

JAMES M. BRADBURNE e ILARIA BOLLATI

A Rolling Stone Gathers No Dust. When the Museum Becomes a Verb

ABSTRACT: Since at least the late 19th century museums have struggled to overcome the popular impression they were unchanging, inert repositories inaccessible to the public, dark and unattractive, in a word “dusty”. Generations of museum directors on both sides of the Atlantic have tried to convince the public that museums were in fact dynamic, vital institutions that changed regularly in response to public demand, with limited success. I argue that this is due part to seeing the museum as a place, dark or light-filled, dusty or sparkling, rather than as a series of activities, in short, as a verb not a noun. The approach, first implemented at the Pinacoteca di Brera in September 2020, represents a major paradigm shift in how museums are perceived, used, funded, and governed. By completely eliminating the ticket and replacing it with a subscription at the same price, the museum turns its back on the practice of being a place to which access is sold to an institution in whose activities one can participate, in effect turning the noun “museum” into a verb, and the visitor into a stakeholder with all the incumbent rights and privileges. Indispensable to this paradigm shift is the ability for the museum to argue that it offers access to museum-enhanced activities 24/7.

KEYWORDS: Museums, Over-Tourism, Online, 24/7, Civil Society.

Since at least the late 19th century museums have struggled to overcome the popular impression they were unchanging, inert repositories inaccessible to the public, dark and unattractive, in a word “dusty”. Generations of museum directors on both sides of the Atlantic have tried to convince the public that museums were in fact dynamic, vital institutions that changed regularly in response to public demand, with limited success. I argue that this is due part to seeing the museum as a place, dark or light-filled, dusty or sparkling, rather than as a series of activities, in short, as a verb not a noun. The approach first implemented at the Pinacoteca di Brera in September 2020 represents a major paradigm shift in how museums are perceived, used, funded and governed. By completely eliminating the ticket and replacing it with a subscription at the same price, the museum turns its back on the practice of being a place to which access is sold to an institution in whose activities one can participate, in effect turning the noun “museum” into a verb, and the visitor into a stakeholder with all the incumbent rights and privileges. Indispensable to this paradigm shift is the ability for the museum to argue that it offers access to museum-enhanced activities 24/7. These activities are offered in person during ordinary opening hours (66 hours/week or approximately 40% of the total hours available) but most importantly online, when the museum building is closed or unavailable

for use. The development of a dynamic, integrated and coherent museum experience online – an experience that is not merely illustrative but substantive – is the goal of the Pinacoteca’s site www.breraplus.org. The subscription to the Pinacoteca includes – for the price of what was formerly a single adult visit – access to the museum, its collections and activities in person for three full months from the time of first access to residents and tourists alike, PLUS one year’s access to the museum’s ongoing activities and research online on www.breraplus.org. Although the impetus to reimagine the museum came from the sudden and unforeseen lockdown of 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the proposal in fact represents a provisional answer to issues and challenges that have plagued the museum world since the 1970s.

First among these is the belief that museums – all museums, not only art museums – are generally intended to distribute truth from above; a top-down approach with experts at the apex of the pyramid of knowledge and the ignorant public at the bottom. Second is the belief that the public is unable to appreciate and enjoy the acquisition of new knowledge and new skills, and that the museum must offer an educational “experience” that requires little commitment and offers a fleeting pleasure similar to a theme park, as expressed by the term “edu-tainment”. Third, which derives in part from the second, is the defining the museum not as intrinsically valuable to a community but as part of the “leisure industry” and the increasing instrumentalization of the museum by governments as a tool to generate tourism revenue, with the consequence that a museum’s quality is defined by journalists and governments in terms of visitor numbers and visitor revenue. With the advent of COVID-19, this third concept has emerged forcefully, reshaping how we view museums and their role in society. In a mere three months, the pandemic not only accomplished what environmental activists had struggled to achieve in decades – a significant reduction in international travel – but forced museums to reevaluate their practices, especially as physical visits became restricted or impossible. This situation has demanded swift adaptation and accelerating technological transformation¹. Cultural institutions responded to the lockdown by extending their cultural offer beyond their traditional buildings, reaching their audience in their homes by means of the Internet².

