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Close Encounters: Reconsidering Conventional Wisdom in a Global Pandemic

by Aryn G. Neurock Schriener

Abstract: When the COVID-19 pandemic forced museums to close, institutions scrambled to reposition themselves in a virtual climate. Creating virtual programming to reach visitors and patrons in their homes became a priority, and many turned to Google Arts & Culture due to its technical capabilities, visually appealing interface, and brand-name recognition. The Rijksmuseum seized this opportunity, currently using their Google Arts & Culture page to host online exhibits, images of their collections, and virtual ‘tours’ of the space using high-definition panoramic photography. One online exhibit offered by the Rijksmuseum, titled *The Milkmaid*, is the focus of this review. Though only one of many online exhibits offered by the Rijksmuseum, the theoretical implications the exhibit generates echo the pandemic-induced reimagination and repositioning of museums at large. The brevity inherent in online cultural programming prevents this exhibit from realizing its full educational potential, but *The Milkmaid*’s technical execution and virtual accessibility is commendable and speaks to broader discussions in the museum studies field. By placing conventional theoretical wisdom in conversation with the uniqueness of our present moment, *The Milkmaid* reveals itself to be a small but powerful embodiment of the tensions between authenticity and reproduction, physical and virtual, and ability and restriction.

Keywords: *Rijksmuseum, Digital Exhibition, Museum Studies, the Milkmaid, Johannes Vermeer*

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced museums to close in 2020, institutions scrambled to reposition themselves in a virtual climate. Creating virtual programming to reach visitors and patrons in their homes became a priority. A common solution has been the use of Google Arts & Culture, a free online platform showcasing art and objects from museums and cultural institutions across the world. With a streamlined interface and innovative image viewing technology, institutions have been able to share their collections with global audiences with Google Arts & Culture. Visitors to the Google Arts & Culture website choose from a wide range of interactive experiences, from virtually touring galleries to creating filters based on famous paintings for selfies, all accessible to anyone with an internet connection. The platform had existed before the pandemic swept the globe but quarantining and museum closures have made it a more popular source of remote entertainment and education.

The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Netherlands, is currently using their Google Arts & Culture page to host eleven online exhibits, digital reproductions of much of the museum's collection, and virtual 'tours' using high-definition panoramic photography to explore eight rooms in the museum. One online exhibit offered by the Rijksmuseum, [titled *The Milkmaid*](#), is the focus of this review.¹ The exhibit is named for the sole feature of the exhibit, Johannes Vermeer's painting *The Milkmaid* (see Fig. 1). Though this exhibit is but one of many offered by this prominent museum, it is emblematic of the pandemic-induced reimagination and repositioning of museums at large. *The Milkmaid's* technical execution and virtual accessibility is commendable, but the brevity inherent in online exhibitions prevents this exhibit from realizing its full educational potential. In spite of this, the exhibit speaks to broader discussions in the museum field prompted by the events of 2020 and 2021. When placed in conversation with conventional museological wisdom, *The Milkmaid* reveals itself to be a small but powerful

embodiment of the tensions between ability and restriction, physical and virtual, and authenticity and reproduction.



Figure 1. Johannes Vermeer, *The Milkmaid*, oil on canvas, 1600, Rijksmuseum, purchase with the support of the Rembrandt Association.

The exhibit begins simply, featuring the titular painting as the background behind the Rijksmuseum branding and buttons to share the exhibit on social media. Progression through the exhibit is triggered by the visitor scrolling down the page. Overall, the exhibit consists of wide shots and close-ups of the painting with informational text overlaid. Movement from the wide shots to the close-ups is extremely smooth and the text provided to the visitor is concise, unobtrusive, and informative. The exhibit can be viewed in its entirety in under ten minutes and in fewer if the viewer is familiar with the painting or Vermeer already.

The viewer is guided through an examination of the painting using a combination of full shots, close-ups and accompanying text. Close-up shots of the painting take advantage of high-definition photography to allow an intimate look at the painting, exposing hairline cracks in the paint and Vermeer's miniscule brushstrokes that would be otherwise unavailable to visitors in a

physical space. The accompanying text reads like an extended exhibit label and begins by contextualizing *The Milkmaid* in Vermeer's oeuvre. Following this introduction, the exhibit walks the viewer through various aspects of the composition, noting Vermeer's use of light and perspective in creating such a striking scene. The exhibit then informs the viewer that *The Milkmaid* is "exceptional" and "greatly admired," as demonstrated by its appearance "in various auctions throughout the centuries."² Though some viewers may feel some of these statements go without saying, each informational tidbit is part of a scaffolded learning experience in which the viewer is able to eventually evaluate the possible interpretations of the painting.

