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Mobile Exhibits and Digital Initiatives: Contextualizing Museum Engagement in the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on physical mobility has demanded that museums adapt their operations to substantially new, mutable circumstances, with institutions implementing virtual programming, adapting their gallery spaces to new functions, and other measures to maintain and expand audience engagement. Although the scale of the pandemic's effects on mobility and in-person interaction is unprecedented in living memory, virtual collections and other initiatives echo longstanding concerns regarding institutional relevance. To take one example, for at least a century art museums and other cultural organizations have used traveling exhibitions as a means of attracting new audiences or maintaining established ones. While blockbusters are arguably among the most studied and critiqued of these mobile installations, another kind of show, the outreach exhibition, merits closer examination. Intended to expand art access beyond an institution's immediate walls by appearing in schools, libraries, or portable artmobiles, outreach exhibits complicate longstanding assessments of museums as institutions that prioritize collections management over community engagement. At the same time, these shows invite critical analysis regarding their potential significance to either reifying or resisting systemic inequities regarding art access and representation.

Focusing on art museums in the United States, this presentation offers a preliminary assessment of recent digital collections engagement initiatives by contextualizing them within a longer history of mobile art education programs such as traveling outreach exhibits. I posit that while digital formats provide a virtual encounter with art that is experientially distinct from in-

person viewings, physical and digital outreach exhibits share a mutual interest in rendering artworks approachable through referencing the visitor's sense of place. As such, digital initiatives should be contextualized within a longer history of mobile education initiatives and audience engagement, both to understand how these established forms influence contemporary methods, and to assess whether they reinforce or challenge systemic inequality through their content or accessibility to different audiences.

Before discussing contemporary art-sharing efforts, the history of outreach exhibitions should be considered. Outreach exhibits organized by museums in the United States developed at the turn of the twentieth century during the Progressive Era, with the earliest known documented examples appearing in locations ranging from New York City to Cleveland, Ohio (De Forest, 1919, p. 189; Horton, 1920, p. 20). While mobile visual spectacles such as moving panoramas and magic lantern shows had been part of the American cultural landscape since at least the late eighteenth century, these primarily profit-based ventures focused on both entertainment and education to attract a wide range of paying customers (Dennett, 1997, pp. 2, 5; Huhtamo, 2013, p. 5). Extension exhibits organized by art museums, by contrast, focused primarily on didactic content, reflecting a broader institutional emphasis on education as a means of addressing ongoing anxieties regarding the impact of immigration and industrialization on the accepted social order (Trask, 2013, pp. 49-50).

Already critiqued as outdated and disconnected from society at large by the late nineteenth century, art museums started implementing more aggressive education efforts at the turn of the century. While most of these initial educational reforms took place within the museum itself, from the development of docent programs to establishing children's galleries and classrooms, museums also explored the possibilities of outreach. In the first years of the twentieth century,

many museums began collecting and circulating photographs in the form of lantern slides and halftone prints, enabling them to share their permanent collections while bypassing the logistical and financial challenges of transporting original artworks (D., 1918, 205). During the 1910s, however, some museums also began exhibiting original objects in schools, libraries, and other spaces outside their immediate gallery walls. In 1913, for instance, the City Art Museum in St. Louis, recognizing that its location outside the downtown area prohibited many visitors from accessing its galleries, developed a plan to begin hosting monthly collections rotations within the public library (Holland, 1913, p. 68). Around the same time, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York also began sharing paintings with the New York Public Library, expanding its lending program to branch libraries within a few years. By 1917, the museum had developed traveling exhibitions of textiles for schools throughout New York State, and in 1919 it established a department of extension focused on outreach (De Forest, 1919, pp. 189-190). Similarly, the Art Institute of Chicago founded its department of extension in 1916, while the Cleveland Museum of Art had begun sending out display cases filled with collections objects to schools by 1920 (Art Institute of Chicago, 1916, pp. 240-243; Holland, 1913, p. 68; Rohr, 2003, p. 24). Public school teachers and other educators also iterated the pedagogical importance of sharing original objects with visitors who could not access museum collections, as when Jessie L. Clough argued in a 1918 article for *School Arts Magazine*, that "There should be traveling exhibitions to go to schools, to small towns, to the libraries..." (Clough, 1918, p. 384).

What encouraged museum staff and public educators to begin emphasizing the pedagogical value of these extension exhibitions? After all, these shows did not replace photography as a means of sharing collections beyond the museum. Whether as halftone prints for classroom display, illustrations in catalogs and related publications, or lantern slides for illustrated lectures,

photography remained a prominent aspect of art education, so much so that some printing companies specialized in it, advertising exhibitions of reproductions available for rent to schools and other educational institutions (School Arts Magazine, 1912, p. 137). Nor were museums the only organizations to circulate traveling art exhibitions. The American Federation of Arts, founded in 1909, specialized in traveling exhibitions on a national level, while women's clubs and other social groups regularly organized exhibitions that traveled locally and regionally (Art and Progress, 1919, p. 139; Art and Progress, 1910, p. 368-369; McCauley, 1914, pp. 204, 208). Yet museum staff and educators believed that having museums share their collections of art through outreach exhibits accomplished something that neither photographic reproductions nor exhibitions facilitated by other organizations could do. What kind of work, then, did these outreach exhibitions do for the museums that organized them and the audiences that visited them?

