Web Museums as the Last Endeavor

Roxane Bernier
Université de Montréal, Canada

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the 19th century, the museum was generally constituted as an accumulation of uncatalogued objects, while its fundamental role was relatively haphazard, with principal concern the elite's good taste and high culture provided within a sacred site. At this time, heritage organizations began serving as a pedagogical source and incorporated learning strategies to accommodate the general public. Influenced by the Arts and Craft Movement, the Industrial Revolution brought an art education awareness, which first flourished in European museums, and then emerged after the Civil War in the United States—principally between 1870 and the Wall Street crash of 1929—for studying important artworks and supporting art appreciation through a constructivist perspective (Zeller, 1989). Some scholars posit that constructivism is the most convenient way to subjectively gain understanding, by involving visitors as *active learners* beyond the traditional approach (Hein, 1998). Earlier than the Second World War, the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York (www.metmuseum.org) was already known as a leader for setting educational programs with unique behind scenes of major masterpieces (see Figure 1), whereas the Louvre in Paris (www.louvre.fr) rapidly acted as a model in the Victorian Era for other established museums throughout the continent. Both Web museums of these organizations have shown creative ways of displaying their contents and for attracting an international crowd.

Indeed, the goal of cultural institutions is knowledge transmission and thus offering the required explanations concerning the benefit of the population's education, because individuals mainly visit museums for personal enrichment; the words egalitarianism, didacticism, and entertainment best describe the pragmatic view of North American museums. The American Association of Museums was founded in 1906 for collecting and naming objects, overseeing meanings as well as presenting information within social, cultural, economic, and political angles with respect to public interest (Ambrose & Paine, 1993). Nonetheless, it was not before the mid 1960s, 50 years later, that collection management became systematic and when interpretational material took its importance emerged by museum educators (Hooper-Greenhill, 1988). Thus, the necessity of enlightening museographic means within structured contexts became more widespread. Two decades later, Web designers gained

Figure 1. Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York©

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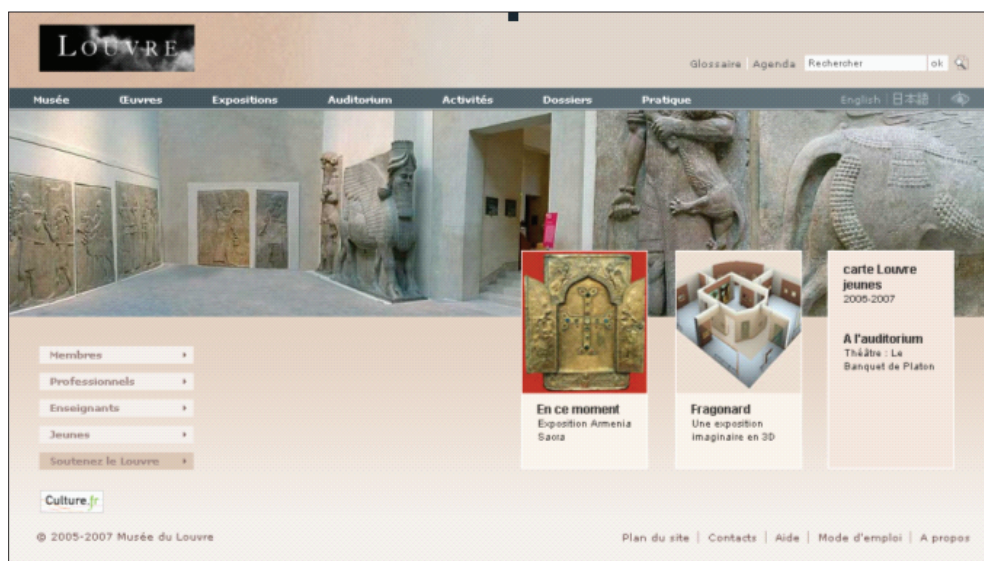
additional visibility. As museums transform themselves into content providers, exhibitions tend to focus on the visitor, which launched Museum Studies in the early 1970s, and is the beginning of the heritage's popularization (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Roberts, 1997).

