

The St. Vincent Art Museum: Finding a Way to Face COVID-19

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“Art enables us to find ourselves
and lose ourselves at the same time.”
Thomas Merton

May 2020: Taking her traditional seat at the board’s table in the glass-casted room, Ann Hailstrom, Director of the St. Vincent Art Museum, looked extremely worried. On the table, thick books on Leonardo anticipated the plan for the next exhibition. Since her appointment as the Director, she had worked hard to make the St. Vincent Art Museum an excellent and faultless expression of high quality. Nonetheless, the totally unpredictable spread of COVID-19 had called off the entire year’s program. The severe uncertainty that the museum was facing was putting its survival at huge risk. While sitting, Ann knew that the board members expected her to come up with valuable ideas for prompt adoption to face the crisis that the pandemic was creating for the museum. Many questions were crowding her mind: “How can we be resilient in the face of the consequences of the virus? How can we keep on developing our activities yet preserve the high level of quality of our intellectual offer? What can we learn from these challenges to remain competitive? How can we incorporate the lessons learned into our strategy to compete better in the future with other cultural institutions in Europe? As soon as COVID-19 is over, how can we increase the attractiveness of the St. Vincent Art Museum to the international markets?” While reflecting, she also wanted to show the board how much effort she had put into looking at this tremendous moment as an opportunity to renovate the museum and some of its procedures and its ways of dealing with customers as well as its work activities. Waiting for all the members to join the meeting, from the other side of the room, the Grand Palace seemed to observe her with austerity.

1. A fantasy name.

The St. Vincent Art Museum

The St. Vincent Art Museum is located on St. Vincent Square, a place that combines five hundred years of history. Kings and emperors have all left their mark on it. The St. Vincent Art Museum was built over fifteen years, from 1850 to 1865. Together with the White Palace and the Winter Palace (originally a villa built on the ruins of the city and adapted as a civil and criminal court), they made a stunning urban space. Appointed by the government, Andreas Schoemaker was the first architect to work on the new St. Vincent Art Museum. He was charged with redesigning the simple, run-down building originally erected at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The original magnificent entrance, with its two semi-elliptical stairways, was rendered even more striking by the elegant balustrade added by Schoemaker.

Completely restored during the 1950s, the building covers approximately 20,000 square meters over several floors. Wide-open spaces on the second and third floors house the exhibitions. A cafeteria is situated on the mezzanine level and a bookstore, a giftshop and special areas dedicated to exhibition-related initiatives occupy the ground floor. The great window, designed as part of an overall restoration of the St. Vincent Art Museum, is one of the site's main attractions.

Past, present and future perspectives

The restoration, which ended up being very expensive, had implied an entire reorganization of the museum's business lines and the related corporate strategy. The new concept of the St. Vincent Art Museum took a couple of decades to be implemented. Strongly supported by the government, it aimed to become a symbol of the national culture and, more importantly, a vehicle to spread education and a sense of community internationally.

Since then, the museum's strategy has focused on two main areas. On one side, there are the temporary exhibitions, the first one taking place in 1990. Rather than simply being a collection of old masters, the exhibition bore witness to the history of early nineteenth-century taste in collecting. It was the first time a broad selection of works of art from a famous Russian museum had ever left their home. Some 100 paintings and drawings by Degas, Monet, Renoir, Cézanne, Gauguin, le Douanier Rousseau, Vlaminck, Derain, Vallotton, Vuillard, Sisley, Pissarro, Matisse, Miró and Picasso had been hosted by the St. Vincent Art Museum for four months. Over the years, guidelines had been adhered to with scientific stringency and continuity when choosing topics for exhibitions at the museum, including a program for boosting the appreciation of both classical and modern art, an innovative and in-depth look at the relationship between Europe and the best of international art and major projects devoted to the history of world art. These stunning events, along with all the others that have made up the program of exhibitions held to date, have always played the dual role of being both enjoyable and of immediate interest to the wider public and, at the same time, being historically and artistically stringent and innovative from a scholarly standpoint. At the St. Vincent Art Museum, temporary exhibitions have traditionally relied on the trust

