

"The Museum in my Pocket"

Digitalization at the Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar and Beyond

Samba Sanghott und Alena van Wahnem

*Digitalization*¹ has been a major societal topic for several years now which has also made its way into museums worldwide. It raises new questions and transforms our understanding of these institutions as well as the way we relate to the knowledge they preserve. Thus, the abstract notion of 'digitalization' can take very concrete yet diverse forms, both in physical exhibitions, and in virtual spaces. As such it opens multiple new horizons for the museums of the future. What digital options exist for visiting museums in a new way? Which are desirable, which are not, and how do they affect the way we relate to museums? Finally, how does the Dakar Museum of Black Civilizations position itself in this regard?

In the following conversation, we, Samba Sanghott, Technical Director of the Museum of Black Civilizations (MBC) in Dakar and Alena van Wahnem, student of anthropology at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, tried to answer these questions and share our experiences and personal opinions on the matter.

Due to the pandemic our dialogue took place remotely on several occasions in January 2021.² In order to approach the abstract notion of digitalized museums, prior to our conversation, we each visited three different virtual exhibitions: *Turner – peintures et aquarelles* at the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris,³ *Dialogues*,

- 1 The term 'numérisation', used in the original French version of this interview, is usually translated with two terms in English which are used throughout this text. 'Digitalization' refers to the different ways of using digital technology, whereas 'digitization' designates the process of converting objects or any other analogue information into a numerical (digital) format [translator's note].
- 2 We phoned twice and I registered and transcribed our conversations. We subsequently edited them together. The following are excerpts of the transcribed interviews, organized thematically [AvW].
- 3 Links to the digital exhibitions: <https://www.musee-jacquemart-andre.com/fr/decouvrez-visite-virtuelle-exposition>.

techniques mixtes sur papier of the Afikaris Gallery in Paris⁴ and *Des images dans la pierre* of the Musée de la Civilisation in Québec.⁵

* * *

Alena: Inaugurated in December 2018 in Dakar, the MBC was, amongst other things, conceived during the 2016 International Conference of Foreshadowing. Participants included some 150 museum employees, as well as museum experts, intellectuals and artists from all over the world. The minutes on several occasions stress how important it is to integrate digitalization and so-called new technologies into the infrastructure and exhibitions at the MBC. Could you tell us to what extent these innovative technologies are up and running in the museum today?

Samba: Digitalization is a vast subject. At the MBC we make use of it on several levels. First, of course, within the administration and for communication among museum employees, and with the press and the public at large. But there are also more museum-specific practices like archiving and exhibitions.

A: The MBC holds a huge variety of objects, from human remains to extremely ancient archeological discoveries, from pre-Islamic African statues to modern African art. Could you tell us what digital devices you are using in your exhibitions and what their role is?

S: A visitor entering the museum first encounters *African Civilizations: Continuous Creation of Humanity* which, with the help of different objects (for example skulls and tools), retraces humanity's evolution in Africa until the first people left the continent.

In this part of the museum most of the exhibited objects have been additionally created as digital 3D models which are shown on high resolution screens. This makes it possible for the visitor to have a full three-dimensional view, with every angle visible, of the different objects in this vast hall. This is an example of what we do here at the MBC.

Until now we have only catered to the visitor who has actually come to the museum and is physically present. At the MBC we also exhibit what we call *Lines of*

4 <https://afikaris.com/pages/dialogues>

5 <https://imagesdanslapierre.mcq.org/>

Continuity, with photographs of prominent historical and contemporary black figures, some of whom, such as Nelson Mandela, are extremely famous, others, such as Ndaté Yallah, less so, at least on the international stage. For this part of the exhibition, we have created a system of QR codes associated with each photograph. Visitors can scan the code with their smartphones and are then directed to a website with comprehensive information. In this way they can also save as their favorites the URLs relating to the personalities they are most interested in and deepen their knowledge at a later date. All these digital options make the exhibitions more accessible and the museum more visitor-friendly.

A: Are there any domains or exhibition spaces at the MBC where you have deliberately decided not to use digital elements and if so, why?

