

# 3

## Global Digital Museum Narratives: Representation, Authorship, and Audiences

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Digital media and online channels have redefined the ways in which communications is defined and how stories are told among us. The unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by social distancing, have accelerated the adoption of various digital communications platforms and reinforced the internet's role connecting people globally. This is a phenomenon with a Global scope.

Successive lockdowns and additional social distancing strategies compelled museums to close their doors and move their activities to the online sphere. The opportunities to access online exhibitions and resources from every corner of the globe became more useful and relevant than ever before. Numerous articles in various types of media outlets offered curated lists of the best 'online exhibitions' to visit during the pandemic highlighting the popularity and paradigmatic-shifting nature of online exhibitions and online catalogues. Research has assessed the impact of the pandemic on museums practices providing evidence a significant shift towards online initiatives (Giannini and Bowen 2022; Hoffman 2020; Samaroudi et al. 2020). This research questions the readiness of museums as they confront the challenge of operating in the digital realm and the level of technical innovation in this area.

Another effect of the pandemic has been the resurgence of social and geopolitical inequalities among different ethnicities, cultures, and social classes, as well as between countries. The murder of George Floyd marked the beginning of a global wave of protests against systemic racism and breathed new life into the Black Lives Matter movement, not only in the United States but also worldwide. In this climate, museums from all over the world felt the need to respond to the situation and issued statements reinforcing their social stance in relation to threatened communities globally and their arts and cultures. Concurrently, both onsite and online decolonization initiatives have gained renewed urgency.

The level of preparedness of art museums and their online resources in the face of such a critical societal crisis is at stake. An asymmetrical social reality, seeking social justice, demands a strong and decisive response from institutions like art museums. These unique conditions bring several questions to the forefront: How can we study online resources in a manner that allows us to scrutinize their content regarding global arts<sup>1</sup> and assess their value in light of the current challenges and needs? Do online resources need to be reimagined and remodelled? If so, what types of changes would effectively ‘decolonize’ them? What is the scope and direction of these changes and modifications?

### *Art museums’ online resources as narratives*

The examination of museums as textual entities and the narratives they present to their audiences has garnered significant attention in museum studies and adjacent fields (Bal 1992, 1996, 2004; Francis 2015). Narratology, the theory that focuses on the study of narratives, defines narratives as structures composed of interconnected and indispensable components. These components are typically examined separately, even though they would not exist independently (Chatman 1978; Bal 2017). By disentangling this structure, we can isolate components for further scrutiny. A narrative primarily consists of two levels: the story and the discourse. On the one hand, the story would constitute the ‘what’ of the narrative (Chatman 1978; Genette 1972) encompassing events, actors, as well as the time and space in which the story unfolds. On the other hand, the discourse element represents the ‘how’ of the narrative (Chatman 1978). This distinction between story and discourse responds to a ‘traditional distinction between content and style/form/expression, subject matter and treatment, or matter and manner’ (Shen 2005).

Narratology also studies the interchange between the author of the narrative and the receiving party, defined as the reader or the audience depending on the context and the medium of the narrative. Approaching museums’ online resources as narratives offers the opportunity to analyse them, taking into account their complex and multifaceted nature from a perspective that can help question their roles and functions. Issues related to the fair representation of global arts and cultures, notions of repair, as well as matters of inclusivity and openness in museums can be addressed through this lens. More specifically, a narrative approach assists in addressing questions regarding the character of the stories conveyed in online resources and the subjects that museums choose to feature or not feature in these narratives. In essence, it answers questions about the ‘what’ of the narrative.

Additionally, this approach leads to an understanding of the ‘how’ of the narrative: where do these stories originate, from what perspectives are they being told,

what is the role played by the museum in terms of establishing institutional authority and defining authorial intentionality. Lastly, narratology provides a means to examine the audience or ‘readership’ of museums’ online resources.

The widespread interest in museum studies in studying the exclusionary, authoritative, non-neutral, and biased nature of museums and the narratives they present in exhibitions has given rise to a rich line of enquiry. The focus on the types of stories that are told or omitted, as well as the perspective from which they are told, lies at the heart of scholarly discussions. Critical museology (Shelton 2013) and postcritical museology (Dewdney et al. 2013) are driven by self-reflective and critical ethos, with the former positioned externally to the institution and the latter engaging in a dialogue with the institution and the audiences. The recent decolonial turn inspiring museums necessitates a critical stance to realign them with a decolonizing agenda.

