

Staying COVID-19 secure: Navigating the new normal for museums

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Museums around the world experienced plummeting visitorship, cancellation of exhibitions and revenue losses as the pandemic broke out. In this essay, Alvin Tan provides a look at how museums in various countries have coped during lockdowns, and explores how the museum experience may adapt to the new normal, from curating hyperlocal exhibitions to designing touch-free interactives.

In the words of Queen Elizabeth II, 2020 has turned out to be an *annus horribilis* for museums as well as the wider arts and culture sector. As COVID-19 spreads across the globe, museums find themselves confronted with plummeting visitorship numbers, postponement or cancellation of exhibitions and programmes, and unprecedented revenue losses. While the COVID-19 pandemic may have led to museum

closures and threatened the livelihoods of museum professionals, it has also resulted in many museums having to rethink and revise their immediate and mid-term strategies, and more significantly, pivoting to the digital realm in order to stay connected with their audiences and reach out to new audiences during the stay-at-home period.

Impact on museums worldwide

According to the report *Museums, Museum Professionals and COVID-19* released by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), by April 2020, almost all the museums around the world had been closed due to the COVID-19



Figure 1. A visual from a COVID-19 dos and don'ts marketing campaign featuring mannequins at the Indian Heritage Centre's permanent exhibition. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore.

pandemic, and more than one in ten might be forced to close permanently (International Council of Museums 2020, 2). Likewise, UNESCO’s *Museums Around the World in the Face of COVID-19* report painted an equally dire picture with 90 per cent of museums worldwide closing their doors during the crisis and more than 10 per cent of museums indicating that they may never reopen again (UNESCO 2020, 4).

Based on research reports, published surveys, newspaper and online articles, museums and museum associations worldwide have responded to the COVID-19 outbreak in the following three ways: first, temporary closures and cancellations or postponements of exhibitions and programmes; second, ramping up their digital offerings and sharing available resources to support one another nationally and internationally; and third, making the necessary preparations for re-opening and operating in a post-COVID-19 environment.

In Singapore, National Heritage Board (NHB) launched a survey to determine the impact of

COVID-19 on the Museum Roundtable (MR), a collective of more than 55 public and private sector museums in Singapore. Based on the responses from 43 MR members, close to 75 per cent indicated that they suffered a severe drop in visitorship numbers (especially from tourists and school groups) and revenue prior to mandatory closure. The remaining 25 per cent were unaffected as they had already closed temporarily for various reasons such as renovations and/or redevelopment works prior to COVID-19. Many of the respondents also indicated that they had to cope with budget cuts for exhibitions and programmes as well as the postponement or cancellation of projects. Fortunately, close to 90 per cent of respondents indicated that they did not have to furlough their staff.

Going digital

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, museums had already been engaging audiences digitally, with varying degrees of success, as part of their

