

The Digital Content: An Opportunity to Enjoy Collections

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Introduction

Museums were established to grant universal access to collections (Bazin 1967; Cataldo and Paraventi 2007; Griesser-Stermscheg 2014). That idea entitled ordinary people to enjoy vast collections. The concept of democratization has waned due to curators and museums collecting without pondering spatial constraints (Ferriot 1995; Ames 2015; Crenn 2021; Gilson 1914). The lackadaisical approach resulted in premises that were inundated with countless artifacts. Furthermore, museums have implemented specific aesthetic standards to enhance displays to rectify the unappealing presentation (Bazin 1967; Griesser-Stermscheg 2014; Reinach 1909; Avery-Quash and Crookham 2018; Murray 1904). Consequently, many treasures have not been exhibited at museums, thereby deviating from the initial concept of their democratization for everyone's benefit. Hence, a substantial number of collections are only accessible to professionals rather than for public enjoyment. Accordingly, the matter of kept collections has emerged as a significant concern as it undermines the fundamental concept of museums as institutions that aim to provide access to their collections for all individuals to appreciate.

The concept of democratizing collections has evolved over time, even though collecting objects and individuals' history has been intertwined since prehistoric times (J. Simmons 2004; Cataldo and Paraventi 2007; Thiemeyer 2017). The collecting activity initially focused on amassing objects as representative examples of behavior and gradually shifted toward acquiring valuable stuff. For instance, in the fifth century B.C., Greek civilization collected votive offerings, whereas Byzantine or Islamic civilizations stored treasuries in churches, monasteries, mosques, or cathedrals (Bazin 1967; Gimatzidis 2011). Private collectors began making things available through cabinets of curiosity starting from the fifteenth century (Griesser-Stermscheg 2014; McCombe 2009). Since its establish-

ment in 1683, the Ashmolean Museum has showcased private, princely, and religious collections for public use.

The trend of democratizing collections by establishing “modern museums” for the general public reached its highest point in Europe during the eighteenth century (Hooper Greenhill 1992; Van Mensch and Van Mensch 2010). Subsequently, museums have amassed a significant number of artifacts, resulting in a lack of available space to exhibit them in the main museum galleries. Several studies have shown that museums have faced challenges in managing their collections due to limited space, exacerbated by the rapid growth rate of collections (Henderson and Parkes 2007; Heritage Health Index 2005; The Institute of Museum and Library Services 2019; Haydn 2015). Due to limited space, most collections have been placed in storage, rendering them accessible only to select privileged groups (Gilson 1914; Ferriot 1995; Jaoul 1995; Ames 2015; Crenn 2021; Henderson and Parkes 2007). The discussion regarding this socioeconomic imbalance intensifies when financial factors are considered, as museums get public funding (Fleming 2001; Keene 2005; Bond 2018; Caesar 2007).

Previous research dealt with stored collections. According to a worldwide study by UNESCO and ICCROM (UNESCO-ICCROM 2011), 90 percent of museum collections are stored. Other studies examining the size of the phenomenon of stored collections focused on specific countries. With regards to the United Kingdom, early research estimated the stored part of collections to be 80 percent, and it also demonstrated how differences of that size stemmed from the type of collections (Lord, Lord, and Nicks 1989). For instance, it was determined that archeological museums displayed only 4 percent of their entire collections. The estimated size of stored collections at 80 percent was confirmed by further studies conducted by Wilkinson (2005) in the same country.

Following these first studies, some authors conducted research in England and Wales, reporting that approximately 90 percent of collections were not displayed (Keene, Stevenson, and Monti 2008). Roughly the same conclusions were reached in other countries. In the Netherlands, a commissioned report highlighted that 80 percent of collections are in storage (De Erfgoedmonitor 2020). Likewise, a recent study conducted in Spain found that only approximately 19 percent of collections are displayed (Serrano 2023). Moreover, scholars faced the stored collection issue by analyzing various case studies worldwide (Kisters 2021; Brusius and Singh 2018).

Despite its importance, there is a surprising paucity of research on the dimension of stored collections in historical and archeological museums and what museums are doing to increase the accessibility of stored items.

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The digitization of items might represent one possible solution, for digitized collections can potentially be enjoyed by anyone, regardless of the time and the place the user is. For this reason, this study aims to determine the size of stored collections in historical and archeological museums. Moreover, it aims to highlight to what extent these museums have digitized items to enhance their accessibility.

