

“WALK AROUND”, FROM BELGIUM TO THE V&A VIA THE PRADO: USING DIGITAL DATA TO CREATE EXPERIENCE FROM CULTURAL HERITAGE OBJECTS

Jule Rubi

Theatre and Performance Department, Victoria and Albert Museum,
Cromwell Road, London SW7 2RL, UK
j.rubi@vam.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT:

When it comes to the use of digital in cultural heritage, significant attention has been given to the use of digital visualisation for communication and learning purposes, as well as to the use of infrared or ultraviolet imagery for conservation. This paper will explore another possibility within digital interpretation of cultural heritage: the use of high resolution data to virtually reunite pieces of a series of paintings that are physically situated in different countries, in order to create an interpretative resource. The author discusses the case study of a series of paintings scattered between the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Prado collections in Madrid — the Ommegang, ‘walk around’ in old Flemish — and draws from a collaborative digitisation project with the Advanced Imagery Laboratory of Kyoto University. This article examines the process of deciding what to digitise and why, and reflects on the possibilities offered by digital data for collections to facilitate the encounter between the visitor and a historical object. Furthermore, building on the V&A experience in performance curating, this paper explores the possibilities of using digital data to create a fully embodied interpretative experience, and imagining new ways to emotionally engage museum visitors with traditional cultural heritage.

“Now fully engaged in a new electronic world, art museums are being pressured to move in new, yet-to-be defined directions, as they were by photography one hundred and fifty years ago. Like photography when it appeared on the scene, digital technology is, simultaneously, a new art medium, a new way of interpreting and publicizing art, and a distinct challenge to art itself.” (Walsh, 2007)

1. INTRODUCTION

This vision by Peter Walsh defines some of the challenges that twenty-first century museums are facing. The use of digital technology in museums is being frequently discussed (Cameron and Kenderdine, 2007, Burnette Stogner, 2011) yet there are still many areas to explore. Walsh (2007) defines the then South Kensington Museum (today’s Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A) as the archetypal ‘post-photographic’ museum: a museum that uses photography for means of interpretation, considering the new medium almost as valuable as a real object, for the possibilities of discovery and

understanding it offers to the public. Walsh suggests that twenty-first century museums are now facing similar challenges with digital technology as they did once with photography; this paper aims to explore the role of digital data in the post-internet museum. Drawing from a recent experiment by the V&A Department of Theatre and Performance collaborating with the Prado Museum and the Advanced Imaging Technology Laboratory of the University of Kyoto, this paper examines two trends that are developing in the use of digital data. Virtual reunification is an area where limited literature exists; it concerns mainly archives or literary works (Shenton 2009, Punzalan 2014). This paper aims to add to the earlier experiments the experience of a reunification involving painted works. Furthermore, following Witcomb’s (2007) advocacy of digital objects standing in their own right, and presenting the experience of the V&A Theatre and Performance Department in creating theatrical exhibitions, possibilities of digital data in creating displays which enhance visitor experience will be explored.

1.1 The Ommegang series by Denys Van Alsloot, History and Geography

This paper was prompted by a digitisation project by the Victoria and Albert Museum, which involves a series of paintings created by the Flemish artist Denys Van Alsloot (before 1573, ca. 1625/26) and his workshop in 1615, upon a commission by the Archdukes Albert and Isabella, governors of the Spanish Netherlands 1598–1621. The commission included eight paintings, six referring to the Ommegang procession, one showing the shooting of the Papegeay by Isabella and the last one a party at the Vivier d'Oie with the Archdukes. This paper takes its title from the English translation of the Dutch *Ommegang*, which means 'walking around' the church in a procession.

The Victoria and Albert Museum acquired three paintings during the 19th century: one in 1859 and two (originally one painting cut in two halves) in 1885 (accession Nos. 5928-1859, 168-1885 and 169-1885); these paintings all came from the same series. Both original artworks are linked with two other paintings held by the Prado Museum in Madrid (accession Nos. P0147 and P01348). The four of them were created in 1616, as part of the wider series of six paintings commemorating the Ommegang festival of 1615 when the infant Isabella, daughter of Phillip II of Spain, was crowned 'Queen of the Ommegang'. From the original series, two were considered lost, until in 2011 Sabine van Sprang discovered a painting that could be the number four of the series in a private collection. Thus the series of paintings, originally created as a whole in Brussels in 1616 and probably sent to Spain as a gift to Phillip III before 1618 (Sprang, 2013), is now scattered between London, Madrid and a private collection. In addition, although one of the V&A paintings will be on display in the new 1600–1800 Galleries to open in 2015, the two halves of the other painting are in storage. In Madrid, one painting sits in a government building, while the other has been removed from display in 2014. At the moment of writing, none of these paintings is accessible to the public.