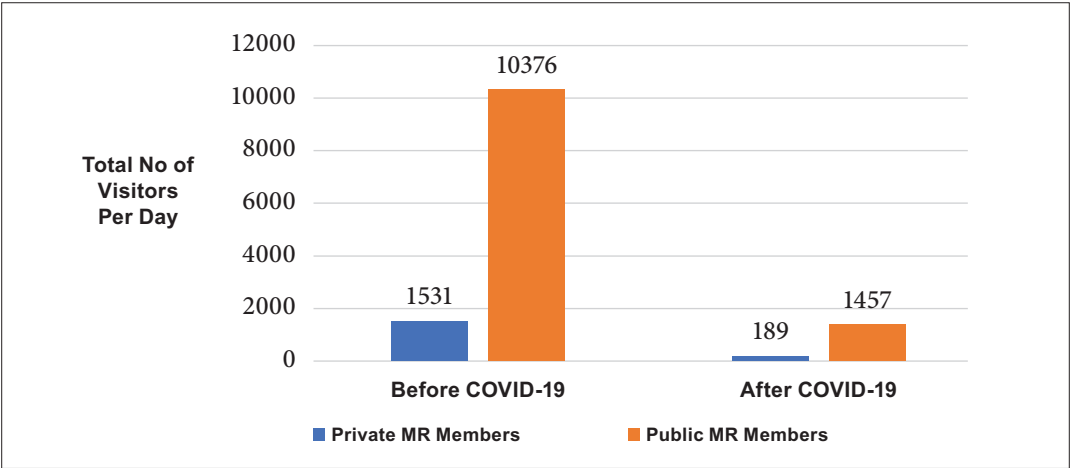


Figure 2. Comparison of average daily visitorship figures for Museum Roundtable members before COVID-19 (i.e. months of December 2019 and January 2020) and after COVID-19 (i.e. months of February and March 2020 before mandatory closure of museums in Singapore in April 2020). Information courtesy of International & Museum Relations Division, National Heritage Board.

efforts to attract more visitors online and to convert these digital visitors to actual museum visitors. With museum closures and more people spending more time online, many museums have hopped on the digital bandwagon in an effort to remain physically closed but digitally open. This has resulted in an unprecedented buffet of “click-as-much-as-you-can-consume” digital content as museums rush to put their collections online, launch social media campaigns and offer collections- or institution-based quizzes, contests, jigsaw puzzles etc.

In a survey on the impact of COVID-19, the Network of European Museum Organisations reported that four out of five museums in Europe have increased their digital services to reach their audiences while another Art Fund survey in the UK revealed that 86 per cent of their museums and galleries have increased their online presence and content (Network of European Museum Organisations 2020, 2; Wafer Hadley 2020, 7). In its report, ICOM noted that while all digital

activities have increased after the lockdowns for at least 15 per cent of its museum respondents, activity on the museums’ social media networks increased or started for almost 50 per cent of its respondents (International Council of Museums 2020, 10).

Not surprisingly, museums which had invested resources to establish their online presence and develop their digital offerings prior to COVID-19 found themselves in “a better position to succeed than those just now coming to the keyboard” (Dilenschneider 2020d). In this regard, the Chinese museums have a strong lead. Between the months of January and February 2020 alone, more than 1,300 Chinese museums were already offering more than 2,000 online exhibitions (Jing Travel 2020). However, it would appear that digital resources and efforts from museums worldwide and locally have been uneven, and many museums have only begun to take their first digital baby steps.

