MUSEUMS IN TIMES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. FOCUS ON ROMANIA AND ITALY

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Abstract
Museums depend on two factors to achieve their educational and cultural missions: heritage/collections and audience. In the past decades the role of museums in society, as well as the way they relate with their audiences changed significantly. As in many other domains, the internet and technological development influenced museums' public offers and how they interact with their audiences, either visitors or the online public. Nevertheless, museums' strategies have concentrated on effective visitors to the museums' premises. One of the effects of COVID-19 pandemic was the complete closure of museums around the world. Therefore, museums had to adapt to remain significant to their audience and to continue to achieve their missions. The present investigation tries to map innovative approaches of museums, especially the ones in Romania and Italy. A special focus is put on the strategies adopted by museums aiming to help their communities better cope with the pandemic.

Keywords
COVID-19 pandemic; museums; museums online; museums and communities; museum mission.

Introduction

Recent transformations concerning the role of museums in people's lives are maybe best reflected by the failure of ICOM to vote for a new definition in 2019. The mere fact that an international organization that confers prestige and legitimacy to museums all over the world came together in an attempt at building international consensus around a new definition of a museum is, in itself, enough to point out that a major shift has happened. What is missing now is both acknowledging that change and incorporating it into future projects. Such a definition like the one proposed by ICOM (or, indeed, any other international organization of that weight) usually fulfills two roles: it describes the reality (best case scenario) as well as prescribes the future. Is projecting an ideal state for the museum to reach.

The recent debates around the concept of "museum" identify it as a cultural and educational organization that contributes to engendering social value creation within communities where it operates to enhance the wealth of people and groups within society. Increasingly, museums tend to become inclusive and democratizing organizations that follow a participatory and engaging approach in developing interaction and communication with visitors and their public serving the community by engendering social value creation within society (Brown & Mairesse, 2018). In contemporary society, museums play actively within communities they exercise a critical role in terms of social involvement and inclusion of communities (Sandhal, 2019). Museums are educational and cultural malls and places that contribute to sustaining social interaction and meetings (Zbuchea, 2015) that help cultural knowledge creation and awareness involving museum staff and audiences to be involved in debate and reflection about cultural contents (Lord, 2006). Increasingly, museums are embracing a participatory and engaging approach to better communicate with the public and restore the relationships within communities by rediscovering an activist role for supporting social inclusion and justice (Simon, 2010; Watson, 2007; Janes & Sandell, 2019).

Museums are learning to get a new opportunity to engage with the public and restore a social and cultural role within society moving from the threats coming from the global health emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic in virtue of a new coronavirus Sars-Cov2 able to infect rapidly many humans and lead to an acute respiratory syndrome in serious cases posing difficult challenges to healthcare infrastructures sustainability. COVID-19 pandemic forced public and cultural organizations as museums to close on-site visits and rethink services and facilities embracing an online and digital strategy to respond to the unexpected health emergency rethinking the use of social media from a channel of communication to a means for spreading cultural material and posing a challenge in the way that enables museums to disseminate materials about cultural knowledge and foster participation and engagement with cultural contents (Agostino, Arnaboldi & Lampis, 2020). Moreover, the closing of onsite visits has driven museums to improve online services and cultural contents delivery through digital and interactive technology to stress the social role of museums as organizations embedded within the milieu of communities to contribute to social value opening a new model of engaging with culture by enhancing the use of digital sources and social network platforms to support digital experiences of online visits as a means to motivate people to experience to revisit the museum as physical place and space of dialogue, debate and meeting taking for granted that future museum will integrate and blend onsite and online sources and competence to meet and satisfy the needs of visitors and attract new audiences (Agostino, Arnaboldi & Lampis, 2020). The increasing demand of online services for cultural contents and knowledge fruition helped museums to actively play a social role within society stressing networking, meeting the needs of their actual and future visitors, working to provide emotional and creative support in online visits, and fostering creativity and learning opportunities, enhancing digital platforms as a means to relaunch the social role of museums as institutions embedded within life of communities that contribute to driving sustainable and inclusive societal growth (Tully, 2020).

Museum reactions all over the world during the first stages of lockdown generated by the Covid19 pandemic is proof enough that museums have transformed. The spike of interest in activities proposed by museums (at the beginning of lockdown) also ensured

that at least some part of their audience was there to witness the change and to form new expectations. The current article explores how exactly these changes took shape in the case of museums in Romania and Italy, with insights from around the world.

The paper is structured in the following way. After the introduction, the task and role of museums within contemporary society are presented. In the third paragraph, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on museums around the world is analyzed. In the fourth section, coping strategies of museums in times of COVID-19 pandemic with regards to developing audiences and helping communities cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Some case studies in Romania and Italy are presented and discussed. Finally, conclusions and discussions are outlined.

Museums within contemporary society

Everybody knows what a museum is. It is that place where people go to see old and valuable artifacts. But is it a museum? Probably this is the predominant perception – a positive one, but maybe not so appealing for most, certainly not so exciting. Despite this simple and quite dusty view of museums, when we look at how museums are and what they do, we see a different picture. Museums today thrive to be dynamic educational, cultural, and social-engagement places. They offer modern facilities and many additional services. They have become cultural malls, at least the big and famous museums (Zbuchea, 2015, pp.107-122).

Nevertheless, both visitors and museum professionals keep asking what is a museum? A relatively large variety of answers has been given.

