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## **Museum Observation #2:**

### **Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site and Interpretive Center**

#### **Blending the Digital and Physical Worlds of the Museum**

As information professionals in an increasingly technological era, we must be active participants in both the digital and physical realms. Knowledge about and the ability to blend these two spheres is of increasing importance and must be embraced if the museums of today wish to be present tomorrow. The ways in which individuals within our society interact with technology in their everyday lives needs to be evaluated and adapted in order to create a more immersive experience that users will want to be engaged in. The NMC Horizon Report 2016 Museum Edition states, “The Science Museum Group has published its digital strategy, outlining a three-year digital program for its four museums that facilitates deeper exploration of objects and how they operate through interactive installations...”<sup>1</sup> The Science Museum Group’s Digital Strategy, which spans the years 2015-2017, outlines five principles and five objectives which are useful reference tools for any museum developing or wishing to develop a digital strategy.

The Science Museum Group’s mission is to “engage people in a dialogue about the history, present and future of human ingenuity.”<sup>2</sup> The Group’s vision statement includes this mission then expands on it by stating, “Increasingly, achieving this mission is dependent on making digital a dimension of everything the Group does.”<sup>3</sup> In recognition of the organization’s mission and the need to alter their approach in order to continue to fulfill this mission, the Group has outlined these five “digital principles”: 1. Audience Centered; 2. Sustainable and Scalable; 3. Entrepreneurial and Innovative; 4. Open, Reusable and Sharable; and 5. Embedded Across the Organisation.<sup>4</sup> These principles are mainly concerned with the organization introducing technology slowly and analyzing appropriateness in terms of user needs and longevity, as well as creating stronger connections with other organizations and providing “open data platforms.”<sup>5</sup> The Group also outlines five “objectives”: 1. Experience; 2. Culture; 3.

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<sup>1</sup> “Developing Effective Digital Strategies.” 2016. *NMC Horizon Report: 2016 Museum Edition*: 23.

<sup>2</sup> “Digital Strategy 2015–2017.” Science Museum Group, accessed April 10, 2018.  
<https://group.sciencemuseum.org.uk/policies-and-reports/digital-strategy/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Collection; 4. Narrative Content; and 5. Infrastructure.<sup>6</sup> Much like the Group's digital principles, these objectives are mainly concerned with gather data on user needs and experiences and providing greater shared access to collections and resources.<sup>7</sup>

### **Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site and Interpretive Center**

The ability of the Science Museum Group to take their mission and reevaluate what that means for the organization as it moves forward is a perspective I believe the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association (WWBA) could greatly benefit from. The WWBA's mission states, "Walt Whitman Birthplace Association is Walt Whitman's voice today, celebrating the poet's vision of democracy, diversity, and creativity. Our programs and exhibits educate the public on Whitman's life and times, explore his contribution to our nation's rich cultural heritage, and inspire young poets and writers."<sup>8</sup> While this mission statement holds true, the association merely seems to maintain their mission without incorporating it into a vision for the future. The WWBA needs to reevaluate their place in today's technological society. They need to consider their mission and reinvent themselves by figuring out how their mission can be better represented in today's world. It is a difficult transition to make, but the museums of yesterday are rapidly being left behind. This position is made more difficult by the museum's physical location on Long Island where there are a number of museums to visit and Manhattan is a short distance away.

Since the State Historic Site and Interpretive Center does not use technology in any part of the museum, there are no examples to give of how the museum attempts to blend the digital and physical. As previously stated, the association would do well to reevaluate how to bring their mission into both the present and the future by consulting other museums' digital strategies, like the Science Museum Group's strategy. In terms of my selected object, the spinning wheel, the lack of technology makes it difficult to suggest ways in which the object can be made more interactive that is not enmeshed in a strategy that would affect the entire museum. However, I do believe the technology I wrote about in the Interactive Technology Assignment would be an appropriate piece of technology for the museum to consider should the WWBA choose to embrace the necessity of a new user experience.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site and Interpretive Center," accessed March 27, 2018. [http://waltwhitman.org/.](http://waltwhitman.org/)

## Bibliography

- “Digital Strategy 2015–2017.” Science Museum Group. Accessed April 10, 2018.  
<https://group.sciencemuseum.org.uk/policies-and-reports/digital-strategy/>.
- “Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site and Interpretive Center.” Accessed March 27, 2018. <http://waltwhitman.org/>.