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MENA Region
Journal



# MUSEUMS
## & THE
## DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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Cover Image: Boutros and Salvia Touma's engagement, Santiago, 18 September 1952. The Collection of Khalil Touma - Digital Archives Project / The Palestinian Museum.

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# MANAL ATAYA

**Director General of Sharjah Museums Authority**

# INTRODUCTION

In order to ensure that we remain accessible and to meet the needs of our audiences, Sharjah Museums Authority (SMA) responded with swift action and creativity to tackle the challenges posed by the global pandemic that left all sectors, including the cultural and art scene in uncertainty and pressure to rethink their engagement with the public.

SMA successfully pivoted quickly and attracted new virtual visitors, expanding its digital footprint by leveraging and developing its existing digital platforms to launch virtual tours, making number of its exhibitions and collections available online, and roll out numerous online workshops, seminars and activities for all age groups.

With a stronger digital presence, our collections, exhibitions such as Barjeel Foundation's 'A Century in Flux', and Ethiopian photographer Aida Muluneh's 'Homebound: A Journey in Photography', and our family programs were no longer confined to the walls, but rather made their way to the homes of our local and international audiences.

To this point, I feel I am obliged to commend the authority's and its museums' ability to rapidly adapt to the changing conditions the world has witnessed and successfully come up with solutions to continue to present content that delivers knowledge to the people. There is still much to learn and we do not have all the answers, but this is why sharing the stories of others in this journal is so critical to gain insight and learn ways in which we may overcome challenges facing us and others.

In this third edition of Museums in the MENA Region Journal, we shed light on some of the measures and practices undertaken by SMA and museums across the region, to help mitigate the impact of the pandemic and stay relevant to their local communities. As always, we hope this journal acts to inspire, make connections and encourage solution-based thinking to our family of museums in the Arab world.

# FOREWORD


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# DR. ADILA LAIDI-HANIEH

**Director General of The Palestinian Museum**

## ABOUT ME

Writer, academic, and cultural manager, Dr. Laïdi-Hanieh has been the Director General of the Palestinian Museum since 2018. She developed the museum's first five-year program strategy, encompassing knowledge production and research, multi-generational education, collections valorization, digital platforms, and an original exhibitions program.

She published several books and essays, including the artist biography "Fahrelnissa Zeid: Painter of Inner Worlds." She also published "Palestine, rien ne nous manque ici," which interrogates and celebrates contemporary perspectives of Palestine.

Her academic work encompasses critical theory, aesthetics, and ideology theory. As a Fulbright Scholar, Dr. Laïdi-Hanieh obtained her PhD in Cultural Studies from George Mason University. She also taught at Birzeit University.

## THE PALESTINIAN TRANSNATIONAL MUSEUM: FROM LOCAL IMPERATIVE TO A GLOBAL MUSEUM NECESSITY

The Palestinian Museum is an independent cultural institution dedicated to promoting an open and vibrant Palestinian museum culture locally and internationally. The museum's mission is to produce and disseminate emancipatory learning experiences about Palestine, its people, culture, and history through innovative programs . The museum adopted two approaches to its work as a result of its operational conditions— an institution operating under occupation and geographically and politically cut off from most of its audience, namely Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the diaspora. The museum developed a practical and technical approach, as well as a conceptual one.

Through the technical and practical approach, the museum became a transnational institution by utilizing electronic communication technology to disseminate Palestinian historical narratives and human experiences to the world. For this purpose, it used websites, digital archiving projects, virtual reality experiences, and 360-degree exhibitions to spread awareness.

Conceptually, the museum is an institution made to instill hope and inspiration, rather than an institution of retrospective celebration. It aims to foster curiosity and a desire to learn and discover.

The Palestinian Museum's experience during the pandemic was in tune with its mission and vision. Its experience as an institution whose primary potential audience lived far away became that of all museums worldwide confronted with the lockdown.

The Museum was immediately able to develop initiatives online that preserve, document, and disseminate knowledge about Palestine and its cultural heritage via fun, pluralistic, open, and participatory approaches.

One of the museum's early projects was the "Palestine Journeys" (Palquest.org) platform— a comprehensive sort of museum about the modern history of Palestine. Open all day, all week, the platform provides academically verified content in the form of a free and digital encyclopedia on the question of Palestine. It includes articles, glossaries, documents, biographies, timelines, and images, making this comprehensive site encompass any museum experience that can be presented and developed later through various exhibitions and activities.

The museum also developed a digital archive for Palestinian society, documenting the achievements and resilience of ordinary people in a "history from below" approach. The archive currently includes hundreds of thousands of papers, audio, and visual materials such as photos, correspondence, newspapers, diaries, leaflets, and recordings. Each of these representing a seed for thousands of future exhibitions and is placed on the digital platform from which visitors can collect, curate, and store items on a private account to create their own private museum.

During the pandemic and lockdown periods, the Palestinian Museum was able to overcome the challenges of the hour because of its make-up as a transnational institution. It started a campaign with the hashtags #MuseumFromHome and #PalestinePerseveres. It created a rich and diverse educational and entertainment program for its audience of adolescents and families, which was published on the museum's various online platforms. In addition, it launched several video tours with the curators of the "Printed in Jerusalem" exhibition, held at the time in the museum, to enable the public on lockdown at home to visit it. The campaign reached a wide audience. Due to the success of this initiative, the museum is now planning to mainstream it by launching a permanent educational platform to transmit the knowledge and artistic content produced by the museum to children, adolescents, and educational workers in Palestine and the world.

The peculiarity of the Palestinian situation has led the museum to take a chance on the diversity and appeal of online content and narratives, but this has become an imperative for museums around the world during the pandemic and beyond. In particular, museums are now competing with entertainment sites and social networking platforms to attract different types of visitors—young, old, or families. This necessitated displaying their collections to an audience they couldn't see in their galleries, as well as creating lively entertainment, educational programs, and effective interactive aesthetic experiences outside the white square rooms and expansive galleries. Instead, museums had to organize visits that connected with emotions, imagination, and unlimited interactions as opposed to having crowds wander in crowded rooms for a few hours.

The experience and identity of the Palestinian Museum—a transnational institution— became an imperative for all museums around the world to communicate with audiences as they now face the challenge of voluntarily reaching out to a global audience.

**Resources**

The Palestinian Museum is a non-governmental institution based in the town of Birzeit. It is one of the most important contemporary cultural projects in Palestine. It was established in 2016, and received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2019, and the Gold Certificate for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Green Buildings in 2017. The museum is one of the most important projects of the Taawun Foundation, a Palestinian non-profit civil organization that provides developmental and humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in the West Bank, including Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, inside the Green Line, and Palestinian communities in Lebanon.



# DR. SALIM ABUTHAHER

**Director of the Digital Archive Project at the Palestinian Museum**

## ABOUT ME

Dr. Salim Abuthaher is a Palestinian researcher and academic working as the director of the Digital Archive Project at the Palestinian Museum. Abuthaher joined Birzeit University, where he obtained a bachelor's degree in civil engineering, then continued his studies at the same university to obtain master's degrees in urban planning and design engineering, and a PhD in social sciences. Abuthaher worked as a lecturer at Birzeit University, in the faculty of educational sciences with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), as the director of an engineering office, and as a research advisor in the areas of local governance, history studies, gender, and urban and cognitive transformations in the global south. His current research interests focus on indigenous studies, and the social history and urban political economy of Palestine and the Middle East and North Africa region.

# THE PALESTINIAN CULTURAL SCENE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: MEMORY AND ELITISM

**Executive Summary**

The paper argues that the Covid-19 pandemic has penetrated social, economic, and cultural boundaries and contributed to the reshaping of classes, practices, and behaviors that perpetuate fragmentation and separation based on social status and consumer tendencies associated with it. The pandemic allowed the lower classes—considering the rush to remedy the disruption caused by the strict closures around the world—to "virtually" access cultural and scientific spaces that turned to the digital world in parallel with their physical existence. Spaces that were otherwise usually monopolized by certain social groups. The paper views the Palestinian Museum's digitization project of its archive as a proactive step in the right direction. It is a forerunner in terms of its type, size, and scope, to establishing the first open digital archive platform available to researchers and the public, who effectively contributed to its digitization and the presentation of the history of Palestine as found in the personal and institutional archives. It presents Palestinian history and culture to the Palestinians and those interested in them. The project brought together the fragmented archives and encompassed the largest possible number of personal experiences, behavior patterns, and practices that consolidate the comprehensive national identity.

**Corona: A pandemic and novel cultural practices[1]**

The rationale behind the history of mankind and its overall course may be one of the most controversial and urgent issues on people's minds today. In his historical approach, Hegel said that major events and historical figures are repeated twice in time. Meanwhile, Karl Marx suggested that an event would first occur as a tragedy, then reoccur as a farce. These views are key to addressing current perceptions related to the cognitive changes and behavioral transformations the world has witnessed because of the pandemic. It is a reminder of the changes in social structures and value systems and of the systematic, critical, and radical theses of the 1960s and 1970s, which were characterized by philosophical and intellectual

tendencies that called for the elimination of historical limitations and for respecting the other. It had a significant impact on reformulating and shaping contemporary critical discourse (Sturruck, 1996; Safadi, 1990), since these events coincided with the outbreak of the seventh cholera epidemic and with the criticism of urban structures that perpetuate social inequality (Abu-Lugod, 1965).


شهادة دولية للتطعيم ضد الكوليرا

هذه لتبين أن ..... عمره ..... ذكر ..... انثى .....

والمبين توقيعه بجانبه .....

قد تطعم أو أعيد تطعيمه بالتاريخ المبين ضد الكوليرا •

| | التاريخ | توقيع ووظيفة المطعم | توقيع ووظيفة المصادق على الخاتم الرسمي |
|---|---|---|---|
| ١ | جرعة اولى ٦٧/١/٢٤ | | |
| ٢ | جرعة ثانية ٦٧/١/٢٨ | | |
| ٣ | | | |
| ٤ | | | |
| ٥ | | | |
| ٦ | | | |
| ٧ | | | |
| ٨ | | | |

تطعيم واعادة التطعيم يجرى بجرعة واحدة من طعم ذو فاعلية محروفة •

تبدأ مناعة ثانوية هذه الشهادة بعد خمسة أيام من تاريخ التطعيم وبحالة اعادته تبتدئ خلال ستة اشهر من ذلك التاريخ وتمتد لمدة ستة أشهر من تاريخ التطعيم أو اعادته •

على الشرطة المبينة بأعلاه فيما يختص بالحجاج فإن هذه الشهادة تدل على ان جرعتين قد اعطيتا بين الواحدة والاخرى ..... يوما • وثانويتها تبتدئ من تاريخ الجرعة الثانية • يصادق على مهنة المطعم من قبل السلطات الصحية او اخر مصرح له من قبل الحكومة المحلية حيث جرى التطعيم أو حيث أعطيت له هذه الشهادة ، اما اذا كان المطعم احد اعضاء السلطات الصحية أو القوات المسلحة يكتفى بوضع الخاتم الرسمي على التوقيع •

يعفى اعضاء القوات المسلحة ليس من الضروري وضع مكان الوجدة •

أن شطب او تعديل في هذه الشهادة تجعلها غير معتبرة •

*Photo 1:*
*International Certificate of Vaccination against Cholera of Jamal Abdel Aziz Hawari, 1966*
*Source: The Collection of Jawad Hawari, Palestinian Museum Digital Archive*

Given the time of the pandemic, and in light of the varying policies of the different regimes and the absence of justice or disparity in the distribution of vaccines, it appears that the Covid-19 pandemic and its repercussions in relation to crisis management and accompanying restrictions on movement have penetrated social, economic, and cultural boundaries. The pandemic constituted a new event that contributed to reshaping class structures and the formulation of new systems of power and individual behaviors and practices. It triggered a discussion on many issues related to the production and reproduction of socio-economic inequality, subtle life interactions, and the ability to consume services—considering the apparent global rush to provide relief assistance to the most vulnerable and marginalized, and to address educational and cultural needs by resorting to the open digital space as an alternative platform available to the public (researchers, students, and visitors). This contrasts with a time where visiting theaters and museums and participating in the cultural scene were deemed elite behaviors linked to the social status of individuals, whether actual or imagined[2], their aspirations, and their access to financial resources that allowed them to attend these events.

Undoubtedly, such behavior has for a long time been an indicator, or evidence, of the symbolic capital an individual possesses. This becomes clearer through the various cultural, social, and economic structures that represent the economics of social practices. Although consumption is considered a driver of post-modern societies and a phenomenon of an economic nature, power relations and social dimensions are related to it, which is also related to the promotion of certain lifestyles and the habit centered on the ability of different classes to consume and compete. It is perpetuated by individuals unconsciously creating a sign of personal styles, individual experiences, and the desire for cultural, social, and symbolic distinction. It constitutes a starting point for behavioral patterns and consumption habits in daily life that are realized or perceived as indicators of social status. It does not only indicate a person's status, but rather the status of others as well[3].

Considering the intellectual commonalities shared by members of the middle class and the local globalized elites with their counterparts around the world (Robinson, 2004; Sklair, 2000), the Palestinian urban fabric was indeed tested. During the past three decades, it witnessed some aspects of a neoliberal system, and numerous visions related to redefining space at the beginning of the pandemic. This led to the rise of new cultural, social, and economic activities. New social actors, who adopted individualistic and globalized values, sought to seize consumption and online shopping because of the closure of many service spaces the elite used to frequent. This represented an attempt to displace and reproduce the social space (Abuthaher, 2020b).



*Photo 2:*
*A scene from the Ramallah Municipality Dabke band's performance on the stage of the Ramallah Girls High School as part of the first Ramallah Festival, which took place in 1961, at the initiative of Ramallah Mayor Nadim Al Zarro and was supervised by the municipality and the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism.*
*Source: The Collection of Janet Mikhail, The Palestinian Digital Museum Archive*

Despite the endeavors for exclusivity to wealth, status, and social prestige, as well as the achievement of a real or imagined affiliation to a particular group which the pandemic has provided, it was the ambiguity with which the crisis was managed, its accelerated transformation, and its unknown ending that made everyone concerned regardless of their class.

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[1] This subtitle is inspired by the title of a blog published by the author; (Abuthaher, 2020a).

[2] See part of the discussion and analysis of the "imagination" or the new social imaginary in Taraki (2014) and Abuthaher (2020b).

[3] Review in this context, Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2018; 1989; 1985; 1984) argued that the individual's position in the multi-dimensional social space is related to the cultural, social, and symbolic capital that social actors possess.

This led to the emergence of common behaviors among the various segments of society in the form of community support and solidarity initiatives, which were visible at least on social media platforms. It also made many cultural and scientific materials and digital activities available for consumption by everyone, from the comfort of their homes. This was seen by many as a new reality addressing elitism and class, prompting the rise of new theories on the behavior of members of the different strata classes. It is also important to examine the new spectrum of collective awareness and how it contributes to the reduction of the gap between the individual and society (Abuthaher, 2020b). While these digital trends came generally in the second quarter of 2020, the Palestinian Museum had worked since its inception in 2016, as a cultural institution that crossed political and geographical boundaries, to produce and transmit knowledge about Palestine, its culture, and society through many platforms, including digital ones, to illuminate the indigenous narrative of Palestinian history and review its multiple aspects.

**The Palestinian Museum Digital Archive: The Basic History of the Palestinians**

There has been a lot of controversy in recent times regarding classical historical structures and the dominant narrative of elitist colonial systems. This prompted a call to criticize these structures and the exclusion of individuals from the historical narrative amid the hegemony of the elitist and authoritarian one within the context of saving these structures. I find it necessary here to refer to Bourdieu's approach (Bourdieu, 1989) to the struggle of individual and collective actors and his interpretation of the dialectical relationship between the "objective moment" and the "subjective moment". The former is concerned with observing behavior related to the action of structures while disregarding the representations of the actors, while the latter reduces sociological observation to individual action, rejecting generalizations that claim a certain structure may produce a particular individual behavior. In my opinion, the objective structures, holistic and elitist classic narratives, and power relations that historians and sociologists build or draw on in the "objective moment" constitute, in fact, a basis for a dominant historic narrative that systematically excludes the lives of ordinary people and the relations between the actors themselves.

Bourdieu addresses the ability of dominant actors and the dominant cultural and social strata to impose its own cultural or symbolic products and tastes in what can be constituted as a form of symbolic violence. This paper examines the classical approach to the study of history, which focuses on articulated characters and events while excluding the experiences of "ordinary" people from the historical narrative. The resulting cognitive tendencies and mythological cultural trends shun the past and the preservation of historical continuity and communication— a symbolic form of violence. It can be said that historical writing has witnessed a clear shift with sociological, geographical, and demographic dimensions in the light of the economic, social, and intellectual transformations that France witnessed in 1968, contributing to the creation of an epistemological and structural break with previous trends in historical research. Michel Foucault (1987) raised many questions about the system of historical relations and the possibility of studying the totality of events. He noted that the interest of historians started to shift to studying, investigating, and highlighting the aspects of separation that were neglected by classical history, explaining that separation became one of the basic elements of history after it was deleted from its pages in the past. It became a practice after it was once an obstacle, liberating us from what is imposed upon us.

It should be noted that social history in the context of the 1960s and 1970s flourished, emerging as a conscious reaction to the dominance of elitist and authoritarian narratives in historical studies. And while social history constitutes a field of historical study that deals with the development of social structures in a society (Katz, 1987; Gunn, 2006), it has since become synonymous with the historical philosophy that expresses the voice of the marginalized and ordinary people while often referring to them by terms such as "basic history" or "history from below". In the countries of the Global South, many trends have emerged calling for the analysis and dismantling of discourses, central knowledge structures, and major historical narratives. These trends aspire to challenge information based on history, confront authorities, hold ideologies related to recorded history accountable, and examine and represent missing and fragmented parts of the dominant historical narrative. They also focus on studying social, economic, and political structures and re-defining the relations of power and control between the authority and the society, the system of values and perceptions, networks of non-authoritarian and elitist relations, and the interaction between the various groups of society. These trends aim to give ordinary people the opportunity to contribute to the production of history away from the official narrative and frameworks of supremacy and political and economic excellence (Said, 1979; Amin, 1995; Guha, 1999; Chakrabarty, 2000). These trends seek to locally produce a parallel liberated historical narrative that does not deny the experiences of specific groups and does not exclude the Palestinians from the historical context, but rather is aware of the historical facts that have been overlooked and the voices of the people who have been absent from the traditional, colonial, authoritarian, and elitist narratives. Undoubtedly, issues related to archival studies and the management of its sources are closely related to recording history, as the latter is impossible in the absence of an archive that covers the narrative's authentic, regional, and global dimensions. Although there have been many efforts to explore what has been hidden in Palestinian archival documents, the archive still suffers from the absence of legislative frameworks regulating archival work. Just like many of the looted national archives, the Palestinian archive has been subjected to incidents of loss and theft. It witnessed the obliteration, destruction, and looting of many of the components of the Palestinians' cultural heritage and many of its contents from personal libraries and private documents— some of which were deposited in the Israeli National Library.

There is no doubt that the absence of any respect for the culture of the colonized by the colonizer and the exclusion of their indigenous memory from recorded history caused a rift between hegemony and knowledge production. It contributed to allowing the various colonial powers to seize and loot the archives of the colonized as part of a framework that aimed to erase indigenous memory, consolidate colonial control, and obliterate the identity and historical narrative of the indigenous population.

In light of the intertwined relationship between the archive, history, colonial domination mechanisms, and the scarcity and fragmentation of Palestinian archival resources, it has not been possible to use these resources effectively as part of cultural and political resistance and the preservation of the identity of the original narrative. However, since the turn of this century, attention to the Palestinian archive has increased by institutions, researchers, intellectuals, and ordinary people in general, in an attempt to preserve history, protect collective memory, and save the rest of it to pass it on to future generations in a scientific and

methodical way, away from manipulation and forgery. As a natural extension of these trends, the Palestinian Museum announced in early 2018 the first steps towards establishing the largest digital archive platform of its kind in the country, representing the history of Palestine using personal, family, and institutional archives in Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon. The project came as a strategic initiative that is part of the vision of the Palestinian Museum and its various programs to create an open digital archive available to researchers and interested individuals, both Palestinians and others, in both Arabic and English



*Photo 3:*
*Part of the work of the poet Khalil Toma's collection (1945-2019), which is part of The Palestinian Digital Museum's archives. The collection includes written drafts and copies of his poems, as well as numerous family photographs, notes, and documents relating to his political and union work.*
*Source: The Collection of Khalil Touma, Palestinian Museum Digital Archive.*

Within a context that categorically rejects all attempts to falsify and reshape the Palestinian narrative by excluding, changing, and blurring the Palestinian identity, the Palestinian Museum's digital archive project sheds light on many aspects of the Palestinians' social history and family heritage from 1800 to the present day. The paper views the project, with its free access to all archived documents, as a proactive step that breaks cultural, class, and geographical boundaries, allowing everyone to have access to the same information. The project, in terms of its type and size, established the first long-term digital archive platform in Palestine and acquired a unique and exceptional importance in the face of the consistent threat and loss the Palestinian heritage is witnessing because of colonial practices. The project also expands to document Palestinian historical events, interruptions, and important pivotal moments, such as the Nakba of 1948 and the Naksa of 1967, the various Palestinian uprisings and the accompanying socio-economic transformations in the struggle, political movements, and academic research. The project aims to consolidate an archive that is considered a sustainable social act that allows individuals to record the indigenous Palestinian existence and to ward off any attempts to obliterate in other people's writings.

This paper concludes that the digital archive project has, since its inception, constituted an initiative to re-consider parallel visions and narratives. It calls for cultural pluralism and rejects the hegemony of one culture, cognitive injustice, and theoretical coercion practiced by supremacist discourse and hegemonic narrative mechanisms. It seems, however, that this approach, which is concerned with addressing trends and conceptual frameworks that focus on recording history from the viewpoint of the elite, has taken another dimension since the start of the pandemic. It called for a worldview after it began within private and fragmented local contexts. The project opened a field for historical study that deals with the development and formation of social structures in a society away from the classical approach. It allowed individuals and groups to participate in the production of history outside the narrative of official and elite frameworks and structures of power. It enabled them to express their identity and narrate their forgotten and oppressed history in their own words.

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# ALYA AL-MULLA

**Curator, Sharjah Art Museum**

## ABOUT US

With over 15 years of work experience at Sharjah Art Museum, Alya Al-Mulla oversees the museum's operations and collections, curating exhibitions, developing collaborations, and day-to-day museum management. Al Mulla graduated with a bachelor's degree in Multimedia Design from American University of Sharjah (2003) and received her MA in History of Art and Museum Studies from Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi (2012). Her work experience includes a three-month internship at the Guimet Museum of Asian Art, Paris, France (2012). She has co-curated and worked on numerous exhibitions, including Lasting Impressions: Baya Mahiddine (2021), and also retrospectives of Ibrahim El-Salahi, Abdulqader Al-Rais, and Najat Mekky.



# Muna Al Hammadi

**Senior Education Specialist, School and Family Programs at Sharjah Art Museum - Education Department**

In 2010, I started working as a Guide at Sharjah Art Museum. I later became an Education Specialist in the school and family programs at the museum, where I prepared and planned workshops for the permanent and temporary exhibitions hosted by Sharjah Art Museum throughout the year. These workshops were typically designed around a variety of artworks—drawing, coloring, printing, sculpture, calligraphy, photography, and other media, for example. These acquisitions related to different topics, and it was our job to look for a link between a few of them and group them together. For example, three artworks could be identified that relate to one topic, like nature. We built a plan and prepared discussion questions to suit specific age groups. After all, discussions with children differ from those we have with older age groups, and so on.

# SHARJAH ART MUSEUM: PLANNING FOR A DIGITAL AGE

The role of museums and audience programing is an ongoing practice that has evolved with time. However, I don't believe anyone was really prepared when the Covid-19 pandemic hit in the first quarter of 2020 and caught us all by surprise.

When museums started to close down one by one in the country and the region, we all assumed it was only a precautionary measure and that it would be a matter of time before we reopened with things going back to normal. Yet, this unusual situation continued for a prolonged period of time. Eventually, it became necessary to come up with other ways to engage with our audiences. And just like other museums in the region and around the world, the main priority was to keep the museum relevant, visible, and accessible to all. Going through the pandemic was a global collective experience. It had, and continues to have, a deep impact on everyone at various levels, including museum audiences and demographics, which have changed significantly in the recent past. The focus has become more community-based, making it more reachable to all.

Soon enough, online engagement became the new buzzword, and it was indeed a challenge to navigate this new digital sphere and understand its dynamics to best reach our audiences. At Sharjah Art Museum, we had four different exhibitions on display at the time of closure. Apart from the museum's permanent collection, the other three exhibitions were part of various partnerships and collaborations with other art entities. One of them was supposed to open the same week when the new safety and precautionary measures came into effect. We looked into the option of offering digital solutions. It became our responsibility to not only provide a visual experience but also assimilate knowledge. Accordingly, the first thing we did was to turn these exhibitions into virtual experiences.

Coincidentally, one of the three exhibitions was "A Century in Flux: Highlights from the Barjeel Art Foundation," which had already been available online in the form of a virtual tour since a year before. The team at the foundation has worked tirelessly to make their collection available to the public. Thus, it became one of the first exhibitions to be launched online again, but in a changed context. The technology was pretty simple and very user-friendly, which I believe is key if we are to think of offering any kind of digital solutions.

At this juncture, I am reminded of the important phrase "the medium is the message," which was made famous by the Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan in 1964. I believe this phrase resonates with us now more than ever. Not to go too deep into this very complex theory, but the point worth noting here is that '[i]t introduces a notable change in our otherwise general understanding of things… in terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves'.

For us at the museum, the idea was to make available the virtual tour link to anyone and everyone so they could easily access the exhibition and view it on their devices and from the comfort of their homes. The tour gives a few viewing options, including a bird's-eye view of the exhibition with a floor plan and a 3D version of the actual galleries where the works are on display. By maintaining the same sense of physical space and movement, the viewer was able to navigate through the rooms just as they would if they were at the museum. By walking around the space digitally and moving the cursor over a certain artwork, a high-resolution version of the work appears along with its captions, both in Arabic and English. It proved to be a success, especially for audiences abroad who had not seen the exhibition when it initially opened in 2018.

This was followed by the exhibition of our museum's permanent collection of "Modern and Contemporary Arab Art," where we applied the same technique. However, because it had never been filmed digitally before, we had to get it filmed. The museum was still closed at the time, and we had strict protocols and measures in place for those entering the premises or carrying out any kind of work there. Only security officers and operational staff were allowed entry. Accordingly, special permission was obtained for a filming crew to enter and film the exhibition. The same crew also filmed the remaining two exhibitions—"Homebound: A Journey in Photography" by Ethiopian artist Aïda Muluneh and "Fairytales Come True: Worlds from the Imagination of Hans Christian Andersen."

The former was an exhibition organized by The Africa Institute in Sharjah, in cooperation with Sharjah Museums Authority (SMA) and Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF). As I mentioned earlier, this was the exhibition that was supposed to open when the closure took place. As a result, The Africa Institute decided to adapt to the current situation and officially launch it to the public online. It was a wonderful collaboration that catered to a niche audience and introduced many new visitors to the museum. Once the museum reopened a few months later, this exhibition proved to be a huge success as the public was eager to see the vibrant and intensely stylized photos in person.

As for the exhibition, "Fairytales Come True: Worlds from the Imagination of Hans Christian Andersen," it was organized by the UAE Board on Books for Young People (UAEBBY). It specifically focused on a younger audience, with a lot of interactive touch screens and tactical displays. It was quite a challenge to turn this vivid and dynamic exhibition into a digital alternative. The displays in the galleries were inspired by fairytales of the Danish writer and were colorfully themed accordingly, with sounds, 3D models, as well as selfie areas. The UAEBBY team undertook the responsibility and came up with wonderful digital conceptions for it. Aside from the captions and information text, there were audio files in the virtual tour that explained the works in greater detail. It also included short videos for each display. By placing the cursor on a particular work, a small box would appear with a prerecorded video in which a child can be seen interacting with that particular work. Although this did not entirely replace the physical experience, it did provide a creative temporary solution. In addition to this virtual experience, UAEBBY also recorded videos of a narrator reading excerpts from some of the fairytales. These videos were shot inside the exhibition galleries at the museum. The videos were later uploaded periodically on social media throughout the duration of the exhibition.

Once the museum had reopened, QR codes were added to offer a safe and contactless experience. So, instead of having to touch any screen or physically interact with the exhibits, scanning the QR code opened a sound file that provided a detailed explanation of the work, making the galleries more digitally accessible with the least amount of physical interaction.

With time, we started receiving calls from some educational centers who wanted us to give them guided tours of these virtual exhibitions. As a result, we started an internal training program for our museum guides to ensure that they were well equipped to give these tours online and offer workshops that people could do at home. It was a new experience for all of us and a fresh way to look at these collections once again, prompting questions such as: What would be the best way to disseminate knowledge through these online platforms? How can we enhance museum learning without it being relegated to a mere online visual gallery?