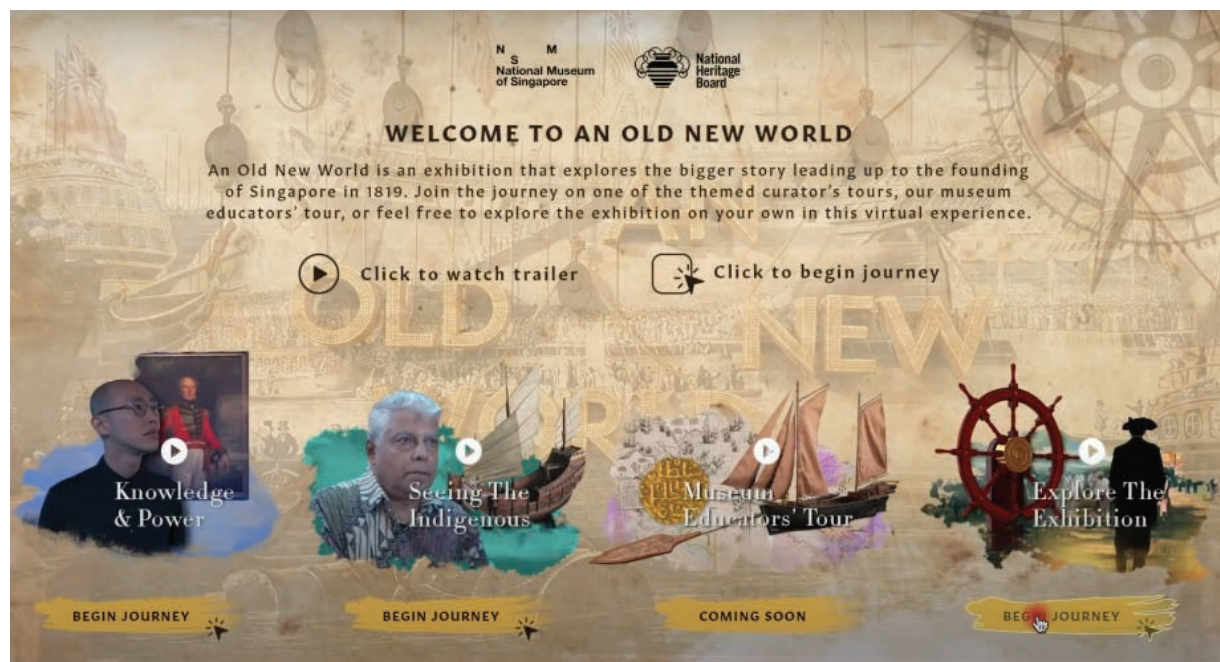


Figure 3. National Museum of Singapore launched a digital edition of its exhibition “An Old New World” during the lockdown. Image courtesy of National Museum of Singapore.

In Singapore, the heritage institutions comprising Indian Heritage Centre, Malay Heritage Centre and Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall were first off the starting blocks by using their collections to offer COVID-19 related tips and presenting online versions of their special exhibitions, organising stay-home activities such as their “(re)create art” and mask-a-rade challenges (a call to recreate artefacts and artworks from the institutions’ collections using objects found around the house and a “design a face mask” competition for children

respectively). They also provided digital docent tours, and even offered their audiences behind-the-scene glimpses of the essential services that were being carried out when the institutions were closed. Likewise, National Museum of Singapore launched a virtual tour of its special exhibition with both guided and self-exploratory options, while ArtScience Museum offered video tours of its exhibitions. Other museums such as National Gallery Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum and Singapore Art Museum have also rolled out curators’ talks and tours, DIY activities etc.



Figure 4. A digital jigsaw puzzle based on an artwork was created for online audiences.
Image courtesy of Malay Heritage Centre, Singapore.

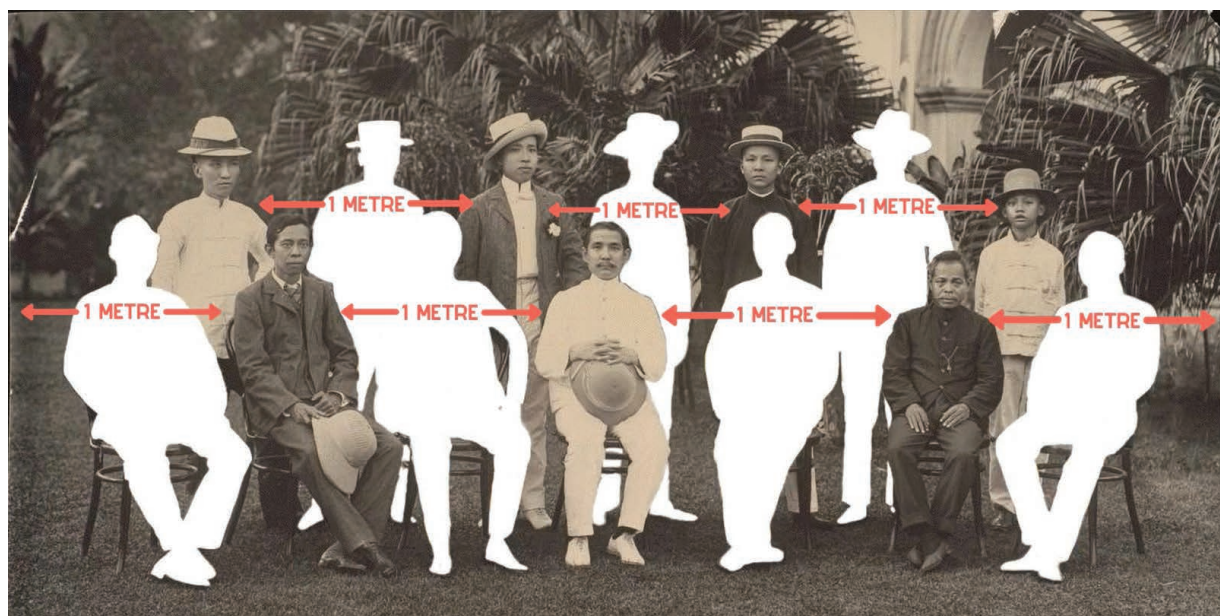


Figure 5. An online quiz with a safe distancing message.
Image courtesy of Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, Singapore.

