

Pandemic heritage squared: international project + NGV Triennial

Susan Faine, April 2011



Eager to stay connected to their communities in spite of The Pandemic, museums around the world have been reviewing, tweaking or radically changing their processes and outputs. And now, to be COVID-safe and reopen, museums are redefining internal spaces and visitor access to accommodate social distancing. In a way, The Pandemic has been an exercise in disaster preparedness, just not the kind that most of us in the heritage or museum sectors expect to deal with. My sense is that it's made us think more laterally about who can engage with an institution and a collection, how we can make this happen globally as well as locally – how we can support one another, professionally and personally, right around the world.

The International Council for Museums, and four of its international committees are collaborating on 'Clothing the Pandemic'[1], an ICOM Solidarity Project that uses digital technologies to demonstrate that museums can remain in touch with and be relevant to our everyday, and continue to be inspirational, accessible and democratic.

The project's iconic object is the facemask - symbol of The Pandemic, and of individual and collective resilience, community and unity across societies, globally.

Over the last 12 months, participating museums[2] have begun collecting facemasks and other pandemic-related dress. Each has applied their own approach to collecting - from international to local, from fashion designers and makers to small-scale and local artisans. They're creating a virtual repository that will consider the art, practice and culture of facemasks and tell stories of medical, artistic and social responses to The Pandemic and other global events of 2020 such as the Black Lives Matter movement. If your contemporary collecting projects include pandemic-related dress, you might like to let the International Committee Costume know: corinne.thepaut-cabasset@chateauversailles.fr

If you're keen to explore this further, 'Clothing the Pandemic' provides three important professional development opportunities: in June, 'Documenting the Material Culture of the Pandemic: Strategies and Challenges', a free online workshop where expert panellists will discuss the strategies and challenges in collecting, displaying and conserving material culture to document the COVID-19 pandemic and present the research project to date; in November, a collaborative virtual exhibition of COVID-19 facemasks, and in December, a suite of online programs including a conference looking at the processes and results of the project, a publication of the summary of conference papers, resources that will assist others to create collections of their own and support educators discussing The Pandemic through these international collections.

You can check for project news at <http://costume.mini.icom.museum/clothing-the-pandemic/>

Closer to home, in Melbourne, the NGV's Triennial is now closed but it included two artistic explorations of the concepts behind 'Clothing the Pandemic':

During the first weeks of The Pandemic, English designer Alice Potts began using food waste and plant dyes to produce reusable and sustainable cotton masks and other accessories. The PPE included in the Triennial, entitled 'Dance Biodegradable Personal Protective Equipment (DBPPE) post COVID facemasks', were face shields made using 3D print polymer, bioplastic and elastic.



Scotty So's 'China Masks' was a series of eight porcelain face masks and six photographic prints. Accurate representations of real PPE, So's first mask for the series was the Qihua glazed respirator mask, which also doubled as an incense burner. "I wanted to play with the idea that this is something that is supposed to protect me but has become this beautiful, fragile ceramic piece," he said.



We'd love to hear how you've been documenting your community's response to The Pandemic, or whether you're inspired by 'Clothing the Pandemic' to begin a collecting project. Drop us a line or two ...

Images:

Hidden Liotard IV (after Portrait of Joachim Rendorp by Jean-Etienne Liotard, 1757, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam), Photocollage by Volker Hermes, 2020@www.volkerhermes.de @volker.hermes
Selected pieces from Alice Pott's 'Dance Biodegradable Personal Protective Equipment (DBPPE) post COVID facemasks' exhibited as part of the Triennial, National Gallery of Victoria, April 2021
Photograph: © Scotty So 'China mask/Incense holder, Hong Kong Orchid Tree, no. 1', Scotty So 2020.
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My work is with communities, people and their stories, objects and places. I encourage people to speak of their life as they have lived it.