

# Museums in 2020

Barco panel discussion with industry experts

**Barco sits down with four experts in the museum and themed venues industry to talk about their experiences during the global lockdown, how they see the future and what role museum technology will play in the next years.**

## The panelists



**Arnold van de Water** is partner at Factorr, a creative consultancy agency, founded in 2005, that provides global services in Strategy, Spatial Concepts, and Transformations. In addition, Arnold is acting as general manager of the Meet Vincent van Gogh Experience for the Van Gogh Museum. With over 15 years of experience in the arts and culture and touring exhibitions sectors, Arnold believes in using technology to create more personalized experiences and immersive storytelling.



**Dave Patten** is Head of New Media at The Science Museum, London, where his role includes managing all aspects of new media and AV, from conceptual design, prototyping and production to project managing external developers and production companies. He has a background in electronics and computer science, and has worked at the Science Museum for over 30 years, developing exhibitions and leading development teams. Dave Patten runs the Science Museum Groups Digital Lab Initiative which experiments in emerging technologies and visitor experiences.



Global thought leader, speaker, creative strategist, founder and director of Molten Immersive Art, **Dorothy Di Stefano** leads a collective of experiential artists who create large-scale, site-specific, digital immersive experiences. As an ambassador and consultant for the arts and with 20 years' experience, Dorothy sits on many cultural committees and is the International Partner representing Australia in the Global Startup Leaders committee of the World Business Angels Investment Forum (WBAF). Awarded LinkedIn's Top Voice for 2019, Dorothy has a worldwide following on this platform which she uses to highlight the importance and impact of art on our world and to showcase global artists to a business-focused community.



**Hilary McVicker** is Communicatrix at The Elumenati – a title that would translate to VP of Sales and Marketing at most companies. The Elumenati are thought leaders in the field of immersive projection design, creating innovative applications in education, enterprise and entertainment. Partners and clients range from NASA and NOAA to Dreamworks and Deloitte. Hilary has managed collaborative projects for The Elumenati with leading museums from the California Academy of Sciences to the American Museum of Natural History, with a focus on incorporating technology to create transformative learning experiences.

**Barco: We love to bring people together, especially in these days, so I'm glad that you are joining from all corners of the world. The initial plan to set up a panel discussion with museum industry experts originated back in January. But a lot has changed since January. So let's tackle this elephant in the room, and talk COVID. How lasting will the impact be of this current health crisis?**

Dave: It's hard to judge. I suspect we will see some societal fundamental shifts, but it's hard to predict what those will be at the moment. The most important thing is whether we'll manage to get a vaccine. Because the impact partly depends on if there are further waves of the virus coming and what the societal impact of those will be. Because every time a new wave hits, it has the potential to change the way people live or respond to things.

Arnold: I agree, it's too early to define how substantial and permanent the new situation will be. What I find remarkable is the global differences in dealing with these turbulent times. In the western parts of the world, we never had this setback since the second World War. But in Asia, this is the third time in 2 decades they've been hit with a virus. We're shutting down entire countries with the idea that 'one stop fits all'. While they're putting temporary measures in place in certain areas, which they can reopen as soon as the situation allows. In terms of flexibility, they're ahead of us.

**Barco: And to ask the most frequently asked question of 2020: what will the new normal look like in museums?**

Hilary: A lot of what we do is about shared experiences and bringing people together, which is a tricky thing to promote these days. However, it is what people are yearning for. People are ready for it. Museums need to find a way to balance the basic need for connection, on the one hand, and the fear that people have coming out of this period. It's for museums and any public spaces, to be extremely responsible and create safe space.

Dave: Our museum been closed for 89 days now, and we won't reopen until middle of august, early September. As Arnold points out, we haven't been closed for any length of time since the second World War. Everything is closed up. And it will be complicated to reopen the museum. We need our estate teams to go in and recommission the water systems and the power systems, our ICT department must recommission the networks and the conservation team needs to go in and check if the collections are still in good condition. Almost certainly when we'll turn the water back on, bits will leak, because bits of the water system are hundred years old. We're working through all the exhibitions. Looking at what can open as is, what needs to change with COVID-proof regulations. We have a fairly major task, just to get to the point when we can let the people in. Given enough money and resources, we can make museums safe. A bigger issue is the public perception of safety.

Dorothy: Communication will play a big part in this. Disney Shanghai, for example, invited journalists to report on cleanliness days before reopening. They hit social media with these reports to convince people they're ready to welcome them back.