1.2 The importance of the Van Alsloot Ommegang



Fig. 1. *Le Triomphe de l'Archiduchesse*, Denys Van Alsloot, 1616, (381x117cm) V&A 5928-1829 © Victoria and Albert Museum

This series of paintings was commissioned in 1615 by the Archduchess Isabella to her court painter Denys Van Alsloot. As one of the first iconographic documents representing the Ommegang (Twyffels, 2013), it has always had a documentary value to historians and

ethnographic scholars studying this lasting Belgian tradition. As van Sprang points out, it has mostly been studied for this reason (van Sprang, 2013): Rubens's fame eclipsed the aura of his contemporaries and Van Alsloot has always been merely considered as a landscape painter.

The Ommegang series importance lies not only in its descriptive qualities. It was created to serve political and social purposes, and as such, it presents an important insight into the history of Spanish Netherlands. Of the series, the most studied and written about is the fifth painting, *The Triumph of Archduchess Isabella*, from the V&A collection (Fig.1). It is by far the most luxurious of the series, featuring carts and street theatre, music and fairy animals. However, the full meaning of the painting cannot be understood without it being confronted with its companion paintings. Indeed, when bought by the V&A in 1859 it was labelled 'Said to represent a fête given by the Jesuits in commemoration of the Victory of Pavia by Charles V' — a comment that has the date wrong by fifty years and that commits an anachronism, as the Jesuits have not been invited to parade in Brussels before the 17th century. However, by taking the painting on its own, such a mistake could be understandable. Van Sprang (2013) explains that the iconographic programme of the painting brings to light why it was commissioned. The meaning of the paintings lies in their assemblage as a political message addressed by Isabella to her brother Phillip III of Spain. In 1615, the Archduke Albert was already very ill and Isabella would soon become too old to have an heir. According to the agreement signed by Phillip II for their marriage in 1598, should the Archdukes die without heirs, the Netherlands would come back under Spanish government. Phillip III, accessing to the throne in 1598, had just given mandate to Albert to accept the Netherlands' allegiance in his name. However, as Albert was in bad health, it was necessary for Isabella to assert her position as the potential ruler of the country in case of Albert's death. Although contemporary copies of the paintings were made and put on display in the Archdukes' palace of Tervuren, an inventory of the Alcazar collection in Madrid in 1618 shows that the originals were in the palace main rooms at that date (Sprang, 2013): most certainly Isabella sent them to her brother as a symbolical reassessment of her faithfulness to Spain and the Netherlands allegiance.

1.3 Why digitising?

This is why showing only the fifth painting on its own, although of historical and documentary importance, can fail at revealing the underlying sense and meaning of the work, depriving it of its full political content. While each painting represented a component of the Netherlands society in the 17th century, its coherence under the Archduchess rule is only understood by considering the

artwork in its complexity. Although two of the paintings are considered lost, digitising the four remaining artworks enables to create a virtual version which may help giving a sense of the series in its original completeness.

On another level, following Fiona Cameron (2007), digitising the Ommegang series creates a momentum enabling the paintings to unveil their full potential in terms of interpretation, museum education and artistic value.

“Deciding what to digitize and render in 3D—and what not to—involves an active process of value and meaning making equivalent to that of the physical object. It enacts the curatorial process of selection of what is significant, what should be remembered and forgotten, and what categories of meaning such as classification, cultural values, or aesthetic attributes are given pre-eminence. And the value of the “real” increases when digitized, enhancing its social, historical, and aesthetic importance, owing to the resources required in the compilation of a 3D rendering, and through distribution.” (Cameron, 2007, p.57)

Although the Ommegang project does not fall in the category of 3D rendition, dealing with 2D works such as painting, this analysis by Cameron uncovers the purpose of the project from a curatorial point of view. The digitisation of the Ommegang created images in colour as well as near-infrared images of the paintings. These two kinds of files can be used for different purposes. Of course one first, immediate use is the one that conservators could make of near-infrared and specular lighting images. The purpose of this paper is however to look at the use of data for interpretation and visitor experience. The end product of the Ommegang project is still to be defined in its entirety; however it has already been decided to create an immersive display out of the digital data. Several analyses can be explored, such as discussing the creative process of the creators the paintings conservation status through the specular and near-infrared images; or develop its interpretation with the help of the high-resolution trichromatic images. One immediate product will be to reproduce the four paintings in their actual size, to give a sense of their grandeur when they were originally displayed in Tervuren or the Alcazar. However, although 17th-century visitors would have immediately understood the underlying meaning of the iconography, 21st-century museum visitors may have trouble to read the symbolical aspects of the paintings. An interpretation is necessary to convey the full content of the painting to today's visitor.

The V&A project of digitising the Ommegang thus tackles several issues that museums are facing when it comes to digital products: the integration of a new process (virtual reunification) into strategies of adapting to the virtual world; the problem of the copy and its purposes in an environment dedicated to the 'real thing' (as defined by

Duncan Cameron in his 1968 essay) and the question of interpretation through digital material.

