# Chapter 19
# Multimedia Technology:
## A Companion to Art Visitors

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter describes the design and use of multimedia technology for personal guides and public projections for two exhibitions on ancient and contemporary art. The authors discuss the critical issues, suggest approaches and solutions, and evaluate the results. In both exhibitions, the researchers designed personal guides on Apple iPod touch devices, with rich information structure and rich multimedia content. In one of the two exhibitions they also implemented a narrative path in the exhibition rooms with large displays and projections. They evaluated the guide design with questionnaires and automatic tracing of device use. This chapter reports the project outcomes.*

## INTRODUCTION: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Compared to what has occurred for almost all other expressions of human creativity, the enjoyment of a work of art has remained essentially unchanged for over two centuries. To make a few examples, we acknowledge that the way we listen to music has deeply changed from the late eighteenth century; at that time photography was in its infant life; cinema would come one century later; radio and television have reached a mature

stage in the second half of the twentieth century, and only at the end of the last century the Net has started to gradually—albeit permanently—change our way to access information. Also the way we read, which is the most ancient and widespread cultural experience, has deeply changed in the meanwhile.

In the visual arts domain the last radical invention concerning the fruition of works of art is due to Tommaso Puccini (1749-1811), superintendent of the Uffizi collections in Florence, Italy. In the middle of the eighth decade of the eighteenth century, he decided to affix a "card" next to each work in the Gallery; the card, a tag labeling the

artwork, was telling the author's name, the subject depicted, the date of execution, the techniques used, almost anticipating the golden rule of the five *W* of the Anglo-Saxon journalism (even if *Why?* remained in the background).

The invention of Puccini is definitely a turning point in our way to approach art. Until then the relationship with art was mainly set on aesthetic parameters; the visitor directly facing artworks was mainly concerned in admiring masterpieces, perceiving the richness and variety of a collection, making small personal discoveries. Later on, the visitor's attention was increasingly drawn to matters related to knowledge rather than to pleasure: finding authorship attribution (who made this work?), identifying complex subjects (what does it represent?), detecting relations (who or what has influenced it?), as well as distinguishing original work from replicas and copies.

The way art was accessed before the Puccini's invention was elitist in private collections and shared in public places like churches and other buildings of worship; both certainly ensured a great involvement of users, demanding for opinions and making art fruition a personal experience. The Puccini's invention caused users to approach the knowledge side of art rather than its emotional side, favoring those users who were able to recognize the style of an artist, to solve an uncertainty about anonymity, to specify a date or an influence. Indeed, the historical artistic knowledge has been built on such a ground, as long as the taste of the public approaching art was going through refinement. As a consequence, the work of art has increasingly become an object of study, the "document" of a specific culture and not only the confirmation of the classical style; knowledge and reflection have replaced enjoyment and immediate experience.

The concepts that have driven the study of art dynamics in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were justified by the demand that art regain a social centrality after the storm of the French Revolution and the Napoleon season: due to the sudden weakening of the former ruling classes and the deletion of countless religious orders, a millennial population of art clients disappeared; the training protocol of an artist had radically changed, no longer held in the shop of an older master but within academic institutions, thus changing the attitude towards tradition; substantial changes occurred in the dynamics of the art market.

Such a situation has forced the artwork into a kind of still *aura*, almost acting as a shield and obstacle in its fruition. Curiously, such a sacral esteem has been mainly rooted in highly advanced countries, like USA and Japan, which have rarely felt the need, even in recent years, to apply the growing technological resources to achieve a more engaging and participatory fruition.

Especially since the mid-twentieth century onwards major investments were undertaken to refurbish and modernize the containers of art—when they were located in buildings not originally designed for that purpose—and to build new special exhibition spaces. In an early stage of this process the architects have naturally speculated on how to make more effective and enjoyable the access to artworks. However, very often their ideas resulted almost exclusively in the search for better light sources, in more adequate sizing and shaping of the spaces, in the choice of functional pathways and in the creation of accessory spaces, such as a cafeteria, a bookshop, etc.. In a second phase the research has been focused on designing innovative shapes for the art containers themselves; never was put into question the intimate process of art fruition, retaining the chronological alignment as a chief criterion for the presentation of the artworks.

All this happened despite the history of art had, in the meanwhile, multiplied the tools and approaches for *studying* (much more than for *enjoying*) artworks; approaches based on iconographic methods, the social history of art, the conception of the artwork as a *sign* (in a semiology perspective), or as an *brief*, as in more recent

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