

# The Museum that Leaps over The Physical Wall:

## *Museum Practices in Japan Under the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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### Abstract

Under the pandemic COVID-19, museums around the world are facing unprecedented challenges. This paper focuses on the museums in Japan and traces their practices between around February 2020 and March 2021. It presents a timeline of changes in the museum scene with along the spread of the Virus in the country and the policies, particularly the declarations of “State of Emergency.” To open to the public, an inherent purpose of a museum, becomes questionable when physical gatherings are undesirable with higher risk of virus spread and it is more expensive to remain open with much less visitors. This paper offers three cases studies of practices of crowdfunding campaigns, livestreaming of exhibitions, and a virtual reality exhibition. It argues that the conflicting agendas are leading the museums to dilemmas, however, creativity and digital technology comes to the rescue to a certain extent.

**Keywords:** Museum, COVID-19, Crowdfunding, Digital Museum, Museum Engagement, Japan, Virtual Exhibition

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## Introduction

The museum has an inherent purpose to stay open to the public. This *raison d'être* however is facing challenges in the COVID-19 pandemic. As defined by the International Council of Museums, a museum is “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, *open to the public* (accentuated by the author), which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM, n.d.1). Due to the high infectious capacity among human and widespread of the COVID-19, a new coronavirus known as severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus-2, museums around the globe are experiencing “unprecedented times” as called by Christina Kreps (2020). The balance among the triad, i.e. public health, economic vibrancy, and a need for cultural and entertainment experiences, becomes precarious. Receiving the influence from both the pandemic and governmental policies to consolidate this balance, the museum shares the dilemma with other organizations such as education institutions and cultural enterprises involved in the industries of entertainment and tourism.

This paper analyzes museum practices in Japan under the pandemic COVID-19 with three case studies. Through tracing the museums' reactions during a one-year span between around February 2020 and March 2021, it analyzes the institutional measures to cope with the threat. It particularly focuses on three cases, i.e. crowd-funding campaigns, live streaming in cooperation with Niconico video site, and a virtual exhibition to demonstrate the museums' proactive attitudes towards incorporation of information technology to stay engaged and the strong support from partner corporations and individuals. It reveals the resilience of the museum with the assistance of creativity and digital technology and a transitioning museum model able and keen to leap over its physical wall.

## An Overview of the COVID-19 Situation and Museum Responses in Japan

After the first confirmations of “pneumonia of unknown cause” in December 2019, an outbreak around the turn of the year 2021, and the first lock-down in the world between January 22 and April 8, 2020 in Wuhan, China, the number of confirmed cases has reached 116 million with a death toll over 2.5 million by March 6, 2021 (Worldometer, 2021). Now given its name, the COVID-19 marks as an unprecedented virus in human history not because that the pandemic is unique. The Spanish Flu between 1918 and 1920 serves as another significant fight between human and virus in documented history. It is the two features of the twenty-first century, global mobility and wide availability of information technology, that have complicated the situation. The mobility is an issue, not only in spreading the virus, but also in that it is taken for granted; and economic activities, particularly, the tourism industry, depend highly on the mobility of human beings. The higher economic dependence on tourism, the larger damage this pandemic is creating on that specific geographic area. The digital technology, to be more specific, the prevalence of the internet and social networking services (SNS), enables rapid information exchange in which users are gaining both access to huge amount of information and agency to be a producer of information. It is easier to keep oneself updated of what is

happening at a geographically distanced place. Information spreads more rapidly and the differences among varying countries become more visualized than before the age of the Internet.

First only as a fire on the other side of the river, the new virus started its spread in Japan from early 2020. After the first case confirmed on January 15, 2020, the total number of confirmed cases now has reached 430,000 with a death toll over 8,000 (NHK, 2021). The first “declaration of the state of emergency” was announced by the Hokkaido Prefecture on February 28 followed by the Act on Special Measures Concerning COVID-19 promulgated on March 13 and two “declarations of state of emergency in response to the novel coronavirus disease” targeting at a wider area in the country between April 7 and May 25, 2020 and second started between January 7 and March 21, 2021.<sup>1</sup> The most densely populated cities and areas, Tokyo and its neighboring three prefectures, Saitama, Chiba and Kanagawa together with Osaka Prefecture have been confirmed with the highest numbers of infections in the country.