The sudden transformation to digital and virtual programs presented many challenges. Physical museum visits provided educational and entertaining opportunities that enrich visitors' experiences making them unforgettable. For example, some works of art are just so fine an intricate that one needs to walk all around them to examine their every angle. Some visitors like to take their time and read the plaques and information signs that go with every work of art. Some people may even spend the whole day going around to see the collections. The experience for children is also important, who need practical applications and enjoy individual experiences. They need to move freely around the art pieces in the museum halls and to research them. Most of the pre-planned tours were accompanied by some art workshops allowing the children to freely experiment with different forms of art using the tools the museum provided. All these experiences were based on an engagement between the employees and visitors during physical comprehensive tours that lasted an hour, or an hour and a half covering information about the artwork, questions and answers and allowed opinion sharing.

After moving the guided tours and educational workshops to the virtual world, it was difficult to make a child or student or that visitor who needs to satisfy their curiosity by moving around, touching, and examining the works, to sit in front of computer screen just be a listener. We needed to engage them in a meaningful discussion making the tour experience last for half an hour if not 40 minutes at the most.

We also had to focus the discussions on the realities of the pandemic and their impact on the mental and social health of the individual, regardless of the age group. For example, the painting of the Emirati





artist Abdul Qader Al Rayes entitled "Memories" is devoid of any human element and is of beautiful mountainous desert nature. The challenge was to attract the visitor sitting on the other side of the screen to this large painting and simplify it to become clearer and easy to understand. In the UAE, we prefer to visit nature in winter and when the temperature is moderate. We flee from the city to the confines of nature. Most families, in the past or in recent times went on trips in nature. Accordingly, we asked the visitors about their memories and experiences in nature when they were children or at some point in their lives. The answers were in the affirmative, where people said the painting reminded them of their family trips in nature, where they cooked meals in open air and played games (some even traditional ones), and so on. In this instance, we linked the discussion to family gatherings and memories, which we missed during the pandemic.

One of the challenges that we faced was to digitize the educational tools we used at the museum since it was museums that provided all the material and tools to visitors, including school and university students. Museums closed during the height of the pandemic period. Even after they re-opened, there were precautionary measures and strict procedures in place preventing visitors, for example, from touching anything. We had to continuously disinfect the place and maintain social distance. The latter restricted the movement and freedom of visitors. We asked ourselves, how can all attendees of the virtual programs find the material and tools they need? Do they have the capacity to do that? We prepared lists of material that are easily found at every home and were mostly being reused such as paper and plastic boxes, tissue paper, available coloring tools (we did not specific any color) and other available material. We were successful in meeting our objective and everyone benefited. The final output of the artworks with which we usually conclude our tour exhibited the different techniques used by the visitors due to the use of different material.

When a specialist prepares digital programs, their biggest challenge is putting together an entertaining, educational, artistic workshop for audiences of different age group sitting on the other side of the screen. A screen that is often small and limiting compared to the spacious physical location where the workshop would normally be held.

We developed a new approach based on our personal experience presenting the first digital workshop for children aged 6 to 13. The first step was to review and memorise the workshop's plan and sequence

before presenting it to our work colleagues for feedback; the most noticeable observation was the tension. We agreed to introduce ourselves at the start of the session, refrain from narrating, engage the audience, and encourage their interaction and participation in the dialogue by asking them about their personal opinions or what they would do in the artist's shoes. As a result of audience cross-screen interaction, anxiety and tension have been overtaken by peace and comfort.

One of the successful approaches in these virtual workshops was to depend on another invisible colleague who you put in charge of the technical matters and sharing the presentation material in conjunction with the information you give. We sync together when we present the information, and write down notes to avoid deviating from the topic under discussion.  It is very important in these digital programs to always begin with a strong introduction, a clear voice, a straight posture, and appropriate lighting. It is also important to end with a summary of the session and open the floor to the audience to ask questions then thank them for their attendance.




With the pandemic, institutions continued to work remotely, and it became necessary for employees to find a suitable alternative place at home to work. That lent itself to humorous situations sometimes where family members, especially children, appeared out of nowhere during business meetings or presentations, or when cameras are left open after the end of a meeting, or the constant disturbance of a doorbell distracting everyone. Not to mention those who turned their dining table at home into an office. But this did not stop anyone from doing their work… and doing it well. I was keen not to allow such situations to disrupt the program or impact any one's focus as most as possible.

It is no secret that digital transformation has created opportunities for communication with audiences at a larger scale. While museum visitors love direct interactions during their physical visits, virtual programs did not prevent the introduction of some attractive, useful, and effective activities for a large segment of visitors.

One of the advantages of the digital transformation of museums is the provision of a platform that comprises the acquisitions, exhibitions, and educational workshops for a large segment of society. It did not matter if they were living in the UAE or abroad.  The virtual museum doors were open for all visitors, art lovers or explorers, and they easily accessed the educational resources and pictures of art pieces.

These were some of the makeshift solutions that we offered to our audiences at the time. The idea was not to have just a static virtual exhibition as a one-time solution, but to continue to engage audiences and have a sustainable medium that will thrive with time. All of these virtual tours are still available online. As frustrating and as challenging as all this seemed at the beginning, it certainly opened up new windows of opportunities and options we would not have explored if it was not for the pandemic forcing us to push our boundaries.

These methods of online programming do work with a lot of audiences, especially those who would have otherwise felt intimidated to step inside a museum building due to the pandemic or explore further. Audiences can now enjoy looking at these exhibitions as well as taking part in the educational programs at their own pace.

We can use these digital possibilities to our advantage, especially in this part of the world where much of our Arab art history may be overlooked. If these solutions are used properly, we can reach a wider audience and give new dimensions to narratives and the art canon.

Nevertheless, connecting with audiences via digital platforms should not be the only way to go, but definitely an option that has endless engagement possibilities. Having said that, we should not forget that, despite these various options and vast digital opportunities that we have at our hands, the museum as an actual physical space can never be replaced. And as Manal Ataya, Director General of SMA, once said, the museum is always a place "where conversations take place about what you have seen or what you made together in a workshop – strengthens bonds and creates memories."

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# SAMEH KAAWACH

**Arabic Language Specialist**
**at the Ministry of Culture and Youth**

## ABOUT ME

Sameh Ahmed Kaawach is a Palestinian literary critic, poet and journalist. Born in Lebanon in 1969, he worked as a cultural editor for Al-Kifah Al-Arabi newspaper, collaborating with Nidaa Al-Watan and Al-Nahar newspapers and others. In 2007, he moved to the UAE where he assumed the position of cultural editor at Al-Khaleej newspaper and a consultant for culture and arts at the Abu Dhabi Group for Culture and Arts, before becoming an Arabic language specialist at the Ministry of Culture and Youth in the UAE.

He has nine literary criticism publications, including: "The Question of Vocabulary and Denotation" (2008), "Visions of a Meaning" (2009), "Transformations of Sand : A Reading in the Novelistic Experience of Ali Abu Al-Rish" (2010), "The Key to Doubt: A Reading in the Poetic Experience of Ahmed Al-Asam" (2011), "The Aesthetics of the Poet's Ego: Features of Popular Culture in the Emirates" (2011), and others.

## THE MUSEUM DIGITIZATION EXPERIENCE

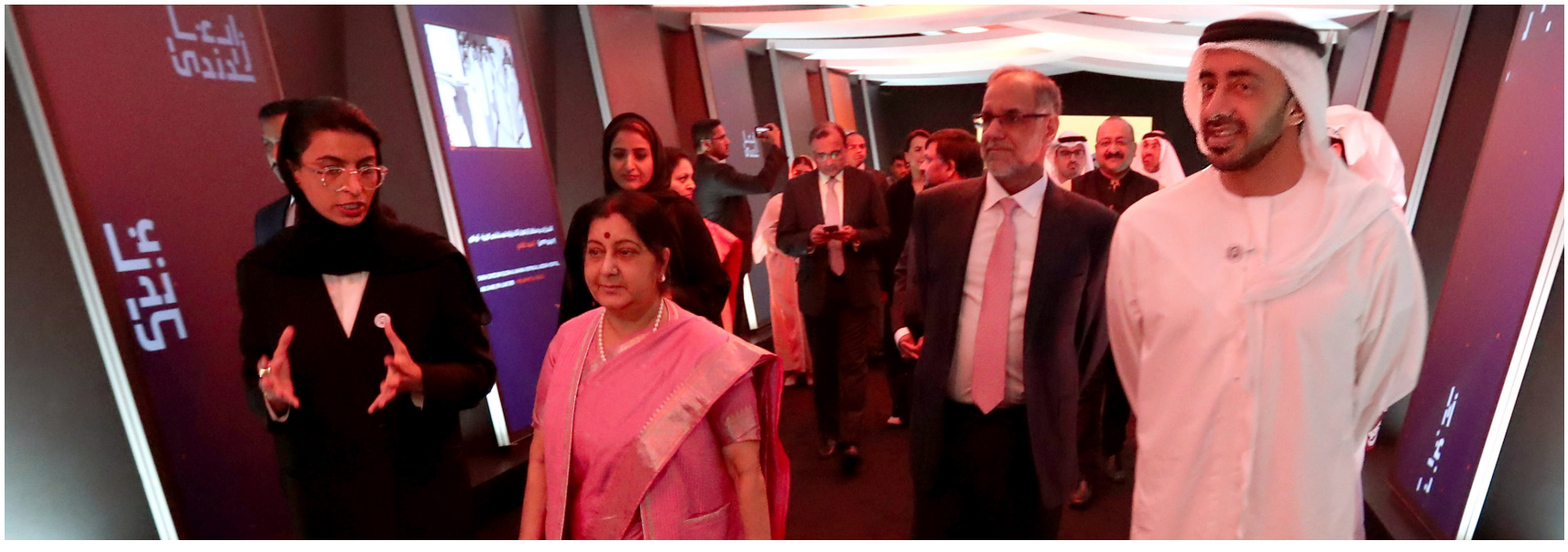
**Executive Summary:**

This research focuses in general on digitization in museums, its necessity and implementation in light of the outputs of the Fourth Revolution — using electronic, digital and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology to achieve it. It addresses the importance of digitization in preserving museum collections and expanding its public and social base across borders within the framework of a mutual global experience and interactive international partnerships.

It sheds light on many scientific theories in extrapolating the status of museums and their digital experience through important global practices at the levels of individuals and institutions. It uses scientific research and professional experimentation in documentation, organization of collections, creation of best presentations to the public, and building mutual creative, artistic, social, and feasible networks.

Through a scientific approach, the research reflects on the vision and efforts of the UAE in museum content digitization. It demonstrates how the UAE is at the forefront of these efforts since the beginnings of the smart digital transformation and digitization of services up to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led government and social institutions to digitally preserve their tangible and intangible acquisitions to promote a knowledge infrastructure to overcome the pandemic. This research also examines some of the digitization experiences in the UAE's Ministry of Culture and Youth, such as the Zayed Digital Museum, and the Ministry's contributions to foreseeing the future of digital transformation in museums, based on its artifacts, art collections, and other objects.

The paper is concluded by looking at pioneering Emirati initiatives in museum content digitization, anticipating its future in the UAE. It looks at the visions that focus on providing digital platforms for museum exhibition and interactive museum experiences such as tours, visits and exploration of collections and capabilities.



**The Museum Digitization Experience**

Virtual museums are interconnected with virtual reality. The latter is a term that constitutes two words: reality, which refers to the state of things or events as they are, and virtual, which means the imaginary or the approximate. Thus, virtual reality becomes a form of imitation or simulation of reality by feeding 3D data to machines. Virtual reality is one of the most advanced technologies used to simulate experiences in various fields, where 3D models are considered the basic or core element of this technology. It makes the individual interact with this imaginary virtual environment and form new learning experiences .

Dr. Ahmed Mohamed Abdel Rahman Enab, Assistant Professor of Islamic Archaeology and Architecture at the Faculty of Archaeology at Fayoum University, argues that virtual museums provide an online creative and interactive opportunity to learn about their artefacts. The digital documentation of authentic artefacts using latest multimedia technologies in an interactive environment that relies on audio and video technology can easily provide the necessary information to visitors in 3D virtual tours in what resembles physical ones at the museum. The virtual tours will allow access to information and identify collections through a database that contains the research and studies associated with those acquisitions as well as other miscellaneous museum services. He notes that virtual museums are an advanced form of the digital museum idea that emerged in the 1990s, which was originally a platform used by large and small museums to post information about their work.

The International Council of Museums defines a digital museum as "a permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, and acquires, preserves, researches, communicates and displays the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity for the purposes of education and study." This definition fulfils the conditions for sustainability and effectiveness since a digital virtual museum produces and sustains databases, which are updated and have public access. It also confirms its effectiveness in acquiring, preserving, researching, and displaying human heritage, both tangible and intangible.

The digitization of museums is also linked to the process of digitizing the human heritage. According to the UNESCO Charter project on the Preservation of Digital Heritage, the disappearance of heritage in any of its forms represents a form of impoverishment for all nations. It argues that the digital heritage consists of unique resources of knowledge and human expression, including cultural, educational, scientific, and administrative resources, and includes technical, legal, medical data and other information created by digital means or converted into digital form from analogue resources .

Wikipedia defines virtual museums as digital entities that rely on the characteristics of the museum to complement, improve, or develop the visitors' experience through customization, interaction, and content enhancement. It argues that a virtual museum must represent the digital footprint of the physical one, or act independently, while maintaining the official mission stipulated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in its definition of museums. The virtual museum must also commit to the provision of public access to its knowledge systems that are embedded in the collections and its exhibitions, and to maintain that in the long run. Digital culture is an integral part of modern societies, since digital technologies "facilitated access to various sources of information around the world, given the critical importance of technological development and digitization in the production of data and knowledge, preservation of documents, and digitization of heritage to make it available and ensure its preservation."

According to Hardo Center's publication on museum digitization, digitization is defined as "the process of converting information sources of all kinds (books, periodicals, audio recordings, pictures, and motion pictures....) into a readable form by computer technologies. "Doug Hodges presents another concept adopted by the National Library of Canada, in which he considers digitization as a process that converts intellectual content available in a traditional physical medium, such as (journal articles, books, manuscripts, maps....) into a digital form. This definition, however, means that the digitization process is not only about obtaining and managing collections of electronic texts, but is primarily related to converting the source of information available in paper form or on a traditional medium into an electronic form. Thus, the traditional text becomes a digitized text that can be viewed using computer technologies.

Manahil Thabet bases her work on the definition that considers the digital museum "a platform on which large and small museums publish information about their objects, noting that prior to 2000, a number of digital museums were established using digital technology, providing an opportunity for distribution all over the world." Examples include web browsers, quick links, and worldwide web everywhere .



**Scientific theories and global practices**

Pierre Yves Duchemin identifies a set of basic objectives for digitization . These can be summarized as:
- Protection of original and rare collections.
- Sharing resources and collections.
- Accessing texts
- Increasing the value of texts.

One of the first museum experimentation with digitization was when the Apple Computer Museum produced a CD in 1992 which was distributed free of charge to 1,000 schools, universities, and museums. The exhibits in the museum were educational, covering topics such as medicine, flora, ecology, and space. To facilitate interaction with the museum, a novel navigation system through a 3D space was developed, allowing interactions with objects in that space. The new system was called "Virtual Navigation".

Some of the most famous examples of virtual museums include the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and many others. The virtual museum known as "Discover Islamic Art", which is organized by the Museum with No Frontiers Foundation in Brussels, is considered the largest virtual museum in the world. The Museum with No Frontiers (MWNF) is one of the most important digital experiences that saved on transportation costs and traditional museum exhibitions.

A pioneering Japanese experience in the field of digitizing the content of art collections is the Templab Museum on Odaiba Island in Japan. Similarly, an inspiring museum experience of the digital museum in Shaanxi Province, northwest China, attracted more than two million virtual visitors from over 120 countries to its website since it became operational in 2012. The museum includes the famous terracotta warriors.

Another inspiring experience is that of the Städel Museum of Frankfurt, which won the Grimm Online Prize in 2015 for its project "Digitorial"— the digital guide to the exhibition "Monet and the Birth of the Impressionist School." Chantal Eichenfelder, Director of Education and Communication at the Stadel Museum, discussed the record number of visitors, digital education and art education in the 21st century .

A unique Saudi experience in digitization in general and the digitization of historical documents and museum holdings in particular is that of King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archives, which sought to serve the history, geography, literature and heritage of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in particular, and the Arab and Islamic countries in general under different themes. For more than 40 years, the foundation sought to preserve, document and research Saudi history resulting in the establishment of many information databases, including the National Manuscripts Database, Oral History Database, Historical Photographs Database, and Historical Documents Database, the King Abdul Aziz Database of Foreign Documents, the Museum Information Database, the Biographical Information Database, and many others using rare historical documents and sources. With the support of the Saudi Ministry of Education, the foundation also established the Digital Center of Saudi History to make the main sources on the history of Saudi Arabia accessible and to protect them for future generations and researchers using modern technology. The center provides institutions and individuals with digitization services for all types of media (books, audio, visual, tangible) in accordance with international standards.

**Digitization in the UAE: Pioneering Leadership**

The UAE is one of the first Arab countries to focus on virtual education technologies in many fields. It established the Museum of the Future in Dubai, which provides innovative scientific solutions that address



the challenges of the future, including virtual environments. The UAE houses many museums which adopt the virtual sphere including Sharjah Art Museum, one of the most important art museums in the country, Louvre Abu Dhabi and many others.

Her Excellency Noura bint Mohammed Al Kaabi, UAE Minister of Culture and Youth, argues that cultural practices in the UAE are changing due to the use of modern technologies in organizing cultural exhibitions within an integrated experience that uses digital platforms and a variety of future innovations, including artificial intelligence and virtual and augmented reality. She says: "We have many examples in our recent history of employing technology in the arts sector, such as the famous works of Andy Warhol, who was known for using innovative technology inspired by graphic arts, and Najla Al Khalifa, a Bahraini artist who is the first Arab artist to use virtual reality in drawing paintings that focus on art history and archaeology."

Her Excellency notes that there are many areas where technology can be used in developing arts and in inspiring creators to invent new techniques for artistic expression, whether in cinema, literature, or music, and deliver them to a wider audience, break language barriers and spread culture and knowledge. Technology after all has changed the experience of galleries, museums, and cultural institutions. For example, a visitor can view a historical work of architecture without having to leave home. Technology can also be employed to preserve the arts and architecture using a variety of techniques to perform a complete analysis of historical buildings and archive and assess any technical issues that require renovations.

One of the distinguished museums in the UAE that sought to digitize the museum experience was the Etihad Museum in Dubai, which is located next to the place where the UAE union document was signed in 1971. With an estimated area of 26,000 square meters, it stands as a prominent landmark that tells the full story of the union. It highlights the events that took place between 1968 and 1974 providing a presentation of the political and social context of the time. It includes many interactive displays and digital content found on screens and in images, films, and even currencies that circulated in the region from 1780 until 1973. The latter found home in a digital display at the museum.

The Museum of the Future in Dubai also emerged to reflect the deep Emirati awareness of the importance of digitizing museums and artistic experiences and transferring them to virtual reality. Unlike traditional museums around the world, it is the first to provide a fertile environment for innovative ideas, technology, and future projects to create a destination for inventors and entrepreneurs. The seven-storeyed building utilizes the latest technologies in augmented and virtual reality, data analysis, artificial intelligence, and machine learning to provide visitors with experiences that answer many pressing questions related to the future of mankind, cities and societies, life on earth, and even outer space.

The Ministry of Culture and Youth believes that the future of culture in the UAE and the world relies on new technologies to create a cultural archive that protects its history and heritage for future generations. In early 2019, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ministry produced many digital platforms for its audiences as well as organized the Zayed Gandhi Digital Museum in Manarat Al Saadiyat in collaboration with the Gandhi Digital Museum in New Delhi. It aimed to celebrate the human values of the founding father, the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, which coincided with the 150th anniversary of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi .

The organization of the museum came as a celebration of two world leaders, whose noble human values were witnessed by the whole world and contributed to spreading the spirit of tolerance, cohesion, and harmony among people. It used interactive images and videos to represent the lives of the two leaders and their achievements.

The museum was designed in a way that went beyond the usual exhibitions, which usually focus on biography and documentary. The aim was to create a meeting place for civilizations, to celebrate cultural exchange and dialogue, and invite visitors to a journey of love, the homeland, the wise leadership, peace, and tolerance at a time of war and strife. The boundaries of the museum were expanded in a figurative sense by using technology in the works of art to represent the commonalities between Sheikh Zayed and Mahatma Gandhi. It also used supporting designs by dividing the museum into six virtual areas: Government and Wisdom, Power of Giving, Peace Advocates, Power of the Word, and Conservation of Nature.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, and the conditions imposed as a result of it as social distancing, lockdowns and curfews, many prestigious Emirati institutions were able to provide exceptional experiences in digitizing museum and artistic content. Sharjah Museums Authority (SMA), for example, expanded its presence by exhibiting 100 pieces



of its artefacts from the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization on the Museum Without Frontliners' website. SMA also provided virtual tours of each of the permanent collection in the Acquisitions of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum, and the exhibition Fairytales Come True: Worlds from the Imagination of Hans Christian Andersen. Inspired by the imagination of the Danish writer and poet Hans Christian Andersen, the exhibition was organized by the UAE Board on Books for Young People, in cooperation with SMA. In addition to the exhibition of Ethiopian artist Aida Muluneh, launched by The Africa Institute in Sharjah in cooperation with SMA and Sharjah Art Foundation, under the title Homecoming: A Journey in Photography. SMA also launched new and diverse digital programs and workshops every month.

It is impossible to count the many UAE museum digitization initiatives that facilitate the virtual learning of collections for audiences locally and globally.  Digitization is considered an important foundation as the UAE prepares for the next 50 years. It is also vital to note the main recommendations of the Developed Museum Conference organized in December in 2020 by SMA, which discussed virtual communication with audiences in light of the challenges posed by conditions similar to the Covid-19 pandemic. It focused on virtual transfer of culture and scientific knowledge globally, while zooming on the role of museums in ensuring virtual access to its collections. Fifteen researchers and museum experts discussed museum experiences in digitization and presented experiences that went beyond the pandemic. Leith Carlson, Executive Director of the Museum of the Future in Dubai, considered engaging audiences with an interactive experience and enhancing emotional and social communication through technology to help them understand the contexts of the works to be one of the most important challenges of digital or virtual museum work.

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# MEHDI QOTBI

**The National Foundation of Museums of Morocco**

## ABOUT ME

The National Foundation of Museums (NMF) of Morocco was established in 2011. In 2014, and in accordance with Law 01.09, this foundation will oversee the management of national museums that were previously managed by the Ministry of Culture. Chaired by Mehdi Qotbi, the NFM is a non-profit institution and a legal entity with financial autonomy that aims to strengthen the governance of the national museums it manages on behalf of the Government. The promotion of culture, as well as the strengthening, preservation, and enhancement of the cultural and artistic Moroccan heritage, is part of the main objectives of the foundation.

## THE NATIONAL FOUNDATION OF MUSEUMS OF MOROCCO

Sharing culture is what we aim for at The National Foundation of Museums of Morocco (NFM) and it motivates our actions every day.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, lockdown measures were deployed, closing almost all museums around the world. As a reaction to this unprecedented situation, the NFM spared no effort to keep in touch with its public by increasing its digital activities. This approach enabled us to enhance museums as cultural and educational assets for every home. Among actions taken to serve this purpose, we maintained a golden thread on our social networks by posting a wide range of cultural content covering paintings, educational games, contests. We also streamed classical Moroccan movies as a result of our partnership with the Moroccan Cinematographic Center (MCC).

Even when the Moroccan museums were forced to close their doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the NFM took action to share the national collections with the world and remain engaged with the museum public during the lockdown period through the creation of hashtags. This approach helped the foundation fulfill its educational and informative objectives through digital content that highlighted some of its greatest national and international exhibitions.

**Redefining the role of digital and communication**

The global communication strategy of the NFM is based on two main pillars: the promotion of its collections and their permanent enrichment, and the promotion of the upcoming exhibitions and all related cultural activities.

The foundation’s social media accounts were mostly used to ensure clear communication of its activities in a timely manner, to encourage the engagement of a wider public and promote the exhibitions.

**MEHDI QOTBI**
*The National Foundation of Museums of Morocco*



The COVID-19 crisis changed museums' perceptions of the digital world forever by highlighting the lack of technological solutions and accelerating changes that were already in progress. The forced temporary closure of museums during the first lockdown in Morocco in March 2020 suddenly pushed digital communication with the public one step further. At the NFM, we mostly used digitization to promote communication about Moroccan heritage and national artists since it has a high potential to impact various aspects of museums' sustainability, social roles, and effectiveness.

Since we were not highly prepared at the foundation to deal with the pandemic in relation to digital support, we created the hashtag #lemuséeàlamaison ("museum at home") to share online activities on our social media and to maintain strong links with the public. We shared many virtual tours of our past exhibitions at the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMVI), such as Picasso, Giacometti, César, Baldaccini, French impressionist painters (Cézanne, Monet, Renoir, Sisley, etc.), Hassan El Glaoui, Chaibia Talal, Fatima Hassan El Farrouj, Radia Bent Lhoucine, and many others.

We highlighted some archeological objects from our national collections and made them come alive through stories on Instagram, so our audience could discover the history of our heritage. During Ramadan, we mostly shared Islamic objects exhibited at the Kasbah Museum of Mediterranean Cultures (in Tangier), which is one of the oldest cultural institutions in Morocco, reflecting the richness and diversity of the Mediterranean region. We also shared collections from the Museum of History and Civilizations (in Rabat), a museum that offers its visitors an exceptionally rich archaeological collection, bringing together the material evidence of the various civilizations settled in Morocco from Prehistory to the Islamic period.

New recurring themes have emerged on our social media, such as "Un jour, un artiste" ("One day, one artist") and "Un jour, une oeuvre" ("One day, one work of art") to promote Moroccan artists and their works of art exhibited in our museums, and share their stories, messages, and visions. We also shared a glimpse/behind-the-scenes look at our exhibitions to enable the public to see the whole process of setting up an exhibition.

Strongly affected by the pandemic, the Moroccan film industry had to stop production and screening of movies since cinemas were forced to close their doors as well. The NMF entered into a partnership with the MCC to stream classical Moroccan movies such as "Rock the Kasbah", "A la recherche du mari de ma femme", "Wachma", "Juanita de Tanger" and "Secrets d'oreillers" and to introduce them to the younger generations by generating and sharing a link that lasts three days on our social media.

Overall, the importance of communication has always been emphasized in the NFM strategies, but the COVID-19 outbreak made us realize how imperative and fundamental digitalization is, and how we have to surely accelerate the transition to digital transformation. At the NFM, we strongly believe that the development of digital technologies will lead to a more valuable and memorable experience for visitors. The diversification of communication methods and the increased frequency of online media use have completely changed the composition of our audience and brought us a younger public. We see this as a way to create further opportunities to change the relationship between our museums and their users, who play a dominant role in shaping the future of the museum industry.

**Preparing for the "new normal"**

After three months of a complete lockdown, from March to June 2020, the foundation reopened its museums following the authorities' approval.We prepared for the reopening of the museums by working on new exhibitions that mainly focused on Moroccan art. The exhibitions were curated under tight restrictions and unforeseeable hardships. Aware that digital does not replace a real visit to the museum, we intensified our efforts to allow Moroccans to return to our museums under very specific conditions. The NFM was one of the very few institutions worldwide to quickly reopen its museums and schedule activities and exhibitions.
"Will the public be there?"
"How will the audience react to the new exhibitions?"



We asked ourselves many questions that showed us that there would be no return to the "old normal" in our museum spaces. All the initiatives and adaptations that took place during the pandemic will remain. The willingness of the museum sector to make the best of the "new normal" and the creativity that has been on show as a result is nothing short of inspiring.

**MEHDI QOTBI**
*The National Foundation of Museums of Morocco*



During the pandemic, we chose to highlight renowned Moroccan artists and perpetuate the tribute exhibitions of Moroccan painters. We started a couple of years ago with tributes to Ahmed Cherkaoui, Hassan El Glaoui, Chaïbia Talal, Fatima Hassan El Farrouj, and Radia Bent Lhoucine at the MMVI.

From July 2020 to April 2021, we exhibited two major Moroccan painters, Jilali Gharbaoui and Fouad Bellamine. We also created one permanent exhibition "Moroccan painters in the national collection, from Ben Ali R'bati to nowadays" (thanks to a huge donation of works of art from the Moroccan Ministry of Culture and the Royal Academy), which focuses on the evolution of our national artistic modernity in the past 100 years, with many artworks by great Moroccan artists such as Serghini, Yacoubi, Melehi, Chebaa, Belkahia, Kacimi, among many others.

In line with its policy of openness to other cultures, the MMVI has showcased, every year since its inauguration in 2014, internationally renowned artists. The "Delacroix, Memories of a Trip to Morocco" exhibition, which was initially scheduled for June 2020, finally opened at the MMVI in July 2021, showcasing the impact the country had on Eugène Delacroix. It was the very first time the French romantic painter had exhibited in the Arab world and on the African continent.