2. THEORISING VIRTUAL REUNIFICATION

Punzalan defines virtual reunification 'as the strategy of putting together physically dispersed heritage collections in order to produce a consolidated, digitised representation of scattered artifacts, literary and artistic works, and/or archival records attributable to a single origin or common provenance' (Punzalan, 2014, p.294). The Ommegang project is an archetype of this definition. The paintings were scattered throughout their history between different collections, as were their copies, and their digitisation enable institutions and scholars to have access to a consolidated representation of the whole series.

2.1 Analysing the Ommegang Project Process

Virtual reunification, however, as defined by Punzalan, concerns mostly literary works and archives, and this is where this paper aims to make its contribution to the general reflection about virtual reunification. Examples and case studies quoted by Punzalan include Jane Austen's Fiction Manuscripts Digital Edition¹, the William Blake Archive², the Penn/ Cambridge Genizah projects³ and others (Punzalan, 2014). The closest to our project would be the Dante Gabriel Rossetti Hypermedia archive⁴, which aims to provide high quality digital images of all material by Rossetti, including drawings, prints, paintings and archives, or the King's Kunstkammer created by the National Museum of Denmark⁵ in order to reunite virtually the content of the Renaissance Kunstkammer of King Frederick II (Gundestrup and Wanning, 2004). However, all of the projects described have only web based outputs — thus immaterial. In the last part of this paper, will be advocated how virtual reunification should join with digital display technologies to push forward museum possibilities.

Punzalan offers three models to apprehend virtual reunification projects, which he then offers to link together in a consolidated approach. In the Ommegang project, the model that seems to prevail is the 'Linear, goal-orientated approach'. Indeed, the digitisation of the four

¹ <http://www.janeausten.ac.uk/index.html> [19 Mar. 2015]

² <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/> [19 Mar. 2015]

³ <http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/genizah/index.cfm> [19 Mar. 2015]

⁴ <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/> [19 Mar. 2015]

⁵ <http://natmus.dk/historisk-viden/temaer/nationalmuseets-historie/kunstkammeret/> [19 Mar. 2015]

known paintings was first envisioned thanks to the discovery of the work of Sarah Kenderdine, who works with digital interpretation. Her work on the installation *Pure Land: Inside the Magao Grottoes at Dunhuang* aimed to define strategies for the embodiment of the visitors' experience with the digitally created recreation of spaces. In her words, 'these installations reactivate the history of the immersive view in museums and reinvigorate archeology with aliveness, extending the role of digital facsimiles for new levels of aesthetics and interpretative experience' (Kenderdine, 2013a). Given the descriptive quality of the paintings of the Ommegang, a digitisation that would enable the development of an immersive interpretative display seemed particularly appealing. Thus the primary goal of undertaking the digitisation was always to result in an interpretative digital display of the painting; although the main interest of the paintings historically laid in the fifth one of the series, from the earlier stages of the process, it appeared that a full interpretative approach would not be achievable without the full series of painting, as previously explained.

This is where virtual reunification enters in line. Punzalan gives seven reasons that would lead institutions to undertake virtual reunification:

'(1) Transcend geographic dispersion for objects that cannot be physically reunited due to vague or contentious ownership concerns, (2) overcome physical limitations of format and genre, (3) collaborate with institutions holding complementary collections, (4) show how dismantled collections or missing fragments of artifacts appeared in their entirety, (5) preserve or conserve original artifacts, (6) represent or exhibit collections in a new way by means of new and emerging technology, and, finally, (7) open up opportunities for institutions to work collaboratively with researchers and scholars in making online products.' (Punzalan, 2014, p.300)

The Ommegang projects falls into several categories here. First the geographic dispersion: two of the paintings are in Madrid in the Prado collection; one of them is in storage at the Prado, while the other one is on loan to a governmental institution. Two other originals are at the Victoria and Albert Museum. One of these is cut in two which falls into the reason (2) — overcome physical limitations, as the original painting rendition cannot be completed with two parts (although the copy held by the Royal Fine Arts Museum of Belgium is still whole). Interestingly, in this project the reason (3) came as a result of the process: although both the V&A and the Prado had always been aware of the pendants to their paintings in their respective collections, it was the opportunity of the digitisation project that created the collaboration. Reason (4) was definitely the main goal, digitisation being here the way to pull together all the paintings. This could still be done in the material world; however, the size of the paintings and the state of

conservation of some of them, would make it a very expensive undertaking. And where would that reunification happen? A digital version could travel across all the museums interested in the Ommegang. Finally, reason (6) was an important part of the decision making, as both the curators at the Prado and the V&A were aware of the interest of having a display with all the paintings presented.

Interestingly, since the digitisation happened, it was discovered that a fifth painting had survived, the number four of the series, *Le défilé des géants et du Cheval Bayard*. This was unveiled by van Sprang in the catalogue of the Albert Marinus exhibition *Ommegang!* in 2013. At the time of writing the Private Collection where it is held has not been disclosed. We can hope that a digitisation of this painting could happen in the future, thus getting closer to the full series than we ever have since the 17th century.