However, some commentators such as Andrew McIntyre have noted that while museums may have “pushed some people further along the digital adoption curve ... that will merely enhance, not replace, the analogue” and that the digital offerings of museums, however excellent, “will only ever be an extra: a wrap-around enhancement” (McIntyre 2020a, 2020b). Yet another school of thought holds the view that “the online museum is here to stay” and will become an essential part of how audiences experience museums and their collections going forward (Grynsztejn 2020).

Whatever the case may be, it remains undeniable that museum digital offerings play an important role in augmenting the museum-going experience and maintaining top-of-mind recall, and hold the potential of translating digital visitorship to actual museum visitorship. According to NHB’s Digital Consumer Survey (Wave 1) conducted in May 2020 comprising 269 respondents, NHB’s digital offerings successfully reached out to 43.5 per cent new audiences (i.e., users who had never consumed NHB’s digital content before) during the circuit breaker period. 87.4 per cent of survey respondents agreed that NHB’s digital offerings piqued their interest in visiting Singapore’s museums when they re-open.

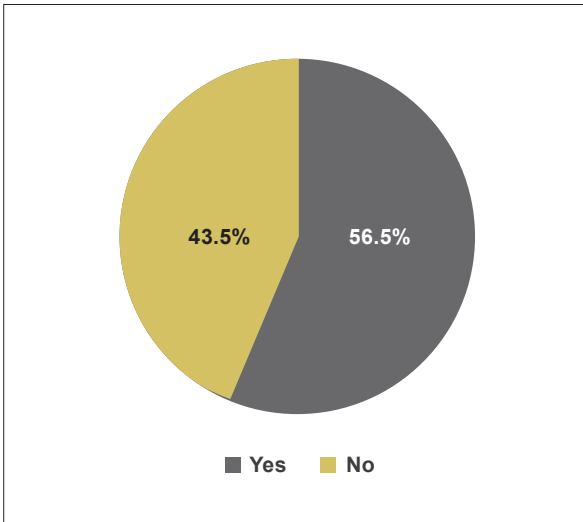


Figure 6. NHB’s survey results show that 43.5 per cent of 269 respondents were new to its digital offerings.

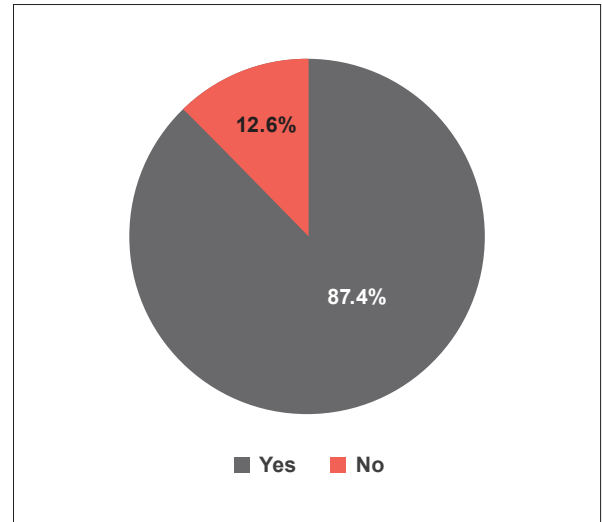


Figure 7. Survey results showing 87.4 per cent of respondents agreed that NHB’s digital offerings made them interested in visiting a museum in Singapore.

