



FACTVM
FOVNDATION

FOR DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY
IN CONSERVATION



Viewed from afar

31-05-2015

An article in the Wall St Journal was pointed out to me last week - not a paper I am used to coming across important cultural references in normally, but here was one. And it resonated.

The article - *Europe Braces for a Summer Travel Crush*, (E. Gamberman/I.Landauro/L. Moloney) is a pragmatic, fact filled, unromantic and practical view of what is happening to our heritage sites and objects now that mass leisure has coupled with the growing ability of previously restricted visitors from newly emerged economies to create vast crowds in all the great sites and museums. And these visitors have little time, often a limited budget but they have a desire to see the important objects of the Western Heritage.

Coincidentally, hence the resonance, I was in Prague over the last few days - a city that used to have the atmosphere of history's quiet continuum (though its history was far from quiet), walking across the Charles Bridge in the evening was idyllic (and that was really not that long ago). Now it's like the subway at rush hour, all day, packed with clearly frustrated human traffic trying to get to the next 'attraction' first - whilst many are there with the idea of cheap beer and all night bars - and the mixture is not good.

The WSJ article notes that Milan hopes for (perhaps fears) 20 million for Expo 15, the Louvre sees up to 40,000 a day shuffling past the Mona Lisa, for an average of 11 seconds each, just enough time to focus and shoot with their trusty selfie sticks, cruise ships disgorge multitudes into Rome who make up a large part of the 2,000 teeming people who might be in the Sistine Chapel the moment you get there - trying to ignore the feeling of claustrophobia, humidity, nausea - to concentrate on the ceilingand now you can do so until midnight some days. Try standing on the Japanese bridge at Giverny, you may not have room - but that's the only way you can do it at the Tower of London as there is a conveyor belt to slip you past the Crown Jewels - the ultimate expression of visitor as cattle.

The Rijksmuseum has just doubled its capacity to 5 million so that more can come in - but even that may be increased as late opening is also being considered. At Santa Maria della Grazie 400,000 saw the Last Supper last year (600,000 were refused) - increased viewing times will hardly dent the demand (remember the 20 million expected in Milan).

These numbers are mountainous, vast and increasing..... but this experience is what our heritage means to many, many people, especially the young. It's incredibly sad. This humid scrum is what the newly able public sees and has to be part of. This new section of our society has a right to see what we have inherited, publicly.

Articles like the one in the WSJ ask - what can be done? Answers include - spread out the works (i.e. make them more inconvenient to see), increase viewing hours, increase prices, limit hours, close exhibits, employ crowd control firms, divert visitors - marketing firms are brought in to advise, tourism consultants to analyse.

What Factum Foundation did in Luxor last year, recreating and installing the perfect replica of the Tomb of Tutankhamun, presents a very understandable and viable answer.

We can duplicate the great works and they can be taken to other parts of the world or back to where they came from. In re-creating the Polittico Griffoni in facsimile this exquisite example of renaissance art is being replicated exactly - the original was de-constructed in the C18th and sold to a wide spread of collectors - we are bringing the original 16 elements back together in Bologna - where it belongs. For a calm public to view with awe.

Veronese's Wedding at Cana hangs opposite the Mona Lisa - impossible to see through the throng twenty deep (without mentioning the iPhones and GoPros held high) as it hangs just above the floor - entirely wrong as it is painted to be seen above eye level. But then it also hangs in perfect replica in the tranquil refectory of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, for which it was painted and where Factum Arte hung their facsimile. Standing there, looking up from the cool stone floor with the bright (natural) light coming through the Palladian windows is a rather different experience.

This is the answer - it is not so expensive, it is what the Foundation does and supports and wants you to support and it saves the objects we care about both being destroyed by the love of visitors but also rewards that love by making the experience less torture, more appreciation. And at least we record exactly for our descendents so they have the record, safely and permanently.

High resolution recording of great works, with our developments in technology, can allow for perfect facsimiles that can allow the vast numbers to enjoy what we inherit - without the appalling environment for contemplation that mass tourism is, inadvertently, creating. Great treasures can be re-created and taken to where visitors are - they can be duplicated - just as images of the Mona Lisa have created her fame (she wouldn't be famous without the millions of images that have build her renown) - so can facsimiles allow everyone to see and feel and understand what it might all be about - without the crowds.