IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE

OFFERING OLDER ADULTS A SERIES OF VIRTUAL GUIDED MUSEUM VISITS

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The purpose of this implementation guide is to outline a recommended methodology for developing an effective series of virtual guided museum visits for older adults as part of your cultural institution's programming.

This document is the result of a series of research projects undertaken with this mission in mind. The initiative was born out of a partnership between researchers studying aging at the Montreal Geriatric University Institute Research Centre (CRIUGM) and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA), in collaboration with Concordia University's Aging + Communication + Technologies (ACT) Lab.

From the ideation stage to the implementation and evaluation of this innovative offering, this guide details our experience and insights.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Partners

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA)

Founded in 1860, the MMFA is Canada's oldest art museum and one of the top museums in North America. Its collection presents Canadian, Québécois and international art from a critical and intercultural perspective.

This collection rich includes over 45,000 paintings, sculptures, graphic works, photographs, multimedia installations and decorative artifacts, dating from antiquity to the present day. The MMFA's exhibitions interweave disciplines ranging from archaeology to fine art and contemporary practices. Housed in five interconnected pavilions, the museum comprises more than 80 exhibition rooms, the Bourgie Concert Hall, an auditorium/cinema, a boutique/bookstore, a publishing house, a public arts garden and the Michel de la Chenelière Centre for Learning and the Arts. A pioneering museum in the field of art therapy, the MMFA collaborates with community, education, health and technology sectors to offer inclusive and enriching art experiences for all.

Spanning over 3,588 square meters, the Michel de la Chenelière Centre for Learning and the Arts is North America's largest educational complex housed in an art museum.

Following the centre's expansion in 2016, the MMFA is increasing the number and scope of its ambitious educational, social and community programs, while launching innovative projects in fields like art therapy, education and digital mediation.

Within the MMFA, the Learning and Community Engagement Division, which goes by the French acronym DEEC (Direction de l'éducation et de l'engagement communautaire), is responsible for creating educational programming for children and families, school and community groups, and adults. DEEC's core mission is to make art accessible for all, offering enriching cultural experiences that foster engagement, well-being and personal development.

Among its many activities, DEEC develops initiatives for populations with special needs, such as people living with autism spectrum disorder, people with disabilities, people with chronic illnesses and older adults. These programs are designed to provide accessible and inclusive cultural experiences for all.

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' Association of Volunteer Guides

Since 1965, the MMFA's Association of Volunteer Guides (AVG) has been providing visitors guided tours of the museum's collections and exhibitions. Thanks to the remarkable work of its 250 members (including 150 active guides), thousands of visitors each year enjoy an even more enriching museum experience.

In 2022, the AVG (specifically Andrea Mackenzie, Ghyslaine Roy, Grace Powell, Nuria Claro, Pauline Jourdain, Madeleine Colaço and Colette Richer) received the Museum Volunteer Award from the Canadian Federation of Friends of the Museum and the Canadian Museums' Association. They were recognized for their participation in the guided visits project, designed to improve the health and well-being of older adults experiencing social precarity.

The AgeTeQ Lab of the Montreal Geriatric University Institute Research Centre (CRIUGM)

Headed by professor Olivier Beauchet, the AgeTeQ Laboratory is housed within the Research Centre of the Montreal Geriatric University Institute. The lab's mission is to improve the quality of life, autonomy and health of older adults and their caregivers by empowering them to take charge of their health while maintaining an efficient and fair healthcare system.

The AgeTeQ lab initiates, develops and implements projects at the intersection of four domains (action research, knowledge brokering, teaching and information) and four areas of expertise (preventive healthcare, the care continuum, caregiving and inclusive technology). The lab's main research subjects are telehealth and the evaluation of the health effects (physical, mental and social) of arts and culture, as well as its impacts on the well-being and quality of life of older adults and their caregivers.

The AgeTeQ lab has obtained funding from the Fonds de Recherche du Québec - Société et Culture to organize, implement and manage the scientific evaluation and dissemination of several projects developed jointly with the MMFA.

Concordia University's ACT Lab

Directed by professor Kim Sawchuk, The ACT (Aging + Communication + Technologies) Laboratory is based out of Concordia University's department of Communications.

Since 2013, ACT has been conducting multi-methodological research that brings together researchers, students, activists and artists to address the transformation of aging linked to the proliferation of new forms of communication in digital society. Among other things, the lab addresses issues related to "digital ageism", or the individual and systemic biases that create age-related forms of inclusion and exclusion. Through its collaborative research practices, ACT provides analysis grounded in its engagement with individuals and communities of older people, while proposing strategies conducive to change.

Since 2019, ACT has been collaborating with the AgeTeQ lab on various projects related to telehealth and the relationship between art and older adults' well-being. As part of the guided museum visits project, ACT carried out qualitative research to complement the medical studies conducted by AgeTeQ. This helped to shed light on the experience and reflections of older adults and those around them.

1.2 Co-developing an innovative project: A series of virtual guided museum visits

1.2.1 Problematic: Older adults' social isolation

Social isolation is defined as the reduction in number and in quality—of interpersonal contacts, leading to the loss of a person's social position and role. The proportion of older adults (i.e., individuals >70 years of age) experiencing frailty in an emerging situation of social isolation is significant in Canada, estimated at 30%. This represents 1.5 million people. As one of Canada's fastest-aging provinces, Quebec must take action to combat, i.e., avoid, delay or slow down, the social isolation of seniors.

Since 2019, the research team and the MMFA have been offering guided museum visits (called "visites coup-de-pouce" or helping hand visits) aimed at combating the social isolation of older adults living in Montreal. This project is part of a broader social innovation strategy.

The body of evidence shows promising results for interventions involving art-based activity to combat social isolation.

However, no previous study has (1) analyzed participants' feelings, needs or expectations, (2) involved the participants themselves in the process of co-creating the intervention, or (3) studied the deployment (i.e., implementation and transfer) of the new knowledge acquired by practitioners in "real-world" settings.

As part of this project, we have formalized an effective intervention model, as well as an implementation and transfer strategy, based on a concerted, standardized process adapted to older adults and relevant practitioners in the field.

1.2.2 Why virtual: A change of strategy linked to the COVID-19 pandemic

Initially planned as a series of in-person guided visits on the premises of the MMFA, the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 virus required joint reflection between the research teams and the MMFA.

The result was a "safe" solution that respected the rules of social distancing. At the same time, we were able to offer older adults an activity that would meet the objectives of the project as initially conceived: to reduce social isolation and the deterioration of their health, quality of life and well-being.

The project thus evolved into a series of virtual guided museum visits.

Questions quickly arose concerning the skills required to use a digital platform. The transition to the virtual was ultimately deemed possible, as older adults are experiencing unprecedented rates of digital inclusion. We were therefore able to set up a virtual activity aimed at seniors with adequate digital literacy, access to digital devices (such as a tablet or computer) and a high-speed Internet connection.

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic further contributed to older adults' uptake and use of digital technology—imposed by several months of confinement—with each subsequent wave accelerating this trend. Despite these encouraging data, it is important to emphasize that significant social inequalities persist when it comes to seniors' digital access. According to a recent study, an estimated 83% of seniors (aged 65 and over) use the Internet in Quebec.

(https://transformation-numerique.ulaval.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/netendances-2022-les-aines-connectes-au-quebec.pdf)

Nevertheless, the proportion of Internet use in this population is closely linked to social factors such as level of education, socio-economic background and region. For example, only 55% of seniors earning less than $20,000 per year have Internet access. What's more, only 33% of all Quebec seniors (and 8% of seniors earning less than $20,000 annually) use videoconferencing software like the one used in this project. These statistics illustrate the fact that virtual activities continue to exclude a significant proportion of the senior population.

Please note :

The 2021 Government of Canada Survey of Heritage Institutions report states that "online virtual visits to heritage institutions declined less significantly than overall physical visits during the pandemic. There were more than 161 million online visits overall throughout 2020, down about 36% from pre-pandemic levels (254 million online visits)."

https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/corporate/publications/general-publications/about-survey-heritage-institutions.html

1.2.3 A guided virtual visits project to improve the physical health, mental health and social inclusion of older adults

The project developed jointly with the MMFA is a free, art-based and participatory activity consisting of a series of virtual guided museum visits. Each virtual visit is conducted with a group of six to eight participants, with the same guide. They meet online once a week for a 45-minute session over a three-month period. An additional 15 minutes after the visit is dedicated to informal discussion. Each visit is different and conducted by a guide trained by the MMFA. The groups remain the same from one week to the next—this has the effect of encouraging cohesion among the participants and fostering rapport with the guide. In the context of this project, visits were conducted in French, English and Mandarin, depending on the language spoken by the participants.

The visits were conducted using the videoconferencing software Zoom. Thanks to this software, participants could see the guide and the other members of their group. They were also able to interact by speaking aloud. A PowerPoint presentation was used throughout the visits to visualize the works as well as to present additional elements, such as information about the artworks (descriptions).

Whatever the theme of the visit, each was standardized and separated into three consecutive phases: (1) presentation of the activity's objectives, (2) visit (presentation of the artworks) and open discussion with the guide, and (3) period for informal exchange. The cornerstone of our approach was that the guides intentionally did not present the works in a "scholarly" manner. Rather, aesthetic appreciation and the exploration of key messages was emphasized, whereby each participant could share their impressions and contribute to the appreciation of the work.

The virtual visits combined live discussion with the guide while viewing digital reproductions of the artworks, as well as video capsules on themes linked to specific pieces. All led by MMFA guides, each visit in the series was different. All, however, focused on visual art (i.e., painting or sculpture). Specially developed for the project, the visits revolved around emotions and interactions experienced when viewing a painting or sculpture. Each of the 12 visits was different but complementary (following a historical and thematic progression). Each group was given the same visits.