Lord (2006), starting from Foucault's definition of museums as heterotopias, defines the museum as a space of representation and difference. She stresses that interpretation is at the core of a museum. Museums bring the past in the present for discussion and contestation. She observes that "the definition of the museum as heterotopia explains how the museum can be progressive without subscribing to politically problematic notions of universality or 'total history'. Indeed, museums are best placed to critique, contest, and transgress those problematic notions" (Lord, 2006).

Walhimer (2015) considers a more practical definition: "an organization in service to society, open to the public, acquires, researches, exhibits, and interprets objects and ideas for the purpose of education, study, and entertainment". This functional approach could be useful to museum managers to set the overall strategy of their organization, providing that a specific mission is also set.

Other functional definitions are useful for strategic managerial approaches. Lord and Lord (2009), in an influential museum management manual, define museums as "complex cultural institutions uniquely concerned both with collecting and preserving the material cultural heritage and at the same time communicating its meaning – whether that meaning arises from works of art, archaeological and historical artefacts or scientific specimens" (Lord & Lord, 2009, p.3).

International Council of Museums (ICOM), the most prestigious international professional organization, has for long defined a museum as "a non-profit, permanent

institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of education, study and enjoyment" (ICOM Definition of a museum 2007). Later, the definition was a bit modified to acknowledge the social and environmental concerns of contemporary society specifying the purpose of a museum is "study, education, and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment."

Other professional or governmental organizations in the US, the UK, Romania, or in other countries offer the same kind of definitions, stressing up to now the management of collections and their presentation to the public (Dillenburg, 2011, p.8). As Dillenburg (2011) observes, all these definitions have in common the following aspects: nonprofit, open to the public, collections, exhibits, and public service. Analyzing all these elements, he observes that they are either imprecise or not specific to museums, but stresses that at the core of a museum is the exhibition. Dillenburg defines a museum as "an institution whose core function includes the presentation of public exhibits for the public good" (Dillenburg, 2011, p.11), and the exhibit is "a physical environment designed for the experience of embedded knowledge" (Dillenburg, 2011, p.13).

But nowadays, these approaches are too narrow considering the evolution of museums and their relationship with society. After the second world-war museums slowly changed their role within communities. In the beginning, local museums were concerned more with serving and interacting with their(local) communities (Brown & Mairesse, 2018, p.528). Slowly museums became forums aiming to disseminate knowledge (Cameron, 1971). Slowly, museums start to consider themselves and to be considered (at least by central and local administration) agents of local development, they (could) contribute to general well-being.

A critical question in understanding museums and designing proper management and marketing strategies for them is "what is the role of museums?". Many responses have been given, mostly revolving around the ideas of education and research. Lubar and Lubar (2017) show that "at each stage of their history, museums and museum artifacts have found new utility" (p.245). Maybe the most recent and relevant role of museums for contemporary society is community building, no matter the profile of their collections. This new focus does not mean that the educational or cultural relevance of museums has vanished, quite the contrary. They are still at the core of museum activity, but they are considered in an interactive and experiential framework and have a social/societal focus.

Considering this evolution, in 2019, ICOM radically changed the way it defines museums. At the annual conference of ICOM, a new definition failed to be accepted by the museum community. The proposed definition states: "Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artifacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing." This extensive description of museums shows a dramatic shift from "academic", "classic" museums to organizations tightly connected

to their communities, with a significant social role. As Sandhal (2019) observes, museums are an important and active part of the society, and cannot be understood outside their communities.

All the above shows that museums can be vital actors within society, with a complex role for the benefit of various communities. But, considering that museums closed and all their activities have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, in this context and post-pandemic societies can museums still be relevant?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on museums around the world

Starting with March 2020, for at least two months, many museums in Europe, the US, as well as in other parts of the word closed for visitation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, museums did not stop operating due to two main considerations. On one hand, heritage/ museums' collections have to be properly and permanently managed, even if the museums are not open for visitation. On the other hand, museums' missions are oriented towards the public good, towards museum communities, and they should be reached no matter the difficulties. Therefore, most museums either adapted their previous projects or took new challenges (Dobrzynski, 2020), trying to cope at their best with the new situation.

Blocking the direct contact between visitors and museum collections and staff, the pandemic gravely affected all public programs as well as the attaining of museums' missions. Another significant negative impact is the sudden decrease in funding, both directly – cutting the visitor-related revenues – and indirectly – affecting sponsorships and other financing mechanisms. Also, additional costs have been registered, such as disinfecting protocols or acquiring of digital technology. In many countries, both public and private organizations set up a mechanism to help museums, as well as other cultural organizations and artists, survive the multiple challenges they face due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Carrigan, 2020a; de Silva, 2020; Hickley, 2020; McGivern, 2020). Nevertheless, these efforts are not enough (see, for instance, Bailey, 2020), and museums have to apply effective crisis management strategies.