that links the owners of the masterpieces with the exhibitors. To this extent, St. Vincent Museum has been considered highly “credible” since its inception. Such credibility has granted the museum the possibility of attracting valuable pieces, as owners trust the competence of the people and the quality of the design and planning of the exhibitions. The credibility has been rooted in the adoption, since the very beginning, of an operational practice informed by the international standards of transparency and accountability. The reputation has so far been “a shield and a stimulus,” the St. Vincent Art Museum being imprinted with a “culture of excellence.”

A second relevant business line concerns the business services. Hence, in accordance with the traditions and history of the St. Vincent Art Museum, which is open to the public seven days a week, special private tours can be organized outside the opening hours. Selected clients can arrange private showings in the evenings, with exclusive access to the beautiful rooms and works of art on display. On the occasion of these special events, guests, divided into groups of 25–30 people, are provided for in every way and accompanied by art historians. The bookshop also stays open accordingly and the current exhibition catalogue is made available to these special guests at a discount. Among the detailed services provided are therefore the following: guided tours, cocktails or buffets for up to 200 people, seated dinners for up to 100 people, hostesses and wardrobe services.

In line with the new strategy, a renovated management structure was introduced in 1990 with a Museum Director supported by an Exhibition Director and an Operation Director. More recently, given the need to monitor the financial activities more rigorously and to plan appropriate marketing strategies carefully, the executive team was expanded to include a Communication & Marketing Director together with a Finance Director.

Despite its highly recognized success at both national and international levels, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was posing the St. Vincent Art Museum inconceivable challenges. In a recent report, considering that in 2020 more than 95,000 museums have been counted all over the world (60% more than the 2012 estimates; Exhibit 1), UNESCO registered that 90% of all museums had closed their doors during the pandemic to safeguard the well-being of staff and visitors, producing serious economic and social repercussions. It appears that 13% might never reopen again due to a lack of funding. Similarly, a survey by the Network of European Museum Organizations (NEMO) reported a loss of income of 75%–80% because of COVID-19. More specifically, most museums claimed that a great portion of their income loss has derived from lost revenues for tickets, shops, cafés and other services. In this regard, 30% of participating museums declared that they were losing up to 1,000 euros per week; 25% were losing up to 5,000 euros a week; while the biggest ones reported that they were losing between 100,000 euros and 600,000 euros per week (Exhibit 2).

In the face of such a crisis, the St. Vincent Art Museum therefore had to redefine its strategies completely for the short, medium and long terms. As Ann Hailstrom had claimed in some previous board meetings, “the museum we closed will not be the museum we reopen.”

Museums and other exhibition halls had to handle physical site closures, staff furloughs, budget shortfalls, the need to digitize entire exhibitions and programs and audience assessments. According to many experts, the epidemic was forcing a de-prioritization of touch and physicality. Hence, individuals were obliged to isolate or socially distance themselves, thus pushing cultural institutions to shift to digital formats. Emerging concepts such as “hybridity” (a mix of interaction and mediation) might open new possibilities for (re)imagining museums’ activities. In addition, the St. Vincent Art Museum was struggling to continue playing a key role as a vital space in the development of social ties and cohesion, in building citizenship and in reflecting on collective identities.

Finding a way

All the board members arrived on time for the meeting, forcing Ann to return to reality. Cindy Schnell, the Head of Exhibitions, sat next to Ann, Mike MacCullagh, the recently appointed Head of Communication & Marketing sat opposite her, while Dan Anderson (Head of Finance) and Lynn Chapman (Head of Operations) took the remaining seats.

