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VIRTUAL MUSEUM AS THE NEWEST MECHANISM FOR
PRESERVING HISTORICAL MEMORY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Abstract. The development of information technology has entailed an active rethinking of the concept of cultural memory, the transposition of the actual formats, methods of interpretation and presentation to the audience, in particular through online technologies and museum activities. Museums, which are formed exclusively on the basis of online technology, become a qualitatively new cultural form of activity, which terms and conceptual nomenclature were built spontaneously, empirically in the process of practical activity. The purpose of this research is to analyze the concept and peculiar features of an online (virtual) museum as a multidimensional phenomenon of an interdisciplinary nature, and to propose their classification based on best practices of Ukrainian and international museums.

Keywords: culture; cultural space; historical memory; cultural heritage; museum activities; online museum; virtual museum; online collection.

The large-scale development of information technologies and adaptation of the realities of the post-pandemic experience contributed to the emergence of new approaches to the perception of objects of historical memory, the preservation of cultural heritage and institutional formation of the cultural space. In accordance with the Declaration of Principles “Building an Information Society – a Global Challenge in the New Millennium”, the formation of an open, people-centered information
society should be aimed at development and be based on the principles of respect for cultural identity and cultural diversity as the common heritage of humankind [1].

Nowadays, culture is moving away from the vacuum of traditionalistic approaches to the actualization of memory. The “accumulative” (“archive”) culture of the preservation of material artifacts is being rethought in favor of the “functional” [2, p. 58] for interiorizing culture to the needs of the target audience. Namely, there is an active rethinking of the cultural memory concept, the transposition of its actual expression formats, ways of interpreting and presenting it, in particular through online technologies and museum activities. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to spotlight and analyze the concept of online museum, its typology as one of the most progressive mechanisms for the preservation of historical memory, cultural heritage and formation of cultural space.

According to the Art. 1 of the Law of Ukraine “On Culture”, culture defines the totality of the material and spiritual wealth of a certain community, accumulated, consolidated and enriched during a long period, which is passed on from generation to generation, includes all types of art, cultural heritage, cultural values, science, education, and reflects the level of development of this community [3]. In § 4 of part 1 of Art. 1 of this Law, the varieties and directions of cultural activities are enshrined, namely creative, scientific, informational, museum, educational, cultural, leisure and entertainment and other types of activity [3]. Thus, the author of this research proposes to consider museum activities as one of the key areas of cultural activity.

Pursuant to the research results, three main approaches to defining the function of the museum as an institutional subject of cultural activity can be distinguished: the positioning and self-identification of an individual in society [4, p. 17], socio-cultural development [5, p. 230] and the formation of historical and cultural space. Besides, most experts agree that in the context of the scaling information society, it is necessary to harmonize these approaches through “museum communication” that simulates cultural discourse, and presents it to the society using various information technologies [6, p. 81]. Analyzing culture as a mechanism of social inheritance or a system of capturing/recording, storing and transferring information and
implementing museum communication, the main function of the museum is to transmit the “experience” of generations [7, p. 17], and the museum as one of the key mechanisms of history and culture is meant to develop the cultural space, preserve the socially significant information and reproduce culture [8, p. 457].

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines a museum as an institution designed to meet the needs of society and its development, which resources and objects are available to a wide range of people, that forms, preserves, explores, exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity, carries out appropriate communication on them for the purpose of awareness-raising, education and the satisfaction of cultural needs [9]. According to Art. 1 of the Law of Ukraine “On Museums and Museum Activities”, a museum is a science and research, cultural and educational institution created to study, preserve, use and promote museum items and museum collections for scientific and educational purposes, to bring citizens closer to national and world cultural heritage [10]. Accordingly, cultural heritage covers the totality of objects inherited by humanity from previous generations, including outstanding real estate objects, their parts, movable objects associated with them, territories or water objects, other objects, regardless the condition of preservation that has been reported (Art. 1 of the Law of Ukraine “On the Protection of Cultural Heritage”) [11].

The principles “Building an Information Society – a Global Challenge in the New Millennium” define the need for the development of cultural institutions – museums as a mechanism for preserving cultural memory [1]. Geneva Action Plan declares the need to form an information and communication infrastructure, in particular, by providing online information and communication technologies for cultural institutions, including museums [12]. The 2015 UNESCO Guidelines for the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections attach great importance in the cultural area to museums, their diversity and role, but also emphasize the importance of digital technologies in the museum sector and activities aimed at promoting virtual museums [13].

Having analyzed the provisions of legal acts that define or convey the concept
of a museum and other related concepts, the author of this research can conclude that the main activity form subjects in the field of preserving cultural heritage is performed in real space or offline. In addition, the author draws attention to the fact that the current legislation of Ukraine does not have the concept of “online museum” or “virtual museum” or any other definition to interpret a museum using online technologies.

