



Original Research

Open Atelier Digital Competition: Leveraging the Potential of Digital Transformation to Enhance Young Audiences' Engagement in the Interpretation and Dissemination of European Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: In the last decades, digital technologies and practices have produced major changes in the way heritage is conserved and accessed, offering new methods to collect, manage, and disseminate historical artifacts and knowledge. The transformative potential of the rising digital culture refers to the enhancement of traditional processes as well as to the development of unprecedented opportunities and formats, the outcomes of which are generating a particularly significant impact on audience engagement—i.e., on the creation of cognitive, emotional, or creative experiences that enable people to have an active part in the interpretation, presentation, and use of heritage. The study aims to observe one of these new formats—namely “digital creative competitions.” Specifically, it outlines this emerging practice and reflects on its potentialities and criticalities in light of the experience carried out within Open Atelier, a project funded by the European Commission Within the Creative Europe program (CREA-CULT-2021-COOP-2). The Open Atelier Digital Competition was launched in Spring 2024 to foster young creative talents to develop innovative reinterpretations of the collections of four European house museums based on their possible connection with the achievement of one or multiple tasks blueprinted by the Sustainable Development Goals at the core of the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda. The evaluation of the outcomes of this experience provides evidence about the strategic role of digital audience engagement in generating innovation in the heritage sector by activating online co-creative forums through which young generations can become the producers and narrators of fresh and resonant perspectives.

Keywords: *Young Audiences' Engagement, Digital Culture, Digital Creative Competition*

Introduction

In the last decades, the rise of a digital culture¹ has generated several challenges and opportunities for the heritage sector. In the passage between the third and fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab 2016), digital technologies and practices have radically transformed the

¹ The present time is generally referred to as a Digital Age; this started in the 1970s, following the transition from traditional industries to an information technology-centered economy, where computer-based activities have become pervasive and many tasks started to depend on the internet.

way cultural heritage is conserved and accessed, offering new methods to safeguard, communicate, and disseminate historical artifacts and knowledge. Such changes resulted in new criticalities—related to intellectual property limitations, quick spread of misinformation, fast obsolescence, the creation of technological barriers, and problems ensuing from underdeveloped policies and sustainability concerns—but they are also producing innovative means and occasions fostering deeper connections between citizens and their cultural history and heritage.

Digitization and digital platforms are making cultural institutions, sites, and collections more accessible to diverse audiences, by enabling the overcoming of many geographical, financial, and social barriers, thus empowering a more inclusive public to engage with the past (Yates and Rice 2020). At the same time, they are broadening the scope of heritage preservation by mobilizing a wider range of actors, from reference communities to stakeholders at local, national, and international levels. Digitization is also expanding the very notion of heritage, for example through the extension of the life of those assets that may be inaccessible or endangered, and the acknowledgment of new resources—such as those that are referred to as “digital heritage,”² which are playing a strategic part in fostering innovations across various sectors. Digital tools are widening information and education opportunities, by enabling innovative methodologies and formats, that captivate people with resonant communication patterns and encourage interaction (Parry 2009). New technologies are also profoundly changing cultural experiences, by diversifying the types of audience engagement and enhancing their active participation, not only in fruition but also in production, interpretation, and dissemination processes (Parry et al. 2018).

The transformative potential of digital technologies in the heritage sector also refers to the development of unprecedented formats for audience engagement, which nowadays is one of the key concerns of cultural actors, and is considered a fundamental condition to establish deeper connections with visitors and make their encounter with heritage more appealing, resonant, and impactful.

The study aims to observe one of these new formats—namely “digital creative competitions.” In particular, the text will explore this emerging practice and reflect on its potentialities and criticalities in light of the experience carried out within the project “Open Atelier: Building new innovative formats for active audience participation and interaction with cultural heritage within European House Museums.”

² As explained in the Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage promoted by UNESCO (2003), digital heritage includes “cultural, educational, scientific and administrative resources, as well as technical, legal, medical and other kinds of information created digitally, or converted into digital form from existing analogue resources.” Digital cultural heritage also encompasses all those assets that were not born as digital but ensue from the digitization of artifacts, collections, archives, etc. (Kremers 2020).