There is no reliable, comprehensive, and complex global evaluation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on museums' management, and it is too early to observe the lasting impact, but the data we possess shows the following situation:
- all museums have been severely affected from a financial perspective (ICOM, 2020b; Kotarba-Morley, 2020; NEMO, 2020); private museums and those in the capital cities being the most impacted (NEMO, 2020); somewhat paradoxically, museums that were the most successful in business operations, therefore previously more independent from sponsorships and funding schemes, have been the hardest hit (Knott, 2020; Stokes, 2020).
- a significant part of museum staff, especially of independent and national museums (in the UK) worry about their roles in the new context (Knott, 2020);
- in most cases museum employees worked from home in April (ICOM, 2020b; NEMO, 2020), their activity and responsibilities being changed to better cope with the new context (NEMO, 2020);
- Museums have generally given up working with volunteers and external experts (NEMO, 2020); In the US, 23% of the art organizations reduced staff and 24% reduced

salaries (Americans for the Arts, 2020); around the world, 30% of the museums intend to downsize, with the highest figures in North America (ICOM, 2020b);

- in April, around 13% of the museums considered they will close permanently, the most affected regions being those with newer and fewer museums (Arab countries being the worst impacted) (ICOM, 2020b);

- 10% of museums around the world have taken additional security measures to protect their collections (ICOM, 2020b).

- in terms of marketing strategies, a study (Richardson, 2020) shows that museum marketing managers turned to digital, although the associated costs are increasing. A new boost was given to e-mail marketing strategies. Another change is targeting more local audiences. Generally, budgets are declining.

Some museums transformed the re-opening for visitation is an event, some others opened the doors cautiously. A strategic approach was mean to overcome fears related to the pandemic, to (re)focus the attention of the public towards culture – a difficult task considering the new everyday challenges. A beautiful campaign was initiated by the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, entitled "Il MANN ricomincia da te".[1]

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[1] http://www.museoarcheologiconapoli.it/it/2020/05/il-museo-archeologico-nazionale-di-napoli-riapre-il-2-giugno-novita-per-la-ripartenza-al-via-la-campagna-il-mann-ricomincia-da-te/.

Reopening museums for visitation is a challenge both for museums and their visitors. A first concern is related to the safety both of visitors and museum staff. Having this in mind strict visitation procedures have been developed. In some countries, such as in Romania, the government imposed specific rules. Various professional organizations also issued various guidelines. For instance, see the case of the National Museum Directors' Council in the UK (NMDC, 2020), the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art (CINAM, 2020), or ICOM (which organized also webinars for interested museums). The Romanian National Network of Museums[2] also issued a set of recommendations, but most of them seem to be eluded by museums, which comply with the minimum required by the regulations issued by the Minister of Culture.

In the case of Italy, discussions among professionals have been developed during the lock-down and various public bodies, as well as universities, have been concerned to support museum operations during and after the lock-down. For instance, as early as March 2020, the School of Specialization in Historical-Artistic Heritage from the Padova University organized a webinar "Musei in tempo di Covid 19: nuovi scenari e modelli di gestione", inviting managers of important museums in Italy. The Ministry of Culture supported the campaign "La cultura non si ferma"[3], or the webinar of the delle Marche University[4] on how to develop museums in the new context. Also, before the re-opening for the public, a series of personalized recommendations and regulations have been presented for cultural organizations[5]. The Mus.e Association, in partnership with the Municipality of Florence, initiated in April a weekly forum on Instagram, dedicated to museum professionals, presenting approaches and insights from best practice, discussing the role of museums in the future, etc. (FirenzeToday, 2020) Also, ICOM Italia was active in supporting museums with workshops and discussion platforms, weekly online discussions on digital culture approaches, online conference, or stimulating museum visitation (ICOM Italia, 2020a, b, c, d).

Even in these situations museums still have a lot to say to ensure health security (for instance visitation paths, distance markers, or providing masks). Having strict visitation procedures does not ensure their awareness and compliance. Therefore, museums should inform visitors on them and monitor the implementation. Most museums would probably use posters to inform their visitors, but more creative means might be used to ensure their effectiveness. For instance, museums could use all sorts of videos – which also present the opportunity to raise awareness for the museum's programs and exhibits, and even attract visitors (Atkinson, 2020). At least temporarily, alternative access procedures are designed (Dickson, 2020).

Sometimes re-opening museums had to be postponed because ensuring proper infrastructure for safe visitation and another necessary arrangement was not possible due to lack of funding. This was even the case of large museums, such as Palazzo Vecchio in Firenze (Bozza, 2020).

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[2] https://www.facebook.com/Reteaua.Muzeelor/posts/3125633257513619.

[3] https://www.beniculturali.it/laculturanonsiferma.

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l83iZNoQMLM&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR006hib ArMvXsL4LWq40nQ183tu1Cran-CsEXaShoidbatQFftA6HyI8mI.

[5] http://musei.beniculturali.it/musei-covid19

A difficult aspect to handle is the interactivity inside the museum. For the past decades there is a trend to ensure interactivity, hand-on exhibits, touch screens, and such, and now all these present risks for users. Some museums just stopped the access of the public to these installations, as it happened to several museums in Bucharest with installations, games, and self-managed tours for families. Some others adapted to the situation, for instance offering disposable supplies, or single-use pens for touchscreens.

One of the challenges museums are facing is ensuring interactivity and delivering a unique visiting experience without touching. Creativity and innovation are key to this process. At least temporarily, museum interaction which up to now is touch-based will become virtual (Vanek, 2020). Some museum-based tools might be used, such as movement and light sensors, as well as visitors' smart devices that would use museum-designed applications. Museums turn toward movement- and voice-activated technologies, but not all museums could afford the investment (Jacobs, 2020).