Methodological approaches such as worlding propose the analytical and activating use of the concept as a tool (Worlding Public Cultures. The Arts and Social Innovation 2023) that grounds the global within local worlds offering new ways to decolonize the so-called ‘universal’ western narratives and canons deriving from western epistemologies (Cheah 2016; Heidegger 2002; Spivak 1985). Elevating the concept of worlding implies engagement with methodologies aligned with postcolonial or decolonial digital humanities practices and research in information and digital museums studies which provide the critical foundation necessary to assess and transform key aspects of art museums’ digital resources. Practices that generate new forms of knowledge in the digital sphere or challenge existing ones are seen as a *worlding* exercise by postcolonial or decolonial digital humanities (Risam 2018). Augmenting narratology with intersectional theories and approaches can ultimately suggest pathways to challenge, reinvent, disrupt, remodel problematic practices in art museums’ online resources.

### *A survey of digital narratives in art museums*

The renewed attention that online engagement with exhibitions, publications, and other multimedia materials created by museums has received during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to research exploring the museums’ presence on the web during this unusual period. A couple of significant reports authored by UNESCO in 2020 and 2021, titled *Museums around the World in the Face of COVID-19*, analyse the issue in detail. The 2020 report provides evidence of widespread and increased development of digital activities during the pandemic. Interestingly, the report highlights the prevalent use of already-existing digitized or digital materials, online exhibitions, and activities over newly created ones. This underscores the need

for an analysis that addresses not only online resources that have been produced during the COVID-19 pandemic but also those predating its occurrence.

The starting point of the research presented in this chapter was a survey of art museums online resources with an overarching and cohesive narrative as opposed to collections websites or databases. This survey concentrated on resources such as online exhibitions, online publications, exhibitions websites, microsites, and similar interactive resources. In total, this survey includes 195 online resources created between 2006 and 2021. The initial phase of the survey was completed before the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in the documentation of 132 online resources, while the second phase, completed in 2021, accounted for 63 additional resources.

The objective of completing the survey was to be as comprehensive as possible, although limitations were encountered in terms of the reach of data collection. Even after defining the types of resources and the scope of data collection, locating them proved to be a challenging process. These limitations have also been acknowledged by authors working on the same topic (Hoffman 2020). Existing directories of online exhibitions such as the Virtual Library of Museums webpage (Bowen 2000) have existed since the early days of web development in museums. However, more recent examples continue to emerge, as seen in the environmental scan conducted by Quigley (2019). Despite their significant documentary value, these directories are compiled by us, researchers, or professional associations without the resources to consistently keep them up to date. Moreover, due to the lack of a clear definition of the different types of resources museums have on the web (Hidalgo Urbaneja 2020), each directory contains resources defined by different parameters and characteristics.

To compile both the initial and subsequent surveys of online resources, websites from major art museums and popular awards, including the Webby Awards and the Best of the Web Award from the Museums and the Web annual conferences, were systematically consulted. Manual Google searches using keywords such as 'online exhibitions', 'virtual exhibitions', 'online publications', and 'interactive' or 'online resources' were also performed. The new data collection began in the first months of 2020, coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, various digital media outlets, including cultural sections of newspapers, general magazines, and art magazines, featured the best online exhibitions that one could visit 'from home' (McGreevy 2020; Nurjuwita 2020; Yerebakan 2020; Dawson 2021). A review of these articles provided several notable examples. However, these 'best' exhibitions were generally those created by Google Arts and Culture. These exhibitions were excluded from the survey because they are not directly and entirely produced by museums, leading to a more complex dynamic in terms of authorship and ownership. Nevertheless, this dynamic should not be

overlooked, as it raises a number of issues that will be discussed in the following paragraphs of this chapter. As the survey was being updated, more comprehensive and accurate lists of online resources provided by associations of museum practitioners were found such as the Museum Computer Network guide to virtual museum resources (MCN n.d.). This reflects the widespread and increased interest in online exhibitions, publications, and other interactive resources.

The survey is accessible<sup>2</sup> and was collected in a Google Docs spreadsheet. The parameters of the online resources that have been analysed include country of creation, language used, year of creation, type of resource, institution responsible, implied audience, and whether it features global arts. These parameters were not chosen randomly; they assist in addressing questions related to the types of stories covered by the digital narratives, the perspective or focal point from which these digital narratives are presented, and the intended and potential audiences that museums have considered for their digital narratives. As the chapter unfolds, the insights from the data collected are analysed using a combination of theoretical foundations from narratology, critical museum studies literature, and postcolonial or decolonial digital humanities.

