

Mediating the Museum: Can technology make our collections shine?

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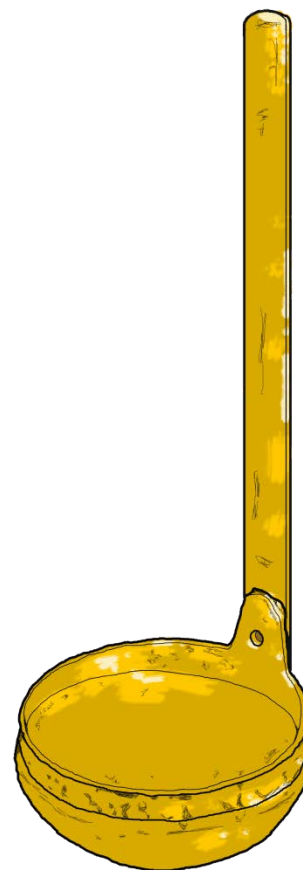
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What do you see?







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meSch

Material Encounters with Digital Cultural Heritage

“meSch aims to co-design novel platforms
for the creation of tangible digital exhibits
at heritage sites”

How can we personalize the visit?

What is the role of technology?

What about the object?

What do you see?



Collaboration between Museums,
Creative Industries & Researchers is *key*.



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Slide 1: Start/set-up

Slide 2: What do you see? [pauze] This is object APM 01352.

Slide 3: It is part of a spoon. We don't know exactly how old it is, but we know it's Roman and found in Italy. It was acquired in 1934 by Mr. Scheurleer, who bought it from a Dutch dealer in antiquities.

Slide 4: Its catalogue card also mentions that the handle was cut off, and a small hole was drilled in the side, so it could be used as a holy water font.

Slide 5: So... what do you see? In her book *The Look of the Past*, Ludmilla Jordanova presents physical objects as valuable historical sources. She emphasises the importance of looking. Looking closely at objects.

Slide 6: But when you visit an exhibition full of objects, with many stories to tell, where do you begin? How can we make it easier for our visitors to look at objects, particularly the ones that are less aesthetically pleasing, and at the same time unlock some their stories? Could technology help? Or is technology a distraction? After all, you can't look at your phone screen and the world around you at the same time...

Slide 7: My PhD research is part of the EU funded project meSch. Material Encounters with Digital Cultural Heritage is a four year project that aims to co-design novel platforms for the creation of tangible digital exhibits at heritage sites. The meSch team is not only international, but also interdisciplinary, with museums, computer scientists, evaluation experts, computer-human interaction specialists, product designers and PhD students all being part of the mix. Co-creation is our mantra; trying to find ways in which we can work together in a way that optimises everyone's contribution, making use of each individual's unique skill set.

Slide 8: Some of the questions that our project is dealing with are: How can we personalise the visit? Should we second guess people's wants and needs, based on visitor profiling and complex algorithms, or should we find clever ways to offer our visitors well-considered choices? What is the role of technology? Should it be visible or invisible? Embedded, brought by the visitor, or pervasive? Do we get rid of screens all together? And what about the object? What role does it play within the stories we're telling, the digital content we are unlocking. What does its physicality mean? Can we work with the tangible nature of objects *and* tech, or the performative nature of the visit?

This research puts me, as a researcher, in a very exciting position. I cannot be an observing bystander, submerged in theoretical thinking and reflecting on the processes as I see unfolding in front of my eyes. I am embedded in the museum. I think about exhibition texts, negotiate with project partners, talk to our visitors, conduct usability tests with colleagues and ask advice from other experts. Does this make my research messy at times? Yes. Does it make it challenging to progress as much as I like. Definitely. But I feel this is worth it, because I also have the opportunity to directly feed back what I'm learning to the museum. And I can contribute to a bigger project and work as part of an international team, which is a wonderful experience.

[pauze]

Slide 9: Two days ago, I was at a conference for art teachers and educators where I led a group discussion about the question "What does technological innovation in the museum really mean?" At one point, I referred to research by Saunderson, Cruickshank and McSorley, which implied that people don't actually look differently at real objects, compared to replicas. I was practically booed off the stage...

The passionate response from the audience actually matched the point I wanted to make at that conference. We all KNOW real objects are important and should play a significant role in our museum displays. Even Saunderson, Cruickshank and McSorley downplayed their own research and emphasised that although people were looking at real objects and replicas in the same way, they probably had different thoughts and two different experiences.

What they also found out, and I think this is more significant than it seems, is that there was a big difference between the way art historians looked at the objects and the way non-experts looked at them. Although this might seem obvious to

some of you, I think this is important. Why do I think this is important? Because the reason I think there is a difference between these two groups is because art historians have been trained to look. They know *how* to look at objects. This is a skill that many people don't have. And this is exactly where I think technology can play a role. It can facilitate discovery, if you like. So, looking at the object is important.

Slide 10: But what do you see? This is still often what the use of technology looks like. People huddled around a touch table and ignoring the art. I have to say, I don't know anything about this particular installation, and it could be a very meaningful experience for these young people. But if we would put that table anywhere else, a park, a school, a shopping mall, would it be the same meaningful experience? And if the answer is yes, should we focus on installing it in our museum? Or should we do something else. Something that would actually make use of the fact that you are surrounded by real objects in the museum?

I don't think we have the answers yet to any of the questions I posed in my talk. But hopefully what I said about the principles of the meSch project, as well as some of the challenges we're facing as museums working with tech, you will leave here today with at least one answer.

Slide 11: Collaboration between museums, creative industries and research is *key*. Are there challenges? Of course there are. When you work with different partners, each partner will have his or her own agenda. Nobody *owns* a collaborative project, but everyone will *need* something from it. To work together successfully, the different partners will have to mesh well. Pun not intended. It takes time finding partners with whom you enjoy working, who are on the same page as you. It also takes time and effort to stay on that page together, or ideally read the book together! In my eyes, the biggest challenge is to make sure all partners get out of the project what they had hoped for, so everybody feels the journey was worth it in the end and is excited to start the next project. Because the journey never really ends, does it?

Both my research and the meSch project are now just about half way. We have until February 2017 to make discoveries and solve bits of the puzzle, so I'd say until then.

Slide 12:
Watch this space...