2.2 Walking Around Europe to Digitise the Ommegang Series



Fig.2 Scanning the Ommegang paintings at the V&A, calibration. 21st July 2014.
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In terms of the stakeholders, this project brought together three institutions from three different countries, on two different continents. Thanks to the mediation of Sarah Kenderdine from Sydney, the Advanced Imaging Technology Laboratory (AITL) from Kyoto University was put in contact with the V&A and accepted to collaborate for this unique project. The AITL specialises in developing hardware and software capable of creating analytical images for use in cultural heritage. 'Analytical imaging refers to techniques, which provides useful information about an object being imaged beyond its 'conventional visual content' in an image' (Toque, 2010, p.120). Analytical images serve 'to derive quantitative information from the image, such as spectral reflectance, colorimetric values, spatial information and other relevant quantities for material analysis' (Toque 2014, p.1). Here, the AITL created three sorts of images: a first scan was operated on all the paintings, simultaneously creating trichromatic and near-infrared images. On one occasion, the timing allowed to operate a second scan with specular lighting.

Trichromatic scanning is the more common form of imaging, in the visible electromagnetic spectrum (380–760nm). While mimicking the human vision, this sort of imaging limits the information that can be extracted from the image. Near-infrared scanning gives images just outside the range of human vision (760–1000nm) and can reveal the surfacing under layers of paintings. Specular scanning, by lighting the objects from one side only while performing the scan, enables to reveal the texture of the surface of the paintings, showing, for example, possible cracks in the paint layers.

The Prado was approached in a second time, and provided graciously the space for the digitisation to happen and the access to both of their paintings. The process of digitisation involved a certain amount of planning, in order to enable the Advance Imaging Technology Laboratory to have access to all of the paintings in a relative short amount of time. The main challenge in the process was the geographical dispersion of all the paintings. Indeed, in London, two of the paintings were located in the V&A storage facilities at Blythe House, while the third one was in conservation at the main site in South Kensington. In Madrid on the other hand, one painting was at the Prado while the other was on loan at a governmental building. When it came to costs, it was easier to move the dismantled scanner around rather than transport all the paintings to the same space.

The technology developed by the AITL enabled the scanning of each painting to happen in record time given the circumstances (Fig.2). Each painting of the Ommegang series is approximately 320cm long and 120 cm high, which was another challenge to overcome. The AITL is used to work with oversized objects; the scanner had to be purposely fitted for this project. In addition, unlike most of digitisation projects, here the scanner had to move around and thus had to be rebuilt at each location. On top of these necessary manipulations, precise calibration is entailed in the digitisation process and several phases of test scans have to happen. Thanks to the adaptability of the scanner, and the state-of-the art technology provided by the Advanced Imaging Technology Laboratory, these technical challenges were mastered and each painting was scanned in one day.

2.3 Pioneering Paintings Reunification

The Ommegang experiment by the V&A enables us to add to Punzalan's interesting study the example of a project involving paintings. Virtual reunification has been popular in several domains, including archaeology and architecture, where you can use virtual data to fill in theoretically the gaps of missing fragments. The developing use of 3D imaging helps archaeologists to virtually recreate an artefact, to document and visualise fragmented objects. 3D Imaging also enables curators to

develop tools aimed at visitors to understand the story and original use of objects; as well as creating experience based on 3D and digital imagery. Virtual reunification of literary works or photographic archive enable scholars to look at an ensemble and to compare and study archives in a new way, adding metadata and historical context to the study of the object itself. However the virtual reunification of paintings for interpretation purposes is only in its infancy.

How many altar pieces and decorative series are scattered around European and international collections due to the hazards of history? One example is the *Studiolo* of Federico da Montefeltro (1422–1482), a masterpiece from the early Renaissance, the panels of which are now scattered across Europe, some in the historical Palazzo Ducal di Urbino, some at the Louvre in Paris. While an attempt of virtual reunification was made in 2008 by the Physics Laboratory of the University of Urbino "Carlo Bo", the resulting video shows the limits of technology then.⁶ Today's possibilities could maybe restore the grandeur of the original *Studiolo*. The list of scattered painted masterpieces would represent a full research study in itself, but a few examples include the *Pala Baglione* by Raphael (1507), which central piece, *The Deposition*, is held at the Galleria Borghese in Rome while the cyma and intermediary patterns are at the Galleria Nazionale de Umbria and the predella at the Vatican museum; the *Pala Barbadori* by Fra Filippo Lippi (1438), with its central panel, *Madonna with Child*, at the Louvre in Paris and three remaining elements of the predella at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence; the *Battle of San Romano* by Paolo Uccello, which three panels are respectively held by the Louvre, the National Gallery in London and the Galleria degli Uffizi.