### *What stories?*

The subject of the narrative, the story it conveys, emerges as one of the most critical aspects of this analysis. Understanding what is being told in online exhibitions and online publications provides an initial insight into the topics, artists, and objects that audiences encounter on the internet. As the online resources were collected and analysed, attention was given to whether or not they feature global arts in the narratives. In essence, having global arts as subjects implies that the cultures or the origin of the artists or objects featured in the online resources are from non-western territories and former colonies. The concept of global arts also encompasses art created by artists belonging to diasporic communities originating from non-western and formerly colonized territories. It is worth noting that identifying these cultures and origins in the resources raises concerns about identity and agency. The identity of the artists and cultures considered for this research was the one determined by museums. However, there is a possibility that artists may self-identify differently, and in acknowledging this, the biases that exist in data collection together with the need to address this issue in museums catalogues are acknowledged.

The findings after analysing the resources are not surprising. They underscore the predominance of the western canon in online resources. Most of the resources feature objects, art, and artists from Europe and North America and

who are easily identifiable. Out of the 195 resources, a total of 88 showcase objects and works of art from global majority cultures and territories and diaspora communities in western countries. Nevertheless, there is a slight increase in the number of resources dedicated to global arts when compared to the results from the initial survey, where only 44 out of 132 online resources covered this subject. Moreover, there is a notable increase in the number of online resources developed in non-western countries, specifically focused on their local arts manifestations. An interesting case can be observed with the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. The institution has consistently created online exhibitions or exhibition microsites for each temporary exhibition that was on display – some of which have been removed from the internet but still can be accessed through the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine. Notably, the topics of these exhibitions have shifted towards indigenous or local artists, themes, and artistic movements in recent years.

In an effort to study the resources and the narratives they present in greater detail, the scope of the themes was observed. Online resources were categorized based on whether they feature the work of a single artist or a group of artists. The group exhibitions encompass either local or global artistic styles and periods. The category includes these two types of group exhibitions. For instance, some resources feature an artist monographic exhibition such as the website of the exhibition about the Colombian Artist Doris Salcedo at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago. Others focus on group exhibition dedicated to a local style, like the exhibition website created by the Guggenheim for their temporary exhibition on the Japanese Avant-Garde group Gutai. Additionally, there are resources with a more encyclopaedic focus, as seen in some of the interactive resources the Metropolitan Museum of New York has developed in past years.

The results offer an interesting picture that reflects the state of global arts in museums. Among the 88 resources that were classified as those showcasing global arts, 24 were dedicated to a single artist, while 32 featured artistic groups, styles, or themes of local nature and circumscribed to a specific geographical territory. The remaining resources, totalling 30, delve into ‘international’ artistic styles or maintain an encyclopaedic focus (Figure 3.1). Online resources focusing on a single artist predominantly feature artists from the contemporary art scene, emphasizing the current inscription of global arts in the contemporary art canon. A more complex and occasionally problematic picture emerges when considering resources that display global objects and arts alongside creations from western countries. For instance, online resources such as MoMA’s *Object:Photo* present a narrative that de-centres artistic hubs, while others reinforce notions about artistic influence and directionality, positioning the arts of Europe and North America as a universal canon.