To achieve these purposes, a quantitative analysis was performed for this research. A survey was sent to offices of members of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 48 countries, allowing it to reach the museum community within those offices. To avoid accumulating negative input, two main measures were implemented. First, a total of 2,558 museums across 25 countries were explicitly requested to participate in the study through a direct invitation sent via email. The invitations were based on a careful selection from national museum directories, ensuring that museums of different types and sizes and those with different legal statuses were equally represented. Second, the participants were explicitly notified that the study ensured the preservation of the respondents' anonymity. The study tool was deemed suitable for providing a comprehensive evaluation of museums regarding the contentious matter of held collections.

The survey was conducted online to collect data promptly. The survey comprised 40 questions assessing various characteristics of stored collections to ascertain their dimensions and utilization. The questionnaire was created to determine the main characteristics of participants with regard to the type and size of their collections, as well as the legal standing of the museums. Furthermore, the inquiries were centered on the size of stored assemblages and their applications, including the methods and extent of their utilization. Moreover, participants were allowed to include comments to acquire other information they wished to highlight. Questions were provided with corresponding responses to mitigate the risk of digression, and participants were required to click on them. To qualify for the study, participants were required to complete all the questions.

After the survey was finished, data were gathered to conduct a quantitative analysis. A total of 131 museums across 31 different countries participated. Subsequently, the sample was categorized into groups based on many criteria, including the collection's type, size, and the museum's governance. For example, museums were categorized into small museums (with a maximum of 100,000 items), medium museums (with a maximum of a million items), and large museums (with more than a million pieces). The variables were examined in relation to the proportion of stored collections utilized inside visible storage. The data were examined with

pivot tables created in Excel spreadsheets. This approach affords certain advantages as it eases showing linkages between two or more variables and enables comparisons among findings.

Results and Discussion

This study focuses on digitization as a solution to enhance the accessibility of stored collections belonging to archeological and historical museums. Regarding the survey participants, the feedback numbered 131 museums in 31 countries, of which nearly 50 percent have archeological and historical collections.

Here is the list of the countries of participants, which come mainly from Europe:

1. Africa: Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco, and South Africa.
2. Americas: Argentina, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States of America.
3. Asia: India, Japan, the Philippines, and Saudi Arabia.
4. Europe: Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.
5. Oceania: Australia and New Zealand.

On the whole, the gathered data highlight that most museums keep more than 90 percent of collections in storage. And only a few museums (3 percent) can display a significant part of their stored collection. That means that most collections are out of reach. Specifically, archeological museums store 70 percent of their entire collections versus 75 percent of historical museums on average. These findings seem to be the consequence of the past tendency of museums to collect items just because of the availability of premises. Indeed, due to the lack of space, collections have been housed in unsuitable accommodations, unsafe for collections and people, and unavailable to people (Jaoul 1995; Griesser-Stermscheg 2014; Griesser-Stermscheg 2013; Kisters 2021).

Perhaps museums keep collections in storage because of their conditions. According to the survey findings, a prominent share of respondents (95 percent) conducted a collection assessment, even if some of them had done it five years earlier (13 percent). The assessment findings highlight that museums don't display some items because they are deemed for scholarly

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interest, repetitive, or light-sensitive. Museums also reported fragile and damaged items. It is meaningful that the worst data come from Europe. For instance, table 1 museums with archeology collections have more light-sensitive pieces (45 percent) than history collections (42 percent). Likewise, repetitive items represent 48 percent in archeological museums versus 45 percent in historical museums, damaged items 49 percent versus 46 percent for history items, and fragile artifacts with 49 percent in archeological museums versus 45 percent in historical museums (see table 2). Given the different degrees of fragility of items, a great part of collections cannot be made accessible through solutions other than museum galleries, such as rotation, loans, exchanges, and visible storage.

Table 1. Results of the collection assessment
(Regions and share of museums in percent)

Region/ % museums	Light-Sensitive		Scholarly Interest		Repetitive	
	Archeology	History	Archeology	History	Archeology	History
Africa	9%	7%	4%	5%	7%	3%
Americas	21%	18%	15%	13%	12%	10%
Asia	11%	9%	8%	6%	9%	6%
Europe	45%	42%	35%	37%	48%	45%
Oceania	11%	9%	6%	4%	9%	11%

Source: Author Lara Corona.