Digital Competitions as Strategic Tools for Audience Engagement

In the last decade, one of the areas within which cultural actors have mainly explored the possibility to harness the power of digital technologies is audience engagement. This refers to the creation of cognitive, emotional, or affective experiences that enable users to have an active interplay with a content, one that implies they “invest time, attention, and emotion” (Lehmann et al. 2012, 164).

In the framework of the dramatic changes in attitudes, values, and skills of contemporary societies, accelerated by a “stimulus glut” that immerses people in a cocoon of information, images, and sounds (St. Claire 2011, 49), digital experiences appear not only captivating but also capable to enable the internalization of messages and the construction of deeper bonds with history and heritage. In particular, they facilitate an active engagement, which is considered as a precondition for processes of meaning-making, value creation, and connection to public discourses (Broersma 2019).

The most diffused type of experimentation with the use of digital tools to enhance audience engagement refers to the growing range of on-site experiences offered to the public during the visit to heritage sites and museums’ collections (e.g., through multimedia display facilities, interactive installations, or mobile apps guiding and enhancing the exploration of places and content). Nevertheless, other opportunities are emerging in the field of digital engagement, where innovative tools and strategies are being developed to more actively connect and interact with visitors online.

After the beginning of the 2010s, a format generally referred to as “digital creative competition” started to be tested by several cultural organizations trying to enhance a participatory approach to the conservation and dissemination of heritage. The initiatives promoted under this label are events or contests organized to solicit individuals or groups to take part in creative activities aimed at fostering the exploration of a cultural theme or asset, and at producing new interpretations or visions, formulated and shared in a digital form. The digital nature of these experiences is meant to widen the participation scale, as it overcomes geographic and cultural barriers and thus allows anybody in any part of the world to access the content and contribute, but also to massively circulate and disseminate the results, and to enhance their resonance and impact.

In some cases, the production of the required outcomes starts from the engagement with physical spaces (heritage sites), analog materials (objects and artifacts, old documents, or historic photos), and concrete actions (such as taking photos or doing interviews). The knowledge, ideas, and interpretations ensuing from such experiences are then elaborated through digital processes and tools. Usually, participants are asked to synthesize and express the outcomes of their interaction with heritage through audiovisual products.

The submission solicited by digital creative competitions may include image-based outcomes (e.g., digital illustrations, manipulated photos, collage art), GIFs and animations (e.g.,

motion-based reinterpretations of classic artworks, stop-motion animations, AI-generated animations), videos and short films (e.g., documentary-style storytelling, experimental film), and augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) projects (e.g., interactive 3D models or “digital experiences” based on the use of new technologies, such as immersive environments, multimedia installations, virtual tours, and interactive spaces). Depending on the complexity of the contest, if all these products are included in the competition, they are usually evaluated separately. The “Heritage in Motion Award,”³ for example, invites submissions in four different categories, encompassing all the above-mentioned materials, as a strategy to strongly foster innovation in heritage interpretation and dissemination through digital media.

In some other cases, the interaction itself and the whole process are arranged exclusively in the digital dimension. This condition arises when participants are asked to explore heritage places or assets that may be distant or not easy to access, or when they are asked to work on digital heritage. In such initiatives as the “GIF It Up”⁴ project, for example, people are challenged to reuse digitized cultural heritage material to produce unique GIFs and share them online. By allowing participants to explore, remix, and manipulate the openly licensed paintings, photos, and texts made available by Europeana and other digital libraries, this competition aims not only at creating new interpretations but also at fostering people’s interaction with digital heritage and helping them learn about image licensing in an engaging and fun way.

These initiatives are not exclusively but mostly designed to address young audiences. The targetization of these practices draws on the opportunities ensuing from the use of digital means as well as on the set up of their objectives.

New generations were born into a digital environment; hence, they are quite adept at these technologies and use them extensively.⁵ Besides producing the conditions for captivating their attention, their familiarity with digital tools also implies the development of specific skills that older generations may have difficulties in acquiring. The “digital literacy” (Lankshear and Knobel 2008) that is innate in most youngsters guarantees both the technical and cognitive abilities to participate in digital challenges. Furthermore, the actions required to enter the competition are usually similar to those they frequently perform in their everyday life. For example, shooting and recording experiences through a digital device has become a common practice (Tinkler 2008); in fact, constant photographing and photo sharing among young friends seem to have become a sort of play (Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänen 2023).

