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### **Interactive Technology: Virtual Reality**

**Info-matic Blog Link:** <http://info-matic.org/?p=1139>

The Jewish Museum currently exhibits the *Model of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in a Bottle*<sup>1</sup> within a gallery that deliberately mimics a Renaissance Cabinet of Wonders, a display of interesting and intricate objects in often crowded shelves.<sup>2</sup> This approach showcases the breadth of the Jewish Museum's collection in a small space, but the packed shelves and high cabinets also make it difficult to appreciate individual artifacts. Many objects in the Jewish Museum's Cabinet of Wonders are small, and their complex details cannot be fully observed when they are behind glass, crowded with other artifacts, and placed on a high or low shelf. *Model of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in a Bottle* measures 11 ¼ x 5 x 5 inches and is placed on a low shelf lit in bright pink. Although I could see that the model of the temple inside the bottle is quite intricate, I had difficulty seeing all its details.

Through virtual reality technology, museums can give visitors the opportunity to explore objects that are small, fragile, or have some other limitation on their physical display. In 2016-2017, the Art Gallery of Ontario ("AGO"),<sup>3</sup> the Cloisters branch of the Metropolitan Museum of

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<sup>1</sup> Moses Formstecher, *Model of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in a Bottle*, 1813, The Jewish Museum, accessed at <https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/17578-model-of-the-second-temple-in-jerusalem-in-a-bottle>

<sup>2</sup> Scenes – *Taxonomies*, The Jewish Museum, accessed at <https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/on-view/scenes-taxonomies>

<sup>3</sup> *Small Wonders: Gothic Boxwood Miniatures*, Art Gallery of Ontario, November 5, 2016 – January 22, 2017, accessed at <https://ago.ca/exhibitions/small-wonders-gothic-boxwood-miniatures>

Art,<sup>4</sup> and Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam<sup>5</sup> organized an exhibition called *Small Wonders: Gothic Boxwood Miniatures*. The exhibition displayed about 60 carved boxwood miniatures, including prayer beads, miniature rosaries, and tiny altarpieces. Both the [AGO](#) and the [Cloisters](#) supplemented their physical exhibitions with a virtual reality experience in which visitors could explore the interior of a boxwood prayer bead.<sup>6</sup> AGO conservator Lisa Ellis collaborated with the Canadian Film Centre's Media Lab and the Seneca College School of Creative Art & Animation to produce this experience, which was made possible through micro-CT scanning and virtual reality. Visitors signed up online for five minute sessions on specified days and times, and participants were required to sign a waiver before using the equipment. Participants must be 13 years old or older, and parental signature was required for those under age 18.<sup>7</sup>

This [video](#) simulates the participants' virtual reality experience for *Small Wonders*.<sup>8</sup> A prayer bead<sup>9</sup> with a radius of less than 3 inches is expanded to about the height of a human being in virtual reality. Participants could walk around the object and see its complexity and craftsmanship. Furthermore, participants could “explode” or “collapse” the different segments of the prayer bead so that they gained a better understanding of the different biblical narratives in

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<sup>4</sup> *Small Wonders, Gothic Boxwood Miniatures*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, February 22, 2017 – May 21, 2017, accessed at <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2017/small-wonders>

<sup>5</sup> *Small Wonders*, Rijksmuseum, June 17, 2017 – September 17, 2017, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/small-wonders>

<sup>6</sup> *Small Wonders: The VR Experience*, Art Gallery of Ontario, accessed at <http://www.ago.net/small-wonders-the-vr-experience> and *Small Wonders: The VR Experience*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed at <https://www.metmuseum.org/events/programs/met-tours/gallery-talks-cloisters/small-wonders-the-virtual-reality-experience>

<sup>7</sup> *Small Wonders: The VR Experience*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/events/programs/met-tours/gallery-talks-cloisters/small-wonders-the-virtual-reality-experience>

<sup>8</sup> *Small Wonders: The VR Experience*, YouTube, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mc4MA8srQDM>

<sup>9</sup> *Prayer Bead with God in Glory and the Last Judgment*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed at [https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7b49419ef4-95b9-4237-b6cb-4bb4ccdcc9f7%7d&oid=671351&pkuids=392&pg=0&rpp=50&pos=37&ft=\\*&offset=50](https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7b49419ef4-95b9-4237-b6cb-4bb4ccdcc9f7%7d&oid=671351&pkuids=392&pg=0&rpp=50&pos=37&ft=*&offset=50)

the prayer bead and how the artist put it together. Within the virtual reality space, a soundtrack of 16<sup>th</sup> century northern European church music set the atmosphere and drowned out museum sounds. The experience recreated “almost . . . a meditative state, much like a Gothic worshipper would have when studying the scenes in the palm of his hand.”<sup>10</sup>

The virtual reality experience occurred in a space adjacent to the gallery where the original objects were displayed. As such, the experience complemented the act of observing the original object. Visitors could marvel at the tiny objects and then fully explore their complexity through virtual reality. Rather than using technology in a gratuitous or showy way, it promoted the educational aspect of the exhibition.

A similar virtual reality experience could enhance a visitor’s experience with *Model of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in a Bottle*. Such an experience could attract multiple adult audiences, such as people interested in architecture and in Jewish history.<sup>11</sup> A design team could expand the temple inside the bottle to life size and allow a participant to walk through it. A similar “exploding” and “collapsing” function could allow participants to examine different architectural elements and discern how the artist was able to put it in the bottle. Jewish spiritual music would further “transport” participants in the virtual reality experience. Rather than passively observing, participants direct how they explore and experience the temple model.<sup>12</sup> This experience also invites viewers to move and feel the three dimensionality of the object, compared to stooping and squinting at a bottle inside a glass case.

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<sup>10</sup> Allison Meier, “Walk inside a Gothic Prayer Bead in a VR Experience at the Cloisters,” *Hyperallergic*, February 24, 2017, accessed at <https://hyperallergic.com/361000/walk-inside-a-gothic-prayer-bead-at-the-cloisters/>

<sup>11</sup> Since children under 13 were not allowed to participate in the Small Wonders VR Experience, I will limit my audience for this hypothetical VR program to adults.

<sup>12</sup> Compare Falk, John H., Lynn D. Dierking, and Marianna Adams, “Living in a Learning Society: Museums and Free-choice Learning,” *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by Sharon Macdonald, 323-339. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.

In addition to the virtual reality experience, participants should have access to the original object and information about it. For example, visitors should be aware that the model is the artist Moses Formstecher's re-imagination of the temple and uses some 19<sup>th</sup> century architectural elements. Perhaps the physical exhibition could incorporate other artistic interpretations of the Second Temple and examine the limited historical information on what the building actually looked like. Beyond learning about this particular model, the virtual reality experience would inspire participants to imagine how they would recreate the Second Temple and spark contemplation on how people craft their religious identity.