The post-COVID-19 world means different practices in terms of exhibitions. For instance, the expectation is that museums would use more their collections and blockbuster exhibitions will hardly be considered (Debono, 2020; Dickson, 2020). It is possible that more cooperation for joint exhibitions and public projects between neighbor museums to emerge (Hawkins, 2020). Also, traveling exhibitions will change, their present picture consisting of lighter, smaller but denser in terms of knowledge (Debono, 2020). Online exhibitions might increase – and they would probably be more collaborative. Storytelling and increased cultural value might become the main traits of future exhibitions. Creativity and innovation could be two pathways to the effectiveness or at least image development. During the lock-down many museums took the opportunity to experiment with various formats of online exhibitions and services, therefore, they could have a base for development in a post-pandemic world (Keats, 2020). Not only online but also unique offline formats, such as a drive-in exhibition (Ritchie, 2020), have been proposed. An analysis of these new models would generate better approaches.

The regained physical access to museums' collections will not eliminate increased attention to the online platforms of the museums. The quality of the experience of the public due to the pandemic increased, leading to raised expectations. The museum cannot go back to previous approaches. The digital approach is, for sure, one of the permanent consequences for museums connected to the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many museums around the world to undergo an abrupt digital transformation, especially when considering their audience and public offer. Although this path was taken by museums many years ago, the pandemic accelerated the movement.

The managerial and marketing strategies of museums have to give more attention to three relevant dilemmas: user engagement, planning & control, as well as costs (Agostino, Arnaboldi, & Lema, 2020). The first one refers to finding the balance between what uses want and what the museum think is better to provide. Fine-tuning between the two is not only a matter of content but also of form, tone of voice, and attitude. The second dilemma is related to the degree of flexibility in designing and implementing online projects. The latter concerns if museums should charge users for (some of) their online services. The free offer that was the norm when the internet was perceived as a

secondary communication channel is questionable when the place of social media as a tool for delivery of cultural services and mission attainment shifted.

Museums around the world adapt to the new context, but they need to change their strategies and approaches. Nevertheless, this is not easy to do (Ambroso, 2020). Museums have to change their operational model, but also how they communicate with their public. Many dimensions have to be considered, such as staff, infrastructure and accessibility, design, technology, and others (see some suggestions offered by Studio Tectonic, 2020). Marketing strategies face new challenges to bring visitors back in these troubled times. It seems that the return of visitors to museums is not a smooth process. For instance, in Bucharest, between May and August, the number of visits decreased with more than 60% in most cases (Agerpres, 2020). In Italy also the visitation figures are much lower after lock-down. On one hand, foreign tourists are low in numbers. On the other hand, new regulations are limiting the number of simultaneous visitors, and locals/Italians might not be so eager to flock into museums. In these situations, museums tried to adapt, such as the Vatican Museums which changed the visitation hours to allow Romans to visit after work (Williams, 2020).

Museum managers consider the high probability of a medium and long term drop in attendance numbers, and one of the measures taken to reduce risks and costs is to fire staff (Charr, 2020; Shaw, 2020b). In reaction, museum professionals become actively involved in unions. The staff of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston organized a successful mutual-aid campaign to raise funds for their laid-off colleagues (Kinsella, 2020).

Coping strategies of museums in times of COVID-19 pandemic

Developing audiences

Of course, museums turned online to connect with their public. The digital technologies have offered new opportunities for museums. The internet is a simple communication channel. It can provide a framework for significant personal and educational experiences. It allows development of new cultural and educational offers (Fedele, 2020). It has been exploited in various ways by museums around the world in the past few years, but the lock-down associated to the COVID-19 pandemic pushed the strategies forward.

In the beginning, they used and adapted existing online products, later developing new products and online campaigns. The online items that recorded the highest growth were, according to a NEMO study (NEMO, 2020), the use of hashtags in social media, the presentation of online collections, online exhibitions, virtual tours, and competitions/quizzes. As expected, services that require more resources, time, and knowledge, such as podcasts, have grown less. The European countries with the highest increases in the use of online services during this period are Ireland, Russia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The countries that reported the lowest increase in online activity are Switzerland, Belgium, Sweden, France, Germany. Romania reported an average increase in the number of online services, as well as Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. (NEMO, 2020) It should be noted that this reporting refers to the growth of the online activity, not to its magnitude or quality. Countries/museum s that already were active online and had a consistent offer probably did not report a

significant increase or even intensified this activity. A global study of ICOM (2020b) shows similar situations, with social media increases for almost half of the museums and podcasts presented the smallest development.

Some museums relied on past exhibitions/ public programs, but developed them in an original way. This allowed them to prove their creativity, to develop consistently their offer and connect in new ways to their audience. For instance, in the beginning of May, starting from a past exhibition which has a dedicated online platform, the Archeological National Museum in Napoli developed a "Giorni della Forza" week[6]. Under the pretext of the Star Wars day, the museum presented artworks and histories related to ancient heroes. Sone public and educational programs were offered in an online format, as online debates on Facebook/ YouTube.

Social media proved to become the most important channel to connect museums to its audiences. Museums use social media in many ways to inform of cultural opportunities even in times of social distancing, to raise awareness, to educate, to engage. The use of hashtags increases the international visibility and impact (Dawson, 2020).

