The Charm of Reproduction: The Special Experience Brought to Visitors by "Flying Mythological Horses" in the Hong Kong Palace Museum

Shengwei Chen, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR

Abstract

The emergence of digital technology has had an immeasurable impact on society. Reproduction using VR, AR and other technologies as media also appear more frequently in museum exhibitions, which has also aroused many people's doubts about the "authenticity" of museums. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin believes that reproduction lacks the authenticity, tradition and culture of the original, and its value is far less than that of the original. Therefore, this research mainly explores several questions: How do people view the relationship between reproduction and the original? What are the differences between audiences' perceptions and experiences of the original compared to their experiences of VR or AR-mediated reproduction? Can VR or AR-mediated reproduction enhance appreciation and understanding of the original? This study takes the "Flying Mythological Horses" installation in the Hong Kong Palace Museum as a case and collects data from 20 visitors based on observation and semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, this study found that most respondents agree that reproduction is the re-creation and re-interpretation of the original. Although reproduction does not replace the original, it does provide visitors with more opportunities for "dialogue." Finally, the experience based on reproduction is more diversified, which is beneficial for visitors to understand the original from different angles and protects the museum's "authenticity."

Keywords: Digital Technology, Museum, Reproduction, Original, Audience Experience

Introduction

In the digital age, immersive technologies such as VR, AR, MR, etc., have impacted museums. Many artifacts using these new technologies as the medium appear more frequently in museums instead of original ones, bringing audiences a richer viewing experience. However, the presence of artifacts has also led to many debates about the "authenticity" of the museum. In the book "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin believes that reproduction lacks the authenticity, tradition and culture of the original, and its value is far less than that of the original (Benjamin, 2018). Labadi (2010) states that the original does not It is not a simple antique, it possesses contemporary, artistic value, representativeness, cultural values, etc. Replicas cannot replace these values. Khalaf (2017) pointed out that if we need to understand the real past or history, the audience must truly see ancient objects, and the aura of these ancient objects will lead the audience back to the past. However, reproduction is not just a simple "copy," it has unique attributes and values (Karp, 2014). Some scholars pointed out that when replicas appeared in the West in the 13th century, whether they were books or artworks, they were also seen as "authentic," and the aura of the original would be transferred to the reproduction (Evrard & Krebs, 2018). Smith believes that the core value of the original product itself is undeniable, but we cannot ignore the critical value of experiencing "authenticity" (Smith, 2013). If no collection cannot be truly experienced, then it is not very meaningful to the audience. Some scholars also pointed out that the importance of collections lies in the way of "dialogue" with audiences. The value of exhibits is that tourists can obtain the knowledge they want from exhibits, rather than just focusing on preserving collections (McKay & Monteverde, 2003). Therefore, this study explores two questions: How do people view the relationship between reproduction and the original? What are the differences between audiences' perceptions and experiences of the original compared to their experiences of VR or AR-mediated reproduction? Can VR or AR-mediated reproduction enhance appreciation and understanding of the original?

Case Selection

Opened to the public last July, the Hong Kong Palace Museum (HKPM) is one of the most important museums in Hong Kong dedicated to researching and collecting Chinese historical and artistic relics. "Flying Mythological Horses" is in the ninth exhibition hall. It is an artifact created based on immersive technology and collections. More importantly, it is not just a simple replica, which means it is a "recreated" artifact based on different collections. Therefore, in this study, "Flying Mythological Horses" can be referred to as reproduction, artifact, VR, AR-mediated installation, or replica. On the other hand, this original resource of installation comes from five different originals, which include "Dragonlike horse with wings," "Roof tile with celestial horse," "Mythical creature," "Celestial globe" and "Red-figure askos."

In addition, the "Flying Mythological Horses" projection screens are suspended above the exhibition hall, consisting of 4 projection screens with a length of 2.66 meters and a width of 1.53 meters. There is a special projector in front of each screen, and augmented reality technology (AR) projects mythical horses on the screen. Each screen is hung in a different position in the exhibition hall, and adopts a "non-parallel" arrangement, which provides a rich viewing angle for the audience. As the artist state, digitally modeled and animated, mythological winged horses fly across the virtual airspace of the gallery, their flight paths determined by a bird-flocking algorithm. Also, these moving images are projected in

real-time onto four translucent projection screens, and the screens are portals into a mythological ancestral space, through which horses from antiquity fly into the gallery.

