

Presentation 3

Digital Initiatives at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in the Age of Covid

Dr. Aaron Rio

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Profile

Aaron Rio is Associate Curator of Japanese Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. A specialist of medieval and early modern Japanese painting, with a particular focus on ink painting, he earned his PhD from Columbia University in 2015 while serving as a Fellow at The Met. From 2015 to 2019, he was Assistant Curator, and later Associate Curator of Japanese and Korean Art at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, where he curated exhibitions of Japanese painting, pan-Asian Buddhist art, and contemporary Japanese decorative arts. He is currently preparing an exhibition at The Met that will explore artistic responses to the manifold anxieties of life and death in premodern Japan.

Presentation

In the past decade, The Metropolitan Museum of Art has striven to provide its global audience with unparalleled digital access to information about its vast holdings. In 2011, the Museum dedicated to the public domain select data for every artwork in the collection, including the results of curatorial, conservation, and scientific research. Two years later, it unveiled MetPublications, which provided unparalleled online access to hundreds of exhibition catalogues and other books published by the museum since its founding in 1870. In 2017, it implemented an Open Access policy that allows for unrestricted use of images of artworks believed to be in the public domain. This talk examined what these institutional commitments to accessibility and information sharing look like “on the ground,” how they have informed curatorial work, specifically as it relates to the arts of Japan and Asia more broadly, and how related projects have been impacted by or driven by the evolving global public health crisis.

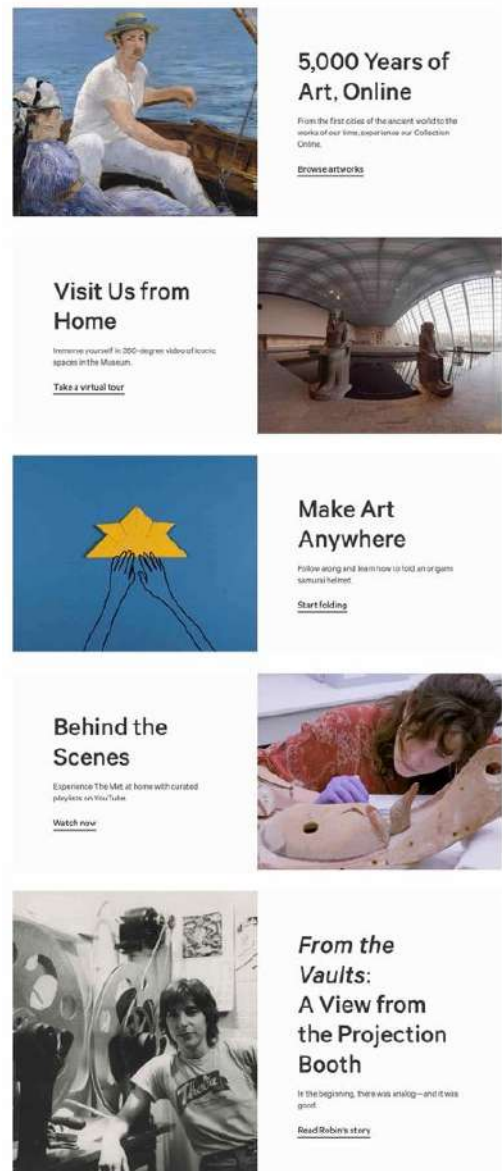


The Metropolitan Museum of Art shuttered in Spring 2020

I begin by surveying various ways in which museums around the world have discovered innovative ways