The Foundation also opened, in March 2021, a new museum in the north of Morocco, the Villa Harris–Museum of Tangier, an iconic and historic building with a refined architecture that testifies to the sumptuous and fascinating era of the city in the 19th century. The Villa was built by Walton Burton Harris, a correspondent for the British newspaper The Times.

The permanent exhibition at the museum consisted of a donation of works of art from a private sponsor dedicated to the fascination of Western painters with the light, colors, and hospitality offered by the natural, urban, and social landscapes of Morocco. Following in the footsteps of Delacroix, many painters were impacted by this period, such as Jacques Majorelle, Edy-Legrand, Claudio Bravo, and Jacques Veyrassat. The exhibition also covered the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's, showcasing the affirmation of Moroccan artistic modernity and the diversity of plastic approaches that came with a theoretical and conceptual mastery of the debates that crossed the world art scene in post-independence Morocco.

In Marrakech, the "Morocco, Richness and Diversity Heritage" exhibition opened at the Dar El Bacha – Museum of Confluences, in March 2021. The exhibition provides a glimpse into the Moroccan heritage and showcases more than 2,000 years of our history, starting from the ancient era and the Roman settlement in Morocco until the early years of the 20th century through a collection of more than 150 items organized by sections.

Finally, we organized the "A Bonne Distance(s)" exhibition in partnership with the French Press Agency (AFP) and the Institut Français (The French institute) in Rabat. The AFP, which is present in 151 countries around the world with a network of more than 200 journalists, has covered the COVID-19 crisis very closely on the ground. Its reporters were mobilized on a daily basis to witness the effects of the pandemic, narrating its stories and the great upheavals that followed, giving a face to this invisible enemy. The exhibition includes more than 200 photos taken around the world documenting life under the virus, from New York to Wuhan, via Thailand, the Amazon forest, and the esplanade of the Holy City of Mecca.

**More fear than harm**

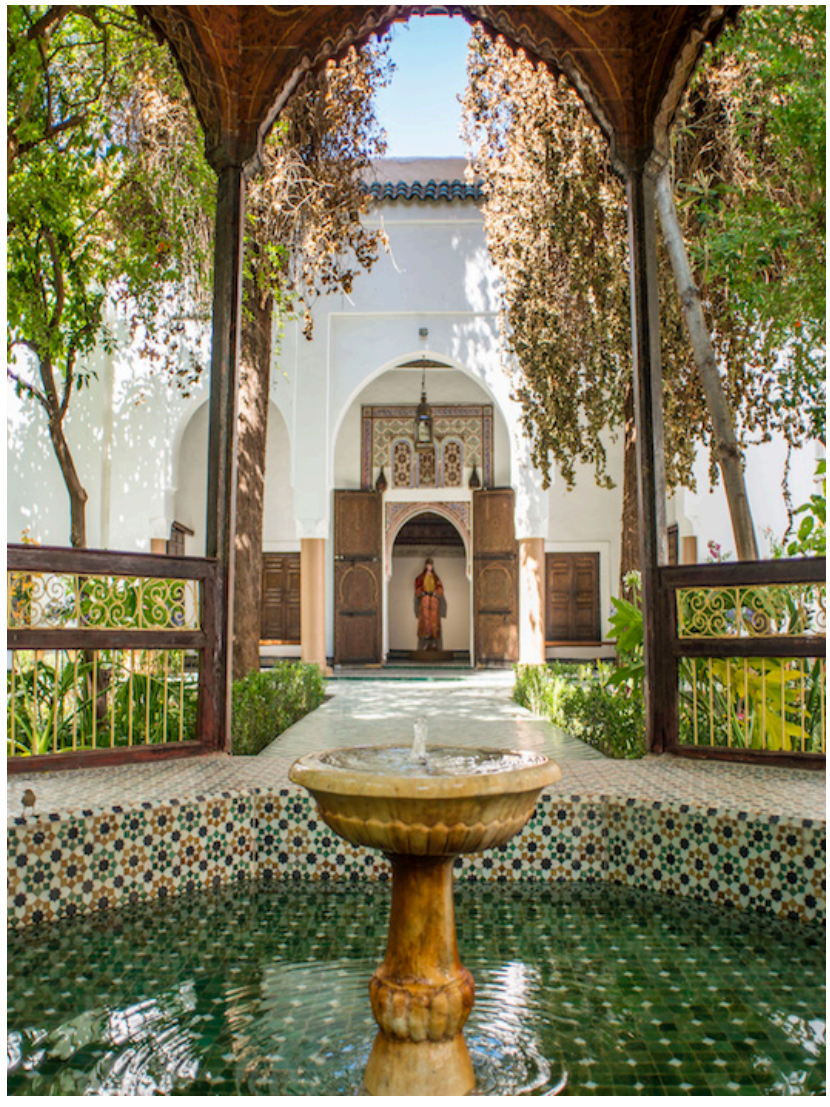
This year made us realize that our Moroccan heritage should be, more than ever, at the heart of the foundation's policy and commitments. It is important for us to support Moroccan creatives and the national artistic heritage in order to perpetuate it. Our Moroccan artists represent the cultural identity of Morocco and are the guardians of the imagination of an entire society.

In the middle of the pandemic, we launched a call with the support of the Ministry of Culture for a competition for the acquisition of works by Moroccan artists. The works are now on exhibit at the MMVI. It is essential for us to show our support for these artists and to offer them national and international visibility.

We are also very thankful to all the sponsors who helped us through this pandemic with their unexpected donations. Private sponsorship represents a large part of the foundation's resources. It demonstrates not only Moroccans' trust in the NFM, but also the altruism, patriotism, and generosity of citizens who assisted us in filling the museums and exhibitions with valuable and relevant collections that enrich our national cultural landscape.

Certainly, the impact of the pandemic and the damage it has caused far exceeded our expectations. As advocated by Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, "Culture has helped us out of the crisis." This is why museums are urged to rethink their strategies by offering innovative and creative solutions in an era of social distancing to ensure the safety and comfort of their visitors and staff while continuing their mission of offering unique and immersive experiences.

The years 2020 and 2021 were intense, filled with achievements, research, and experimentation, and they paved the way for us to adjust to the needs of our contemporary era and all the changes that accompany it. The foundation will definitely intensify its efforts and investment in innovation and research to improve the digital transformation and conservation of works of art in accordance with international standards.



On a slightly more personal note, we, at the foundation, hope that the work we have done with passion and abnegation so far will serve future generations and allow them to better understand their culture and heritage and disseminate them with love and pride.

The National Foundation of Museums (NMF) of Morocco was created in 2011. In 2014, under Law 01.09, this foundation will oversee the national museums that were previously managed by the Ministry of Culture.

Chaired by Mehdi Qotbi, the NFM is a non-profit institution and a legal entity with financial autonomy that aims to strengthen the governance of the national museums it manages on behalf of the Government.

The promotion of culture, as well as the strengthening, preservation, and enhancement of the cultural and artistic Moroccan heritage, is part of the main objectives of the foundation. The NFM supports the national museums through restoration of the buildings, upgrading exhibition conditions and existing collections, as well as a commitment to cultural diplomacy that promotes dialogue and exchange between different countries.







# MANUEL RABATÉ

**Director - Louvre Abu Dhabi**

## ABOUT ME

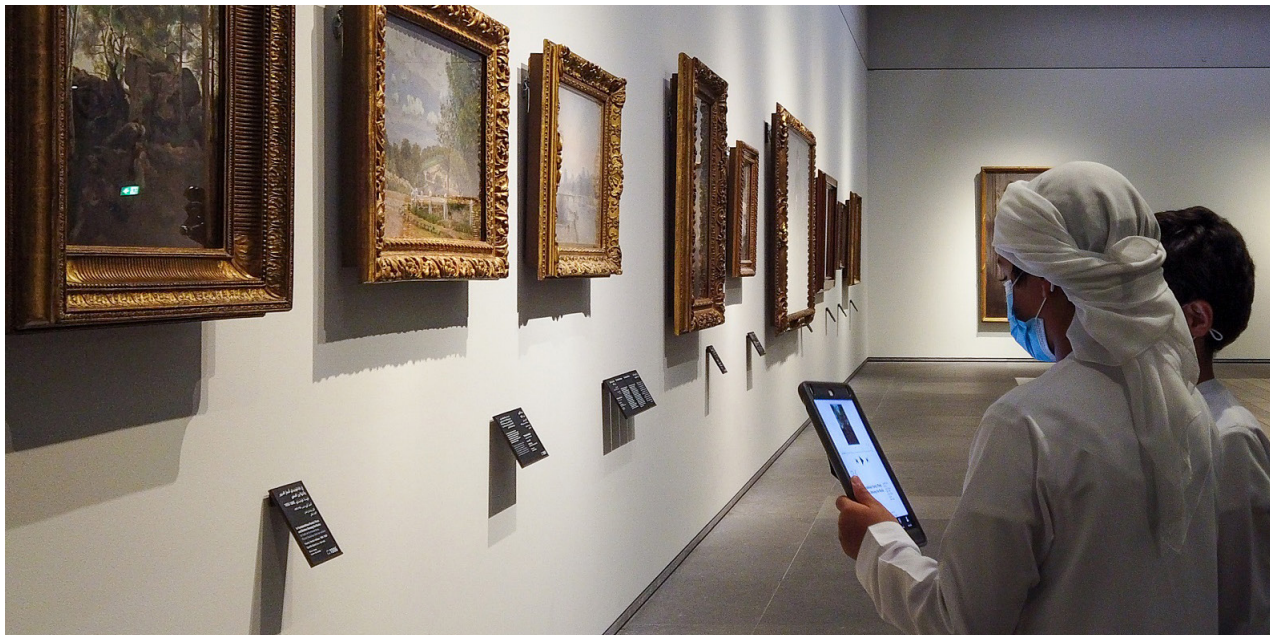
Manuel Rabaté has been Director of Louvre Abu Dhabi since 2016 and oversees all aspects of its operations and activity. Rabaté has worked on the museum since its inception, joining Agence France-Muséums a year after the signature of the intergovernmental agreement between France and Abu Dhabi, first as CFO, then Secretary General and CEO (2008-2016). Rabaté was Deputy Director of Cultural Development (2005-2008) of Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac for its opening, managing the launch of the museum's first touring exhibitions. He is a graduate of Sciences Po (1998) and HEC Business School (2001), and a Knight of France's National Order of Merit.

# CLOSED CIRCUIT: LOUVRE ABU DHABI & THE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE FROM CLOSURE THROUGH REOPENING

Whereas online engagement, virtual exhibition and collection visits, and robust social media channels were much desired but not at the core of museums' mission's pre-pandemic, they have now become benchmarks for sustainable business models and an essential litmus test of a museum's ability to maintain and grow audiences.

This paper explores Louvre Abu Dhabi's acceleration of the digital experience as a core pillar of the museum's strategy and its holistic implementation, across all departments and across all aspects of the visitor experience. The digital transformation has been underway within museums just as it has for every industry, and for some time. What the pandemic fundamentally and suddenly changed was the speed and depth of digital solutions to meet structural and operational needs as well as provide new visitor experiences.

An exploration of Louvre Abu Dhabi's digital experience – how and when new initiatives were implemented—is structured around three purposes and three areas of impact. First, the paper focuses on the operational implementations, the agile adoption of digital tools during Louvre Abu Dhabi's 100-day closure in spring 2020. Second, it focuses on visitor experience, on bringing the museum's mission, collection, and programmes into the digital space. Finally, now that museums have reopened to physical audiences, it examines how this adopted hybrid digital-physical model continues to evolve at Louvre Abu Dhabi.



**Operational Implementation**

In mid-March 2020, with the temporary closure announced, my museum colleagues and I faced the daunting challenge of managing the safety and security of a museum empty of all staff. For Louvre Abu Dhabi, as it was for the Department of Culture and Tourism-Abu Dhabi, technology came to the rescue in affording us the ability to shift entire staff teams to working remotely from home overnight. Collaboration continued from afar and Zoom and Microsoft Teams entered our daily lives. After first ensuring the health and safety of our people and the artworks in our care, our thoughts immediately turned to how we were going to prepare to re-opening safely for physical visitors. Intimate spaces to engage with artworks now became bottlenecks that needed to be addressed; mediation tools including large touchscreens, printed tickets, and audio guide devices needed to be completely re-conceived. For these immediate concerns, we turned to Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted technology. This allowed for a point-by-point analysis of where those bottlenecks existed. This technology gave an immediate bird's-eye view that significantly eased and shortened the onerous challenges faced by our operations team.

Our teams now faced the challenge of implementing a purely digital, timed ticketing system, as well as bringing all our mediation tools online, onto the Louvre Abu Dhabi app for mobile phone. In just over a month, the app and Louvre Abu Dhabi website went from an alternative mediation tool to a central platform and home to museology mediation, multimedia content, and commissioned digital programmes and content.

Our marketing team turned to WhatsApp, another programme already engrained in our daily communication, to put it to use with paintings talking to one another. To announce the museum's reopening on June 24th, we produced a video capturing a WhatsApp chat between Louvre Abu Dhabi's Édouard Manet's, The Bohemian, our Bactrian Princess, and Osman Hamdi Bey's Young Emir Studying, with the Mona Lisa from Musée du Louvre, and Vincent van Gogh's self-portrait from Musée d'Orsay, that captures their excitement around the re-opening.

Ensuring safety of staff and visitors alike would not have been possible without the centralized data, tracing and testing services of Abu Dhabi health service's digital application, and the Abu Dhabi government's ability to quickly ascertain the measures necessary to guarantee safety through the "Go Safe" certificate made for a clear mandate on what we needed to do to reopen safely.

**Visitor Experience**

Louvre Abu Dhabi was in its third year when the pandemic hit, just having celebrated its second anniversary in November 2019. It is difficult to understate the impact of this period on museums' missions, and not every transformation called for was brought about by the pandemic alone. As civic institutions, we are being called upon to speak with more voices to a larger and more diverse audience than ever before. With this fundamental shift in role and responsibility, Louvre Abu Dhabi embraced digital solutions to reinvent how audiences experience our mission.

Focusing on the works in our collection that represent major shifts in universal themes and human experience, we immediately accelerated the digitization of our permanent collection and made it available on the app and on our website. Transforming our app into a platform where the collection could be accessed anywhere, anytime as a relevant, remote resource required an immediate pivot from that content as a mere mediation tool, complimentary to experiencing an artwork in-person as part of an audio guide. Digitizing our collection had been a long-term project well before spring of 2020, but this period of closure meant an acceleration of this project, among many others. In March 2020, our current exhibition, Furusiyya: The Art of Chivalry between East and West came online as a 360-degree tour, with every wall text and in-gallery mediation tool reconceived for a virtual tour environment and a digital catalogue. These initiatives formed the core of expanded access.






The digital transformation of our educational outreach was as swift, with our team immediately bringing impactful programs online. The "Make and Play" series debuted on our social media handles, with downloadable art activities for children based on artworks and artefacts in the permanent collection. School children's classrooms in local schools were connected by video link with those abroad through "YouthSpeak", inviting whole classrooms on a virtual tour of the museum led by our education department. Similarly, others in our community who we knew to be particularly potentially vulnerable and isolated, such as senior citizens, were engaged in a series of moderated video conversations where an artwork served as a prompt for participants to share stories and life experiences. Finally, in our mission to tell stories of cultural connections, we saw opportunities to experiment in new digital mediums for storytelling. What was once supplemental digital content became central in the form of original, commissioned collaborations. Louvre Abu Dhabi partnered with the streaming platform anghami to create playlists to accompany physical or virtual visits to our galleries and commissioned an original audio-visual collaboration with Soundwalk Collective entitled "We Are Not Alone", which debuted on Louvre Abu Dhabi's website in June 2020. Narrated by Hussain Al Jassmi, Willem Dafoe, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Zhou Dongyu, Nina Kraviz, Wim Wenders, and Jean Nouvel (in their respective languages of Arabic, English, French, Chinese, Russian, and German), the visitor experience was no longer tethered to physical visitation. A cinematic, science-fiction-inspired podcast, video and narrated audio transported audiences regardless of locale, to a futuristic post-human world under Louvre Abu Dhabi's dome. "We Are Not Alone" was nominated in 2021 for an Amby award for best performances in audio fiction.

November 2020 marked our third anniversary. On this occasion we again approached this milestone as an opportunity to bring the visitor experience into a purely digital realm, this time bringing the permanent collection to life through a commissioned short film. The Pulse of Time premiered live on YouTube on November 11 in English, French, and Arabic. Narrated by Saoud Al Kaabi, Charles Dance, and Irène Jacob, the 12 chapters of Louvre Abu Dhabi's permanent collection were explored through universal themes and through-lines in a purely digital representation. Rather than a divergence from the physical experience of standing before a work of art, this commissioned artwork was in itself an embodying extension of the collection, expanding access to the collection to a much wider audience unable to access our galleries physically, and a new medium through which Louvre Abu Dhabi could convey our curatorial narrative.

Similarly, in November 2020 we were able to co-convene with New York University Abu Dhabi over 60 illustrious guest speakers, panellists, and moderators from around the world for the first-of-its-kind, free virtual symposium addressing the new challenges and responsibilities facing museums today, Reframing Museums. Through a pre-symposium series entitled "Unframed Voices," museum professionals from across the globe gathered virtually to revisit three institutional pillars, the collection, building/site, and people, and define the key questions they – as museum professionals and artists – would like to see addressed during the symposium. The three-day programme format included roundtable discussions, keynote speeches, and presented case studies followed by regular opportunities for attendees to network in break-out sessions and to continue discussions in a Virtual World Café. The digital nature of the symposium provided the ideal platform for seamless engagement with all who participated and attended, from around the globe. Virtual participation exceeded the 1000 user limit well before opening, but all content was recorded, translated in Arabic and French, and made available to all on YouTube, where it can be accessed today.

Collectively, Louvre Abu Dhabi's acceleration and adoption of alternative, digital offerings for audience engagement provided learnings across all departments. Adoption and implementation of digital solutions to the challenges of 2020 have now become the extension of our physical offering. Tracking audience engagement from 2020-2021, there is no doubt that our expanded digital footprint of audience engagement, original commissioned content, and educational programmes are here to stay in a complimentary, hybrid model. Recorded video roundtables with exhibition curators, 360-degree exhibition experiences, and virtual tours have all led to increased, return engagement of global audiences from more geographies. For Abstraction and Calligraphy: Towards a Universal Language, our first international exhibition post-closure, the hybrid digital-physical model was carried through with a recorded pop-up music performance with Berklee Abu Dhabi, a curator video with Didier Ottinger of the Centre Pompidou and a calligraphy demonstration by Emirati artist Mohammed Mandi.

An expanded digital footprint does not, however, address the significant economic losses many institutions are contending with. If anything, the pandemic crisis has challenged the museum world's economics, sustainability, and model for the long-term, leading to a questioning of—between paid ticketing for virtual access and the human cost of maintaining vastly expanded virtual museum environments—where value truly lies. What my colleagues and I have concluded in reflecting on these many new models and their continued implementation in varied ways is that true value still lies in the moment of human connection. The monetizing opportunities that museums have cautiously experimented in – from guided, virtual tours to ticketed previews – still depend upon access to knowledge and guidance from a human behind the screen. The most impressive Augmented Reality (AR) rendering of a museum's gallery space can allow for representation of the physical with added opportunities for interactivity with the artworks, but if the spaces are devoid of live dialogue and human exchange, I question how long that ascribed value can hold.

**Back to the museum – a hybrid model**

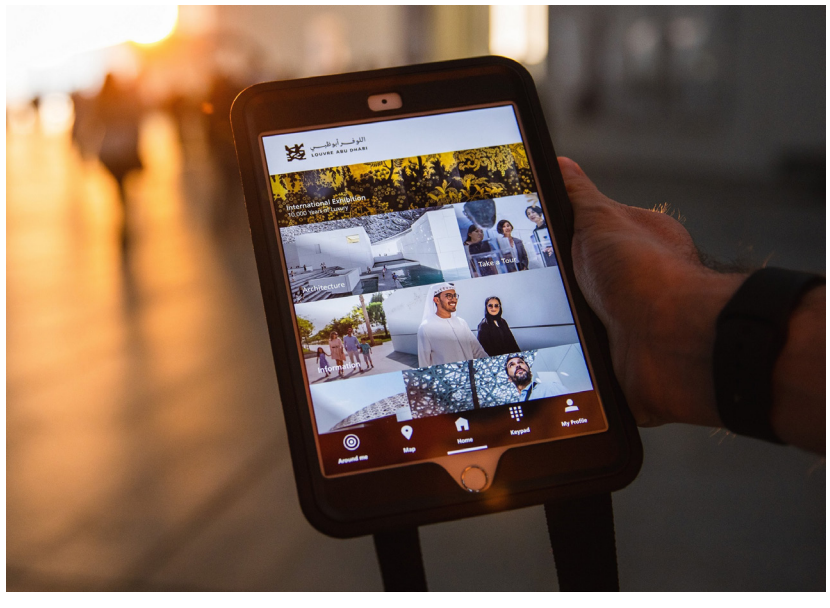
In effect, a return to the museum space means a continuation of content development across two planes – that which is new and original and purely digital or purely physical, along with flexible programming that includes both. "We Are Not Alone" still engages audiences whether they are under the dome on a tour or listening in from anywhere in the world through our website; our anghami playlists can be enjoyed in relation to exploring our galleries or not; and "Make and Play" activities for children are back within the museum, with safety measures throughout, as well as online.

As we saw more opportunities to bring audiences on-site for physical programming, Mandi, along with Juma Alhaj, hosted sold-out Masterclasses, and in-person children's workshops returned. Integrated physical-digital programming is here to stay, not just out of reactive necessity, but as proactive strategy to increase access for all and to bring about continued exploration of how Louvre Abu Dhabi can continue to tell stories differently, through more voices, in new mediums and over varied, complimentary platforms.

New metrics and measurements of success are now firmly multi-faceted, encompassing physical attendance figures, digital engagement, and social media benchmarks. Beyond the data points, what has also been instructive for Louvre Abu Dhabi was the embrace of technology in new ways within the gallery space. In June 2021, we re-opened the Children's Museum, which closed in March of 2020 and remained closed for more than a year in accordance with health and safety guidance. A year of embracing digital acceleration came full circle. First, we saw immersion in the digital space to bring all our programs, content, and mission to life in a solely digital, remote context. Secondly, upon reopening we experienced the continuation of digital alternatives within a hybrid system of audience engagement. And now, along with this continued hybrid model, technology plays a crucial role in allowing for visitors to safely return to our galleries and ease disruptions of the visitor experience in the face of changing and still-challenging circumstances.

Emotions! The New Art Adventure opened on June 18, 2021, aimed at children aged four to 10. Works from Louvre Abu Dhabi's collection joined those on loan from the Musée du Louvre, the Musée d'Orsay, and the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, including marble busts of a Happy Child, a Sulky Child, and a Nó theatre mask, respectively. Children, whose tactile mode of experiencing the world around them, presented a unique challenge to our Museography & Multimedia Mediation team considering the health and safety restrictions. Touchpoints of the exhibition turned touchless; gamification became part of the visitor experience with children collecting points as they completed activities in identifying emotions; local artists Ali Kashwani, Shaima Al Amri and Maryam Al Atouly came to life on video screen to lead children through craft projects to represent different emotions; and 'Emo', a digital character, guided children through a series of challenges to ultimately "master" their emotions.

Technology now has a centralized presence in our mediation implementation in a way that had been previously ancillary. We anticipate this to continue. Our challenge, like that of so many institutions, is to seamlessly integrate the convergence of these tools – in the context of a physical visit as much as the visitor experience by smart phone. In parallel with this integration, however, will remain our steadfast belief in the value of human interaction. As Emotions! argues, art is an emotional conduit and a prompt. An artwork asks a response of its audience. The creative impulse is not driven by provocation alone, but somewhere between affirmation of a human experience, the generosity of shared beauty, and a desire to connect, every artwork asks us to look upon it with open, empathetic spirit. We find ourselves fatigued, trying in vain to make eye contact in a world of video conference calls. To only experience art through a screen




and devoid of human interaction can, I believe, ultimately lead to similar frustration over time. This great experiment of technological integration is here to stay and will only accelerate further as new modes of communication and simulation evolve. At Louvre Abu Dhabi we will continue to embrace this integration whilst also maintaining a firm belief in the value and primacy of human interaction.

**References**

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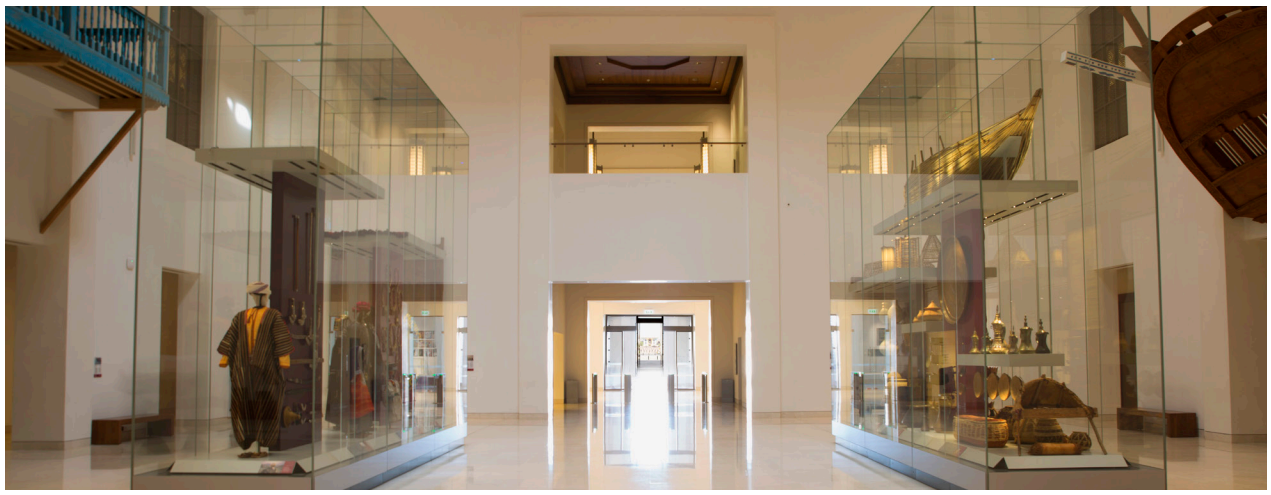
# THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF OMAN

# THE NATIONAL MUSEUM HIGHLIGHTS OMANI CULTURAL HERITAGE USING CYBERSPACE

The National Museum is the most prominent cultural institution in the Sultanate of Oman. It is dedicated to highlighting Omani cultural heritage since the Sultanate's first human settlements. It is through such institutions that we look forward to the future. The National Museum was established by Royal Decree (62/2013) on November 20, 2013 (16 Muharram 1435 AH), declaring it a legal entity in accordance with internationally recognized museum classification experiences and standards. The museum's educational, cultural, and humanitarian mission is to consolidate noble Omani values, establish a sense of belonging, and raise public awareness about Omani history, heritage, and culture among citizens, residents, and visitors. It seeks to develop their creative and intellectual abilities, especially in the areas of preserving evidence and collectibles, highlighting the various cultural aspects of Oman, and implementing best practices and standards in museum sciences.

The display experience at the museum is divided into 14 galleries as follows: Land and People Gallery, Maritime History Gallery, Arms and Armor Gallery, Civilization in the Making Gallery, Aflaj Gallery, Currencies Gallery, Timeline Gallery, the Prehistory and Ancient History Gallery, Splendors of Islam Gallery, Oman and the World Gallery, Renaissance Gallery, and Intangible Heritage Gallery. They house over 7,000 distinctive and carefully selected pieces, as well as 33 digital interactive display systems.

The National Museum is considered the Sultanate's first to open a learning center that meets the highest international standards. It offers a variety of educational programs to raise public awareness about the importance of the Omani cultural heritage, thereby increasing interest in Oman's ancient history among all types of visitors. It is also the Sultanate's first museum with conservation facilities, fully equipped laboratories, and an audio-visual exhibition gallery that uses UHD technology. It is also the first museum in the Middle East to use the Arabic Braille system. The museum houses a large collection of prehistoric archaeological



artifacts and employs the region's first open storage system, where visitors can learn about the different stages that the museum pieces undergo before they are displayed.

The National Museum also offers a "Friends of Oman Museums" membership card, which entitles holders to a variety of exclusive services at the National Museum, the Royal Opera House, and the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism's museums, which include the Natural History Museum, the Omani-French Museum, the Children's Museum, and the Saidia School of Education Museum. This card is specifically designed to provide added value for frequent museum visitors, and it can be renewed annually.



Several royal decrees relating to the National Museum were issued in 2020, most notably His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq's honorary patronage of the National Museum and the assignment of the late Sultan Qaboos Bin Said bin Taimour's most prominent royal possessions to the National Museum in order to preserve the late Sultan's legacy.

