

Muz., 2021(62): 267-272

Annual, eISSN 2391-4815

received – 08.2021

reviewed – 08.2021

accepted – 09.2021

DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0015.3626

(R)EVOLUTION OF MUSEUM EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Piotr Górajec

Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów

ORCID 0000-0002-5412-3343

Magdalena Pasternak-Zabielska

Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów

ORCID 0000-0002-9611-1471

World culture besieged

It goes without saying that for some dozen months the main factor shaping the socio-economic and cultural life in Poland and worldwide has been the COVID-19 pandemic and all that was connected with it, also local and cross-border strategies of fighting against the virus, as well as of preventing its results. The elements which significantly affected the operations of many branches and the future of thousands of businesses and people employed in them were the temporary restrictions on running business activity and on mobility. According to OECD, owing to the policy of limiting social activity within public space, about 85.000 museums were temporarily closed to the public (i.e., 90% of the existing ones), whereas the reopening of the remaining 10% was threatened owing to epidemic-caused financial difficulties.¹ Over a half of the museums (60%) suffered the decline of their proceeds from day-to-day activity, and due to the worsening mood in financial markets they also observed their donors' diminished readiness to support their activity. As a consequence, the majority of them were forced to revise their budgets for 2020, halt or temporarily suspend a part of their projects, planned display and educational events, conservation works, and research projects.²

In Poland, the decision to close the culture sector to the public owing to the pandemic was made on 11 March at the

session of the Governmental Team for Crisis Management in communication with the Minister of Culture and National Heritage.³ In the post-1989 history of Polish culture this had been unprecedented. The last lockdown of the culture sector was introduced by the legal authorities in Communist Poland almost 40 years earlier having imposed martial law in December 1981 as stipulated by the Military Council of National Salvation (WRON).⁴ Despite the sources and historical contexts for these decisions being different, what the two have in common are the consequences and the situation of the cultural institutions following these decisions, as well as of the individuals and businesses which cooperated with them and of the artists. In both cases the institutions were closed overnight, thus limiting access to cultural offer, whilst artists and other professional groups connected with the culture sector were deprived of the possibility to work in their profession and earning their living.⁵ From the point of view of the studies in the participation in culture and history of culture they delineate two symbolic borderlines between two social realities of which one was created out of the blue in reaction to extraordinary circumstances the state and society found themselves in; upon the announcement of the first lockdown the world so well known to us came to a standstill, while the right to freedom of social life (Arts. 30 and 33), economic life (Art. 20), and cultural life (Arts. 6.1 and 73 in the *Constitution of the Republic of Poland*) were

either limited or suspended.⁶ Under the new circumstances the public disappeared from museums, and together with them, in a sense, we disappeared, too: museum curators and museum educators, working remotely, quarantining, or sick with COVID-19. Like thousands of other people, we began experiencing anxiety and threat which were intensified with the lack of the answer to the most relevant questions related to the nearest future of museums, when we would return to the situation which we could call normality from today's perspective. These are important questions which until the moment of this text being written have remained unanswered.

