

Designing Liquid Heritage: How Hybrid Museum Experiences Shape Co-Created Cultural Value

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed modern art museums to fundamentally reconsider their relationship with audiences, reshaping how they communicate, engage, and build shared cultural value. This paper looks at how hybrid configurations can assist the formation of a fluid, co-created layer of cultural meaning emerging from interactions between visitors and institutions, and extends beyond the physical form of collections: the liquid heritage. This study proposes liquid heritage as an evolving, relational cultural process and, in doing so, offers a design-centered view for conceptualizing and facilitating co-creation in post-COVID museum environments. The research uses a comparative design-led methodology across museums in Europe, Asia and North America to understand how hybrid experiences are developed; how certain technologies and spatial arrangements are employed; and how they encourage interpretation, participation and shared authorship in contemporary art settings. By analyzing communication patterns, participatory interfaces and selected case studies this study seeks to provide insight into how hybrid encounters can generate relational forms of value, which may be invisible or unrecognized within traditional museal frameworks.

Keywords: Liquid heritage, Liquid modernity, Hybrid museum experience, Participatory heritage, Co-creation, Cultural memory, Museum digital transformation, Institutional governance

INTRODUCTION

Historically, museums have applied collections, classification and display to establish their own cultural authority and position the public largely as passive recipients of expert knowledge. The museum's building and interpretative tools act as a 'frame' that directs visitors attention and guides them toward understanding and creating meaning. However, the frame is never neutral; it influences what visitors can do with artworks, what narratives are shared, and how collective memory is created (Simmel, 1994). In recent years, there has been significant resistance to this traditional model of framing culture in contemporary museums. Today's museums are perceived as both social and experiential spaces where meanings are constructed through dialogue between individuals, rather than a unidirectional transmission of knowledge. Furthermore, digital media allows for the extension of interpretation beyond the galleries and museums, including web archives, social platforms, and mobile apps. This transition is not one from physical to digital, but an

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integration where the face-to-face experience occurs simultaneously with digital documentation, interfaces and dissemination (Galani, 2020). In the words of Leanza, “museums are no longer merely storage facilities for completed artifacts, but are instead functioning platforms that co-create the current state of affairs through public engagement, programming, and institutional format” (Leanza, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically increased these changes due to the disruption of co-presence globally and forced museums to adapt access, communication, and interpretation into digital structures as quickly as possible. At the height of the pandemic, according to sector reports, nearly 95 percent of all museums worldwide had closed (International Council of Museums, 2021). As a way of describing this transformation, we propose the concept of *liquid heritage*, which refers to a relational layer of cultural significance co-created by participants, interpreters, and those who remember, and stabilized by designed traces or institutional infrastructures. Through a comparative, design-oriented analysis of hybrid initiatives within museums across Continental Europe, East & South East Asia, and North America, this paper investigates how hybrid configurations produce co-created value and under what circumstances that value can endure as cultural heritage.

FROM LIQUID MODERNITY TO LIQUID MUSEUM PATRIMONY: LITERATURE BACKGROUND

The initial museum structure provided a space where there could be a constructed state of attention to the object that was being shown. Simmel’s evaluation of the picture frame shows us that museums create a space where there is distance, because it creates that a barrier separates the art from the viewer’s daily life, yet allows the viewer to focus on and give meaning to the piece (Simmel, 1994). In recent times the traditional notion of the “frame” of museums has begun to fall apart and people have questioned the neutrality of the curator and directed the museum visitor’s attention toward the voices, representations, and belief of the people visiting the museum (Macdonald, 2015). Therefore, the public’s desire to contemplate has not decreased. Rather, the contemporary audience is searching for forms of attention that allow them to reflect on their thoughts and connect with others in a way that creates a sense of meaningfulness that is not limited to the walls of the museum, but can be experienced by the visitor through interactions, shared time and responsive formats. As museums and galleries evolve into different and unique forms of display and interaction, the manner in which exhibitions are organized and the experiences that the visitor has will also evolve. While contemplative distance may be lost, it will be replaced with a new type of attention that combines both contemplative thought and engagement with others, providing a new method of interpretation and understanding of the objects and exhibitions presented to the visitor. When the social structures (institutions, identities, horizons of belonging) that have existed for centuries are unable to provide a sense of continuity and stability, then cultural value cannot be seen as a “solid deposit,” and therefore must be created by the museum and its visitors, rather than simply