Compared with the lockdowns of the major cities in the U.S. and Europe, the measurements adopted by the central and local governments in Japan is a lot softer. On February 26, 2020, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan required the organizers of cultural events to cancel, postpone, or reduce their scale for two weeks, leading to closures of almost all the museums in the Japan (MEXT, 2020). During the first period of declaration of state of emergency between April and May 2020, schools, universities, libraries, and museums closed upon the governments’ request. During the second, the declaration mainly requiring the restaurants to close by 8 pm, many public places such as schools and museums have re-opened with all kinds of measures to prevent the virus spread. This trend of re-opening also echoes with that in the world (ICOM, 2020a & 2020b).

The announcement and messages from the central government have been criticized as unclear and lack consistency. The public has been requested to refrain from going-out for “*fuyo fukyu*,” meaning not needed and not urgent. Work from home and to stay home remain as slogans and it is out of the private organizations, firms, individual’s choice whether they would cooperate and to which degree they would answer to the governmental call. In addition to the ambiguity of “*fuyo fukyu*,” the “Go To Campaign” which encourages tourism and dining outside to invigorate economy was launched between the two “declarations of state of emergency” in the latter half of year 2020. The balance among the control of virus spread, economic recovery, and people’s need for social and cultural life and get-aways becomes extremely difficult to maintain. Adding to the already hardship, is the untimely international event, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games originally scheduled to be held in August-September 2020 and now postponed to 2021. With investment in both hard and soft infrastructure, Tokyo, Sapporo which would hold the marathon, and wider areas in Japan had a high expectation of economic returns particularly through the inbound tourism the megaevent would promise. Presently the smooth opening of the Games in this summer remains largely unclear, not to mention the economic returns.<sup>2</sup>

In this environment, museums in Japan have been facing severe challenges. The close-downs in the first half of 2020, shortened open hours and cancellation of exhibitions, particularly loan-based ones, led to a great drop in ticket revenue. Although whether museum visits are “*fuyo fukyu*” largely depends on one’s individual interpretation, the blockbuster exhibition of long tradition in Japan has lost many of its supporting grounds.<sup>3</sup> The cost of varying measurements to contain the virus spread such as online ticketing, acrylic boards, thermographic camera, antiseptic solutions, management of the staff’s health condition, additional work to monitor the visitors and guide the visitor routes, adds further financial and managerial burden.

The Pandemic is a crisis for the museum. ICOM has released a “statement on the necessity for relief funds” addressing the urgent need to salvage museums and their professionals (ICOM, n.d.2). The financial plight is however not a new issue for museums in Japan. After the construction boom that ended with the economic bubble in the late 1980s, the museums in the country of which number reaches 2,700 are facing a “winter season,” or even the “ice age” (Suginaga, 2016; Fukagawa, 2018). It is a hostile winter in that financial vigor is constantly requested and competition with other cultural or entertainment enterprises is fierce. The cost to maintain the buildings and facilities in need of maintenance or renovation and stable employment is pressing, on which governmental funding becomes less countable.

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, a few legislations mark a shift of the governmental attitude towards museum management from heavy-handed to hands-off. One is the Act on General Rules for Incorporated Administrative Agency (*Dokuritsu gyousei hojinho*; hereafter abbreviated as IAA Act) that creates an impact on the management of the national museums. Born in the late 1990s climate of economic recession and a pressing need to re-evaluate the efficiency of government performance, the Basic Law on the Administrative Reform of the Central Government (*Chuoshochoto kaikaku kihonho*) was released in 2001 (Kato, et al, 2006:16-17; MIC, 2007). Introduced as a part of this reform, IAA reorganizes the national museums and research institutions as the Incorporated Administrative Agencies, a new identity between public and private sectors. The IAAs still receive financial support from the government but are expected to “shift from heavy-handed budgeting to a more independent budget making” (Tomooka, et al, 2002:57). The reform aims at not only improving the institutions’ administrative efficiency and downsizing the central government, but also encouraging funding from sources outside the government (Kato, et.al, 2006:16-17).

