loans and returns were largely stopped, the durations of existing exhibitions were adapted, and business travel was put on hold until further notice. Even at the point of writing, we only approve business trips in exceptional circumstances.

Our main goal then was to develop a comprehensive hygiene concept for the period during and after lockdown. This focused in particular on our staff who worked on-site, in the

museums or offices, throughout these months. We are fully aware of our privileged position of not having to impose part-time work on any of our employees, or fire anyone.

We quickly learned what is involved in shutting down such an extensive complex of ongoing museum operations and starting it up again a short time later. The museums were reopened one-by-one in accordance with the development of the pandemic. This flexible reaction to the pandemic was also reflected in changing opening hours, in part due to the immense security costs for every institution opened. From these initial openings, we applied the lessons learned to our visitor management: we tried to estimate how many visitors would come the next day, and wondered whether they would follow the new rules. Security also played a role: How quickly would our external service provider be fully operational again? They had been forced into introducing part-time work for some of their employees and had to redeploy others elsewhere during the closures. We also had to pick up work where we had left off, resume planning and meet deadlines for exhibition preparations, projects and catalogue printing. Our exhibition planning for the following three years needed a complete overhaul.

The hygiene protocol comprises mandatory face masks, ensuring safe distancing between visitors and staff, enhanced hygiene measures like regular disinfection and plastic barriers, prescribed one-way routes in museums, online registration and limiting the number of visitors in a given museum at the same time—the figure prescribed by Free State of Saxony is one visitor per 20 m². The flyers and catalogues on display have been removed, audio guides are currently unavailable, guided tours have to be booked in advance, visitors are encouraged to buy tickets cash-free, and the only cloakroom facilities on offer are lockers.

Confronting new challenges

The SKD experience ranges from access restrictions with a security interlock, to rethinking exhibitions with significant tactile, haptic and participatory elements, like our successful ‘Children’s Biennale’ which is held in cooperation with the National Gallery Singapore. What educational and didactic formats, or even exhibition formats, will we be able to use in the future? Will a local exhibition involve creating digital spaces? How can we educate groups of visitors without endangering them? This shows the precarious situation of this key aspect of museums—art education. Such work usually entails a high level of contact with our visitors and among staff, and it is desirable that art education should continue its work with the same value added in the future. This area must now reinvent itself for the digital age, which may also give it a positive impetus.

During the period, we were also in constant communication with our external partners and our main sponsors, cooperation partners, and lenders in particular, keeping them abreast of our security measures and changes. That was especially important for us, as we must continue to highlight the relevance of culture and our museums in the future to ensure that we do not lose public and private funding. In all of this, we needed to remain in especially close contact with local authorities and ministries to plan the reopening process. Our aim was to implement the complex, rapidly changing regulations in our internal organisational structure.

The direct consequences of the coronavirus pandemic on the cultural landscape are clear and obvious: the future of independent sponsors is full of uncertainty, which is why we are trying our best

to support artists and creatives. These concerns are evident, especially in the local environment; many artists earn their living by transporting artworks or installing exhibitions, activities that are now greatly reduced, while any long-planned stays abroad and scholarships cannot be undertaken, blocking their development. Of course, we are also doing everything we can to foster the creation of art, but our resources are limited—the SKD is a large museum network with collections ranging from ancient times to the present. We must try to meet the needs of all creatives equally. That said, we forwarded information on government emergency relief measures, reassigned education and didactics employees to other projects where possible, and began conceiving new online formats.

How will the way we exhibit and experience art change? We suffered seven-digit losses in revenue due to the protracted closures and gradual re-opening. Dresden is a city that thrives on tourism: visitors used to flock from Eastern Europe and Russia to see the Sistine Madonna in Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister and admire the restored “Florence on the River Elbe” with its royal palace that houses unique collections like the Grünes Gewölbe state treasury, the 500-year-old Münzkabinet, and the Royal State Apartments reconstructed in 2019. German and international tourists come in particular to see masterpieces from the Romanticism period and the former German Democratic Republic to artists such as Gerhard Richter and Rodin at the Albertinum. According to forecasts, these tourists will remain conspicuous by their absence for some more time. Due to the associated sharp decline in our visitor figures, we have had to draw up new business plans and fundamentally rethink our approach. Now, more than ever, we will have to appeal to our local public, including new visitor groups and expectations. The tighter budget also means fewer blockbuster exhibitions. The result will be a lower number of temporary exhibitions, which will have to be

planned together with our local network and entail increased cooperation with regional institutions.

However, in spite of this focus on our local audience from Saxony and Germany, we will not be abandoning our international orientation. Museums must not become provincial; they must uphold the cosmopolitan spirit against any and all nationalist and racist tendencies. We have to consolidate joint projects and reinforce bridges to other nations. The closed borders and travel restrictions, reductions in international tourism as well as a potential decline in lending of artefacts, and business travel, which is incidentally in line with our desire for greater sustainability, inspire us to coordinate and communicate even more intensely. In this context, we are currently enjoying the generous spirit and empathy in the museum environment, as reflected in special consideration for plans and lending transactions.

Turning the crisis into opportunity

For all its darkness, this crisis has rays of hope too. During this time, we are increasingly looking inwards, without the hustle and bustle of international operations. We can turn the crisis into an opportunity by concentrating on the qualities available locally, in our own rich collections. While we have reduced our programmes, postponed or even cancelled exhibition openings and meticulously planned events, the present deceleration satisfies our yearning to break out from the rat race. Business as usual, with its countless long-distance trips and the overflowing programmes of art and culture came to an abrupt, enforced stop. This has given our researchers time to focus even more on their projects, something they have always wanted but

may have been denied for organisational and bureaucratic reasons. Meetings are now more efficient and, paradoxically, more intimate than ever, in spite of and perhaps due to the virtual format. We experienced this both at digital meetings and international virtual conferences, where we felt great solidarity in the museum environment. In this new era, fluid, fast and effective new forms of external and internal communication are required to overcome the lethargy of traditional, rigid structures and develop an atmosphere of creativity, trust and humour to be able to respond quickly.