³ This initiative was founded in 2012 by the European Museum Academy and Europa Nostra, to promote the exploration and safeguarding of Europe’s cultural heritage by collecting and awarding innovative audiovisual and multimedia projects that may foster the interest of European citizens, and especially of young generations.

⁴ This annual competition has been promoted since 2013 by Europeana, in collaboration with the Digital Public Library of America, Trove, and DigitalNZ.

⁵ According to a Pew Research Center’s survey conducted in 2024 on American teens aged 13 to 17, 96% of them own a mobile or tablet, and report using the internet daily; nearly half of them say they are online almost constantly (up from 24% a decade ago).

These phenomena are being enhanced by the growing attention for social media. Enabled by ubiquitously accessible and scalable communication techniques in mobile devices, these internet-based applications were created as mass communication tools to allow people to quickly and intuitively create and share content on their own. In the last decade, they have substantially changed the way individuals, organizations, and communities interact, in an unprecedented environment of hyper-inter-connectivity (Alexander 2008). If originally the internet was visited to simply consume content (e.g., to watch, read, and buy products and services), social media and the new digital platforms (such as sharing sites, blogs, and wikis) are used to generate, modify, share, and discuss internet content. These tools are thus shaping a new digital ecosystem, in which people are becoming accustomed to produce and disseminate information, ideas, personal messages, and creations, and to give them an instant and potentially major exposure. The attendance of this environment and the extensive use of its means is training young generations in creative production strategies, participatory practices, and especially in content generation (Selwyn and Stirling 2018).

The digital creative competition format exploits the normalization of the creation and exchange of user-generated content, as it appoints participants as the producers and narrators of new interpretations and visions for heritage. These contests are indeed meant to enable people to explore and document cultural heritage in personal ways, and to showcase their creativity or academic and technical skills through multimedia submissions.

The value of this format is thus twofold. On the one hand, by operating through the intersection of heritage with new communication tools and modalities that are particularly familiar to young generations, this type of engagement is meant to captivate their interest and involve them in conservation and promotion processes. On the other hand, by giving participants an active role, it allows for the production of new narrations and uses of heritage in the contemporary world, and enables their dissemination into a digital environment, enhancing circulation, collaboration, and connections.

These goals are shared by all those cultural organizations that are testing the effectiveness of digital competitions, which are meant to engage people in a creative way, to solicit new types of interactions with heritage, and to give it an active role within the contemporary scenario.

Some initiatives were started by specific institutions that used this type of engagement to throw new light on their content and collections. A paradigmatic experience was promoted by the Rijksmuseum, one of Amsterdam's major cultural institutions. When it reopened after a long renovation process of the main building, in 2013, a new digital platform was launched—the Rijksstudio, an online collection of high-resolution images, resulting from the digitization of more than 250,000 items, made available without any copyright restriction. To stir and maintain interest around this tool, the institution promoted several projects in collaboration with various partners (Europeana, Etsy, etc.), aimed at encouraging people to develop their own creations based on the use of the digital collection. One of these, the "Rijksstudio Award," is an annual competition, that was started in 2014 to invite the public

to use or draw inspiration from the museum's online images to design new artworks, objects, photos, or videos (Engberg 2012); the outcomes of these interactions are shared on digital platforms, and evaluated by a jury of renowned designers and curators.

A growing interest in digital challenges resulted from the burst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of the virus and the temporary closure of cultural institutions accelerated the experimentation with new ways to allow people to engage with art from a distance (Strzelichowska 2021; Giannini and Bowen 2022). The J. Paul Getty Museum, for example, in October 2020 launched a social media campaign that charged their followers with recreating the works of art in their collections using only what they had lying around the house; initially inspired by the Instagram user "Tussen Kunst & Quarantaine," this contest utilized the institution's vast digital gallery to promote their services from their physical location to online.