Beginning of the pandemic

The analysis of the data collected during the research titled *Cultural Institutions during COVID-19. Museum Strategies for Reaching the Public*⁷ conducted among museum educators by the Forum of Museum Educators as commissioned by the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections (NIMOZ) showed that the COVID-19 pandemic came as a great surprise to museum curators. The fact that the virus attacked comprehensively museums as institutions was widely acknowledged, while 75% of the respondents declared that museums had been prepared neither logistically nor technically to operate in the difficult time of the raging pandemic. What proved a real challenge to museums were government's decisions to halt tourism and to introduce social distancing, which reduced the number of the public by 44% as compared to the previous year.⁸ A low turnout implied lower proceeds from ticket sale and financial difficulties on the horizon with respect to the implementation of the ongoing and accepted projects for 2020. In order to save them, decisions were often made to halt the ongoing investment projects, while research and conservation works were suspended or delayed. Despite those difficulties the majority of the museums did not reduce their full-time employment-contract staff (79.6%). An exception having been the group of staff employed under civil law contracts, assigned mainly the tasks of making the collections available to the public and dealing with the public's services and education. Every second of the surveyed museums (54.2%), owing to the lack of visitors and fearing the financial liquidity crisis, either terminated contracts with educators or did not prolong them. Almost a half of them (45.8%) offered educators other employment opportunities, mainly related to launching and operating educational programmes online or a position in a different museum department.⁹ During the first weeks or even months of the pandemic, no experience in managing cultural institutions in crisis made it difficult to construct likely hypotheses as for the consequences that lack of the public would have on museums. It was all the more difficult for museum curators, since they had a vivid memory of museums on 11 March, namely on the day before their closure: filled with crowds visiting exhibitions, participating in stationary museum classes and workshops, or waiting in line for cheaper tickets which they would often buy entire months ahead of time. At that point nobody was surprised at it, since the summer season was approaching fast together with high turnout characteristic of it, and with it also the chance to break yet another admission record.¹⁰

Educational lockdown

The first lockdown made the majority of museum curators face many logistic challenges concentrating on two major areas: both important and difficult, both of unprecedented proportions. The first essential problem was lack of the public and its consequences. The public who are the driving force of all museum projects disappeared overnight, and the scale of this phenomenon and its duration heralded to museum curators changes and challenges connected with gaining new competences and experience. The sight of deserted museum spaces also had its more down-to-earth financial dimension. A part of museums, owing to limitations in the access to cultural institutions, gave up any investment in educational infrastructure, temporary exhibitions, or educational programmes, since there was no one to benefit from them.¹¹ During the pandemic, a frequent picture were educational materials, having been printed a dozen of months or so before, piling up on shelves and collecting dust, awaiting the moment when visitors, who were nowhere in sight, would pick them up. Another, possibly even more serious problem was a human dimension, and related to the lack of stationary jobs for museum educators during that time. This affected a numerous, and important from the point of view of contemporary museum's mission group of professionals who are less willingly than other professionals employed under a full-time employment contract. A definite majority of them cooperate with cultural institutions under unfavourable civil law contracts. In the case of this group lack of visitors often meant the job loss, and together with it also the loss of the feeling of a relative stability, replaced with uncertainty about tomorrow and questions about the developments in store. The problem was particularly acute in large museums who, owing to their sizeable educational offer, either employed or cooperated with teams of some dozen or even more educators. With a substantial part of them (12.5% of museums run by the Ministry and 20% by local governments), museum directors preventively terminated contracts upon the outburst of the pandemic in order to secure their budgets and jobs for full-time employees.¹² Over that time, 79.6% of educators did not change their workplace, and actually, in private museums their number even grew.

As shown by numerous reports on the state of culture published in the countries afflicted by the pandemic, the financial standing of cultural institutions significantly deteriorated, while one of the tools meant to improve it was perceived in firing the staff who were not full-time employees. Such hard decisions were faced by directors of both small local museums and of institutions with multi-million budgets, before the pandemic generously provided for by their organizers and numerous donors.¹³

The online education project

As said above, government's decisions on introducing sanitary limitations and a temporary closure of various economy sectors did not spare cultural institutions. They caused that museums simply came to a halt, at the beginning of the pandemic for almost twenty days, but finally for several to some dozen weeks. In any case, the reality in

which they were to operate was so unclear that modelling any expectations as for their future and impact on them bore a high risk. Importantly, prior to the pandemic the majority of them had among their monthly liabilities various civil law contracts concluded with e.g., museum educators. Finally, a certain rescue for that professional group and for museum educational functions was found in the digitizing of museum collections and also of their offer, the process which due to the pandemic significantly speeded up. The question that may be asked on the occasion is whether the process that occurred can be regarded as a revolution? Before we try to answer it, let us separate digitizing whose purpose is to digitally secure the image of historic items for documentation or academic research from other forms of museum digital activity, e.g., online courses, contents published in social media, on museum websites, or on streaming portals, the latter of interest to us owing to their educational component.