In addition to the IAA Act, another law, the Designated Administrator System (*Shitei kanrisha seido*; hereafter abbreviated as DAS), also reveals a hands-off approach of the government but on a more local level. Introduced as a part of the Local Autonomy Law (*Chiho jichiho*) in 2003, this system establishes a new administration model of public institutions established by local authorities including cultural facilities such as halls, theaters, and museums. Taking a further step from the 1991 Usage Fee System (*Rioryokin seido*) which allows the “third sector,” or a

mix of public and private funders or administrators, to take a proportion from the institutional revenues, the DAS allows the appointed organizations including private foundations and companies to carry out full managerial role for a designated period of time (Katayama, 2007:1-29). In 2013, 27.5% of public museums had introduced in the DAS (Suginaga, 2016). Despite the varying nature of the establishers and managerial body, to create funding mosaic from multiple sources outside the governmental subsidy, particularly self-generated revenue, is a shared agenda for the museums in Japan in the twenty-first century. The COVID-19 pandemic is in a way accelerating the museums' financial re-structuring.

### **Under the COVID-19 Situation: Three Cases of Museum Practices in Japan**

The COVID-19 has led to changes in museums around the worlds. While the negative news reports on staff laid-offs and permanent close-downs, some other reveal positive changes such as the expanding digital engagement. Two examples are "The Met Unframed" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and "Animal Crossing Art Generator" by Getty followed by other museum institutions. The former utilized augmented reality to allow smartphone users to display virtually some images of a few collections of the Museum. The latter, "Animal Crossing Art Generator" allows the game players of Nintendo Switch game, "Animal Crossing," to decorate their virtual islands with images of art works made available by the museums and cultural institutions.<sup>4</sup> The following will focus on three case of museum practices in Japan, crowdfunding, live streaming of museum tours, and a virtual exhibition.

#### ***Crowdfunding: Turning Financial Plight into Opportunities***

The pandemic of COVID-19 has led to a plunge in museum visitor number. For example, the exhibition "STARS: Six Contemporary Artists from Japan to the World" at the Mori Art Museum had only achieved half of its expected visitation (Toyo Keizai, 2021). The Report of Fiscal Year 2020 of National Institutes for Cultural Heritage including the national museums confirms a 15% drop in their ordinary income from the previous year, mainly caused by the decrease in the exhibition ticket revenue (National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, 2021:29).

The drastic decrease in profit from tickets and other services urges the museum to make more efforts in generating revenue and some have turned to crowdfunding. The following four museums, all private, launched crowdfunding campaigns in 2020 out of revenue loss due to the COVID-19. The Meguro Parasitological Museum is a small-scaled museum founded in 1953 dedicated to parasitology. Established by the gallerist Watari Shizuko in 1990, the Watarium Museum of Contemporary Art is one devoted to contemporary art. The Yamatane Museum of art founded by the industrialist Yamazaki Taneji in 1966 is famous for its collection of *nihonga* Japanese modern paintings. Established by Ohara Magosaburo in 1930, the Ohara Museum of Art is the first private art museum in Japan. Except the Ohara Museum of Art which is located in Kurashiki, Okayama Prefecture, the other three are located in inner Tokyo. Figure 1 summarizes their crowdfunding information.

| Museum  | Crowdfunding Period                                     | Platform  | Goal (JPY) | Number of Funders | Fund Achieved (JPY) |
|---|---|-----------|------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Meguro Parasitological Museum (Abbreviated as Parasitological Museum) | August 15-31, 2020 (donation stays open to the present) | Home-page | 5,000,000  | 1,724             | 10,037,643          |
| Watarium Museum of Contemporary Art (Abbreviated as Watarium)         | August 26 - October 30, 2020                            | CAMPFIRE  | 5,000,000  | 1,515             | 21,601,100          |
| Yamatane Museum of Art (Abbreviated as Yamatane)                      | October 7 - December 14, 2020                           | READYFOR  | 5,000,000  | 872               | 13,109,000          |
| Ohara Museum of Art (Abbreviated as Ohara)                            | October 26 - December 25, 2020                          | READYFOR  | 10,000,000 | 1,704             | 23,155,000          |