Table 2. Fragile and damaged items
(Regions and share of museums in percent)

Country/ % museums	Damaged		Fragile	
	Archeology	History	Archeology	History
Africa	5%	3%	4%	2%
Americas	17%	14%	19%	17%
Asia	11%	13%	15%	10%
Europe	49%	46%	49%	45%
Oceania	10%	9%	11%	8%

Source: Author Lara Corona.

Only digitization allows people to enjoy these collections, even if they are damaged or light-sensitive items. These findings corroborate previous research, which assessed 40 percent of the share of collections with light-sensitive items, 35 percent with scholarly interest, 44 percent with repetitive pieces, 46 percent with damaged artefacts, and 45 percent with fragile belongings (Corona 2022).

Poor documentation exacerbates the conditions of collections. The lack of a collections policy for many respondents might represent a threat and lead museums to improperly manage items. The findings also show that museums lack risk management (39 percent in museums with archeology collections and 32 percent in museums with history collections) and conservation plans (35 percent and 32 percent, respectively, in archeology and history museums). Moreover, many participants do not boast any accessibility plan (47 percent in archeology and 42 percent in history museums). With regard to the collection policy, no differences are reported in both types of museums, for 22 percent of respondents lacked it. These results outnumber the findings of a previous study carried out by Corona (2022), who illustrated lower degrees of lack of documentation, such as the lack of conservation plan (29 percent), risk management (35 percent), and accessibility plan (44 percent). This divergence might be caused by the fact that Corona's study considered a wide range of collections, including art collections, whose museums display 30 percent, meaning a greater share of collections, than archeology and history collections (Lord, Lord, and Nicks 1989). These findings suggest museums are unprepared to face some risks and ensure the best preservation of items (J. E. Simmons 2020; 2015; Gilmore and Rentschler 2002; M. Malaro 1995; Miller 2017; M. C. Malaro and DeAngelis 2019; Brokerhof 2006; Krämer-Weidenhaupt 2023).

In this framework, digitization represents a way to strike a crucial balance because museums are supposed to preserve collections for today and future generations. Nevertheless, museums hold collections in people's trust (J. E. Simmons 2015). So, this strategy can ensure both preservation and accessibility. Given this context, what are museums doing to make collections available?

The digitalization of items might represent a game changer to enhance the accessibility of collections, even during a pandemic (Corona 2021). Thanks to technical advancements and the emergence of the Internet, collections can be accessible to the audience at their convenience, both in physical and digital formats.

The digitizing of items bears specific benefits and drawbacks. For example, it contributes to preserving artifacts by creating digital surro-

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gates. In addition, collections are made freely accessible, although in a virtual manner, thereby promoting democratization. However, there is a contention that digital content could potentially diminish the inherent “aura” commonly linked with the experience of viewing original goods because of their distinctiveness. Moreover, digitalization is a laborious and time-intensive procedure susceptible to abrupt technological stagnation. Also, the digital content generates sources of income, such as selling items and licensing images (Corona 2023).

The findings highlight that digitization is an ongoing process for most museums. Indeed, although all respondents have embraced digitization in the last five years (91 percent of historical museums and 89 percent of archeological museums), 72 percent of historical museums and 57 percent of archeological museums had done so the previous year. Approximately nine out of ten museums are going to continue with the digital procedure in the following five years versus around one out of ten that doesn't plan to go on. According to the findings of this research, archeological and historical collections boast a higher level of digitization compared with the average percentage of digitization of items in museums, which is 45 percent. Specifically, the digitalization of historical collections (57 percent) is considerably more prominent than the average digitization of collections in European museums (33 percent), and the digitizing of archeology items (72 percent) doubled the European average.

How much does digitization make the collection accessible? The research findings shed light on the fact that digitization unlocks the doors of museums and makes collections accessible, including the stored ones. Namely, digitized items are 42 percent on the average of history collections, whereas archeology, with 21 percent, is at half of the history collections. Specifically, the findings highlight that the leading museums adopting the digitization procedure are situated in Europe (53 percent of historical museums and 24 percent of archeological ones), as opposed to those with a slight degree of digitization in Africa (13 percent of archeological museums and 18 percent of historical museums).