S: The answer is “no”. Thanks to the generalization of QR codes, all the exhibited objects have been digitized, enabling access to the associated information. Inside the museum, the QR codes, the 3D media and the films shown on high resolution screens (4K) are indeed beneficial to the visitor who is physically present, but for virtual visits, they are much more, they are a godsend. Our goal is to exploit to the full any new technology that can enable us to do better. It must also be said that it is still in its early days. The museum only opened two years ago and there are many things that would be possible technically but that we have not yet implemented.

A: Like what for example? What are you planning for the future?

S: Holograms. To get to a new kind of interaction between our visitors and the exhibited objects thanks to helmets and glasses for augmented reality (AR). With AR we can enrich the users' experience in their real environment without replacing it. That is to say, AR communicates digital content (information and/or images) on a different sensorial level, which allows for different realities to overlap.

A: And how does the public react to the new technological options offered at the MBC? How do they respond to the digital elements already in place in the exhibitions?

S: Until now, there have been many positive reactions. And there have even been other cultural institutions in Dakar who have expressed interest in certain technologies, such as the high-resolution screens, the 3D animations, etc.

A: Another aspect of the vast subject *Digitalization and Museums*, and you have already mentioned it, is the remote virtual visit of the museum. We have both visited three different virtual exhibitions. What did you experience during your visits?

S: The three exhibitions had very different approaches.

In the Canadian case, it was downright reading illustrated by pictures. It was like using Wikipedia. I check out the different areas of the exhibition and, for example, the rock art from the Atlas catches my eye. Then I can read all the texts provided, or just some of them, depending on how much time I want to allocate. The information is better presented than in an encyclopedia. It is instructive and easier to read, and the layout is more attractive. However, there are no animations, the camera just shows the static object from one perspective.

The approach is good but it excludes anybody who cannot read, thus limiting the number of people who could benefit from it. Why? Nowadays, thanks to audio files, technology allows us to access information without necessarily knowing how to read. There are many people who cannot read very well in this world, whereas listening is more accessible. If in an exhibition such as this, every time there was a text a device could activate a reading in different languages, people would have the chance to listen to the texts associated with an object.

A: Sure, there are many texts, and this can pose a problem, but I am not completely in agreement with your comparison between the format of the exhibition and Wikipedia. It is true that the exhibition is more like an informative website and not very interactive, but if we think of the connection between content and form, of what is exhibited and how it is exhibited, I find that there is an interesting angle to their solution. Since the exhibition deals with rock art, which is usually found outside, in nature, I really liked how this format did not try to recreate a digital museum space with the art inside, but rather an entirely new virtual environment. Within it, we are first shown a video which gives us an impression of the surroundings, the vegetation and the climate where the rock art can be found. We get the feeling we are travelling to the place, we hear the water, the rain, the wind, the snow. It is a sort of first sensorial experience that enables us to familiarize ourselves with the subject and imagine this place we are visiting through our

screen at the other end of the world. And only after this we discover the rest, in texts, photographs and other videos.

The exhibition *Dialogues, techniques mixtes sur papier* at the Afikaris Gallery in Paris presents five contemporary African artists, concentrating on their works on paper: drawings, watercolors, collages. The virtual space to visit is a *white cube* gallery, where objects are presented as digitally 'attached' to the walls. Even the frames are digital creations.

S: It moves, it is alive and that is great. There are two types of visits. The 3D visit of the exhibition and the visit I'd like to call "the dead visit", where we have only the objects and the description of them. Here, we can decide which perspective to choose, that is not a bad thing.

A: Yes, the visitor can move around this space and look at each object in detail, but it is clear that one is not in a digitized version of the real gallery, a photographed version for example. I rather had the impression of being inside a video game. In my opinion, what is really a pity is that the physical characteristics of the objects and the paper, which is so very significant in this exhibition, disappear completely in this form of presentation. It is not visible anymore and a zoom in to get nearer and see the surface of the paper is not possible. One stays at a certain distance. Nevertheless, the objects are very well digitized and illuminated and the colors are so alive! I was touched by many of the works.

With similarities, yet also very different, is the exhibition *Turner – peintures et aquarelles* at the Musée Jacquemart-André. It is a virtual 360° exhibition that guides us through this Paris museum and its presentation of the works of the famous British painter, enabling us to discover them in a setting that I would describe as "classical".