Figure 1. Crowdfunding information of the four museums. (Data sources: Meguro Parasitological Museum, 2021; CAMPFIRE, n.d.; Yamatane Museum of Art, 2021; READYFOR, n.d.1).

The successful cases of crowdfunding reveal merits in creating and strengthening networks and enhancing the museums' public profile. With the exception of the Parasitological Museum which is thematically scientific and utilizes only its homepage to call for funds, the other three are art-related and collaborate with crowdfunding platforms. Yamatane and Ohara turn to READYFOR, the first venture company providing crowdfunding service established in 2011. Watarium uses the CAMPFIRE which followed READYFOR and was also founded in the same year. As the museums' partners, the professional crowdfunding platforms expand the usual communication channel of museums such as the homepages and SNS and excel in reaching a larger audience.

These crowdfunding campaigns function as a tool not only to raise funds vital for the museums' survival but also create and visualize the ties with the star figures and more general consumer/supporters, and communities. In addition to the reasons for the financial needs and planned usage of the gathered funds, their pages also introduce the histories and distinguishing features of the museums, packages of tickets and goods as "returns" and tax incentives. The packages of goods with along tax incentives also share similarity with the *furusato nozei* (paying tax to the hometown) system started in 2008, allowing one to choose which local areas they would like to financially support as a way of paying tax and receive the local specialties as returns. The "returns" mobilize the "supporters" as consumers rather than just good-willed donors. This transition from audience to consumers echoes with the analysis by the museum studies scholar Murata Mariko (2014). Reports on how the funds have been used and news about the museums are also shared among the supporters, consolidating the transparency of the use of the funds and confirming the "public" as the stakeholders. In addition, after the end of the

campaign, Watarium publicizes the supporters on its website, including the contemporary artist Nawa Kohei, musician Sakamoto Ryuichi, industrialist Toyama Masamachi, and architect Fujimoto Sosuke (Watarium Museum of Contemporary Art, 2020). Yamatane's READYFOR page includes the messages of support from the artists such as Murakami Takashi and Senju Hiroshi, and renowned art journalists, politicians, and actors and actresses (READYFOR, n.d.2). A kind of "Art Worlds" as termed by the American sociologist Howard S. Becker ([1982] 2008) becomes visualized through the media/crowdfunding campaigns.

The crowdfunding thus serves not only as a financial means but also as a promotion strategy. These campaigns are not only out of a long pressing need for the museums to secure multiple financial sources and particularly to survive in this crisis of the pandemic, but also "museum events" in which the museum directors, star artists, and celebrities attract social attention and the general public is invited to become the museums' patrons. Serious financial plight is turned into an opportunity to create and enhance the networks with the existing and new stakeholders.

#### *Collaborating with Niconico - Broadcasting Exhibitions and Museums Live and Creating Co-Viewing Experience*

Another responsive practice, also a collaboration with the existing digital platforms, is "Niconico Bijutsukan (Niconico Art Museum, abbreviated as Nicobi)." Providing live streamed tours of museum exhibition, Nicobi is one program offered by Niconico, a video-sharing site founded in 2006. This specific program was started in January 2016, inheriting a predecessor one between May 2012 and January 2013 produced by the art department of Niconico. It. The videos are also saved in its archive accessible afterwards. By March 6, 2021, Nicobi has produced more than sixty programs in wide-spanning genres including exhibitions of art, history, science, and religious events and tours of temples. More than forty were produced after March 2020, meaning that the COVID-19 situation has greatly accelerated its production speed. Probably the program producers saw a rising market need.