Recently, many organizations variously related to the European Union have started to experiment with the digital competition format. Their overall aim is to solicit participants to explore their local heritage with renewed eyes but also to contribute to a larger cross-national narrative, in order to reinforce the shared identity of Europe. In some cases, the focus of these initiatives refers to a heritage that participants may already know: the goal is to encourage its exploration through new perspectives, but also to reflect on wider questions (for example, about the meaning of heritage, and the possible connections among local stories and European narratives). In other cases, namely when the initiative is recurring (for instance, when it is organized on a yearly basis), the competition has an overall thematic framework, but its exploration may vary depending on the focus on a specific topic, question, or observation point. For example, the "Young European Heritage Makers Competition," promoted by the Council of Europe since 2018⁶ as part of the "European Heritage Days" initiative, calls on participants aged 6 to 17 years to explore their heritage and share their creative interpretations of a theme defined every year (the 2024 edition was dedicated to "Heritage of Routes, Networks, and Connections," and the 2023 one revolved around the question, "What is your European cultural heritage for you?"). This initiative is meant to foster the next generation of Europeans to take an active role in the celebration of cultural heritage, and create a deeper sense of belonging and connection.

The digital creative competition format is actually being exploited to achieve similar goals also in other fields. In particular, in the last years, several initiatives were promoted to raise interest and foster the creation of new narratives related to some major challenges the world is facing. Many of these initiatives focus on environmental issues, such as air and water pollution, waste management, ozone layer depletion, and climate change. For example, since

⁶ The initiative ensues from the evolution of what started as the "Heritage Makers" project, launched in Finland in 2013; as of 2018, the program became a wide cross-frontier activity, that has been recognized by the "European Heritage Days" National Coordinators from across Europe as a unique opportunity for engaging young people, both online and in their immediate surroundings.

2019, the Global Network of Water Museums organizes a yearly youth prize contest, “The Water We Want,” calling to action young students between the ages of 6 and 18 to share their perspective on water heritage and climate change through drawings, photos, and videos. In the last five years, the initiative has engaged many students, teachers, museums, and civil society organizations from all over the world, enabling young people as narrators of more sustainable water futures.

Several of these projects harness the message of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the seventeen interconnected blueprints at the core of the United Nations’ 2030 agenda, intended to address the global challenges related to climate change, environmental degradation, poverty, inequality, peace, and justice. The “SDG Art Competition,” for example, was launched by the Sustainable Development Council to exploit the power of art to inspire change and promote social responsibility among children and youth, by engaging them in the creative exploration of the seventeen SDGs. The contest is aimed at participants up to the age of 18 (organized in three classes of entry: 2–6, 7–9, 10–13); it asks them to create a poster on the annual theme (i.e., one of the SDGs), hence instilling social values and educating participants from all economic backgrounds through their artistic expressions.

Within this scenario, in 2024, a digital creative competition was launched to evaluate the potential of this format in intertwining the goals related to heritage conservation and dissemination and those pertaining to the promotion of social and environmental awareness: by harnessing the power of digital technologies, this initiative aimed at enhancing audience engagement in the formulation of new interpretations and uses of heritage, to be developed in light of their possible contribution to the achievement of the social, economic, and environmental tasks blueprinted by the SDGs. This contest was organized in the framework of the project “Open Atelier: Building new innovative formats for active audience participation and interaction with cultural heritage within European House Museums,” to highlight the strategic role that European museums’ content can play as catalysts for socio-cultural innovation.

The Open Atelier Digital Competition

Open Atelier is a cross-sectoral network of four European House Museums—Art Museums of Skagen (Denmark), Millesgården (Sweden), Einar Jónsson Museum (Iceland), and Plečnik House at the Museum and Galleries of Ljubljana (Slovenia). These institutions are partnering with one creative performance organization (AMAT [Associazione Marchigiana Attività Teatrali], Italy) and a University (Politecnico di Milano, Italy) to develop innovative modalities to enhance audience engagement in the way cultural heritage is explored, interpreted, mediated, and used.



Figure 1: Open Atelier Digital Competition; Entry Created by Luca Vergani (Italy), Based on the Reinterpretation of the Art Museums of Skagen's Collection in Light of SDG 14 (Life Below Water)

Drawing on the concept of the atelier, the artist's private workroom, the place from which all the involved museums stemmed, Open Atelier aims to innovate the understanding and engagement with this context by opening up its doors to the public and transforming it into a modern "experience lab." This is intended as an interactive, co-creative, dynamic, and participatory space where collections become the point of departure for new interactions among the audience, the museum, and its professionals.

This process is being promoted within the framework of the European Commission's Creative Europe Programme (from October 2022 to September 2025), within which partners are designing, realizing, and evaluating a set of experimental practices—the Open Atelier Experiences. These are co-creative activities planned and implemented by the four museums involved in the project through a collaborative, interdisciplinary, and problem-based approach, aimed at developing and testing innovative formats to promote audience engagement in the contemporary scenario.