While traditionally objects are accompanied by exhibit labels that focus on basic information about the piece (e.g., the title, artist or creator, creation date, dimensions, etc.), this exhibit asks viewers to consider differing interpretations of the artwork. The exhibit proposes two possibilities: is this a straightforward image of a woman at work, or is there a saucier meaning? The text explains that some interpret the maid as a model of a dutiful and hardworking woman, while others point to the inclusion of a small foot stove – possibly a symbol of burning desire – in the bottom right corner as reason to believe the work reflects the common stereotype of a promiscuous kitchen maid. To explore this question, the exhibit explains the important role of modern x-ray technology. When modern x-ray technology was used on the work it appears that the maid was originally accompanied by a laundry basket rather than a stove, which may illuminate the artist's intention. The deliberate replacement of a symbol of domestic duty – the laundry basket – with a warming device that women often used by positioning under their skirts leads many to question the woman's virtuousness despite the fact the painting centers on the maid fulfilling a simple daily chore. The inclusion of differing interpretations and the results of

x-ray analysis are a break from traditional exhibit labels, particularly in art museums, as are the presentation of multiple meanings and lack of definitive interpretive answer.

The remainder of the exhibit addresses Vermeer's stylistic choices, quickly noting Vermeer's signature small brushstrokes, the room's lighting, and the contours along her shoulder. This is where the exhibit ends, and the viewer is shunted away from the image of *The Milkmaid* to credit information. The ending is abrupt, and though it serves the brevity of the exhibit, such bluntness may lead a viewer to quickly dismiss the exhibit from their mind. Without a culminating thought or conclusion, the exhibit seems inconsequential, nothing but short-lived trivia.

However, there is so much more than meets the eye. User experience and the very nature of virtual exhibits implores scholars to revisit conventional museological wisdom. It is widely held that the physical arrangement and flow of material is an integral part of museum exhibits, as space and non-visual sensory experiences can be used to convey or reinforce tone or messaging.³ Online exhibits require necessary concessions because most spatial experiences become impossible. Online exhibits are inherently limited to what can be conveyed on a screen and can only take advantage of audiovisual elements. To counteract this, *The Milkmaid* exhibit takes advantage of the medium at hand, providing the viewer with a unique visual experience with constant movement across the painting, alternating between wide shots and close-ups on different parts of the composition that only a screen can allow. With simple, aesthetically pleasing informational text, the exhibit delivers a unique experience that harnesses modern technology to engage viewers – qualities that work to mediate the tension between spatial configuration and on-screen capabilities.

The current global climate plays a large role in the significance of the exhibit since COVID-19 lockdown measures changed the proverbial game for exhibits. Though some museums and galleries have now allowed visitors back into their physical space (in limited amounts with masks and other sanitary measures required), the extended closure of museums resulted in a surge of virtual exhibits. This drastically altered museums' potential audiences, as online content is available around the clock and can be accessed remotely at no cost. No longer did work hours, physical distance, or cost prohibit attendees. This helped welcome a more diverse scope of visitors, some of whom may not have frequented *any* museum prior to the COVID-19 proliferation of virtual exhibits. The rise of virtual exhibits meant that now more than ever it was necessary for museums to ensure their programming was meaningful, clear, and engaging.

Creating accessible and appealing content to successfully compete with the plethora of newly created online programming posed a new challenge. Further complicating this situation was (and is) screen fatigue that occurs with increased hours spent in front of a screen for remote work or school.⁴ Online exhibits must be alluring enough to be worth fighting this inertia. *The Milkmaid* exhibit succeeds here, providing viewers with an experience that is easily accessible at no cost through Google Arts & Culture. The exhibit lasts long enough for the viewer to learn about the piece but is short enough to avoid exacerbating screen fatigue. Additionally, it has straightforward information about the artwork that requires no background knowledge and is therefore accessible to a wider range of people.