When the first declaration of state of emergency was announced on February 26, 2020 and the museums closed their doors answering the governmental request, Nicobi released a timely call to the museums on February 28. It was a plan to cover all the cost to live broadcast the exhibitions that the general public would not be able to physically visit (Niconico news, 2020). Most of the programs are about two-hour-and-a-half in the length and hosted by Hashimoto Mari, a prolific writer on art, and attended by the curators and scholars, explicating the backstage of the exhibition planning and details on the exhibits. Although media programs featuring on art and art exhibitions are not new in Japan with the NHK's television program "*Nichiyo bijutsukan* (Sunday Art Museum)" started in 1972 serving as an early and representative case, Nicobi distinguishes from the print media and radio and TV programs in its live format and *danmaku* comments, invigorating a co-viewing or visiting experience. Although the visual quality of the videos cannot compete with those of the program "Sunday Art Museum" and real visits, the programs are rich in the content with humorous explanations by the knowledgeable Hashimoto,

museum curators, and experts whom a usual museum visitor may not have much chance to meet and talk with. *Danmaku*, or “bullet curtain,” a feature of Niconico, allows the registered users to “shoot” their comments live and the spectators of the live can read the comments on the screen with a short time lag. In addition, Hashimoto and the staff endeavor to enhance the synchronicity by turning to *danmaku* from time to time to collect the comments and questions from the viewers. This synchronicity enabled by technology and the staff’s efforts creates a virtual space in which the exhibits, hosts, and the viewers co-present.

This synchronic virtual co-presence became all the more valuable during the closure of the museums. The first program features a tour of “The Tradition of Edo Creativity: The Skill and Soul of Craftsmen Give Birth to Japanese Beauty” at the Edo-Tokyo Museum and its exhibition, live broadcast on March 10, 2020. The exhibition, originally scheduled between February 8 and April 5, 2020, unfortunately met the emergency declaration and extension leading to the Museum’s closure between February 28 and June 2. It was only able to open to the public only for the first three weeks of its original schedule. This Nicobi offered a chance for the Exhibition to be seen by more. It was among the most popular programs with 32,039 live views, 3,906 live comments, and 2,757 views after its broadcast (Niconico Art Museum, n.d.).

| Live Broadcast Date | Exhibition Title   | Museum   | Number of Live Viewers | Number of Live Comments |
|---------------------|--|--|------------------------|-------------------------|
| March 10, 2020      | The Tradition of Edo Creativity: The Skill and Soul of Craftsmen Give Birth to Japanese Beauty | Edo-Tokyo Museum   | 32,039                 | 3,906                   |
| March 18, 2020      | Peter Doig   | National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo   | 38,087                 | 14,793                  |
| March 29, 2020      | 100 Years of Czech Design  | National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto   | 31,378                 | 19,660                  |
| May 17, 2020        | Inaugural Exhibition 250 Years of Kyoto Art Masterpieces                                       | Kyoto City KYOCERA Museum of Art (abbreviated as KYOCERA)  | 35,526                 | 38,720                  |
| June 29, 2020       | Masterpieces from the National Gallery, London   | National Museum of Western Art   | 35,843                 | 18,821                  |
| July 20, 2020       | Kimono: Fashioning Identity  | Tokyo National Museum  | 33,314                 | 21,717                  |
| July 24, 2020       | Kannon Worship: The Thirty-three Pilgrimage Sites of Western Japan                             | Kyoto National Museum  | 33,052                 | 29,772                  |
| January 12, 2021    | Japanese Architecture: Traditional Skills and Natural Materials                                | Three venues (Tokyo National Museum, National Museum of Nature and Science, Tokyo, and National Archives of Modern Architecture) | 31,244                 | 17,767                  |

Figure 2. Top eight Nicobi programs with the largest numbers of live viewers between March 10, 2020 and March 6, 2021. Source: Niconico Art Museum, n.d.