While most of these experiences interact with participants in the sites where the four institutions operate, one experimentation was designed to test a merely digital engagement. In particular, this initiative was meant to evaluate the potential of the digital creative competition format.

The Open Atelier Digital Competition was promoted by the team involved at Politecnico di Milano, with the aim of using the four museums participating in the project as a testing ground for an innovative type of contest. The initiative was intended to verify the effectiveness of digital technologies in widening access to collections and content, fostering connections between young generations and European museums (including small institutions located in "remote" areas), generating and sharing new perspectives and multivocal narratives, and strengthening the role of heritage as an active resource in contemporary scenarios.



Figure 2: Open Atelier Digital Competition; Entry Created by Greta Nizza (Italy), Based on the Reinterpretation of the Einar Jónsson Museum's Collection in Light of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities)

To achieve these goals, the Open Atelier Digital Competition called on all creative talents to explore the heritage promoted by Art Museums of Skagen, Millesgården, Einar Jónsson Museum, and Plečnik House, in light of their possible connection with or involvement in the achievement of one or multiple SDGs. One of the distinctive features of this initiative was thus its twofold aim. On the one hand, this experience was meant to test the potential of the digital competition format in promoting the engagement of young people in refreshing museums' work. On the other hand, it enabled a critical reflection on the value of heritage as an active resource for the present, capable of promoting positive changes within the current social, economic, and environmental scenarios.

Participants were provided with basic information about each institution's history, mission, and collection, and they were given access to a set of high-resolution images (~10 per museum), each one provided with a short description. These pictures were selected by the museums' curators, among the documentation included in their archives (e.g., historic photos) or recent photos depicting their collections and venues. Each image was chosen to offer a glimpse of the museum's identity, of its most significant assets, and especially of the themes and spaces for which the institution is now in search of new interpretations or uses.

The young creatives interested in participating in the competition were asked to use these images to reflect on the possibility of activating the heritage assets and themes represented in the photos as inspirations or "stepping stones" for the development of visions or messages that could foster positive changes and support the construction of a sustainable, fair, prosperous, and peaceful future.

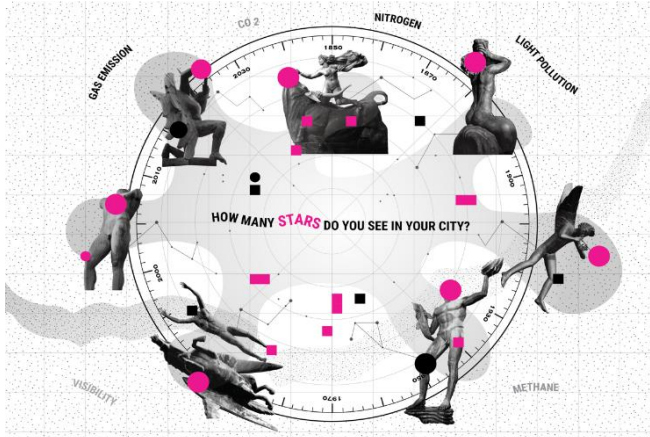


Figure 3: Open Atelier Digital Competition; Entry Created by Hoi Yan Young (Hong Kong), Based on the Reinterpretation of the Millesgården's Collection in Light of SDG 13 (Climate Action)

Specifically, participants were asked to freely manipulate the images to convey their reinterpretation through a “visual statement” (a new image, a collage, a GIF, or a short video), capable of harnessing the powerful link between cultural heritage and people to evoke a resonant meaning, encapsulated in a “claim” (a short text presenting the proposal in less than fifty words).



Figure 4: Open Atelier Digital Competition; Entry Created by Marta Mattioli and Camilla Mauri (Italy), Based on the Reinterpretation of the Art Museums of Skagen's Collection in Light of SDG 14 (Life Below Water)

The Open Atelier Digital Competition was launched on February 6, 2024, with a communication campaign that exploited cultural institutions' websites, social media, and the connection with several European schools and organizations. Submissions were welcomed

until June 6, 2024. Organizers received eighty-seven entries, which were critically analyzed by a jury composed of a group of experts and the directors of the four museums involved. The evaluation was developed according to four parameters (accuracy and depth of engagement, originality of interpretation, innovative use of the digital media, technical quality), and it led to the identification of four winners, one for each museum, and four special mentions. The presentation of results and the announcement of the awards took place in Venice on September 13, 2024, during the Open Atelier Biennale session. A selection of the best entries remains on display on the dedicated Instagram page (@open_atelier_competition).