Intent to return

Despite the efforts of museums to stay digitally connected with their audiences, the question of who will return and who will stay away when museums eventually re-open, and what will make visitors feel reassured enough to return, are pressing issues that most museum authorities and directors are grappling with. To quote Mary Ceruti, Director of Walker Art Center: “the hardest part is understanding not just the risks, but the psychology. Because there is so much uncertainty, there is a big range in terms of how people feel—both staff and potential audience. That is the biggest challenge: to give people confidence that we are doing everything we can, but also recognising that we can’t create zero risk for everybody” (Halperin 2020).

According to ongoing research by IMPACTS Experience, audiences in the United States intend to return to their usual attendance behaviours within three months (Dilenschneider 2020e). This is perhaps a natural reaction to restricted overseas travel options. More importantly, the research has revealed that, while “demand isn’t necessarily increasing or decreasing ... it’s being redistributed” towards certain types of cultural organisations and away from others (Dilenschneider 2020a). In this regard, there will be increased demand for cultural experiences that feature outdoor spaces and/or allow for relative freedom of movement (Dilenschneider 2020f). As such, museums are generally expected to fare better as compared to enclosed performance arts spaces due to the increased “perceptual risk” of contracting COVID-19 (Dilenschneider 2020b).



Figure 8. Sample pages from Malay Heritage Centre’s re-opening resource booklet which was uploaded on its social media platforms (together with the booklets from Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall and Indian Heritage Centre) three days prior to its re-opening. Image courtesy of Malay Heritage Centre, Singapore.

The above findings are corroborated by Audience Outlook Monitor, a tracking study of audience attitudes with regard to arts and cultural programmes during and after the COVID-19 crisis, which reveals that the outlook for museums is “looking positive” with most audiences saying that they would be at least “somewhat comfortable” walking around a museum gallery (88 per cent) today, if they have open spaces and are following recommended safety measures. However, the same study reveals that while the public is comfortable with visiting museums and galleries, the majority remains uncomfortable with using interactive exhibits (Patternmakers, Wolfbrown, and Audience Outlook Monitor 2020, 5).

In the latest research published by Dilenschneider in June 2020, “availability of a coronavirus vaccine” remains the leading factor that will make the public feel safe about visiting cultural organisations again, followed by factors such as seeing others visit, mandatory face coverings

and government lifting restrictions. More than 30 per cent of the respondents indicated that they would feel comfortable visiting cultural organisations as they trust that cultural organisations will not re-open unless they are “ready to do so and can safely welcome back their audiences” (Dilenschneider 2020c).

Overall, while there may be pent-up demand for museum visits as audiences yearn to reconnect directly with arts and culture, it is likely that the museum-going market will remain highly cautious, at least in the first few months following the re-opening of museums, and that there will be a period of adjustments and readjustments. As such, it is more likely that museum-goers will adopt a wait-and-see attitude to assess if there will be overcrowding at museums when they re-open and to see how well museums cope in terms of implementing and policing the various safety management measures.



Figure 9. Indian Heritage Centre curator, Nalina Gopal, carrying out condition checks and maintenance works inside the galleries. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore.

Considerations for re-opening

With countries lifting or easing COVID-19 restrictions, museums have either re-opened or are preparing for re-opening, and museum associations have issued and shared advisories and guidelines. All these documents share common and common-sensical advice that recommend that museums be guided by and comply with official government guidelines, and to re-open responsibly and only when the necessary safe management measures are in place for staff, volunteers, and visitors.

In view of the above, some countries such as Singapore, France and the United States have adopted a phased approach with staggered museum re-openings over a period of time. The staggered re-openings will be complemented by a likewise staggered approach to visitorship numbers (i.e., museums to allow more visitors in phases) and to the resumption of guided tours and museum programmes. This is perhaps a wise approach as different museums will be at different stages of readiness.

In NHB’s Museum Roundtable survey which also measures members’ “readiness to reopen”, close to 75 per cent of the survey respondents indicated that they would be able to conduct temperature screening, disinfect and clean premises and frequently-touched surfaces, provide hand sanitisers in key locations, display signage within their premises, collect travel and health declarations from visitors, and implement visitor registration and contact tracing measures (Tan 2020).