The choice of setting up a series of 12 visits over three months corresponds to patterns observed in the senior population. According to the scientific literature, weekly recurrence over a three-month period represents the ideal pace and duration for observing positive effects on physical and mental health, as well as on well-being and quality of life. What's more, this rhythm and duration enable social relations to be developed among participants, who have time to get to know one other after getting accustomed to the virtual format, both in its technical aspects and its novelty.

Finally, this approach enables participants to acquire new skills, such as learning to interpret and analyze a work of art, as well as discussing the work itself.

1.2.4 Quantitative study: health benefits in all domains.

After evaluating the various data collected during the research project involving 106 participants, we were able to demonstrate that this series of 12 virtual guided museum visits spanning three months had various beneficial effects on participants' physical, mental and social health.

Compared with individuals in the control group (who did not participate in the virtual visits), those in the intervention group (who did participate in the virtual visits) showed:

- Greater social inclusion;
- Improved quality of life;
- Improved well-being;
- Reduced anxiety;
- Improved health, resulting in reduced fragilty.

1.2.5 Qualitative study

The ACT team was interested in the experiences and perspectives of the participants, guides and other project stakeholders. ACT researchers were also able to identify, through participant feedback, some promising practices and strategies for improving the guided visits. To achieve this, a variety of qualitative research methods were used, including observation of the virtual visits, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Data collection was spread over two cycles of virtual visits.

The results of the qualitative study demonstrate the potential of virtual museum visits as a social, cultural and educational activity for older adults who are interested in art, want to maintain social ties on a digital platform and have access to the Internet.

In summary, we identified three categories of results:
- Artistic/educational
- Social
- Cultural

In terms of artistic and educational results, participants described the visits as offering a new means and pace of engaging with visual art. In addition, they characterized the visits as an opportunity to acquire or deepen one's knowledge of art. For many, the virtual visits gave them the desire to go to the museum, or even to create art themselves. In terms of social benefits, participants explained that the visits gave them a sense of community. Several even expressed a desire to stay in touch with their group members.

On the subject of social isolation, however, responses were more ambivalent: while some respondents described the visits as useful in this respect (or at least potentially useful), others felt that the program didn't place enough emphasis on fostering social relationships.

The majority of participants ultimately felt it would have been easier to build relationships in person. While some guides reported seeing little evidence of this, others clearly stated that they saw signs of emerging connections between participants.

From a cultural perspective, the virtual programming offered a gateway to local culture and history, as described by some Chinese-speaking participants who were experiencing linguistic and cultural isolation as recent immigrants. Finally, the results show that when given the choice between in-person, virtual or hybrid programming, the majority of participants (80%) opted for a hybrid format. This is an indication of the importance of virtual programming. For our participants, it offers increased accessibility for those with mobility impairments and other disabilities, and allows them to engage in cultural activities from the comfort of their own home. Guides also mentioned that they appreciated both in-person and virtual encounters for different reasons.

2. PREPARATION

2.1 Objectives

The first step in implementing a project of this type is to clearly define its objectives beforehand. This will ensure that the project is in line with your institution's strategic planning, while enabling you to better pinpoint the target audience.

Here are a few examples of objectives that could be pursued through virtual museum visits:

- Promoting the well-being of target populations through a museum activity
- Improving the quality of life of target populations through a museum activity
- Improving the physical and mental health of target populations through a museum activity
- Promoting the social inclusion of target populations through a museum activity
- Attracting new audiences unfamiliar with museums
- Reaching populations that are geographically isolated or live far from the museum
- Reaching populations with mobility problems
- Reaching people who can't get to the museum in the winter or during bad weather

- Offering a new thematic range of visits
- Enabling visitors to discover works that are not exhibited in the galleries, or to offer points of view that would be impossible during an in-person visit.

Please note :
From the outset, it is important to determine the scope of your project. Is it a pilot project to test the implementation of a new offering, or a flagship project that will feature in your institution's official programming?
By answering this question, it becomes possible to define the scope of the initiative.
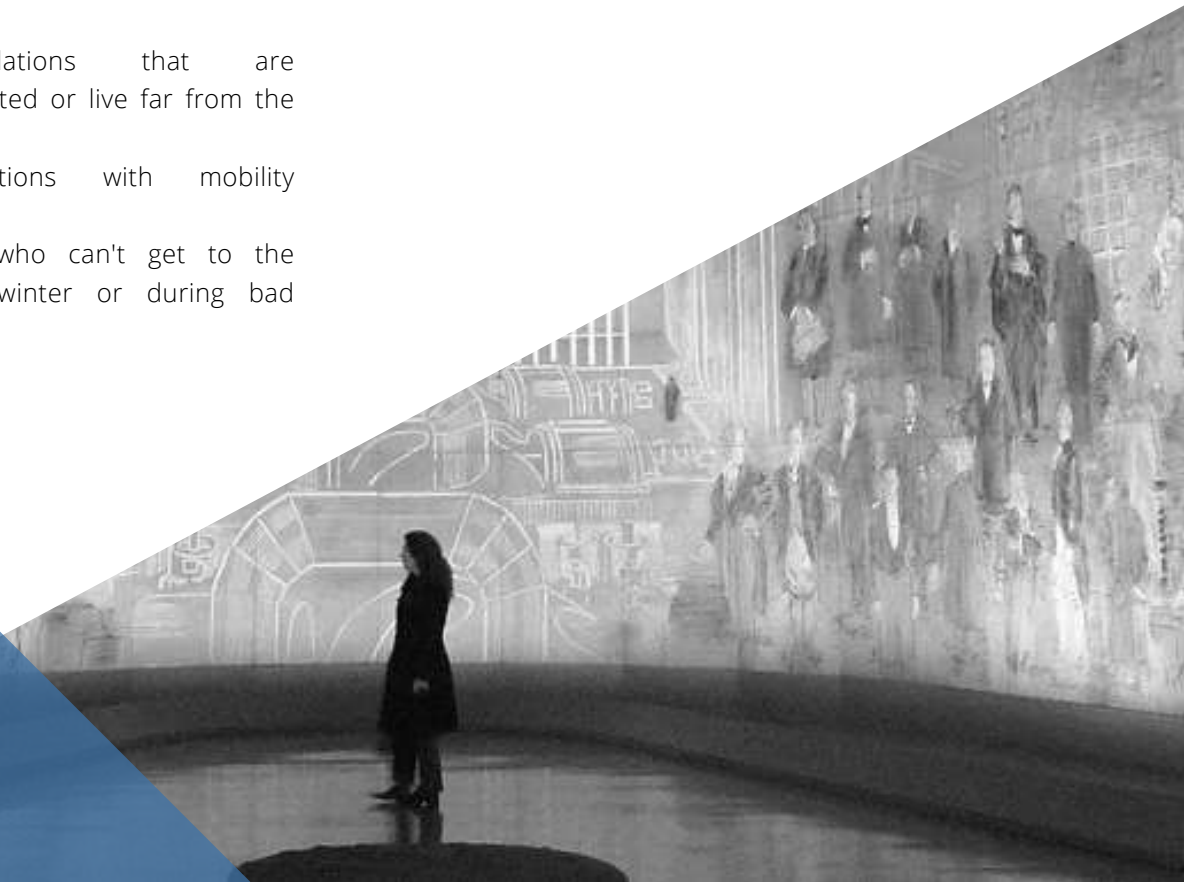
2.2 Target audience

Choosing the target audience is a crucial step in planning a successful project. The target audience must be clearly defined to ensure the effectiveness of the intervention and to maximize the use of resources.

Here are a few methods for identifying a target audience for a virtual museum activity:

1/ Needs analysis: who is the target audience and why?
It's important not only to identify the population present in your area, but also to understand the needs of the community for which the intervention will be designed. Depending on the chosen objective, a solid understanding of the terrain will enable you to better identify the individuals likely to benefit from the intervention.

2/ Analysis of available data:
Data on health trends, lifestyle habits, and environmental and socio-economic factors can help identify groups of people with particular needs.

3/ Stakeholder consultation:
Community stakeholders, such as community leaders, local organizations and health professionals, can provide valuable information for identifying groups of people likely to benefit most from the intervention.

These organizations will also be valuable partners in informing the public about your project and helping to recruit participants.