receiving it. In this regard, the museum can be understood as a service system in which value is increasingly co-produced through various configurations of actors and resources, including technological ones; in the digital era, value is co-produced primarily through human-machine (and not only human-human) interaction, which redefines where agency lies and how meaning is mutually produced (Barile et al., 2021). Bauman's discussion of liquid modernity is useful for understanding the transformations occurring in the museum experience. Liquid modernity refers to a society in which social forms are continuously reconfiguring themselves; as a result, stability is no longer guaranteed but is instead something that must be continuously produced in a world characterized by uncertainty, rapid pace of change and mobility (Bauman, 2000). Therefore, the museum must be willing to function in a world characterized by distributed ecologies of attention, identity and participation, and from this definition we understand liquid heritage as the invisible co-created patrimony of a museum: a layer of cultural significance that is relational, distributed and evolving, and is developed through participation, interpretation and memory. Importantly, the question is not simply whether digital systems make these ecologies "more intelligent," but whether they can be used to orchestrate co-creation in complex situations by enhancing the human interpretative and decision-making abilities through an intelligence augmentation (IA) effect—focusing on human-centered augmentation and the development of "wise" (as opposed to merely "intelligent") systems (Barile et al., 2021). Keller Easterling defines Medium Design (2021) as the area in which agency resides, and she states that design functions by locating and intervening in "the medium or matrix in which [things] are suspended and in which they change over time" (Easterling, 2021). This perspective aligns with the developing nature of museum design where the boundaries of the museum frame are becoming increasingly porous, and the challenge of designing the museum is to design the "in-between"—the infrastructural field that establishes what types of encounters, authorizations and persistence are feasible. From this perspective, technical mediation is not a layer on top of the museum, but rather a fundamental aspect of the "medium." It can act as an operant resource that influences interaction and meaning-making only if it is effectively connected to other resources and to the requirements and values of the participants; otherwise, it can lead to co-destruction rather than co-creation (Barile et al., 2021). According to Ewan McEoin, Senior Curator at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, institutions and curators are "creators of a collection" to the extent that they establish the conditions under which a collection can "radiate an energy field" that enables the creation of new modes of engagement and understanding among the visitors (Leanza, 2025). Within our reasoning, this represents a succinct description of liquid heritage: continuity is not abandoned but is established through the design of specific forms of encounter and participation.

This "medium turn" is operationalized by the strategies, technologies and infrastructures of the present moment that enable museums to experience the visitor. Digital Transformation Technologies (DTTs) in museum exhibitions represent how AI, immersive technologies (AR/VR/MR), additive manufacturing, the Internet of Things and cloud computing influence the

transformation of exhibition design, accessibility, educational programs, and visitor experience assessment (Li et al., 2024). Technologies do not only increase the number of channels of access; they modify co-creation configurations by placing human-machine interaction at in a central role, and they are most productive when they are curated as augmentation infrastructures that promote interpretative diversity and wise decisions rather than only increasing engagement metrics. Overall, these literatures converge on one practical statement: Co-created value does not become heritage until institutions design the medium (functions, formats, infrastructures and governance) through which interpretive contributions can persist and be considered significant — and in digitally mediated contexts, when these arrangements explicitly support the human-centered conditions for effective interaction that enable co-creation to be sustained rather than dispersed across unstable, liquid configurations.

How We Read the Case Studies Across Continents: Our Methodology

The case study analyses were done as design interventions into cultural value rather than as “digital projects” alone. What was asked: When museums take on hybrid media frames do they create cultural value with publics, and if so, does that value endure? Each initiative is read through the same three parameters to maintain consistency in comparison across the globe.

Co-Produced Value. The value created for the public is measured by whether people have contributed to the production of the content through authored interpretations, shared inquiries, documented testimonies, or through some other form of participation. That is, we ask whether the project affords any kind of authorship, and whether those contributions become visible within the museums output.