Yet in spite of all the pre-planning and preparatory efforts of museum authorities and museums, and with no end in sight to the COVID-19 pandemic, museums that have re-opened and/or are planning to re-open have realised that “the museum we closed will not be the museum we reopen” (Stulen 2020). Moreover, museums will not only have to find ways to overcome the public’s safer-at-home mentality and ensure public safety at all times—they will have to come up with a back-to-business model that makes economic sense. This is because the operational costs of re-opening museums are likely to remain the same as before COVID-19 (and in some cases, possibly higher in view of the implementation of safe management measures) while ticket revenues and profits from retail and food and beverage offerings will remain at an all-time low for an indeterminable length of time.

Museum Roundtable Members' Ability to Implement Precautionary Measures
(based on NHB's 25 March 2020 Advisory)

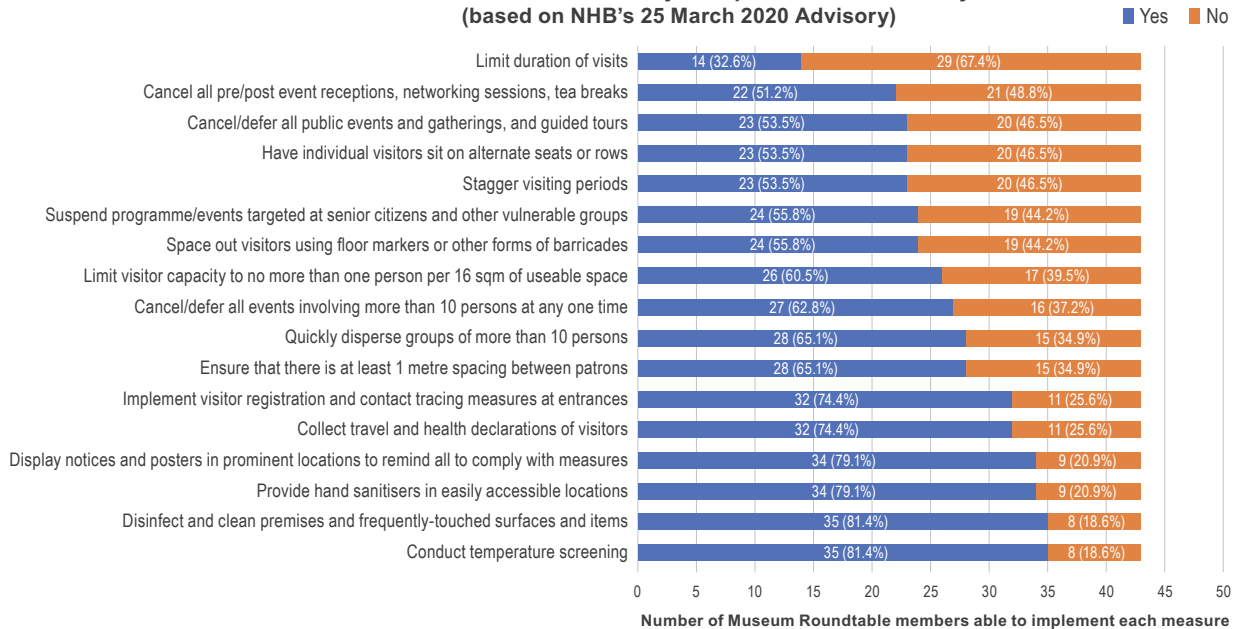


Figure 10. Findings for Museum Roundtable's "readiness to reopen" ranked according to safe management measures issued in March 2020. Image courtesy of National Heritage Board.



Figure 11. A safe distancing signage.
Image courtesy of National Gallery Singapore.