In short, the pandemic encouraged museums to reconsider their relationship with visitors, the community, and the environment. In a post-COVID-19 world, museums were challenged to:

- 1) Shift emphasis from the museum “visit” – the phenomenon of viewing the objects in person – to the museum experience – the “valorisation” of the museum’s collections – which we realized during the lockdown could occur increasingly online. Both experiences are equally valid and necessary, complementary but fundamentally different. For far too long the museum's identity has long been confused with that of its collection (whether of paintings, pot handles or porcelain), akin to confusing a musical score with performance;
- 2) Recognize that the in-person museum visit is now more precious than ever, and the art of slow looking³ – «an approach based on the idea that, if we really want to get to know a work of art, we need to spend time with it» – is fundamental⁴ to getting the maximum value from seeing the original. Pre-visit preparation is therefore more important than ever and tools such as labelling encourage visitors to look more closely and extract more meaning, which are among the primary missions of the museum. We must also consider the insights of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) – the visitor has to feel safe, respected, included, and comfortable, making even the act of having a coffee in the café at the end or start of a visit an important condition of experiencing the collection fully⁵.

COVID-19 taught us that neither the total number of visitors nor the revenue these visits generate are appropriate parameters to measure the value of a cultural institution⁶; «Museums have become victims of the equation, more = better»⁷. More importantly, if the museum’s activities are not only readily but in some cases only available online, the way to involve and welcome users and the community to a museum by merely letting them enter its spaces or enjoy its contents and collections *in situ* is no longer best achieved by a conventional ticket, which is only the permission to access a physical space. If the enhanced online content is sufficiently rich and representative, the former practice of purchasing a ticket to see the permanent collections could be transformed into an annual subscription – in effect, a membership – which includes access to the museum’s activities both in person and 24/7 online. In this way, as Kenneth Hudson argued, the museum can be seen like a private club (even more than a disco) with its ambitions remaining modest and its financial health based on its membership base⁸.

Thus, whereas tickets expire at the end of a visit, a card is all-encompassing and longer-term. It allows visitors to organize their visits according to their desires and needs at different times, inviting them to return by developing a sense of familiarity with the spaces and the collections. Not only does this card give visitors access to what the museum has, possesses, and preserves but it also allows them to experience the museum's constantly evolving cultural activities and proposals. In this manner, the online museum experience – which encompasses preparation for the visit as well as post-visit activities and events throughout the year – becomes the comprehensive museum experience, wherein the physical visit to view the original artefacts is a treasured opportunity. Consequently, the revenue from ticket sales becomes inconsequential, rendering the museum effectively free to all, but only through membership in the museum community. By shifting away from using the single visit as a measure of its quality, the museum can now focus on its primary mission: to transform visitors by encouraging them to stay longer and see more of the objects in the museum's permanent collections. The museum's value can be measured not by visitor numbers but by subscribers to its total creative output – by what the museum does, not from what it has. Thereby the museum becomes a verb, not merely a noun.

The Pinacoteca di Brera adopted this approach, having evolved in this direction from 2015 until 2023. Over the past eight years, the institution has undergone a comprehensive reorganization, reclaiming its cultural and social roots by enhancing its artistic, human, and historical heritage, following the legacies of its former directors Corrado Ricci, Ettore Modigliani, Fernanda Wittgens, and Franco Russoli. The culmination of the museum's long and activist history, which begins as a consequence of the French Revolution, is *BreraPlus*, a versatile cross-media platform accessible 24/7 from any location, designed to seamlessly enhance and enrich real-life experiences without attempting to duplicate them⁹. This initiative arises from the recognition that, while the authenticity of encountering an original work of art is irreplaceable, a digital visit can serve as an indispensable complement to the physical encounter, as clearly shown during the pandemic. The digital platform allows for the exploration of aspects that a physical visit might not provide but can only be fully appreciated in a virtual format. The online experience can act as a catalyst for subsequent in-person visits or provide post-visit insights, fostering a relaxed and curious exploration of the museum's offerings¹⁰. Through the *BreraPlus* annual subscription, the museum has effectively integrated the asynchronous digital and the actual physical experiences to create a single holistic