4/ Understanding barriers to participation:
When determining the target audience, it is important to identify barriers to participation and any special needs that may arise. In the context of virtual programming intended for seniors, we need to think about participants' digital access. First, we need to target participants who have access to adequate digital devices. Secondly, we must ensure that they have a reliable, high-speed Internet connection. Finally, it's important to target a population with the necessary skills not only to use the Internet, but also to use videoconferencing software. In some cases, the presence of a relative with digital expertise can compensate for insufficient digital skills.
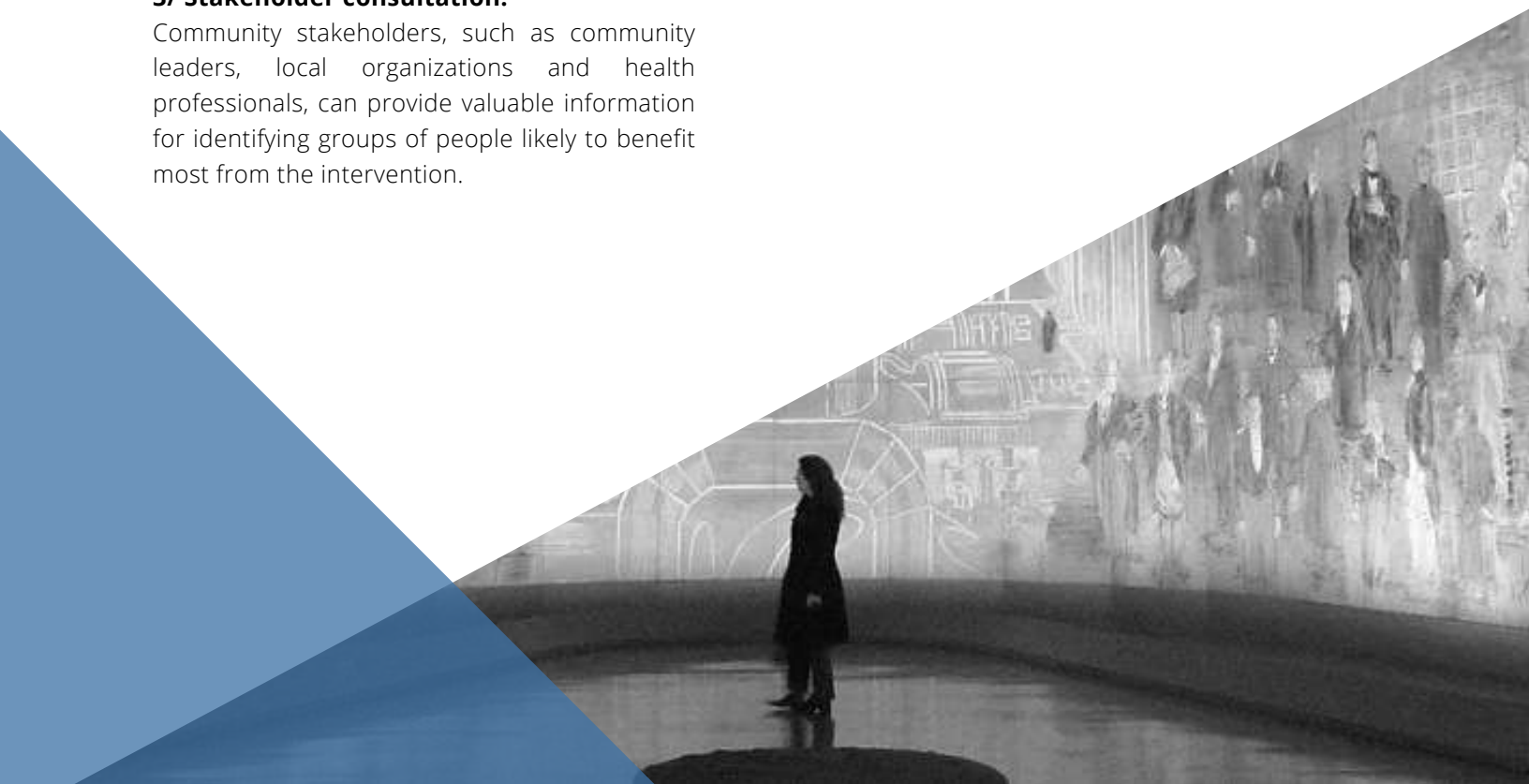
In addition, it is important to consider that the target audience may have special needs that may require additional accommodations, such as vision or hearing challenges, or difficulty handling digital devices. It is also important to consider the cultural specificities of the participants in order to create a relevant offering that appeals to their interests. With careful planning and analysis, the choice of target audience will contribute to the success of the intervention.

2.3 Intervention format

The last major step in planning the program is selecting the intervention format.

To implement this type of project within your institution, you have two possible formats:
- Virtual guided visits
- Hybrid guided visits, part in-person and part virtual.

The choice of format depends on your objectives, your target audience, your human and material resources, and your budget.

For instance, virtual visits can reach people who are geographically remote, have certain psychiatric disorders (e.g., autism, agoraphobia), or mobility problems. A program of this type could therefore be beneficial for these populations, resulting in the choice of a virtual format.

A hybrid format, on the other hand, can attract a new population to your institution, one that is local but for whatever reason not familiar with, or accustomed to visiting, cultural institutions.

Likewise, the days and times you schedule your visits should be considered in relation to your audience.

On the whole, if your target audience is actively working, scheduling tours on weekdays during office hours will have a negative impact on the success of your program.

If you are targeting an older population, you should take into account the days and times when people are most likely to be looking after their grandchildren, for example.

While financial and human resources may guide you in your selection, we advise you to base your decision on a achieving a balance between the format, target audience and objectives, even if that means adjusting the scale of your project to minimize the impact on your human, material and financial resources.

This adjustment can be made, for example, by adjusting the number of visits within a series, the number of participant groups, etc.

It should be noted, however, that the study which demonstrated positive results for the various parameters assessed (social inclusion, quality of life, well-being, anxiety, and health) was based on a series of 12 visits, held weekly over three months. There was no evaluation of the effects of shorter or longer cycles on these parameters.

2.4 Selecting a digital platform

To implement virtual visits, you need to select the digital platform that will serve as the meeting point. This choice may depend on a number of factors, such as security considerations, the allocated budget, the tools, digital devices and software already available, and the organization's ability to support participants in their use of the software.

There are many possibilities on the market. For this project, we chose the platform Zoom because it met the following key criteria:

- The software must be easily accessible and available to all (downloadable from the web and free for users)
- The software must be compatible with a wide range of devices and operating systems
- As far as possible, the software should be familiar to users (the pandemic led to an increase in Zoom use and user skills, particularly among seniors, although not everyone is familiar with it).
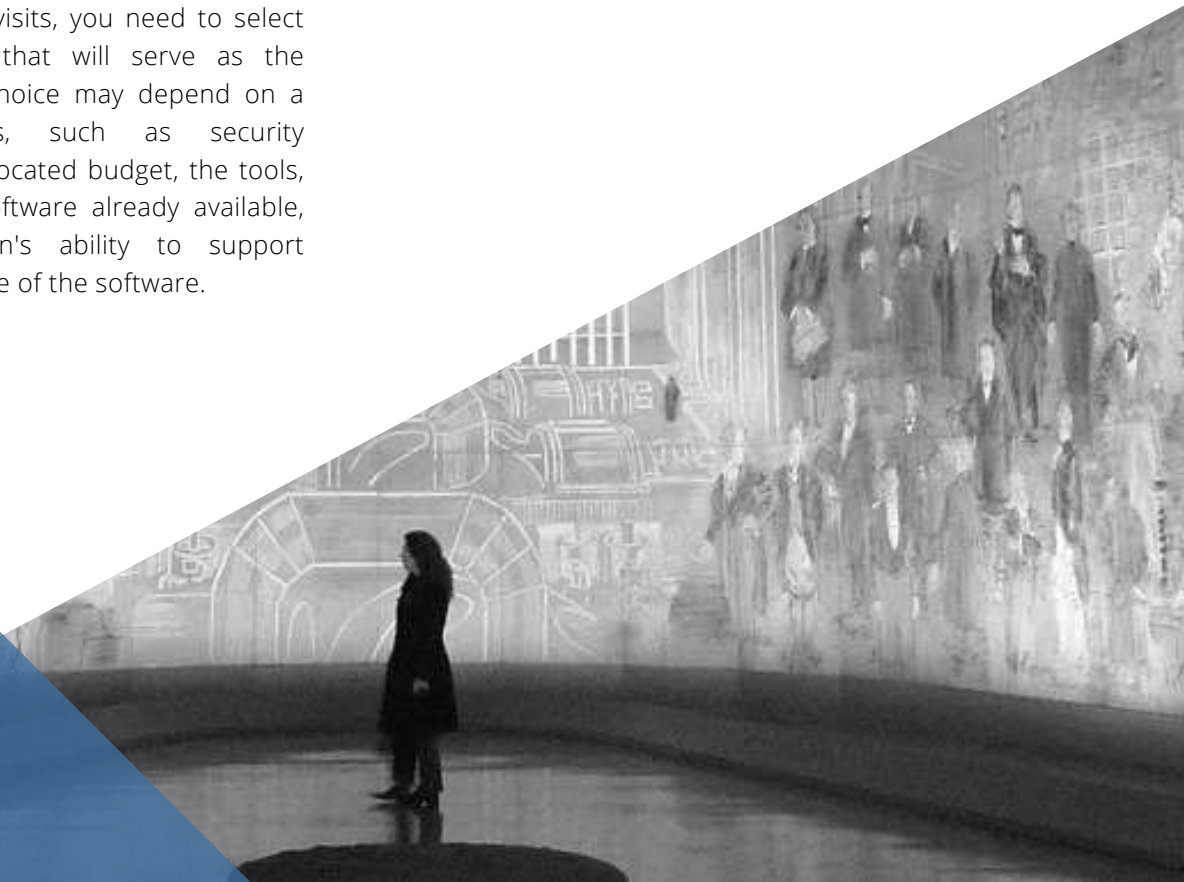
Please note :

It's important to be aware of the platform's possibilities and limits in order to adapt your virtual programming appropriately. For example, the maximum number of users visible at once on Zoom is currently eight. In other words, there is a limit to the number of participants who will be visible on screen during a videoconferencing call. Our guides and participants have appreciated being able to see each other, and we've found this to be an important factor in ensuring interactivity during the visits. This is one of the reasons why we limited groups to 8 participants.

Similarly, software that is too complicated or unfamiliar to older adults might mean that participants would need to be trained on how to install and use it.

2.5 Budget

Once the above elements have been defined, it's time to estimate the budget for the project. Some of the costs to be considered are hardware and software, human resources dedicated to the development, coordination, promotion and facilitation of the activity, as well as training costs and expenses that associated with the organization of complementary in-person activities (such as refreshments, transportation fees, etc.).

This budget will help determine whether the project is feasible within the organization's financial capacity, or whether additional funding will be required.