Figure 1: Flying Mythological Horses Installation

Method

This research used a combination of unobtrusive observation and informal interviews to collect data. The researcher stands somewhere far away to observe the visitors' behavior, including the length of time they experience, body language, etc. Informal interviews are conducted after observing the respondents. The content of the project interview with the audience is relatively casual and relaxed, but the researcher will also ask some questions about their experiences and feelings about the original and reproduction. Finally, 20 valid data were collected. researcher grouped these data in the research and used T1, T2...T20 to represent each respondent.

"Reinterpretation" of Collections

Benjamin believes that the replica destroys the "aura" of the original, and it cannot replace the original. Duval et al. believe that the debate between original, reproduction and fake has existed since the emergence of technology. However, these debates have received more attention in the context of immersive technology (Duval et al., 2020). In particular, a reproduction based on immersive technology as the medium has brought audiences is no longer a simple "replica". As a visitor (T16) said:

> My impression of artifacts is simple imitation and reproduction like the Mona Lisa being made into a pendant decoration on my bag. However, my experience with horses is very complicated for me. It was not just a replica. It allowed me to see how

these horses fly, these flying horses that brought the myths and legends of the written word to life...

Savedoff (1993) argued that the unique value of the original product has not been destroyed by reproduction. On the contrary, she believes that reproduction is more helpful for the audience to discover the unique value of the original product that is difficult to detect. It is clear that this installation is not simply transforming the collection into artifacts to show the audience through immersive technology, but instead "recreating" the collection by combining historical materials and artistic thinking. The audience's appreciation of collections goes beyond literal labels and static objects. These reproductions show the audience the possibility of a mythical horse flying, and make up for the illusion in the audience's mind through vivid visual presentation. When the audience actually watched these flying horses, they had a different understanding of the collection. The visitor (T10) said:

> These enlarged collections let me see the details I overlooked on the original. For example, although these collections are all horses, their expression is different. Some seem serious, while others feel very happy. I think maybe it's because they come from different cultures...

The visitor (T7) said:

> When I appreciate original, I pay more attention to their shapes. However, these reproductions arouse my curiosity. After they are enlarged, their colors and materials feel completely different? Why? Is it because the production period is different? Why do some horses? Is it a "one up and down" flight, while others fly without wings? Could it be because of some special situation lead?

In fact, it is easy to see that what this reproduction brings to the audience is no longer limited to the similarities and differences of shapes, but stimulates independent thinking and exploration of visitors. Tourists have different perceptions of reproduction, resulting from the combined effects of different knowledge, culture, social experience and other factors. From the visitors' perspective, the VR or AR-mediated work does not replace the value of the original work itself. On the contrary, they are a complementary relationship. As pointed out by a visitor (T5):

> I think the collection is very important because it represents a specific period of history. However, I also think that reproduction is very important. Its importance lies in allowing me to understand this culture differently.

It is found in the research that the original works in the museum have an irreplaceable position, because the special attributes of the original works, such as history, culture, and materials, cannot be replaced by reproduction, and it is the core element to defend the "authenticity" of the museum. Although VR or AR-mediated reproduction cannot replace the original, it enhances various attributes of the original. The reproduction reveals the hidden stories, culture, and history contained in the original through technology and vivid visual language further explaining the original work. Through reproduction, tourists can appreciate more details that are easily overlooked in the original work, and have a more diversified understanding of the original.

Diverse Engagement and Dialogue

Museums have been exploring cooperation with tourists in recent years to establish a further "dialogue" between collections and visitors. Smith (2013) states that the aura of cultural heritage or collections allows audiences to experience, if without an experiential component, then collections or exhibits are just isolated objects. In this case, reproduction is transformed into an original prosthesis, and visitors use reproduction as a medium to further appreciate the collection specially. "Follow and explore" is the most obvious feature of the audience's visit behavior in this installation. Many visitors not only stop in the collection, but also spend more time looking at the replicas above their heads, and participate in the viewing through their bodies. The visitor (T2) said:

> My favorite is the pink horse. It's so cute. I was going to take a picture of it, but it disappeared from this screen and appeared on the opposite screen, and I followed it through the past, then it traveled to the next screen, and it felt like it was living in these screens.