Furthermore, by all accounts, 2020 was an exceptional year. It marked the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus, which was declared as a global pandemic, resulting in the implementation of a number of precautionary measures, including the closure of the National Museum for nearly eight and a half months (from 17 March to 1 December 2020) in accordance with the decisions of the Supreme Committee responsible for addressing the pandemic's impact. Foreign tourism also stopped completely. Nonetheless, it was a busy year full of achievements, challenges and success stories of which we are proud.

Following the pandemic outbreak, the National Museum did not stop working. It entered the world of cyberspace and implemented several projects, organized events and activities on various online platforms. Employees also worked remotely and had access to the museum's various systems, enabling them to handle and clear transactions electronically, and reducing paperwork.

The museum's Learning Center organized 153 online programs and activities, resulting in a 36% increase in the number of those who benefited from the family program. There was also an increase in public participation in other programs, such as the program for people with disabilities, which increased by 14%, and the continuing education program for adults, which increased by 8%. The museum built on this experience in 2021. In collaboration with the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the museum also organized activities focused on their loaned items as a part of a framework to introduce Omani cultural heritage, promote the Sultanate regionally and internationally, and highlight its cultural role as a bridge between East and West. The museum's social media platforms registered 17,942 participants until the end of December 2020.

The National Museum, through its Learning Center, aims to involve the largest possible number of visitors in its educational programs. As a result, it identified target groups interested in Omani cultural and historical affairs: representatives of various national and international cultural and educational institutions, historians, artists, craftsmen, researchers, museum workers, and the general public— Omani citizens and residents, foreign tourists, young employees (aged 25-35), visitors with special needs, school students (under 18 years old), college and university students, and the public and private sectors.



The museum also launched a trial version of its website (www.nm.gov.om) on 8 March 2020. The site is a digital portal that highlights the role of the museum and it serves as an informational resource for visitors and specialists, with an interactive map that displays the museum galleries, prominent archaeological artifacts, as well as interactive activities and programs.

As part of the 50th National Day celebrations, a competition titled "The Happy Covenant" was launched on social media sites, which was the most trending topic in the Sultanate. It also enabled the use of IGTV videos for the first time, which resulted in a 1000% increase in followers. The museum also organized a poetry evening titled "For the Love of the Country", which featured prominent Omani poets via "Zoom," and during which poems describing Oman's historical greatness and developmental achievements were recited, and rejoiced of what is being implemented in Oman, the land of peace.

The National Museum also produced a program entitled "Findings and Recording History", which is a series of video clips that introduce the viewer to the museum's most prominent archaeological finds, handicrafts, manuscripts, documents, correspondence, publications, ancient coins, models of ships, boats, marine navigation tools and traditional weapons. The videos were published as daily episodes across social media platforms during the holy month of Ramadan in 2021.

Last year, the museum held a "Zoom" session celebration to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the inclusion of its Land of Frankincense in the UNESCO World Cultural and Natural Heritage List.

It also organized a lecture titled " Muscat: The Social and Economic Life" on International Day of Cities, which is celebrated on October 31st every year. The "Zoom" lecture featured Dr. Salim Al Hinai, author of the book "Muscat (Social and Economic Life)".

In the same year, the National Museum hosted the "Creative Imagination" program, which was presented by Dr. Nasser Balanji, Associate Professor in the Department of Fine Arts at the Scientific College of Design in the Sultanate, which witnessed the participation of 20 women artists. The program consisted of 14 stages divided into two phases— one at the museum and the other via remote video communication. The objective of this workshop was to work on creating artworks inspired by the museum's collections using contemporary styles.

This year, the National Museum organized a workshop titled "Sustaining Community Initiatives", via "Zoom," featuring Qais Bin Salem Al-Maqrashi, CEO of the Youth Sada Foundation.

The past year also witnessed the organization of exhibitions and performances, both locally and internationally. The international exhibition "Patterns and Symbols: The Heritage of Belarusian Decoration" was transformed into a virtual experience on the museum's official website. It is the museum's first hosted digitized exhibition. Furthermore, the museum was the only one in the Middle East to take part in external events such as the exhibition "Cultural Treasures Online: Choices of Directors of Participating International Museums." The event was organized by the National Museum of China, and witnessed the participation of 16 national and international museums via "Zoom." The National Museum also participated in the activities accompanying the "Per Fumum" exhibition, which focused on perfumes. The virtual exhibition was organized by Archeology Museum in Turin, Italy. The Omani National Museum presented nine artifacts related to Omani perfumes and incense, including the oldest incense burner discovered in Oman, which is 4,500 years old from Ras Al-Jinz. The museum also presented ceremonial incense burners, a frankincense scraping tool, and an antique frankincense preserver. In the course of developing the museum collection, about 1,773 artifacts were electronically documented.

In terms of the museum's future plans, it is seeking to develop its "virtual tours", which will enable visitors to take a 3D journey through the museum's galleries and discover ancient Omani history and culture, as well as the museum's collections. The museum is also working on a "audio-guide" project, which is a self-guided tour inside the museum that allows visitors to use their mobile phones to select which information they want to hear in the gallery they are in. in addition, the museum is developing a "robot" to greet visitors and answer frequently asked questions about the museum in Arabic and English.

The Omani National Museum is adapting to the current situation by developing innovative strategies and solutions and utilizing the virtual space to provide its services to all visitors, thereby facilitating access to culture. The museum also seeks to integrate digital technology into its tours once life returns to normal, which would create a paradigm shift for the museum sector in Oman and bring it in line with the best museum standards and practices in the world.



ما هي الولاية العُمانية التي اتخذها الإمام ناصر بن مرشد اليعربي عاصمة له في محافظة جنوب الباطنة؟

What is the Omani Wilayat located in South al-Batinah Governorate that served as the capital of Oman under the rule of Imam Nasir bin Murshid al-Yarubi ?



ما هي المحافظة العُمانية التي تشتهر بصناعة "الجرز"؟

What is the Omani Governate well known to manufacture "*al-Jirz*"?



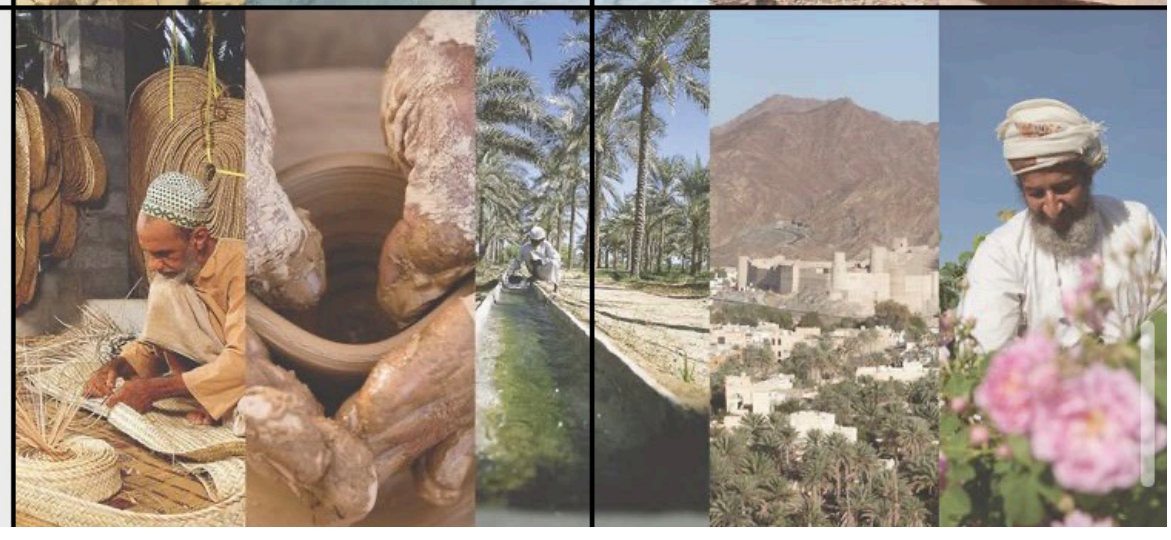
ما هو الموقع الأثري العُماني الذي أُدرِج في قائمة التراث العالمي لليونسكو عام ١٩٨٨م؟

What is the Omani archaeological site inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage list in 1988 CE?



ما هو أول موقع عُماني أُدرِج في قائمة التراث العالمي لليونسكو في عام ١٩٨٧م؟

What is the first inscription in Oman to be listed in UNESCO's World Heritage Site in 1987 CE?





# MAHMOUD MOHAMED ABDEL ALALEM

**Research in documentation, libraries and information**
Heritage - Dubai - United Arab Emirates

## ABOUT ME

Mahmoud Mohamed Abdel Alalem was born in the village of Monkitin in the Minya Governorate, Egypt in 1992. He graduated from the Department of Documentation, Library and Information Sciences at Minya University with honors and became a member of the International Council on Archives in Paris. He also holds a master's degree in Arab Systems for Document Management and Electronic Archiving. Abdul Samad worked at the Juma Al Majid Center for Culture and Heritage in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and he still has several Arab and international initiatives in the fields of documents, electronic archiving, and information sciences. Abdel Samad has published his peer-reviewed scientific research in Arab scientific journals in the areas of documentation, electronic archiving, library sciences, information and museums.

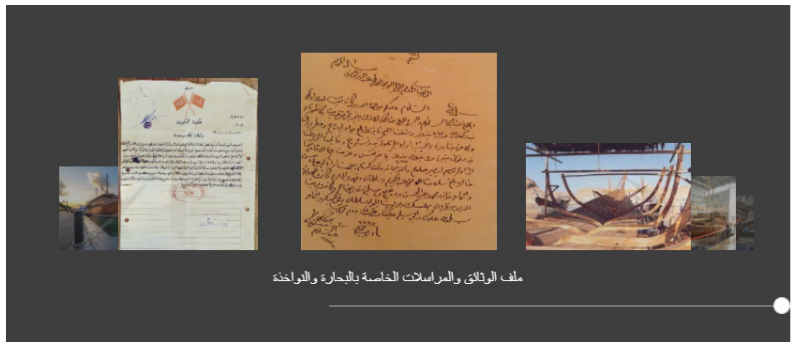
# TOWARDS BUILDING A DIGITAL MUSEUM TO PRESERVE AND DOCUMENT THE MARITIME HERITAGE OF THE ARABIAN GULF: AN APPLIED STUDY

**Introduction**

This study demonstrates how international standards can be adapted in describing, documenting, and preserving heritage-material and bodies and making maritime heritage available in a digital format. This paper focuses on the comprehensive standardization of the maritime heritage based on five main areas: traditional vessels, traditional maritime professions, people of the sea, historic seaports, and historical maritime documents. It also concentrated on the documentation of these aspects and made them available through a digital platform that conformed to recognized international standards in documentation and archiving. The paper focuses on what these standards and modern technical applications can do to preserve maritime heritage and make it available digitally in a standardized format.

**The significance of the study**

The focus of the study on maritime heritage, its accessibility, preservation, and documentation based on international standards using the right technology are of great importance.




**Objectives**

The study aims to clarify the role of international standards in describing and documenting heritage materials and bodies as issued by the International Council on Archives (ICA). These standards include the International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR CPF), the International Standard for Describing Functions (ISDF), General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD G2), International Standard for Describing Institutions with Archival Holdings (ISDIAH), and the integrated applications of those standards in preserving the Gulf coast maritime heritage in a digital platform using a strategic plan. Through that, maritime heritage can be documented and made available in the five main categories of maritime heritage based on five main aspects including traditional vessels, traditional maritime professions, people of the sea, historic seaports, and historical maritime documents. Such accomplishment would contribute to preserving the Arab heritage in accordance with best practices.

**Thesis and research questions**

There is no integrated normative-descriptive practice that uses international standards to describe and document heritage materials and bodies to preserve and archive marine heritage. There is no practice that is based on a standard information system specialized in documentation, archiving, and knowledge availability in the digital space. Further, there are no applied studies that seek to make this heritage available using an integrated approach using a unified platform. The following research questions arose as a result of this: to what extent can international archival standards and their technical applications, as prescribed by the ICA, document and make maritime heritage available in the following five areas:




Figure 1: The five areas in documenting maritime heritage

**Scope**

- Time: the study was prepared from April 2020 to May 2021.
- Space: This includes all museums and heritage institutions acquiring the maritime heritage of the Arab Gulf with the aim of collecting, archiving, and making it available through the proposed platform.
- Subject: The study addresses the role of international standards and technical applications in describing and documenting heritage materials and bodies as prescribed by the ICA and how that applies to the maritime heritage and its availability digitally in interconnected intellectual and historical contexts.

**Methodology**

Applied research depends on conducting experiments to examine the applicability of the study objectives. The following research tools were used:
1- Sources and literature concerned with the Gulf's maritime heritage.
2- Websites specializing in listing, displaying, and introducing the Gulf's maritime heritage.
3- International standards and technical applications used in documenting and archiving heritage materials or bodies.

- "The Digital Museum of the Maritime Heritage of the Arabian Gulf: Infrastructure and Practical Applications"
- Standards and technical structure of the Digital Museum of the Maritime Heritage of the Arabian Gulf:

The following figure shows the design structure and standards of the digital portal of the museum:

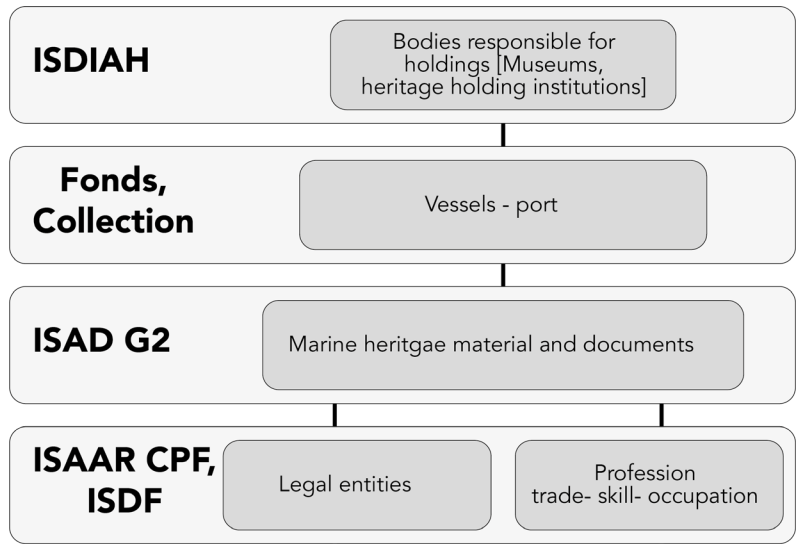



Figure 2 International standards used to catalogue and document heritage areas in project construction and design

Figure 2 shows the international standards used to catalogue and document heritage areas in the construction and design of the proposed project, i.e., the Digital Museum. We define the structural standards used to build and design the portal and its functions as follows:

1. The International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR CPF) in its second edition. Issued by ICA, this standard description is used for vessels and seaports as legal entities, and the people working on or related to them.

2. The International Standard for Describing Functions (ISDF) by the ICA, to describe extinct, disappearing, or continuing heritage maritime professions that are common among seafarers.
3. The General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD G2) by ICA, to describe documents and archival material specific to general vessels or personal ships, and for the comprehensive description of all types of maritime documents that fall under the framework of the archival group representing merchant ships and their history and stories.
4. The International Standard for Describing Institutions with Archival Holdings (ISDIAH) by ICA, to describe the entities responsible for preserving the heritage collections or materials that are intended to be archived and made available via the platform for research.

As for the technical structure, it uses one of the most prominent open-source and free applications based on ISAD G2, ISAAR CPF, ISDF, and ISDIAH units, which is AtoM2: Access to Memory. Designed by the ICA in Paris, it is one of the most prominent applications used in archiving and making heritage material available. Further, the ICA agreement with Artefactual Systems in British Columbia, Canada, ensures the application's continuity and technological update.

The methodology and application of the plan to test the application for the Digital Maritime Museum of the Arabian Gulf

There are several stages to follow, each comprising a number of procedural steps to catalogue and document all aspects of the project. This plan is based on information, images, and lists that are controlled to ensure the progress of the project. This is represented through:

1. Museum inventory of traditional vessels and seaports:
• Preparing the museum inventory list of the traditional vessels and seaports that require archiving; collecting the necessary relevant information and images to fill in the descriptive fields such as the date; in the case of vessels, information includes the oldest known register related to this particular vessel, date of production and registration, and the date it expired, damaged, or went out of commission.

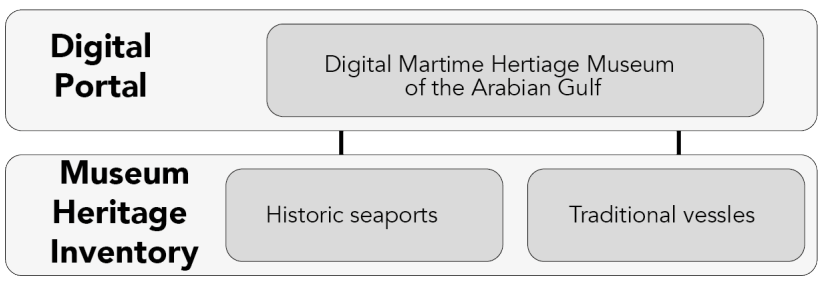
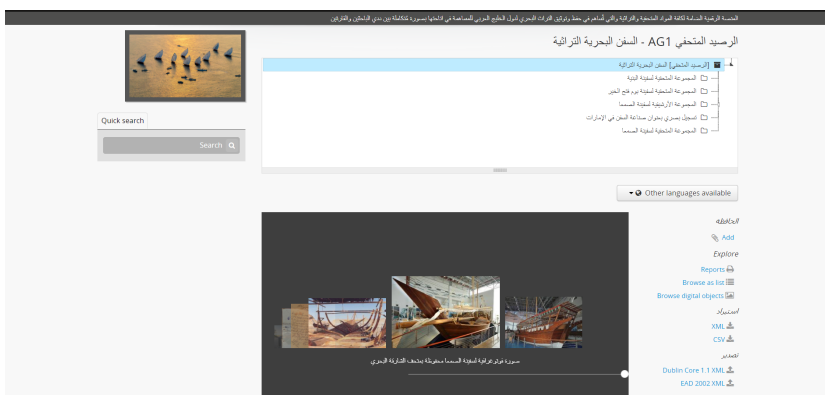



Figure 3: Museum inventory list of traditional vessels and seaports

**Table 1: Inventory of the museum's assets and collections in the portal**

| Authority record identifier | | Name of museum asset/collection | Level | Standard |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| AG 1 | | **Traditional vessels** | Museum asset | ISAD G2 |
| | 1 | Bunaya (Jalbout) | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |
| | 2 | Fatih Al-Khair (Bhum) | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |
| | 3 | Fatih Al-Jhair (Dankiyeh) | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |
| | 4 | Fatih Al-Kahir (Sanbouk) | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |
| AG 2 | | **Traditional Seaport** | Museum asset | ISAD G2 |
| | 1 | Jedda Islamic Port | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |
| | 2 | Jubail Commercial Port | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |
| | 3 | Al-Oqair Port | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |
| | 4 | Darine Port | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |
| | 5 | Dhiba Port | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |
| | 6 | Khor Sihat Port | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |
| | 7 | Zayed Port | Museum collection | ISAD G2 |



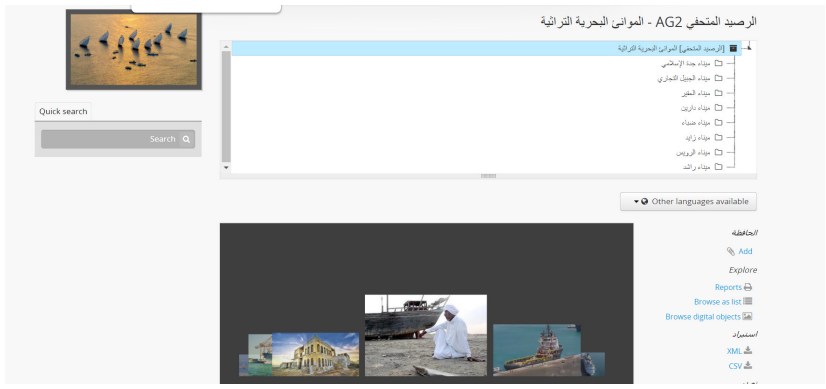




Figure 4: Museum inventory list of traditional vessels and seaports

**1. Authority Control of the people of the sea:**
• Preparing the museum list of historic personalities [legal entities] associated with traditional vessels. This requires the archiving and collecting of data and images for each entity.

**Table 2: A model of the museum's authority control process for the people of the sea, who are viewed as legal entities.**

| Authority record identifier | Authority Control file | ICA Standard |
|---|---|---|
| People of the sea (historic personalities) | | ISAAR CPF |
| Person 1 | Said Bin Musbeh Al-Qaisi Al-Falasi | ISAAR CPF |
| Person 2 | Ahmad Bin Salman | ISAAR CPF |
| Person 3 | Ali Abdul Rasool | ISAAR CPF |

• Establishing descriptive records of historic maritime personalities according to the ISAAR CPF standard by including all the data and images related to each person in the relevant description field in the database. In the case of vessels, information such as the oldest known register related to the vessel, date of production and registration, and the date it expired, damaged, or went out of commission. For legal entities, the information includes birth and death dates using the authority records as follows:

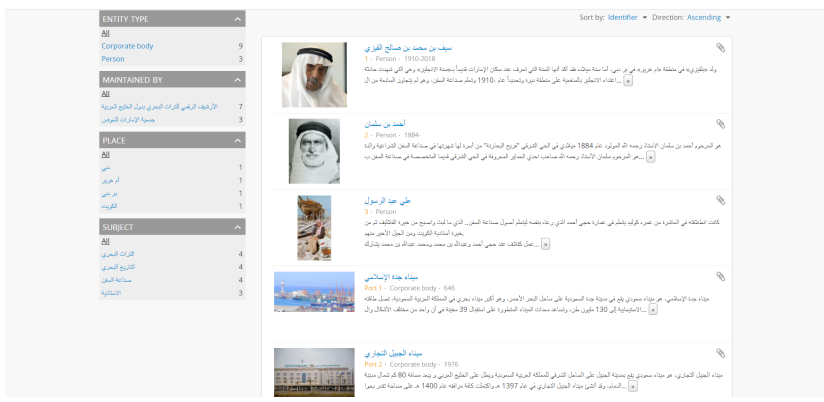



Figure 5: Example that describes and documents maritime personalities in the database

• Establishing descriptive records of traditional vessels as legal entities in accordance with the ISAAR CPF standard, by including all the data and images related to the vessel in the archival list in the relevant description field. This is in line with what is specified in the authority records of the app's database. This is done as follows:

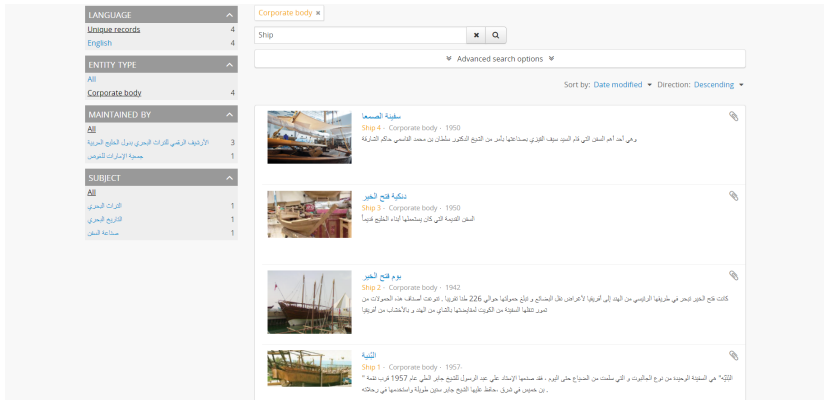



Figure 6: Sample of vessels described and documented in the database in accordance with the ISAAR CPF standard

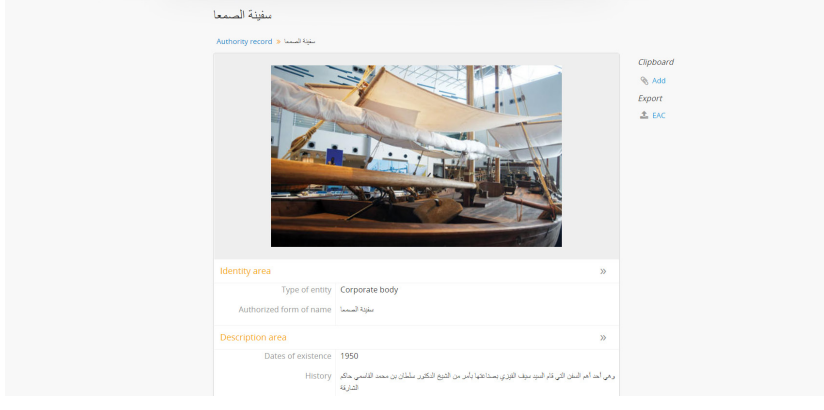



Figure 7: (Example) Record and description of the Al-Samaa ship according to the ISAAR CPF standard

**1. Authority control of maritime professions:**

• Preparing an authority control list of traditional maritime professions related to traditional vessels and personalities.

**Table 3: Museum control and coding of traditional maritime professions**

| Authority record identifier | Function |
|---|---|
| Function 1 | Ustadiya – ship architect |
| Function 2 | Al-Muqadami – chief sailor |
| Function 3 | Al-Jalaleef – installs the wood panels of the ship as prescribed by the Ustadiya |
| Function 4 | Al-Darareeb- nails the wood panels |
| Function 5 | Al-Mazuri—fills in temporarily when a sailor is absent |
| Function 6 | Al-Wulayid- 9-year old who hands Al-Jalaleef the tools and trains for the profession |
| Function 7 | Al-Sirdal - Captain (strategic level) |
| Function 8 | Al-Nokhatha- Captain (Executive level) |
| Function 9 | Al-Mujadami- runs ship affairs |
| Function 10 | Ghawas- Diver |
| Function 11 | Al-Saib- pulls the divers out of the water |
| Function 12 | Al-Sukkuni steers the ship |
| Function 13 | Al-Radif- assists Al-Saib in pulling the divers out of the water |
| Function 14 | Al-Tabbab- trainee |
| Function 15 | Al-Jallasa- on standby to fill in for the divers in case of emergency/ opens the oysters |
| Function 16 | Al-Nahham- singer |
| Function 17 | Al-Tabakh - cook |
| Function 18 | Al-Kytoub- Accountant/registrar |

• Establishing descriptive records of traditional maritime professions in accordance with the ISDF standard, by including all information and images for each function.

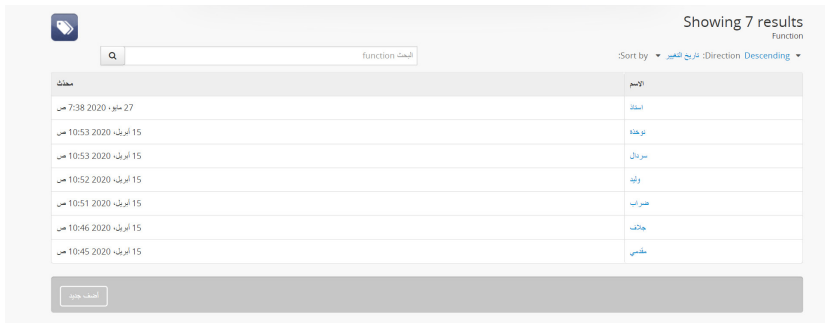



Figure 8: Example illustrating traditional maritime functions listed in the digital museum database

**2. Organizing relationships and links between personalities and professions:**

• Preparing and implementing a plan to organize the relationships and links between personalities and professions.

**3. Authority control of key maritime terminology and applications**

• Preparing an authority control list of key maritime terminology related to the processes of describing and documenting the project's main collections. The list should use well-known terminology by the community and researchers, taking into account the relationships and links between the terms and their synonyms. A map should be established, clarifying the relationship between the terminology used and the synonyms used in different geographical areas. The following example shows how a term is added.

