

# New museum app: Like GPS, only indoors

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Scene 1. You're in the middle of nowhere. You pull over in your car. You set the GPS and it's only a moment before you're flying around some hidden switchback on the way to your destination - that stretch of beach with the secret waterfall. You thought you'd never see it again. But there it is!

Scene 2. Now you're in a museum. The place is big - a million galleries flying off in every direction. You've got the handy-dandy foldout map that's supposed to guide you to that painting you fell in love with the last time. But you can't find it anywhere in the labyrinth - where's your GPS?

Now the technology that keeps you from getting lost outside is being used to help you find your destination inside - and tell you about it once you are there. The de Young Museum in San Francisco has launched a new app that uses the latest indoor positioning technology to take you by the hand - or at least the phone in your hand - and guide you toward that favorite painting or installation.

Just like GPS, only indoors, it's the first app to use Apple's indoor positioning with core location technology. It can help you navigate to the Hockney, Picasso or Cassatt you were seeking, not to mention the gift shop and exit.

Simply put, the app - which tracks your latitude and longitude and figures out the direction you're facing - gets you through the labyrinth. It alerts you as you approach the painting you're after, and once you've reached it, all you do is lift the phone to your ear and listen as one of the

museum's curators explains what you're seeing. The lecture triggers automatically, and only you can hear it, through your phone or earbud.

Bye-bye to audio tours with their clunky shoulder sets and headphones. No more confusing 2-D maps and brochures. This is elegant, unobtrusive.

"You're ready to start exploring?"

It's Mark Paddon speaking. He's the CEO and founder of Guidekick, the Berkeley-based startup that developed the new app in collaboration with the de Young and Apple's indoor positioning engineers.

Paddon taps his phone and there we are: our position in the enormous lobby is pinpointed. He rolls his fingers over a couple of blue markers, showing what's nearby: the coat-check room, the restrooms. He taps "start exploring," scrolls through a few of the options that pop up, and suggests that we check out some of his favorite works from the contemporary American art collection.

Following the blue arrow on the phone, we soon find ourselves standing in front of his pick: a pulsing, wall-sized digital landscape by David Hockney. It seems to breathe, this video of the Yorkshire countryside with its eye-popping greens and multiple perspectives of forest and field at the height of summer. It's made up of 18 panels, each containing an undulating piece of the overall scene.

I hold the phone to my ear - and hear the voice of Richard Benefield, the de Young's acting director, who curated the museum's massive Hockney exhibition of 2013-14. He explains how Hockney painted, in effect, with his cameras, saturating the natural colors, multiplying the perspectives in order to create something beyond Picasso and Braque, "a cubist movie."

"It's like walking around with the best curators in the world," says Paddon, who is 26 and grew up feeling that trips to low-tech museums with printed placards or programmed audio recordings were unsatisfying. For his generation, he says, "The apps sucked and we didn't really like the audio tours. So we thought, 'How do we do it better?'"

Gary Castro, the de Young's chief information officer - and Paddon's main collaborator inside the museum - is touring the galleries with us.

He notes that the de Young's core audience is aged 45-60. It's loyal. Many among this constituency still gravitate to traditional audio tours and don't mind the protocol: punching in numbers or scanning bar codes on the wall to trigger the mini-lectures in their headsets.

"But we're looking to get the next wave, the millennials," Castro explains. "They require a little more technology to engage with the art on the wall."

Just this morning, he says, a team of Apple engineers was on-site, surveying the building with iOS9 technology in order to help refine the app (so far only available on iPhones and iPads) and prepare for the design of future apps. Paddon's company already has one in the works for the Legion of Honor museum. It will include a curated tour of the upcoming exhibition devoted to post-Impressionist painter Pierre Bonnard.

The de Young's app is a kind of "beta project," Castro says, and the museum intends to build upon it.

Right now the app - which is free to download and has no pay-walls once inside it - includes four curated audio tours of the museum. It also includes lectures by Benefield and other curators on 33 key works, representing art of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, as well as early

and contemporary American art. (Castro hopes to triple that number in 2016.) For each work, the listener selects from among four lecture tracks, each diving deeper and at greater length into the subject.

The app's developers plan to take it to Android, perhaps by summer. They hope to add video and to incorporate a kids' tour. Eventually, special exhibitions will have their own curated tours and the museum will likely sell admission tickets and ask visitors to RSVP to special events via the app.

"We're going to be adding and expanding," Paddon says. "It's going to continue to grow; a living organism."

He follows the arrow to several other favorite works, which are also described via audio.

There's a hanging installation by San Francisco artist Ruth Asawa, who drew on Mexican basket-weaving techniques to weave lengths of wire into spiraling natural forms, intricate as beehives.

There's a ghostly portrait of "The Last Civil War Veteran," painted by Larry Rivers who based it on a notorious 1961 photograph that appeared in Life magazine. The photo was of one Walter Williams, who claimed to have fought for the Confederacy, but proved to be an impostor. Born in 1854, he was only 11 when the Civil War ended.

Now we take the elevator up to the [museum](#)'s nine-story Hamon Tower, with its glass walls and wraparound views of Golden Gate Park, the city, the bay. There are more lectures to be heard here, about San Francisco and its history, and about the architecture of the copper-clad de Young.

I hold the phone to my ear and hear a voice: "If you continue to your right, you'll come to the north side of the building where - fog permitting

- you will see the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge ... "

I turn to my right, and there's the bridge. I spin in a circle, and the app's blue arrow - like a compass that keeps pointing the way toward magnetic north - spins in response, continuing to show me the way. It again guides my vision to the Golden Gate, and then I forget about the [app](#). The technology has vanished as I put the phone away, which would seem to be the point.

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