As shown in Figure 2, the top live-viewed Nicobi programs are mainly those held at the national museums with the exceptions of the Edo-Tokyo Museum and KYOCERA. KYOCERA is a new museum in Kyoto inheriting the building of previous Kyoto City Museum of Art with renewals and additions and more significantly restructured with corporate naming and sponsorship. Its extended opening due to the COVID-19 spread had caught great media attention. The Nicobi tour at KYOCERA is thus not just about its opening exhibition but also the brand-new look of the museum architecture.

Offering diverse programs, the Nicobi programs have achieved in presenting the exhibitions and museums that suffered in the loss of physical visitors and creating a distinguishing co-viewing experience with its danmaku function. The Pandemic offered an opportunity to bring creative contents to the audience and strengthen the collaboration between Niconico and the museums.

#### ***Collaborating With Animation Movie "The Girl Leapt Through Time" – A Virtual Exhibition at Tokyo National Museum***

The final case for analysis is a virtual exhibition "Virtual Tohaku: Anonymous" between December 19, 2020 and February 28, 2021. Organized by the Tokyo National Museum, the National Center for the Promotion of Cultural Properties, Japan, and TOPPAN Printing Co., Ltd., this exhibition utilized "clusters," a virtual event service founded in 2015 to exhibit fourteen pieces in the Museum collection of whose authors remain unknown, or "anonymous." The conception of the exhibition originated from an animation movie *The Girl Leapt through Time* by the director Hosoda Mamoru released in 2006.

The animation has one of its stages at a museum modeled after the Tokyo National Museum. The hero Chiaki travels through time to seek a mysterious painting which is already lost in his time and meets the heroin Makoto. The museum is not only the place where Chiaki finds the painting, but also the workplace of Makoto's intelligent aunt with a nick name the "witch." *The Girl Leapt through Time* is a popular work with an original novel by Tsutsui Yasutaka published in 1965 and nine adaptations of TV dramas and movies afterwards, among which Hosoda's marks as the only animation.

The embedding of a museum and particularly the Tokyo National Museum was out of the friendship between Hosoda and the curator at the Museum, Matsushima Masato. In the original story by Tsutsui, there is no museum as the stage. When reflecting on how Hosoda incorporated this idea, Matsushima mentioned that they were peers at the Kanazawa College of Art; at an alumni gathering in 2004 when Hosoda was in the midst of creating this film led to this conception (Matsushima, 2016).

After the release of this animation, the Tokyo National Museum had held two events related to this animation, between October 10 and 11, 2014, and between July 12 and 31, 2016 respectively. The first was a part of the Asia Festival during which the animation was screened outdoor in front of the museum's main build-

ing at night. During the summer of 2016, the second event included the outdoor cinema for two nights and a special exhibition curated by Matsushima at a corner in the main building. Occupying a corridor among the art galleries, this corner introduced the fictional museum and painting in the animation and other actual-and-anonymous paintings in the Museum collection. Upon an interview with Matsushima in 2017, he emphasized that at the beginning, it was not a collaboration between the animation work and the Museum on an institutional level but realized by their personal relationship. With his background in Asian art, Matsushima was able and willing to serve as an advisor to conceive the mysterious painting and a fictional exhibition of “anonymous” works in the animation. Enthusiastic with developing connections with corporate sponsors and the society, he had initiated the first exhibition featuring flower viewing at the Museum in 2007 during the sakura blossom season for which the location of the Museum, the Ueno Park, is famous for (Matsushima, 2017). The embedding of the Museum and a fictional exhibition in the animation was out of Matsushima’s motivation to invite diverse readings of the museum and art works, with which the director Hosoda sympathized (Ibid.).