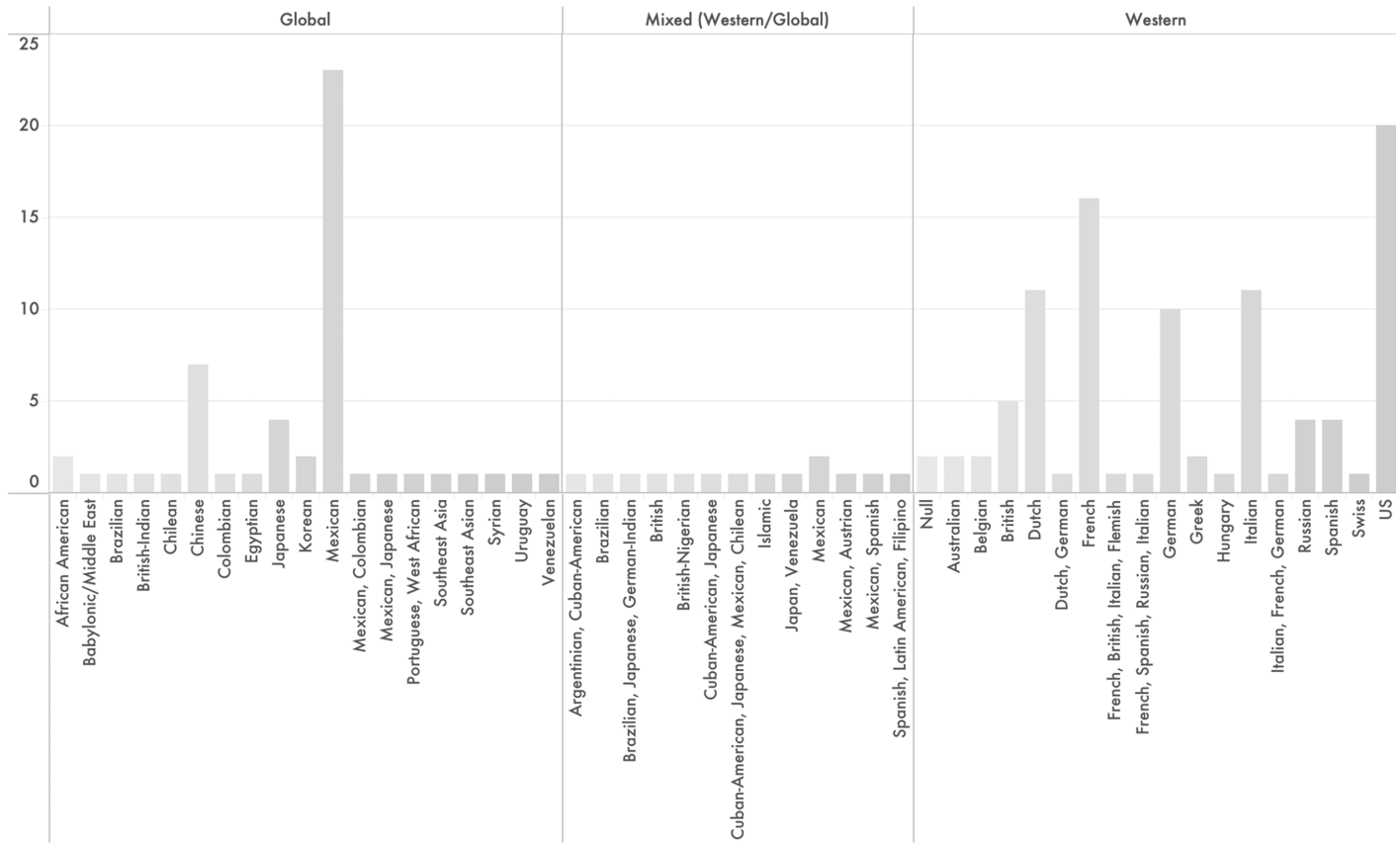


FIGURE 3.1: Bar chart that shows the distribution of themes in online resources. Author's copyright.

In analysing the stories in online resources, several key points come to the forefront. First and foremost, the expansion, albeit modest, in the number of online resources that museums have developed with a narrative centred on global arts shows that change may indeed be possible. This also signifies a more sensible and equitable approach towards non-western and non-canonical subjects. However, when delving into the online resources, moving beyond merely quantitative and thematic aspects of the data reveals the necessity for a deeper understanding of the narratives presented in the resources. Narratology can guide this analysis in a logical direction, emphasizing not only what is told in the narrative but also the manner in which it is conveyed, thereby advancing the discussion in this chapter.

### *How are stories told?*

Increasing the presence of global art in the digital sphere and challenging the dominance of stories from western cultures in online exhibitions and publications are necessary and important steps. Gaps must be filled. Yet, the mere addition of more online resources presenting stories from traditionally underrepresented, neglected, and omitted artistic voices and creations is insufficient to repair deeply disrupted institutions rooted in a societal order defined by structural racism and inequality if these stories are told from a certain perspective and by specific narrators.

Museum studies texts on narratives characterize the museum as an institutional entity whose discourse influences the stories they present (Bal 1992). This discourse extends to the multiple elements that physically constitute a museum, from the building to the labels, and digitally, from the ontologies that model their databases to the software used in websites. Museums determine which stories are worth presenting to the audience. Traditionally, the discourse of art museums has been constructed by western dominant epistemologies that have shaped art historical canons, as well as more recent technologies adopted by them. A common area of discussion in literature is the fact that while the museum's aim is to present objective and accurate historical facts in their narratives, omissions, biases, and assumptions inevitably creep into these narratives (Bal 1992; Porter 1996; Lidchi 1997). To aid in understanding how museums function, narratology proposes a term: focalization. The term introduced by Genette (1980) is understood as a 'point of view' or 'perspectival filter' (Jahn 2007). It responds to the questions "who sees?" or "whose perspective orients the text?" (Aczel 2005). A selection and/or restriction of narrative information happens in relation to the experience and knowledge of the author or narrator (Niederhoff n.d.).