New normal for museums

However museums prepare to re-open their galleries to the public in an era of mandatory social distancing, one thing is certain—they will be greeted by a much changed museum landscape. In this new operating environment, museum and gallery capacity will be drastically reduced. In Singapore, museum visitor capacity has been reduced to 25 per cent; Beijing and Borneo to 30 per cent; Abu Dhabi to 40 per cent and Dubai to 50 per cent. According to a recent article in *The Art Newspaper*, museums in the UK are projected to attract only an estimated 20 per cent of their pre-COVID-19 visitorship numbers when they re-open (Bailey 2020) while museums such as the Guggenheim Bilbao is expecting only 10-20 per cent of its normal visitorship over summer and 45-50 per cent of its typical numbers over fall (Kenney 2020).



Figure 12. Temperature screening in progress during the second day of Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall’s reopening on 4 July 2020. Image courtesy of Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, Singapore.

In addition, with limited international travel and the need to watch the bottom line resulting in international exhibitions and loans cancelled and/or put on hold, there has been speculation in the museum world that it may be time to bid goodbye to imported blockbuster exhibitions (Dickson 2020)—at least for the short term—and for museums to focus on bringing out more of their collections from storage. Moreover, with tourism practically non-existent, museum audiences are likely to become “hyperlocal with increased appetites for engaging, dynamic experiences in their backyards” (Atkins 2020) and museums will have to think, curate and show local and shine the spotlight on the treasures already in their possession.

The museum experience post-COVID-19 is also likely to be characterised by contactless or hands-free solutions including self-service models such as online reserve-ahead ticketing system with timed entry, virtual queues, and contactless

payment as museums strive to strike a fine balance between public safety and an engaging and hassle-free visitor experience. In China, participating institutions are listed on an online WeChat mini programme, “Culture and Tourism Green Code”, which allows visitors to apply for museum entry by providing their personal information and health status declaration, followed by the selection of the date and time of intended visit. Once the entry slot has been successfully secured, the user receives a QR code which is scanned for entry into the museum (Parulis-Cook 2020).

With concerns surrounding high-touch surfaces, many museums have also relooked hands-on experiences. While the immediate strategy is to close off these interactives from public use and/or use antiviral coatings or conduct more frequent cleaning and sanitisation, there is a movement to explore and adopt alternatives that are not hand-operated, such as switch mats, voice- or gesture-based tools and proximity-based activations.

Many museums have also ceased to offer docent guided tours and discontinued the use of shared audio tour devices. Instead, museums such as Mauritshuis in the Netherlands are turning to personal devices to continue to provide curated tours to visitors and even offer indoor wayfinding.



Figure 13. The Smartify mobile application allows visitors to scan an artefact to retrieve more information and enjoy audio tours of the galleries. Image courtesy of Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that, unless a vaccine for the coronavirus is found, the road to recovery for museums will be long and hard. Even then, we will not be able to completely pandemic-proof our museums. However, as the days go by and more and more museums start to reopen, we are getting a better sense of what the transformed museum landscape looks like, and we will get more adept at navigating our way through a much changed museum world. This is all thanks to museums worldwide sharing what they are doing and learning, and in the process, becoming, as Hollander described, “both resourceful and a resource” (Hollander 2020).

Still, a few good things have come out of the pandemic. First, it has demonstrated that museums are resilient entities that are able to improvise and reinvent themselves by pushing their collections online, launching viral social media campaigns, taking fund-raising online, offering free collections- or institution-based content etc. Second, and more importantly, it is the validation of the role that museums (and other cultural organisations) play in the wellbeing of their audience and the wider community in terms of alleviating the “challenges of confinement” (UNESCO 2020, 6), reducing the social isolation, and boosting national morale. □

About the Author



Alvin Tan is Deputy Chief Executive of Policy & Community at National Heritage Board, Singapore. He oversees strategies, operations and projects pertaining to heritage impact assessment and mitigation, National Monuments and heritage sites, National Collection, collections care and management, community outreach and education, volunteer engagement, the heritage institutions, heritage grants, language campaigns, international relations and Museum Roundtable. He also leads a COVID-19 rapid response team that conducts international scans of museum strategies and responses, and contributes to COVID-19 related policy formulation and operational guidelines for the museum and heritage sector.

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