S: Here we see something completely different. Something that is a Covid-19 and social distancing palliative. Let's imagine I am somewhere in Thailand and I adore black civilization and culture, I would like to visit the MBC but I don't have the means to do so. Thanks to the Musée Jacquemart's virtual concept, I can enter the museum and 'really' visit it, with an added optional on-the-go guided tour. I move as if I was holding the camera. I can't look wherever I want, for sure, but at least I can see everything that is exhibited. We are given the possibility of focusing on a particular work and of listening to the curator presenting it in a deeper or more technical way. Which all makes this approach very different from the previous ones.

A: I completely agree. I was very impressed by this exhibition which offers not only a visit in images but also in sounds. As you already mentioned, one can hear the curator's specialized descriptions but also the conversations, comments and personal interpretations of other visitors, who are in fact actors, writers, architects and artists. This more intimate, more familiar framework allows us to escape from the discourse of the official guided tour and offers us a space for our own questions. And what impressed me the most, because I didn't expect it, was the background noise. We hear far away voices, the footsteps of other visitors and, at the beginning of the tour that starts on the street in front of the museum building, we hear the far away noises of the city, the song of a bird... All of which really gives us the impression of being there. The 360° perspective allows us to discover nearly everything: the walls, the floor, the ceiling, the shadows of the paintings, the ornaments of the golden frames and we can even get so close to the paintings that their texture is visible. This digitization, which tries to get as close as possible to the reality of the physical museum the visitor already knows, creates a sort of familiarity. Within a location that one immediately recognizes, one discovers a whole new setting.

S: Of course, there is an approach which existed even before the widespread use of the internet and social media, which was the *physical support*. It was either a CD, a hard disc or a DVD-ROM, etc. One could visit the museum on video. That is rather similar to the exhibition at the *Jacquemart André*. With this device one did not visit a sole exhibition but a complete museum. Let us take the Louvre for example. In its virtual visit one could choose where to go: either into the *Ancient Egypt Galleries* or towards the paintings or other objects. And one could access not only the information on the paintings and sculptures but also the structure of the building, of the Palais du Louvre itself and even its history.

A: Did you visit a museum by DVD or CD-ROM at that time?

S: Yes, the Louvre. I even owned the CD-ROM. Visiting the Louvre as a student had a strong influence on me and made me decide to buy the CD-ROM. The museum is so large that it is difficult to visit all of it. But with the CD-ROM I had the Louvre at my place, and from time to time I could look at things I never could have seen during my physical visit.

A: Let's take the MBC as an example. Unfortunately, I have not been able to visit it yet due to the pandemic, but I know that in the entrance hall there is this immense sculpture of a baobab that is 10 meters tall! To physically experience the spatiality of the hall, the height of the sculpture and also of the glass ceiling, must be incredibly impressive! And that is where I see the limits of visiting such a special place virtually. Because there is a difference between a virtual exhibition which shows paintings (like the ones we visited together) and being in a space in which sculptures – whether big or small – to which I can relate are assembled in three dimensions. A space in which the architecture around me also influences my thought.

S: Yes, you are absolutely right, that's a big difference. But at least we can make it possible to get an impression, to access the work, even if from far away. The sculpture of the baobab (called *The Tree of Humanity*) which you mentioned was created by the famous Haitian sculptor Édouard Duval-Carrié. It is indeed 10.68 meters tall and weighs 7.08 tons! In point of fact, it is in this same space that our screens show the 3D animations of *African Civilizations: Continued Creation of Humanity*. I actually think that, regarding this space, the physical visit has its limits compared to the virtual option. In the latter we could have gone as far as to give the visitors control of the 3D animation of the skull or the sculpture, so that they could visualize the parts they would like to view closely. It is like on a webpage. When you want to buy something, you can often activate a 3D image of the object. This option could also apply to museum objects.

A: So, a way to personalize the virtual visit even more?

S: Exactly. The possibilities are huge. Because on a computing and technical level it is possible.

A: And is there a museum which you personally really like?

S: I have never worked in museums, as an employee I mean. It is only this year that I started to work in a museum. Before my domains were computing, telecommunications and project management. And I used to go to museums every time I could, because I love them. When I travelled, I always took the opportunity to visit museums I didn't yet know. There is for example the small museum which shows the

works of Dalí, in Montmartre, which I love. Because I like Dalí's work, I like what he did. But that has nothing to do with digitalization. It is not digitalization which made me interested in museums. I loved some museums before digitalization. It is digitalization which allows me to carry the museum in my pocket.