Achieving Goals. We compare the results of each project to the stated intentions found in institutional documents (project pages, press releases, program notes). A project has worked when the goals it has declared have been turned into a functional system, e.g., an archive, a collecting process, an editorial series, a participative platform, a repeatable format.

Viability Over Time. We use the definition of viability as a design and institutional commitment to long-term sustainability. This includes repeated events; continued support of platforms; continuing programming; multi-year implementations; and continuous access paths to a platform. This definition aligns with recent research regarding the successful implementation of digital transformations at museums; in that sustainable governance and maintenance are significantly more important factors to success than simply being new.

EUROPE: DESIGNING PARTICIPATION INTO ARCHIVES, CAPTIONS, AND PANDEMIC MEMORY COLLECTIONS

MAXXI (Rome): Didascalie in Collezione and the Caption as Shared Authorship

The MAXXI project explicitly frames the objective of Didascalie in Collezione as “ambitious”: to make young people feel more actively and consciously engaged with art, while removing barriers to museum content — even though

the museum's physical locations were difficult to access. The co-created value is produced through a structured form of participation: students are not simply encouraged to respond; they are instructed to write captions for their fellow students, and those captions are integrated into the museums communicable texts (MAXXI, 2021). In the documentation, the authorship and care provided by the project are also clearly identifiable. The booklets assign responsibility to MAXXI's Education department and define the project as a designed pedagogical method — and not as a single, isolated workshop. It is in the documentation that goal achievement is made tangible: the captions are durable records and therefore, student interpretations are preserved as part of the museums institutional memory, and not lost as “engagement.”

Centre Pompidou (Paris): When Visitor Memory Becomes Museum Record

At Centre Pompidou, the most liquid-heritage-oriented move is transforming visitor experience into a retained medium. *Hors série: Centre Pompidou sentimental* is “the visitors’ podcast,” comprising hundreds of voice messages that collectively provide a sensitive portrait of the museum as experienced by those who have visited it (Centre Pompidou, 2025). The co-created value here is immediate and affective: memories, confidences and personal narratives become publishable cultural material. The project achieves its goal insofar as the museum both requests voices and includes them in its institutional podcast ecosystem, creating a durable and repeatable form of participation (Centre Pompidou, n.d.).

London Museum: Participatory Collecting as Co-Authored Heritage

There is another form of co-creation specific to Europe during the COVID-19 era: Participatory Collecting is based on transforming public experience into collection material. The London Museum frames *Collecting Covid* with an unusually clear metric of success, noting that it rapidly collected over 600 objects and experiences to document the pandemic's effects on Londoners and create a record for future generations (London Museum, 2020). Here, the co-created value is produced through a deliberately-designed intake of lived experience — objects, stories, digital trails — so that daily life under crisis becomes institutional memory. The goal (to create a comprehensive record) is fulfilled by the stated scale of the project and the project's inclusion in collections work; the long-term viability of the project is dependent upon continued stewardship and interpretive use of the material, however, the infrastructure is explicitly collections-focused rather than campaign-focused (London Museum, 2020).

ASIA: SCALING HYBRID ENCOUNTERS THROUGH PLATFORMS, LIVE CO-PRESENCE, AND URBAN INTERFACES

Mori Art Museum (Tokyo): From Emergency Programming to a Named, Post-Covid Institutional Layer

Mori's decision to formally establish an online presence is significant because it rejects treating online activity as a temporary fix. In June 2020, the museum announced that the online programming established during the closure will be called "MAM Digital," and will continue as "an essential component of our post-COVID-19 operations" (Mori Art Museum, 2020). That statement does much more than provide a plan for future online activities. It represents a commitment to durability, and the co-created value lies in the museum's focus on educational formats that foster continued dialogue. The same announcement identifies two other areas of ongoing development at the museum, including MAM Screen Special Online Screenings and learning online, which includes "Meet the Artists," suggesting that the museum wants to ensure not only that visitors will have access to artwork, but also that visitors will have access to the social space of interpretation, meeting, listening, questioning, and being spoken to. Since Mori has made its purpose clear, the success or failure of the project can be measured in terms of whether the museum successfully transitions from closure-time improvisation to a durable institutional medium.