In ‘Telling, Showing, Showing off’, Mieke Bal adopts the term to explain the position of western museums as they represent non-western cultures in their galleries from a clearly western-centric perspective (1992). Bal reinforces the idea that focalization is intrinsic to narratives: ‘Whenever events are presented, it is from within a certain vision’, and she continues by pointing out that ‘storytelling is inevitably slanted or subjective in nature. [...] It is of course possible to attempt to give an objective picture of the facts’ (1996). In the current moment, multiple but legitimate truths and realities are recognized. Accordingly, narratives should be ‘likely to be less complete, more fragmentary, and to consist of the elements of many narratives that can be combined in a range of ways rather to be completed finished story’ (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). However, in practice, reality often presents a less objective and more fragmentary presentation of narratives. The contentious statement that museums are not neutral (Fraser et al. 2020) is not only made by critical voices but also by museums in an attempt to reshape institutional authorship.

Museum studies literature has often reinforced the belief that the hypertext and the Web are democratic instruments, capable of challenging the ‘unassailable voice’ museums inherently possess (Walsh 1998). Contrary to techno-utopian views (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) that were especially common in the early years of the Web, the reality is that museums still tend to impose a slanted view on the narratives they present online. For example, the British Museum, in collaboration with Google, developed a notable immersive online exhibit titled the Museum of the Word. Despite its inclusion in an article listing the Top 10 exhibitions of 2020, the *Smithsonian Magazine* pointedly notes that ‘Notably absent from the project is an acknowledgement of the London museum’s colonialist history, which came under renewed scrutiny this summer amid global protests against systemic racism’ (McGreevy 2020). This example illustrates how museums serve as focalizers that deliberately exclude certain stories from the narratives they present about the objects in online resources.

Identifying elements to quantify focalization can be a complex task, which is best approached through a more qualitative and careful analysis of individual online resources, as seen in the above example. However, one aspect that is relatively easy to quantify is the location of the institution that has developed the online resource. It is almost certain that a museum from a given western country will function as a focalizer, and the stories will be told from a biased and non-objective perspective. The way in which stories are told has an impact on the audience’s perception of history, cultures, and objects which are viewed through the lens of the author, in this case, the museum. Unsurprisingly, online resources of western origin outnumber the resources created in non-western countries. As the survey indicates, only 53 out of the 195 online resources are from non-western countries. Furthermore, even resources in western countries are predominantly from

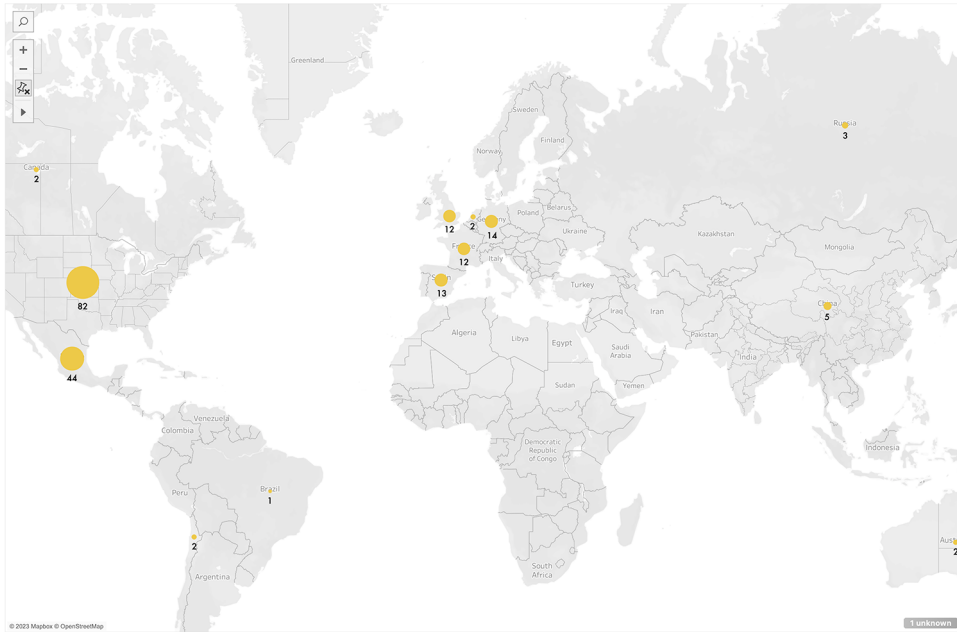


FIGURE 3.2: Map that displays the geographical distribution of the institutions that publish online resources. Author's copyright.

major institutions within those countries, with a majority of them belonging to art museums in the United States (Figure 3.2).

