

Google Glass, apps and interactive exhibits change the museum-going experience

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Looking at a painting no longer means simply looking at a painting.

As I walked through the Keith Haring exhibit at the deYoung Museum in San Francisco recently, a borrowed pair of Google Glass perched on my nose, the virtual docent inside the device was serving up audio narratives and visual cues that brought the late American street artist to life in the most remarkable way.

The museum-going experience, I realized as the voices of Haring and others filled my mono ear bud with artistic context and illuminating storytelling, is in the midst of a mind-blowing and revolutionary redesign. Museums around the world are increasingly opening themselves up to virtual visits by anyone anywhere on the planet. At the same time, the brick-and-mortar versions are getting tricked out with the latest tech wizardry to enrich the viewing process and teach [visitors](#) about the artist and their work.

"We're trying to make going to a physical building more like going to a website," says Lath Carlson, the San Jose Tech Museum's top exhibit designer and a veteran of the interactive-immersion movement that has been changing museums in recent years.

The Tech also uses bar-coded tickets that let visitors tap directly into exhibits. One, for example, will record you interacting with a robot and then post the video to The Tech's online space, my.thetech.org.

"The idea is to personalize a visitor's museum experience and then couple that with a web portal," says Carlson. "So once you've gone through the museum, you can later share your experiences online with others and together build upon them over time."

From cutting-edge Glass apps to interaction with smartphones or tablets to increasingly sophisticated interactive displays, technology is turning the concept of art and science exhibits inside out.

The deYoung Museum's partnership with Google, and the exhibit-tour app created specifically for Glass, is one of the most thrilling experiments yet. Billed by French app-maker GuidiGO as the first-ever tour of a complete exhibition on Glass, the augmented-reality effects unfolding within my wearable device made me feel less like a detached spectator and more like a privileged guest at an intimate salon. With one eye on the actual painting before me, I could tap and slide my finger along the Glass stem and call up text or images or an audio interpretation of the piece by Haring's sister, Karen, who teaches history of science and technology at Stanford University.

The Glass made each painting come alive, though. A series of drawings Haring did in the New York City subway were augmented on the tiny screen by a Charles Osgood newsreel from the 1980s. A painting entitled "Untitled (Apartheid), 1984" came with a voice-over from chief curator Julian Cox about Haring's hatred of bigotry and racism and how he took on these subjects in his work.

"We wanted the tour to be about Keith and include the people who knew him personally," said Christine Murray, the content designer who worked with GuidiGO to produce the app. "I wanted the guide to bring him to life and use his paintings to tell his story. And I didn't want it to be all scholars, but to talk with friends and colleagues of Keith and focus on the personal."

While the Google Glass app offers perhaps the most dramatic view into the future of museum science, it's only available to official Glass "explorers" now test-driving the technology, so the general public will have to wait awhile before trying out the Glass app. Other venues in the Bay Area and beyond are busy tweaking their exhibits with the latest technology, however, and much of it is designed to work seamlessly with the smartphones and tablets visitors are increasingly bringing along with them to shows.

"We found that 65 percent of our visitors are accessing their mobile devices while they're in the museum," says The Tech's Carlson. "We realized we can't stop them from using their phones so we're giving them stuff on their phones to help enrich their experience."

The Tech does that by providing a smorgasbord of exhibit information that visitors can access on their devices that's built to look like an app but doesn't require visitors to actually download one. "A lot of museums out there are building apps," says Carlson, "but if you do the research you'll find that most visitors won't take that step and download it, especially if they're just coming in for one visit."

The Oakland Museum of California has created a whole slew of tech tools that visitors, especially young ones, can use to add a virtual layer to a physical entity. Olivia Ting's 3-D projection of sea creatures, for example, fills the walls of a small room and places visitors at the bottom of Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuary, an underwater wonderland off the California coast. The feeling of being immersed deep below the ocean's surface is exhilarating.

Another exhibit lets visitors paint their own portrait on a screen and then see it displayed on a wall of professional portraits done by various California artists. More than 50,000 visitor-portraits have been completed since 2010 and the interactive nature of the site has made it

one of the most popular spaces in the building.

"We have three main galleries where we tell the story of California through art, history and science," spokeswoman Kelly Koski told me during a recent visit to the museum. "When we renovated in 2010, we actually built in a lot of interactive features because we knew they'd increasingly be a part of the way visitors would be experiencing our exhibits."

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