M+ (Hong Kong): The Facade as a City-Scale Interface Where Publics "Play Together"

M+ expands the hybrid frame beyond the walls of the museum to the city itself. The M+ Facade is presented as a surface that offers "moments of play, humor, poetry, intellectual reflection, and meditative contemplation," with "participatory and performative screenings" that involve the audience through digital platforms (M+, 2022). This is critical to the framework you propose because it defines the museum not as a building that occasionally broadcasts outwards, but as a public interface: an urban medium, a public interface whose "audience" includes people walking past the museum, people watching remotely, and people participating through their mobile phones. Moniker (an Amsterdam-based studio) and its commissioned work *Touch for Luck*, make the co-created value legible in terms of mechanisms: the work "connects you to your phone" and allows you to "link up with others who are tapping their own screens at the same time" (M+, 2022). It is an invitation to experience sociality as a synchronized gesture—touching, holding, not releasing—the smallest actions of the body transformed into a collective situation. Success in achieving the goals of the project are supported by the project's own framing: an interactive piece intended to reflect "cooperative online presence" and the mechanisms of social platforms. The fact that the museum documents both "what the project is about" and "how to participate" indicates that the objective is not to view passively, but to participate actively (M+, 2022).

MMCA (Korea): Watch and Chill as a Platform That Tests Hybridity by Design — Then Repeats

Watch and Chill, MMCA's online streaming service, is the most prominent example of an Asian case that explicitly plans for the viability of its projects. According to the museum, Watch and Chill is a subscription-based platform and is intended to “re-establish the relationship between online experience and physical exhibition” and to develop a methodological approach to curation that addresses the limits of both (MMCA, 2023). The co-created value is developed not primarily through crowd-sourced content, but through institutional collaborations across multiple publics: Season 3 of Watch and Chill is collaborating with TONO (Mexico City), Peabody Essex Museum, and the National Gallery of Victoria to choose works and present them both online and in physical exhibitions. To the extent that Watch and Chill performs as it intends—to create online access as a central condition and to present a physical counterpart in order to test the hierarchy of these modes, not simply to duplicate exhibitions—this goal is achieved. And in terms of the durability test, this case is unusually strong: since the museum itself presents Watch and Chill as a multi-year effort, with changing regional partnerships each season, this suggests that the project is viable as a repeatable grammar, not as a singular response to the pandemic (MMCA, 2023).

NORTH AMERICA: BUILDING DIGITAL COMMONS, COLLECTION GOVERNANCE, AND DURABLE LEARNING SYSTEMS**San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA): Embedding Co-Created Value in Collections Infrastructure Through Artist Self-Authorship**

SFMOMA's most enduring contribution is infrastructural: the museum has redesigned the museum's collection knowledge to enable artists to contribute to the way they are represented. SFMOMA presents The Artist Identities Data Program as an internal collaborative effort to ensure ethical stewardship of identity information and improve institutional practices (SFMOMA, 2022). As such, this represents a powerful form of co-created value since it occurs at the level at which museums create meaning: the database record, the language of documentation, the metadata that accompanies the label, scholarship, and the eventual interpretation of the work. SFMOMA's stated purpose — ethical stewardship of identity data and improved institutional practice — is realized to the degree that the program is formalized and continued, rather than being abandoned as a short-term experiment. The museum's own update notes that the program was initiated in late 2020 and subsequently became an ongoing program, signaling institutionalization (SFMOMA, 2022). Therefore, the viability of the project is particularly robust relative to the liquid-heritage framework, since the co-created value is inscribed into the museum's collections governance and therefore designed to endure as long as the museum maintains its records (SFMOMA, 2022; SFMOMA, 2023).