In all continents, the digitization of historical collections is double that of archeological ones, except for African collections, where there are no significant differences among types of items. Also, archeological museums reported an ongoing digitization process of 21 percent in the Americas, 23 percent in Asia, and 23 percent in Oceania, in contrast with museums with historical collections, which digitized their stored items at 48 percent in the Americas, 45 percent in Asia, and 45 percent in Oceania.

Furthermore, according to the size of collections, meaning the number

of pieces, data show that the museums with smaller collections adopt this tactic more than their big brothers (77 percent of archeological museums and 57 percent of historical museums with small collections, 3 percent and 29 percent of large collections, and 20 percent and 14 percent of medium collection). So, data suggest that smaller museums are more virtuous than museums with extensive collections. The average digital content accessible to the public is 28 percent (total of digitized archeology collections; 21 percent of the total is represented by stored items that are digitized; so, 7 percent of the digital content deals with the exhibited items) and 53 percent (total of digitized historical collections; 42 percent of the total is represented by stored items that are digitized; so, 11 percent of the digital content deals with the exhibited items), with a predominance of stored collections. These data corroborate previous results Ames (2015) obtained of large museums, which were found to be more likely to store more items (95-99 percent) of their collections. These findings might be read as the more items that are in storage, the more the number increases of museums that digitize items to make them accessible. Therefore, the size of the collection is a crucial factor for the dimension of stored collection that museums can make accessible through digitization.

So, how is democracy achieved? Many participants offer their collections through social media (70 percent and 65 percent of archeological and historical museums) and around seven of ten museums have websites to reach online users. Additionally, museums use other channels, such as Wikipedia (22 percent and 20 percent), Europeana, and Google Art Project (18 percent and 17 percent), to spur virtual users to access their collections. Therefore, collections can be seen online: A computer and Wi-Fi are all that is required to access them. Despite the museum presence in the digital realm, some authors reported that collections as presented on the internet range from one-fourth to one-third of the entire collections (Nauta, van den Heuvel, and Teunisse 2017; Keene, Stevenson, and Monti 2008).

The survey results highlight that online visits are, on average, twice the physical visits. This research, thus, corroborates earlier study that considered the digital experience as a producer of more extensive utility (Frey and Meier 2006). Indeed, it might be that online visits are carried out before or after to obtain more information or simply because online users can't visit the museum because they live in the opposite part of the world, or due to physical challenges, or because of a pandemic outbreak. An important advantage of digital collections is that they create a sort of democratized access because digital content can be enjoyed by anyone, not

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specifically researchers, regardless of age, gender, education, background, or social and economic status.

As a result, digital content fulfils the right of accessibility, regardless of people's location. People can enjoy collections at home on their comfortable sofa. No boundaries and no geographical limitations mean that museums have the opportunity to engage a new public.

Conclusion

This study suggests crucial conclusions. First, an important practical implication of this research is that museums can enhance the accessibility of their collections by implementing the digitizing of collections, particularly those museums that have not yet embraced this approach. The process of digitizing collections can be advantageous for museums because it can make all collections available regardless of location or time constraints.

Nevertheless, this method bears several problems. For example, some online users may experience a sense of being overwhelmed and encounter challenges when searching due to a lack of technological and cultural knowledge. Therefore, choosing the most widely recognised artworks for online exhibition is advisable because these prominent objects are more likely to align with visitors' preferences. Another possible consequence could be an increase in the number of visits due to greater media and internet presence. This could enhance awareness of museum collections and stimulate people's interest in visiting museums in the future, as supported by previous research (Ateca-Amestoy and Castiglione 2014).

Digitizing items has other downsides, such as affordability, digital illiteracy, lack of aura, sustainability, technological quicksand, and a need for expertise and capillary presence on the Internet. Nevertheless, it is a powerful tool to enhance the accessibility of collections. Because of some disadvantages, it is recommended to vary strategies, rather than focusing only on one, to compensate for their upsides and downsides. Further, adequate collection management is of the utmost importance to ensure healthy conditions for collections. This is a pre-requirement to improve collections' accessibility. Museums that start or continue the procedure are recommended to ensure a capillary presence in the digital realm. To mitigate costs, selecting the most popular items might represent a solution. An alternative action might be represented by sharing specific expertise with other institutions and involving practitioners in the field (Solima 2012).

In conclusion, this research highlights how digitization may increase the accessibility of stored collections. It indicates the measure of stored

collections in archeological and historical museums and to what extent digitization makes them accessible to people. Finally, the study provided some practical recommendations.

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