One way to approach this question is to consider outreach exhibitions through the lens of mobility studies, and more specifically the social aspects of mobility. To take one example, in their study of young adults living in southwest England, *Mobilities, Networks, Geographies*, Jonas Larsen, John Urry, and Kay Axhausen note that despite the availability of virtual communication, families whose members had relocated from their home communities expected them to periodically make in-person visits. While conversations over the internet or telephone help to maintain consistent contact, the physical presence of the person who has moved away from the home community seemingly reaffirms familial bonds in a way that virtual means do not (Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen, 2006, pp. 1-10). Because humans experience their reality through embodiment, in-person visits are regarded as key to maintaining a sense of contact with others, a

quality that has been reiterated through recent studies on touch starvation and other repercussions from the pandemic (Pierce, 2020).

Looking back to museum engagement, as educational experiences, outreach exhibitions organized during the early twentieth century appear to reflect both social and didactic motivations. While visitors were discouraged from touching the artwork, outreach exhibits share commonalities with in-person visits by enabling visitors to experience the scale and materiality of the works on view. Geographically, these shows often confined themselves to the cities that the hosting museum occupied. Whereas museums lent out lantern slides on a national and occasionally international level, and organizations such as the American Federation of Arts toured their shows nationally, outreach exhibitions facilitated by art museums often remained confined to a single city or state and targeted local visitors who were not already visiting the institution (D., 1915, pp. 190-191; D., 1918, p. 205; H., 1912, pp. 158-161).

This idea of using original artworks to attract new visitors within a museum's home city is readily demonstrated in an early outreach initiative from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1914, the Met lent a group of paintings to the Washington Irving High School, located south of the museum at 15th street. Initially, Robert de Forest, President of the Museum's Board of Trustees, thought the exhibitions were unnecessary because the school was located relatively close to the museum. The school board countered that despite its proximity, students did not visit the museum because it was not an established part of their daily commutes or routines. By introducing works from the collection into the classroom, the school board argued that students would not only benefit from studying the works in person, but would be more inclined to visit the museum itself because it had now become part of their established community spaces, asserting that "if you show some of your pictures in this school, many more will be attracted to

the pictures in your museum'" (de Forest, 1919, p. 189). The outreach exhibition served as an intermediary between the school and the museum, with the works on view both teaching students about aesthetics and inviting them to visit the rest of the collection.

From these early outreach exhibitions, several important qualities emerged that have continued to define collections-based outreach efforts in museums. First, they rely on encounters with the permanent collection as a means of establishing a sense of connection to the visitor. Whereas lantern slide collections and traveling shows such as those from the American Federation of Arts often included works from multiple collections, museum-organized outreach shows in libraries, schools, and other public spaces focused exclusively on the permanent collection, with the original artwork forming a tactile link between the visitor and the museum (Art and Progress, 1911, pp. 85-96; De Forest, 1919, pp. 189-190). Second, the shows relied on their visitors' sense of place by occupying spaces that were already part of their established routines, with schools arguably being the most frequently used sites. They extended the museum's presence outside of its immediate walls by entering familiar spaces, a spatial presence that both familiarized the collection to visitors and encouraged them to make the journey to the museum itself.

Extension exhibitions also raise questions regarding accessibility and best practices as observed in museums. As educational experiences, outreach shows embody longstanding tensions between the museum's desire to share its collections and to preserve them. As such, these events should be studied more deeply concerning the influence of conservation and other practices on the selection of site and transit routes. Do outreach exhibitions target better-funded schools, for example, because they can more easily meet the requirements for collections safety and security regarding temperature control and other logistics? When in transit, are they more

likely to use well-maintained roads, thus resulting in transit routes that favor affluent communities? While I do not have time in today's presentation to address these questions more deeply, mobile experiences such as outreach exhibitions underscore the complex issues informing how museums approach community outreach and development.

Having established this historical background for collections-based outreach efforts, let's now consider the current moment. During the pandemic, museums have endeavored to make use of virtual platforms to engage audiences unable to visit their spaces, whether through providing online versions of their galleries, or annotated versions of exhibitions. With their virtual format and ability to transcend national and international borders, such online efforts bear striking similarities to the slide collections and photographic reproductions that circulated within the visual culture of the early twentieth century. Yet these virtual initiatives also share affinities with the more localized, place-based efforts of Progressive-Era Museum extension exhibits. Such similarities underscore not only how museums continue to appeal to the visitor's sense of place to establish rapport, but also emphasize the extent to which they continue to rely on their collections as emblems for their own institutional identities.