Evaluating the Open Atelier Digital Competition's Results

Measured against the goals of the initiative, the results of the Open Atelier Digital Competition provide some interesting insights into the potentialities and criticalities of this format.

The Open Atelier Digital Competition was open to anyone, but it was primarily addressed to a specific target—participants were mainly young adults (17–27 years old). This outcome was partially expected: being the initiative promoted by Politecnico di Milano and consistently disseminated within its network, it is easy to explain why university students have been engaged more than other targets. Nevertheless, participants involved from other geographic contexts also belong to the same generation. This result provides evidence of the inherent capability of this format to captivate the interest and commitment of young people.

Most participants were Italian (72%). Notwithstanding, the span of international entries was remarkably wide. Organizers received submissions from several countries all over the world, namely Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, Germany, Poland, Turkey, Lithuania, Russia, China, India, Thailand, Mexico, and Brazil. The unbalanced geographic distribution of participants ensues from the fact that the initiative was mainly promoted within Italian channels and networks. However, the number and the distance of the countries involved substantiate the capability of the digital format to reach out massively, to overcome geographic and cultural barriers, and to facilitate international connections and trans-sectoral collaborations.

In particular, it is interesting to point out how this format allowed young people from faraway countries to become acquainted and to interact with four small European house museums that manage artworks and content that are deeply rooted in the local history and identity. According to a survey conducted among some of the students from Politecnico di Milano, no participant had ever heard about the Open Atelier museums before. All of them showed appreciation for the value of these institutions' heritage, increased awareness about their role as drivers for sustainable development, and willingness to continue their engagement beyond this experience—and even to visit them in the future.



Figure 5: Open Atelier Digital Competition; Entry Created by Pietro Giacometti, Margherita Forin, and Gabriele Valenzani (Italy), Based on the Reinterpretation of the Einar Jónsson Museum's Collection in Light of SDG 13 (Climate Action) and 14 (Life Below Water)

On the one hand, this outcome validates the outstanding dissemination potential of digital tools and highlights the crucial contribution this can bring to small museums: digital engagement has affordable costs and concurrently a plausibly massive impact. On the other hand, it substantiates the idea that, although heritage may have specific connections to a precise context, it has the power to resonate in the mind and spirit of people from all over the world, and possibly to operate as food for thought, fostering critical thinking on a range of topics, also referred to various time and space coordinates. This concept highlights the importance of further enhancing access to heritage, and the strategic role that digital technologies are playing in relation to this task.

Within the Open Atelier Digital Competition, digital engagement allowed an international group of young creatives with different cultural backgrounds to contribute to challenge institutionalized and traditional views on the involved museums' collections, by exploring the possibility of using them to tackle the challenges blueprinted by the SDGs. The request was positively addressed by all competitors: although it is necessary to report differences in the level of complexity, consistency, and resonance of the submitted proposals, all of them were able to produce fresh perspectives and thought-provoking statements. By intertwining the goals related to heritage conservation and dissemination and those pertaining to the promotion of civic awareness, this experience engaged young creators in a new meaning-making process that has provided evidence of the possibility to turn heritage into an active resource in contemporary scenarios.



Figure 6: Open Atelier Digital Competition; Entry Created by Natalia Anna Wojtasik (Poland), Based on the Reinterpretation of the Plečnik House's Collection in Light of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)

It is interesting to note that most entries were developed in relation to more than one SDG (only 23% addressed one goal) and that significant recurrences can be detected in their selection. The SDG around which most proposals were developed is “Climate Action” (Goal 13), followed by “Sustainable Cities and Communities” (Goal 11), and “Life Below Water” (Goal 14). Particularly inspirational were also “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions” (Goal 16), “Quality Education” (Goal 4), and “Reduced Inequalities” (Goal 10). These data may suggest that participants have developed a higher interest in the problems related to climate change and ecological crises, as compared to those related to societal issues. Although this result may have been influenced by various elements (e.g., the choice of the subjects of the photos selected by museums’ curators), this is evidently consistent with the growing spread of environmental identity and eco-anxiety among young generations (Brophy and Olson 2022).