In the majority of museums the digitizing of their offer started several weeks after the first lockdown, and despite running different courses, the processes all had the same goal: to re-establish communication with the public, and, with a bit of luck, to create a group of recipients who after the isolation period were hungry for a contact with culture. Online education, earlier marginalized in museums' activity, during the pandemic suddenly exploded.¹⁴ Social distancing and closing museums to the public caused a four-fold increase in the number of museums posting materials online.¹⁵ The participants in the research *Cultural Institutions during COVID-19. Museum Strategies for Reaching the Public* adopted different strategies for the development of this channel of communicating with their public. At the beginning of the pandemic, almost a half of the education departments of the participants (47.3%) did not have equipment necessary for the implementation of tasks connected with online education. Among that group the largest percentage (83.4%) were institutions financed by local governments. A different attitude was represented by every fourth of the respondents, most frequently employees of museums co-run by a ministry (54.5%).¹⁶ The drop of the turnout and the implied decrease in proceeds from ticket sale did not impede museums in acquiring technological devices necessary for registering and editing audio and video materials, e.g., cameras, stands, headsets, lamps, speakers, lighting. Additionally, the museums acquired essential licences, mainly for software used for processing and editing audiovisual materials. However, in order to actively participate in the virtual world, also people and their ideas are needed. The pandemic showed what a great potential is comprised in the individuals employed at museums: the majority of them are staff who boast adequate competences to implement tasks connected with the virtual world (71.7%), only every third respondent was of a different opinion.

Setting up new communication channels with the public required from museum curators elaboration of the strategy for creating and publishing contents. Initially, owing to the pace at which they were published, they were of mediocre quality, if judged against the contemporary technological capacity, however along with the increasing stabilization of the museums' situation, the process of their creation was promptly professionalized, and at the moment they

do not differ in quality from other contents available online. At the beginning, education departments mainly digitized and shared contents well known to the public from stationary workshops, however, with time they began preparing proposals better matching the public's expectations and the technological potential offered by tools for digital content presentations. The majority of the respondents (76.9%) when working out the goals and assumptions for educational activities resorted to the results of the public's satisfaction and expectation survey, mostly conducted independently (32.8%), and shared the contents created on their grounds using popular services: YouTube (18.75%), Facebook (16.6%), or Instagram (15.63%). The least popular with museum curators were museum websites (18.75%) and e-mail (13.54%), today considered as traditional means. A certain novelty proposed by museums were webinars offered by every tenth museum (8.33%) or contents shared on TikTok, niche in cultural institutions, as used merely by 1% of the respondents.¹⁷ There is no doubt, however, that the pandemic and sanitary restrictions connected with it turned out to be a strong stimulus for a prompt digitizing of museum educational offer and the reason why its share in the museum resources increased almost four-fold (382.87%), on average constituting 16.4%. Compared to the previous years, interest in this type of offer was also higher.¹⁸

What after the pandemic?

A year has passed since the outbreak of the pandemic: the time in the course of which museums were closed and reopened several times. The brief, sometimes several-week periods of being open to the public, were enthusiastically taken advantage of in order to, following weeks of isolation, visit favourite sites on the cultural map and 'breathe in' a bit of a different, and actually maybe the well-known 'old' world. After all, museums are peculiar institutionalized time capsules. However, even they had to yield to changes. The pandemic affected our reality, and that, in turn, affected museums. Today, a dozen months later, they are still the same institutions, yet thanks to fast digitizing of their offer, they allow doors to two worlds: the real and the virtual one. The virtual museum world has been available for many years now, however, never before had it offered so much on such a large scale. Over a half of the respondents (54.7%) observe positive aspects of the online education and are of the opinion that the programmes for remote education in combination with stationary classes will create a new hybrid model of museum learning. An important indicator of interest in such education forms is the percentage of classes conducted in real time, which in the past year stood on average at 40%. Audio and video materials shared on museum websites (35.5%) and on YouTube (27.4%) enjoy a slightly smaller popularity.¹⁹ Every fourth respondent (24.5%) is of the opinion that when the pandemic finishes, museums will only offer stationary educational programmes, while 7.5% think that the change in their character is here to stay. When a year ago museum websites published the first online educational programmes, museum curators and educators were convinced that it was the beginning of a 'revolution' in the access to museum offer. Not only in designing interaction with the public, but also in creating groups of the public and