to reach new and existing audiences in the age of Covid. Museums across the globe have striven to add or enhance digital offerings, from social media and online learning programs to podcasts and virtual live events. According to a recent study by the International Council of Museums, well over thirty percent of museums have added or expanded such digital programming since last spring, above and beyond museums that have previously prioritized this type of outreach. Virtual gallery tours and digital exhibition tours have also given global online audiences access to gallery installations currently shuttered and exhibitions unavoidably cancelled. Meanwhile, museums have brought renewed attention to important long-term projects newly applicable during the age of Covid-19—such as initiatives to make available high-resolution, fully manipulable 3-D models, through online platforms like SketchFab.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was among the first museums forced to shutter as New York became an early epicenter of the Covid-19 crisis last spring. One of the very first things the Met did when it, alongside a number of other New York cultural institutions including the Metropolitan Opera, the Guggenheim, and the Museum of Modern Art, closed its doors on March 13, 2020 was to make a subtle but powerful shift to the main landing page of its website, metmuseum.org. Although the website had a mindboggling array of digital offerings, the pre-Covid iteration was clearly intended to augment the experience of a visitor to the museum. After the closure, however, the reimagined website, dubbed #MetAnywhere, offered varied ways for audiences to engage with the Met and its holdings through a wholly new lineup of digital content that existed alongside and complemented its existing selection. This new alignment of digital offerings highlighted 1. the database of the more than two million works of art in the museum’s collection alongside longstanding webpages devoted to such topics as collection highlights, spotlights on certain cross-departmental areas of the collection such as Islamic Art and Asian Art, as well as rich educational resources for kids, students, and adults alike, including the collection of essays and chronologies known now for two decades as the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History; 2. “Visit Us From Home,” which directed audiences to The Met 360 Project, allowing users to explore several of the museum’s most iconic spaces such as the Great Hall through short videos created using 360-degree spherical technology and presented on the YouTube platform; 3. a variety of activities and learning resources for kids, and their

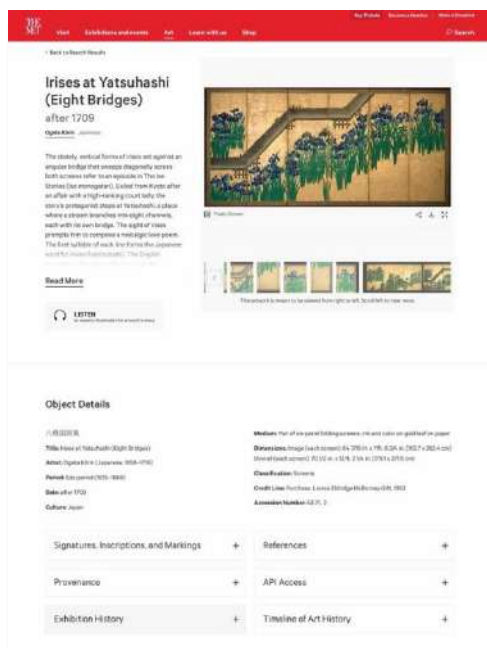


Digital offerings on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website during the shutdown

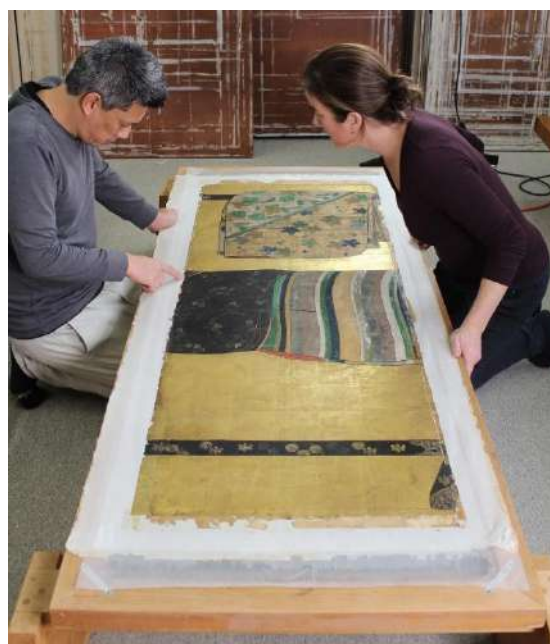
caretakers and teachers, dubbed “Make Art Anywhere;” 4. a section of the website called “Behind the Scenes,” with a wide range of curated videos and articles; 5. a feature called “From the Vaults,” which gives digital access to the Met’s film archives, some dating back to the 1920s; 6. “Met Stories,” a one-year-long social media initiative and video series that shares inspiring stories gathered from visitors to the museum, everyone from curators and teachers to artists and public figures to staff of the museum; 7. a constellation of offerings related to the exhibition, Making the Met, which was originally intended to coincide with a larger commemoration of the 150th anniversary in 2020, including overviews of the exhibition and each individual gallery and topic, a complete digital presentation of the nearly three hundred artworks featured in the exhibition, access to the in-gallery guides and audio guides, a virtual tour of the exhibition, and an extensive online primer featuring archival photos and videos.