The concept of Web museums takes its origin from the "imaginary museum," a term introduced by the French philosopher André Malraux during the 1950s (Malraux, 1956). Web museums have sparked enthusiastic claims for art democratization to disseminate images of original artworks using several forms of medium (e.g., books, magazines, catalogues). Art democratization was developed further through digital technology and should apply whether the museum is imaginary, real, or virtual; it aims at presenting masterpieces as objects of veneration, although accessible to all. Nowadays, the advent of the Internet for heritage institutions is an indisputable turning point of the 1990s and seen as the most innovative cultural portal by both curators and educators because it holds a great potential with the realism of higher-end technologies.

The contribution of new technologies is indeed a significant change of the curators' philosophy and considered to be at the forefront of innovation for museums, avoiding the dreary institutionalized discourse of art galleries (Walsh, 1992) as well as it successfully expanded the traditional method of organizing and offering information (Hoptman, 1992). At the turn of the third millennium, the Web has inevitably helped national art galleries accelerate their scope of cultural diffusion by offering an inventive landscape as a specific means of communication to heritage and recognition of the artistic creations, thereby achieving exposure to the highest number of people from fulfilling multimedia experiences to Podcasting (Müller, 2003; Bernier, 2005; Katz et al., 2006).

Our key objective is to provide a clear meaning for the philosophy of museums found on the Internet, typically known as Web museums or virtual museums, continuously molded by new features such as blockbuster exhibitions, databases, quizzes, virtual guided tours, specialized online forums, and Web casts (Bernier, 2007). In this way, the Web museum is a virtual layout inspired of the real building, providing a specific setting for educational resources. The main characteristic to stress about museums online is that they are spaced-oriented institutions providing a dynamic environment for art exhibits with two issues (Jones-Garmil, 1997; Nilsson, 1997): (1) its structure (i.e., ergonomics) and (2) its layout (i.e., iconography). In other words, the architecture no longer remains problematic, because there are no awkward spaces or limitations on the number of objects; as a result, there is indefinite storytelling to pass on knowledge. Contextualizing objects according to ideas rather than physical and functional taxonomies represent a significant paradigm shift for museums (Cameron, 2001).

Consequently, we ask ourselves: what is the major distinction between online exhibitions also presented in physical museums as opposed to those exclusively accessible on the Internet? Firstly, what links both environments are—whether real or virtual—places of conservation, education, and research and reflection on our cultural inheritance, as well as material evidence of people and their environment at local and international levels with contents concerning the past, the present, and even the future (ICOM, 2004; UNESCO, 2006). Secondly, another connection to be established is conveying a self-contained and genuine aesthetic art experience or visiting the physical organizations in real-time. However, the principal distinction from the real institution is to conceal one's visualization of the masterpieces, like texture and composition or showing the objects' dimensions in their natural surroundings; while the ideological divergence lies in a nonlinear visit offered through multilayered features.

THE UBIQUITY OF WEB MUSEUMS

Museums online can be trustworthy interpretational resources, if they are not pedantic or authoritarian in their ways of educating young and old people (Bearman & Trant, 2000). Hence, art galleries are no longer strictly reserved for high culture, bypassing social and economic ranks as well as ethnic background and geographical location, building an international status for objects, artworks, and overall collections (Bernier, 2001). Web museums have indeed become very expedient for all strata of the society, such as marginalized groups (e.g., third world countries) that are free from localism and can equally browse information on foreign organizations available 24 hours daily and all free of charge. The intrinsic strengths of the "ubiquitous museum" is also making no distinction between remote and onsite visitors, by constantly developing technology usage opportunities for the museum's entire knowledge arsenal (Sumption, 2006). For example, every release in a foreign language, the Louvre Web site has constantly grown with more than 2.5 million monthly hits (Louvre Newsletter, 1997). The Canadian Museum of Civilization has reached close to 6 million online visitors, which is a four to one ratio over onsite visits (Macdonald, 2000), whereas the National Art Gallery of New York has received 1.2 million virtual visitors yearly in comparison to 1.6 million in person (Johnson, 2000). Most importantly, Web logs have proved to be efficient for social tagging (i.e., how people search art objects with key words) and therefore, build communities of interest according to specific index.

Today, many cultural institutions emphasize serving the general public instead of augmenting their collections in order to become incentive to mass tourism, disregarding the visitors' enquiries and the quality of information.

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