These unbalanced results reflect systemic inequalities across institutions. Research has shown that access to technological means, including software, as well as skills and human resources, plays a significant role in the development of online resources and shapes the way in which narratives are presented (Hidalgo Urbaneja 2020). The affordability and user-friendliness of tools are key to their adoption by museums (Hoffman 2020). Creating online resources requires an enormous amount of labour in addition to economic resources and the right institutional infrastructure, which not all museums, even major ones, possess. While inequalities affect museums worldwide, museums from non-western countries are at clear disadvantage when it comes to creating online resources and sharing their narratives with audiences in the digital domain.

As museums from non-western countries have embraced the digital age, software, systems, and tools created in the West were nearly the only ones available to them. Shifting the focus to the Google Arts and Culture web platform, it is noticeable that a significant number of museums worldwide have partnered with them with the aim of showcasing their objects and galleries to a wider audience, not only

in western countries but also in non-western ones. In some cases, museums may have opted for joining the Google platform to overcome technical limitations and a lack of appropriate resources needed, for example, to create 360-degree views of their galleries or launch online exhibitions. While the initiative has received an overall positive reception, critical voices have raised concerns about the potential dangers of ceding data and the capacity of creating narratives to commercial entities. These entities ‘attempt to reposition the power of art to asymmetrically extract cultural capital from non-profit and state institutions’ (Pepi 2019). Behind these extractive practices lie issues concerning ownership of technological systems and narratives. The concept of ‘digital colonialism’ introduced by new media artist Morehshin Allahyari (2019) facilitates a critically engagement with ownership issues. Digital colonialism refers to the position of museums, heritage institutions, and corporations involved in the digitization, preservation, study, and display of objects from non-western countries. These organizations tend to define themselves as ‘saviours’ and ‘protectors’ of heritage, but in reality, they perpetuate traditional colonial roles and functions of the museum. Heritage is digitized, preserved, and shared with audiences online, but the ownership and copyright of the digital copies belong to institutions and organizations in western countries, not to the communities of origin of the objects who were not engaged in decision-making processes that lead to digitization (Boast and Enote 2013). This once again highlights the limitations of initiatives and online resources focused on uniquely increasing the representation of global arts and cultures while replicating existing power dynamics.

In addressing absences and omissions in terms of the technological frameworks used by museums, the postcolonial – or decolonial – approach in digital humanities defined and established by Roopika Risam seeks to provide solutions to this problem:

Representation will never be a sufficient approach to addressing the colonial and neocolonial inscriptions in the digital cultural record. Digital humanities practitioners, therefore, must also interrogate colonialist and neocolonialist politics through project design to intervene in the epistemologies of digital knowledge production. Put together, the representational and epistemological dimensions of digital humanities scholarship hold the possibility for creating a postcolonial digital cultural record.

(Risam 2019)

With the invitation to challenge and remodel the epistemologies of colonialist knowledge production that permeate institutions such as museums, Risam sets the stage for a complex and multilayered process that involves questioning not only the technologies and software that is used in online resources but also the more textual elements of narratives. This idea converses with the views of Digital Art History scholars, such as Pugh (2020), who agrees on the fact that epistemologies

generate standards ‘that can impose or perpetuate cultural biases’ that go beyond art historical canons and influence digitization processes, ontologies, archiving and cataloguing practices, metadata production, user experience design, software, and more. The biases present in the systems used by museums in online resources frame and shape the narratives that are presented to us in these resources.

Strategies that respond to the need to correct biased narratives and help communities regain ownership over their stories must offer more than additive or textual and linguistic intervention in online resources. Fields such as information studies, digital humanities, software studies, and human-computer interaction research have introduced frameworks that, if adopted by museums’ online resources, would help transform the nature of their discourse. Ontologies (Bruseker and Guillem 2018; Hunt 2014), information systems (Boast et al. 2007), software (Ali 2014), and interfaces (Lazem et al. 2021) all are susceptible of decolonization, in other words, reinvention and transformation to accommodate the diverse ways of knowing and being that frame the modes of production global arts.

### *Who is the audience?*

Narratives involve two parties, often described as ‘a sender and a receiver’ (Chatman 1978). This condition also applies to museums: ‘what is a museum for if not for visitors?’ (Bal 1996). In the context of this research, both the visitor or audience of museums and the user of an online resource are equal in form and function to the concept of the reader. Reader-response, a subfield of narratology, provides the foundation for a better understanding of the status, role, and behaviours of the reader. It invites us to interpret the audience of online resources through the lens of narratology.