the reach of the published materials. We were watching the horizon to spot any forecasts of the upcoming revolution which was to transform analogical museology into digital one. It did not happen, however. Undoubtedly, the process of awaited change was launched, and proved successful to a degree, this demonstrated in e.g., the percentage of online classes among the educational programmes submitted for trade prizes for 2020. However, is this the herald of the revolution in museums? In colloquial language the term 'revolution' is understood as a sudden event whose holistic consequences lead to multi-aspect changes of a spontaneous and fundamental character. Is digitizing of the museum offer a phenomenon of this quality? It certainly is not in the given meaning, since it was not a spontaneous activity, but planned, with the goal defined beforehand. Additionally, the rejection of such a hypothesis is supported by the fact that each time culture was reopened, a mass-scale return of the public to museums occurred, this accompanied by a decline of interest in the online offer. This may testify to the need of a direct contact of the public with museums, art collections, and stationary museum learning.

Are they supreme goals overshadowing all the remaining solutions? There is no doubt that during the pandemic museums underwent the process of changes which, however, should not be considered in the category of revolution but evolution, in whose course museum staff gained new competences, became acquainted with new communication channels with the public and with work methods. Such gained experience is likely to stay with them for long, if not for ever. Nonetheless, can the digital experience of museum curators and the public from the pandemic replace the interaction in person or a direct contact with museum items, the latter being the supreme goal of museums? Contemporary museums and social reality, remaining in constant move, affect one another. The pandemic demonstrated how dynamic the relation is. In brief intervals between subsequent waves of the virus, due to remote schooling museum spaces did not fill up with pupils. Owing to mobility and tourism restrictions introduced by the government, neither foreign tourists nor domestic excursions visited museums. However, whenever there appeared information in the media about the reopening of the culture sector, the awaited public flocked to the majority of museums. Who dominated were individual visitors, coming on their own or in small, usually, family groups. In random conversations with museum curators they said that they had come to the museum seeking the pre-pandemic normality, and referred to going out to visit a museum inaccessible for a longer time in categories of a celebration or therapy. Whenever the opportunity arose during the pandemic, the public always showed up, regardless of the offer prepared for them at that particular point.

In many a case, visitors flocked to museums simply to spend time in the surroundings they knew so well, to see again the permanent exhibitions they had seen many times before. Also to rediscover museums anew.

Importantly, the museums reopened intermittently did not provide their visitors with any stationary educational projects owing to the valid sanitary regulations. This, however, did not discourage the public from visiting them. Finally, in late May 2021, the government loosened the restrictions enough for stationary learning to return to museums, first in the form of classes held outdoors, and gradually directly in galleries and workshop rooms. Straight away, a sudden drop in the public's interest in online educational offer, prepared so painstakingly and with focus on detail, was observed. As a result, its share in museums' offer fell to merely several per cent.

When this paper is being written in mid-June 2021, through the window the public enlivened with the summer sun can be heard: they are coming to museums in increasingly bigger numbers and more boldly. After such a long break school students, exhausted with months of remote learning, have returned to them. Educational classes and workshops are conducted. The first international tourists are appearing. Museums are operating almost 'normally', and though the number of visitors has been growing, time is needed for the turnout to reach that from before the pandemic. This, however, does not alter the fact that the online offer in the context of the current number of visitors has slightly lost its prominence.