The virtual exhibition in 2020-21 under the COVID-19 situation is made possible by the pre-existing personal relationship, two related events in the past, and further updated with the integration of digital technology. This event achieved in collecting part of its fund via crowdfunding. Through Makuake crowdfunding, it raised JPY192,600, 12.8% of its original goal, JPY1,500,000 by December 10, 2020 (Makuake, n.d.). In addition to this crowdfunding, the Exhibition showed great inter-laced partnership between the government and corporates. It was co-organized by TOPPAN Printing Co., Ltd and the National Center for the Promotion of Cultural Properties. TOPPAN Printing Co., Ltd has been a long partner of the Museum with a dedication to promotion of digitization and active use of museum collections and cultural properties. The TNM & TOPPAN Museum Theatre showing digital contents was established in the Museum premise in 2007 and renewed as a ticketed theatre in the Museum’s Asian Gallery (Toyokan) in 2013. This exhibition was also sponsored as a part of TOPPAN’s project, “Bunka geijutsu shuekiryoku kyoka jigyo.” This project is a financial scheme set up by the Agency of Cultural Affairs (ACA), Government of Japan in the summer of 2020 to enhance the profitability of culture and arts (TOPPAN, 2020). It aimed at saving the art and cultural enterprises that had been losing their revenue due to the COVID-19 and help build new business models with/after the pandemic (ACA, 2021). TOPPAN was amongst the ten receivers in the fiscal year 2020. Virtual Tohaku in this sense was born in the COVID-19 situation.

Another organizer, the National Center for the Promotion of Cultural Properties, Japan is a national organization under the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage with a mission “to share the wonder of Japan’s cultural treasures with the widest audience” beyond museum personnel and volunteers (2021a). Established in July 2018, it is young but has expanded the activities of the cultural institutions. As one of its four major activities, this organization promotes creation of digital resources of cultural properties and distribution of information within and outside

Japan (Ibid.). Based on this vision, the museum is expected to leap over its physical wall to engage with the wider public through the digital contents.

This Virtual Tohaku exhibition was made possible through the partnership amongst the private and governmental organizing bodies. It was successful in drawing the online audience. Charging JPY290 (virtual “cluster coin” 280) for the virtual exhibition and JPY1,100 (virtual “cluster coin” 1,060) for the special talk between Hosoda and Matsushima, a user can access to the virtual space 24 hours during the exhibition period and join the talk on December 18, 2020 live through smartphones, PC or VR devices (Cluster, n.d.1 & 2). As a feature of “clusters,” the users appear in the virtual space as three-dimensional avatars and the virtual crowds and emotional reactions can be visualized in the real time (Figure 3). After entering the building, walking upstairs the grand staircase, and getting into the exhibition room all closely modelled after the actual space of the Museum, the user can choose different angles to view the fourteen anonymous pieces exhibited according to a chronological order (Figure 4). Some of the works had appeared in the Animation whilst others were new faces. The exhibits included the national treasures “Kujaku Myoo (Mahamayuri)” in the twelfth century of Hei’an period and “Scenes in and around Kyoto, Funaki version” in the seventeenth century of Edo period (Virtual Tohaku, Anonymous, n.d.). According to the report of the National Center for the Promotion of Cultural Properties, the visitation to the Event reached 3,374 with high satisfaction rates, over the Exhibition 74% and over the opening talk 91% (2021b). Its self-evaluation states that although it was not possible to gain the expected income, the Event had achieved in “presenting a new model of content encouraging participation and experience in the Pandemic” and “attracting new audiences in their twenties and thirties, younger than the Museum’s usual visitors” (Ibid.).