In the context of a global pandemic and the constraints of online exhibits, the exhibit's visual charm is cast in a new light. Here, Harvard University Professor Stephen Greenblatt's seminal discussion of resonance and wonder are useful. Greenblatt asserts that resonance, or the

power of objects to hold deep cultural meaning, and wonder, a distinctiveness that enraptures the viewer, stand as oppositional modes of exhibiting artwork.⁵ *The Milkmaid* exhibit relies heavily on wonder, which is deftly achieved through the aesthetic of the exhibit and the intense proximity to the artwork that would be otherwise unattainable in a physical space. Resonance is virtually nonexistent, present only in the feeble allusions to Vermeer's other work and *The Milkmaid's* enduring masterpiece status. Greenblatt advocates for a merging of both resonance and wonder, but the exhibit flouts his standards, holding value despite the strong imbalance between the two concepts.

Part of the wonder evoked by *The Milkmaid* is tied to the enchantment and aura of such a well-known artist and artwork.⁶ Walter Benjamin famously argued that an object's aura, and therefore its worth, vanishes through reproduction.⁷ Where does this leave *The Milkmaid*? Is this exhibit inherently less valuable because it is hosted online, and can it no longer be enchanting or hold Greenblatt's wonder? Museum scholars are grappling with the authenticity of virtual and three-dimensional reproductions as the world's access to and dependency on the internet increases. Digital heritage scholar Fiona Cameron would argue that this exhibit does not follow Benjamin's logic, as she rejects the original/reproduction binary, but there is more at play here.⁸ The exhibit owes its retention of wonder and aura to the year 2020. Advances in photography and technological literacy since Cameron's (and Benjamin's) writing make this exhibit possible, and COVID-19 has driven people inside, online, and to the websites of cultural institutions, where digital images must fulfill the role of physical objects that now lie in a requisitely vacant museum. This is not to say that the urge to view works in person or the aura of physical objects no longer exists; rather, the public's awareness of COVID-19 suspends typical attitudes towards digital reproductions and augments the cultural capital of online exhibits such as *The Milkmaid*.

Surely the intimacy of the high-definition close-up views bolster these feelings of awe and wonder. Though the end of the pandemic will bring physical exhibits to the fore once more, this temporary reversal of traditional thought processes provides an invaluable opportunity for museum professionals and scholars to shape museums into a space that is responsive to the needs and desires of visitors in 2021 and beyond.

The Milkmaid exhibit is brief and lacks depth, which are qualities that would typically mark the exhibit as unworthy of scholarly attention. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, *The Milkmaid* exhibit reflects both the uniqueness of the present moment and the growing challenges to traditional museological thought. The pandemic demanded that museums create online exhibits and these exhibits often developed content that contradicts or complicates conventional wisdom about exhibit space, value, and materiality. When exhibits must be viewed on screens, cultural institutions must create accessible content that is compelling and brief enough to overcome screen fatigue inertia while remaining engaging enough to provide visitors with an experience that captures the magic of a physical exhibit. As the pandemic persists and the world continues to become increasingly virtual, it is necessary for museum scholars to revisit what we have long held true. Exhibits such as *The Milkmaid* have much to teach us about accessibility and engagement, particularly given ongoing conversations about decolonization and dismantling elitist, hegemonic practices. The accessibility inherent in this and other virtual exhibits go a long way in levelling playing fields related to availability, accessibility, and comprehension. To dismiss this or similar exhibits for brevity or shallowness is to miss crucial opportunities for growth in our field, and museums are too significant in our society for us to overlook the possibilities.

Endnotes

¹ “The Milkmaid,” Rijksmuseum, Google Arts & Culture, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-milkmaid/cQJib89R45GfJg>.

² “The Milkmaid”, 2021.

³ Constance Classen and David Howes, “The Museum as Senescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artefacts,” in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Phillips (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), 199-222.

⁴ Mary Helander, Stephanie A. Cushman, and Shannon Monnat, “A Public Health Side Effect of the Coronavirus Pandemic: Screen Time-Related Eye Strain and Eye Fatigue,” Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion, Issue Brief #24 (2020), 1-3.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42-56.

⁶ Fiona Cameron, “Beyond the Cult of the Replicant: Museums and Historical Digital Objects – Traditional Concerns, New Discourses,” in *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage: A Critical Discourse*, ed. by Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderdine (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) 49-76.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. H. Zohn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970).

⁸ Cameron, 2007.

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