Finally, let us ask the question regarding motivations of the visitors who during the pandemic stormed the ajar museum gates. From the comments of the visitors to the Wilanów Museum, shared in passing, a coherent picture of a museum during the pandemic emerges: it is accompanied by the feeling that it constitutes a place giving the feeling of agency in reaching the goal that the times from before the pandemic and the normality they entail are. Furthermore, museums are also organizations performing therapeutic functions, by facilitating a direct multisensory contact with art and people of culture. These aspects of the museum curator's work have to be borne in mind, since they are a part of the museum evolution.

Will the new public be like this? What will their expectations be? What language will we use to communicate with them? Will museums, apart from being a meeting venue, turn into therapeutic centres, offering a healing repose in the tough contemporary world? Time will show. These are, undoubtedly, issues that museum curators have to seriously reflect on, since their future work format will depend on the responses to the above questions.

Abstract: In the paper the results of research titled *Cultural Institutions during COVID-19. Museum Strategies for Reaching the Public* are presented. It was conducted by the Forum of Museum Educators as commissioned by the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections (NIMOZ). The main

purpose was to show the impact of the pandemic on the operations of museums after 12 March 2020 when the decision was made in Poland to close the culture sector to the public; the aim was also to diagnose and analyse problems that the pandemic caused, and to point to the directions of impact on

cultural institutions possible in the future, namely after restoring 'normality'. The perspective adopted in the research, i.e., institutional and individual one, enables a multifaceted analysis of the processes initiated by museums in response to unclear

and often complicated mechanisms of the new pandemic reality, which still today, some dozen months since its outbreak, continues for museums the source of challenges as far as logistics and financing issues are concerned.

Keywords: culture digitisation, culture during the pandemic, museum education, museums, museums during the pandemic, online education.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Culture shock: COVID-19 and the cultural and creative sector*, <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/> [Accessed: 17 June 2021].
- ² *Museums Around the World. In the face of COVID-19 Report*, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000376729_eng [Accessed: 10 June 2021].
- ³ <https://www.gov.pl/web/kultura/transport/zawieszenie-dzialalnosci-instytucji-kultury-i-placowek-szkolnictwa-artystycznego> [Accessed: 17 June 2021].
- ⁴ Cultural institutions were closed with the Decree on Martial Law of 12 December 1981 (Journal of Laws no. 29 item 154.).
- ⁵ On the situation of cultural institutions under Martial Law (1981) see J. Grey, *Trójmiejskie życie kulturalne w stanie wojennym i... „powojennym”* [Cultural Life in Tricity during Marial Law and... 'After the War'], 'Dzieje Najnowsze' 2017, Vol. 49, No. 4.
- ⁶ See P. Kubaszewski, K. Wiśniewska, *Prawa człowieka w dobie pandemii* [Human Rights during the Pandemic], Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, Warszawa 2021.
- ⁷ Survey conducted in December 2020 on the sample N=53 muzeów.
- ⁸ P. Górajec, M. Pasternak-Zabielska, *Raport z badania. Instytucje kultury w okresie COVID-19. Muzealne strategie docierania do widzów* [Report on the Research *Cultural Institutions during COVID-19. Museum Strategies for Reaching the Public*], https://nimos.pl/files/articles/252/Raport_z_badania_Institucje_kultury_w_okresie_covid.pdf [Accessed: 10 June 2021].
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹⁰ In the data available on the GUS (Statistics Poland) website we can read that 2019 was a record-breaking year as for the museum public: museums were visited by 41.6 million visitors, which was an increase by 9% compared to 2018.
- ¹¹ *Museums Around the World. In the face of COVID-19 Report*, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000376729_eng [Accessed: 10 June 2021].
- ¹² P. Górajec, M. Pasternak-Zabielska, *Raport z badania. Instytucje...*, p. 10.
- ¹³ <https://www.artforum.com/news/moma-and-new-museum-among-ny-institutions-cutting-jobs-to-curb-deficits-82681>, [Accessed: 10 June 2021].
- ¹⁴ K. Pyzel, *Muzeum wirtualne – historyczna rezydencja królewska w Muzeum pałacu w Wilanowie* [A Virtual Museum: Royal Historic Residence in the Museum Palace at Wilanów], in: *Edukacja muzealna w Polsce, sytuacja, konteksty, perspektywy rozwoju. Raport o stanie edukacji muzealnej w Polsce* [Museum Education in Poland, Situation, Contexts, Development Prospects. Report on the State of Museum Education in Poland], Warszawa 2012, p. 108.
- ¹⁵ P. Górajec, M. Pasternak-Zabielska, *Raport z badania. Instytucje...*, p. 14.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-13.