The researcher relied on several sources, such as the glossary of maritime terminology and the Glossary of Fish and Marine Life for Juma bin Thalith, in making the connection between the terms used and synonyms in the thesaurus. The following table shows how terms are connected in the thesaurus and the system used to retrieve the data on Jarjour Abu Tarifa (a type of shark), samari (a ship left to the wind to steer), and Al-Aish. The hierarchal relationship is illustrated with external sources that are connected to the thesaurus:

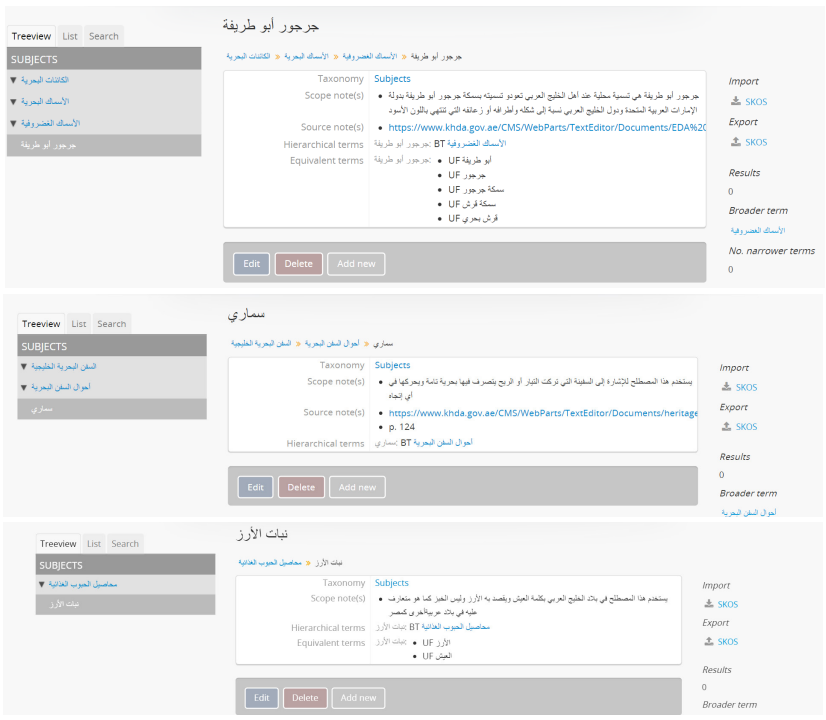



Figure 9: An example illustrating the connections between the terms

- Practical application in the system of a spatial term and an object after connecting the thesaurus and the Glossary of Maritime Terms by Jumaa bin Thalith, is shown by the following examples.
- The following example shows the authoritative control of the spatial terms of the Emirati islands of Sir Bu Nair and Dalma in Abu Dhabi and the hierarchical relationships. It explains the linkages between the sources used for the spatial terms in the thesaurus:




Figure 10: Spatial connections for the UAE island of Sir Bu Nair and the island of Dalma in Abu Dhabi

**4. Museum inventory of documents and practices:**

- Preparing the museum's inventory list of the documents that form the structure of the project and highlighting the classification and coding of the documents and contents— names, numbers, symbols, and hierarchy of description for each group in accordance with historical maritime documents such as records, insurance documents, shipping documents, trip registers, seafarers' books, and ship crew documents and belongings.

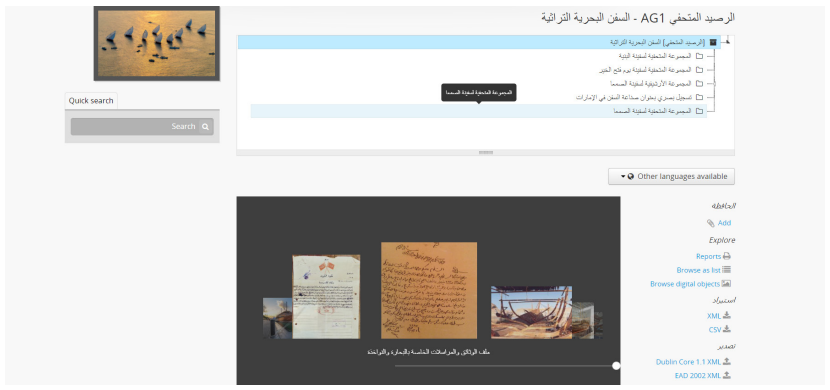



Figure 11: View of the museum's document collection or heritage material from the Al-Sama`a ship

- The description and documentation processes begin, then are uploaded to the digital system as required by each descriptive field.

**5. Search methods and strategies in the digital museum:**

At this stage, the archived information in the digital portal can be retrieved through the search function. Filters may be applied to narrow down the search (see figure 12):

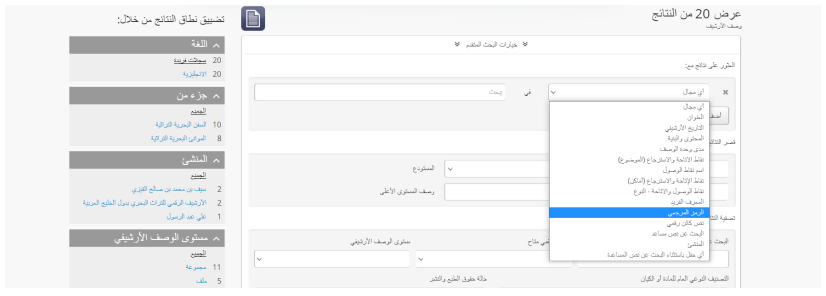



Figure 12: A screenshot of the search function in the digital museum's database

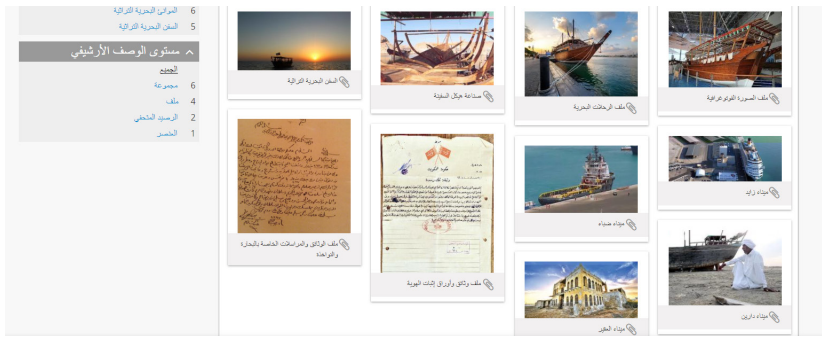


Figure 13: search results and display of pictures and snapshots of ships and documents

**Content includes:**

A. Search Engine: divided into four sections:

1. Add new criteria: this command adds a new search engine and connects it to others using Boolean logic:

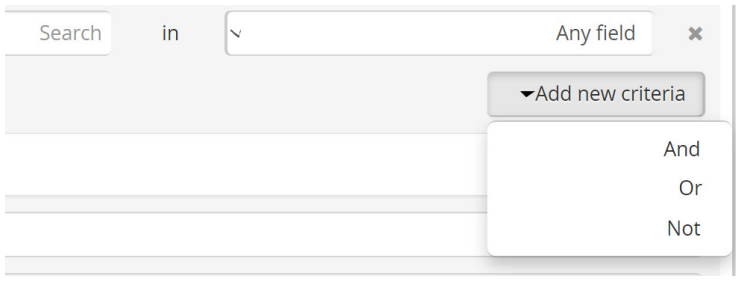



Figure 14: Boolean operators

2. Search determinants: defining the search parameters:




Figure 15: Search parameters in the descriptive fields

B. Determining the scope of the repository search: allocating the museum or entity that is in possession of the maritime heritage material as shown in the following figure.

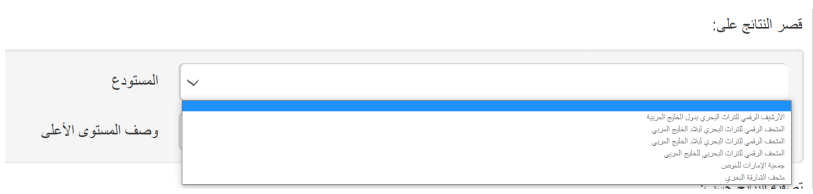



Figure 16: Search in the primary group

C. Use of filters leads to accurate retrieval rates of information (see Figure 17)

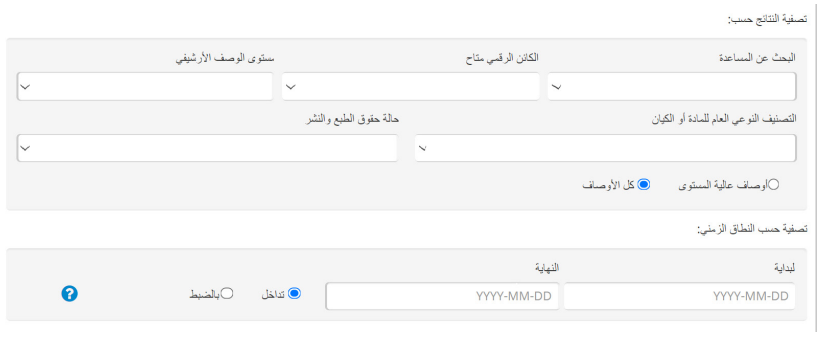



Figure 17: Filter options

Filtering the information can be done according to description, available records and digital images, available medium, copyright, wanted material, and historical range.

**- The implementation plan of the Digital Museum for the Maritime Heritage of the Arabian Gulf.**

Based on the previous stages and applications, the implementation plan for the project is as follows:

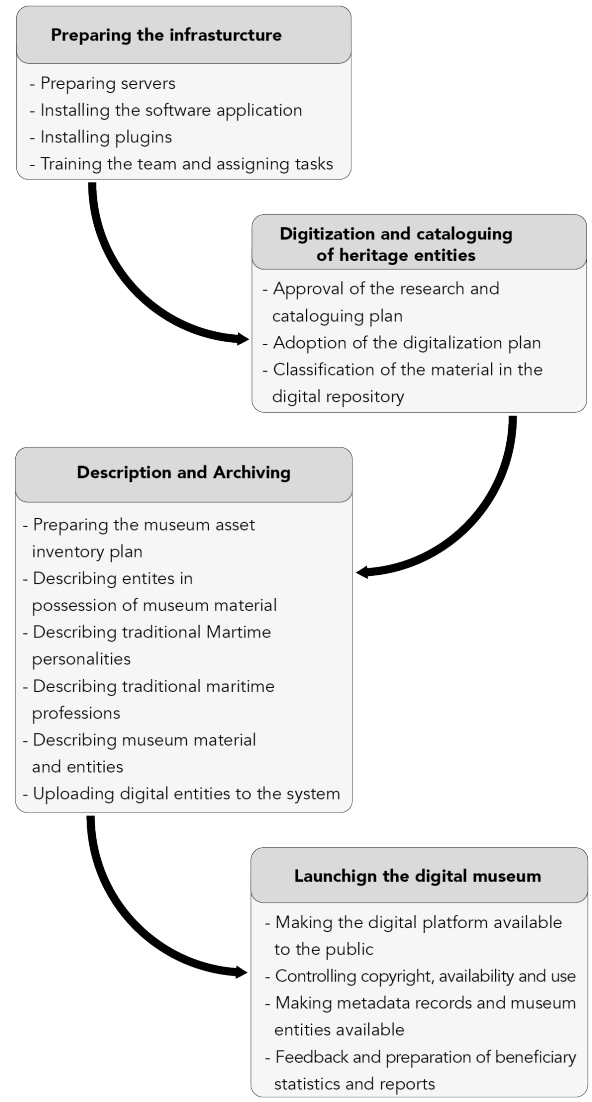



Figure 18: Implementation of the Arabian Gulf Digital Museum of Maritime Heritage project

## Conclusion

The study illustrated how to adapt and use internationally recognized standards for describing, archiving, and modern information systems in documenting maritime heritage and making it available. The study also focused on the integrated standards and documentation of traditional vessels, traditional maritime professions, people of the sea, historical seaports, and heritage maritime documents through a digital platform that conforms to recognized international standards.

From this point of view, the study recommends that museums and heritage institutions concerned with maritime heritage in the Arabian Gulf come together in their documentation and make it available through the proposed digital platform. This can be achieved through the use of the proposed archival inventory plan.

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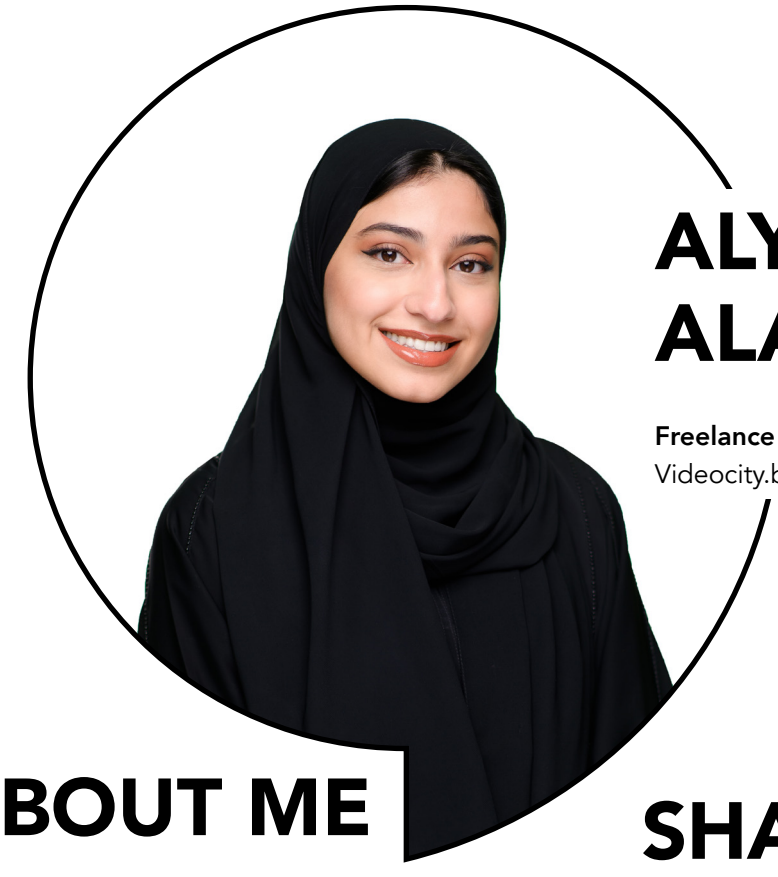


# ALYA ALAWADHI

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Videocity.bs


## ABOUT ME

Alya Alawadhi is an aspiring art researcher and economics scholar with an interest in documenting and understanding the Arabian Gulf's rich cultural legacy. Alya, who is based in the UAE, has a BA in Economics and a BA in Art History from New York University Abu Dhabi, and she is currently pursuing her passion as a freelance researcher at Videocity.bs.

# SHARING IS CARING -- OR IS IT? ON THE MUSEUM'S PEDAGOGICAL AUTHORITY

"Museums do not simply issue objective descriptions or form logical assemblages; they generate representations and attribute meaning and value in line with certain perspectives or classificatory schemas which are historically specific" (Hall 1997, p. 4).

**Introduction**

Museums are active sites of identity negotiation (Trofanenko 2006, p. 49; Duncan 1991, p. 101). According to Edward Said (2008), "all things in history, like history itself, is manmade" (p. 180). Museums have long served as the traditional gatekeepers of history, deciding what, and more importantly how, to represent through their collections (Trofanenko 2006, p. 51). In recent years, the museum's representational responsibility has fallen under closer scrutiny from field experts and laymen alike. Denouncements of colonial legacies, demands for the repatriation of long-severed artefacts, and controversies over cultural insensitivities and historical inaccuracies have led to increased demands for the reassessment of the museum's faculty for representation (Flynn 2011; Trofanenko 2006).

Pragmatically, these demands manifest in a new-found emphasis on "inclusivity," most notably through fostering visitor and community engagement. The call for such engagement has only been exacerbated by the onset of the global pandemic, which has forcibly shifted much, if not all, of the museum's activity to the virtual realm. In this realm, the museum is no longer the sole presenter of content since visitors also partake in the production process. Yet, by sharing their authority in story telling with the public, museums run the risk of diluting their own institutional agency and pedagogical authority -- what Pulh and Mencarelli (2017) call "disenchantment" (p. 12). This paper investigates the ways in which various forms of visitor engagement tactics affect museums' standing pedagogical authority. It traces the source of that authority, and further situates it within the framework of Michael Frisch's "shared authority". Through several case studies, this paper

highlights how different variables affect the museum's authority and demonstrates how the museum's commitment to honest representation and collaboration is the ultimate key to successful engagement.

**The Shifting Pedagogical Authority of the Modern Museum**

The modern museum derives its pedagogical authority, at least in part, from its colonial legacy. The earliest museums were conceived as elitist, privately sponsored, self-fashioning instruments: intuitively understanding how "the fame of objects and the renown of people are mutually creating," noble and princely patrons of the 16th century symbolically curated their own identities through collecting worldly objects to house within their cabinets of curiosities (Gosden and Marshall 1999, p. 170; Flynn 2012, p. 11). This encyclopedic collecting persisted into the 18th century, where the museum was turned into "an instrument of the bourgeois nation state" (Flynn 2012, p. 11). According to Dr. Tom Flynn, established art historian and professor, "The public art museums we know today grew directly out of princely collections formed between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries" (p. 12). As objects moved from the private to the public realm, the museum grew to implicitly shape "the moral, mental, and behavioral characteristics" of the masses it attracts (Bennett 1995, p. 60). The modern museum legitimates its institutional authority by leveraging such communicative abilities (Trofanenko 2006, p. 51).

Yet, this authority is adulterated by questions of ownership and legitimacy arising from modern-day values. A characteristically 21st century paradigm shift towards individualism and liberalism complicates the museum's inherited role as the "protector" of heritage and "broker of identity" (Trofanenko 2006, p. 49). Limited accessibility and authorship, which was once a source of prestige to the museum, is now widely regarded as a deficiency. Instead, museums are growing increasingly self-reflexive of the ways in which their collections and displays allow knowledge to be "taken in and taken home" (Macdonald 1996, p. 86). The pervasiveness of modern technology and the context of the global pandemic have only exacerbated the call for increased virtual interaction, inevitably shifting the visitor-museum relationship. It is thus not surprising that the spike in digital participatory and inclusive programming in recent years is palpable, manifesting in various forms within the museum context. By far the most prevalent, Visitor-Generated Content (VGC) takes the form of "photo sharing, digital storytelling, blog contributions or comments, open art projects, and much social media activity" (Kidd and Cardiff 2017, p. 45).

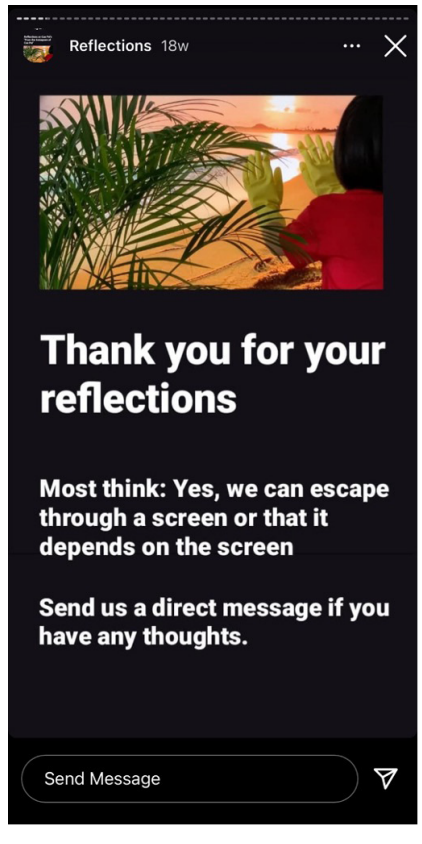
While the move to the virtual realm has been celebrated for abolishing the "symbolic barriers of museum access," scholars have equally warned of "the illusory wisdom of the crowds" that reigns supreme in the decentralized digital world (Pulh and Mencarelli 2015, p. 11). Incapable of "produc[ing] anything other than a chaotic jumble of references," such illusory wisdom is reported to inhibit the collections' coherence (p. 11). More colossally, "it may prove difficult not to take the desire for democratization beyond the point at which it tips into demagogic excess," whereby it renders the museum incapable of fulfilling its institutional duty "in the service of society and its development" as defined by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) (p. 12). In contrast, Michael Frisch (2011) seminally argues that museums are not sharing historical authority per se, but finally acknowledging "the already shared authority in the documents we generate and in the processes of public history engagement—a dialogic dimension, however implicit" (p. 128). According to Frisch, "'author-ship' is shared by definition, and hence interpretive 'author-ity' as well" (p. 128). In its ability to readily facilitate such a decentralized scheme of communication – its ability to share authority –, it is no wonder then that the digital realm gains special currency today, though the extent of authority sharing is dependent on the specificities of the VGC (Duclos-Orsello 2013, p. 122).

**The Various Forms of Community Engagement in Museums: What We Know Works**

After surveying the most relevant literature and scouting illustrative case studies, the following section highlights four primary variables that must be accounted for by museum program developers in the digital age. Among all the listed variables, the museum's commitment to authentic community engagement is paramount.

**Audience-Specific Instruments**

According to the literature, successful engagement programs clearly identify their targeted audience, whether it is the general public, a specific community, or an age-group (Long 2013, p. 146; Kidd and Cardiff 2017, p. 47). Ultimately, the ramifications of community engagement on museum authority are dependent on the way 'community' is defined, identified, and engaged with. After defining "what [and who] we mean by 'community'," renowned oral art historian, Stephen Long, recommends actively listening to the needs of said community; presumptions about the form of museum collaboration with the community should be abandoned to allow space for honest dialogue (p. 150). In doing so, community engagement can allow the museum to truly be "a center where people gather to meet and converse and an active, visible player in civic life, a safe haven, and a trusted incubator of change", as defined by the American Alliance of Museums (Long 2013, p. 142).




Amidst the global pandemic, the New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) Art Gallery delivered a timely virtual exhibition, "not in, of, along, or relating to a line," that explores the affordances and limitations of digital culture. Honoring its role as an academic gallery and understanding the demographics of its predominantly adult following on Instagram, the gallery developed a well-curated VGC instrument in the form of a weekly questionnaire on its Instagram story.

Prompting its followers to reflect on their relationship with technology, online and offline senses of belonging, and the ways in which the pandemic has altered these responses, the gallery reported the most common answers among their respondents and linked them back to the exhibited artworks. Importantly, the NYUAD Art Gallery immortalized this fleeting VGC by hosting the representative responses within a highlight reel on their official Instagram page. The gallery effectively shared its authority with its community by (a) allowing a space for exchange while leveraging the intricacies of the social media platform to exercise their own discretion in what is presented to the public, and by (b) curating a selection of thematically and socially relevant questions that answer to the community's collective pandemic experience in a language and format that is compatible with their following's age and sensibilities.

**Language and Word Choice**

The implicit power structure in the language used to describe community engagement "informs and permeates" the nature of the exchange (Lynch 2014, p.10). According to Yaël Filipovic, the language used, "although well-intentioned, can be belittling and condescending" through phrases such as "we foster…" and "we provide and educate…" (2013, p. 133). Lynch concurs, arguing that "the rhetoric of service places the subject (community member) in the role of [….] 'beneficiary' and the giver (the museum and its staff) in the role of 'carer'," thereby distilling people's "active agency" instead of sharing authority (p. 10). Filipovic further notes that "collaboration has become a word exchangeable with partnership, consultation, participation, affiliation, and even beneficiary" (p. 133). The museum's pedagogical authority is differentially affected in each scenario.

Language used by the museum in recounting the engaged voices is no less important than terminology used to describe the community engagement initiative. The presence or absence of distance in these narratives greatly changes their implications for the museum's pedagogical authority. Consider the Manchester Museum's Community Advisory Panel (CAP), which was established in 2000 to "challenge the museum's traditional Eurocentrism" through dialogue (Lynch 2014, p. 6). According to Lynch, "CAP [seemed to exist] simply to rubber-stamp museum policies" due to the museum's incessant quieting of potential conflict in its unwillingness to present the engaged voices as its own (p. 5). This distancing was a deliberate effort by the museum to retain its traditional hegemonic control, yet, in clinging onto it, the museum compromised its pedagogic authority by contradicting its actions with its words.

**Program Duration**

A large contributor to the success of community engagement is the initiative's duration. Numerous short-term and shallow engagements paint the institution as a money-hungry firm at best, and an unreliable and inauthentic ally at worst (Filipovic 2013, p. 137). In contrast, longer community-museum collaborations signal the museum's long-term commitment to and respect for the community it is engaging. For example, Sharjah museums' commitment to accessibility and the emirate's community of people of determination is renowned, and this has been ongoing since at least 2010. Pre-pandemic, Sharjah Art Museum offered free in-person programs to families with disabilities. Despite the pandemic, their engagement of people of determination was sustained virtually, yielding surprising advantages to the participants who were now engaged from the safety and comfort of their homes. It is the museum's long-term institutional commitment to this community that contributes to its authentic sharing of authority.

However, temporal considerations condition the effectiveness and relevance of VGC. Despite being employed in an attempt "to surprise", "involve", thus "re-enchant" visitors over their museum experience, the prevalence of VGC devices may "engender a form of disenchantment" (Pulh and Mencarelli 2015, p. 13). To remain relevant, "their short life span means they must constantly be updated" with the latest technological trends (p. 13). To remain effective, they must not render the visitors' "pro-sumption" (production-consumption) "routine" of the museum visit (p. 13). Both considerations can clearly be seen in the case of Tate's Hello Cube, a sculptural twitter-bot that immediately replies to visitors' tweets at it, considering its success is reliant on Twitter's continued relevance and the public's continued interest (Kidd and Cardiff 2017, p. 47). Similarly, Instagram's sustained relevance in the Arabian Peninsula has supported the success of the VGC instrument issued by the NYUAD Art Gallery.

**Mediating Audience's Expectations**

Because VGC is by definition is beyond the museum's productive capacity, the museum is expected to "anticipate the control of this interactivity" and "avoid an artificial interaction" by committing to its word. The museum may not censor its invited contributions or retract its initiative as advertised without damaging its credibility and authenticity (Pulh and Mencarelli 2015, p. 11). Hence, the museum's explicit disclosure of discretion, in choosing what and when to share its invited contributions, is crucial to its e-reputation. This allows the museum to (a) "not be overwhelmed by [the number of] visitors' contributions", and (b) not be bound to the quality of works shared, "which may be not up to the expected results" (p. 11). For instance, Louvre Abu Dhabi's weekly Instagram photography competition calls on museum visitors to share images of the museum with the hashtag "#LouvreAbuDhabi" only for a winning image to be selected and reposted to the museum's official Instagram page as its chosen "#PicofTheWeek". Similarly, Jameel Arts Center, Qatar Foundation, and Qatar Museums launched digital art contests in 2020, the third edition of "Art Jameel Commissions" and "Untold Stories of Resilience" respectively, which clearly communicated their objectives, prizes, and selection criteria. In all these examples, clear and careful communication successfully mediated the audience's expectations.

**Conclusion**

According to Tomislav Sola (1997), "the entire museological concept begins with two questions: 'What?' and 'For whom?'" (p. 172). With regards to the issue of authority and authorship within the context of the 21st century museum, the primary questions are unchanged. This paper explores the source of museum pedagogical authority and traces its evolution through the centuries. By doing so, it shows that the question of whether sharing is caring in the context of pedagogical museum authority is both difficult to answer, and the wrong question to ask, given shared authority's inevitable nature and the pervasiveness of technology in today's geopolitical climate. Instead, it addresses a more useful formulation stemming from these insights: how can a nuanced virtual relationship between the museum and the public be leveraged for positive social change?



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## ABOUT ME

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# THE PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL EXPERIENCE IN LIGHT OF VISITOR ENGAGEMENT USING MUSEUM TYPOLOGY AS AN URBAN CULTURAL DENOMINATOR: SHARJAH-UAE IN PERSPECTIVE

**Abstract**

Physical and digital experiences are key factors in relation to visitor engagement in museum typology, with their representation as urban cultural denominators. This paper focuses on three exhibitions that were conceptualized-curated-conducted (ccc) at Al Mahatta Museum, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (UAE). Sharjah's perspective on urban development is contextualized through museum typology as a cultural denominator with ongoing research since 2004 reflecting on the importance of integrating cultural development into this emirate's urban fabric by the establishment of Sharjah Museums Authority (SMA) (A. G. Iyer, Deboo, Gandhi, & Parekh, 2019). By understanding museum typology from an architectural-to-urban standpoint (A. Iyer, 1996), and a field study-based analysis of London, Berlin, and New York, this comparative juxtaposition introspects the global pandemic scenario on the re-ignited debate of online engagement and virtual exhibitions, reinforcing physical engagement and adaptation.

This paper examines the physicality of museum typology with its urban relevance taking center-stage through visitor engagement in this ongoing debate and its relevance during and post the Covid-19 pandemic.



**Key Words:**

Physical – Digital Experience, Visitor Engagement, museum typology, urban – fabric – development – cultural denominators, conceptualized-curated-conducted

**Introduction:**

From an urban standpoint, museum typology as cultural engines is presented through case studies where museums are the focus of international exhibitions, including 10 Museums – 10 Positions ("Museums-Positionen," 1992) and Palaces of Art: Art Galleries in Britain, 1790-1990 (Palaces of Art: Art Galleries in Britain, 1790-1990, 1991). The architectural dissertation dealt with Indian and international case studies involving museum typology, including Jawahar Kala Kendra & Crafts Museum in India, designed by Charles Correa; the German architecture museum by O. M. Ungers and State Gallery Stuttgart in Germany by James Stirling. While these case studies looked at both physical and digital experience as the essential paradigm concerning visitor engagement in the 1990's, museum typology was also considered as a representative urban cultural denominator. The proposed dissertation site location hewed to New Delhi as an urban site by identifying a museum core-zone in the national capital of India (A. Iyer, 1996), thus setting a starting point in further understanding museum typology as urban cultural denominators.

