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Virtual Museums

The Development of Virtual Museums

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Virtual museums on the Internet have been "under construction" for some ten years now. This is a short time compared to the long tradition of "brick and mortar" museums. Hence the virtual museum still lacks a generally accepted definition (for a working definition see the central quotation) and even an established term to designate it. It is called an on-line museum, electronic museum, hypermuseum, digital museum, cybermuseum or a Web museum depending on the backgrounds of the practitioners and researchers working in this field. Regardless of the name, the idea behind this phenomenon is to build a digital extension of the museum on the Internet, a museum without walls. Enthusiasts even think of establi-

shing a world-wide virtual museum that might bring together digital objects from museum collections all over the world.

- The following categories of museum, developing into the virtual museum, can be identified on the
- The brochure museum: this is a Web site which contains the basic information about the museum, such as types of collection, contact details, etc. Its goal is to inform potential visitors about the museum.
- The content museum: this is a Web site which presents the museum's collections and invites the virtual visitor to explore them online. The content is presented in an object-oriented way and is basically identical with the collection database. It is more useful for experts than for laymen because

the content is not didactically enhanced. The goal of this type of museum is to provide a detailed portrayal of the collections of the museum.

• The learning museum: this is a Web site which offers different points of access to its virtual visitors, according to their age, background and knowledge. The information is presented in a context-oriented way instead of being object-oriented. Moreover, the site is didactically enhanced and linked to additional information that motivates the virtual visitor to learn more about a subject they are interested in and to revisit the site. The goal of the learning museum is to make the virtual visitor come back and establish a personal relationship with the online-collection. Ideally, the virtual visitor will come to the museum to see the real objects.

• The virtual museum: the next step on from the learning museum is to provide not only information about the institution's collection but to link to digital collections of others. In this way, digital collections are

he term "virtual museum" has been defined as

...a logically related collection of digital objects

composed in a variety of media which, because of its

capacity to provide connectedness and various

points of access, lends itself to transcending tradi-

tional methods of communicating and interacting

with visitors...; it has no real place or space, its

objects and the related information can be dissemi-

nated all over the world" (Andrews and Schweibenz

in Art Documentation, Spring Issue, 1998). How

does the digital world enhance or alter the work of

the "real" museum? What are its strengths and

weaknesses? Does the virtual museum spell the

death of the museum as we know it?

created which have no counterparts in the real world. This is the implementation of André Malraux's vision of the "museum without walls".

The idea of becoming virtual might not be a pleasant one for some museums, especially not for art museums who cherish the ideal of the "real thing" and its aura. But this development is inevitable because of the

> increasing digitisation of cultural heritage and the demand to make collections more Eventually, these trends will blur the differences between cultural heritage institutions, and in the long run these institutions will merge into one memory institution. A memory institution combines digital surrogates of the collections of archives, libraries and museums in rich interactive environments and allows access to the content regardless of the nature of the institution. The goal of the memory institution is to preserve this content for future generations and support its use and management over time.

The virtual museum is no competitor or danger for the "brick and mortar" museum because, by its digital nature, it cannot offer real objects to its visitors, as the

traditional museum does. But it can extend the ideas and concepts of collections into the digital space and in this way reveal the essential nature of the museum. At the same time the virtual museum will reach out to virtual visitors who might never be able to visit a certain museum in person.

accessible

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