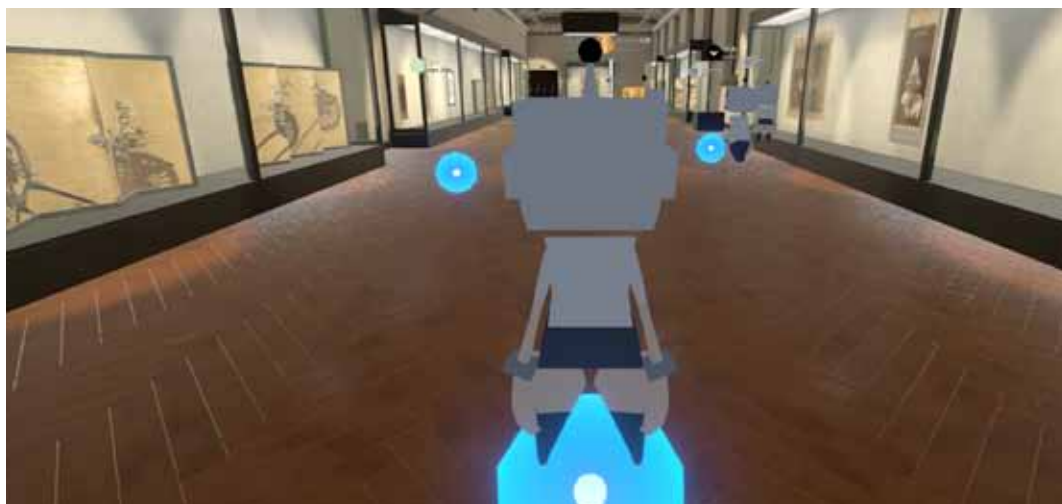


Figure 3. Screenshot of the Exhibition by the author, December 18, 2020. ©Virtual Tohaku.



Figure 4. Screenshot of the Exhibition by the author, December 18, 2020. ©Virtual Tohaku.

### Conclusion

This paper has analyzed three cases of museums practices in Japan under the situation of COVID-19, crowdfunding, live streamed tours, and a virtual exhibition. There is further exchange among the three as we can see that the exhibition “Virtual Tohaku: Anonymous” uses crowdfunding; and its online talk had been released on Niconico. These practices reveal the resilience of the museum which has been repeatedly raised up at the conferences on museums before the Pandemic. The resilience lies in the museums’ financial health, proactive attitude towards incorporation of information technology and development of partnership with corporates, and a continuous sought to stay engaged with the society. The partnership and engagement cannot be built all of a sudden but upon personal exchange and long-term trust. As can be seen in the case of “Virtual Tohaku: Anonymous,” personal relationship between Matsushima and Hosoda, Matsushima’s motivation to constantly wire the museum programs to the society, and long partnership between the Museum and TOPPAN are crucial to actualize the Exhibition.

Although the mission of the National Center for the Promotion of Cultural Properties, Japan, “to reach the widest audience beyond museum personnel and volunteers,” remains as a difficult task as the practices analyzed above demand literacy of information technology, access to the Internet and varying gadgets on both sides of the museums and participating users. A division between the haves and have-not has always been a highly debated theme in the discussions on the relationship between the museum and digital technology. The model of “musée imaginaire” (translated into “museum without walls” in English) suggested by André Malraux is still on its way to be truly democratic ([1947] 1965).

The cases analyzed in this paper however shed light on the future model of the museum. While the Pandemic has severely worsened the financial situation of museums around the world, these creative projects were exactly born in this dif-

difficult time. They had achieved in presenting new models to diversify the financial resources, reach new audiences, and create engaging experiences. These practices demonstrate the resilience of the museum and the potential for the museum to further utilize digital platforms and contents.

Two limitations of this paper lie in the distance and a focus on Tokyo. As this paper is written in the midst of the Pandemic, the statistics and situation are in constant change. The paper also pays attention to the situation in Tokyo and other major cities. Experiencing longer closures and more significant drop in attendance, the prefectural and local museums have been facing more severe difficulties in the financial term. The author anticipates future research, particularly when the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic dwindles, to fully analyze with updated and comprehensive data, interviews, and comparative studies among varying locations and industries.

### Endnotes

- 1 See Cabinet Secretariat, Japan, n.d. for the extensions and changes in target areas of the “state of emergency.”
- 2 On March 3, 2021, newspaper articles have mentioned the government's preparation to host the Games without overseas spectators (Mainichi, 2021).
- 3 Blockbusters in Japan have a long tradition as those sponsored by newspapers and media companies since the early twentieth century. The Art Newspaper rankings of the most attended exhibitions in the world also reveal the frequent entry of the exhibitions held at the major museums in Japan (for example, see The Art Newspaper, 2020).
- 4 By March 6, 2021, the museums in Japan that have released images of their collection for “Animal Crossing” include Mitsubishi Ichigokan Museum, Tokyo, Tokyo Bunko, Pola Museum of Art, Ota Memorial Museum of Art, and Edo-Tokyo Museum.

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