Dave: Yes, but it's not enough to just make statements to visitors that your venue is super safe. Seeing is believing. Before, all this cleaning used to be done behind the scenes; but now people want to see cleaning happening before their eyes. It's almost a theater of cleaning.

**Barco: What is the importance of technology in this post-COVID museum experience? Are there any new things that you have seen these last few months?**

Arnold: There's so much innovation going on right now, and I like it! It really shows the resilience of our industry. One thing I've heard of, is a Belgian company which has created a UV disinfection device to clean and sanitize wearables or tools that are being used to interact with museum visitors, like audio guides.

Dave: We did some research in the past looking at how people use phones in and out of museums. The barriers are many and people are not that keen on using them. I suspect this might change, as it's the one thing that is yours. You know it's safe because only you were touching it. We built some exhibits in the past with interfaces on mobile phones, and it's one thing we've got listed to test when getting back into the museum.

Hilary: Technology is going to have a huge role to play. We've been approached by several parties about touchless interfaces, for instance. COVID is going to be the impetus to move forward and develop these technologies to make them applicable for museums and any public venue.

Dorothy: It's exciting to see how creativity is front of mind at the moment. However, I'm cautious of diving into touchless equipment. Our primary instinct is to touch things, it's what we did as children.

Hilary: I agree, it is complicated. You really need to design a user experience around it. Not just throw it in, because you can, but create an experience that makes sense and that supports the story you want to tell. As you should do with any kind of technology actually.

Arnold: One lesson to get out of COVID is the creativity. We've talked about technologies that change the visitor experience, but a large number of museums didn't even know how to co-work with teams from a distance. The current situation has sped up the embedding of basic communication and collaboration technologies. There's no option to delay, you need to embrace the change now.

**Barco: What about virtualizing the experience? I noticed some museums offering a virtual walk through their exhibition. Is this a permanent trend in a new visitor journey?**

Dave: You can visit the Science Museum in Google Street View, but it's not what people are doing. If you want to extend the visitor journey with an online experience, is just duplicating the physical structure of your museums really the best way to access that content? It probably isn't. One of the ways we try to use digital is to give an approximation of the curatorial experience. Getting a personal tour by the curator is a special experience, because they will read you as people and understand the stories you're interested in. You can give every person a digital experience, but the question is how can you get close to that personalized experience.

Dorothy: Indeed, online needs to complement the in-person experience. Not just a digital copy of what you see when you're there, but a bit more behind-the-scenes. That's what online content should be.

Arnold: I absolutely agree. It's interesting to see that a lot of museums are forced to rethink themselves. Some think "if I replicate my gallery online, I'm accessible"; other, often smaller institutions, find creative ways to extend the journey and tell the story in a new format.

**Barco: Have you intensified your online activities during the last months? And is it useful to do so?**

Dave: We already had very large online footprint before, so we didn't rush to get more stuff out there. We didn't follow that instinctive reaction to get everything out there asap, but really thought things through. Quality over quantity. We also reevaluated information people find on other websites, like Wikipedia, to ensure an accurate representation of our content and objects.

**Barco: Related to that, there's an abundance of information available online on other websites too. Do you feel the need to compete with that online content? And do you see visitor rates dropping because of that?**

Dorothy: I don't think so. The online experience is very different to walking into the museum and seeing real-life dinosaur bones. There is still that need to engage and interact with something that is not online. You never have that experience online. Also, the museum visit is a curated experience, you're not just scrolling and drowning in information.

Dave: What Dorothy says is so true. There's no comparison between looking at the image of an iconic object and standing next to it. It's still a special thing to be in proximity of things. That's not changing. On the contrary, people want to engage even more with the physical and tangible things, because already so much of our lives is spend in front of screen and online. And more importantly, most people don't come to museums wanting to find out about a particular thing. They come because they want an entertaining day out and for the majority of the people it's a social experience. The web is not at all good at replicating those intimate social experiences.

**Barco: What are your thoughts on the shift from education to entertainment in museums? Do you see that trend accelerating to attract audiences back to the visitor attractions?**

Dorothy: I don't know if you can separate the two. Entertainment is crucial to the education process. But you don't just want it for its entertaining value...

Dave: It's a constant conversation we have. People believe education and fun are two extremes. We don't see it like that at all. We always mix the two together. For example, we've had a screening of the movie Dunkirk. It's not a science film, but there's an interesting aspect of science and technology behind the production of that movie. We also brought in the special effects people who did some expert talks preceding the screening. It really inspired the young audiences.