The flying horse's shuttle between the four screens stimulates the visitor's physical engagement. As we know, these artifacts are not statically projected on the four screens. On the contrary, these screens build a virtual space without borders in the real space through a specific layout design. When these flying horses shuttle through the four screens, it is as if they are flying in mid-air in the exhibition hall. This combination of virtual and real visual effects arouses the participation interest of visitors. They follow the rhythm of these flying horses and use their bodies to experience their moving routes. These physical movements deepen the memory of visitors. Andrea Witcomb, a museum theorist, notes that integrating digital technology establishes a "dialogue" between visitors and exhibitions, enabling open narratives and deeper engagement with interactive elements (Witcomb, 2006). For visitors, this reproduction is not just an "accessible" work, it is also the embodiment of the original work, through which visitors can start a dialogue with the collection. Visitor (T19) said:

> While the colors we have seen in the collection are real, I think the colors of flying horses that have been carefully manipulated are also wonderful. Even though the collections have been through a long time, but they through the reproductions speak to me about the beauty of the art and color in those eras.

It widely agrees that the authenticity of history is not only the authenticity of the collection, but also the authenticity of the audience experience. The authenticity of this experience comes from the restoration and interpretation of the history, culture, stories, etc., of the collection (Jones & Yarrow, 2013). Although these flying horses are digital artifacts, they bring the audience back to a certain era. Tourists focus on more than just the beauty of the artifacts themselves, but look for the real history through certain elements. These real histories are often hidden behind the collections for a long time, but reproduction makes these hidden elements redisplayed in front of tourists. Reproduction is like a window through which the collection tells its own "aura," and the audience goes back to the past through it to experience a real history and culture.

Conclusion

This study takes the "Flying Mythological Horses" in the Hong Kong Palace Museum as a case to explore several issues, such as how tourists perceive the relationship between artifacts

and originals and what kind of impact reproduction has on tourists' experience, etc. From the research results, this research believes reproduction has a more positive impact on audiences and museums. First, reproduction helps tourists to understand the collection and history from multiple perspectives. It transforms some of the history or stories of the collection that can only be described in obscure words into specific objects through visual language, allowing tourists to experience and appreciate it more intuitively. In addition, reproduction has more "accessibility." Visitors can communicate with it in various ways. This kind of communication is not just physical interaction, but uses it as a window to explore the true history and culture of the collection itself. Finally, this research agrees that reproduction does not influence the "authenticity" of museums. On the contrary, it inspires more tourists to find the truth hidden behind many collections. Reproduction is not intended to replace the original, but to help audiences better understand the original.

References

Benjamin, W. (2018). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In *A museum studies approach to heritage* (pp. 226-243). Routledge.

Duval, M., Smith, B., Gauchon, C., Mayer, L., & Malgat, C. (2020). "I have visited the Chauvet Cave": the heritage experience of a rock art replica. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *26*(2), 142-162.

Evrard, Y., & Krebs, A. (2018). The authenticity of the museum experience in the digital age: the case of the Louvre. *Journal of Cultural Economics*, *42*, 353-363.

Jones, S., & Yarrow, T. (2013). Crafting authenticity: An ethnography of conservation practice. *Journal of Material Culture*, *18*(1), 3-26.

Karp, C. (2014). Digital heritage in digital museums. *Museum International*, *66*(1-4), 157-162.

Khalaf, R. W. (2017). A viewpoint on the reconstruction of destroyed UNESCO Cultural World Heritage Sites. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *23*(3), 261-274.

Labadi, S. (2010). World Heritage, authenticity and post-authenticity. *Heritage and globalisation*, 66-84.

McKay, S. W., & Monteverde, S. R. (2003). Dialogic looking: Beyond the mediated experience. *Art Education*, *56*(1), 40-45.

Savedoff, B. E. (1993). Looking at art through photographs. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *51*(3), 455-462.

Smith, L. (2013). Theorizing museum and heritage visiting. *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, 459-484.

Witcomb, A. (2006). Interactivity: thinking beyond. *A companion to museum studies*, 353-361.