Research on the social media activity of the main Italian museums shows a doubling of social media activity (Agostino, Arnaboldi, & Lampis, 2020). Nevertheless, the number of followers did not increase to a similar extent, with the highest value registered on Instagram. This data suggests a high potential for Instagram as a channel for relating and even engaging with the audience. Not only that museums communicate more on social media, but they also changed the content – social media is not anymore used during the pandemic only as a communication channel, but a knowledge-transfer tool (Agostino, Arnaboldi, & Lampis, 2020)

A study on the museums in Bucharest shows that all the museums turned to Facebook to keep contact with their audience (Zbuchea & Bira, 2020). In most cases, the FB account changed its status from a notice board to a cultural and educational tool. In several cases, Instagram also became an active cultural environment. We register for some museums a deep and relevant transformation during the pandemic - educational and cultural projects have been developed online, allowing museums to pursue their cultural-educational missions. We consider it a beneficial strategy if museums do not abandon this approach in the medium and long term. One positive effect of the pandemic could be a pressure on museums to burn stages in the development of a relevant digital offer through online channels.

Helping communities cope with the COVID-19 pandemic

The International Council of Museums (ICOM, 2020a) issued recommendations to museums around the world to better cope with the pandemic. Maybe surprisingly to those who see museums only as guardians and exhibitors of heritage, ICOM placed at the center of museum management concerns their communities and the support of community resilience.

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[6] http://www.museoarcheologiconapoli.it/it/2020/05/mannhero-online/

An online survey conducted during the second half of March 2020 in Romania and Italy (Zbuchea, Romanelli, & Bira, 2020) revealed a disparity between museum visitors from the two countries concerning their perception of how museums reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked about their overall view on how museums were involved in efforts to build community resilience (e.g. proposing educational online activities for children, online visits) respondents from Romania considered that museums abroad are doing a much better job than museums at home. Respondents from Italy on the other hand, are appreciating the efforts made by museums at home as being more consistent than those made by museums abroad. On the other hand, the public view concerning museums involvement in general conversations around relevant topics for society other than the pandemic (e.g. global warming, migration, etc.) tends to privilege museums abroad: both the Italian respondents and the Romanian ones consider that museums abroad are more involved than museums at home in current concerns of societies. However, the perceived difference is higher in Romania than in Italy. Another study that allowed us to explore differences between museum professionals and the lay public in Romania regarding museums supporting the society to cope with the current pandemic shows that overall perception is more favorable for museums abroad (Zbuchea & Bira, 2020). Summing up, the public observed some implications of museums, but rather at modest levels which suggests that they would have higher expectations.

"Stay at home" campaigns developed on social media with related/translated hashtags were very popular with museums especially during the lock-down. These campaigns had two folded messages. On one hand, they raised awareness about the importance to stay home to protect oneself and others. On the other hand, they proposed to people blocked at-home access to culture and spread the message that culture could help in many ways help people pass through these difficult times. Various approaches have been adopted by museums around the world, but in most cases, the visuals presented museums' collections. Some original campaigns were mainly based on humor and virtual reality (see examples in Ciecko, 2020). In Italy, a very popular such campaign, #iorestoacasa, was initiated by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Many museums participated, as well as artists and various celebrities (Scaramuzzino, 2020). In the case of the Romanian Museums, we would mention a campaign of the National Museum of History of Romania which aimed to educate the audience giving reasons to stay home and offering suggestions for fulfilling spending of the tine at home (see more details in Zbuchea & Bira, 2020).

Helping the society to better understanding pandemics is one-way museums can contribute to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic (Sholts, 2020). Fighting misinformation was one approach, adopted by the Smithsonian Institutions. Presenting historical and artistic perspectives on pandemics make visitors reflect the present pandemic, understand, and adopt proper behaviors to ensure health security.

Museums around the world have started collecting artifacts and documents related to COVID-19 pandemics (Coates, 2020). In this way, museums become guardians of our history and contribute to better understanding these times. There is probably a long list of such museums but many initiatives are proposed to the local communities, therefore, are not so visible to the outside world (see, for instance, the following cases: Bird, 2020; BBC, 2020b; Coates, 2020; Kotarba-Morley, 2020; Smith, 2020). UNESCO (2020) also offers support to started collecting artifacts and visual documents related to these times this process.

A more consistent approach is the "participatory platform where everyone can contribute to the historiography of the COVID-19 pandemic" developed in the Netherlands - coronacollectie.nl. A special initiative is a new museum on Instagram – the Covid Museum[7].

Planning and documenting exhibitions about the COVID-19 pandemic is a form of helping society to cope in these times. The perspectives could be diverse – psychological, artistic, historical, etc. Museums can, therefore, choose from a wide variety of interdisciplinary approaches. Not only museums are active in understanding the impact of a pandemic on society, but also artists (Dobrzynski, 2020), especially that many of them have been greatly affected by the changes associated with the pandemic (Carrigan, 2020b; Michalska & Brady, 2020).

Another significant way museums can help their communities is by offering educational support for professors and parents. Large museums for decades have a consistent offer in this vein. The changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic were to determine some museums to offer for free educational packages for which they previously charged, to adapt offline materials to the digital environment, and to develop new online educational services, kits, and products to be used at home. Offering educational support does not only contribute to reaching a museum's mission but also to build sustainable relationships with schools, teachers, and families (Downey, 2020). Close cooperation during teachers and museums during these times leads to a series of sustainable benefits both for those involved, as well as for the community. Some local museums might even depend on this cooperation (Hargraves, 2020).