In the next section of my talk, I surveyed the Met’s longstanding commitment to providing its audience with information on the artworks in its care and its evolving approach over the past two decades. This included 1. The launch of the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, a reference, teaching, and research resource that after several refreshes and expansions includes more than 1,000 essays and 7,000 artworks; 2. The gradual dedication to the public domain of data for nearly every artworks in the collection, including the results of curatorial, conservation, and scientific research; 3. Increased accessibility to non-English speaking audiences; and 4. The adoption of an Open Access policy, allowing the free and unrestricted use of all images of public-domain artworks for scholarly or commercial purposes.

Next, I focused on the various ways curators, specifically those working on the Arts of Japan, have found ways to improve the online presentation of the works in our care both before and after Covid, including efforts to 1. Increase the number and quality of images of artworks in the collection; 2. Improve the ways in which visitors can interact with images; 3. The improve the quality and amount of data available in the collection database, including bibliographic information, technical and scientific data, and the addition of Japanese language for select data sets.



Expanded object page on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's online collection database



Japanese painting conservators Jennifer Perry and Masanobu Yamazaki examining one panel from a Tagasode folding screen during conservation treatment

Talk Session 3

Dr. Aaron Rio

Dr. Laura Allen (Chief Curator and Curator of Japanese Art, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, USA)

Laura Allen (L): Hi, I'm Laura Allen of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Aaron, thank you so much for that fine presentation. It's great to see the many ways in which the Met has enhanced its efforts to reach and engage audiences during the pandemic. Not only is it impressive, but it's also really tempting. I need to spend a lot more time exploring all of those films, podcasts, tours and all the other experiences you described. These efforts are really essential now, while museums are closed to the public and in-person visitation is limited. They will remain important, I think, in the future as virtual experiences increasingly extend the museums' reach across national and international borders.

The second part of your lecture showed that the Met's team of curators has done an incredible job building and enhancing the online collection database for Japanese Art. My questions are focused on the database project. I was really impressed by some of the new database features, particularly the feature that encourages viewers to look at screens and hand scrolls from right to left. What other special conditions or challenges do you face in presenting Japanese art collections in virtual form?

Aaron Rio (A): First, I'll comment on the effort to allow viewers to see things from right to left. That was something championed by John Carpenter, apparently for some years, and it only just came to fruition during COVID. But it's really, really important. We had made this effort to get all these photographs of screens and pairs of scrolls, for example, up online, but when a person views them from left to right, they're always saying that you can never see the composition, the combined composition of the two things in that carousel of images. I think it probably began as just a pet peeve of John's, but he really pushed for it. He and the Chinese Painting Curators were on top of that, and then finally, the web developers got it working last fall.

Something else that I'm currently struggling with is the ability to find a place to put Japanese characters. The website isn't made to have alternate names—alternate names for artists or other constituents in the databases. So, we've tried to find a place. We've come up with a bunch of different options where we could put that information in and make sure that it is searchable. That was always important for us. It's one thing to have the Chinese or Japanese characters in the database for our benefit. But we really wanted it to be in a place on the website where Japanese visitors to the museum could search, for example, Rosetsu by kanji and all the paintings by Rosetsu would appear there. We did end up finding that place. Now it's an issue of having to go through every single artist in the collection and add Japanese characters to the name, which is a struggle, of course.

There are lots of things going on behind the scenes as well for a project like that. Alternate names of artists, studio names, and seal readings, for example, aren't things that we consistently put on the website. But they are there in the database, and all of those names are also getting Japanese and Chinese characters so that someday, maybe it will go on the website, or at the very least, we can make that also searchable. That's an ongoing challenge.

L: That's a huge effort. I know that just entering the characters by the artists' names and titles alone is really demanding. My second question could be even more ambitious than that, and something that I've been thinking about a lot lately for our collection. Are you thinking about adding things like box inscriptions and authentications to the data that you're showing online? Also do you think it'll be possible in the future to link to other websites or other sources of data for background information, historical data, etc.?

A: As far as box inscriptions and authentications, and other kinds of associated documentation, those are actually something we are doing now. It's just an issue of backlog. When our conservators process works of art as they come into the collection, they're photographing all those things, but someone has to manually go through the photographs and decide what is appropriate to go to the website, and what isn't. But by and large, all the images go onto the website now, for newly accessioned works.