The team of executives started discussing the main issues that required immediate attention and investment from both a strategic and an organizational perspective. The minutes of the meeting included the following points:

- **Don’t forget your usual visitors**, who expect museums to continue serving them as usual – maybe in a more innovative way. They could have set higher expectations after the pandemic resulting from the increased desire to return to the museum and enjoy its services. One concern, therefore, is to break the public perception that the museum could be stuck in the past, with its past work procedures and offerings.
- **Let’s have a look outside**: The team agreed on the need to conduct accurate **benchmarking** with competitors; such a comparison aimed not only to understand competitors’ strategies but also to try to learn from them and eventually propose a collaboration when the service offers are found to be complementary and logistically compatible.
- **Enjoyment in safety**²: As the museum started to reopen after lockdown, a number of **social distance measures** had to be adopted to bring people in safely and enable them to access and enjoy the museum’s collections and services. The way forward therefore had to rely on a change in visitors’ mindset in receiving services and, in particular, their behavior in public spaces, mainly in relation to social interaction with others. Due to this, the St. Vincent Art Museum had to re-think how it could combine enjoyment and perceived safety while considering the building’s physical constraints. This reflection was not solely related to the emergency situation generated by COVID-19. Experts were foreshadowing a long-term requirement for social distancing that

2. For this part, we advise readers to refer to SHellis and Szanto (2020): <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/museum-reopening-table-1867743>

would change the scale and spatial arrangement of indoor facilities: the COVID-19-imposed distancing (i.e., 1 or 2 meters) could become the “new normal” in the post-pandemic phase (e.g., like the limitation on carrying liquids on plane that forged the new normal in air transport after 9/11). As the greatest challenge for curators around the world is reopening their exhibitions to meet the requirements for safety without sacrificing the spatial, social and educational experience, new guidelines were required for the reopening of museums during and after the pandemic crisis.

- **Going digital?** During the emergency and the closure, **digital contents** published by museums on the Web have proliferated. Museums have attempted to practice resilience with proposals aimed at consolidating relationships on the Web, reaching the public, strengthening contacts and finding new ways of spreading culture. Museums will have to overcome some restrictions and limitations. The Web will represent a critical channel for making physical spaces accessible virtually and for maintaining the relationships with customers. Nonetheless, data on the quality of the experience must be analyzed to draw clear strategies rather just tactical reactions conducted under the impulse of urgency. Digitization is important in all sectors, and museums are no exception. However, it is not appropriate for all the targets in a market and for all the layers in a public community. In this regard, some board members of the St. Vincent Art Museum noted the limits of virtual tours and exhibitions and proposed to reflect on the importance of designing virtual offerings that could educate, reduce isolation and decrease boredom. Given this situation, what criteria can museums follow to implement a quick and efficient analysis of their choices and their strategies in the online environment? How is it possible to define, measure and evaluate their effectiveness on the Web? How can virtual tours effectively improve visitors’ participation and engagement? Museums try to keep the relationships with their audiences alive with the help of the Web yet aim to preserve the accessibility to buildings and palaces, most of the time “an attraction (buildings) in the attraction (exhibits).” Digital, physical or “phy-gital” (hybrid)? That was the trilemma for the St. Vincent Art Museum.
- **Money does matter:** The COVID-19 pandemic caused museums to **seek financial aid from corporate sponsors**. However, corporate sponsorship may have negative consequences for museums in terms of their authenticity. The executive team therefore investigated whether the extraordinary circumstances caused by COVID-19 may have changed visitors’ perceptions of corporate sponsorship. Some studies showed that tourists reacted more positively to corporate sponsorship if it was associated with a greater sense of safety (granted by additional financial means and the brand endorsement effect of large corporations). Other studies demonstrated that corporate sponsorship by multiple smaller- and medium-sized companies generates more positive outcomes for museums than the effort of a single large company in terms of perceived authenticity loss, visiting intentions and willingness to pay. Therefore, on which door was the museum supposed to start knocking?
- **Sharing a higher purpose**, which is the collective desire to help the society recover as quickly as possible. To this extent, museums across the same region or country could join forces in mak-

ing culture more accessible. This is also consistent with a longer-term vision eyeing the post-corona world to **consider the promotion of the public’s scientific literacy** as a dynamic process instead of a one-off project. This is in line with the aim to **address effectively the disparities of cultural literacy** between well-developed and less-developed areas, contributing to the ambitious goal of enhancing the general literacy of populations.

