

Virtual Museums: Are they good or bad for established museums?

by Mary Ann Marazzi

Virtual museums are exhibits ‘understood as a selection of objects put on show for an audience’ either in a kiosk within an established museum or online (Davies, 2010, p. 307). There are several topics that should be mentioned to discern if virtual museums have any effect on established museums such as: whether or not virtual museums contribute to or detract from revenues; if they supplement physical visits; and if they have educational value or not. Virtual museums or exhibits can include two-dimensional or three-dimensional scans and such didactic information as title, artist (if known), date, provenance, current physical location, and any interpretive information deemed necessary by the collection curators. Since a museum, according to the Greek word *mousikh*, refers to the art of the Muses including arts, letters, and accomplishments, it is a place where the accomplishments of mankind can be collected or displayed. This interpretation could apply to both a physical location and an electronic version without a physical counterpart.

On the side of virtual museums being good for established (or brick-and-mortar) museums, they create situations not physically realizable (Angeloni et al., 2012); they help to train people in creativity or problem solving (Jun & Bin, 2011); they present items from a collection in a cost-effective manner (Sylaiou et al., 2010); and they enhance cultural awareness (Sylaiou et al., 2010). On the side of virtual museums being bad for established museums, the physical interaction with the artefact is lost (by looking at a computer screen, one cannot really get the sense of the size or medium of the artefact, thereby losing part of the ambiance of the visit that is available to those in a physical museum) and if the resolution of the images is not clear or if the chosen system is not working well (Mannoni, 1997), visitors may choose not to visit the site and learn what is available at the physical location. One advantage of the virtual museum over the physical is that a virtual setting can show sites not open to the general public or sites that would be damaged by public visits. Many tombs in the Valley of the Kings, Egypt are prime examples. The tombs of Horemheb (KV57) and Sety I (KV17) are beautifully decorated but in poor structural condition making visits by the public dangerous.

Do virtual museums contribute to or detract from revenues? Virtual museums do contribute to revenues. Since public attendance at physical museums has been falling (Ulusoy, 2010), digital museums (those images in the collection of a physical museum displayed on that entity’s website) help to drive up physical attendance by visitors who saw artefacts on the website and want a more close-up look. Virtual museums are also an effective cost-cutting measure in that the costs of transporting and insuring artworks are drastically cut when those items are put into virtual exhibits (Angeloni et al., 2012) since there is no need for packing, transportation, and insurance.

Do virtual museums supplement physical visits? Yes they do. Their ‘purpose is to provide visitors with more information than the traditional museum’ (Jun & Bin, 2011) which should serve to supplement rather than replace the physical museums. By employing more interactive possibilities in virtual museums, it is possible to attract more visitors of the younger generations to the physical locations (Angeloni et al., 2012). Also virtual museums enhance visitors’ cultural awareness (Sylaiou et al., 2010) by allowing visitors to interact with the objects in their own time and interest level.

Do virtual museums have educational value? Yes. Students using a virtual museum are not only visiting a museum, they are participating in an interactive learning platform (Zhao, 2012). According to Angeloni et al. (2012), virtual museums are an educational support and a virtual tour is a valuable teaching method since it can be more dynamic than traditional classroom lectures as the visitors can customize their visits. According to Ulusoy (2010, p. 37) ‘publication of objects in electronic format provides students opportunities to visit a museum and access images and information easily.’ Therefore the development and maintenance of virtual museums is a good way to provide students-centered learning environments. One student in the Turkish study (Ulusoy, 2010, p. 44) went so far as to state that virtual museums ‘may bring peace and tolerance to the whole world’ because they allow people to learn about other cultures from the safety of their own communities.

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