museum offering. By acquiring the *BreraCard*, users gain access to *BreraPlus*'s enhanced online content for one year and can visit the museum for three months from the date of their first entry at their convenience. This model, established in public libraries for decades and recently adopted by the print media in the form of digital newspaper subscriptions, illustrates a shift towards more versatile user engagement. *BreraPlus* serves as a digital extension of the museum's offerings, allowing subscribers to access a range of content including unpublished stories, interactive documentaries, experimental films, and scholarly studies. Additionally, subscribers can participate in concerts, premieres, live-streaming events, and engage with historical narratives, read books in their original language, and interact with other users.

BreraPlus thereby represents a transformative innovation in the realm of museum experiences, operating as a cross-media platform accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This platform is meticulously designed to extend the museum experience both spatially and temporally, offering curated content that introduces fresh perspectives and diverse voices. It integrates various media forms, including experimental films, interactive documentaries, concerts, backstage content, storytelling, and readings in their original languages. The conceptual framework of *BreraPlus* distinguishes the museum experience from traditional film viewing. Unlike films and the other time-based arts, which possess a predetermined and finite duration, the length of a museum visit is inherently flexible. Films follow a linear, narrative-driven structure with controlled emotional peaks determined by the director, whereas museum visits are non-linear, characterized by chance encounters and social interactions largely determined by the user. The emotional impact of film is largely personal and individualistic, while the museum experience is profoundly social and communal. This distinction is analogous to contrasting a meticulously planned amusement park ride with a leisurely stroll through a park, replete with unexpected discoveries.

Operating on the premise that museum visits are elastic, ever-changing, and unpredictable in duration¹¹, *BreraPlus* offers a diverse array of interconnected content designed as an "open" narrative experience. The platform allows users to navigate through videos, images, texts, audio recordings, digital versions of original books, high-definition paintings, original music, contemporary reinterpretations of classical artworks, and unpublished stories. Such a structure empowers users to explore, revisit, and continue their journey seamlessly, akin to participating in an endless, immersive game. It fosters an innovative approach to

storytelling, providing a dynamic environment conducive to browsing, learning, excitement, and sharing. It resonates strongly with the characteristics of a *living museum*¹², through its online platform.

The dynamic and flexible nature of the *BreraPlus* experience is primarily ensured through the inclusion of supplementary content alongside the main videos. These additional features – *VideoPlus*, *SpotPlus*, *HighDefinition Plus*, *DeepPlus*, and *BookPlus* – serve to extend and enrich the narrative experience. As users engage with the main content, these extras appear, offering the option to stop in order to explore further or continue with the primary narrative, based on the user's preference at that moment. This system is analogous to boarding a train, where users have the autonomy to embark and disembark at intermediate stops, and engage with different segments of the journey. Each piece of content is designed to be consumed in a single session or it can be revisited several times for deeper exploration and understanding.

Since its inception in 2021, *BreraPlus* has progressively expanded its content library, now boasting over 100 pieces of content, with new additions introduced monthly. The platform evolves in tandem with its audience, striving to maintain an ethos of openness, dynamism, and inclusivity akin to that of the physical museum. Currently, it encompasses seven distinct sections, acting as a repository of memories, innovations, voices, videos, images, and music:

1. ***FilmPlus***: Experimental films produced by the Pinacoteca di Brera, including interactive theatre plays and puppet operas.
2. ***DocPlus***: Documentaries that go beyond traditional narratives, incorporating untold stories with additional interactive content.
3. ***MusicPlus***: Compositions by renowned musicians, performed by top-tier artists, exploring the interplay between visual arts and music.
4. ***StoriesPlus***: Oral histories presented through words, music, and videos, tracing the historical narratives of Brera's connected locales and personalities.
5. ***Once Upon a Time Plus***: Narratives presented in their original languages (Italian, English, Russian, Dutch) by prominent figures, blending the pleasures of reading with elements of fantasy and theatricality.
6. ***High Resolution Plus***: Masterpieces showcased in ultra-high definition, revealing intricate details and pigment nuances.