In fact, it's often more likely that we put too much on, and I have to go back and say, for example, that's just an old newspaper clipping that was stuck in the box or something, get rid of that. But at present, everything is going on the web, including box inscriptions and authentications. Even when the Mary Griggs Burke Collection came to the Met in 2015, they photographed everything, including handwritten notes by Mary Burke, or handwritten notes from certain dealers to her about things she had purchased in the 70s or 80s. Those things are all going online now because they are no different than an 18th century letter associated with the object.

Regarding linking to other websites, I only recently discovered that we aren't even able to effectively link within our own website. I had a conversation with the head of our Collections Management Team for Asian Art. I was hoping that we could do something like, link, make a reference to a painting within a web chat and actually embed that hyperlink into the chat. It turns out that our website isn't capable of doing that. The website will break if we embed those links into it. We haven't figured that out yet. But one of the things I've been doing, partially because there's just been so much downtime, where I've been able to focus on developing the database. I've been doing a lot with a certain field in the database that we use that allows the recording of related works of art, both within the collection and outside of it.

As I've been doing that, I've been hoping that someday that material will be able to go online. If that object, that painting, that work of art has a webpage associated with it from another museum, it would be nice to be able to link directly to it. But I don't know if that's ever going to be feasible, or at least I can't imagine it being

feasible at this moment. I'm not exactly a technologically advanced person. Links die, links change, so it'd be just a never-ending process of updating those hyperlinks all the time. I think about a website, like Ukiyo-e.org, which is an incredible resource, but when you actually begin using it, you realize that many of the works of art to which they link on museums, websites, those links have died. It's less helpful as it could be otherwise.

L: That's really interesting, and I suppose the technology will improve as time goes on. We'll be able to do more and more. Another question that came to mind, you're relatively new to the museum, but of course intimately familiar with its holdings. Is there any particular area that you're feeling drawn to working on or presenting in the future or something that seems particularly appropriate, given the plethora of digital tools that you have at hand?

A: There are a couple of areas of the collection that I've tried to focus on, one more successfully than the other. My hope initially was to focus on the Buddhist collection because my first exhibition at the Met will be related to Buddhist art, and I wanted to just do a deep dive into the holdings of Japanese Buddhist art. But the museum shut down, and I didn't have access to the collection or storage. So instead, I shifted focus and began trying — and I still haven't completed this project — to develop a consistent terminology for Buddhist art, one that makes possible a sort of multilingual understanding of the art. I think the impetus for doing this was to have a visitor who knows nothing about Japanese Buddhist art or Buddhist art generally, maybe at all, be able to go to, for example, the Southeast Asian galleries and see a sculpture of Avalokiteshvara and understand that it's the same or related deity to Kannon in the Japanese galleries or Guanyin in the Chinese galleries, something I imagine that you at the Asian Art Museum think about all the time. The Met hasn't really done that. There isn't a consistent terminology across the various Buddhist collections, so that's something I'm interested in doing, but it's on pause at the moment.

Instead, when I first started, a year and two months ago, which seems like six lifetimes ago actually, it was just a few weeks really before we shut down, I was focused on doing studies or preparing, laying the groundwork for a study of paintings in the collection that hadn't been seen really, that hadn't been studied at all, or that someone had decided weren't “good” at some point in the past. Since then, they haven't been shown or studied, and the initial point was to just pull them out, photograph them, document them, and get them online. Of course, that didn't happen until very recently when we were allowed occasionally back onsite. I've been working with our senior Japanese painting conservator, Jennifer Perry, and going through dozens and dozens of mostly hanging scrolls that just simply haven't been photographed or documented, and so are catalogued.

We're doing that one at a time, and it's very exciting. Nothing makes me happier than being able to go into storage with a conservator who sees things in a different way than I see them. But we put our heads together and try to figure out the mystery of this thing in front of us. More often than not, the people who said they

weren't good were right, 70, 80, 100 years ago, but we have found a couple of things that are exactly what they purport to be. Nevertheless, they're all going online, good and bad. I think that's exciting, and important work. So, I'll keep focusing on that.

L: Absolutely, hidden treasures we will be on the lookout for.

A: Yeah, shopping the closet.

L: The storehouse of treasures. This may be all we have time for. I want to thank you very much again for your presentation, and really hope to be able to see you in person again in the future, and before too many months pass. Thank you.

A: I look forward to it.