Virtual reunification, would feed in an existing tendency from museums to look at studying and reunite scattered work. In 2006, The Musée des Beaux Arts de Lyon created an exhibition called *L'énigme du retable dispersé* (The mystery of the scattered altarpiece), about an enamel altarpiece created by an unknown artist at the beginning of the 16th century.⁷ The exhibition retraced the study of the enamel plates, which started in the 19th

⁶ Virtual reconstitution by Physics Laboratory of the University of Urbino 'Carlo Bo', Italy, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6glyAzEwU7s> (27 Apr. 2015) and <http://www.uniurb.it/PhysLab/Studiolo.html> [27 Apr. 2015].

⁷ The exhibition 'L'énigme du retable dispersé', Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, 1 April – 19 June 2006. Press release available at http://www.mba-lyon.fr/static/content/pdf/presse/dp-_lenigme-du-retable-disperse.pdf [19 Mar. 2015].

century after the altarpiece had been scattered in the 18th century. It looks at the different plates, their style and techniques, in order to provide visitors with the keys to unravel the enigma themselves. It is both the story of the object and the story of art historian trying to pierce its mystery; this project also shows the necessary cross-disciplinarity between art historians, scholars, and in this case the Department of Arts and Literature of the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Lyon who created the online database. These few examples show the potential opportunities that can be delivered by virtual reunification, which can support scholarship, interpretation and displays.

1.4 The Romanticism of the Quest for Lost Paintings

All these different scattered series have different stories; each of them could be a fascinating project in itself. In the case of the *Battle of San Romano*, a virtual reunification and interpretation would probably be the opportunity to not only reunite the three paintings, but also explain and develop for the visitor's benefit the origins of its commission, the historical roots of the battle and its symbolical underlying meanings, as much as it does for the Ommegang series. Experiments such as the one by the Italian University for the *Studiolo* de Montefeltro, or the exhibition at the Musée des Beaux Arts de Lyon, show the high interest scholars from all backgrounds have in the reunification of scattered ensembles. In addition to the scholarly and historical interests, virtual reunification has the potential to help in the quest for lost paintings. In the case of the Ommegang, the element of mystery is added by the still lost painting, the third of the series. Indeed, if van Sprang suggested that the fourth painting has been rediscovered in a private collection, the third painting of the series seems well and truly lost. The Madrid inventory of 1636 describes this painting as the most important one in size, and therefore probably in meaning (Sprang, 2013). It would have shown the Archdukes attending the Ommegang Festival from the Maison du Roi balcony in presence of the Court, with the Grand Serment des Arbalétriers (the most important Guild of Brussels at the time) parading with Isabella's colours. Politically this painting would have been the focus point of the series; the inventory stated it was more than 5m long, almost twice as big as the other ones. Reuniting the remaining paintings could also be a way of giving a new impulse to the search for this lost piece.

2. DISPLAYING THE REUNITED SERIES: THE PHYSICAL OUTPUT OF DIGITISATION

The digitisation of the four known paintings was completed in July 2014, and the data stitching in November that same year. The data was created in order

to create a display, but raises several issues that are long known by scholars working on the implication of digital in cultural heritage. The question of the aura of a work of art versus its reproductions is well known since Walter Benjamin's famous essay of 1936. We will here try to look at different approaches that change directions in theorising the aura, inputting more recent ideas on how digital reinterpretation of works can enhance the visitor's experience as well as the meaning of a work of art. Digital reinterpretation is here being used as a way of differentiating the potential output of the digital data from the traditional interpretation in the museum context, that usually goes through a variety of means, from texts to audio-guides and including screen based devices. Here digital reinterpretation is meant, following Witcomb's idea, as a way to convey the meaning of the works by creating a display using digital data and technology that would stand in the museum in its own right (Witcomb, 2007).

2.4 The aura of high-resolution data

Peter Walsh defined the strategy of the original V&A as such:

'The South Kensington Museum had two main goals in mind: to elevate public taste, especially the taste of British manufacturers, and to elevate society through the morally beneficial influence of great art. Collecting valuable original art works was not, at least initially, especially important. When originals were unavailable or too costly, photographs, plaster casts, and other reproductions made entirely satisfactory substitutes. Typically, the South Kensington Museum exhibited all four together—photographs, casts, copies, and originals—in the public galleries. In the educational approach of the South Kensington Museum, and at its offspring elsewhere, the photographic reproduction was only slightly less valuable than an original.' (Walsh, 2007, p.25)

The casts, once created for the public's education in architecture and referred to as vulgar copies, are now on the edge of becoming museum collections on their own and objects of scholar studies. Most of the casts are now in better condition than the originals (this is the case of the Trajan column casts of the V&A, which reliefs are a witness of what the original in Roma looked like before pollution started its erosion); the cast courts are one of the areas most visited in the museum. One of the Cast Courts at the V&A reopened exultantly on 26th November 2014, unveiling a real size copy of Michelangelo's *David* and leading the Guardian to question the aura (Toynbee, 2014). Following the point of view of the reproduction as being as valuable as the original when it comes to education — in which way are today's digital images different?