7. **ChatPlus**: Interactive discussions and messaging features that allow users to share comments and insights on the artworks.

BreraPlus also includes a *LivePlus* section, offering live online coverage of special events at the museum, such as concerts, premieres, and conferences. This feature enables remote participation in Brera's initiatives. In June 2023, for the first time, users were invited to participate in a meeting of the museum's Board of Trustees, thereby transforming them from mere visitors who could be listened to at the museum's discretion, into stakeholders with the right to be listened to. Approximately seventy five attendees had the opportunity to observe the live presentation of the museum's strategic directions and contribute suggestions via a chat system. This process embodies the social role the Pinacoteca aspires to fulfil, promoting a sense of sharing and belonging, a different model than that of mass – or perhaps better, “disinterested” – tourism. A record of the proposals communicated by individual users through chat was drafted and posted online, facilitating constructive exchange and dialogue.

BreraPlus thereby exemplifies how digital innovation can enhance and redefine the museum experience, regardless of the museum's size, budget or the nature of the museum's collection. By merging the flexibility of physical visits with structured digital content, *BreraPlus* creates an engaging, immersive, and inclusive platform, enabling users to interact with art and culture in novel and meaningful ways. It is no coincidence that data from 2023 further indicate that the acquisition of the *BreraCard* and subsequent activation and use of *BreraPlus* for accessing online content frequently correlates with physical activities organized by the institution. For instance, the temporary exhibition in the library dedicated to Otto Prutscher, *A Golden Thread (1900-1938)*, linked to a dual documentary on the Viennese architect available on the platform, exemplifies this connection. Additional peaks in first logins to *BreraPlus* were recorded during the members' assembly in July and the December screening of the film *Peregrin and The Giant Fish* at the MAXXI in Rome, demonstrated cross-institutional engagement.

The *BreraCard* was first introduced in 2020, but it was in 2023 that a second release of *BreraPlus* was effectuated with all content available in dual languages. Examining the data from the last two years, 2022 and 2023, it is evident that the number of reused *BreraCards* (indicating individuals who returned at least once within 3 months with the same card) in 2023 increased by 16%, compared to 2022. Additionally, the number of multiple entries rose from 19% to 24%. In 2022,

among the 19% of redemptions, some individuals visited the museum up to 8 times in 3 months; in 2023, this increased to 10 visits in 3 months. In both years, most initial returns were by individuals alone or in pairs, with a minimal percentage returning in groups. Subsequent returns were predominantly by individuals, highlighting a personal relationship with the museum. The transition from a single physical ticket to a card or subscription model that encompasses both *in situ* and online museum activities has transformed the nature of museum engagement. This shift has repositioned the museum from a static entity to a dynamic participant in a continual dialogue. By functioning as a “verb”, the museum engages actively with its collections through diverse activities and fosters ongoing interaction with its audience. This transformation facilitates a reciprocal exchange between the institution and its visitors, extending cultural experiences beyond physical boundaries and into the digital domain, thereby enhancing the museum’s influence both within the city and within individual homes. The museum starts a dialogue with its public made of users, not just with visitors¹³. To clarify, the terms “visitors” refers to people who visit the collections in person, while the term “users” signifies a person who can interact with the museum in a wider range of ways.

