

UN agency warns pandemic could kill 1 in 8 museums worldwide

May 19 2020, by Raf Casert



Visitors wearing a face masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19 admire statues in the Rome Capitoline Museums, including the second century A.D. Roman marble statue "Cupid and Psyche", at right, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. In Italy, museums were allowed to reopen this week for the first time since early March, but few were able to receive visitors immediately as management continued working to implement social distancing and hygiene measures, as well as reservation systems to stagger visits to museums in the onetime epicenter of the European pandemic. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

Museums are starting to reopen in some countries as governments ease coronavirus restrictions, but experts warn one in eight worldwide could face permanent closure due to the pandemic.

Studies by UNESCO and the International Council of Museums show 90% of the planet's museums, some 85,000 institutions, have had to shut at least temporarily.

"It is alarming data that we are giving," Ernesto Ottone, Assistant Director General for Culture at UNESCO said in an interview with the Associated Press Tuesday.

He said the problem cuts across the board, affecting museums big and small, new and established, featuring art or science.

Museums that indicated they might well not reopen, he said, "have been closed for months and they have no revenues. And they don't know how they're going to get their revenues."

And once they do reopen, Ottone said, "they (won't) have the capacity to update their infrastructure" to conform with social distancing and other pandemic precautions.

Some costly blockbuster shows have suffered heavy damage this spring. A once-in-a-lifetime exhibit bringing together fragile paintings by Flemish master Jan van Eyck had barely opened in Ghent, Belgium, when it was abruptly canceled. It won't be resumed, as many of the works were on loan and had to be returned.



A boy walks by a model of a dinosaur wearing a face mask, during a partial lockdown to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, at the Museum of Natural History in Brussels, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. Museums are hesitantly starting to reopen as the coronavirus lockdown measures are relaxed, yet experts say that one in eight in the world could potentially face permanent closure because of the pandemic. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

In Rome, a similar supershow on Renaissance artist Raphael had to close after just three days, but was able to hold on to all 120 works and will now reopen June 2 through Aug. 30.

Overall, the picture is dark, more Munch than Monet.

"Nearly 13% of museums around the world may never reopen," UNESCO and ICOM said in a joint statement, saying those in poorer countries faced a greater risk.

Things are pretty bleak in wealthy countries too.

The Network of European Museum Organizations said large institutions in tourist hotspots like Paris, Amsterdam or Vienna have suffered income losses of up to 80 percent, that can reach hundreds of thousands of euros (dollars) a week.

Places like the Stedelijk and Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, or the Kunsthistorisches in Vienna, could lose up to 2.5 million euros (\$2.75 million) a month.



A view of the Roman Forum archaeological area, which is still closed following the measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, in Rome, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. Italy's museums were allowed to open on Monday, but many are waiting till anti-contagion measures can be put into place. (AP Photo/Alessandra

Tarantino)

Ottone said matters were particularly tough in Latin America, "where 99.4% of all museums are closed right now."

"So you have a continent that doesn't have anything open," Ottone said. "It's the first time in our history and it will be very difficult to come out from this crisis for those institutions."

It is little wonder that royalty and prime ministers are now lining up to boost their cultural institutions.

"We have to show our support at the maximum level to this sector by coming here, to show that they are open again and that people can come back here in complete safety, but also by taking measures and decisions ... to support them," Belgian Prime Minister Sophie Wilmes said Tuesday, touring the re-opened Bozar Center for Fine Arts in Brussels.

King Philippe of Belgium and Queen Mathilde visited the nearby Royal Museums of Fine Arts, wearing protective masks.



Belgium's King Philippe, second left, and Belgium's Queen Mathilde, center, wear face masks, to prevent the spread of coronavirus, as they visit the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. Museums are hesitantly starting to reopen as the coronavirus lockdown measures are relaxed, yet experts say that one in eight in the world could potentially face permanent closure because of the pandemic. (Daina Le Lardic, Pool Photo via AP)

Across Europe, such reopenings provide some hope.

In Berlin, four museums and one special exhibit that reopened had 10,000 visitors over the past week - about 43% of last year's level for the same week. Visitors need to buy tickets for a particular time slot, which limits the number of visitors.

In Italy, one-time epicenter of the pandemic in Europe, the Villa Borghese and the Capitoline museums, both home to Caravaggio paintings and Bernini sculptures, reopened on Tuesday.

There's still no reopening date set for Italy's biggest cultural draws, including the Uffizi in Florence and the Vatican Museums or the Colosseum in Rome.

The same goes for France. Big hitters, such as the Louvre – the world's most visited [museum](#)—and the Pompidou Center remain shuttered after an easing of restrictions May 11.



Belgium's King Philippe, center left, and Belgium's Queen Mathilde, center right, wear face masks, to prevent the spread of coronavirus, as they visit the

Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. Museums are hesitantly starting to reopen as the coronavirus lockdown measures are relaxed, yet experts say that one in eight in the world could potentially face permanent closure because of the pandemic. (Daina Le Lardic, Pool Photo via AP)



A museum employee wearing a face mask to prevent the spread of COVID-19 fills a bottle at a fountain next to the 3rd century marble statue known as Marforio, at Rome's Capitoline Museums, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. In Italy, museums were allowed to reopen this week for the first time since early March, but few were able to receive visitors immediately as management continued working to implement social distancing and hygiene measures, as well as reservation systems to stagger visits to museums in the onetime epicenter of the European pandemic. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)



Belgium's King Philippe, center right, and Belgium's Queen Mathilde, center left, wear face masks, to prevent the spread of coronavirus, as they visit the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. Museums are hesitantly starting to reopen as the coronavirus lockdown measures are relaxed, yet experts say that one in eight in the world could potentially face permanent closure because of the pandemic. (Daina Le Lardic, Pool Photo via AP)



A young boy wears a face mask as he walks past a dinosaur skeleton while on a structured one directional walk, to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, at the Museum of Natural History in Brussels, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. Museums are hesitantly starting to reopen as the coronavirus lockdown measures are relaxed, yet experts say that one in eight in the world could potentially face permanent closure because of the pandemic. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)



A visitor wearing a face mask to prevent the spread of COVID-19 walks at Rome's Capitoline Museums, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. In Italy, museums were allowed to reopen this week for the first time since early March, but few were able to receive visitors immediately as management continued working to implement social distancing and hygiene measures, as well as reservation systems to stagger visits to museums in the onetime epicenter of the European pandemic. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)



A museum employee cleans a statue, as a visitor wearing face mask to prevent the spread of COVID-19 walks in the Rome's Capitoline Museums, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. In Italy, museums were allowed to reopen this week for the first time since early March, but few were able to receive visitors immediately as management continued working to implement social distancing and hygiene measures, as well as reservation systems to stagger visits to museums in the onetime epicenter of the European pandemic. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)



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Visitors wearing face mask to prevent the spread of COVID-19, look at 'The Boy with Thorn' a first century B.C. bronze statue in the Rome's Capitoline Museums, Tuesday, May 19, 2020. In Italy, museums were allowed to reopen this week for the first time since early March, but few were able to receive visitors immediately as management continued working to implement social distancing and hygiene measures, as well as reservation systems to stagger visits to museums in the onetime epicenter of the European pandemic. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

Greece reopened its ancient sites—including the Acropolis—Monday, and set a June 15 date for museums.

Overall, the situation remains dire amid uncertainty over when tourism, a lifeline for most museums, will resume.

"It's (going to) be a very, very difficult year," said Pierre Coulon, Operation Director for Public Affairs of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences Museum. "And we don't know exactly how long it will last and when we will recuperate a normal income."

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