Their increased distress often encourages them to take action. In the last years, this issue has also reached major art centers and museums, as climate activists have protested by marking art pieces with cake, soup, paint, and glue, and by attaching themselves to the frames or surrounding walls, with the aim of raising awareness and prompting public debate. Considering the disruptive nature of this phenomenon, and the fact that many studies suggest that it is not producing the expected results (on the contrary, these “attacks” seem to negatively affect public opinion and alienate more people than they convert to the cause), at this moment, it is urgent to support young generations in finding alternative ways to use art and culture as catalysts for environmental awareness. The digital creative competition could contribute to this task: by harnessing the power of online platforms and social media, the

visual statements it produces have the possibility to be disseminated globally, hence spreading new messages and raising attention. This function is enabled by the use of images (sometimes complemented by texts and sounds), which are the prisms through which perceptions are constructed and phenomena are discussed in today's society (Wieczorek-Tomaszewska 2021). Furthermore, visual products can easily result in specifically designed communication campaigns that have already proven effective in manipulating public opinion and the way we make sense of information (Hansen 2018). The distinctive design of the Open Atelier Digital Competition may have paved the way for an innovative use of this format in the enhancement of the role of cultural heritage in the present scenario.



Figure 7: Open Atelier Digital Competition; Entry Created by Michele Castelletti (Italy), Based on the Reinterpretation of the Millesgården's Collection in Light of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)

Digital Competitions Fostering the Use of Heritage as an Active Resource

The evaluation of the Open Atelier Digital Competition's outcomes contributes to providing evidence about the strategic role of digital audience engagement in fostering innovation in the interpretation and uses of European museums' collections. This initiative offered a compelling example of how digital experiences can put small, remote, or neglected cultural institutions on a map and connect them with people from all over the world. It outlined a captivating way to stimulate access to museums' content and services, but also an innovative modality to use them. In particular, it proved that this format is capable of generating an effective platform through which young generations can become the producers and narrators of fresh and resonant perspectives around heritage, challenging institutionalized and traditional views, and contributing to rethinking its role as a resource for contemporary scenarios.

Being a construct, involved in the regulation of a range of values (Smith 2006) and positioned in a spatial-temporal environment, heritage needs to be interpreted and activated in order to create ways to understand and engage with the present. Digital technologies are supporting these processes, not only by widening access to cultural resources and enhancing its conservation (Kalay et al. 2008) but also by fostering new uses and understandings, and enabling the incorporation of unprecedented types of audience engagement (Smith and Iversen 2014; King et al. 2016). In particular, innovative tools and platforms seem to construct new opportunities which entice young people to participate in meaning-making processes, and thus involve them in the definition and maintenance of cultural resources (Zhang et al. 2024).

Within the digital creative competition format, the involvement of young generations seems to be stimulated by various aspects. First of all, these include the performance of actions that are relevant to them (e.g., generating and sharing content online), and the use of languages and interaction modalities that are familiar, where visual logic plays the main role in building cognitive structures.⁷ These conditions also solicits them to explore the connections between heritage and aspects of modern life—possibly enhancing the understanding of heritage not as a static witness of the past but rather as a dynamic force, living into the present. The acknowledgment of this notion, which explains and validates the meaning of the conservation of heritage, is as fundamental to passing it down and ensuring continuity across generations as it is difficult to achieve. The competition format has the potential to contribute to this task, as it engages young people in creative and thought-provoking activities that draw on a combination of key principles of museum education, interpretation, and outreach with the capabilities of digital tools to unfold new perspectives and representation modalities. This format entails not only the exploration but also the production of new interpretations and uses of cultural heritage, hence empowering participants as protagonists in the creation and dissemination of new content, aimed at providing multivocal perspectives on heritage. Giving young people the opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas is valuable for both individual and social development, and the appreciation and recognition which is given to their voice builds on gratification and motivation.