However, according to a survey by The Network of European Museum Organizations, since the beginning of the pandemic, about 70% of museums have increased their presence on the Internet, and 80% have intensified their online activities [14]. The Museum Innovation Barometer 2021 study, in which 39 countries took part, including Ukraine, indicated that 85% of modern museum institutions already use audio and video elements on a regular basis, and 68% make use of visual information displays and projections, as well as smart objects (47%), online exhibitions (42%), interactive surfaces and adaptive spaces (36%), as well as spatial audio sound (36%). The least harnessed elements are holography, AI, VR/AR and other immersive technologies [15]. Thus, we can conclude that virtualization/digitalization of museums is actively taking place now, triggered by the fact that viewers cannot visit museum institutions for objective reasons.

Museums that are formed exclusively on the basis of online technologies are a qualitatively new cultural form. And in fact, the terminological vocabulary and conceptual nomenclature in the field of the museum virtualization were built spontaneously and empirically in the process of practical activity. Thus, within the framework of the study, it is proposed to consider the concept of a museum and activities with the use of online technologies and virtualization as an effective and progressive mechanism for preservation of historical memory and cultural heritage, and, as a result, the formation of the newest cultural space.

So, the term virtual museum is used in many languages: German – “Ein Digitales Museum”, French – “muse virtuel”, Italian – “museo virtuale”, Polish – “muzeum wirtualne” and others. The overwhelming majority of researchers believe that the terms virtual, computer, multimedia, digital, electronic museums, web museums, cyber museums, Internet museums and online museums are synonymous
[16, p. 191], although some rightly insist that the concept of “online museum” is narrower than “virtual museum”, since the virtual museum operates with a large set of communication tools, however, “virtual” and “online” are interchangeable [17, p. 108]. In my opinion, the use of the appropriate terminology directly depends on the type of online institution, the format of presentation and exposition – examples of which will be disclosed through the typology of online museums below, but in the context of the research, the terms “online” and “virtual” are considered identical.

There are two key approaches to the interpretation of virtual (online) museums and their types: as a representation of an existing offline museum and a comprehensive information resource, without an offline presence [20, p. 110]. Thus, supporters of the first approach define an online museum as a type of website optimized for the exposition of museum collections [21], while the second consider an online museum a digital information resource that is freely available on the Internet, that allows you to explore cultural and historical material and operates by means of online communication [18, p. 81]. It is also believed that the virtual museum is a new cultural form of an integrative nature, a multifunctional complex in a virtual space that is addressed to an unlimited number of people [22, p. 20]. Some experts consider the online museum to be a separate subject of cultural and museum activity and define it as an information cultural object created in the format of an information online platform, containing an integrated system of digital products and designed to familiarize users with materials and expositions presented using information technologies. [20, p. 112].

In addition, researchers consider virtual museums through a process, not a form, called “musealization” – as a way to actualize objects and museum expositions in a virtual space, which acquires an integrative nature [23, p. 74] and where there is the process of mastering reality, where the main attention is to the historical and cultural value of reality [24, p. 12]. In support of this approach, the online museum is defined as an integrative cultural form, characterized by structural and functional diversity, technologies of contactless transmission of information, where the main requirements are: a thoughtful approach to the structure as close as possible to a
traditional museum; the depth and versatility of the disclosure of thematic areas and the presence of interactive support [21]. So, when defining an online museum, it is necessary to take into account the following criteria: representativeness; content of the exposition; versatility; correspondence of the request to professional, age and educational target groups; clarity, accessibility and interactivity of the interface [20, p. 112].

In addition, when characterizing virtual museums, it is noted that they are extra-territorial, since they provide the opportunity to view collections without a physical presence, as well as visit institutions, create a virtual experience; they provide more detailed information about objects [25]. However, it is necessary to separate online museums, which are websites of offline museums and represent a separate and autonomous subject of cultural activity. Considering virtual activity in the context of sociocultural interaction, it is necessary to distinguish an online museum from other types of interaction with virtual environments (films, games), since a virtual museum is distinguished by the collection and fixation of certain virtual objects in order to preserve the intangible heritage of humanity and the conditions of human life. For example, the Museum of Civilian Voices is the world's largest collection of stories of civilians who suffered from the conflict in Donbass [26]).

