

MONA: from public art to *our* art with a mobile app

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The term “public art” commonly designates the sculptures, monuments, and murals that adorn our cities. Although this art form can be ignored or go unnoticed (Veyne, 1988), recent events have led to many interactions with it. On the one hand, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought attention to the subject of access to culture. Due to confinement and imposed social distancing measures, citizens rediscovered their urban settings and thus renewed their interest for public art. On the other hand, the Black Lives Matter movement has revived debates over which artworks should be publicly displayed. The statue of the slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol is a historical symbol of white dominant colonial history. Far from an act of gratuitous “vandalism,” its toppling by protesters can rather be understood as an outcry of citizens whose voices have not been listened to. They therefore took matters into their own hands and, as a result, took part in the curation of their city’s public art collection. The destruction of art is recurrent in history, and its motives range from political upheavals to a variety of misunderstandings (Gamboni, 2007). Yet, even when confronted with such “monumental controversies” (Senie, 2019), decisions and discourses about public art are mostly generated by local government officers, politicians, cultural workers, or journalists. Although citizens are sometimes invited to be part of public art commissions, they usually lack the opportunity to voice their opinion. They are considered to be the recipients of public art policies whose aims are to elevate their culture and spirit.

This top-down approach attributes a passive role to spectators, and such conception permeates onto the tools that promote public art. Our research into contemporary mobile applications dedicated to this art form reveals that most apps provide limited interactivity. They are digital equivalents of traditional guidebooks, enhanced with geolocation and audio-guides ([Chicago Public Art](#), 2015, [Otocast](#), 2019). More responsive, the [ARTsansRDV](#) app (Geneva, Switzerland, 2015) adapts the audio content to the user’s location. Nevertheless, these digital tools provide selected information. They instruct users on how to perceive the artworks from the perspective of cultural elites, leaving little room for individual perception and interpretation. This one-sided approach explains the lack of participatory features. The [AtlasMuseum’s](#) app (now deprecated) invited to greater involvement as the project aims to make an inventory of public artworks through crowdsourcing (Pringuet, 2017). However, this active stance requires previous knowledge and focuses on informative documentation.

The underlying goal of these institutions has been to remove the geographical and financial divide, and thus democratize access to art (Donnat and Tolila, 2003: 8). However, even after “extracting culture from its symbolic and architectural shell” (Ghebaour, 2013: 709), interacting with it remains difficult. Whether it is in the choice of what is represented or in the way one should understand it, citizens are subjected to a sort of “institutional tyranny.” The MONA app was created to rethink public art, as a reminder to define it not only through location or funding, but also as a common property. Its name derives from a pun, with *mon* (my, the possessive pronoun) placed in front of the letter “a” for art and app alike. The app has two main goals. It confers citizens the right to have their own interpretation of public artworks. It also symbolically grants each individual their share of responsibility and accountability in their artistic environment.

This free and open source app aligns basic smartphone functionalities with art discovery through gamification, personalization, and imagination. Each artwork is mapped and users are invited to search for them as in a life-sized treasure hunt. Once discovered, they interact with the art via mobile photography. They capture their own perspective of the artwork, voice their opinion through a short comment and produce a rating of their experience. Each discovery adds to their personal collection, which becomes over time a catalog illustrated by their own photographs. As the collection expands, the user receives badges as a reward and encouragement to pursue their exploration. No previous artistic knowledge is required as the app accompanies users in their discoveries, observations and interpretations of the artworks. Conversely, group activities (temporarily online) are organized to help those less comfortable with the use of technologies to apprehend the workings of the app.

