

Maymanah Farhat  
Dr. Angel  
LIS 258: Museum Informatics

### **Brooklyn Museum Partnership: Museum Observation #1**

As the 2016 NMS Horizon Report (Museum Edition) confirms, digital strategies are now central to how museums engage the public, and are not only crucial to educational outreach but institutional sustainability in general. Large encyclopedia museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cleveland Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Dallas Museum of Art have made significant inroads in making their holdings and metadata more accessible to the public, namely through image and information rich online databases. As a result, museumgoers, researchers, and casual browsers now have access to museum content remotely and afterhours, thus significantly broadening an institution's reach.

Take for example the Metropolitan Museum's number of visitors during the 2018 Fiscal Year. According to the Met's annual report, between its three Manhattan locations, the museum received 7.35 million visitors. Yet its website, [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org), recorded a total of 30.4 million unique visits, 32% of which were international. This astounding digital visitorship is mostly due to two distinct features: its online collection, which provides access to 406,000 unrestricted images as of 2017, when the Met launched its open access project, and its Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, an extensive database of information that pairs scholarly essays and historical overviews with digital surrogates of the museum's holdings, keywords, and detailed timelines. These digital initiatives have produced important cultural heritage data while creating new ways for the Met to engage visitors, expand its audience, and support knowledge retention.

What's more, by transforming its website into a vital art historical resource, the museum has remained at the forefront of scholarship worldwide. Last year, in addition to linking its online collection to Wikipemedia and Creative Commons through a live data feed, the museum partnered with Google Arts & Culture in order to provide direct access to its unrestricted digitized images via the image search engine app and website.

According to the Met's Chief Digital Officer Loic Tallon, these partnerships, which allow any third party to "sustainably integrate the Met collection into their websites," are now central to the Met's digital strategy (2018). More recently, the Met teamed up with Microsoft and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to create a digital initiative that uses artificial intelligence to enhance search results. Based on new subject-keyword data sets, the Met x Microsoft x MIT provides innovative ways to engage with the encyclopedic museum's digitized collection, such as the Artwork of the Day prototype, which delivers a new image to users every day based on the their individual open data sets.

Given that the Met's mission is to develop the study of fine arts in addition to "advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects," its extensive, interactive website and digital partnerships, not to mention its robust social media accounts, have brought this mandate into the twenty-first century, guaranteeing the museum's relevance.

While the Met is exceptional in its impressive commitment to digital media as the future of public engagement and access, other institutions like the Brooklyn Museum are gradually expanding their digital strategies in order to build on existing online collection databases.

The Brooklyn Museum’s social media accounts, website, and “ask Brooklyn Museum” app provide distinct but equally engaging ways to access its collection through digital media, including digitized images, metadata, and archival materials. The museum’s digital strategy adds another layer of interactivity to visitor experience while building on its brand (and mandate) as an encyclopedic museum that is geared toward diverse communities.

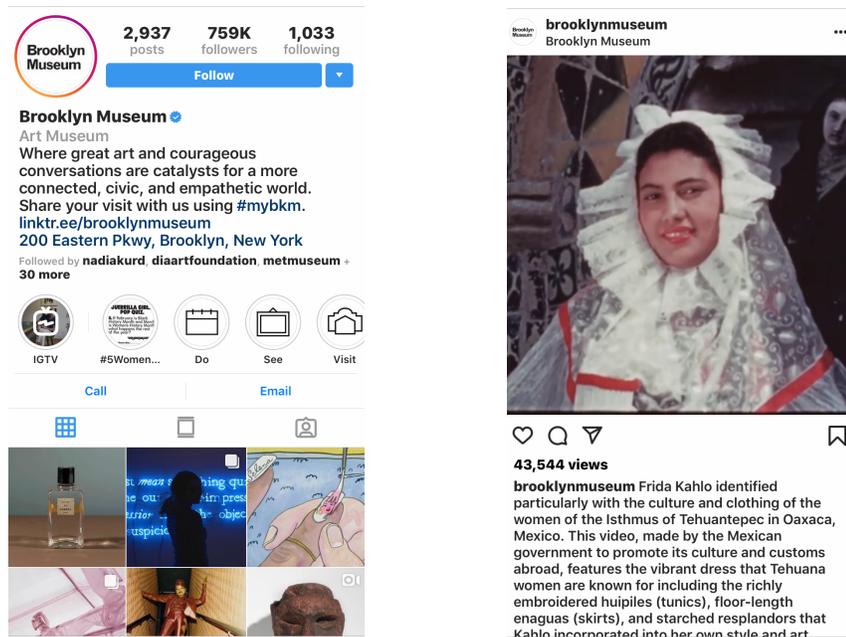
One way the museum utilizes official accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram is to highlight objects from its collection with descriptive posts that are illustrated with images from one of its eleven curatorial departments.