Raising funding for hospitals or communities affected is a way of involvement that is not culture/education-related. Museums could be active citizens in fighting directly the pandemic. Of course, considering the multiple and significant cuts in museums' budgets due to the pandemic, fundraising for third parties is very difficult might seem paradoxical. Also, at the beginning of the pandemic, a few large museums donated from their equipment (masks for instance) to hospitals (Selvin, 2020; Zbuchea, Romanelli & Bira, 2020).

Some museums also showed solidarity with the artists. They have been negatively impacted by the pandemic and even remain without financial resources. In this framework, for instance, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit developed an online marketplace for local artists to sell their work, as well as an Emergency Rapid Response Fundraiser for local artists (Selvin, 2020). The European museums part of the L'Internationale museum confederation had commissioned artists to create "balcony art", which might be considered one of the symbols of this pandemic (Rea, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic some museums provided their support towards other concerns of the society, especially that "Black lives matter" movement or the International day of museums dedicated to Diversity and Inclusion I n 2020 offered good contexts. For instance, the Museo Archeologico Nazzionale di Napoli Developed an Facebook video series entitled "Un lupo al museo" dedicated to raising the awareness

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[7] https://www.instagram.com/covidartmuseum/?hl=en

on and discussing various social and ethical issues, such as racism, bullying and censorship[8].

Case studies – focus on Romania and Italy

In the following section, we will present a series of campaigns of museums worldwide that could be considered models. They could inspire museum managers worldwide, not just in case of crises, but be considered in "normal" times as innovative and effective. We will start with the Getty Museum Challenge, which is probably the best-known initiative of museums during the pandemic.

Getty Museum Challenge – in Romanian style

Getty Museum is a model for other museums in terms of risk management, planning to cope with the pandemic very early, in a strategic way (Potts, 2020). The Getty Challenge, consisting of recreating a work of art and posting it on social media, was inspired by a previous campaign of Rijksmuseum (Goldstein, 2020). This initiative contributed to increased visibility of the museum, in social media as well as in mass media.

Many museums, cultural organizations, or individuals took the challenge (see Barnes, 2020, some of the proposed visual, from around the world). Some of them did it systematically and strategically, in an innovative and significant way. For instance, in the case of Romania, we present two such approaches – at the Romanian National Museum of Arts, at the National Museum of Contemporary.

The Romanian National Museum of Arts (MNAR) was among the first museums in Romania to adapt its communication and offer in times of pandemic, immediately changing the style and aims of its newsletter, to remain significant for its audience (Zbuchea & Bira, 2020). Starting with April 15 – the International Day of Art – the museums proposed a series of recreations of works of art, done by museum professionals (see Figure 1), as part of the *Provocarea ARTfel* campaign[9]. At the same time, the museum challenged the audience to post recreations of works of art. Several persons responded. The campaign was simple, the museum missing the opportunity to post information about its works of art or to transmit a specific message. We would say that the campaign was a game, as well as an invitation to play with the art.

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[8] http://www.museoarcheologiconapoli.it/it/2020/05/un-lupo-al-museo-esperimento-sociale-sociale-su-pagina-facebook-del-mann/

[9] https://www.facebook.com/MuzeulNationalDeArtaAlRomaniei/posts/3012798595447764?__tn__=-R

Figure 1. **Provocarea ARTfel *- a series of paintings "recreated" by the National Museum of Art of Romania***

The second campaign, entitled *Actors to be framed*, developed between May and August, was more complex, with clear cultural and educational aims[10]. Each work of art was accompanied by three posts: the recreation featuring one of the actors of the Nottara Theater, a partner in this project, a 3-minutes video in which the actor presented the artwork and the artist[11], a short "making of" video. 15 artworks have been "reproduced".


[10] https://www.facebook.com/MuzeulNationalDeArtaAlRomaniei/photos/a.130679580326361/3073239309403692/?type=3&_tn_=-R

[11] See the YouTube channel of the museum - https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_vUVJgnopXTljN40vCagZYjbxsqttDZy

Figure 2. **Actors to be framed – *a series of recreations made by MNAR in partnership with the Nottara Theater***

The National Museum of Contemporary Arts (MNAC) developed a smaller campaign[12], but innovative. Starting in April until mid-June, MNAC answered the challenge launched by the Getty Museum by recreating some works from its collections with what is in the house. The specific hashtag used for the campaign was #HomeMadeArtÎnColecțiaMNAC (#HomeMadeArtInTheMNACCollection). The campaign has been appreciated by the public, but no person answered the challenge of recreating artworks with "whatever would be available in a home". The campaign was meant to be fun and educational, providing information on the artwork, the artist, and or the significance and role of arts in these difficult times.

