Chapter 2
Museum or Mausoleum?
Electronic Shock Therapy

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ABSTRACT
Web 2.0 offers exciting possibilities and challenges for extending the museum visit, engaging new visitors and attracting distant audiences. However, the digital media technologies that enable distributed, shared and user/novice-generated audiovisual content can be deployed by experts in other fruitful ways to augment and rejuvenate actual visits to interpretation centres. Going beyond the e-guide, integrated audiovisual media can offer original new visions of ancient cultures, bring intangible as well as physical heritage to the museum, and make exploring it a lively and vivid contemporary experience. Developing and exhibiting original digital art to make the museum visit more dynamic requires new ways of researching, funding, supporting and curating exhibitions. This chapter contextualizes and reviews two recent European case-studies which aim to enhance the museum visit, noting how they were funded and developed, commenting on these approaches and reviewing how improved infrastructures might support attractive, revitalising, dynamic vision in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

Ode: On a Grecian Urn
[John Keats 1795–1821]
(abridged and edited)

O Attic shape! ... Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,
...
Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearièd,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
...
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,

‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.’

John Keats wrote his ode in 1819, following the upheaval of the Napoleonic Wars, and the year of the Manchester ‘Massacre of Peterloo’, where 15 of the 60,000 demonstrators seeking parliamentary reform were killed and 500 injured by charging cavalry (Bush, 2005). The idea of an orderly past in suspended animation, as on a Grecian urn displayed in a museum, was a reminder that truth and beauty can provide eternal values for humankind, a soothing balm to the too-raging passions of the woeful present. Such inspiring perfection is fragile, and needs to be extracted from the hullabaloo of unruly life - to be preserved and protected for more tranquil times.

Sir William Hamilton’s collection of Greek vases and other classical objects was purchased by the British Museum in London in 1772, and added to Sir Hans Sloane’s founding bequest, which had gone on display in 1759. In 1816, Thomas Bruce, Seventh Earl of Elgin (1766-1841), sold his collection of Greek antiquities to the museum, to be admired in the Elgin Room – where they were arranged on alleys of broken columns lit by vast skylights: a tranquil temple at the heart of the metropolis, wherein to contemplate, adore, and find inspiration in the ordered human achievements of classical times. An engraving of the Elgin Room by Edward/William Radclyffe of 1844, from an original sketch by Llewelyn Jewitt F.S.A (Shepherd, 1844), shows men and women demurely parading: looking up into the light at the lofty antiquities displayed on high – ‘all breathing human passions far above’. From 1896, the Museum opened its doors on Sundays, and visiting it became one of the few activities not directly related to church or chapel considered, by the pious majority, proper for the Sabbath (www.britishmuseum.org/).

The sense of museum as a primarily spiritual place continues throughout the twentieth century and beyond. This is noted uneasily by some, such as Theodore Adorno, who makes the sound connection echoed in our title: ‘The German word museal (museumlike) has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are the family sepulchres of works of art’ (Adorno, 1982, p.178). Many other writers have noted the similarity between museums and sites for preserving and visiting the dead; Merleau-Ponty (1994),