*Screenshot of the Brooklyn Museum’s Twitter Page.*

These accounts are also used to disseminate information and announcements about current or upcoming shows and events, and occasionally feature related digitized archival materials from its Library and Archives. For example, a recent post on the museum’s Instagram account included a brief excerpt from a mid twentieth-century tourist film produced by the Mexican Government that featured a model wearing the same style of

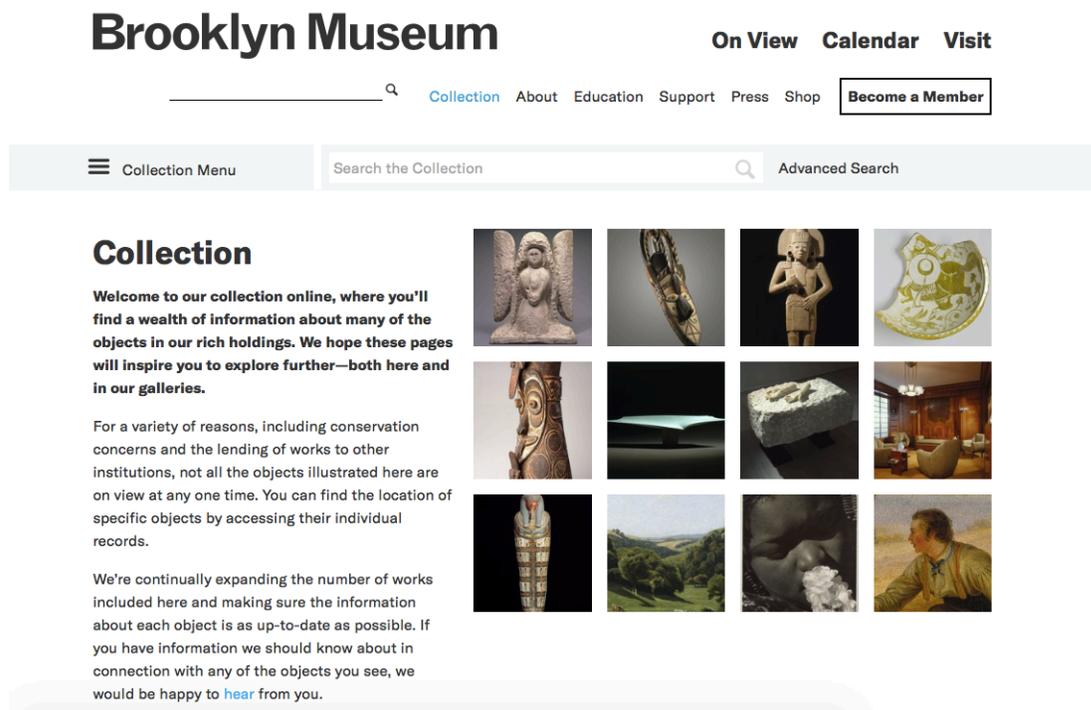
folkloric costume that appears in its current blockbuster exhibition *Frida Kahlo: Appearances Can Be Deceiving*.



*Screenshots of the Brooklyn Museum's Instagram Account.*

As one of the more successful, and popular social media platforms, Instagram also allows the museum to engage visitors by encouraging them to photograph themselves onsite for a chance to be featured on its feed by tagging their personal images with #mybkm. As a digital strategy, this hashtag cultivates in-person visitorship and online audiences, while crowdsourcing images of visitors engaging with its exhibits and displayed objects, a savvy way to promote the museum as a place of leisure and learning across the platform. In addition to highlighting its collection in a fun way, this social media campaign serves as a clever way to attract public interest in its holdings and the didactic materials that they will encounter if they visit the museum. A simple hashtag thus becomes an educational prompt.

The Brooklyn Museum's social media accounts are linked to its website as a means of providing easy access to information on its shows, departments, collection, history, and policies. Often times, a collection related social media post includes a link to the museum's online database.