**Museum Typology as an Urban Cultural Denominator – International Perspective with Sharjah in Perspective:**

The evolving hypothesis of museum typology as an urban cultural denominator was contextualized in the urban development of Sharjah through experiential urban research exploration since 2004. It identified the integration of cultural development as the emerging developmental factor of the urban fabric with the establishment of SMA (A. G. Iyer et al., 2019). From an urban standpoint, built environments as a cultural denominator and 'concept of movement systems' provide evolving parameters in Greek and Roman civilizations from medieval times to the Renaissance and John Nash's post-industrial intervention in London (Bacon, 1967). This represented one of the formative strands of urban cultural development. Hall (1998) elaborates on the monumental enterprise of architectural splendor with studies of Chicago, New Delhi, Berlin, and Moscow (1900-1940) and as an urban economic enterprise involving Baltimore, Hong Kong, and London (1975-1987) (Hall, 1998). The role of culture in urban society is clustered (Pages 87-150) as cohesive urban treatises rendered by philosophers, critiques, sociologists, and urbanists (The City Reader, 2003). By analyzing museum typology under SMA as a cultural denominator, a juxtaposition of this role from an international perspective focusing on Sharjah represents this evolving hypothesis.

Mumford's (1937) attempt at defining the city is the starting point of understanding urban culture and the norms prescribed for urban citizens in society in comparison to the rural standpoint (Mumford, 2003). The evolving hypothesis represents a critical juncture in the argument for the architectural and urban development of the seven Emirates that make up the UAE (Damluji, 2006b). The road to sustainable urban development is precarious with the discovery of new-found oil wealth and its distribution on Emarati citizens and its impact on the capital city of Abu Dhabi and other emirates, including Dubai and Sharjah (Ahmad, 2006; Damluji, 2006b). A personal journey as a resident of 'Heart of Sharjah', colloquially known as Rolla, since 2004 further reflects on this impact from a socio-cultural perspective etched through experiential urban research exploration of urban 'identity markers' and 'cultural denominators' (A. G. Iyer et al., 2019). Urban cultural denominators involving museum typology are central to understanding new domains in sustainable urban development in Sharjah, UAE.

Jacobs (1961) examines the role of sidewalks in her neighborhood in Greenwich Village, New York, and uses this line as the starting point for her emerging hypothesis, both as a microcosm and a macrocosm of urban social and cultural life (Jacobs, 2003). A similar dialogue transpires in our current research through historic urban and architectural developments in the built environment and heritage-cum-documentation in the UAE. On the question of urban cultural gentrification of public amenities in the city, Zukin (1995) presented the case of Manhattan, New York, where economic pressure exerted by private enterprise is a classic standpoint (Zukin, 2003). Similar cases of urban cultural gentrification have been studied in Al Bastakiyyah neighbourhood in Dubai (Olroyd-Robinson, 2006) and from an architectural heritage revival and conservation perspective in the heart of Sharjah (Damluji, 2006a).



### Evolving Hypothesis of Museum Typology as an Urban Cultural Denominator

The analysis of museum typology from an architectural-to-urban standpoint (A. Iyer, 1996) through a comparative analysis of the field trips undertaken in London (2013), Berlin (2016), and New York (2019); the current hypothesis evolves through experiential urban research-based exploration. The comparative juxtaposition during the global pandemic has re-ignited the ongoing debate on online engagement and virtual exhibitions. Museum typology as an urban cultural denominator stipulates reinforcement of physical engagement and adaptation by strengthening museums' placement within the urban citizen experience. Research methodology for this evolving hypothesis includes architectural documentation and analysis through field trips to urban environments.

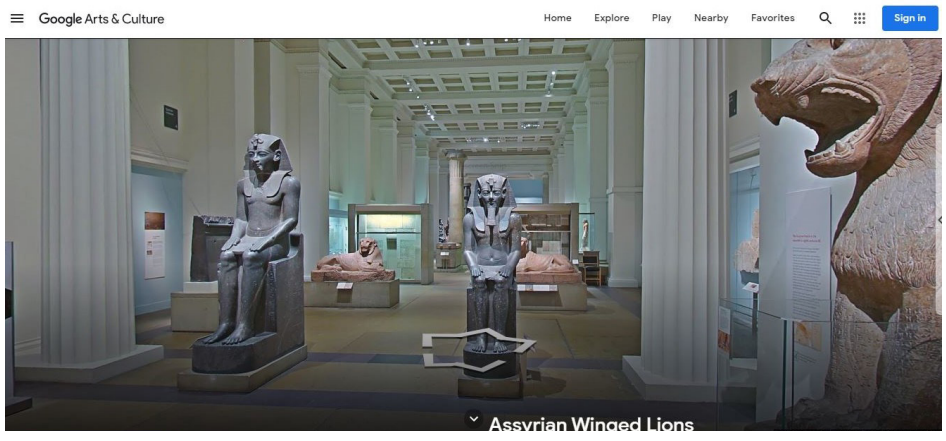
These trips commenced for this author in 1992 as an architecture student, architect, academic, researcher, and traveler, playing an important role in extending this hypothetical framework of museums as an architectural typology denominating the urban cultural landscape of cities in the past, present, and future. Field trips included important cities from both an Indian and international perspective. In addition, the urban experience of the author's city of birth, Mumbai, and migration to the UAE in 2004 is an extension of this exploratory and experiential urban research-based journey.

### Comparative Experiential Urban Research-Based Exploration Analysis: London - Berlin - New York

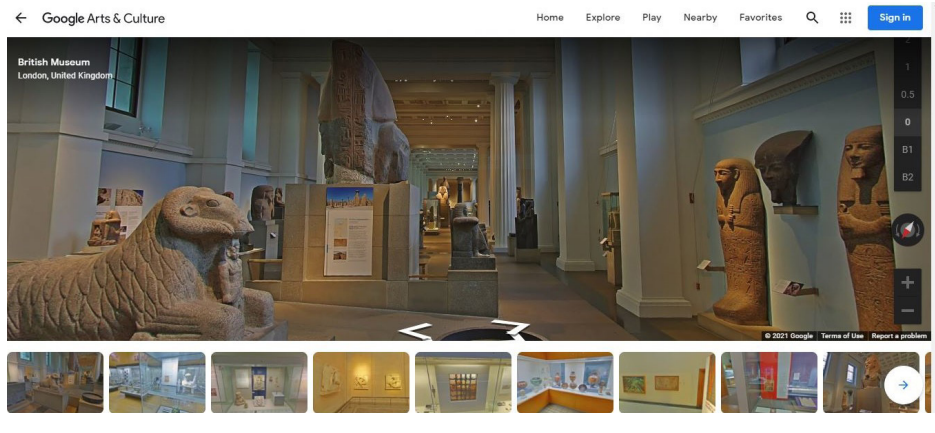
London (2013), Berlin (2016), and New York (2019) field trips focused on the paramount role played by museum typology in shaping the urban experience. The museum experience as a visitor (architect) in London focused on The British Museum through architectural sketching. Berlin Museum Island focused on the post-World War II urbanity of the city and its partition into East and West with the eventual re-unification in 1989. This field trip with architecture students focused on museums as urban denominators in their urban design studio. Meanwhile, New York reflected on the development of urban philanthropists' philosophy of museum collections, focusing on the famous Museum Avenue of New York, abutting Central Park and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET). Observational analysis included the art collection at the MET and its impact on New York's urban culture and the architectural and urban disposition of this museum in transforming Fifth Avenue (or as it's popularly known, "Museum Avenue"). Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of the experiential urban research-based exploration of these three cities by focusing on museum typology to understand the physical and digital experiences in relation to visitor engagement through the lens of the evolving hypothesis.

**Comparative Experiential Urban Research-Based Exploration Analysis of London - Berlin - New York: Physical and Digital Experience Perspective - Visitor Engagement**

Experiential Urban Research-Based Exploration




Picture – 1: Virtual Google Arts and Cultural Institute Tour of the Great Hall of Egyptian Sculpture, The British Museum




Picture – 2: Virtual Google Arts and Cultural Institute tour of various galleries at The British Museum

### London – British Museum – 2021

The virtual experience of the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery at The British Museum (2021) is far from dramatic (Culture, 2021a). Picture 1 represents the digital experience that is extremely static on the computer screen. The virtual tour can be found via The British Museum's official website (Picture – 2).



Picture -3: Sketch by Author of the Great Hall – Egyptian Sculpture Gallery – The British Museum

**London – British Museum – 2013**

Author's notes on 5 August 2013: ".. towards London city again over the hilly terrain of the sandy street onto Strand Road towards South Hampton and Bloomsbury Way and Square. As I approached Great Russel Street and moved towards the entrance of The British Museum, the edifice in front of me was daunting for my inner self…"

"A short walk through the Grand Court (redesigned by Norman Foster) and into the classical collection was the start. The Grand Hall housing the Egyptian Collection was my first forced stop that is etched to my memory …. (Picture – 3)



Picture – 4: Sketch by Author of the Parthenon Marbles in the Parthenon Gallery – The British Museum

**London – British Museum – 2013**

Author's Note on 5 August 2013: "…when I entered the gallery of the Elgin Marbles, the sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens, Greece were exhibited…. I went ahead with my sketch of the gallery and glanced through the rest of the collection, including the original Caryatid from the Erechtheion…" (Picture – 4)



Picture – 5: Panoramic Photograph (author) of the Ishtar Gate (reconstruction of the outer gate) (6th century BCE) at Pergamonmuseum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

**Berlin – Museum Island (Pergamonmuseum) – 2016**

Author's notes on 17 August 2016 – "The architectural monumentality of this reconstructed gate from ancient Babylon somehow subdued the negation felt as the great Pergamon Altar is not on display until 2023".



Picture – 6 Photograph (author) of the Brick Relief Detail of Ishtar Gate (reconstruction of the outer gate) (6th century BCE) at Pergamonmuseum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

**Berlin – Museum Island (Pergamonmuseum) - 2016**

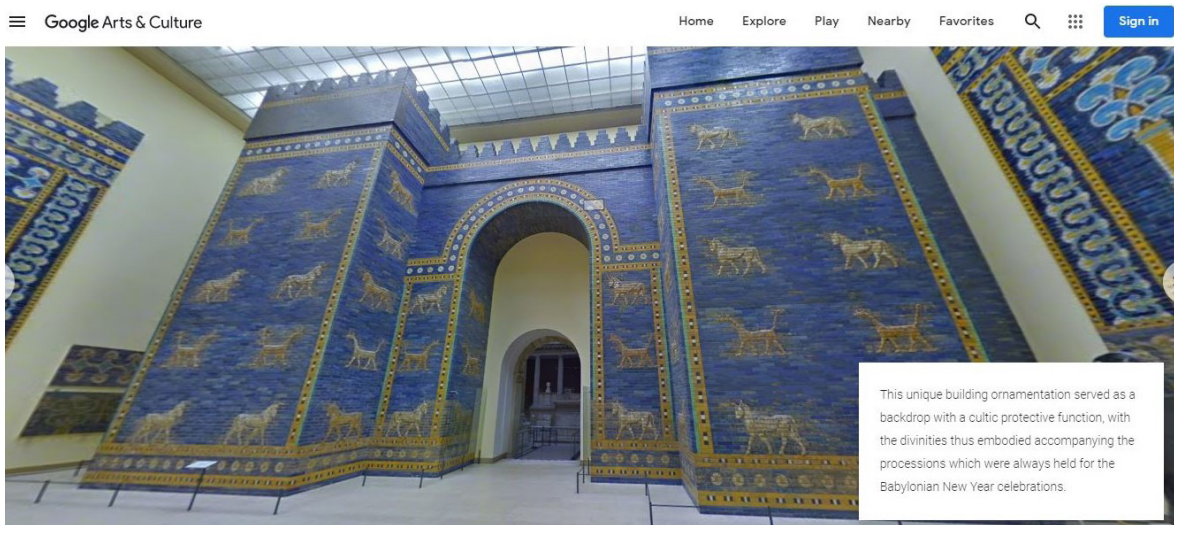
Author's notes on 17 August 2013 – "Architectural detail and the process of reconstruction is experienced at every level. The ancient and worn-down material are visible with the reconstructed material contracting with the heritage"



Picture – 7 Panoramic Photograph (author) of monumental staircase and gallery outside the Rotunda in the Altes Museum (1830) by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

**Berlin – Museum Island – 2016**

Author's notes on 17 August 2016 – "The visit to Altes Museum provided a glimpse of the architectural genius of Schinkel who produced this masterpiece in 1830…"




Picture – 8 Virtual Google Arts and Cultural Institute Tour of the Great Ishtar Gate at the Pergamonmuseum

**Berlin – Museum Island – 2021**

Virtual experience of Ishtar Gate at Pergamonmuseum in 2021 is a static affair. The 'Monumental' is a virtual disconnection to + physical engagement required with this historic piece of art and culture (Culture, 2021b)



Picture – 9 Panoramic Photograph (author) of monumental architecture encompassing the Sackler Wing, The MET, New York

**New York – Metropolitan Museum of Art – 2019**

Author's notes on 7 August 2019 – "Subduing the monumentality of architecture for the exhibit is at the heart of the Museological experience and is reflected in Roche and Dinkeloo's architectural design….."



Picture – 10 Panoramic Photograph (author) of the Sackler Wing and its urban connectivity to the Central Park and the Fifth Avenue of the great city, The MET, New York

**New York – Metropolitan Museum of Art – 2019**

Author's notes on 7 August 2019 – "The architecture of the Sackler Wing represents the conversation that is established by museum typology as a cultural denominator from an urban perspective. This is well-established through monumentality of the transparent external wall that connects the MET to Central Park and Fifth Avenue/ Museum Avenue…"



Picture – 11 Photograph (author) of the Temple of Dendur within the Sackler Wing and Visitor Engagement, The MET, New York

**New York – Metropolitan Museum of Art – 2019**

Author's notes on 7 August 2019 – "The architecture of Sackler Wing respects the grandeur of Temple of Dendur with its neutral presence as an envelope that is central to any museum typology…."

The virtual opening of 'The Medici: Portraits and Politics, 1512–1570' (MET, 2021) represents this disconnection between the physical and virtual experience of visitor engagement, as understanding exhibits and displays within MET also extends towards physically engaging with the architecture and urbanity of New York. The author's physical journey of London – Berlin – New York, epitomizing museum typology as an urban cultural denominator, has been circumscribed by three exhibitions that were conceptualized-curated-conducted (ccc) at Sharjah between 2016 to 2019.

**Conceptualized-Curated-Conducted (CCC):**

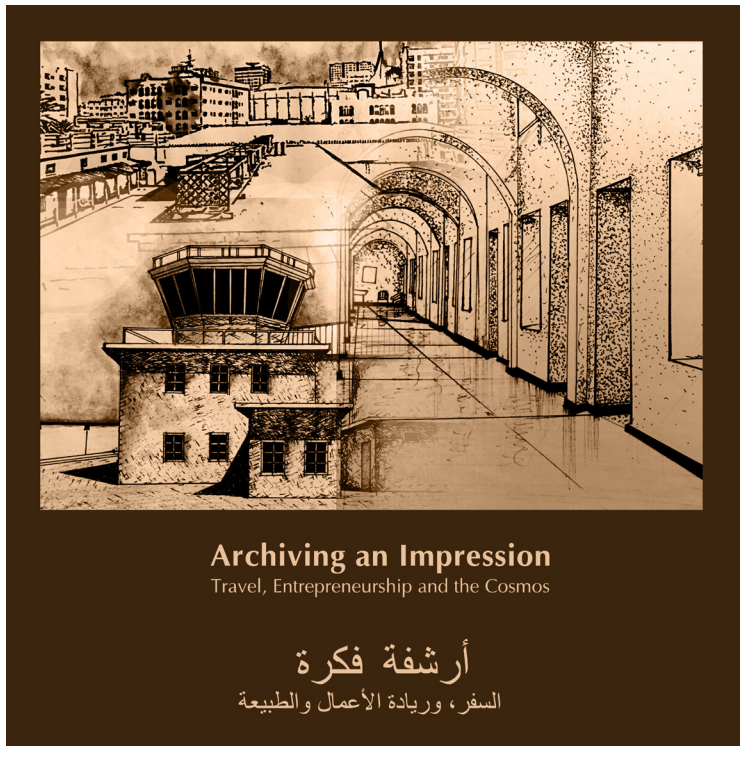
'CCC' at Al Mahatta Museum, Sharjah-UAE, three exhibitions in collaboration with SMA have provided an emphatic progression in furthering understanding of museum typology as an urban cultural denominator since 2013. It officially began with three contemporary architectural market typologies and Al Mahatta Airport Museum, the first air-terminal built by Imperial Airways, UK, and later operated by Royal Air Force (RAF) which were architecturally documented between 2013 and 2015 at the author's university. This collaboration with SMA included architectural documentation and conservation management and a development plan for Al Mahatta Museum (A. G. Iyer, Gandhi, & Parekh, 2016-17).

The three exhibitions are described in Table 2, including the first exhibition in 2016 (A. G. Iyer, Gandhi, Parekh, Vora, & Seed, 2016) and the second exhibition in 2018 (A. G. Iyer, Deboo, Gandhi, & Parekh, 2018).The third exhibition at Al Mahatta (16 December 2019 – 31 August 2021) titled "Architectural & Urban Development of Sharjah: Spatial Analysis of Museums Typology" includes a corresponding publication (A. G. Iyer et al., 2019). The opening of this exhibition coincided with official news of the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Zhu, Wei, & Niu, 2020). This ongoing exhibition that was supposed to conclude in April 2020 was extended to August 2021 amidst the world-wide lockdown in March 2020 and the eventual opening of museums by SMA once the UAE announced lifting off the lockdown.

Architectural documentation, in its formal sense, is part of the curriculum of the School of Design and Architecture (SoDA), Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Dubai. The school has documented four important buildings of architectural and urban importance in Sharjah (A. G. Iyer et al., 2019; A. G. Iyer et al., 2016) and a mixed-use typology in Dubai, UAE. In addition, the school is conducting urban design studios contextualizing the emirate of Dubai in the academic years 2019-20 and 2020-21 with this studio further extending to the six other emirates of the UAE. The evolving hypothesis dwells on the UAE as the macrocosm, with Sharjah as the microcosm.

**Three Exhibitions - Conceptualized-Curated-Conducted (ccc) at Al Mahatta Museum**

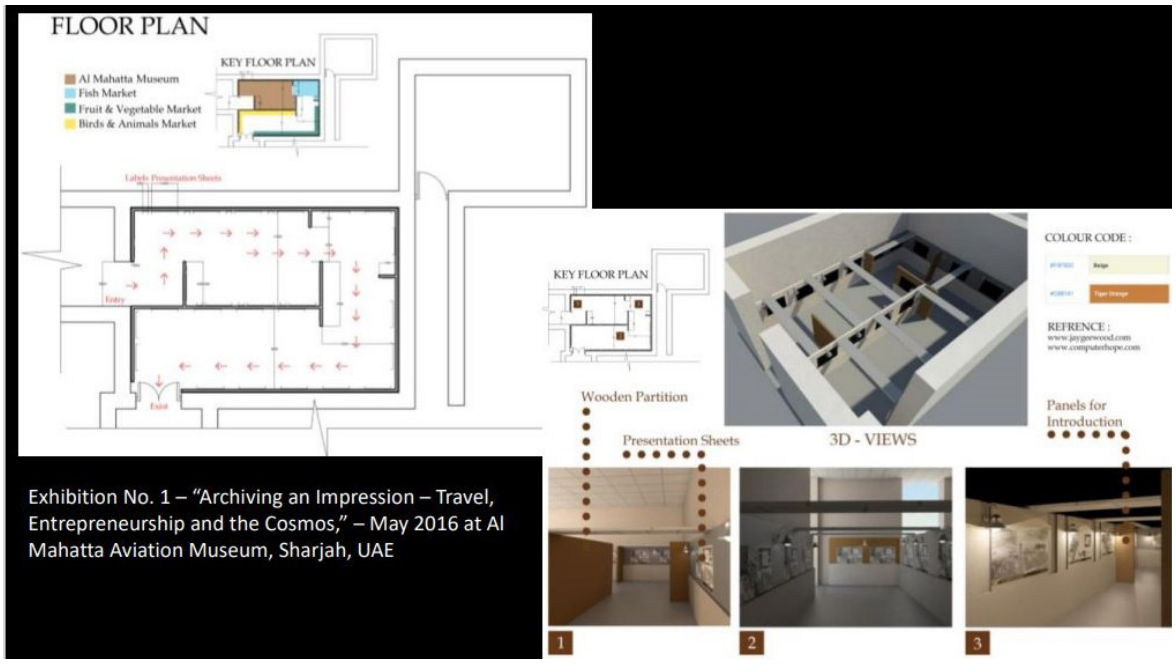
Conceptualized-Curated-Conducted (ccc)




Picture – 12 Draft format of the invitation card jointly developed by MAHE, Dubai, and SMA

**Archiving an Impression – Travel, Entrepreneurship and the Cosmos – 2016**

Architectural documentation was implemented with permission for the first phase in December 2013 with Sharjah Government Media Bureau to photo document (Bureau, 2017) three markets in physical proximity to the Heart of Sharjah. Second phase permissions in December 2014 came through the Education Department at SMA ("Sharjah Museums Authority," 2017) to document Al Mahatta Museum (Dubai, 2019; MAHE, 2017).




Picture – 13 Developmental layout plan and views developed for first exhibition by SoDA, MAHE – Dubai in collaboration with Hazelle Page, Collections Manager, Collections Management Department, SMA

**Archiving an Impression – Travel, Entrepreneurship and the Cosmos – 2016**

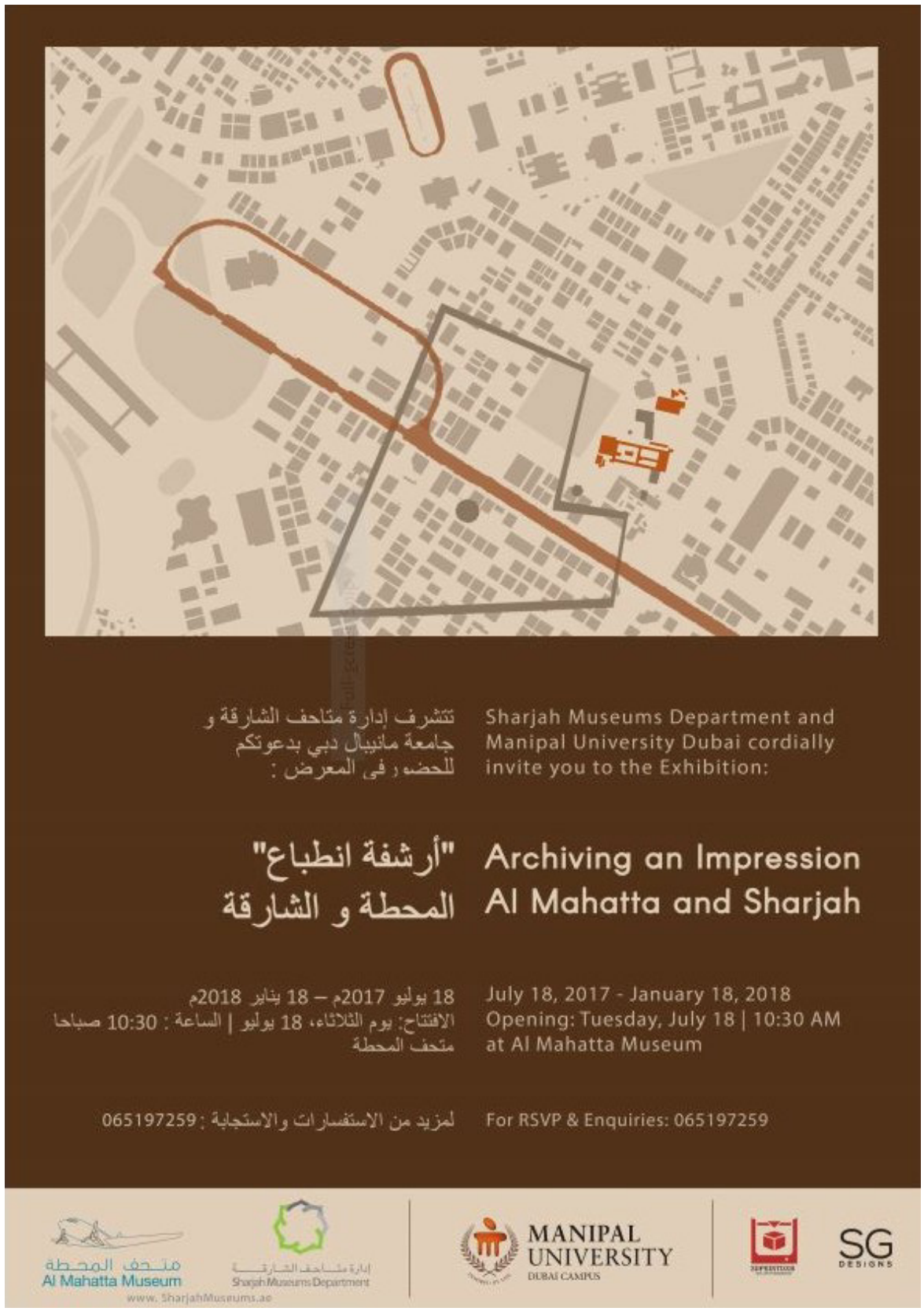
"Architectural Documentation within the academic construct of architectural education is the journey that students takes in identifying and capturing the essence of a historic footprint through the physical experience of deconstructing this built environment to its basic details including plans, sections, elevations and features pertaining to its architecture. The story of archiving these impressions in Sharjah through the notion of 'Travel' depicts the establishment of the aviation industry in this region coupled with 'Entrepreneurship' or trading that is ingrained in the soul of the Emirati populace, but always looking out for the connection with the 'Cosmos' or nature, in its ever-empowering omnipresence. The documentation of Al Mahatta Museum, the erstwhile Fish Market, the Bird and Animal Market, and the Fruit and Vegetable Market encapsulates this story through the means of architectural drawings frozen in time within the academic years of 2013-14 and 2014-15 of SoDA" (A. G. Iyer et al., 2016).




Picture – 14 Initial Proposal of the layout plan and views developed for second exhibition by SoDA, MAHE – Dubai in collaboration with Hazelle Page, Collections Manager, Collections Management Department, Sharjah Museums Authority

**Archiving an Impression – Al Mahatta and Sharjah – 2017-18**

"The exhibition is a culmination of a three-year-long journey with Al Mahatta Museum and Sharjah through two thesis projects that range from a macro urban scale, looking at the City of Sharjah from a tourism perspective, to a micro urban scale focusing on the neighbourhood block of Al Mahatta where Al Mahatta Museum is. This journey commenced with an architectural documentation of Al Mahatta Museum, the first airport in the UAE, by analysing its historical, architectural and master planning aspects keeping the comprehensive evolution as a key factor in a time –space continuum. An Urban Layer Analysis comprising of macro and micro layers with respect to City of Sharjah and Al Mahatta block was also conducted that further developed into the two thesis projects displayed. These projects were undertaken by fourth year B. architecture students, SoDA, MAHE, Dubai (ARC – 402)" (A. G. Iyer et al., 2018)




Picture – 15 Final format of the invitation card for the second exhibition by MAHE, Dubai in collaboration with SMA

**"Thesis 1 (Macro Scale): An Urban Tourism Precinct: Experience of Place, Sharjah, UAE.**

This research aims to provide an integrated outcome for the cultural, historical and architectural interface with the intention of identifying the heritage value and significance of Sharjah by reinforcing the Urban Tourism footprint." (Gandhi, 2018)

"Thesis 2 (Micro Scale): Renewing the Urban Discourse: Al Mahatta Experience, the purpose of this study is to explore the historic setting and connectivity of Al Mahatta Museum with its surroundings; to renew the urban fabric of Al Mahatta city block by contextualizing it to the museum, preserving its significance as a focal point for the emirate of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates." (Parekh, 2018)




Picture – 16 final format of the invitation card for the third exhibition by MAHE, Dubai, in collaboration with SMA

**Architectural and Urban Development of Sharjah: Spatial Analysis of Museums Typology – 2019-21**

"The burgeoning museums typology established through 16 museums under the umbrella of SMA in 2006 and under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah, form the core of this exhibition. The importance of museums typology as an integral part of the urban fabric and development of the emirate as well as the City of Sharjah in the historic and current context is the focus of 'Architectural and Urban Development of Sharjah: Spatial Analysis of Museums Typology.' The macro analysis concentrates on the impact of museums typology on the urban and architectural landscape of the emirate of Sharjah through the argument on the question of further reinforcement by using this typology and broadening the role and jurisdiction of SMA." (A. G. Iyer et al., 2019)



Picture – 17



Picture – 18

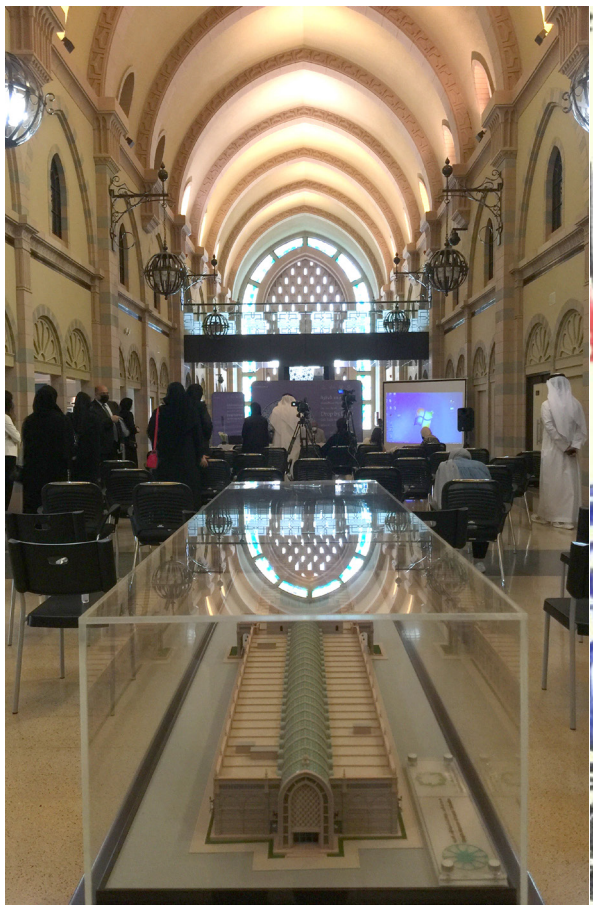
Pictures 17 & 18 (author) : Views of the exhibition taken on the 16th of January 2020; one month after the opening during a visit with the Acting Curator of Al Mahatta Museum

**Architectural and Urban Development of Sharjah: Spatial Analysis of Museums Typology – 2019-21**

Author's Notes - "the experiential journey of 'conducting' exhibitions at Al Mahatta Museum was based on the moment of conceiving this idea in 2014-15 of 'conceptualizing' the ongoing research into an exhibition for the museum visitor to view and appreciate; with the plan being executed by 'curating' this journey in collaboration with SMA…"

**Epilogue:**

Through the evolving hypothesis, this paper presents an argument within the current debate of virtualizing exhibitions and artefacts in museums— an argument that is echoing the world over during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The research, through experiential urban research-based exploration of three international cities in-parallel to 'ccc' – three exhibitions at Al Mahatta Museum, Sharjah, UAE, argues for the continued potential of physicality as a paramount form of visitor engagement within museum typology.