Although fundraising can be difficult for this type of project, a few avenues to explore include philanthropic organizations or government programs (federal, provincial, municipal or local).

For example, the Government of Canada's New Horizons for Seniors Program provides funding for projects that directly benefit older populations deemed to be a priority in a given region.

You can also ask participants to pay a fee for your activity.

Please note :

If your institution doesn't have volunteer guides, it's important to factor in both the time required to carry out the guided visits as well as any preparation time.
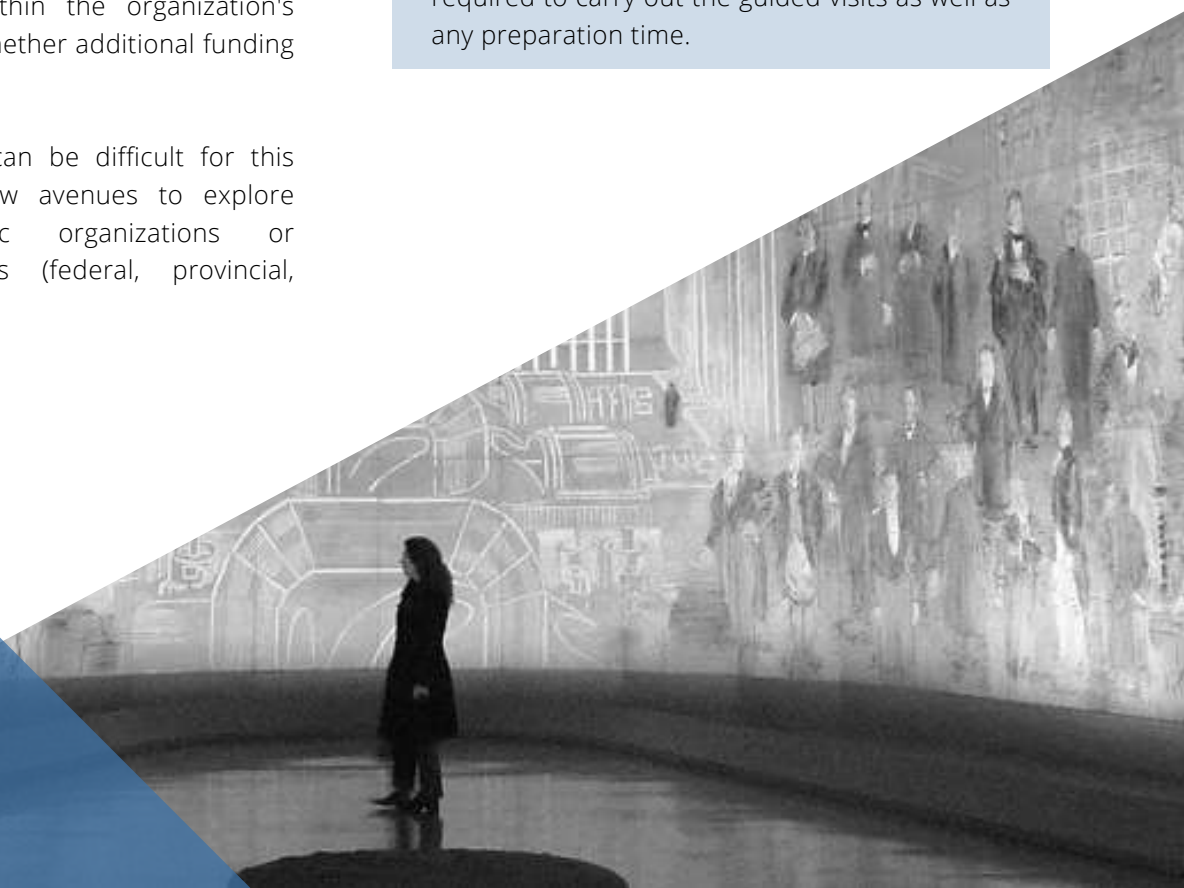
3. PROGRAM DESIGN AND CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

3.1 Before getting started

Depending on the institutions and organizations that will be creating the programming for such a project, we recommend that the selection of artworks be made by a person who has in-depth knowledge of these works, and who is familiar with the sensitivities and interests of different audiences. As we shall see later, this will ensure the relevance of the sequence of visits, while taking into account all the criteria (outlined below) linked to these choices.

3.1.1 Reflecting your objectives and determining your target audience

The first step is to consider how your project objectives and target audience are likely to influence the design and content of your tours.

Firstly, it is important to determine your project's domain of interest: is it an educational, mental health or social project? This will determine the themes you choose for your visits, as well as the facilitation approach your guides adopt to bring these visits to life.

Next, you need to ask yourself what level of knowledge about art your participants have. If your target audience is made up of beginners, you'll need to opt for facilitation strategies that respect this fact. More on this later.

It is also important to think about your target audience's motivations, to ensure their continued participation right through to the end of the program.

In short: what would motivate them to take part in this activity? Are they looking to connect with others around common interests? Learn new skills? To find a creative outlet, or perhaps simply to have fun? Your audience's motivations can also influence the themes you choose for your visits.

It is worth bearing in mind that each participant may have his or her own motivation (or several), so you're likely to have a diverse audience. It is therefore important that the content you offer reflect this diversity of interests, to meet the needs and motivations of different people.

By keeping these factors in mind, you can create visits that are engaging, educational and accessible to all.

3.1.2 Choosing your facilitation approach

When planning guided museum visits, it is imperative to choose a facilitation approach that is in line with the mandate of your institution or organization and that meets the needs of your audience. In this study, we have prioritized the dialogical approach, which the MMFA has been teaching its guides for several years.

This approach focuses on exchanges between all group members (participants and guide/facilitator). Here is a proposed definition:

Dialogue shares the open, improvised quality of conversation, but is imbued from the outset with a greater sense of purpose and is more closely focused on the artworks. A crucial difference is the role of the teacher. In conversation, there is no leader, whereas in dialogue, the teacher deliberately guides and shapes the flow of discourse...

In a dialogue, all participants, including the teacher, take it upon themselves to explore a work of art together through exchanges of observations and ideas. Dialogue is a shared inquiry, a way of seeing and thinking together in a cooperative quest for understanding. (Burnham and Kai-Kee, 2011, p.86.)

This approach therefore favors conversation and interaction over facts and information. It can be useful for groups seeking to build social ties and exchange ideas. It can be highly effective in encouraging interaction and discussion between participants, which can, in turn, foster a sense of community. In short, by choosing a facilitation approach suited to your objectives, you can offer a cultural experience relevant to your audience. It is therefore crucial to fully understand the needs and expectations of your participants, in order to choose the most effective approach according to the project's intentions.

3.2 Designing the programming

3.2.1 Being sensitive to participants' experiences

When planning your program, it is essential to remain sensitive to the idea that some of your participants' lived experiences, when you are informed of them, may have an impact on your choices of themes and works to be included in the guided visits.

Indeed, the experiences, possible traumas or life paths of your participants may reveal certain sensitivities that could be triggered through exposure to certain works of art. So, if you feel that certain sensitivities could jeopardize your participants' positive experience, it may be wise not to include works that could evoke negative emotions, feelings of loneliness or violent situations.

In this case, you may decide to choose works that evoke joy, hope or a feeling of lightness. The person designing the visits must make these selections in full awareness of the context and circumstances, drawing on both their knowledge of the artworks and an understanding of the needs and realities of the target audience.

One way of making these selections is to choose works that, upon first impression, evoke a sense of wonder, aesthetic admiration, laughter, gentleness or joy. Moreover, when exploring the work, the artist's narrative should evoke positive emotions. That being said, there is no guarantee that the viewer will not make a connection to the memory of a more negative experience. This choice is therefore informed by the professional making the selection, but the effect of "staying in a psychological comfort zone" can never be guaranteed. In this sense, training must be offered to guides so that they are equipped to can contain difficult emotions that may emerge during a visit and refer people to appropriate resources if necessary.

3.2.2 Determining the number and duration of sessions

The visit cycle

The Virtual Guided Visits for Seniors intervention has been scientifically validated in several research projects on the basis of a three-month cycle with one visit per week, for a total of 12 visits.
The cycle was divided into three themes (one theme per month). Each theme or module spanned four guided visits, while each visit had its own sub-theme.

The decision to plan a three-month series with a weekly intervention was based on a review of the scientific literature: this corresponds to the recurrence and time required for a non-medication-based intervention to demonstrate a positive effect on health parameters in a population of community-dwelling older adults.

Our studies have shown variable patterns of improvement over these three months on the parameters of physical health, quality of life and well-being, with the onset of positive effects occurring at different times throughout the three-month period.

Furthermore, in our first study evaluating in-person guided visits, we demonstrated that the benefits observed on these three health parameters persisted for at least 12 months following the three-month intervention.

There have been no validated studies on different durations and/or paces of intervention. If you choose to organize your series differently, we cannot predict the effects. However, we realize that it is important to strike a balance between what is realistic and feasible for both your target population and your resources, as well as what will have the maximum impact.

What's more, the objectives you set can have an impact on your communication.
If you don't opt for a three-month program with weekly visits, you won't be able to communicate the fact that the effects on health, well-being, quality of life and social isolation have been scientifically demonstrated.

The visit itself

In terms of developing criteria for the visits, we advise you to plan an hour-long meeting, with a 45-minute visit. The extra 15 minutes will allow for a buffer zone, leaving an opportunity to let people express themselves a little more when they wish, to deal with latecomers and so on. It is best to keep a margin, because if you go over time, you could lose some participants who have made other commitments before the end.