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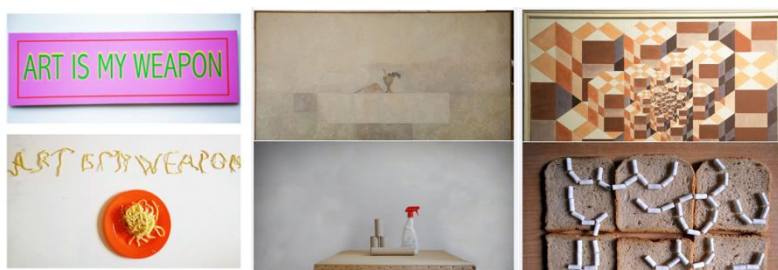
[12] https://www.facebook.com/mnacbucharest/posts/2998849290174084?__tn__=-R
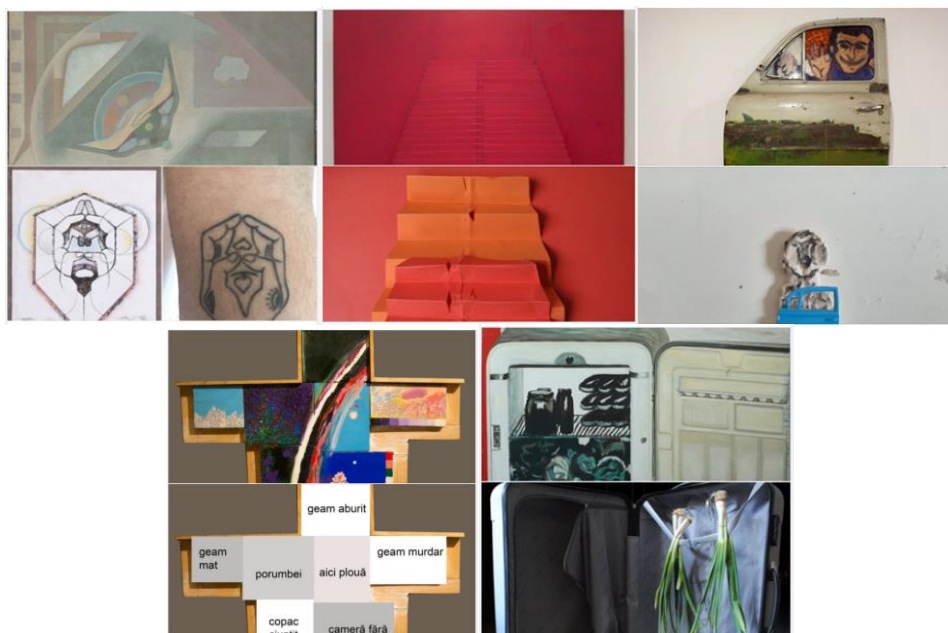
Figure 3. Visuals proposed by MNAC, recreating artworks using handy objects in the house

The Getty Museum Challenge is the most popular museum initiative in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is not the only one positively answered. #CuratorBattle is an initiative on Twitter, launched by the UK's Yorkshire Museum encouraging museums to share the most unusual items in their collections (Clugston, 2020; Laurinavičius & Balčiauskas, 2020). From mid-April until mid-July, the museums launched on social media weekly challenges: creepiest object, biggest object, dullest object, Easter egg, etc. They were largely appreciated, while the last one - #BestMuseumBum, was covered by the Guardian (Sullivan, 2020), while previously the initiative was presented by CNN (O'Hare, 2020) and BBC (2020), as well as other, smaller, media. Some of these articles also encouraged readers to donate to the museum. This campaign is a funny and engaging way in which museums can raise awareness concerning their collections. Also, museums benefit from image development and additional followers on social media.

Museums supporting artists – the case of MNAC

Very rarely the Romanian museums develop their collections through acquisitions. Most of the museums are public institutions, and their financing is not generous enough to cover the costs associated with significant heritage works, while various administrative regulations make it difficult for the planning of acquisitions. In most cases, collections grow through donations and/or archaeological finds. Nevertheless, in August, the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC) achieved the unthinkable: during the pandemic, when budgets for culture are generally cut and funding from tickets and commercial activities decreased to a very large degree, MNAC obtained additional

funding from the Ministry of Culture to acquire works from Romanian artists, active either in Romania or abroad[13].

ArT you ready?

The support of public administration and central governing bodies is essential in helping museums cope with the pandemic, and even to survive. This is why in some countries, such as the US, the UK, or Germany, the state proposed various supporting financial schemes, as previously presented. In some other countries, the central administration proposed cultural programs to help cultural organizations reach their missions even in these difficult times. Such an initiative is *ArtYouReady*, a weekly digital flashmob initiated in March by the Italian Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Agostino, Arnaboldi, & Lampis, 2020). The aim is not only to bring together citizens who have to stay at home, but also to prove that heritage "is alive and it represents the soul of our identity".[14]

The launch of this challenge was an appropriate occasion to discuss the free access to museums' heritage, relevant for allowing it to have the meant educational and cultural, even economic impact (Volpe, 2020). "The liberalization of images and openness to data is not limited to the emergency phase but becomes a cornerstone of a new way of giving value to our heritage… That's why "ArT you ready?" of Sunday 29 assumes an even stronger and higher meaning than a simple marathon of images. It is an invitation to participation, to creativity, to experimenting with new forms of cultural heritage management" (Volpe, 2020).

The campaign, especially its launch, attracted a lot of mass media coverage. This could be related to two aspects. First, being backed by the Ministry, it benefited from large visibility and probably PR support. Secondly, such initiatives have the potential of attracting positive support from media and representatives of the cultural sector, creating a positive state of mind and level of expectation.

Evaluating the public's reaction to the campaign is difficult. The investigation of the associated hashtags shows that although the response was positive, the drive of the campaign was not very strong, especially in the long term. Around 8.000 Facebook posts used the hashtag #artyouready and almost 4.500 posts used #emptymuseum. On Instagram la hashtags were much more popular, still, many of the posts marked with these hashtags are not related to the campaign. We remark that on Instagram the hashtag #emptymuseum seems to be more popular than the other one, in connection with heritage. We also observed that the interest in the campaign faded in time, probably related to less communication and awareness campaigns of the Ministry and the organizing of other digital flashmobs, tourism-oriented.