Pictures 19 (author): Photograph of the central nave of SMIC (12th June 2021)



Pictures 20: Sketch by author sitting on the new corniche being developed adjacent to SMIC (March 2013)

Museum typology as an urban cultural denominator is back to being center stage; both in Sharjah and the UAE with special exhibitions opening in various museums in this region. The author was invited to a seminar by experts for a new exhibition titled 'Drop by Drop Life Falls from the Sky' at Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization (SMIC) in June 2021. Picture 12 depicts the physicality of this experience during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic in June 2021. This has led to the re-opening of experiential urban research-based exploration in the emirate of Sharjah and UAE since the Covid-19 based lockdown. In an architectural and urban sketch of SIMC dated March 2013, Picture 20 reflects on this museum typology assuming center stage for its architectural and urban relevance in the Heart of Sharjah, and visitor engagement in relation to the physical experience of every museum visitor and its relevance to the ongoing debate during and post Covid-19.

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For Detailed references, kindly refer to "Architectural & Urban Development of Sharjah: Spatial Analysis of Museums Typology," 104 Pages in English & Arabic, ISBN: 978-9948-34-965-5, Published by SMA, Government of Sharjah, UAE, December 2019



# DR. SOPHIE KAZAN

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## ABOUT ME

Dr. Sophie Kazan is an art historian, writer and curator. She attended courses at l'Ecole du Louvre in Paris, received a bachelor's degree in Art & Archaeology (Asia/Africa) at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) University of London, a Master's in History of Art from Oxford University, and a PhD from the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, UK. She is an Honorary Fellow of the School of Museum Studies. Her PhD research explores the development of contemporary art in the UAE and considers art and aesthetic discourses that situate it within global art. Sophie Kazan is based in the UK.

# HOW HAVE NEW REALITIES AND THE COVID PANDEMIC IMPACTED ARTISTS AND THE ARTS SECTOR IN THE UAE.

On March 22, 2020, the UAE Ministry of Interior called upon all UAE residents to remain in their homes and for businesses to close due to the mounting threat of the Covid-19 virus. The country's young population has one of the highest levels of internet penetration in the world and so a virtual migration for work, business and social interaction took place almost immediately. Arguably the limitations were felt most strongly by artists and art galleries because the lockdown happened days before the start of Dubai Art Week, Art Dubai 2020 and the Sharjah Biennale 2020. All was postponed, though the accompanying talks series, the Global Art Forum and March Meetings were held online. Nonetheless, this left a substantial gap for small independent galleries and artists, who had relied on the physical contact and security created by large art events. The pandemic has yet to be overcome internationally and restrictions still abound. Nonetheless, this paper aims to examine how artists and art audiences were impacted by the events of 2020 and 2021 so far. More specifically, it explores how new realities developed and were translated into art. This period also saw considerable activity within larger art organisations and cultural entities in the UAE that was reported in the press, which this paper will touch upon briefly.

**Virtual migration and communities of sentiment**

"Future-Facing" is a term often used to describe the flurry of cosmopolitan museum and art events that annually take place during spring, with Art Week in Dubai, the Sharjah Biennial and March Meetings. For businesses such as the fashionable Alserkal Avenue art district, the Covid pandemic was a tragic catalyst that accelerated the digital transfer of the art and culture sector. Within days of the lockdown announcement, the district announced an online platform, alserkal.online. It also introduced a three-month rent waiver through a Pay it Forward scheme, to encourage businesses to collaborate and





engage with each other in a creative manner. This did not directly affect artists or galleries outside the gates of Alserkal Avenue, however it showcased a positive way in which corporates were responding to the crisis. The donations of thousands of meals by the Inked restaurant set a baseline and #payitforward provided an inspiring 'wave' of virtual sentiment. This touches on Appadurai's notion of new sodalities or "communities of sentiment," triggered by social-media, multi-media and global communication in local and global community environments. Jameel Arts Centre responded immediately too, with micro-grants aimed at project-based and independent art practitioners throughout the Arab world. The aim was to sustain the centre's offering, provide workshops online and translate as much of its experience as possible for visitors to enjoy virtually and in its outdoor spaces and sculpture park.

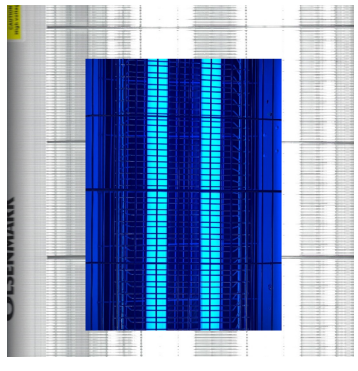
Though the Sharjah Biennial was postponed, it had its own hashtag (#sharjahbiennial14) and the March Meeting discussions flourished into an international online event. They gained a global feel, with speakers tuning in from across the globe and in their own time zones. The founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi's successful Cultural Majlis grew successfully online. In Abu Dhabi, the author and diplomat His Excellency Omar Saif Gobash began a series of interviews for the Office for Public and Cultural Diplomacy and the latter formed partnerships with specialised non-governmental organisations such as The Zay Initiative – the Art of Arab Dress, launched by Dr. Reem Mutwalli, which attracted many viewers from around the world. The Louvre Abu Dhabi's Manuel Rabaté drew attention to the importance of digital accessibility for museums and the new means of measuring success in the cultural sector. "When a virus comes and challenges the capacity for people to connect physically, this is really our DNA that is attacked. For us, the way to answer that is to remind us that we must be mindful of the other.

**Time for reflection and creativity**

As time slowed, reflection and creativity became two important characteristics of this new reality. Artist and Sharjah University lecturer Karima Al Shomely, said that the pandemic allowed her to 'attend' conferences in Egypt, Greece, Iraq and France. Time at home was extremely productive and she explored new media in the university's unused ceramics department. The resulting ceramic-installations of women wearing burqas, prints and ink paintings were exhibited in a faculty show at the Al Maraya Centre in September to December 2020. As became customary, during "Covid times" the exhibition was accompanied by films posted online. These enabled the curator and artists to share their work and practice with audiences in Sharjah and elsewhere.

*Left and Centre - Figure with a burqa and view of several figures, made in the summer of 2020, Karima Al Shomely, photographs courtesy of the artist. Right - From the "International Connections Exhibition" film of Karima Al Shomely, courtesy of the artist and Maraya Art Centre.*

Other local artists who used the enforced isolation creatively, include Sarah Al Mehairi. Al Mehairi's online "Artists Talks," began in April 2020. Now in its second season, the informal conversations with artists about their work proved to be a great success. Sarah was named one of 2020's "Artists to watch." Al-Mehairi said: "With the pandemic, we started to look inwards as artists." She admitted to recognising how reliant she had become on fairs and museums to inspire and provide a context for her work. Al-Mehairi was due to attend the prestigious Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan Emerging Artists Fellowship (SEAF), which she did online and in-person, gaining valuable insights and motivated her artistic practice. Borrowed and Placed is from the experimental body of work that belongs to that period. It explores her hyper-awareness of self and surroundings, the interconnection of objects, forms, visible or forced similarities. Like dreams or unfolding pages in a book, this represents a state of betweenness and continuum, connection and communication.




*Left - "Borrowed and Placed," handmade book (detail), 2020, Sarah Al Mehairi, photographs courtesy of the artist.*
*Right - Inkjet on vellum and ink on book board, 2020, Sarah Al Mehairi, photographs courtesy of the artist.*

The online format was a necessary response to travel restrictions and limited access. Global communication meant that common challenges between museum professionals and artists were shared, and this created a new form of visual intimacy. During Abu Dhabi Art 2020, Beyond: Emerging Artists took place at Manarat Al Saadiyat and was one of the only exhibitions to have a physical presence. It featured work by Hind Mezaina, Afra Al Suwaidi and Afra Al-Dhaheri, an artist and Fine Art Lecturer at Zayed University. The exhibition was also featured online but was unable to convey the tactile quality of Al-Dhaheri's massive installations of heavy rope and thread made

to resemble human hair. Hair is often covered in different cultures because it represents intimacy and femininity. Al Dhaheri recognised that intimacy and introspection had gained relevance during this time.



*One at a Time (To Detangle Series) (detail), 2020,*
*Hair on cotton fabric,*
*200 x 35 cm.*
*Courtesy: The Green Art Gallery www.gagallery.com*

**Rethinking the role of museums and artists**

Artists used isolation to produce new work and were initially supported by non-profit organisations (NGOs). It is telling that Art Jameel's annual Assembly 2020 cohort of 18 to 24 years old artists, researchers and entrepreneurs chose, "Reassigning Value, "as their 2020 theme. Two initiatives born of the pandemic were Forsa School and Engage 101. Engage 101 is an online platform created by curator Munira Al Sayegh and Gaith Abdulla to help situate local art collecting and support artists outside gallery systems. Forsa School began in November 2020 as a collaboration between Sharjah Art Foundation and Naqd. It is a project that aims to equip and empower young UAE art practitioners. It provided practical tools, experience, and mentorships to allow them to succeed in the country's art industry.

Hind Mezaina highlighted the importance of governmental support for artists and filmmakers during the pandemic on her website, The Culturist. She demanded increased support for all out-of-work artists and freelancers. A few days later, the Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development and the Arts and Cultural and Creative Industries Council launched a national survey, asking how it could support artists through the Covid crisis. Whether it was the Covid-19 pandemic alone that had sparked a new awareness of the country's burgeoning creative industry is unclear, however a "National Creative Relief Fund" was created in May 2020. The UAE government bought local art and also offered large grants for emerging and mid-career artists from the UAE and from different nationalities residing in the UAE. While Emiratisation had previously focussed on nurturing exclusively 'home-grown' talent, there were grants that recognised the importance of all actors in the UAE's creative industries. The Chairman of Abu Dhabi's Department of Culture and Tourism, Mohammed Al Mubarak later announced an additional 22 billion AED ($6 billion) in support. Some justified this due to its being "a high value-added sector," however this does not make it any less worthy.

In June 2020, the long-awaited reopening of museums meant a degree of re-adaptation to new realities and visitor restrictions. Reflection and creativity remained important themes for Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) as it held its previously postponed exhibition, Art in the Age of Anxiety, which was suddenly extremely relevant. SAF's 2021 exhibition Unsettled Objects was also reflective of this new reality. Housed in Sharjah's Flying Saucer, a star-shaped pavilion space with glass walls in the centre of the city, exhibition accessibility became its focus. Its location meant that SAF's collection could be admired from the streets. As visits to see traditional forms of art in galleries and museums became possible, the reconstruction and re-imagining of art continues. Considerations relating to connectivity and accessibility continued to play an important part in the visitor experience.

In March 2021, NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery held its first virtual exhibition, not in, of, along or relating to a line. It explored the limitations and freedoms of digital culture and technology offering an art "born digital." For example, a virtual 3D piece by Maryam Al Hamra used fictional and digital artefacts inspired by reality. This reflected on non-linear and "post technology" culture. NYUAD also hosted numerous discussions online, which encouraged a re-thinking of curatorial creativity and related to global developments in art creation and consumption.

The COVID moment gave the actors within the UAE's art ecosystem a valuable opportunity to self-reflect and consolidate. The top-down growth of the past decade is now slowing, and grassroot community-oriented efforts are now taking hold.

The pandemic is not over, and many lives have been lost. Nonetheless, it has created a global and virtual environment where contributors to the UAE's art scene have grown exponentially. Despite forced closures, museums have not lost their relevance. With the silence of the pandemic and migration online, the visual arts have gained a new relevance and renewed recognition. Having proven itself a flexible and forward-facing nation, the UAE's cultural journey is ongoing. Covid's legacy has created a broader art narrative, a re-thinking of the role of the museum and of the place of art in society.

"For the first time in history, people all over the world are able to access the world of academia and the previously exclusive speeches made at conferences… information has been democratized, one of the positives of the pandemic. Information is power and it deserves to be shared."

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# DAVID JOSEPH WRISLEY

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## ABOUT US

David Joseph Wrisley is Associate Professor of Digital Humanities at NYU Abu Dhabi. His research interests include comparative approaches to medieval literature in European languages and Arabic, digital spatial approaches to corpora, artificial intelligence for handwritten text recognition in different writing systems, and open knowledge community building in the Middle East, where he has lived and researched since 2002.



## Estelle Guéville

Estelle Guéville is Assistant Researcher at Louvre Abu Dhabi. In 2016, she joined the France-Museums Agency for the Louvre Abu Dhabi project, where she participated in the opening of the museum as Assistant Curator. In July 2018, she joined the Louvre Abu Dhabi in the new "Research and Development" Department, where she is helping to develop academic research in several fields, including research on medieval collections using digital methods.



## Niccolò Acram Cappelletto

Niccolò Acram Cappelletto graduated from NYU Abu Dhabi in 2021 with a degree in Art and Art History. Currently, he is a Post-Graduate Research Fellow at NYU Abu Dhabi in the Dhakira Center for Heritage Studies. After joining the NYUAD Art Gallery as a Student Curatorial Assistant for three years, he turned to research, focusing on museum studies, cultural heritage, and curation. He is interested in issues of inclusivity in institutions, new trajectories of art history, and intersections between heritage and museum disciplines.

# CREATING NEW AUDIENCES FOR DIGITAL OBJECTS THROUGH MUSEUM-UNIVERSITY COLLABORATION

With the closure of artistic and cultural institutions in 2020 due to the global pandemic, museums witnessed serious challenges in material and physical research of the objects in their collections. By experimenting with new digital forms across their professional activities—digitization of museum objects, modes of communication, dissemination of research results online in conferences and professional webinars—researchers and cultural practitioners have made virtue out of necessity.

This article discusses the Paris Bible Project (PBP), an initiative that started during the pandemic between the Louvre Abu Dhabi (LAD) and New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), with a professional relationship between researchers on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi, turned virtual. This inter-institutional partnership has proven to be a vibrant scholarly exchange, with a growing list of participation in international conferences and papers. In this article, we argue that by studying digitized objects from the museum, not only do researchers break new ground in their fields of study, but the museum objects they study also gain new audiences.

The PBP aims to understand the medieval Bible in Europe, and the project's goals have important implications for the way that research on written culture might be studied in the future. The written documents of interest to us are known as "Paris Bibles," a product of the development of universities in the beginning of the 13th century in Europe. They were produced following the establishment of the University of Paris, and their production and diffusion are linked to how the biblical books were revised, organized, and translated.




*Figure 1. The Paris Bible Project (PBP) website (https://parisbible.github.io) in June 2020. Manuscript: Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. Latin 40 - Source gallica.bnf.fr*

The spread of this new version across Europe established the Paris Bible as a veritable genre, with a very large number of manuscripts produced over two centuries. We know that they were intended for individual rather than institutional use, and as the Bible became smaller and more portable, one of their key features was the presence of abbreviations and special ways of lettering (Ruzzier, 2010). The reason that this cultural phenomenon from a faraway time and place is important to Saadiyat Island lies in the fact that the PBP is studying the digitized version of the LAD Bible (LAD 2013.051), comparing it with hundreds of digitized copies of similar Bibles found in libraries around the world. We might say that when objects from a museum are digitized, the PBP illustrates that they can easily be put into a global context and be contextualized for future researchers (and visitors to a museum). In the digital space, we can tell a rich story about museum objects that are rarely found together, featured side by side.

Although there is a danger of damaging precious objects during digitization, the advantages usually outweigh the risks. We digitize manuscripts for different reasons: increasing accessibility of an online collection, engaging with a broader audience, reducing handling, and preserving the object long-term (Burrows, 2017; VanSnick and Ntanos, 2018). It might be said that even though we decrease physical access to an object, digitization increases research access to it. Normally, a manuscript such as the LAD Bible would be on display for a limited time and under strict lighting conditions in a gallery. Of course, people can visit the museum and view the physical object behind glass, but a digitized copy allows us to "flip through the pages" as much as we want, studying it in depth without any damage to the original object.



*Figure 2. An image of the gallery in which the LAD Bible (2013.051.001) is exhibited. © Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi / Photo Anna Maria Nielsen*

Digitization also creates assets to be managed by the institution and extends the scope of research possibilities, leading to the cultivation of new skills, new ways of looking at objects, and, of course, new ideas about the past of human cultures. Although most institutions cannot afford to digitize their whole collection, some might choose to do so with a portion of the objects that they believe will most benefit from the process (Bauer and Wrisley, 2020). The emergent academic field known as "digital humanities" benefits greatly from the digitization of objects such as the LAD Bible, since it can use technology to gain a deeper understanding of them.

With the recent pandemic, museum, education, and research activities were significantly disrupted, but the availability of digitized museum objects created a surge of interest for those collections. This surge has encouraged cultural institutions to consider making available parts of their collections online, creating modes of engagement beyond the walls of the museum (UNESCO, 2020 and 2021).

Recent initiatives in the Arab world include uploading the masterpieces from the collection of the Louvre Abu Dhabi onto the museum's website (LAD, 2021) or the publication of 3D models from the Sharjah Archaeology Authority on Sketchfab (Sharjah Archaeological Authority, 2020). Their placement within a virtual space extends the reach of this cultural heritage, for sure, but it also provides a much wider context in which they can be understood, without the need to consult these objects in person.

**Digital Humanities and Museum Possibilities**

From its inception, the PBP has been engaging with global audiences. Studying the Paris Bible has proven to be a dynamic topic of investigation, raising new questions and lines of inquiry in Heritage Studies, Digital Humanities, and Medieval Studies. Initial research was based on the analysis of the transcription of the LAD Bible using the AI-powered platform, Transkribus (READ COOP, 2021). This platform allows researchers to carry out "handwritten text recognition" (HTR) on archival documents using artificial intelligence (AI) to decode the digitized document. The process is complex and teaches us that when AI is applied to historical materials, indeed, much human intelligence is required for it to work well.

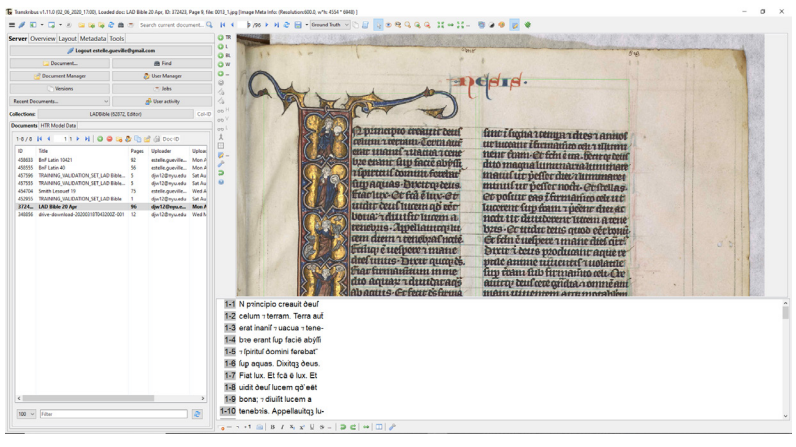

*Figure 3. The Transkribus platform with the LAD Paris Bible (2013.051.001). For the manuscript image: © Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi / Photo BNF; Transkribus interface reproduced with the permission of READ-COOP.*

With transcriptions of documents made by AI, a wide range of array analyses can be performed. Our initial attempts at "reading the Bible with a computer" gave promising results (Guéville and Wrisley, 2020). As the research advances, it will no doubt lead to a better understanding of where—and when—these manuscripts were copied, questions that researchers and museum curators are usually only able to answer tentatively. We hope that it will help us to recognize and describe the specific handwriting of copyists from a long-lost past and to better understand how such objects were made. The project has begun to investigate new avenues of research, tapping into the field of computer vision, to move beyond "reading" the text of the manuscript to recognizing recurrent or shared decorative styles in dozens, even hundreds, of Paris Bibles. By adopting a digital approach, we were able to generate many new pathways for future research.

On account of the digitization of the manuscript, the museum object entered a new realm of research possibilities. By activating the know-how from various cultural institutions, the PBP considers the digital as one keyway to enable rich collaboration. The push of the pandemic led to the object's being investigated and presented to a public that may never have come to see the object at the Louvre Abu Dhabi and helped make the museum's collection known on an international level to a new audience of academics and researchers. We also believe in the potential of similar projects to increase the number of visitors to museums. Even though this new public may not be visiting the museum in person, they are able to get to know the institution and its collections in a "hybrid museum" environment.

The kind of research in the PBP facilitates richer contextualization of the museum artworks on physical display with minimal material interaction, thus maintaining the object's safety and furthering its exploration.

The uniqueness of the manuscript in a museum collection reached various new audiences thanks to the support of the cultural institutions, which, in turn, also benefited from the expanding research. We believe that digital research on collections as part of academic-museum collaboration provides a strategy for other museums in the Arab world and beyond to explore and develop. The model has been elaborated globally in "digital GLAM" (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums). One notable policy for digital GLAM can be found in the UK context (Oxford Museums). Such a strategy is crucial today inasmuch as it puts technology at the service of research and teaching from the museum and engages national, regional, and international publics, increasing accessibility and engagement overall. The PBP is not integrated into the galleries or into educational content, but we are hopeful that in the future, more and more projects will benefit from the use of digital tools for academic and research purposes.

**Changing Modes of Communication and Storytelling in Museums**

One of our hopes is that the PBP will reach specific audiences not usually considered as targeted publics in museums. By using research as a vehicle of outreach, the museum collection provides new audiences the chance to learn about the museum, its collection, and initiatives. In our case, the vision of the Louvre Abu Dhabi of a globalized humanity through culture resonates well with the PBP's goal to understand a phenomenon that nowadays involves institutions around the world. Taking advantage of the digitized collections available online can foster interconnectedness and invite more partners to join in collaborative projects. Yet, these new horizons of culture require us to be attentive to the changing modes of communication in research, be it in a museum, a cultural foundation, a library, or a university. To achieve an understanding of what digital research is bringing to the cultural sector, sets of new skills need to be developed, including digital literacy, to keep up with new modes of information and knowledge exchange among its various publics.

Often, this question is only framed within the question of social media and how to reach cultural audiences, but we believe that this issue deserves considerably more attention.

The PBP is partly a pedagogical effort involving students, but is also committed to teaching and learning through teamwork (what has been called co-teaching and co-learning), in which the individuals come from different professional, educational, and linguistic backgrounds. Teamwork is an integral part of digital humanities research, owing to the different perspectives and expertise in various fields, and an array of skills is required to carry out interdisciplinary research (Siemens, 2009). A strong lesson from our experience might be that when more actors are involved in research projects, the nature of the engagement with the digitized objects becomes richer. From a knowledge development perspective, collaboration also leads the actors to take these experiences back to the various communities to which they belong.

A project such as the PBP requires manifold types of expertise, from project management, specialized historical knowledge related to collections, technical expertise, and most importantly of all, an openness to experimentation. We are aware that not every institution can leverage such skills, but a collaborative spirit makes it easier. Cultural institutions need to begin thinking about the "knowledge infrastructures" and logistical support required to continue (Koivisto, Kopar, and Wicker, 2018). By connecting people and adapting technologies to the cultural field, the PBP demonstrates how knowledge exchange can occur when promoted by institutions through digital tools for research. Museums benefit from the "digital" in various and multiple ways and through institutional collaborations. We have mentioned above "Transkribus," an infrastructural collaboration between many European institutions. Other projects, such as "Photogrammar," an open-source software developed by the Distant Viewing Lab, offer new possibilities for the visualization and exploration of collections. Also notable is the "GLAM workbench," a collection of resources and tutorials useful for exploring and working with the data from the GLAM sector. Tools come and go, of course, but embracing the digital as a changing landscape, both inside and outside the institution, is essential for engaging with these global trends.

In these practical and theoretical applications of the digital to cultural heritage that we have discussed briefly above, institutions complement each other and combine expertise to attract more people to the museum. By uniting similar objects from different institutions digitally, we always find new sources of information that extend the stories that we are able to tell about our museum objects. Opening a research department in the Louvre Abu Dhabi has opened new doors for sharing collection objects and making them relevant in the world beyond the physical museum, thus attracting different kinds of visitors. Starting from the focus on researchers and academics, the digital approach of the PBP stretches into educational activities and raises awareness of the collection itself for both local and global audiences. By encouraging such collaboration, we grow professionally together and build the knowledge infrastructures of tomorrow within our institutions.

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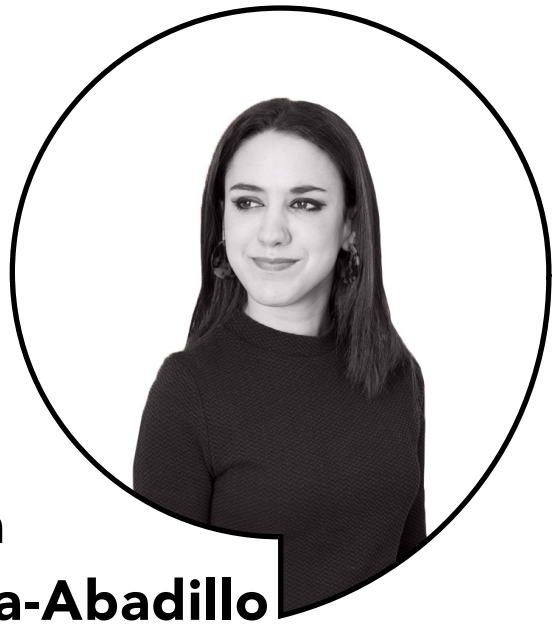
# ABOUT US

## Freya El Baz

**Head of Audiences and Learning at Barker Langham**

Freya El Baz comes from a background in innovation and the humanities. An experienced social researcher and lover of people, she has a relentless curiosity for what makes people 'tick' and is keen to explore how we can begin to shift the dial on putting audiences at the forefront of our collective work across the cultural sector.



## Maria Garcia-Abadillo

**Senior Digital Consultant at Barker Langham**

Maria Garcia-Abadillo is an experienced content manager, specializing in the development of digital experiences within the cultural sector. She is currently working on the strategy and design of Barker Langham's digital products, mainly for projects in the Middle East.

# "SHIFTING THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT"

Today, over 60% of the global population are active internet users[1], and access to knowledge is no longer exclusive to authoritative institutions and encyclopaedic museums. Knowledge is now, quite literally, at our fingertips. In the past years, museums and the whole cultural sector have been seeking to find new ways of engagement with their audiences. The question was, and still remains: What can museums do to keep bringing people to their galleries?

A huge shift from the traditional Western definition of the 19th century museum is already happening in other parts of the world, with examples like the Louvre Abu Dhabi – curated around stories rather than collections – and others like the National Museum of Qatar, or teamLab's Mori Building Digital Art Museum in Tokyo, which define themselves as "immersive museum experiences."

Audiences no longer go to museums to see an artwork or an object they have never seen before. Instead, we are finding that what moves audiences to physically travel to museums is the guarantee that they will feel immersed in an "experience" that is impossible to get online.

