

Probing Question: How are museums keeping up with the changing times?

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Palmer Museum of Art

From America's oldest collection, [Charleston Museum](#), circa 1773, to its tiniest—the 134-square-foot [World's Smallest Museum](#); from the majestic [American Museum of Natural History](#) to the head-scratchingly odd [Spam Museum](#), our nation's love affair with its 17,500 museums is well established.

Despite the stereotype of museums as boring and elitist places, their origins were steeped in the blend of sensationalism, entertainment, and instruction that appealed to a broad cross-section of the population. From 1841 to 1865, showman P.T. Barnum operated the popular [Barnum's American Museum](#) in lower Manhattan, which he claimed attracted 15,000 visitors per day.

“Museums in the United States developed from ‘cabinets of curiosity’ or collections of somewhat unrelated stuff—including natural phenomena, paintings, and animal specimens—into centers of civic pride in the span of only about 100 years,” says Dana Kletchka, curator of education at Penn State’s [Palmer Museum of Art](#), which welcomes more than 40,000 visitors to its galleries each year. (The Palmer is one of seven museums on Penn State’s University Park campus.)

In today’s tech-savvy world, however, it’s no longer enough to simply display collections, notes Kletchka. “Technology such as smart phones and tablets, as well as social media, are reconceptualizing the relationship between museums and viewers. Museum-goers are increasingly curating their own experiences by accessing information from the Web or [QR codes](#) on labels, taking photos and uploading them to personal or museum Flickr sites, participating in Facebook or Twitter conversations with the staff of their favorite art institutions...the possibilities are endless.”

Perhaps not surprisingly, our nation’s largest museums are blazing a trail with innovative approaches to digital and mobile interactivity, says Kletchka. The Smithsonian Institution—the world’s largest museum and research complex, with 19 museums and galleries—offers everything from cell-phone tours and multilingual slideshows to interactive games (like the multimedia scavenger hunt, [Pheon](#)) and augmented reality apps. (One from the Postal Museum brings to life “[Owney](#),” the canine mascot of the Railway Mail Service.)

Increasingly, people can have a museum experience remotely, in addition to visiting in person, Kletchka notes. The National Museum of African Art calls their “[Artists in Dialogue 2” App](#) a “visual call and response that transcends national or geographic borders.” By using the app, one can tour an exhibition guided by the curator, experiment with the artists’ technique in an art-making game, and join in the Twitter

conversation about the work.

“The bottom line,” says Kletchka, “is that most museums want to reach out to visitors wherever they are, and these days ‘where they are’ is often on their computer or digital devices.” Many institutions are enhancing visitor experiences by providing education and interaction in virtual spaces that complement their in-person offerings. “The [Walker Art Center](#) in Minneapolis just premiered its new Web site,” she notes, “and it features art news from various sources, articles, research, and blogs. Museums are combining the best of in-person and virtual education to serve as cutting-edge hubs for information on their subjects.”

With today’s emphasis on virtual experiences, are old-fashioned brick and mortar museums still relevant? Absolutely, believes Kletchka. “Though digital reproduction has given us the means to share very sophisticated visual images of works of art with more people than ever before, technology cannot replicate or enable the other components of a viewer’s experience, including emotional reactions, face-to-face dialogue with other viewers, and the sheer physicality of a work of art.” For example, she adds, “I never really liked the work of Vincent van Gogh until I saw it hanging in the Van Gogh [Museum](#) in Amsterdam. I couldn’t understand the work until I saw, up close and in person, the brush strokes and thick application of paint—it took my breath away.”

So far, technology is enhancing—not replacing—the real thing, reassures Kletchka. For all the ink spilled over the devolution of American culture, an estimated 850 million people pass through the nation’s museums each year, more than attend every major-league baseball, basketball, football and hockey game combined. That’s big business, says Kletchka, and it also means that American museums continue to be places that successfully combine entertainment and education, just in some newfangled ways.

P.T. Barnum would be proud.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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