As experimented within the Open Atelier Digital Competition, this format can also be used to intertwine different tasks: this experience exemplified how young people's engagement with heritage can operate as an opportunity to build up their civic awareness, and offer them a creative way to tackle contemporary environmental and societal problems. This twofold value contributed to distance this experience from the risk of "cultural snacking" (Engberg 2012) and enabled an authentic connection between young people and heritage. The initiative in fact challenged participants in producing visual statements capable of throwing new light into sizable topics, fostering critical thinking on delicate issues,

⁷ The present information society, supported by technologic advancements, draws on a global visual literacy shaped by an image culture, nurtured by the development of a synesthetic mindset (Wieczorek-Tomaszewska 2021).

commonplaces and biases, triggering constructive actions, and nurturing healthier behaviors in individuals or groups. The transformative potential of the outcomes of these initiatives is enhanced by the possibility to massively circulate them, drawing on an effective use of digital communication strategies and tools.⁸ If properly disseminated, this initiative can serve as a valid tool enabling a peaceful type of activism, that uses art, heritage, and creativity to spark debate and ignite positive changes (Lundy et al. 2024).

Despite the numerous benefits of this format, it is important also to acknowledge the potential risks related to its implementation. For example, such active engagement with a museum's collection may also generate some concerns about the possible exposure of cultural artifacts to overinterpretation or misrepresentation, which could lead to inaccuracies, disinformation, or even to controversial outcomes. These issues can be particularly problematic for the institutions that provide the content, as they may have special needs regarding the consistency of the narratives associated with their collection, or deal with culturally sensitive materials and potentially contested heritage. These problems are the main reasons why several museums shy away from participating in these activities. In the Open Atelier Digital Competition, this risk was managed by integrating an ethical code as well as a content moderation phase to allow the involved museums to verify the presence of possible problems related to appropriateness and ethical issues. The integration of a process based on the control and filtering of the content produced by participants may raise some important points concerning censorship, but this tool may reassure museums about the "unproblematic" use of their heritage and possibly foster their choice in taking part in such initiatives. After all, this remains an open question in regard to the use of the internet, the regulatory framework of which is still in progress.

Other risks often discussed when observing the use of digital technologies include the possible reduction in people's physical engagement with cultural heritage, and the gradual distance audiences may take from real-world experiences. However, as a matter of fact, many digital creative competitions are designed to stimulate the opposite reaction, as they invite participants to connect and interact with cultural sites and assets. Even when these may be too far away to access to take photos or videos, these initiatives may stir interest and construct a bond, and later lead to visits or other interactions. By fostering knowledge building (Cheng and Zachry 2020) and learning processes (Dunn and Hedges 2012), such projects can indeed

⁸ Reflecting on the lessons learned through the Open Atelier experience and the transferability of the format, an important aspect to implement in the planning of such initiatives is the design of a compelling communication campaign, and specifically of a strong visual identity and a set of strategies for the use of social media and other digital tools. If the competition is not efficiently communicated and spread, there is a high risk that participation will drop both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Key to achieving success in this regard is the collaboration with professional communication designers as well as the networking with partner institutions, which can play a crucial part in promoting the contest and soliciting potential participants; for instance, the Open Atelier competition was supported by various institutional platforms promoting SDGs, which contributed to capturing the attention of international young creatives.

contribute to developing interactions and a sense of belonging. At the same time, while the global diffusion of technology is often accused of producing cultural homogenization and threatening local traditions and identities, such initiatives as digital creative competitions actually foster young people to discover and to dedicate time and attention to cultural resources that are rooted in histories, heritage, and knowledge systems related to specific contexts. The digital, and embed in the museum's sphere the presence of a vision from a young audience.

Although it implies both beneficial outcomes and criticalities, the digital creative competition's format is emerging as a particularly interesting option to enhance young audiences' engagement in the interpretation and dissemination of European cultural heritage. Furthermore, its emergence invites a reflection on the very notion of innovation in the sector. While it is evident that digital technologies are setting the framework for the development of revolutionary and fertile ways to protect, promote, and use heritage with an inclusive approach, it is important to further discuss the need to accompany technological advancement with the evolution of mindsets. In fact, the pivotal obstacles to innovation are not tools and technology but rather shared behaviors, beliefs, and values. In order to allow digital opportunities to produce actual improvements, it is fundamental to build a culture of experimentation also within the heritage sector, one that strives for progress and allows for unorthodox thinking and risk-taking actions. This task remains in progress and still requires a significant amount of work—which such initiatives as digital creative competitions may contribute to perform.

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Informed Consent

The authors have obtained informed consent from all participants.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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