Barnes Foundation: VXP as a Post-Covid Learning Medium Designed for Co-Created Looking

Finally, to ground this section in the domain of contemporary art museums while illustrating a different model of durable co-created value, the Barnes Foundation is particularly relevant because it conceives of learning as a design problem — specifically, how to preserve close observation and discussion when the classroom has moved online. In 2025, the Barnes Foundation introduced the Visual Experience Platform (VXP) as a purpose-designed vehicle for teaching visual materials online — developed in response to the museum’s transition to virtual classrooms in 2020 and described as a platform that can support greater engagement than generic video platforms (Barnes Foundation, 2025). The co-created value in this instance is produced through the structured practice of interpretation: learners actively navigate images, zoom, compare, and discuss, generating meaning collectively in a designed environment as opposed to passively consuming it. The stated institutional objective of the project is realized inasmuch as the platform is not only sustained but adopted beyond the Barnes Foundation itself. The viability of the project is thus embedded in the project’s trajectory: it transitions from providing emergency continuity to serving as a shared infrastructure.

The Case Study Analysis Conclusion

Liquid heritage appears across European, Asian and North American contexts where museums create the conditions for co-authorship, and decide which of the encounters will be preserved. When museums’ hybrid ‘frames’ evolve into interfaces, platforms, captions, podcasts and data protocols, the question of heritage transforms from which objects are retained, to which roles, voices, and records are retained as part of an institution’s memory.

The three comparative analytical patterns that emerge from the study are:

- 1) Co-created value can increase significantly if participation is created as a role and not simply as engagement. Examples include MAXXI’s user-authored captions; Centre Pompidou’s podcasts produced through visitor dialogue; SFMOMA’s governance of visitor identity data; Barnes’ VXP learning interface; M+’s simultaneous urban participation; and MMCA’s collaborative use of platforms all make “co-creation” functional by creating a medium (a label, a podcast production process, a database protocol, a learning tool, a building façade interactive element, or a platform) to support its execution.
- 2) Projects have success when their intentions are transformed from a singular output to a functioning system. This is evident when projects develop formats that consistently develop into repeatable structures— i.e., Mori’s developed layers of institutionalized online activity, MMCA’s seasonal platform-based logic, and Barnes’ platform based educational model—through which participants have consistent access to participate and interpret project activities with clear institutional accountability.
- 3) The viability of a project over time is the primary distinction between hybrid experience and patrimony. A project has liquid heritage when

the project's traces are re-usable and/or re-enterable over time through the development of subsequent editions, maintenance, and governance; examples of this include MAXXI's multiple edition strategy, MMCA's seasonally-based approach, M+'s ongoing facade programming, SFMOMA's integrated collections strategy.

Table 1: Comparative synthesis of co-creation, system achievement, and viability in hybrid museum case-study analysis.

Comparative Finding	What Museums Do	What Remains as "Liquid Heritage"
Co-produced value	Give publics an author role (not "engagement")	Authored traces (captions, voices, inputs)
Goals achieved	Turn intent into a repeatable system	Stable formats (platforms, pipelines, protocols)
Viability over time	Design for the afterlife (maintenance/governance)	Re-enterable records (editions, seasons, long-term access)

Ultimately, the case studies provide further refinement of the original framework; liquid heritage is liquid in terms of circulation and co-authorship, however, in order for it to become patrimony, institutions must plan for the afterlife of participation so that the co-created meaning does not dissolve into a temporary form of engagement.

RESEARCH LIMITATION AND FURTHER DIRECTION

This research paper begins by suggesting that museums have traditionally acted as an apparatus of attention and authority — dividing art from the ordinary, and intensifying contemplation. Over the last few decades — and especially over the last decade due to pandemic-related lockdowns — the "framing" of the museum experience has expanded and proliferated rather than contracted; it now encompasses not only physical space, but also digital infrastructure, programs, organizational protocol, and hybrids of both that determine how one encounters, interprets, and remembers cultural values. The comparative aspect of this research offers the paper's primary contributions — theoretically and practically — as follows: Liquid Heritage will assist in distinguishing between (a) hybrid experiences that attract attention and (b) hybrid forms of media that create heritage, through the consideration of duration and institutional retention as essential analytical elements. Due to constraints of scope, this study does not consider the full range of local histories, governance models, and infrastructural conditions under which institutions operate. Additionally, this study does not quantify how individual digital frameworks restructure participation, consent, and retention in relation to the museum. Future studies would be beneficial in expanding the analytical framework to other global regions in order to assess the extent to which the patterns observed above may differ across context and whether co-produced values remain as shared patrimony or become ephemeral signals.

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