The concept of the implied reader (Iser 1978) can be defined as the hypothetical or presupposed reader of a narrative, as assumed by the author. A narrative is always constructed by the author with a reader or an audience in mind, making the implied reader intrinsic to any narrative (Chatman 1978). Museum studies literature acknowledges the role of an implied visitor in the development of exhibitions. In fact, in museum exhibitions, ‘the dramatic tension constructed by the content and design team is based on an “implied visitor” which has much in common with an “implied reader” in literary theory’ (Austin 2012). Although authors studying digital storytelling in museums may not explicitly employ the narratological concept of *implied reader*, they use pragmatic methods to outline the implied readers or audience of the narrative that is being constructed and the implied reader is modelled upon real readers’ information. An example of this approach is the CHESS project (Roussou et al. 2015) which uses ‘personas’, a well-known method of user experience research in digital media, for that purpose.

‘Personas’ could be defined as ‘empirically grounded, detailed descriptions of imaginary people (constructed user models) that are represented as specific individual human beings’ (Roussou et al. 2015).

Since online resources can potentially be accessed from every corner of the globe, provided there is internet access, museums must question how they can serve an online audience that is diverse in geographical locations, language, and demographics. In fact, one of the strongest arguments supporting the production of online exhibitions and other types of resources is that through them, museums can reach wider audiences and be visited from all over the world. The concept of implied reader can assist museums in asking this question and design resources for a diverse and global audience, which is a challenge in itself given the multitude of factors that should be taken into account.

Returning to the survey of online resources, the concept of the implied reader can help us understand the level of preparedness of museums in terms of reaching global audiences. One of the parameters used to analyse the results of the survey was the language or languages used in the resource, which implies that the reader of the resource has a certain linguistic background and skills. It is noticeable that a significant number of resources, 96 of the 195, are in a language other than English, but from these 96, only 42 are in English and another language (Figure 3.3). Upon further scrutiny of this second set

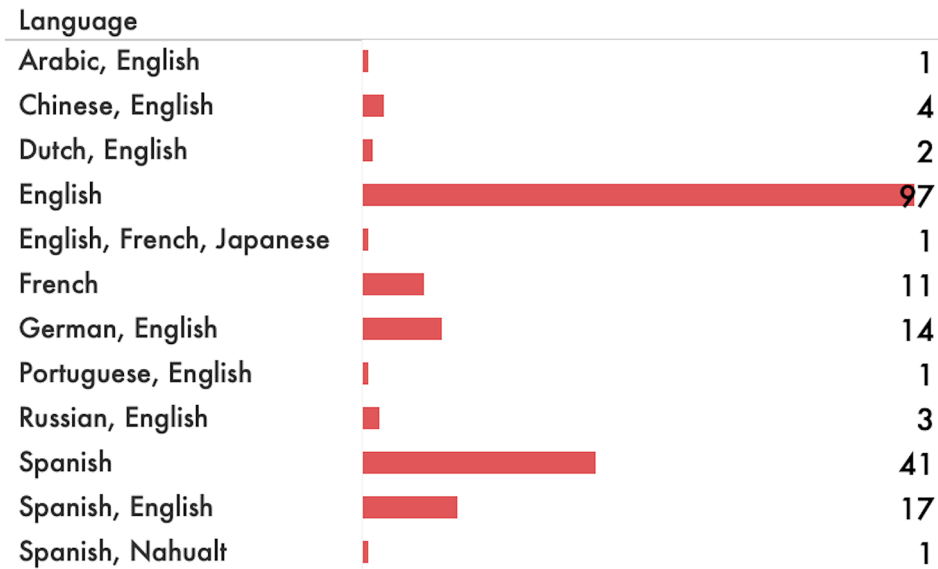


FIGURE 3.3: Bar chart that shows the most prevalent languages used in online resources. Author's copyright.

of data, it becomes apparent that the museums offering resources in both English and another language are not based in English-speaking countries; rather, it is the opposite. The status of lingua franca English has explained such a problematic dynamic. In an effort to become accessible to international audiences, these museums provide an English version of the online resource. However, for many communities learning foreign languages, even English is a privilege. Linguistic barriers exclude them from the possibility of accessing and enjoying these narratives. The universality of English and its linguistic dominance has been raised by digital humanities scholars (Fiormente 2012; Risam 2019). The colonialist connotations of this dynamic in connection to English need to be addressed and contested; yet, this problem is not exclusive to English. Among the collected online resources, the website of the exhibitions from the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico confronted the colonial dominance of Spanish to include a version of some of the exhibition websites in Nahuatl, the most prominent indigenous language in Mexico, as seen in its exhibition *Orozco. Artistas en dialogo. Thomas Newbolt y Roberto Parodi* (2020). This simple act reclaims the space for a minoritized, excluded language and the community that uses it in both the institution and on the internet.