In our first study, we planned 30-minute visits. This was done in order to avoid over-soliciting senior participants for a virtual intervention that was conceived as a substitute for in-person visits—we were concerned over their potential lack of familiarity with videoconferencing tools, fatigue levels, etc. As it turned out, these were misconceptions, and 30 minutes soon proved to be insufficient.

We therefore decided, in the second study, to opt for 45-minute visits, while maintaining the same number of works. This left more time for observation and discussion, a choice that proved successful.

These 45 minutes were combined with an additional 15 minutes for informal socializing. Participants ended up using this time to continue discussions around the works (rather than discussing other subjects), with socializing forming an integral part of these dialogues.

3.2.3 Developing the series: Selecting themes and artworks

Ask yourself these questions beforehand

First of all, it is important to ask yourself: do you want to show works that are on display and/or physically inaccessible (in storage, for example)? Do you want to prioritize an impression of immersion in the works' actual exhibition space, or rather seize the opportunity to show objects that have never been seen before?

Do you want to create links between works in close proximity to one another or, on the contrary, propose new ties by showing works that are never presented side by side?

Of course, all these options can easily coexist, but it is important to ask yourself these questions so that you can align your choice of works with your subsequent facilitation strategies.

For example, you could take advantage of the virtual format to present works in the process of acquisition that are not yet on display, or works that were once on loan and are no longer physically displayed in your exhibition spaces. In addition, if you are working with a population isolated by condition or geographical remoteness, you may choose to instead offer them a physical immersion of the exhibition space from which they are alienated.

Depending on your choices, the narrative possibilities and possible links between the works will be subject to the creativity of each person.

The important thing is to be aware of this, and to compose a narrative that is relevant to your objectives. For the sequencing of your visits, it is of course crucial to plan an overarching narrative, creating a path and a progression through each session that creates meaning for participants.

Creating themes

In order to define the structure of your visit series, it is essential to plan a program that proposes a narrative path throughout each session, thus creating greater meaning for your group of participants.

More precisely, to define your themes, we can give you no other advice than to take into consideration the works of art available to you.

By way of example, here is the breakdown of the visits designed for our project. There are three main themes.

These three themes are organized according to the history of Western art, drawing on the MMFA's collection. The third theme differs from the first two, and was very important in the sequence of our project.

From classicism to artistic freedom

1 – Our starting point

2 – Romanticism and the reflection of reality

3 – Impressionism and beyond

4 – Question of abstraction

Artistic freedom in our time

5 – Sculpture today

6 – Break free from the brush...

7 – Object misappropriation

8 – Creativity in decorative arts

Interculturality

9 – Native artists

10 – Some images of Quebec and Montreal

11 – Arts of One World / China

12 – Arts of One World / Democratic Republic of Congo

In fact, we had two distinct groups in the study: the first was made up of French or English speakers, and the second of recent immigrants who were exclusively Chinese-speaking and culturally isolated.

To promote social and cultural integration, we therefore chose to explore the theme of interculturality by including works from Quebec and Canada, as well as Chinese works.

Choosing your subthemes

As far as sub-themes and works are concerned—each theme being divided into four sub-themes in our case—we chose a chronological trajectory. This enabled us to begin the series with more academic works, allowing participants to learn to engage critically with the pieces and gain confidence sharing their impressions. We wanted participants to feel at ease as they began the cycle.

Once these initial visits were completed, we moved on to abstract works. The progression towards less and less classical works is important. As the visits continue, participants will feel more confident and adept at analyzing the works and expressing their opinions about them.

Please note :
For the Chinese-speaking group, visits were conducted in English or French and interpreted live by an interpreter, as were exchanges between participants and the guide.

For the Chinese-speaking group, we identified three words that could be used in everyday conversation in connection with each painting. These were written in French, English and Mandarin, and the guide asked participants to repeat the words in both languages. The guide also learned from participants how to pronounce them in Chinese, which made for some fun and highly interactive moments.

At the end of the program, a questionnaire was circulated featuring pictures of twenty words from among those learned during the visits, and participants were asked to tick the corresponding French translation. This was a highly entertaining exercise, with the added aim of inspiring participants to learn the language of their adopted country, in order to boost their cultural and social inclusion.

Nearly half of participants said they had enrolled in language courses as a result of the project, in order to improve their communication skills and enable them to return to the museum and read the descriptions of the artworks.

Selecting artworks and conducting research

Although the selection of works will naturally take place at the same time as the selection of themes, it is important to make a final selection, keeping only the works that are most appropriate to the defined themes and sub-themes.

Our experience has shown that limiting ourselves to three works per session is ideal. It is possible to select two, depending on the potential for discussion around them. We have found that a selection of four works is not a good alternative. It doesn't leave enough time for people to immerse themselves in the work and discuss it during a 45-minute to 1-hour visit.

If you choose three works, you can plan for 15 to 20 minutes per work, but leave a margin, as some works naturally generate more discussion than others. This also ensures that you do not overload your audience with information, or tire them out too much (especially early on in the program).

In our case, the programming and choice of works for the visits had, for most sessions, been made by a museum education professional. The guides responsible for leading the tours then researched the works, ensuring that the content was shared and was identical for each guide. We strongly recommend pooling work (on a shared Dropbox or Google Drive, for example), as well as holding meetings between guides to establish a common discourse and ensure cohesion across visits.

Teamwork was therefore a major aspect of the project here, and enabled our guides to feel involved and recognized for their significant contribution. This phase of research takes time and requires a commitment of several hours per artwork.

Note that, in our case, the guides were not the same for phase 1 and phase 2 of the project. Since the works had already been chosen and the texts already prepared, this didn't create as much group cohesion among the guides as in phase 1. It also gave the new guides a potentially misleading sense of preparedness, as they didn't feel the need to get as involved with the content.

3.3 Planning and implementing your facilitation strategies

3.3.1 Preparing your visual materials

Virtual facilitation has its advantages and disadvantages. While we will not go into an exhaustive list here, we will point out that not sharing physical space with the artwork being analyzed comes with its own set of biases and limitations.

We remain immobile in front of a screen, and are not in control of how we wish to view the work in its entirety, including its material form. This obstacle to the visual experience must be taken into account when you create your visual material (ideally a PowerPoint presentation), which should anchor your facilitation strategies throughout the visit.

When creating your files, think about what is not easily visible in a single photograph. Offering different viewpoints to enable your participants to situate works in space, or to discover previously inaccessible details, is an asset and can be easily achieved in the context of virtual guided visits.

We will return to this point later. It is important, however, that the prepared sequence is well thought-out, so that it fits in with your facilitation strategies.

3.3.2 Preparing questions for participants and using them to facilitate the visit

During the research phase, it is also essential to prepare a bank of questions for each of the pieces selected, relating to different aspects of the encounter with the works (emotional, formal, contextual, interpretative...). To create relevant questions for the group, it is important to take into account the different levels of knowledge and interests of the participants. It is also essential to ask open-ended, non-leading questions that allow everyone to participate, whatever their prior museum experience may be. Obviously, for both novice and more experienced visitors, it is essential to allow them to share their first impressions. Also, once you have mastered the questioning approach and strategies, you know that follow-up questions are the key to inviting a participant to further verbalize an idea, or to hear another person's perspective.

The guides' experience is an asset in finding this balance, which is refined as the visits progress.

As this strategy is the cornerstone of the dialogic approach, it will enable you to conduct your visit in a lively manner and keep the focus on the exchange of ideas between group members. It should be noted that some participants may not wish to express themselves during visits, and no one should ever be forced to do so. Your open, listening attitude is essential, but you must also respect the silence of those who wish to remain more discreet.

3.3.3 Establishing a receptive and positive environment

First and foremost, it is advisable (and even essential) to establish a friendly environment from the outset. Be sure to explain your dialogical approach, while making it clear that there will be no wrong answers, and that exchanges will take place in a spirit of goodwill.

In our visit sequence, we chose to plan a Zoom meeting with the participants before the first official visit of the program (i.e., "visit 0".) This meeting enabled the guide to introduce herself, to get to know participants and to establish a friendly tone.

This preliminary visit can also be used to resolve technical problems and even to train participants in the use of the chosen platform (Zoom or other), always with the aim of reassuring participants and ensuring that the visits run smoothly, without hiccups that could potentially cause stress. Ideally, this preparatory meeting should be held a few days or even a week before the first visit, to provide a convivial moment and to put participants at ease. Doing it just before the first visit can be stressful, and can lead to delay the visit itself in the event of technical difficulties on the part of a participant. Doing it a week before, however, involves an additional meeting.