Hilary: I'd say that it's the relation between education and engagement. I can explain an artifact to you, but it's a different experience if you can interact with it. My roots lie in the game industry. Not so long ago, you needed a team of ten developers to make content interactive. Today these tools are very accessible. Coming from that interactive industry and bringing these technologies from the broad entertainment world to new applications can be beneficial for museums. It has a lot of potential to transform the engagement levels.

**Barco: Talking about the influence of other industries. Do you often reach out to other corporates when searching for new creative solutions to fit in your project?**

Arnold: Yes, we've worked with international media partners and technology partners to make certain education programs more accessible in other regions. As long as these collaborations don't endanger the museum's mission and core message, then why not. I do think there's a difference in museums in terms of being open to new ideas. Science & natural history museums have the drive towards innovative technology, it's in their DNA. Whereas, art museums traditionally tend to be more conservative. However, I believe that crossing borders within our industry and outside, can only fuel the creativity. I have a background in the live entertainment and theater industry. I always try to incorporate things I've learned from large festival or concerts into the world of museums, especially with touring exhibitions.

Dave: In terms of exhibit ideas, I'm always looking to other industries like high-end retail, theme parks, event industry... When I'm running sessions, I'll always invite people from other sectors. I don't just want a museum voice in the room, that's not taking us to an interesting place, that takes us to somewhere I already know and understand. If you only ever looked at museums, you'll only get what museums already do.

**Barco: There is this traditional image of a certain type of people visiting the museum. How do you see this changing? Or what can museums do to reach other demographics?**

Arnold: The question is if we're staying within museum walls. We created these intimidating temples, we call museums. And a large number of people don't go there because they just think it's not for them. What we should do is move to non-traditional spaces, presenting an authentic museum experience in a different format and on different locations. Like we see happening with touring exhibitions or pop-up museums. It might be a challenge, but I'm convinced it creates opportunities to reach new audiences. The Vincent van Gogh experience, for example, is a touring exhibition which allows us to not just show copies of the artworks, but also to tell the story of the artist in a different way than we would normally do in a fine arts museum. We can tell it in a way that attracts new people.

Dave: Visitors to museums, certainly in the UK, tend to be mainly white middle-class and educated people. Reaching other demographics is really tricky. Museums need to do much more to take the experiences to where the people are, rather than to expect them to come your venue. I agree with what Arnold says: increasingly the museum experiences will happen outside the walls of the museums. We're currently working on an interesting research project to exhibit local collections in empty shops in high streets. The aim is to offer a snackable museum experience on locations where people are already doing other things. We've done some travelling exhibitions, and now we also produce blueprints packs which we send via WeTransfer link to local museums. It's a more sustainable way of international exhibitions. We don't ship anything, but send these local museums our research, digital interactives, software, suggested plans to build the exhibition and a suggested technology list. They can use this series of instructions and content, and personalize it to their own local perspective. So it's not a London-centric view. It's really proving to be popular, as it's cheaper and has that level of local personalization.

**Barco: And what about recurrent audiences. What does it take to get someone to come back to your museum? Or is this not really an issue?**

Hilary: The democratization of content development tools is really useful to keep your content evergreen. You have access to these agile tools to regularly renew the experience and involve topical themes and current events in your exhibition. Which allows people to come back and see something new every time.

Dave: I'd say it depends on the type and location of your museum. For big national museums, a high percentage of their visitors are tourists. Tourists don't come back. They come once and you're ticked off their bucket list. Constantly changing exhibitions might work for digital virtual exhibitions, but are more complex for other museums. And then there's another challenge. People want museums to be constantly different and changing, except(!) for the things they love. They want those things to be the same for their children and grandchildren. And the things people love is different for everybody. So we're constantly battling with the challenge to satisfy that demand while also staying fresh.

Hilary: Another great tip is the organization of additional events in the museum space. People are coming to those events and see something amazing. Later they'll come back to share that 'something' with friends or family. It's a way to engage and attract audiences.

Dave: Agree, we also organize commercial activities in the museum. But we always try to align them with the cultural program of the museum. So they're part of museum, not just money-making things dumped in the museum space.

Arnold: Having various sources of incomes, makes you more resilient – especially in scenarios like the current situation. The Van Gogh Museum largely depends on inbound tourism. That's 89 % of international visitors that can't get to the museum right now. But the museum has diversified its economic mission and they really thought about having multiple touch points with their customers: one day it's in the museum, then it's online, and later internationally when the exhibition travels to other countries.