Beyond the issue of language, the digital divide that exists in terms of internet access becomes another excluding element. Once again, online resources have been designed for audiences with internet access, and the accessibility and openness of the internet are often taken for granted. Several authors have argued against the techno-utopian discourse around internet access and the illusion of democratic access that others (Weibel 2011) associated with it in the early stages of the internet.

The moment museums started to inhabit the digital sphere, scholarship has highlighted the democratizing and ‘wall-breaking’ role of digital media as it helps museums to have a more open and plural emancipatory role that digital technology could play for museums atoning for centuries of exclusion, colonialism, and omission (Pepi 2014).

The consequences in terms of audience engagement resulting from uneven internet access have become even more pronounced during the pandemic. This fact has been noted in several articles and reports focused on the study of museums online presence during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the UNESCO reports (2021) points to the danger of exclusion and the idea of establishing second-class audiences. However, Rodriguez Lopez (2020) delves deeper and shows a more complex picture. He highlights the fact that audiences that have traditionally felt marginalized by museums due to their inaccessibility now find themselves in a similar situation online. Because they lack the required cultural capital to engage

with online resources, these resources effectively become ‘art deserts’ designed for a select number of individuals.

This reflection on the existing knowledge, background, or cultural capital of the audience and its role in engaging with narratives leads to the final point of this chapter. Reader-response theory examines how the reader’s identity impacts their reading (Prince 2003). Holland’s work on literary response employs psychology and psychoanalysis to demonstrate that ‘readers respond to literature in terms of their own “lifestyle” (or “character” or “personality” or “identity”)’ (Holland 1975: 63). This reflection parallels the concept of entrance narrative in the domain of museum studies. According to Doering and Pekarik’s (1996), every museum visitor has formed their own ‘entrance narrative’ before going through the museum doors. The entrance narrative can be defined as the knowledge and experiential background that influence their interpretation of displays and narratives offered by the museum. Similarly, Everett and Barrett (2009) investigate the way in which individual factors, including personal interests and educational background, shape the visitor’s interaction with the museum. The reader’s or visitor’s experience of the visit, based on their identity, does not necessarily result in an affirmative or positive interpretive or meaning-making response. Disagreement and estrangement are potential reactions to the visit. Doering and Pekarik suggest that audiences visit museums with the expectation of finding validation based on their beliefs and prior knowledge. In museums, visitors seek intellectual and even emotional approval. If they feel contested by the institution, their experience could be negatively impacted. The effects that this sense of validation would have in visitors who do not share a sense of belonging with the institutions for various reasons connected with their beliefs, gender and ethnic identity, and demographics give museums a reason to address inclusivity both in gallery and online. Additional concerns may arise as the entrance narrative the audience brings with themselves encounters ‘challenging heritage’ that addresses delicate topics such as colonialism and racial violence. As Kist (2020) contends, museums face the challenge of enabling an understanding of current events and facilitating critical reflections online, especially in light of the social circumstances resulting from the pandemic.

### *To conclude*

A critical study of art museums’ online resources presents a mixed picture of the current situation. It highlights several pressing and unresolved problems. Some of these, such as the questionable authority and position of the museum in shaping narratives about global arts and the unequal access to the internet, are not new

and have resurfaced as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, there is place for hope as a decolonial agenda seems to be gaining stronger traction in various digital practices. While the overall picture suggests the need for urgent and profound changes, discrete advancements are noticeable.

The methodological approach that constitutes narratology remains relevant to the types of questions and problems that museums face. Art museums are tasked with the challenging goal of addressing a troubled past and present through the stories of the objects they display in both their physical galleries and online platforms. The critique formulated by this research should motivate institutions to develop online exhibitions that tackle the unequal representation of historically neglected or omitted subjects and artists. However, profound revisions of the foundations that define art museum themselves in the digital sphere, including their classifications, cataloguing systems, ontologies, vocabularies, and more, are required as online resources increasingly accommodate narratives that favour plural ways of knowing and being. Lastly, audiences cannot be overlooked. Incorporating other voices and perspectives to the narratives museums should be done with the aim of connecting with everyone globally, especially individuals from backgrounds and geographies that have been traditionally excluded from museums and would certainly lack a sense of belonging with the institution.

## NOTES

1. This chapter uses the term global art to refer to art produced in non-Western countries and colonized territories or created by people original from those territories. Although the term is used in the context of contemporary arts practice, here it is applied to art produced in previous historical periods rejecting terms such as world art which have colonial connotation (Belting, 2013).
2. <https://m-hidalgo.com/online-publications-exhibitions-2020/> (accessed 18 January 2024).

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