Andrew Lowe and Bruno Latour develop this idea in their position paper in favour of the copy of *The Wedding at Cana* by Veronese, now in the monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, for which the painting now in the Louvre collections was originally commissioned. Although the copy is clearly labelled as such, Latour and Lowe explain how the visitor can be much more entranced by the copy hanging in the original location than by the original confined in the Louvre room in front of the tourists assaulted *Gioconda* (Latour and Lowe, 2010). They ask the question whether the aura of the original does only lay in its originality, it is to say the original work by the hand of the painter, or if 'originality does not come to a work of art in bulk; it is rather made of different components, each of which can be inter-related to produce a complex whole' (Latour and Lowe, 2010, p.286). In their theory, the copy would be almost as much 'original' as the Louvre version, because its aura resides not only in its perfect reproduction, but also in its location in the place for which the piece was originally created. Here we can ask then if the aura of the work as defined by Walter Benjamin [1936] is still relevant, or if we could work on a new definition of the aura where digital copies could also have a major role.

In the case of the Ommegang, the aura of the original seems not to have been such a traumatism. Indeed, archives from the Alcazar show that the original works already hanged in the Alcazar Palace in 1618, two years after completion, meaning that Isabella and Albert had probably sent them over to Spain as a present to Phillip III (Sprang, 2013). However, an inventory of Tervuren in 1620 shows that a full version of the Ommegang series was on display in the castle at that time, while there is proof that the originals remained in Spain (Sprang, 2013). Two of these early copies are now in the Fine Arts Museum of Belgium collections. It seems clear from this story that the original aura of the Ommegang did not rely on the concept of the original by Van Alsloot, as he and his workshop were asked to produce a replica of the original series. The aura of the Ommegang sat in their underlying political meaning. Although today the original works carry artistic value, as well as historical and symbolical values, we could argue that creating a third copy in a digital version is not undermining the original aura. Rather, it would enhance the aura of the original by revealing its importance. In this we agree with Sarah Kenderdine for whom 'good quality digital facsimiles both propagate and add layers of significance and meaning to the original, providing the object with a biography, as opposed to being a weak surrogate for the original or competing with or supplanting it' (Kenderdine, 2013a p.203). Furthermore Punzalan defines the virtual reunited object through its possibilities of metadata — archival information, cataloguing, scholar notes, editing, and conservation status (Punzalan 2014). In the Ommegang project, the aura of the digital object would be different

and reside in the different layers of reading that it enables.

2.5 Exploring Immersive Displays: the V&A Theatre and Performance Experiences

The *Triumph of the Archduchess*, the fifth painting of the series, has been displayed for a long time in the Theatre and Performance Galleries at the V&A, and formerly at the Theatre Museum. As such, it was used as a referent for older forms of theatre, to show the use of theatre as an educational tool by the Jesuits and as a way of celebrating the Archduchess' power. The painting was thus used as a narrative tool, as a sign for expressing particular ideas in the Theatre and Performance Galleries context. When the V&A Galleries were created in 2009, a digital interpretative tool was created alongside the painting. One of the historically interesting aspects of the painting was its feature of music, instruments and sounds. The original interactive program for the Galleries emphasised this audio aspect of the painting, adding a layer of understanding and potential for experience for the visitors, as an independent interactive model set further away in the Galleries path.

Since 2009, the Theatre and Performance Department at the V&A has further investigated the possibilities of sound and audio-visual as added media for exhibitions. Exhibitions such as 'Sikert and the Three Graces' (2013) or 'Shakespeare, our greatest living playwright' (2014) used audio-visual as a way of conveying another layer of understanding in parallel of the display of real objects. The videos in the Sikert exhibition created a fictional environment where a former actress was reminded of her past as a performer, thus giving life to the paintings and drawings of Walter Sikert and the several archives on display through the personal vision of a fictional character. In the Shakespeare exhibition, video interviews of actors and directors provided first-hand testimonies of the experience of performing Shakespeare, while the objects were referring to pre-digital experiences of performing. In the exhibition 'David Bowie is' (2013), the experiential use of audio-visual was pushed a step further by the use of geo-localised headphones which were responding to the visitors' spatial situation and interacting automatically with the objects on display in his surroundings. In these three latest examples, the experiential aspect of the exhibition was taken one step further than the original interpretative tool of the Ommegang (the audio dispositive): digital and audio-visual were integrated into the exhibition and treated as objects in their own rights, not competing with the museum objects, but interacting with them to provide a more theatrical experience. According to Witcomb, these different experiences show 'the way in which objects, and in my argument

multimedia installations, are able to engage emotions and in the process produce a different kind of knowledge—one that embodies in a very material way, shared experiences, empathy, and memory.’ (Witcomb, 2007, p.36).

This background made the Theatre and Performance Department the perfect undertaker for the Ommegang experience. As Kate Bailey, curator and producer, wrote in her article about the Edward Gordon Craig display: the experiments of the Theatre and performance Department ‘introduce the basis for an alternative mode for interactive installations — one that promotes a fully embodied experience within the physical surroundings of the museum, one that fosters social interaction, and one that uses digital interactivity as a tool for a more performative engagement with artefacts, archival material and the museum at large.’ (Bailey and Felstead, 2011, p.228).