Bibliography

- Culture shock: COVID-19 and the cultural and creative sector*, <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/>
- Górajec P., Pasternak-Zabielska M., *Raport z badania. Instytucje kultury w okresie COVID-19. Muzealne strategie docierania do widzów* [Report on the Research *Cultural Institutions during COVID-19. Museum Strategies for Reaching the Public*], https://nimos.pl/files/articles/252/Raport_z_badania_Institucje_kultury_w_okresie_covid.pdf
- Grey J., *Trójmiejskie życie kulturalne w stanie wojennym i... powojennym*, [Cultural Life in Tricity during Marial Law and... 'After the War'], 'Dzieje Najnowsze' 2017.
- Kubaszewski P., Wiśniewska K., *Prawa człowieka w dobie pandemii* [Human Rights during the Pandemic], Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, Warszawa 2021.
- Pyzel K., *Muzeum wirtualne – historyczna rezydencja królewska w Muzeum pałacu w Wilanowie* [A Virtual Museum: Royal Historic Residence in the Museum Palace at Wilanów], in: *Edukacja muzealna w Polsce, sytuacja, konteksty, perspektywy rozwoju. Raport o stanie edukacji muzealnej w Polsce* [Museum Education in Poland, Situation, Contexts, Development Prospects. Report on the State of Museum Education in Poland], Warszawa 2012.
- Report Museums around the world. In the face of COVID-19*, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000376729_eng

Websites

- <https://www.artforum.com/news/moma-and-new-museum-among-ny-institutions-cutting-jobs-to-curb-deficits-82681>
- <https://www.gov.pl/web/kultura/transport/zawieszenie-dzialalnosci-instytucji-kultury-i-placowek-szkolnictwa-artystycznego>

Piotr Górajec

A graduate in classical archaeology, University of Warsaw; (since 2004) he has been working at the Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów, first as a museum educator, then heading the Education Department, and then Museum Development Department, (since 2015) he has been Museum's Deputy Director; co-creator of the Forum of Museum Educators, (2009–2012) co-author of *the Report on Museum Education in Poland*; ICOM member; e-mail: pgorajec@muzeum-wilanow.pl

Magdalena Pasternak-Zabielska

A licenced conservator of art works, graduate from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, an anthropologizing sociologist; (since 2019) she has headed the Laboratory – Storage of the Museum Collection at the Museum of King John III's Palace at Wilanów; she deals with sociology of art, investigating cultural institutions, and cultural practices of Poles; at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences, University of Warsaw, she has been working on her doctoral dissertation *A Copy or the Original: Post-modern Conflict in Museum Spaces*; e-mail: mpasternak@muzeum-wilanow.pl

Word count: 3 769; **Tables:** –; **Figures:** –; **References:** 19

Received: 08.2021; **Reviewed:** 08.2021; **Accepted:** 09.2021; **Published:** 10.2021

DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0015.3626

Copyright©: Some rights reserved: National Institute for Museums and Public Collections. Published by Index Copernicus Sp. z o.o.



This material is available under the Creative Commons – Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC-BY-NC 4.0). The full terms of this license are available on: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

Competing interests: Authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Cite this article as: Górajec P, Pasternak-Zabielska M. (R)EVOLUTION OF MUSEUM EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. *Muz.* 2021(62): 267-272

Table of contents 2021: <https://muzealnictworocznik.com/issue/13664>