Thus, an online museum is a multidimensional and multifaceted phenomenon. So, the author of this research offers the following types of online museums, according to the most indicative examples of Ukrainian and international online museums:

1. By form of ownership [10]: state or public (including those managed by local authorities and local self-government, as well as those created at state enterprises, institutions, organizations and educational institutions of public and communal forms of ownership or as part of them) and private (companies, institutions, organizations, religious organizations, citizens and associations of citizens);

2. By the subject of establishment [10]: the state represented by the legal authorities; local government authorities; a legal entity; an individual and association of individuals;

3. By profile [10]: natural (anthropological, biological, botanical, geological,
zoological, mineralogical, etc.); historical (general historical, military history, history of religion, historical household, archaeological, ethnographic); literary; artistic (fine arts, decorative and applied arts, folk art, contemporary art); art (theater, music, cinema museums); scientific and technical, complex (regional studies, ecomuseums); industry-specific, etc.;

4. By the territory of coverage (scaling) – determined by additional technical or linguistic conditions: national; regional (for a specific cultural or linguistic region), international;

5. By the list of objects that constitute the main museum fund [10]: museum collections (museum items united by common characteristics; e.g., the Museum of Civilian Voices has a collection of stories [26]); museum complex (a set of museum collections and museum items, as well as related library funds, archives, catalogues and museum scientific documentation; e.g., Digital Museum of Canada [27]); a set of individual museum items (material cultural value requiring preservation in terms of quality or special characteristics; e.g., digitized originals of films and photographs of the Museum of Cinema by Dovzhenko Center [28]);

6. By availability of services and the method of forming collections [18, p. 193]: open (any user can add an exhibit or collection; e.g., the Museum of Civilian Voices contains an electronic form for filling out and for recording a story [26]); semi-open (a limited number of subjects or entities that can add exhibits – only authorized museums or organizations; e.g., the Archive of Oral History of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, where it is necessary to go through an additional registration and substantiate the historical value [29]); closed (corporations, professional community; e.g., Virtual Museum of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, where some sections are available only for alumni [30]);

7. By target audience: general audience (including expert community; family audience etc.; e.g., the Museum of Civilian Voices provides separate collections on affected adults, children's activities, a separate section for the expert community [26]); special audience (the specificity of the content rules out the possibility of attracting other audience – a professional audience (e.g., Fashion Institute of
Technology Museum [31], where technical drawings and terminology are used); an adult audience (e.g., PornHub Museum [32]), where erotic expositions prohibited for children are contained); children’s audience (e.g., MINT Museum of Toys [33], where the museum space is organized for pre-adolescent children);

8. By the source of storage/existence of material museum objects: institutional (functioning within the framework of museum institutions; e.g., Ostrog Castle, a museum in Tripoli, a museum of archeology in Baturin etc. – all of them have analogues of offline cultural institutions [34]); non-institutional (are an independent online platform; e.g., the Museum of Civilian Voices, which exists only in an online format, without offline representations [26]);

9. By the method of forming and collecting objects: autonomous (independently collects and forms collections; e.g., the Museum of Civilian Voices [26]); through the transfer/donation of museum items (several museums donate their funds or collection; e.g., Smithsonian Institutions [35] have combined several history museums into one); collaborative (which is a platform for the presentation of several autonomous museums and their collections; e.g., Google Arts & Culture [36]), where each museum also demonstrates collections on its own);

10. In the presence of an offline original, materially expressed museum object: with original collections and objects (when the museum presents original online works; e.g., the Museum of Civilian Voices collects and demonstrates stories that were originally created in the online format [26]); with derivative objects (derivative digitized objects are presented, copies of the originals; e.g., The Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression demonstrates documentary evidence legally confirmed by a special procedure [37]); and mixed (can have both original and derived objects; e.g., Shoah Foundation Institute for Virtual History and Education Story, which collects both original documents, artifacts, and people's stories about the Holocaust [38]);

11. If additional online technologies are available: online catalogue or archive (e.g., Europeana digital library [39]); online platform (e.g., the Museum of Civilian Voices [26]); with additional interactive elements (online tours, games/quiz, etc.; e.g., streaming radio Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Bergamo (GAMeC) [40]); with the presence effect (3D, 360, etc. – Museum Sikor Sky [41];
VOMA (Virtual Online Museum of Art) [42]) with available immersive technologies (AI, AR, VR – in the online perspective);

12. By additional functionality: information and cognitive; communication (forum, feedback, chat bot); economic (store, trainings); educational (pedagogical resource, online library); inclusiveness (available to people with special needs) [43].

The above-mentioned criteria and classification are the most typical and acceptable for the realities of the Ukrainian virtual cultural space development and online museums’ classification. Nowadays there is a number of examples of autonomous online institutions that fully correspond to the concept and virtualization of museum collections in order to preserve historical memory and cultural heritage. However, the Museum of Civilian Voices can be considered one of the first and most relevant definitions and concepts of an online museum in Ukraine. In accordance with our typology, the Museum of Civilian Voices is an international non-institutional and non-state online platform for a wide audience presenting the world's largest collection of stories of civilians who suffered from the conflict in Donbass, and a platform with open format of collections organization, because the collection of museum items (stories) is systematically extended by visitors.

Thus, the author can conclude that, within the development framework of the global information space, an active rethinking of the concept of cultural memory is observed, the transposition of the formats of its actual expression, methods of interpretation and presentation to the audience, in particular through online technologies and museum activities. Consequently, the virtual museum loses the features of a material institution or a physical establishment and becomes a new cultural form of an integrative nature, which is a multidimensional phenomenon with an interdisciplinary nature.

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