At the same time, we reflected in-depth internally on our approach as an institution, honing our strategic aims, experimenting with new working models and taking a step towards greater sustainability. For a long time, working from home and instituting dynamic working hours were out of the question in German public-sector institutions, especially with taking into consideration factors such as the question of the right formats, work-life balance and employees who cannot work from home. Overall, we used the pandemic as a time to focus on the basics and view digitalisation as an opportunity to implement working from home. It is also giving a long sought-after boost to a new level of environmental sustainability.

Like so many museums worldwide, we have shifted our presence online and expanded our digital content. We will continue to do so in the future. Besides existing offers like the panorama tours and our website, we developed new online formats. Live “Art for Lunch” video walks with our curators, exhibition openings like our major anniversary exhibition “300 years of the Kupferstich-Kabinett” and interesting contents of our education and didactics departments (e.g. formats like *kunst@home* for children during the lockdown) were made available on the internet. As a rapid response to the new masked encounters in everyday life,

we created the multi-collection online exhibition #wemask based on a suggestion by the Kunstgewerbemuseum. Through an animated tutorial, we launched a campaign to make and donate face masks, and combined it with a brief cultural history of masks in our collections, like those in the Sculpture Collection or our Ethnographic Collections. In addition, professional protective equipment was donated to auxiliary facilities such as hospitals and care centres as part of our efforts to help alleviate the current situation. We also brought some light-hearted humour to the difficult situation with our Meme Creator software, which turns the works in our collections into memes.

The “Here and Now” exhibition, planned and implemented at short notice, was a special initiative. In cooperation with Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, it showcased works by up-and-coming artists in a digital outdoor exhibition on steles in Dresden’s old town. During the lockdown, with its restrictions on going out and socialising, and museum and gallery closures, this offered a platform to young art students, whose very existence is under threat as a result of the pandemic.

Non-digital formats also offer a way to show solidarity. Our staff sent postcards with imagery from our collections to communities, in particular to those most affected by the crisis, (i.e. people isolated in nursing homes) as if to say: If you can’t come to the art, the art will come to you.

However, we must also take a critical look at this extraordinary new situation. The director of the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Thomas Geisler, has dedicated an exhibition to the role of fake news and data visualisation in the current information crisis, how design and access to knowledge interact, and which new approaches are needed. We feel that people have new questions as a result

of these existential changes, and we are responding with new narratives. At the same time, we want museums to be a refuge where visitors can indulge in the immanent beauty of the artworks.

The fundamental tectonic shifts in digitalisation also raise new questions. We envision ourselves as an institution that is as transparent and accessible as possible, a hub of public life in the heart of society. But how can we bridge the gap between free online content, our aspiration to meet our audience's expectations and our financial resources? The future of museums is about people, not numbers, yet, financially it is also a question of our existence as an ongoing concern. How can we operate profitably as a museum, and also support artists cooperating with us? Hybrid solutions are one possible response, for example, using digital satellites as a teaser, with online mirrors of our exhibitions encouraging visitors to come to the museum. Monetising efforts such as exclusive paid content. e.g. podcasts or guided tours available for exclusive groups should be the last resort.

Conclusion

There is one final thought that I find extremely important. Even in this financially difficult situation, museums must not stop collecting. If

we stop now, the gaps we leave cannot be filled by future generations. This applies not just to existing art, but also art that reacts to the here and now in 2020. Great art has always been born in hard times, which are often periods of intense artistic production, and this pandemic is one such event.

This crisis shows how important culture is to society and individuals. Conversely, artists need the public. Again and again, we see that culture is of systemic importance.

There are still many questions arising from the pandemic that we must confront. For example, if people cannot travel again to the same extent as before COVID-19, and if museums remain subject to restrictions, artworks can still build bridges. What will be the future of art loans, in terms of courier safety, sustainability or resource efficiency? Which new, smart, digital solutions will prevail?

Finally, much as virtual formats have made significant headway during the pandemic, the physical museum and its collection remain highly relevant in our society. Digitalisation may have made artworks and artefacts in closed museums accessible worldwide. Yet, as lockdowns ease, we are also experiencing the importance of materiality and direct presence of collections. Ultimately, the sensory experience and aura of the original artworks prove to be irreplaceable. □

About the Author



Professor Dr. Marion Ackermann has been Director General of Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden since November 2016. Prior to that, she held various positions in other cultural institutions, including Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich (1995-2003), Kunstmuseum Stuttgart (Director, 2003-2009) and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf (Director, 2009-2016). Alongside curating iconic exhibitions such as *Joseph Beuys: Parallelprozesse*, *Kandinsky Malevich Mondrian – The Infinite White Abyss* and *Uecker*, she has also set up numerous projects with young and emerging artists. She is also the vice-chair of Bizot Group, a forum that brings together directors of the world's largest museums to exchange ideas and news.

Notes:

1. The renowned historical ensemble called Zwinger, once the forecourt of the new palace built by King of Poland Augustus II the Strong (1670-1733), is now home to three museums of the Dresden State Art Collections: the Porcelain Collection, the Mathematical-Physical Salon and the Old Masters Picture Gallery as well as the Sculpture Collections.