- **And the planet?** COVID-19 has had a major impact on all the businesses and activities that must be delivered “in presence” (or at least the part of the service that requires a physical presence). The sanitization of spaces, disposal of dangerous objects (e.g., face masks) and many other apparently minor issues are exerting a significant impact on the “green strategy” of museums, requiring additional ad hoc expenses in critical times for finance.

Redesigning the St. Vincent Art Museum’s activities

In closing the meeting, Director Hailstrom emphasized the challenges that her team foresaw: “How can we be resilient in the face of the consequences imposed by the virus? How can we keep on developing our activities yet preserve the high level of quality of our intellectual offer? What can we learn from these challenges to remain in the market? How can we incorporate the lessons learned into our strategy to compete better in the future with other cultural institutions in Europe? As soon as the COVID-19 is over, how can we increase the attractiveness of St. Vincent Art Museum to the international markets?”

Everyone agreed that the ultimate aim was to remain competitive, attract quality visitors and, more importantly, learn from the COVID-19 jolt to be ready to face the future. A place like the St. Vincent Art Museum must be responsible for a “wide” cultural offer in line with the best international benchmarks. Furthermore, even for a sense of cultural identity and pride, it could not give up on the ambition of having “A-class” exhibitions.” The St. Vincent Art Museum must offer what others are not able to offer while learning and feeding its self-development over time.

Ann Hailstrom had no doubt that the only option that they could pursue was to emphasize reaching and maintaining positive adaptation toward the current huge adversity. After the crisis, the practices would have to change and things would have to be approached differently. Cindy Schnell was convinced that, in the face of this extremely complex historical moment, it is imperative for the museum’s mission and values to be reformulated, rethought, revisited and redefined. “Maybe,” Lynn Chapman thought out loud, “the deep meaning of all this is that it’s time to re-educate both our visitors and ourselves in the spirit of scientific development.”

The pandemic was forcing museums to fulfill longstanding promises in a different way: to reach more diverse audiences and to enrich their digital offerings while simultaneously building a community. The museum must use the forced “pause” to consider “what it really wants to become,” actively looking for responsiveness and redirection.

Exhibit 1

According to UNESCO, the number of museums is estimated at around 95,000 in 2020, which represents a 60% increase compared with 2012. However, they are unevenly distributed across the globe, with a strong concentration in Western Europe (see Figure 1).