With the Covid-19 pandemic changing the landscape and offering the potential for a paradigm shift, the question has shifted once more to: what can museums do to develop and maintain deep and meaningful relationships with their audiences, and how can they attract new ones from home? This once-in-a-generation experience has catapulted the cultural sector into new territory where the "rules of the game" have changed overnight and we have discovered that the total absence of our physical influence on audiences sharpened our collective focus to realise that it is, in fact, audiences that will be key in determining our futures.

The present reality means that it has never been more important for museums, historical sites, and cultural institutions to put their audiences front and centre when it comes to planning, and to engage with them in meaningful and innovative ways through every step of the process.

At Barker Langham, we have always looked at audiences from a unique perspective. Our audience research (offline and now, more than ever, online) focuses on applying:

- A curatorial lens: what is it that audiences want?
- An interpretive lens: as cultural professionals and future thinkers, we should know what audiences want more than they actually do.
- A business lens: how can audiences sustain the museum?
- A strategic lens: how can we shape the audience's behaviour?

[1]Global Internet Overview (April 2021), retrieved from https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-april-global-statshot

We have continued to focus and develop our philosophy and methodology around our audience work over recent years, and we are now in a position where our offer is broad, varied, and responsive. This shift has stood us in good stead to ensure that clients are able to future-proof their offer by engaging iteratively with audiences – especially when considering the challenges of the global Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, interestingly, the recent pandemic has allowed us to showcase our robust methodology and "audience toolkit" with our clients, meaning that we have been able to continue adding value to our projects and developing our methodology whilst ensuring that clients continue to work in an audience-centric way (Fig.1).

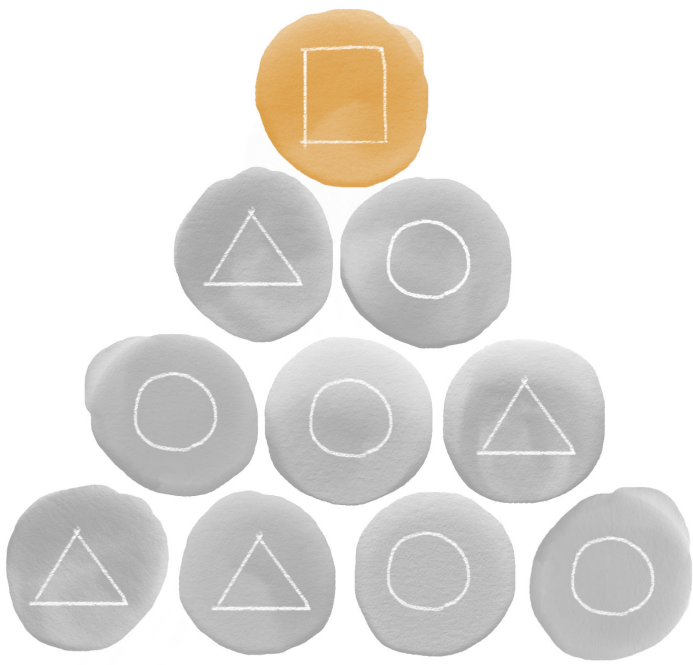


*Fig 1. A traditional and hierarchical approach to audience interaction tends to restrict the creativity and possibilities of working in an audience-centric way.*

Our bespoke approach to audience work means that we are developing opportunities to uncover deep, nuanced, and sometimes surprising insights that clients would otherwise not be aware of. It is this quest for rich, authentic, and meaningful audience insights that defines our approach to audience work. We want to understand what makes audiences "tick", and this requires a radically different approach to cultural consultancy and a shift away from the norm. This paper seeks to share some of our learning and observations of working in this new way.

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Regardless of the method we use, our philosophy is such that we start from the "inside out," meaning that the audience is at the centre of our thinking, and we work our way out from there. Putting the audience (groups and individuals) at the centre of our approach results in an audience-centric response to a client's challenge. Our methodology and ever evolving "toolkit" reflects our commitment to ensuring that the audience's "voice" is part of the wider discussions and reflects on the curatorial, interpretive, and strategic journeys we take our clients on (Fig.2).

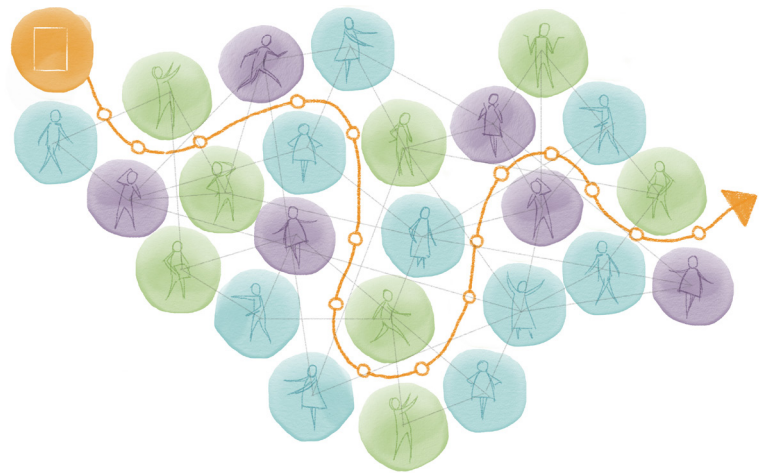


*Fig 2. We work in a collaborative and iterative way with audiences from the outset, including them and inviting them into projects' challenges and solutions throughout the whole creative process.*

Working with high-profile and ambitious clients, we co-create a methodology that enables us to run in-depth and iterative audience consultation work throughout the life of the project— from exploring the specificities of the kinds of experiences audiences are seeking through to concept and themes, script style and tone of voice, and the final physical exhibits themselves. This is exactly the approach we recently undertook with two major science and natural history museum clients in the Arabian Gulf. Embedding the audience throughout the entire process proved an opportunity to provide not only exceptional empirical support for the developing direction of the institutions but also offered surprising and delightful insights that gave our clients confidence that the project was moving in a successful direction. Our digital suite of tools and online community methods that are employed for such research means we are able to engage with audiences across time zones and locations whilst ensuring we are consulting with a diverse and representative audience population. We are proud to be working with a prestigious Saudi Arabian organisation using this methodology and are excited to discover insights that will no doubt shift long-held perceptions and assumptions about what it is that audiences want in order to steer these ground-breaking 21st century cultural institutions as they are created.



*Fig.3: We work both on and offline. Being flexible and creative in one's approach to audience work is key.*

Barker Langham has an international base and a global appeal. We have worked extensively across the Arabian Gulf, Asia and Europe. We are increasingly embedding audience work into all of our projects, since it is clear that clients now have a thirst for this type of knowledge that may not have been previously considered to be as important as some of the other more established elements of curatorial and interpretive design. In the Gulf region, we continue to work with a variety of clients in an audience-centric way by engaging large numbers of audience groups in creative workshops (both on and offline) and running online communities and in-depth stakeholder interviews (Fig.3).

In the UK, we ran an exciting piece of audience research with primary school-aged children through to adults at various stages in their lives to understand their experiences around the theme of money and finances. This research was commissioned by one of the world's most highly respected financial governing bodies, who have an on-site museum designed to encourage new audiences into the "financial world" in order to empower them in their own lives with regards to their finances. The museum is ostensibly designed with young people and families in mind and is the mechanism through which the governing body is able to connect with "regular people" and offer a "soft" education on all things money. It was previously unprecedented for a client of this calibre to include audiences early on in their process and thinking regarding the future of the organisation. It is thanks to their foresight and trust in us that they recognised the crucial importance of engaging with younger and more diverse audiences in order to safeguard the future of their brand and everything they stand for. The co-creation workshops, coupled with the high-level stakeholder interviews we conducted, led us to a fruitful set of insights that laid the foundations for the client's main cultural offering and strategy. The insight gained also encouraged them to reconsider the roles and opportunities for their museum experience, leading them to recognise that there was huge merit in creating audience-centric and co-designed content and experiences.

A combination of methodologies (often all running in parallel) allows us to gather a breadth of insights and, therefore, an understanding of audiences as we journey through a project. The varied and ambitious nature of our approach means that we are able to engage with audiences in a way that is both novel and meets them where they are. If we are serious about engaging audiences and incorporating our findings and learnings into the curatorial and strategic plans of our museums and cultural sites, then we must think of ourselves as co-creators of the audience journey. Whilst we are all experts in our field, it is also important to remember that it is the audiences who are experts in their own experience and in their sense of what it is that works for them and what they need from a cultural experience. This recalibration of the power dynamics between "expert" and "audience" has challenged us to reconsider the way in which we include audiences in our thinking (Fig.4).

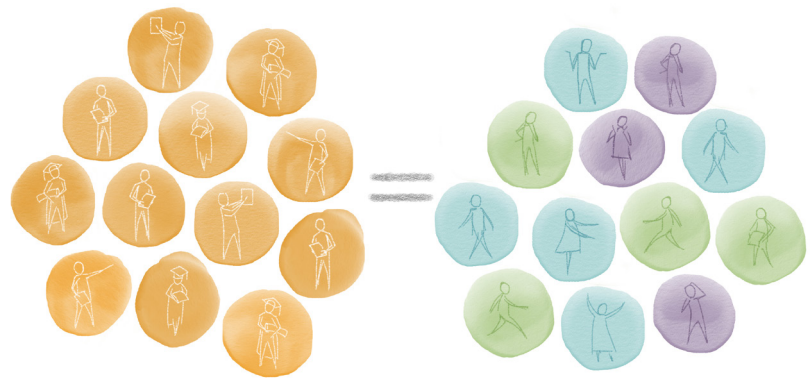


*Fig.4: Recalibrating the power dynamics between "experts" and audiences challenges us to re-think relationships with our audiences.*

We are currently involved in projects whereby audience insights are forming the core foundations for decisions on the design of the space, curatorial journey, content and narrative, tone of voice and language used, and the strategic underpinnings of the overall museum or cultural site. We include our clients in our journey and invite them to join our audience debriefs and workshop sessions. A client and audience-centric approach to this work allows us to be iterative and creative in our problem-solving approach, as well as responsive and proactive throughout the process.

We continue to learn more than we could have imagined, working alongside audiences in an authentic and co-creative way. Below, we outline some of our key learnings and questions we have had to ask ourselves along the way.

1- We have developed an ability to work collaboratively and iteratively with audiences from the early concept design stages, through to the final narrative and content creation which means that audiences have a say in the experience that is being created. Harnessing the power of the people has felt radical and liberating!

2- Establishing an audience-centric way of working allows our insights to be applied throughout the project, safeguarding and future-proofing the final experience. By integrating the audience perspective into the bigger picture, we have ensured that the final output is fit for purpose.

3- "Don't create for me, create with me." Relationships are everything, and building a respectful and equal relationship with audience groups will be the marker of success in the research carried out.

4- We have found that audiences do not assume that they are the "experts" in museum / cultural design and have urged us to reconsider our own position as experts. We too must recognise that whilst we have valuable insights and opinions on audiences based on experience, we are also not the experts on what they are seeking and need. Recalibrating the power dynamics of this relationship has been an enlightening and humbling discovery for us.

5- A conscious re-framing of the relationship between "audience" and "expert" means that we have democratised our relationship with audiences by bringing them "in" and dusting off the notion that we "know best." We embraced the fact that we all "know" and have something of value to contribute. By including as many diverse voices

and perspectives as possible, we are ensuring the best, most creative and robust outcomes for our clients.

6- Working in an intimate and engaged way with audiences also means that the cultural spaces and museums we are building work for and inspire everyone, and that we ensure that we engage with diverse audiences.

The learnings from working in this audience-focused way are extensive and far-reaching. Our own practice and sensibilities around what we think audiences need have shifted. Working in collaboration alongside audiences and seeing them as "partners" in the collaborative and creative process has marked a change in our way of working, and we are excited to discover the benefits of engaging early on and in varied, creative ways – both on and offline – with audiences and the impact that it has had on our final outputs and relationships with clients.

It will be interesting to observe the shift that putting audiences at the centre of our work as a sector will have on the cultural spaces of tomorrow. Will the sector bravely go where we have never gone before, or will the status quo remain largely unchanged? Our minds are set on a future whereby the audience is invited into the "conversation" early on and included as an important and key stakeholder in our projects. We are excited for tomorrow, and for the relationships we will build with audiences. We are building with them, not for them. The tides are turning, and it is time for change.

At Barker Langham, we have always put these audience-centric methodologies at the core of our work, which has allowed us to reflect on our own practices and ask questions ourselves. Having audiences participate by responding to a questionnaire at the end of the exhibition is nothing new. What our experience has taught us is that embedding audiences' contributions right at the beginning and seamlessly throughout the whole creative process is a guarantee of success.

Perhaps the best example of an experience creation process in which the audience plays a central curatorial role lies in the world of film. Test screenings – previews of a film before its release to assess audience reaction – have been common practice since as early as the 1920s. In the history of cinema, there are many examples of directors' cuts that have drastically changed after a test screening with audiences. With museological experiences, we want to go a step further. We not only want to gauge the audience's opinion at the end of the curatorial process. What we want is to change the whole idea of having a curatorial "power-elite" monopolising the narratives. Curators should be storytellers capable of bringing the audience's own narratives into the experience.

This democratisation of the curatorial process aims to give audiences a sense of ownership they might never have felt before. To successfully achieve this, the audience's input needs to be gathered in real time and not be seen as a "post-production" step in the creative process. An interesting example of this gathering of live data is Muse, co-founded by Dr Sarah Kenderdine and Dr Anita Kocsis. This audience evaluation platform records visitors' opinions while walking through the exhibits. In the form of an interactive survey, as part of the exhibit itself, visitors are asked to rate their experience by contributing with drawings, voice notes, taking photos, or even playing with animated graphics.

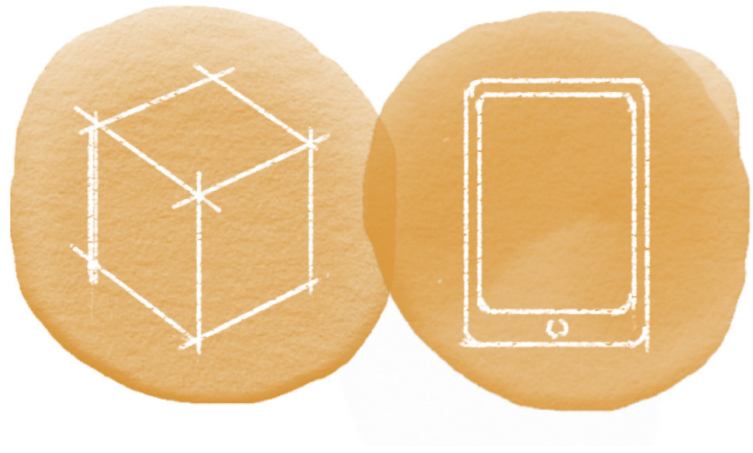


*Fig. 5: The future of audience research and engagement will be a hybrid way of thinking and working - straddling the online and offline worlds.*

The future of audience engagement will be a hybrid involving the physical and digital worlds (Fig.5). Successful audience engagement in our present time is about building "real" experiences together whilst capitalising on digital tools. In this way, we will collectively change the cultural landscape and shift the narratives to reflect the diverse nature of audiences and ensure that the experiences we create inspire, move, and reflect the audiences who experience them.



# DANIEL ORTI-GONZALEZ

**Middle East Director**
Acciona Cultural Engineering

## ABOUT ME

Daniel Orti-Gonzalez has 21 years of experience in project management in engineering, procurement and construction. His experience was integral to his work on the design and construction of museums, exhibits, cultural districts, and signature buildings. His comprehensive and sharp business acumen allowed him to lead multidisciplinary and multicultural teams on iconic projects. Currently working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Orti-Gonzalez is developing projects related to the cultural progress in the Kingdom and assisting government organizations and private entities in telling stories and engaging audiences.

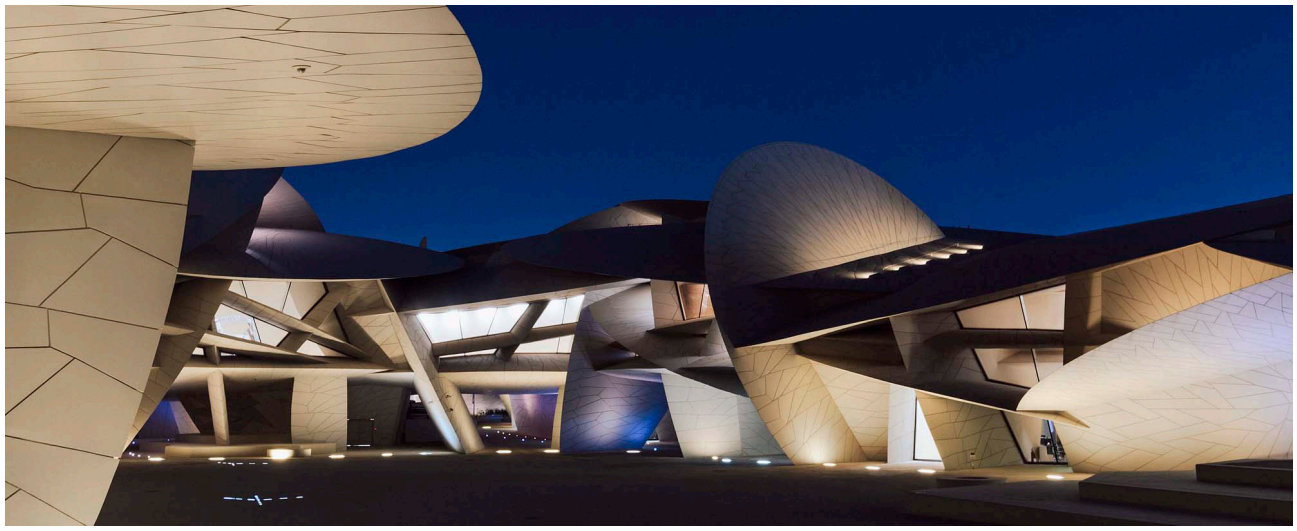
## HOW TO BRING A HISTORIC MUSEUM INTO THE FUTURE

Social and technological (r)evolutions are challenging the role of museums in our society. We can safely say that many young people would prefer a Netflix or game console afternoon rather than a visit to a traditional museum. That is why museums are reinventing the concepts at their very core, understanding the potential these changes could have in transforming them for their own benefit.

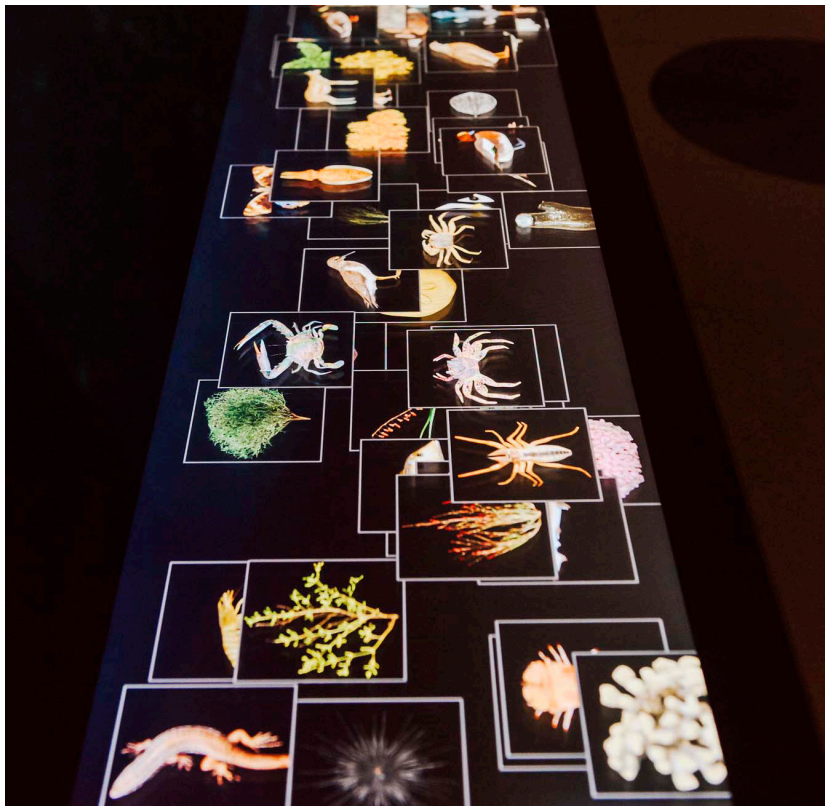
Museums, in an attempt to keep up-to-date and compete with other modern entertainment venues, are reshaping their approach by creating new, experience-driven exhibits that appeal to the ever-more demanding audiences of today and tomorrow.

Beyond these challenges, all the mobility- and visitor capacity limitations that have come into place during the COVID-19 crisis have had a decisive impact on cultural consumption. In fact, experts consider that the new forms of access to culture (virtual visits, virtual conferences, online events, etc), together with new models of enjoying cultural and museum heritage that make the most of the new and latest technologies, will remain even when everything is fully back to normal. Thus, the economic impact of the pandemic has shown us that the digital opportunities taken advantage of by museums are also those from which they continue to get the maximum benefit. In addition to being a challenge, this also presents an opportunity for museums to reinvent themselves, become less location-centric, more accessible and, of course, more attractive.





Today, more than ever, museums aspire to be centers of innovation, trying to offer open digital experiences that make them relevant and useful for the public with whom they want to connect and interact. It is worth highlighting that the 10 museums with the highest number of visits in the world accumulate more than 50% of global visits to any museum, while the small and less well-known ones face the challenge of making themselves more attractive to the public if they want to survive. These small museums could become dynamic elements of culture and the local economy with the support of the new digital environment.



3D printing, for example, plays a key role in this entire context—the digitization of artefacts and 3D printing from high-definition scans of a model, allow the public to get up close to identical reproductions, preventing deterioration of the original pieces while creating attractive and accurate museum and cultural spaces. Less than two years ago, we inaugurated our global 3D printing center in Dubai with the world's largest operational 3D printer using powder bed technology (based on DShape technology). One of the key projects that we have developed in this field was the creation of an exact replica 3D print of the Romanesque Arch of San Pedro de las Dueñas (12$^{th}$ century, original from León, Spain), now exhibited in the National Archaeological Museum in Madrid (MAN), Spain. This technology has also been explored in one of our projects in the region, The Grand Egyptian Museum, where we explored the possibility of using 3D printing technology to provide visitors with tactile replicas that they can touch and feel.

In addition, for the last couple of years, Augmented Reality (AR) has taken over various spheres of people's lives. There are many possibilities for the use of AR in museums and the most straightforward way is to use it to add value to the interpretation of objects. This technology has great potential in creating that crucial bridge between the digital and the physical and it can do it all: interactivity, layering of content, enhanced and immersive experiences, on-site and at-home applications. Moreover, the Bring-Your-Own-Device (BYOD) benefits of AR make it the perfect solution for museums and galleries as its cost benefits are significant. The ability to develop immersive experiences and enhance exhibits without the cost of hardware makes AR an unquestionably flexible and agile option. It is worth considering that COVID-19 has caused a major change in visitor's behaviour, and nowadays, using their own devices is highly appreciated for purely hygienic reasons.

ACCIONA Cultural Engineering has extensive experience applying the most innovative techniques across all its projects. The company covers the entire value chain, from museum consulting and design to the production, fabrication, installation, technical operations, and maintenance phases.

Since 1990, ACCIONA Cultural Engineering has been delivering museums, art centers and exhibitions across five continents. With offices in Europe, America, Africa and the Middle East, the company has a track record of renowned cultural projects in 39 countries and a strong presence in the Middle East. Some of these iconic projects include Al Shindagha Museum (Dubai), the new Grand Egyptian Museum (Giza) and the National Museum of Qatar (Doha).





ACCIONA Cultural Engineering was selected by Dubai Municipality (DM) to carry out the technical development and museum implementation for Waves 2A, 2C, 3B and 3G of Al Shindagha Museums District project, located in the historic heart of Dubai. The objective of the project is to promote the cultural heritage of Dubai across 10 authentic historical houses that allow visitors to customize their experience based on their interests. The museum project combines the most innovative experiential, participatory and interactive technologies through multisensory and immersive video installations or projection mapping, together with traditional objects and elaborate graphics. For example, the Traditional Food House (Wave 3B) offers a unique experience for visitors, who will have the opportunity to cook popular and traditional dishes via an interactive table or explore the extraordinary geographic environments that shape the rich variety of ingredients and dishes across the UAE. Visitors will also get to enjoy moments such as a floor projection choreography of plates and ingredients, which represents each meal of the day, surrounded by an immersive soundscape that walks through each different meal and the joy of people sharing the meal together.



Due to its size and magnitude, the collection at the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) requires a museum to match its undeniable beauty and heritage value. The building, a studio work by Heneghan Peng Architects, with a geometrical triangular design finished with an 800-metre long, 40-metre-high translucent façade, gives the impression that we're looking at a new pyramid in Giza. The sheer volume and quality of the objects, alongside the need to preserve and exhibit millennials-old treasures, posed a real challenge to ACCIONA Cultural Engineering. In line with the objectives set by the exhibition's design, the challenge for ACCIONA to make this possible required a never-before-seen level of attention to detail. The engineering and exhibition technical development project carried out by the company, from the structural calculations to the implementation of the production drawings, was enhanced by the creation of prototypes and the resulting mock-ups. The tests and evaluations throughout the process not only confirmed the efficacy of an extremely valuable methodology to mitigate risks and fulfil expectations, but also highlighted where important improvements could be made with regard to the visitor experience. In this way, lighting plays a role of vital importance in the rooms' atmosphere. It becomes integrated into the narration as another way to tell and enhance the story, with the objects remaining at the center of it all.

The collection is so rich and diverse in terms of size and typology, the lighting project included a bespoke design for each piece, which was necessary to grant each object a sense of its precious place in the museum. Therefore, our consultants designed prototypes for each of the lights based on the desired effect, carrying out a detailed study to find the lamps which worked best, then adapting their design to manufacture them on a large scale before finally adjusting them to the requirements of each type of artefact in the museum. Overall, this was a complex project that required many adjustments in order to achieve optimal results, which was supported by the design and implementation of a control system capable of managing and adapting itself to the different scenic lighting requirements. Seeing how light is transformed and interacts with the items in the museum is going to be quite the experience.

Accessibility is the other cornerstone of the Grand Egyptian Museum. The museum is fully accessible to visitors with reduced mobility. People with visual impairments will also be able to enjoy the collections through tactile replicas of items, reliefs, models, etc. Additionally, the museum has information available in Braille in several languages. These solutions were proposed by ACCIONA Cultural Engineering to eliminate physical, sensory, and intellectual barriers at the museum. This is an inclusive project which will allow everyone to enjoy this great experience, not just for people of determination, but also for children who explore the world in a very tactile way, so that they are also able to touch and experience selected elements.



Similarly, sounds and smells are captured in our immersive experiences. We reproduce highly detailed soundscapes that wrap the visitor in an enjoyable journey, and we include scent diffusers to stimulate a multisensorial reaction, as demonstrated at Terra the Sustainability Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai.

Lastly, thanks to our cultural engineering focus, we have the ability to look for new uses and applications in everything we take part in. Therefore, spaces in the museum previously earmarked for a specific function have been transformed for a different purpose. This is a work of engineering and technology in the service of the collection, without stealing any of the limelight.

Another recent project worth mentioning is the National Museum of Qatar, for which ACCIONA Cultural Engineering was selected by Qatar Museums to produce 149 audiovisual and interactive installations as part of the permanent collection narrative. The exhibition is organized into three themes: Beginnings, Life in Qatar, and Building the Nation, each of which is presented across eleven individual galleries spread over 1.5km, which offer interactive learning environments and an engaging narrative that serve as a knowledge base in providing a cultural understanding of the country.

The story of Qatar comes to life in an exciting and immersive environment that appeals to a multi-generational audience. There are six educational areas specifically designed for families and children that include several interactive games. For example, there's the opportunity to experience what it's like to dig up archaeological treasures in a digitally projected desert in order to learn what these artifacts tell us about how people lived in the past. Meeting a digitally projected falcon and saluki in the desert, children can interact with the animals, making the falcon fly by moving their arms and the saluki bark as they move closer to it.

In fact, most of the countries and regions where we have been working are leading the way toward a more diverse economy. This is the case of the Middle East, where the transformation rests in large part on preserving and showcasing the tangible and intangible heritage of these lands and their identities, while at the same time aligning their story with the 2030 agenda.

Without a doubt, the key to developing a successful digital strategy that makes the museum attractive to the different audiences and communities with which it interacts consists of:

- Rethinking the relationship with audiences and identifying potential new ones, developing more inclusive and sustainable strategies.

- Promoting formulas and public-private relationships with agents from different disciplines that work together in shared interests.

- Creating new forms of access to culture and new cultural products through innovation, experimentation, research, and knowledge production.

Museums, art centers, exhibitions and large-scale events help cities and regions generate a sense of meaning as stable, recurring and quality destinations, simultaneously contributing to their societies' progress in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As such, these projects should always be recognized as an essential element in revitalizing the economy, culture, tourism and society as a whole. Culture itself is becoming a driving force in urban transformation, and in turn, in transforming the lives of all who encounter it.