BreraPlus challenges contemporary museum managers and museum-goers to change their idea of the museum, which has been warped over the decades after the Second War into a form of entertainment – a mere driver of tourism where “footfall” is more important than learning. Museum managers cannot manage without a deep knowledge and deep love for the museum and its fundamental role in society – not merely its content, but its mission. We cannot allow museum directors to become like those journalists, who in the words of Karl Kraus «have nothing to say but the means to say it». *BreraPlus* asks museum professionals to recognise the need for many voices in the museum, and see these voices as complementing, not competing with their professional role. Museum professionals such as curators, registrars, conservators, architects and communications specialists should learn to think like anthropologists – to observe their real users both *in situ* and online – and create the conditions for the maximum experience of the collections of which they are the stewards. *BreraPlus* asks museum users to re-imagine “their” museum as the big house where everyone is welcome, where everyone’s heritage has a voice, an institution with more in common with the hospital or the school than the lunapark. Museum users have to re-assert their rights as citizens and take back the hallowed spaces of the temple in order to create a new agora, a piazza wherein we can all discover what it is that makes us who we are,

and who others are. In the words of a former Director of Brera, Franco Russoli, the museum is more than a place for mere diversion, it is a place of commitment – the commitment to being a critical citizen in a rapidly changing world. *BreraPlus* asks both the museum professionals and museum public alike to see the museum not as a static, physical space, filled with dusty exhibits, but as a dynamic institution whose activities daily create new value for the widest possible spectrum of users – a verb not a noun.

Note

-
- ¹ L. Dal Pozzolo, *Il patrimonio culturale tra memoria, lockdown e futuro*, Milan, Editrice Bibliografica, 2021; P. Sacco, C. Calveri, *La trasformazione digitale della cultura*, Milan, Editrice Bibliografica, 2021.
 - ² I. Bollati, V. Morea, F. Antonucci, M. Spanevello (2024), *Italian Cultural Institutions Across and Beyond Covid-19: Designing Digital Cultural Experiences in Extra-Ordinary Times*, in *Multidisciplinary Aspects of Design. Objects, Processes, Experiences and Narratives*, ed. by F. Zanella, G. Bosoni, E. Di Stefano, G.L. Iannilli, G. Matteucci, R. Messori, R. Trocchianesi, Cham, Springer Nature, pp. 513-525, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-49811-4_49>.
 - ³ A. Reed, *Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrell*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2017; J. P. Watts, *Slow Art in an Age of Speed*, «Tate Etc.», n. 46, Summer 2019, <<https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-46-summer-2019/slow-art-take-time-jonathan-p-watts>>.
 - ⁴ B. Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingerin*g, English trans. By D. Steuer, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2017.
 - ⁵ A. H. Maslow, *A theory of human motivation*, «Psychological Review», vol. 50, n. 4, 1943, pp. 370-396.
 - ⁶ I. Bollati, *Cultura e società digitale. Filtri e dosi raccomandate*, Mantova, Corraini, 2021.
 - ⁷ K. Hudson, *Right and Wrong Road for Museums*, unpublished article, 1995.
 - ⁸ Ibid.
 - ⁹ N. Mandarano, F. Pagliaro, C. Mataloni, *Fuori orario: i musei e la loro vetrina sul web*, «ROLSA, Rivista Online di Storia dell'arte», n. 9, 2008.
 - ¹⁰ F. Russoli, *Senza utopia non si fa la realtà. Scritti sul museo (1952-1977)*, a cura di E. Bernardi, Milano, Skira, 2017; M. Carminati, *Ettore Modigliani. Memorie. La vita movimentata di un grande soprintendente di Brera*, Milano, Skira, 2019.
 - ¹¹ J. H. Falk, L.D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited*, New York, Routledge, 2013; G. Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*, New York, Routledge, 2005, <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203559277>>; G.E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum*, New York, Routledge, 1998, <<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203028322>>; E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, New York, Routledge, 2000.

¹² F. Wittgens, *Brera. Museo vivente. L'attività didattica*, Milan, Sandro Reina, 1956.

¹³ J. M. Bradburne, *Charm and Chairs: The Future of Museums in the 21st Century*, «Journal of Museum Education», Fall 2001, vol. 26, n. 3, pp. 3-9.