### *Screenshot of the Brooklyn Museum's Online Collection Database*

Once on the website, visitors are given a range of information that is sourced from the museum's digitized metadata. For example, on the online entry that appears for my selected museum object, *Gwa'sala Kwakwaka'wakw, Speaker Figure*, the following data elements are listed: Culture, Medium, Date, Dimensions, Collection, Caption, Catalogue Description, and Accession Number. Each listed element links to new keyword search results, a feature that can keep online visitors engaged for long period of times as the various ways to browse the collection seem endless.

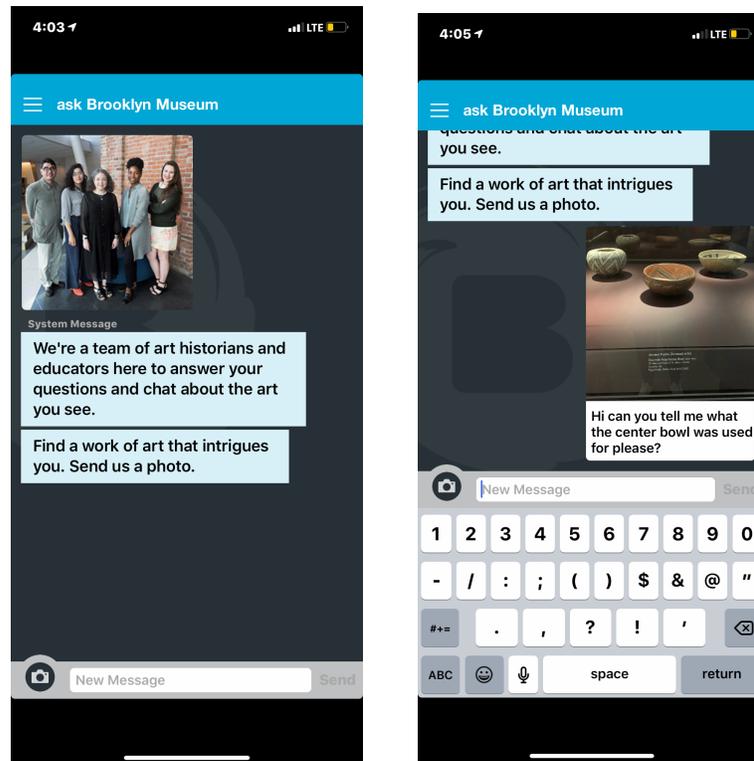
For personal or scholarly use, each collection entry also features images of the object that can be downloaded and an accompanying rights statement. For researchers, the object's provenance is described in a brief paragraph as well as its institutional exhibition history. By providing such extensive information and unrestricted images (according to a Creative Commons License), the museum's online database offers a substantial starting point for research.

For both casual users and researchers, each digitized object page includes icons of related artworks and artifacts that when clicked on direct the visitor to a new entry. Another feature is a series of associated keyword tags (e.g. African, wood, speaking, cedar) and the option to add new tags as the visitor sees fit. This seemingly inconsequential feature is yet another way for the museum to generate a sense of personal investment or interest in its collection holdings through the crowdsourcing of data.

The museum's digitized collection is also linked to a widely popular educational app that was launched three years ago. "Ask Brooklyn Museum" allows online and in person visitors to connect directly with a team of art historians and educators who can answer any question about an object in the collection.

After downloading the app, museum visitors can send a personal image of any displayed object to the team, who will then connect you with an expert. Having the option to chat with a museum expert online or via the mobile app, offers a unique experience for visitors of all ages. During peak times in the museum, the team can be briefly backlogged, so while users wait for a response, a message is displayed that encourages them to set down their phones in order to look at art! Informative, in depth responses are provided through the app, which is beneficial in the absence of gallery

didactic materials or interactive kiosks. In fact, there are very few interactive kiosks in the museum's galleries.



*Screenshots of ask Brooklyn Museum app in use during a recent visit.*

In the Art of the Americas galleries where my selected object is on view, only wall labels provide general overviews of the highlighted cultures, and North West Coast peoples in general. The brief wall label that appears next to the Speaker Figure includes the same descriptive information that appears online. Yet having access to digital media like the ask Brooklyn app is an important first step to remedy this issue. Moreover, by providing such resources online or through mobile technology, the museum allows their audience to personalize their experience by controlling the information they receive. This is crucial to knowledge retention, especially among children who thrive on feeling independent through the process of discovery.

In short, although the Brooklyn Museum may not have the well-funded, highly publicized digital strategy of a larger institution like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it is currently experimenting with new ways to sustain existing audiences and cultivate new ones, all while regularly adding new content to its online collection database.

### References

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