As an example, consider the *Met Unframed*, a temporary, interactive app that the Metropolitan Museum of Art launched in conjunction with Verizon in January 2021. Using their smartphones, online visitors would walk through a virtual version of the museum, complete with simulated footsteps to suggest the sensory qualities of moving through the gallery space, though this ableist assumption of the museum experience warrants closer scrutiny. Once in the galleries, visitors could stop to see specific collections items on display and read about the works through pop-up labels. Yet the experience did not end here. Visitors could also play interactive games designed around specific works, with tasks ranging from correctly naming paint colors to

identifying iconographic meanings. If they answered the questions correctly (and visitors were given innumerable chances to do so), they would temporarily “win” a digital replica of the painting that they could then hang on their walls through the screens of their phones or related devices (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021). While the display of artwork occurred entirely online, its virtual presence happened within the user’s space, presumably a domestic one. Just as outreach exhibitions sought to make artworks familiar by displaying them in recognizable spaces, so this digital initiative took the space of a home and rendered it into a temporary gallery, which the visitors could then share online with friends and family. Whereas outreach exhibitions appeal to visitors through public, community spaces, apps like *The Met Unframed* utilize private as well as public spaces as their primary venues, with visitors rendering the home and other personal spaces public through social media sharing.

The idea of making art accessible by contextualizing it within one’s own space is further explored through the interactive database *ArtLens AI: Share Your View*, developed by the Cleveland Museum of Art. Like *The Met Unframed*, the museum fashioned this tool as a means of engaging audiences unable to travel due to pandemic conditions, stating on the website that “*ArtLens AI: Share Your View* is a fun way to bring art into your daily life and an easy way to deep dive into the museum’s collection resources” (afaxon, 2020). Rather than search works of art by their title or artist, however, as is generally the case with art museum databases, users instead peruse the collection by uploading photographs of their immediate surroundings, whether they consist of their home, their commute to work, or other environs. The database then uses AI to identify a work of art from the collection that visually matches the uploaded photo in terms of formal composition, establishing a visual connection between the user’s space and the collection. Whereas outreach exhibitions occupy familiar spaces to render the work approachable, here the

user's space becomes analogous to the collection itself, with works of art selected based on their resemblance to the user's images.

Admittedly, there are crucial differences between physical outreach exhibits and virtual tools such as the ones mentioned here, and I am not claiming that they are synonymous with one another. Significantly, these digital initiatives enable an intimacy of art engagement not possible through physical works because they are not constricted by the scale or materiality of the actual objects, with viewers able to situate substantial works within their homes or other familiar spaces. Additionally, whereas exhibits such as those designed by the Met during the early twentieth century encouraged viewers to visit the main galleries themselves after viewing the extension installation, it remains uncertain whether these digital initiatives will ultimately attract new in-person visitors in the future. Nevertheless, there remain parallels due to both the reliance on the permanent collection as a means of establishing institutional identity and the use of familiar public or private spaces to render that identity approachable to potential visitors. Both formats also raise questions in terms of representation regarding the selection of artworks, and accessibility, as the virtual formats rely on strong, consistent, Internet connections. As numerous scholars and activists have observed, the pandemic has underscored the extent of inequality concerning Internet access, with the ability to consistently connect intersecting with racial, socio-economic, and other forms of inequity. Apps such as *the Met Unframed* may enable high-quality art access without the need for travel, but only if its users have access to both 4 or 5G devices and a stable Internet connection.

Today's presentation represents only a preliminary assessment of collections-based museum outreach, a topic I intend to explore more deeply in my dissertation. As the pandemic continues to evolve, museum responses and initiatives will likely continue to adapt, and it will be

interesting to see whether they default to in-person programming or continue to utilize virtual or hybridized formats in the future.

Today, however, I would like to conclude this talk by listing three reasons for reassessing outreach exhibitions and related programs through a scholarly lens. First, it encourages us to seriously reconsider outreach exhibits as original experiences. I posit that outreach installations are not simply smaller or derivative versions of in-house exhibitions. Rather, they perform different kinds of work in terms of visitor engagement and should be studied on their own terms. Second, thinking about extension exhibitions further encourages recent scholarly efforts to reconceptualize museums as networked entities rather than autonomous institutions, an undertaking that Sarah Byrne, Anne Clarke, and other scholars have already started doing (Byrne et al., 2011, pp. 3–4). This is crucial to critical reassessments of museums as institutions. While museums have rightly been identified and interrogated as colonialist entities, we also need to better understand how they operate as institutions to critique them effectively, not only in their collecting practices, but in their approaches to community engagement. As outreach exhibits demonstrate, art museums and other institutions have been implementing public education initiatives for at least a century, and this public education work should be assessed as critically as collecting or exhibition practices. Finally, studying outreach exhibitions as a historical and contemporary phenomenon can help us better understand how museums engage audiences in the present moment. While the tools have changed, pedagogical ideas such as the importance of the permanent collection as emblematic of the museum's institutional identity, and engaging visitors through the sense of place, continue to shape museum programming.

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