2.6 Imagining digital displays

The Ommegang experiment aims to follow this line, by employing the digital data that emerged from its virtual reunification to create a display that pushes the visitor to experience the object in a new way.

Following Witcomb’s advocacy for a virtual object in its own right, it seems an output to the digitisation of the Ommegang should not be just another digital heritage object as defined by Andrew Dewdney (Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh, 2013). Catalogue-print quality images of the paintings already exist online on their respective museums website, and although a full-size copy would render the original physicality of the series together, various meanings would still be lost to the contemporary viewer. The painting series is a witness to the history of Spanish Netherlands and its relationship with 17th-century Spain, a descriptive portrait of Brussels society and its games of power; such a complex underlying story would need long panels of texts to be fully explained in a traditional museum display. Moreover, the symbolical meanings of the representation of the guilds, religious groups and emblems of power can be lost to our contemporaries. A digital embodiment of the paintings, adding sound and vision to the original 2D rendition, would thus enable the curator to restore these different layers.

In addition, an important benefice of using digital installation resides in the possibility of developing sensorial experiences. Following Chakrabaty’s idea of a shift from an abstract model of reasoning towards an experiential model since the 1960s and 1970s, Witcomb offers the idea that museums had ‘to move from displays based on abstract forms of reasoning to displays which privileged experience’ (Witcomb 2007, p.46). Instead of conveying the history and political implications of the

paintings through an abstract discourse on panels, an immersive product built from the digital data would enable the Ommegang output to provide a sensory experience to visitors, adding movement and sound to the visual discovery, thus using affect and emotions as a way to convey information.

Although at the time of writing the proper output of the project is still to be produced, a few strands of work can be explored. A first, short term output, and produced with limited resources, would be to use the digital data to create an interpretative video. Such an output would imply the involvement of a video designer and a sound designer, in addition to the necessary researchers to develop the content. An interpretative video, displayed on projection or on screen, could be used on its own or alongside one (or several) of the paintings of the series. This would enable to give a first taste of the scope of the works. As above stated, the museum interest of the Ommegang series resides in different levels of understanding: its commission as a political tool meant to be a gift; it’s imposing physicality that was meant to impress 17th-century viewers; and its role as an iconographic document for scholars since its creation. While, as evidenced by van Sprang and other scholar works throughout the centuries, this last function can still be active by studying independently each painting of the scattered ensemble, the first two meanings of the paintings series are lost to the contemporary public due to the paintings history. In the original series, the meaning of the whole series was revealed and fully expressed in the third, most important painting, which is now lost. Digital reinterpretation allows to restore this meaning through audio-visual, by putting together other material and audio information that would enable the contemporary visitor to understand what a 17th-century viewer would have felt seeing the whole series of paintings.

Another interesting aspect that can be developed through a digital display is the integration of sound, not as an independent dispositive but as an integral part of the digital experience of the painting. By creating an audio-visual product from the digital data, the V&A can re-enact all the different meanings and functions of the paintings, and add a contemporary layer and the history of the digital object in itself. A digital product of the Ommegang would enable to assemble not only the paintings in a virtual reality, but also put together all the pieces of the puzzle, of its meaning, giving the keys to the 21st-century visitor to understand all the layers underneath the paintings, their commission, and history since 1615.

On the technical aspect, the quality of the data would enable a video designer to bring the viewer almost inside the painting, making close-ups of the characters and following the path of the procession as if one was part of it. This unravels potentiality in terms of immersion, but also empowers the visitor to have access to another

physicality of the paintings. How many visitors set up the alarms ringing by approaching museum objects too close, in an attempt to grasp the paintbrushes touch? With the high resolution data of the image, one can bring the visitor even closer to the painted surface than would be able in real life and, potentially, generate an emotion similar to the one of this French journalist brought to tears when facing a reproduction of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* displayed on Google's Art Wall (Richard, 2015). An adequate sound design, with possible surrounded sound, would enhance the experience. The sound design could be doubled with a voice over, explaining the interpretation and contextual background. Such a video would also enable to link the 1615 Ommegang depicted in the paintings with its contemporary relative, the festival still happening every year in today's Brussels.

A longer-term output, and of more consequent financial implication, would be to make use of available technology in terms of touch screens to create a more interactive visitor experience. In the case of a video, the visitor experience is directed by a narrative decided in advance. With more resources, one can imagine a digital version of the paintings where the visitor could dive in and out by himself, curating his own personal experience, using a touch screen. The availability of near infrared images of the paintings also opens up possibilities of bringing in the visitor in the creation process, enabling to highlight the potential repaints on the paintings and underlying drawings. The exhibition, *Trazo oculto. Dibujos subyacentes en pinturas de los siglos XV y XVI*⁸, held at the Prado Museum in Madrid in 2006, showed the appeal to the public of that kind of technical material, with 160 866 attending and the catalogue being now sold out. These behind-the-scene aspects have a high potential in terms of interpretation: the visitor could, through the exploration of the near-infrared images and appropriate help, get to understand how conservators use infrared and images in specular lighting to understand the physicality of an object and restore it.