3.3.4 Conveying information about the artworks in an appropriate, dialogical manner

When facilitating a visit, it is often best to invite participants to enter into a process of aesthetic contemplation before providing contextual information about the piece or the artist. This strategy can, however, be reversed at times (giving brief information before focusing on initial reactions and formal aspects) to reduce redundancy when exploring the works. The important thing is to offer a creative, personalized approach to contemplation that reflects the singularity of each work selected.
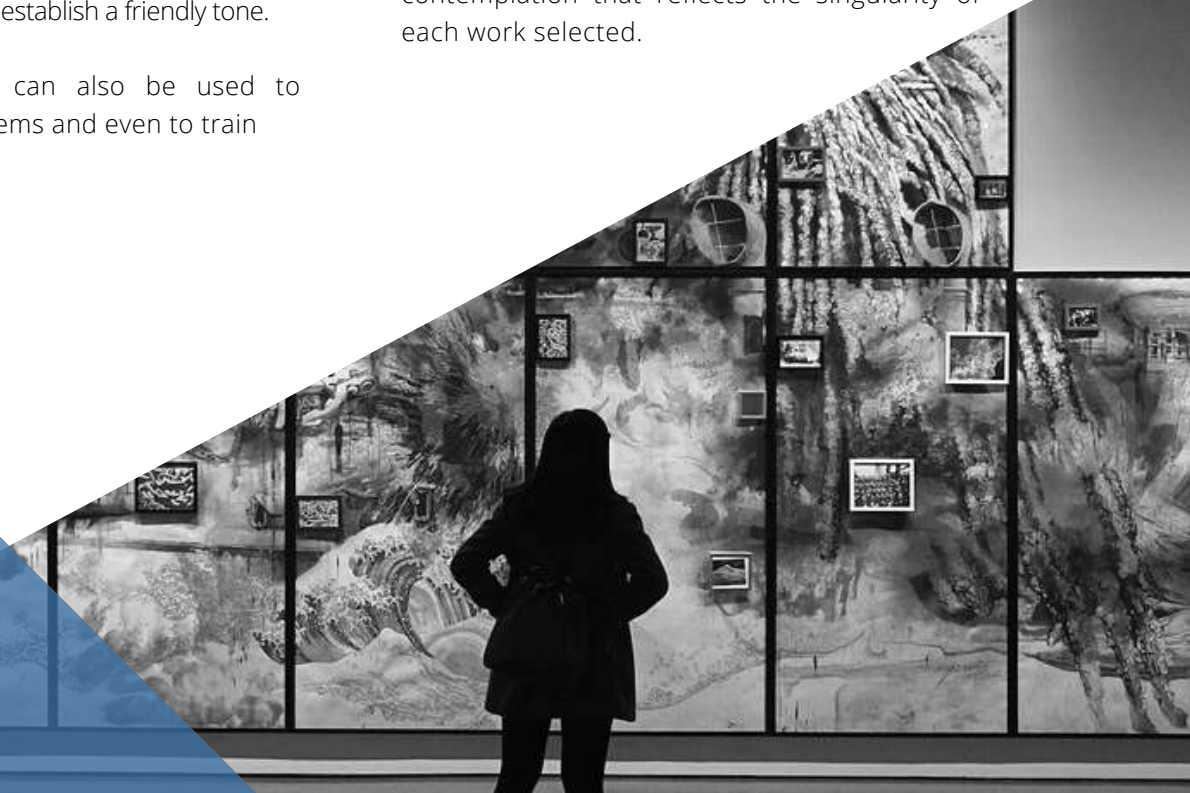
Generally speaking, we must remember that when we look at a work of art, our minds are engaged in a creative process of their own, and that, with the dialogical approach, the guide's role is to help participants advance towards a shared or personal creation of meaning.

It is therefore the guide's responsibility to balance periods for questions and discussion with those set aside for prepared content (art history, contextual information, anecdotes, vocabulary of visual language, etc.). In this way, participants' contributions and comments become essential inputs that contribute to the construction of knowledge and reflections on the works in question. This approach is empowering and inclusive, and not solely based on imparting factual and historical knowledge.

In our program, for the very last visit of the cycle, we had the opportunity to invite a contemporary artist whose work is part of the museum's collection. This live encounter with the artist in question was greatly appreciated by the participants and considered a fitting end-of-program gift. In this case, participants had an initial period of observation and discussion about the work, after which the artist was invited into the Zoom meeting to present his or her approach and to answer questions.

3.4 Selecting guides and navigating digital platforms

3.4.1 Selecting guides

In our project, the MMFA issued a call for volunteers via e-mail, explaining the project in detail and soliciting interest. Availability requirements were specified, as were the start and end dates of the program. The guides were then asked to write a letter of intent, agreeing to the dates of the program, committing themselves to all the visits, and explaining their interest and motivation in taking part in the project.

The MMFA's guides were trained in the dialogic approach for several years during their initial training, and in the call for participation, it was clearly specified that this approach must be applied.
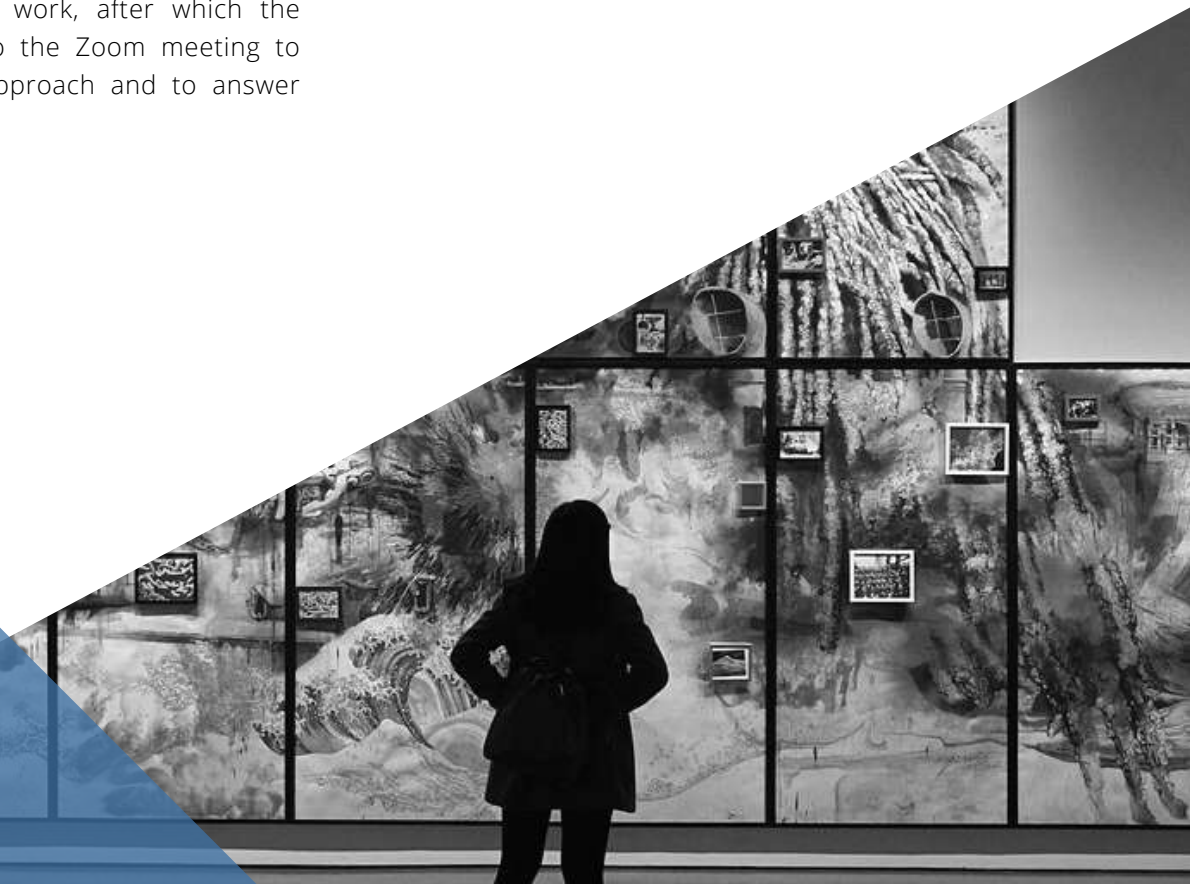
Please note :
When making your final selection of guides, please remember to include one or two extra guides who can take over in the event of someone's absence (due to vacation, illness, technical problems, etc.). These back-up guides can then be granted the role of main guide in a second round of the project.

Although all these criteria apply in general to all MMFA guides, here are a few examples of criteria that were also specifically required to lead the virtual visits:

- Must possess an adaptable personality and a sense of humor;
- Must have relevant experience, with some experience of working with particular communities (depending on the target population) considered an asset;
- Must have good listening skills;
- Must have strong communication skills.

In any case, the key to succeeding in this type of project is, above all, the desire to take part and rise to the challenge!

As far as training guides is concerned, each museum has its own way of training its teams, both in terms of facilitation techniques and the way content is organized.

That being said, the dialogical approach is essential to this type of program, and quite popular among museums in the U.S. and Canada.

One of the MMFA guides who took part in the program had been trained in a more didactic approach. Feeling a little uncomfortable at first, she was able, with the help of the museum team and other participating guides, to develop her skills and become very comfortable with the dialogical approach. The important thing is to ensure that the guides in question embrace this approach and are open to learning and transforming their practice.

Please note :
It is important to include a few moments of feedback with the guides following the virtual visits. This contributes to ongoing training.

3.4.2 Navigating digital platforms: the unique challenges of virtual visits

The use of software such as Zoom for guided museum visits can offer considerable advantages, such as the possibility of viewing works from angles that would not be possible while on site. As we have already seen, this can also present a number of obstacles to understanding the work, particularly with regard to its dimensions, framing, relation to other works in the room and so on.

Another advantage of Zoom is the ability to focus in depth on the works to reveal more precise details, especially when using a tablet. However, this can be tricky for participants who do not have a computer or device with this functionality. It is therefore important to check that all participants have the ability to zoom in before starting the visit. This will avoid frustration linked to technological limitations.

During the guided visit, it is also crucial to have both one's microphone and camera activated. This facilitates dialogue and engagement. It is therefore crucial to remind participants that they must agree to appear on screen to enable exchanges. Seeing who you are interacting with and perceiving their expressions and reactions gives you access to non-verbal cues and a deeper understanding of the person speaking.

It is also important to remember the rules of etiquette on Zoom. We recommend that you address these points during a preparatory visit ("visit 0"). Participants should not be doing anything else during the session—not eating or sitting in a noisy environment, especially as the camera and microphone are switched on. It is best to have a guide play the role of technical assistant to resolve these problems, so that participants feel looked after.