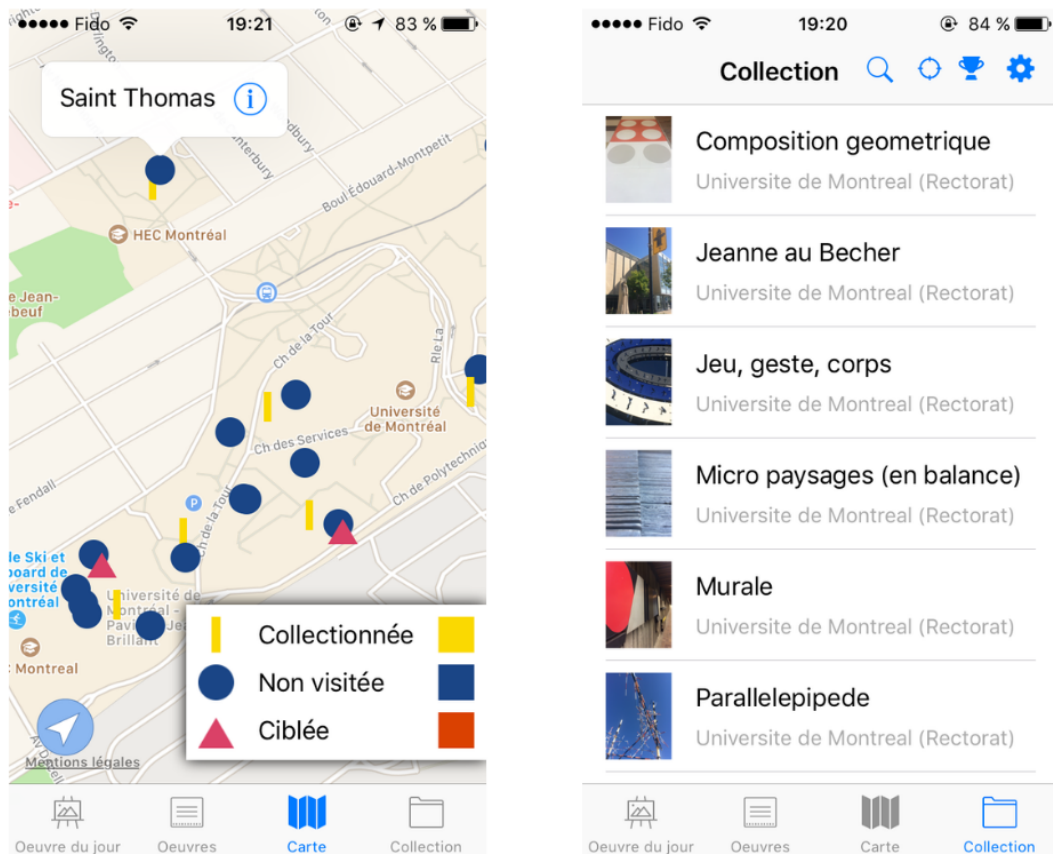


Figure 1: Map and Collection (iOS, 2018 prototype). Screenshots of the MONA app after an on-campus beta-testing activity. CC BY 2.0

Fostering the emergence of the public's opinions has a civil and an academic purpose. The photographs, comments, and ratings provided by the users are collected anonymously on university servers (under our [privacy_policy](#)). These will allow us to study, for the first time, how people see, feel and think about public art. Research and publications derived from the app aim to share these responses, giving authority to the participation of citizens. Now more than ever, people express an active interest in the historical and cultural representations that shape their city's image and identities. MONA users are therefore encouraged to participate in sharing their discoveries and opinions on social media. All — including artists, historians and political figures, but also families, local dog-walkers and curious teenagers — get to share their thoughts on historical figures commemorated in their neighbourhood parks. This is a particularly vivid example for the MONA team since the nearest artwork from our headquarters is the bust of Christopher Columbus (Armand De Palma, 1976, Montreal's public art collection). Altogether, such bottom-up structure creates opportunities to hear from a diversity of people, which is not only valuable for our society but also provides a unique and innovative research field.

Our singular take on public art is the result of a practical, "real-life" approach that corresponds to DH methods for a knowledge base grounded in making and experimentation (Burdick et al., 2012). The app's metadata is provided by Montréal and Québec's open data platforms. The iOS and Android apps are each developed in the native languages, Swift and Java respectively, in order to meet industry standards and user expectations. First prototyped in the class room, MONA has become a collaborative project uniting students in art history, computer science, design, and more. Combining a research project (Art+site) with the work of a non-profit organisation (La Maison MONA), we offer new approaches to the study of public art while also encouraging rich and critical exchanges between all citizens. As digital alternatives flourish in the cultural field, we endeavour to offer physical access to culture and to use the digital realm to create a space of expression for new and unheard voices. Each contribution makes it a little more *our* art, aiming to bridge social and cultural divides by taking into account our society's diversity and complexity.

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