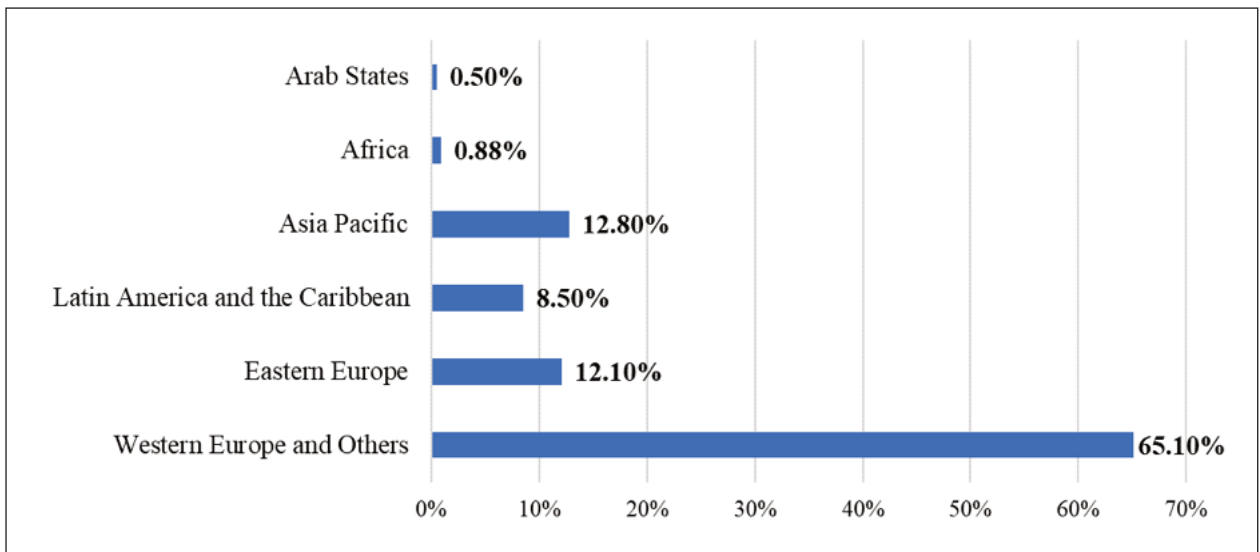


Figure 1. Number of museums all around the world

Exhibit 2

Participants in the survey: 650 museums by 3 April 2020.

Participating countries: 41 countries (i.e., all 27 EU member states plus 9 member states of the Council of Europe plus feedback from museums in the USA, the Philippines, Malaysia, French Polynesia and Iran).

As reported in Figure 2, most museums are closed (92%), with some exceptions in Sweden, Albania and Austria.

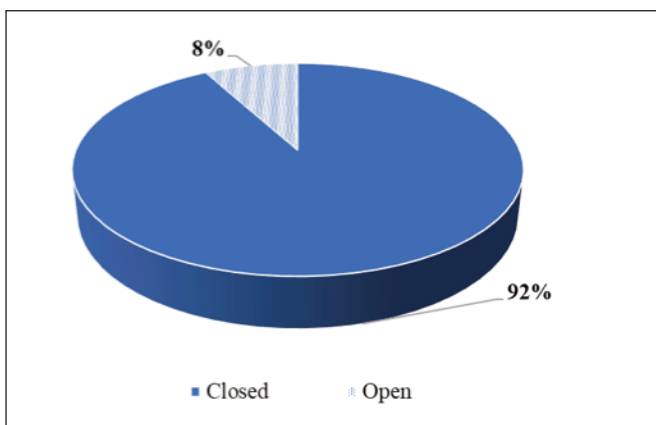


Figure 2. Closed and open museums following the pandemic (%)

To understand museums’ income losses, please note the data reported in Figure 3 below. Note that museums in traditionally touristic regions are experiencing an exceptional income loss of 75–80% due to the complete halt of tourism since March 2020.

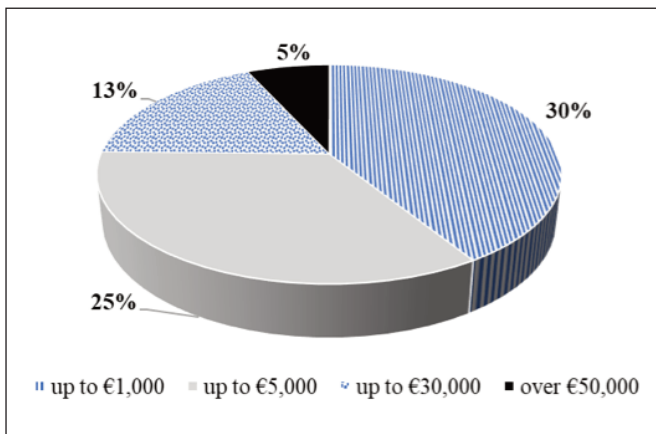


Figure 3. Museums’ income losses following the pandemic