These are two — smaller and larger scale — potential ways of using digital data in order to enhance the visitor experience. Both present a certain amount of challenges, requiring the input of a wide range of specialists — from video maker to musicologist, producers to technologies technicians. As suggested, financial and time resources are key. A video-led display could be relatively cheaply undertaken, when the initiation of an interactive display,

⁸ 'Trazo oculto. Dibujos subyacentes en pinturas de los siglos XV y XVI' (Secret Line. Underlying drawings in paintings of the 15th and 16th centuries), Prado Museum, 21 July – 5 Nov. 2006, curated by Gabriele Finaldi and Carmen Garrido.

involving the visitor and enabling him to participate, implies major inputs in time and financial resources.

Unlike the first interpretative tool that was created in 2009, a new, immersive display should not only be thought as an act of interpretation, but also transformed into an object of interest in its own right. There is a need to conserve the physicality of the series, which could be provided, for example, through the use of a panorama-like display. Aspects of theatrical history can be emphasised by animating the digital version of the paintings; the level of detail should be such as to allow the viewer to dive into groups of characters even more closely than by seeing the real painting, creating the possibility to show all of the different groups, artefacts, costumes, isolating them and unravelling the stories embedded in each detail. Any kind of animation and image enhancement for the visitors' benefit can be imagined with such high quality imagery (Fig. 3). However, these steps are to be carefully planned to enable the full potential of any kind of digital reinterpretation project to live up to the quality of the data.



Fig.3 *Serments en armes*, Denys Van Alsloot, 1616, detail, V&A 168-1885 © Victoria and Albert Museum

In the case of the Ommegang project, the use of digital data is meant to facilitate a theatrical approach to the museum object. In the same fashion as drama, immersive storytelling can activate an emotional response in visitors and thus develop new ways of learning. As Maggie Burnette Stogner puts it, 'Immersive technologies, particularly when combined with powerful narrative, can be used to fully engage visitors in the same way that a great book engrosses a reader and a successful film creates the "suspension of disbelief" that absorbs viewers into the world on the screen' (Burnett Stogner, 2011, p.191). The theatrical catharsis can be recreated in a museum environment using digital technology, and by immersing the visitor in an object related landscape, digital imagery joined to audio-visual and sound interpretation can help unlock cognitive learning process in a new, more experiential way.

Case studies exist on the reception by the public of new displays using immersive technologies (Collin-Lachaud and all, 2008, current research by UCL Institute of

Archaeology and Institute of Education Culture Communication & Media (London Knowledge Lab)⁹, but while more projects are being created there is a full potential of research to be undertaken on how new technologies in museum impact on the visitor experience. The Ommegang project is not yet on display and at this stage only assumptions are possible. However, it is one step more towards the understanding of how digital data from cultural heritage can make a lasting impression not only in conservation and communication, but in interpretation and display. As Dewdney, Dibosa and Walsh put it (2013, p.187), there is a need to have 'discussion[s] on how new media could be entailed in the museums in ways that would make them spaces of cultural innovation' — and only by experimenting can these discussions take place.

3. CONCLUSION

Digital media poses the question of what for are the museums. Cameron, quoting MacDonald, suggests museums should be seen 'primarily as information sources rather than repositories of "authentic" objects' (Cameron, 2007, p.52).

The V&A admitted goal is to provide sources of inspirations for artists and practitioners. Why could digital not be another source of inspiration? As Kate Bailey wrote: 'In this regard, the museum can become a place where visitors go to actively contribute, to *take part* in and of the museum, and in doing so they become a consequential factor of its construction. By facilitating such a pursuit, digital interactivity could help shape the museum into a radical, and performative environment for experiencing, forming, and learning.' (Bailey and Felstead, 2010, p.233).

The Ommegang digitisation project interest thus lays in its introduction to several 21st-century museum questioning. Digitisation of cultural heritage is developing at growing speed, and new technologies are made more and more available to museum professionals. Further to existing digitisation programmes for collections and availability on the internet, what can digitisation offer to museums in terms of creating new visitor experiences? The Ommegang project shows that virtual reunification can be thought of in different ways, as a mean of reassembling a scattered series, but also restoring the

underlying meanings to a work of art which can be interpreted in a hundred manners. The use of high resolution data in cultural heritage can thus be thought as way of developing new visitor experiences in museums, using 2D and 3D digital imagery to create immersive, interpretative displays and play with visitors' emotions.

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⁹ Theano Moussouri and Eleni Vomvyla presented some results of their research 'Cross-disciplinary frameworks for studying visitor experiences with digitally mediated museum exhibits', at the Institute of Archaeology, London on 24 Nov. 2014.

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