A: Yes, I understand. It is about being able to bring impressions of the museum back home with one. But what about catalogues? Or other museum souvenirs? I often buy postcards showing the objects I particularly like.

S: Yes, but catalogues are completely different to digital technology. They are much too heavy and rather impractical. On the other hand, I always have my computer with me, along with a CD-ROM drive or an external hard drive, because those are the tools of my trade. Compared to catalogues, it is much easier to copy a CD-ROM of a museum visit onto my external hard drive and travel with it. Or to access a virtual exhibition via the internet, wherever I am. Besides, I can not only examine the objects and works (like in a catalogue or on postcards), but the whole exhibition space.

S: Another advantage of the virtual visit is that a museum has a specific size and therefore cannot necessarily exhibit all of its objects. Whereas in a virtual museum space, one could show thousands of objects. Now, for the archives it is a little different. They are databases. It is a laborious task to stock and index all the information, making it available to all, and particularly to scientific researchers.

A: Yes, a virtual exhibition space makes it possible to show stored objects that normally cannot be seen at the same time. But I think that a concept is also needed. The visitor should not be overwhelmed or confused by too many objects or an excess of information. To visualize the complete collection of a given museum, I would rather opt for the creation of an informative digital archive as you describe it, which could be accessible to the general public, and not only to researchers.

S: In fact, virtual visits need to offer choice. When someone wants to visit the MBC virtually, we ask the question: "Do you want to see the 10 or 20 most visited objects, or all of them?" It is the visitors who direct the software and choose what they want to see. "Would you like to discover the most popular objects?" "Are you

looking for a particular style?" "For example, is it the African origin of humanity that interests you, and nothing else?" If that is the case, you are directed to everything we have related to the African origin of humanity. Even the objects that aren't directly exhibited. You decide and pick as you wish.

A: You describe here a sort of toolbox with which I could conceive, via parameters chosen freely by me, my own individualized visit of the museum. I realize that this is a bit of a caricature, but it makes me think of online shopping, where, as a consumer, I choose what I want to buy. But how does this affect the role of the curators? Sure, their position is one of power, yet they conceive exhibitions according to guiding principles that create connections between the different works and relate them to one another.

S: As I see it, the software I describe in no way replaces the visits created by the curators. It is just an additional option. Everyone is free to choose their own path: either they follow the marked trail, or they go off the beaten track and discover the objects according to their personal preferences. It is like visiting Paris. Discovering the city on a bus that follows a predetermined route is not the same thing as roaming through the streets on foot.

A: I am convinced that the process of digitalizing museums challenges and profoundly modifies our 'traditional' museum experience. Yet we still do not know exactly where this transformation will take us. We would be well advised to start thinking now about the consequences of this digital revolution, and its influence on the very idea and definition of what a 'museum' actually is.

S: Yes, but I do not fear such a radical change. Let us once again take the Louvre as an example. If you can afford it, what could be more wonderful than to go and see the Joconde? But it is a pity if people who live in the very heart of the Ruhr in Germany cannot see her because they don't have the means. As I said, nothing can beat seeing her in real, but that should not prevent those who cannot make the journey from viewing her online.

A: So, these virtual visits are democratizing knowledge?

S: In any case they improve access to culture.

A: I agree. Actually, I was truly impressed by my virtual visit of the Musée Jacquemart in Paris. And to imagine this possibility for other museums around the world is really fascinating. What I regretted about the online visits is that they are quite solitary. When I go to a museum with other people, we share what we feel and experience during the visit. The museum as a living space where we can meet and converse disappears behind everyone's screen.

S: Yes, you are right that there is less of a dialogue during the visit. But, on the other hand, both of us viewed the three exhibitions on our own and then talked about them afterwards. Sure, the aim was not to say what we were feeling while in the exhibitions, but to talk about our impressions afterwards. And yes, that is not the same. Going to a museum is a walk, it involves sharing something. On the internet the experience is more targeted: the goal is to discover in order to acquire knowledge and to self-educate.

Translated from French by Stella Dietrich.