**Barco: We talked about touchless interfaces, virtual tours and digital content tools. What other interesting technologies do you see entering the museum world?**

Dorothy: I believe in the future we'll be engaging people with as many of five senses as possible, including smell and audio. Audio is crucial, it's like watching a movie without sound effects. It really distracts from the whole experience. And from an interactive perspective, there so many studies that bringing those extra elements in the mix will increase retention, engagement and enjoyment.

Dave: I'm also experimenting with audio immersive experiences. Audio has the ability to really take you to different places. In Manchester, for example, we have the National Railway Museum. We want to bring that nostalgic atmosphere to live by taking them to a point in time wandering through the sounds of the past. Smell and taste are slightly more problematic or complex but working with audio landscapes is the first step.

Hilary: When it comes to visualization technologies, we need to keep an eye open for LED displays as an alternative to projection. LED technology has come a long way, and will become increasingly important for large immersive installations. Additionally, I also see a huge potential in mixed reality technologies and multiplayer interactive technology, like group VR.

Dave: VR is a technology which allows us as a museum to make content about objects in our collection. It's not just an aircraft it's about that specific aircraft in our collection. It's about that Hurricane that was in the Battle of Britain, rather than a generic Hurricane. That's important, because we're about being authentic, and it's easier to make authentic experiences if they're about an actual object. It also shifts the way people look at objects, engaging them into the background story.

Dorothy: On the other hand, Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality tend to be solitary experiences. Visitors are caught up in their headsets or looking at their screens and are not engaging with others. It should always be used in combination to support your narrative. Not just tech for tech.

***Barco: Is that the key to using technology? Supporting the story you want to tell?***

Dorothy: Technology should be invisible. It's always about your narrative! For an artist too, the most critical thing when using technology is its reliability. There's nothing worse than getting ready to launch something that looks absolutely amazing, and then the equipment doesn't work... Poor technology and poor quality, really disconnect people from the experience you've envisioned.

Hilary: I second that very strongly. A huge part of our philosophy is that if the technology does its job, it disappears. You want people to remember the story, and technology is there to serve that. Technology is there to make the experience amazing and efficient. It doesn't matter how cool it all looks, if the technology is down, no one is going to see it. The key is to be thoughtful and make sure we're not diving in technology blindly, but ensuring that it supports the narrative, the engagement and the overall experience.

Dave: And, I third that as well. If technology fades into the background, it's because it's doing its job very well. I'd love for tech to disappear. I'd love for museums not to be full of screens. Not that we should eliminate the potential digital can bring, but it may never dominate the experience. It's disappointing if people cluster around the screens, but don't look at the actual real object the screen is talking about. I'd love to find a way for that not to happen. But hey, digital is still relatively new and it's changing at such a rapid pace that we're still learning what works and what doesn't. I've read the biography of the Science Museum's first director in which he documents discussions with his curatorial team in about writing museum labels. The labels the curators were writing were too complicated, too long and not appropriate for the public audience. That's 1920, and we still have those exact same arguments. We're still bad at it. We'll write labels that are not interesting, or just blindingly obvious. We still struggle with most basic thing, so why would we think that digital comes in and is fully formed and ready. It's still finding its place, and we're still learning.

Arnold: It's not possible to do everything right from the get-go. And just to conclude, some territories are still not equipped for the digital aspect.

***Barco: Any final conclusions on the future of museums?***

Arnold: I see a bright future to engage with a lot of new audiences, and technology will be huge strike behind this. It'll be interesting to look back at this conversation in 3 years from now. The immersive and digital landscape is still quite scattered. Personally, I see a lot of opportunities in hybrid technology solutions; exhibiting in the physical space and extending the journey online. It's not the only way forward, but that's the beauty of today: there are so many ways forward. There are so many options that you can pick and nurture to success.

Dorothy: People are combusting to get out and get back into cultural institutions. At what capacity that will be is still uncertain at the moment. Once we're back, I predict we're moving to a space where creative narratives are really important. And technology will definitely play a role to establish these immersive experiences.

Hilary: And to end on a more philosophical note, the AAM had a special session recently – because COVID is not the only cultural crisis, in the US we're really at a moment of reckoning – in which the Secretary of the Smithsonian aptly said that cultural institutions are better suited than most to define reality and give hope. And hope is what we need right now. This is moment for cultural institutions to provide what we need as society.