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[13] https://mnac.ro/article/199/Apel%20achizi%C8%9Bii%20de%20opere%20de%20art%C4%83%202020/87;
https://mnac.ro/article/200/%C3%8Entreb%C4%83ri%20frecvente?fbclid=IwAR1u_mkbe91lcC7bbjsAtz2w3eResng85dZwhYrq0HzeTVByw6UmdeUdZfs

[14] https://m.facebook.com/MiBACT/photos/a.190659273710/10158061732843711/?type=3&source=57&_tn_=EH-R.

#ARTWORKS 2.0 per Brescia

This campaign was developed by the Brescia Musei Foundation. It is a solidarity movement, meant to support the promotion of the local heritage as well as local development. It is an innovative digital project aiming to generate funding for the city by presenting a 3D animation of Brescian heritage.[15] The project consisted of 3D recreations of some works in the collection of the Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo. The theatrical recreations allow us to make a journey within them, discovering new points of view. The images are accompanied by readings about the artworks.

This project is linked to a fundraising campaign in charge of the municipality of Brescia "SOStieni Brescia. Dona per la tua città". Building a solidarity-oriented and creativity-driven collaborative partnership between Foundation Brescia Musei and the creative professional studio camerAnebbia helps generate new meaning and values by bringing together originally both creativity and solidarity enabling people to appreciate these joint value in a whole and in a very difficult moment for the life of who belongs to Brescian community. Moreover, the professional studio has ceded the own amount of compensation and gains to realize digital animation and fundraising campaign launched by Brescia municipality "SOStieni Brescia. Dona per la tua città". In particular, the idea about the creation of new 3D digital contents helps both enhance the Brescian cultural heritage asset and strengthen the participation of urban communities in the cultural content sharing project by strengthening a dynamic and interactive way of fruition for users and to effectively contribute to supporting the motivation and helping the quality of life within the urban community.

This initiative stresses the need to support cultural dialogue and diversity among private and public institutions as a source to enable collaborative spaces as a framework to contribute to improving the quality of life of citizens within urban communities and environments.

The reopening of the museums in Brescia was supported by various campaign developed by the municipality, under various slogans, such as "L'avventura continua", "Dove eravamo rimasti?", "La bellezza continua" or "Nuovo stile, emozioni antiche".

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[15] https://www.bresciamusei.com/;
https://www.facebook.com/TurismoBrescia/posts/artworks-20-per-bresciasabato-11-aprile-alle-1600-primo-appuntamento-della-nuova/2861313047292231/ ;
https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1133168133689097.

Conclusions and discussions

In the context of the COVID-19 lockdown, museums seemed to have been better placed as compared to other cultural institutions for accelerating the digital transition and expanding the range of meaningful online activities. In addition, a spike of interest in museum activities was noticed, on behalf of the public, everywhere around the world during the first stages of lockdown. Other priorities soon arrived and after returning to the so-called ''new normal'' museums seemed to have regained their usual place within the public preferences for leisure activities.

The attitudes and decisions of the public bodies were also relevant in helping the museum community successfully face the challenges associated with the pandemic. In the case of Romania, the support of the public bodies was low and even some measures supported health or other domain affected had a negative effect on museums and other cultural organizations. The responsibility to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic relied almost exclusively on museum managers and professionals. In other counties, such as Italy, central organizations, both public and private, supported in a significant way museums helping them to cope with the new challenges and also raising the public awareness on museums and culture.

Museums' effort to adapt to online audiences has considerably increased especially in countries were previous online activities were scarce. On the other hand, people's expectations changed. Another study might be needed to explore what exactly changed: expectations related to the quality of online experiences? Expectations as to museum role within society or community?

Museums as organizations need to continuously rethink how to perform the educational and cultural tasks within society to contribute to engendering social and cultural value and knowledge within communities they are embedded in. The rise of a global health emergency due to the advent of a new coronavirus leading to COVID-19 has forced museums to close onsite visits and strengthen the opportunities provided by the use of information and digital technologies as a strategic source to develop new services and reinforce the relationship with visitors, users and the public in general. The rise of a new opportunity for getting online services and materials has led museums to redevelop a digital strategy for promoting increased communication and interaction with the public.

The opportunities emerging from an online and digital explosion and presences open up to rediscovering museums as project-driven organizations that reposition themselves acting to play a new role and meaning restoring communication and relationship with their audience within social and cultural ecosystems. Thereby, it is reasonable to think that the museum's initiatives oriented to, at this stage and under uncertainty conditions, rearrange the organizational and technological infrastructures and sources to reposition the museum within the community and society were moving coherently with emergency contingencies as shown from the advent of a global health threat constituted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, museums are rethinking the future role and positioning of the museum in post-pandemic society and reality by developing and enhancing online capabilities in times of pandemic emergency that had driven museums to reinvent a digital approach to cultural contents production and delivery.

The case studies seem to show how museums are actively using information technology to learn how to shape the museum as a cultural and technological space that enable audiences and communities to interact and contribute to knowledge about cultural contents and support social values and identities rediscovering an activist role as an organization that does not merely offer cultural materials but develops the potential of cultural artifacts as enhanced by increased and strategic use of digital sources and online platforms that drive museums to rethink the museum as a community-oriented organization that restores the relationship with audiences by using capabilities and sources to support social, sustainable and inclusive growth of communities.

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