

# How Bold Moves By Museums Could Shape the Future of Culture and Digital Art

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*On MoMA's pivot toward digital, and why museums investing in digital art matters beyond the NFT craze.*

In September 2022, the Museum of Modern Art announced that it would be selling upwards of \$70 million in artworks from the William Paley collection to invest in expanding its digital reach. The shift toward digital engagement at museums accelerated greatly during the pandemic, sparking a sea change in priorities and perspectives among museums, the art and cultural sector, and the broader public. As a result, our collective understanding of the function and value of museums has evolved, and museums are increasingly embracing technology, social media and a broad range of digital channels to inspire and enhance their connection with the public.

More than ever before, museums see their digital presence as a critical pillar of engagement, access and education — and as an essential tool for reaching new audiences and unlocking new revenue streams. This is a very recent trend and shows no signs of slowing down. As recently as early 2020, according to a survey by the Association of Art Museum Directors, just over 40 percent of art museum directors considered it “highly important” that museums currently “provide digital experiences for audiences who do not visit the physical museum.” At the time, one-third of museums reported having no digital strategy whatsoever. Flash forward to a year later, and by early 2021, 92 percent of art museums had begun offering some form of digital programming to cater to a global public in lockdown, according to my company’s latest survey.

## Skating to Where the Puck is Going

While Covid certainly played a role in expediting the shift toward digital, museums have long been open to using new technologies in their exhibits and in their online presence. In late 2020, the International Council of Museums published a survey that showed about three-quarters of museums were aiming to increase their digital offering across the board. Broadly speaking, institutions were already skating to where the puck was headed. Wrought by the rise of social media, global communication, cultural technologies and novel forms of digital art, this has been the trajectory for some time — Covid simply slapped the puck in the cultural net.

In 1990, the artworks from the Paley collection were donated to MoMA by a foundation representing the estate of the late former CBS CEO. Jumping to the present, the world-class collection altogether comprises 81 pieces to be auctioned at Sotheby’s, including famous works by artists such as Picasso, Rodin and Renoir. The donated works are not subject to the same deaccession rules as would regulate a museum’s permanent collection, and MoMA was granted some leeway in how the works could be accessioned and sold to fund the museum’s future digital-forward pursuits.

To that end, the following are some suggested guidelines, provided in the hope that they will help as MoMA and other museums look to expand their digital futures.

## **A Strategic Bet on the Future**

Museums are following suit, experimenting with a range of cutting-edge digital channels, including alternative approaches to curation and exhibitions as well as new models for engaging their visitors and promoting art. The public appetite for virtual cultural content, which exploded during the pandemic, has stood strong even with the return to in-person life. A 2021 survey conducted by the Network of European Museum Organizations found that for nearly 50 percent of museums surveyed, online visits have remained at the same level or increased overall since reopening. Many have continued to offer virtual tours and other remote experiences. Other museums have invested heavily in digital infrastructure and stepped up their digital strategies. What's clear is that technological innovation and the ethos and infrastructure that supports it are already shaping the future of museums.

## **Trading Old for New**

Selling off parts of any collection, especially redundant or over-represented pieces of traditional collections (often dominated by works created by white European men), is an excellent way for museums to fill gaps, diversify their collections and better represent artists from non-traditional backgrounds and outside the Western canon. Furthermore, the sale of traditional, physical paintings to buy digital artworks should not imply that MoMA is going to drop \$70 million on a bunch of Bored Ape NFTs and Cryptopunks. Despite the buzz and speculation caused by Beppe and other massive NFT sales over the past few years, it's important to note that digital art is an expansive field in itself that goes beyond the NFT craze.

## **Digital Art Is More Than Just NFTs**

We might look to the immersive works of Laurie Anderson or Nancy Baker Cahill, whose works exemplify the embrace and exploration of new technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), through art. Or consider Rashaad Newsome, whose innovative multimedia work "Build and Destroy" blends traditional crafts with computer programming, community organizing and social media to highlight the experience of Queer communities of color. Well before the arrival of DALL-E, artists like Obvious and Robbie Barrat used artificial intelligence (AI) to create works that highlight the increasing integration of generative technologies with art and culture. Shanghai-based Lu Yang's "Electromagnetic Brainology" pushes the creative boundaries of CGI, synthesizing technology and traditional Chinese culture to capture the liberatory nature of the internet and give an electrifying view of what digital art can be.

While some purists might chafe at the idea of selling a Francis Bacon triptych under any circumstance, investing in digital initiatives and cultivating digital art collections could help museums like MoMA future-proof their offerings, reach audiences beyond their physical walls, and reaffirm their reputation as global leaders of contemporary art. I wish the museum community the best of luck in this process and am

excited to see where this pioneering move takes the art world and the cultural sector as a whole. I trust that these museums will allocate these hefty proceeds in a bold, yet thoughtful and sustainable manner. It will be exciting to watch it all unfold and to look back on this moment decades from now as a tipping point in the mainstream adoption of digital art and culture.

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