**Digital Museology under Test: Russian Museums as a Pandemic Place of Solace**

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Like any crisis, the current epidemics and related economic stagnation bring along reflections about the role of museums in social life and about the directions for further development of their accessibility. It opened a massive discussion in the Russian museum sector, and allowed for professionals to polemicize and seek most suitable solution. To some, the importance of museums, and in fact of all cultural institutions, diminishes dramatically during such crises, but to others a museum represents a distraction from isolation and makes up for the lack of social cultural activities. In one way or another, museums find themselves obligated to offer as much access as possible, and that implies a deeper turn toward the digital humanities.

Because cultural propagation is not declared a matter of national priority in the Russian Federation, there is no unified strategy for the lockdown. Museum directors and staff most often decide by themselves on their plan of action and implement measures in terms of their staff’s technological proficiency. Museums across the country are using several strategies: the ubiquitous virtual museum tours, intensive social media work, artistic video- or photo-installations, lectures, children’s interactive and educational sessions, and posts related to the quarantine experience.

Russian museums made themselves most visible through their active participation in managing the COVID-19 crisis. The Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow has launched the “Everything will be good” movement providing lunches for elderly people, medical personnel, volunteers and immigrants. The Multimedia Art Museum, also located in the capital, inspired a flash mob in social media to gather flower paintings for the next vernissage. Moscow auction house Vladey organized a charitable online-auction in favor of Russian medical workers. Showing solidarity with epidemic-stricken Italy, the State Hermitage Museum prepared a series of three virtual museum tours in Italian: “From the Hermitage to Italy”. These activities can be interpreted on two levels: while the heightened media presence of the organizations is beneficial for their reputation and awareness, they demonstrate that museums and other cultural organizations, even private, bear a sense of social responsibility during the periods of crisis and are expected to act accordingly.

This being said, the most important function of museums at times of social turbulence is showing solidarity with the affected people, and maintaining to every possible extent the illusion of normality. In such a way, museums fulfill an essential social mission, not letting people find themselves deprived of traditional institutions and of the possibility to educate or distract themselves. It was mentioned by Artyom Silkin, director of the Museum of the Island-Town of Sviyazhsk, that people maintain the expectations of culture to provide spiritual comfort and consolation. The Hermitage, as the symbolic flagship of all Russian museums, propagates the concept “intelligent isolation”, implying that participation in the museum’s virtual programs would make possible a “cultured” time in isolation, with emphasis on the values of education and intelligence.[[1]](#endnote-1) To put smaller museums in the spotlight and prevent them from bankruptcy, the project “Hermitage visiting colleagues” branched off from “Intelligent isolation” and used Hermitage’s online platform to inform viewers about less known museums.

Simultaneously, other museum professionals, such as Victor Shalay, director of the Far East Museum argue that providing a high quality image and a short description of a collection object is not sufficient, and is not to be considered a viable method.[[2]](#endnote-2) Only seldom will a potential online visitor be interested in the type of content providing a slideshow of masterpieces, since it loses ground to the huge amount of internet entertainment content, for instance documentaries and short films on art history topics.

To make digital museology *competitive* in the online dimension, a proper monitoring of the consumer sector and an adequate response to the changing multitude of existing art historical resources is required. First and foremost, involvement and skillfulness on behalf of museum workers translates into an improved online presence. Over the last few years a process of “rejuvenation” of an otherwise rigid industry in Russia has started. While the age category of the most active social media users in Russia ranges between 24 and 35 years old, the average age of museum workers is significantly more advanced. As is evident from a regional research dedicated to the connection between poor working conditions and labor shortage, the median age of the working environment is one of the factors influencing active participation in further training and skills development programs.[[3]](#endnote-3) The latter is applicable to the category where the workers’ median age lies beneath 35; however, in 2014 it only included around 20 per cent of regional museums.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Ultimately none of the online activities and projects so far managed to become a direct source of income for institutions, even though museums have been among the cultural industries most affected financially during the self-isolation regime. The over one thousand private museums in Russia do not receive any financial aid, so that 60 per cent of them risk closure before the normalization of the situation.[[5]](#endnote-5) It appears that the digital sphere may provide a revenue earning instrument, including the possibility of commissioning digital content such as documentary television films. The experience of the quarantine is to provide an impulse toward the monetization of museums’ existent online products, drawing benefits from the fact that they offer more online educational courses than higher education institutions.[[6]](#endnote-6) Accordingly, a specific direction which will probably be targeted in the future is the creation of additional educational resources for school-age children, given that they represent around 50 per cent of museum-visitors, while only 17 per cent of current online content is suitable for this age group.[[7]](#endnote-7) The above-mentioned facts illustrate how critical the problem of digitalization is for the survival of museums.

The increase in museum digital services is occurring more broadly in the European context, generating a situation where staff previously employed in activities unrelated to the digital sphere may take on new duties. The survey on the impact of the COVID-19 situation on museums in Europe prepared by the Network of European Museum Organizations shows that Russian museums display an overall greater diversification of digital services provided, e.g. podcasts, live content and quizzes. Nonetheless, according to the survey, social media are by far the most popular online services, which implies that the public attention is almost exclusively drawn to them. The statistics provided by the survey are critically important to offer a glimpse of the commonality of European museums’ interests and strategies.