It is also advisable to provide guides with a headset with a built-in microphone, as sometimes sound quality can be poor depending on the device used. In our experience, this was not a need expressed by the guides but rather a request from certain participants. Indeed, many older adults have impaired hearing.

Finally, it is important to clarify the roles of the technical assistant and the guide, as their responsibilities are different. The "technical assistant" guide is responsible for managing the technological aspects of the visit, while the "host" guide is responsible for leading and facilitating the visit. With good preparation and clear communication, using Zoom for museum visits can be an enriching experience for all involved.
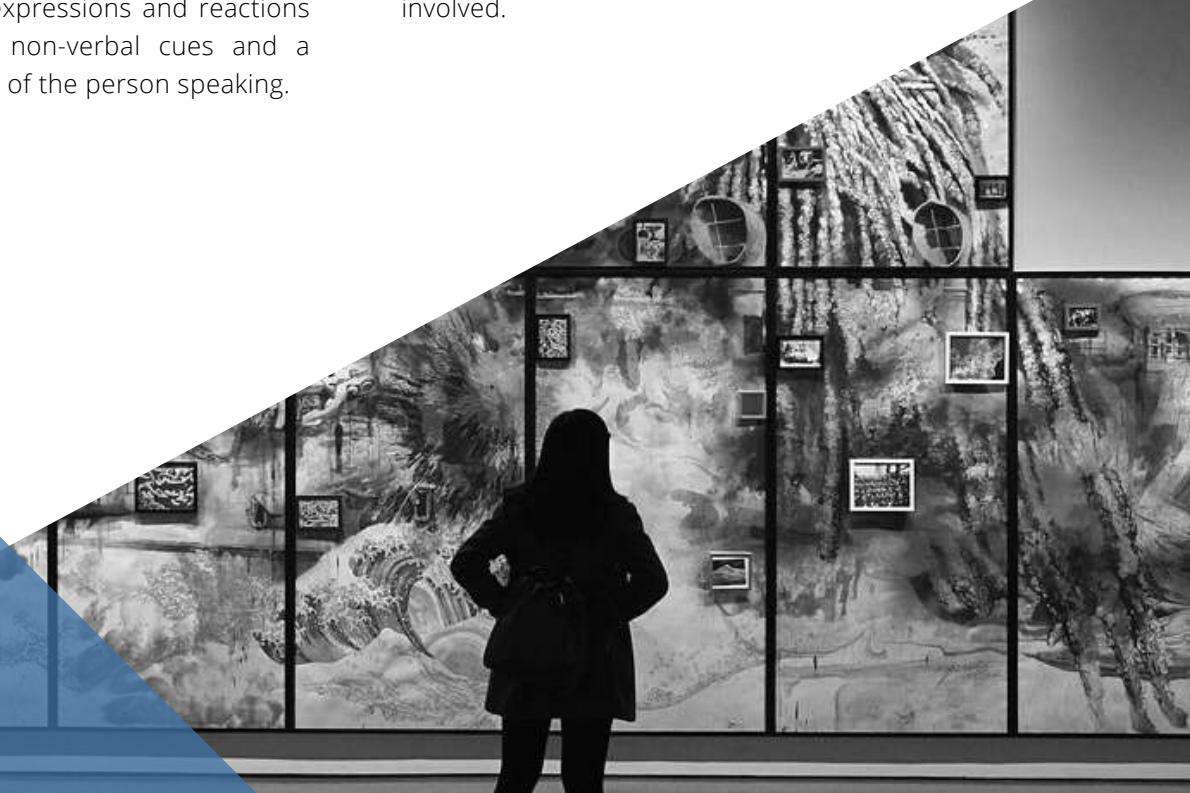
3.5 Incorporating and organizing images of the artworks into a slideshow presentation

3.5.1 Embedding images in your presentation

The creation of a PowerPoint presentation for each virtual visit requires particular attention to ensure the quality and efficacy of the presentation. We recommend that you use a presentation template approved by your institution. Once the selection of works has been completed, you need to obtain the digital images, their credits and labels, as well as consider copyright for their distribution.

Here are a few tips:

- Images must be of high quality and of sufficient resolution for a PowerPoint presentation. Find out what resources are available within your institution. In the case of the MMFA, the archives department enabled us to use their high-quality images.

- If you include photos taken with your own camera, consider taking photos from several angles, zooming in on notable details.

- Take advantage of the virtual: seize the opportunity to take photos from angles that are impossible to see in-person (e.g., the back of a painting, the inside of a sculpture displayed up high, etc.).

3.5.2 Preparing the image sequence using your medium

For most of the digitized artworks, we planned the presentation sequence as follows:

1/ The work in its entirety, with nothing else on the screen: this allows participants to take a little time to observe the piece.

2/ Addition of the work's descriptive label

3/ Return to first slide for discussion

4/ Close-up details of the work and/or different angles/views of the exhibition room, to be shown according to the guide's comments.

This sequence enabled the facilitation strategies to be well aligned and to flow smoothly throughout the session. Participants also appreciated seeing photographs of the work in its exhibition context. This experience took the form of several photographs, showing the room as a whole, then moving closer and closer to the work being presented. This gives a better idea of the actual dimensions of the work, making it easier to initiate discussions or inspiring the desire to go and see them in person.

Please note :
To avoid going back and forth between slides, which would break the rhythm of the presentation, do not hesitate to duplicate slides if necessary.

Note that we also took the liberty of sometimes starting the sequence of images with a view of the exhibition space before moving closer to the chosen work. This allows for a gradual immersion more akin to an in-person museum visit. For the last slide, it is a good idea to end the presentation with an overview of all the works seen. We chose to present the three works side by side and asked participants which one was their favorite and why. This made it easier to reflect on what they had learned, and gave those who may not have commented during the visit the opportunity to express themselves.

What's more, this also gives the guide information about participants' taste and preferences, and can lead to discussions outside the scope of the visit.

3.5.3 Varied media and formats

We suggest that, wherever possible, you vary the media used over the course of a visit. The addition of short videos allows you to diversify the content relating to the works. The aim is to bring the visit to life and stimulate the participants.

For example, in some of our visits, we presented two works in image form and one in a different format (video). The videos presented could be videographic artworks, an explanatory video of a painting or an interview with an artist.

4. LOGISTICS

4.1 Preparing communications materials to reach your target audience

Here is some advice on what you need to bear in mind when communicating with your audience. Communication depends heavily on your institution and the profile you wish to give to your project: is it part of an experiment? Is it a new service offering?

Generally speaking, when preparing recruitment material, it is essential to identify the main places where you can reach your target audience, and to take advantage of snowball recruitment and word-of-mouth whenever possible.

This may involve placing posters in community centers, using mailing lists or even resorting to more "traditional" methods, such as placing an ad in the local newspaper.

Depending on your objectives and capabilities, you may choose to employ a combination of these methods. Whatever you choose, it is important to identify a person who can act as a point of contact and answer any questions or concerns those interested in taking part may have. If you are relying on staff at the facility you have chosen to target for this task, do not forget to take into account remuneration and the work involved in soliciting participants.

When it comes to the content of recruitment materials, it is best to:

- Emphasize the benefits of participation (what's in it for them?);
- Describe the time required, participation criteria and possible accommodations;
- Invite interested parties to contact you by a certain date, and include several options for doing so (i.e., by phone or e-mail).

It is also a good idea to keep the text light and to add eye-catching visual elements.

4.2 Technical preparation for developing virtual visits

4.2.1 Equipment

Depending on your target population and the digital capacity of your institution or organization, it may be necessary to provide your guides and/or participants with technical equipment to facilitate the experience. If you are unsure of the extent of participants' digital skills and access to equipment, it is advisable to interview them during the recruitment/registration phase. We even recommend that you include this criterion in the conditions of participation.

In all cases, you must ensure that guides and participants have access to the following equipment and materials:

- A secure and stable internet connection with sufficient bandwidth for good quality video calls;
- A properly functioning device with a sufficiently recent operating system to support the latest version of the chosen videoconferencing software;
- Access to the software stores (Google Play store, Android, App Store, etc.) necessary to download the application;

- A working webcam, microphone and speakers. As audio quality is particularly important for the guides even if they have all these items at their disposal you may want to also consider providing them with headsets.

4.2.2 Instructions, support and practice

In addition to the equipment, you will also need to prepare instructional material to help participants install and familiarize themselves with the chosen platform, in case they have not yet used it.

It's a good idea to prepare a question-and-answer sheet, as well as a written guide with screenshots detailing the step-by-step installation procedure and configuration of the software on different devices and operating systems (this information is usually available online). It is also advisable to designate a member of your team as a contact person for participants who may need additional help throughout the installation process.

Finally, depending on the software you use, you will need to create one or more links to the sessions and provide participants with instructions on how to access them each week.

For example, because we had unique links for each visit, we chose to send participants the weekly link on the morning of each visit (so it wouldn't get buried in their inbox). We informed them of this protocol before the first week, so that they knew when to expect news from us.

Once everyone has received the equipment (if any) and instructions needed to access the visits, you need to ensure that your guides and team are as well prepared as possible to avoid and, if necessary, resolve any technical problems that may arise during the visits themselves.

To this end, we recommend that, prior to the first meeting with participants, you schedule a few practical tests/role-playing sessions with your guides. During these meetings, you'll be able to test all the technical features you'll be using throughout the visits (e.g., presentation of images, videos, use of chat and/or queuing functions). You will also want to make sure they are used to the environment.

Because managing the technical aspects of the sessions can be tedious and disrupt the flow of the visit, we chose to assign each guide a technical assistant, present at all visits, who was responsible for managing the slide show and any technical problems and hiccups (e.g., muting participants if they forget to do so). This could be a second guide, a volunteer, an employee, etc. This person does not need to possess any particular knowledge of art.