The recommendations and survey findings of the NEMO further acknowledge that “digital cultural heritage and digital engagement have demonstrated its value in the past weeks by bringing people together, encouraging creativity, sharing experiences, and offering a virtual space to build ideas collectively”, which reflects the digital experience of Russian museums as well.[[8]](#endnote-8) Furthermore, the digitalization of museums worldwide stands for innumerous opportunities for interinstitutional and international collaborative projects, unrestrained by geographic or bureaucratic limits.

Conclusion

This short article aimed to illustrate the state and the function of museum digital services in Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic, while integrating it within a broader European context. The new paradigm of insufficient budgeting and lengthy lockdown, as well as the perspective of having drastically decreased numbers of visitors due to social restrictions, demand the reconceptualization of the museum as a digital entity as much as a material one. It can even be said that the pandemic speeded up an already burgeoning process. By transitioning to a more effective digital presence, cultural organizations gain the possibility to establish themselves as places of social dialogue, comfort and solace, a strategy already being adopted in the Russian museum community.

Notes:

1. ‘Intelligentnaya izolyatsiia. Kak posetit’ Ermitaj 2 aprelya <https://support.hermitagemuseum.org/ru/news/view/150>, accessed 30 May 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Zhanna Vasil’eva, ‘Posle kovida v chetverg’ *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* No. 78 (8132) <https://rg.ru/2020/04/09/v-rossijskih-muzeiah-obsudili-sposoby-vyzhit-v-usloviiah-pandemii.html>, accessed 10 June 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. N. V. Polyanskova, A. N. Sorokin, “Izuchenie I ranzhirovanie faktorov razvitia muzeev munitsipal’nikh rayonov Samarskoy oblasti” in Internet Journal *Naukovedenie*, No. 6 (25), Nov.-Dec. 2014, p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibidem*. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sergey Uvarov, “Chastnoe slovo: pandemiu ne perezhyvut do 60% negosudarstfennyh muzeev. Yurediceskie slozhnosti i nekommercheskii status meshaiut im poluchit’ gospodderzhku” <https://iz.ru/1016838/sergei-uvarov/chastnoe-slovo-pandemiiu-ne-perezhivut-do-60-negosudarstvennykh-muzeev>, accessed 28 May 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Valery Gordin, Irina Sizova, ‘Muzei v karantine i vokrug nego’, National Research University Higher School of Economics, <https://spb.hse.ru/news/368078640.html>, accessed 15 June 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibidem*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Network of European Museum Organizations, ‘Survey on the impact of the COVID-19 situation on museums in Europe. Final Report’ p. 3 [https://www.ne-mo.org/advocacy/our-advocacy-work/museums-during-covid-19.html, accessed 11](https://www.ne-mo.org/advocacy/our-advocacy-work/museums-during-covid-19.html%2C%20accessed%20on%2011) June 2020.

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	* Gordin Valery, Sizova Irina, ‘Muzei v karantine i vokrug nego’, National Research University Higher School of Economics, https://spb.hse.ru/news/368078640.html, accessed 15 June 2020.
	* https://www.vogue.ru/lifestyle/vystavka-cvety-vracham-chellendzh-v-tiktok-i-drugie-blagotvoritelnye-akcii-vazhnye-pryamo-sejchas
	* ‘Intelligentnaya izolyatsiia. Kak posetit’ Ermitaj 2 aprelya https://support.hermitagemuseum.org/ru/news/view/150, accessed 30 May 2020.
	* Network of European Museum Organizations, ‘Survey on the impact of the COVID-19 situation on museums in Europe. Final Report’ p. 3 https://www.ne-mo.org/advocacy/our-advocacy-work/museums-during-covid-19.html, accessed 11 June 2020.
	* N. V. Polyanskova, A. N. Sorokin, “Izuchenie I ranzhirovanie faktorov razvitia muzeev munitsipal’nikh rayonov Samarskoy oblasti” in Internet-Zhurnal *Naukovedenie*, No. 6 (25), Nov.-Dec. 2014.
	* Sergey Uvarov, ‘Chastnoe slovo: pandemiu ne perezhyvut do 60% negosudarstfennyh muzeev. Yurediceskie slozhnoski i nekommercheskii status meshaiut im poluchit’ gospodderzhku’ https://iz.ru/1016838/sergei-uvarov/chastnoe-slovo-pandemiiu-ne-perezhivut-do-60-negosudarstvennykh-muzeev, accessed 28 May 2020.
	* Zhanna Vasil’eva, ‘Posle kovida v chetverg’ Rossiiskaya Gazeta No. 78 (8132) https://rg.ru/2020/04/09/v-rossijskih-muzeiah-obsudili-sposoby-vyzhit-v-usloviiah-pandemii.html, accessed 10 June 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)