His or her role as guarantor of continuity in the event of a problem is very important. The technical assistant must be familiar with the presentation content. It is possible and even advisable to involve him/her in the preparation of visits. The assistant is also responsible for managing technical aspects such as changing slides, deleting indications (arrows, element outlines, etc.) that the guide might make on the images, and welcoming participants in the waiting room, especially latecomers, so that the guide can remain focused on the subject at hand.

This allows the guide to proceed with the visit without worrying about technical problems, which in turn allows for a fluid and more immersive experience.

In this case, it is important for each guide to be able to practice with his or her technical assistant. To this end, we recommend that the two meet for a few minutes before each session to a) discuss details (e.g., specific slides) or any additional help the guide may need that day, and b) take a few minutes to chat and break the ice.

Depending on the videoconferencing platform you use, it can also be useful to connect in advance in case participants arrive early. In our case, the guides and technical assistants logged in 15 minutes in advance and placed the participants in the virtual waiting room until it was time to start.

Please note :
When using Zoom, logging in ahead of time also provides participants who do connect early with a message stating that they are in the waiting room, reassuring them that the visit will proceed as expected. If you are not logged in, the message the participant would see specifies that the meeting has not been started by the organizer, which tends to make them worry about whether or not the visit will go ahead as planned, and can cause absences or delays.

During the visit, the technical assistant should keep their camera and microphone turned off, and must not intervene verbally in the visit unless there is a technical problem affecting all participants.

If you have several technical assistants, we recommend that each guide is paired with a single technical assistant for the duration of the program. In our experience, the two quickly develop a kind of shared rhythm and mutual trust, in which the assistant learns the guide's tempo and preferences, and can, for example, change slides intuitively without waiting for instructions each time. This also ensures participants know who to refer to in the event of technical difficulties before or during the visit.

Please note :
During the visit, if you have a video in your presentation, remember to check the boxes illustrated in the image below at the start of the meeting, when screen sharing begins.
This avoids the need to interrupt screen sharing during the visit and restart it with the correct settings activated.

5. RECRUITMENT AND ATTENDANCE

5.1 Recruiting for a research project

To ensure the success of your program, we will be taking a closer look at communication, so that you maximize your target audience's awareness of your initiative.

First of all, it is obviously important to use relevant communication channels to reach your target population. These may include social networks, e-mail newsletters, online forums, discussion groups, an e-mail announcement to your institution's members, posters in your institution and community centers, newspaper advertisements, etc. The choice will depend on the profile of the target audience: an older population will be less likely to be reached by communications based on social networks, etc. In addition, it is strongly recommended to call on partner organizations to disseminate information to their members.

Whatever the chosen medium (or media), it is important to establish clear and precise communication, particularly with regard to objectives, requirements, deadlines and expectations.

It is also advisable to answer questions promptly, and to provide support when needed. If interested parties have all the relevant information, know that they are committing to a multi-visit program and know the dates, you will be sure to limit no-shows before or during the project, thus improving attendance.

If you have planned several groups or sections for your program, it is a good idea to enroll people in a particular group from the outset, based on their availability for the duration of the program. If people cannot be available for every meeting of a group, it is preferable to offer them the chance to participate next time, and not to propose that they join different groups according to their availability.

5.2 Ensuring regular participant attendance

5.2.1 Make logistics as easy as possible for your participants

We advise you to create the Zoom links for all visits from the outset, and to schedule them so that time slots can be reserved for the guides and technical assistant.

For participants, this will depend on their digital literacy. You can create a recurring invitation and send it to them via Outlook, Google Calendar, or whatever booking software your institution uses at the outset of the project. However, to improve attendance, we recommend that you:

- Provide a pdf file with a calendar displaying the dates of all visits (with corresponding visit numbers) ahead of the first visit.
- Issue a recurring invitation via Outlook, Google Calendar, etc. before the first visit
- Send them an e-mail before each visit (in the morning for an afternoon visit, or the evening before for a morning visit), providing them with the link.

Please note :
When creating zoom links, remember to identify in the meeting name the visit title, visit number and the language in which it will take place (if you have several). Be sure not to include an access code to the meeting and to activate the waiting room feature.

5.2.2 Finding a balance between group adaptability and stability

Allow yourself to make adaptations if necessary, but within limits...

When organizing group activities, it is important to ensure that participants have the opportunity to choose the time and group best suited to them at the outset. Before launching the program, be sure to define a procedure for dealing with requests from participants to change groups on a one-off or permanent basis.

Our recommendation: Do not promote the option of changing groups, but allow people to do so on an exceptional basis for reasons linked to availability or group dynamics.

It may be preferable not to encourage switching groups, as this can have a negative impact on group dynamics and the relationships established between members. Participants should also be allowed to do so on an exceptional basis for legitimate reasons.

For example, you may decide to occasionally (no more than twice in a 12-visit cycle) offer participants the chance to attend a visit with another group, rather than missing one. It may also happen that their schedule changes part way through and they are no longer available for their original timeslot.

In this case, it is possible to transfer them to another group, allowing them to continue the rest of the program with this group. This option is also available if the person does not feel comfortable in their group.

This solution should be proposed only if the other groups are not already full, so as not to destabilize the group as a whole.

The person should be introduced to the new group so that they can easily include him or her in its dynamic. There may be situations where participants need more technical assistance or resources than anticipated, or where they wish to change groups along the way for reasons linked to their availability or the group's dynamics.

A stable group = recipe for success

It is difficult to know how each group will behave over the course of the program. We therefore advise you to anticipate the fact that at least one group may not be able to maintain regular attendance over the duration of the series.

In our project, one of the groups quickly emptied out. After four visits, this group was down to two participants. If this should happen to you, it is important to think about how to remedy the situation before the program begins, so as to maintain a positive and productive group dynamic, or even offer the remaining participants the chance to join another group.

Please note :
While it makes sense to combine groups when necessary, we do not recommend splitting groups to equalize the number of participants, as this can have a negative impact on group dynamics and the relationships established between members.

6. OVER THE COURSE OF THE VISITS

6.1 Visit "0"

6.1.1 Introduction and warm-up

Depending on your population's digital skills, participants may benefit from a preparatory meeting before the first official visit. This meeting will:

- Build participants' confidence by introducing them to the team who will be accompanying them for the duration of the program (guide, technical assistant), as well as to the other participants.
- Enable participants to get accustomed to the software and deal with any unforeseen technical issues, with the aim of putting them at ease and ensuring that the visits run smoothly, without any problems or difficulties that could potentially cause stress.

It also helps to explain that the program is based on exchange and personal enrichment. Explaining this a few days to one week before the visit gives participants time to mentally prepare, and it is reassuring for them to see with whom they will be spending time and interacting throughout the series. This preparatory meeting can be held a few days or even a week before the first visit, to mark a convivial moment and put participants' minds at ease.

Doing so just before the first visit can be a source of stress, and can delay the actual visit if a participant has technical difficulties. It is also a good opportunity to share a few etiquette tips, remind participants of the purpose of the visits and invite them to introduce themselves.

6.1.2 Practical tips and etiquette reminders for Zoom and other videoconferencing platforms

If you are using the dialogical method, we recommend that you take a few moments to explain to participants what it means and how this approach ties in with the overall objectives of the program. In our experience, some participants were expecting a more traditional, lecture-style structure, which led to some initial confusion about the guides' conversational approach. By explaining the dialogical method and its purpose in advance, participants know what to expect and what is expected of them—that is, open engagement.

Finally, when participants introduce themselves, it helps to give them a few pointers and options. The guide can do this and start by introducing him or herself. We recommend inviting participants to share some personal information (e.g., their background, hobbies, familiarity with the museum and/or knowledge of art), so long as they feel comfortable doing so, as well as a few words about their previous experience with museums and their motivations for participating in the visits. Although this detail may seem trivial, it allows participants to start bonding with each other and gives the guides a better sense of the group. That being said, be sure not to force anyone who does not wish to introduce themselves at this point to do so.

6.1.3 Etiquette for using videoconferencing software

- **Invite participants to turn on their microphones and cameras at the start of each session, and to mute the microphone only if there is noise.** This allows people to chime in more spontaneously and creates a sense of being in the same room together.

- **Establish a protocol for using the chat box feature and inform participants of it.** We recommend using it exclusively to communicate with the technical assistant in the event of any technical difficulties.

- **Request that participants avoid talking over the guide and their peers,** as most videoconferencing platforms have only one audio channel.

- **Ask participants not to do anything else during the visit, nor to bring their device with them if they need to stand up.** For those without previous experience, virtual activities may seem like a good opportunity to multitask, such as eating during the session. However, this distracts other participants and can negatively affect the guides' morale.

- **Invite participants to raise their hands to speak.** Many platforms have an icon for this, which is preferable. Zoom, for example, places several participants with raised hands in a queue. This allows the guides to stay focused on the content, rather than having to keep track of who raised their hand first.

- **Be sure to remind everyone that there is nothing wrong with making mistakes, and that the technical assistant is their resource.** Explain that in the event that someone forgets to mute their microphone, for example, the technical assistant can intervene on their behalf. And if someone encounters major technical difficulties, it is always possible to rejoin the visit with another group.

6.2 A longer first visit

It is recommended to set aside a little more time for the first official visit: guides will need this time to lay the groundwork by explaining the thematic trajectory of the visit series. They may also choose to break down the format of each session, specifying that each work will be viewed separately, and that a general discussion of all the works will follow. Participants may also have technical questions or concerns that were not addressed during Visit 0. As mentioned above, encourage them to ask for help if they need it. However, ask them to limit any in-depth technical troubleshooting to the end of the visit, if possible, so as not to disturb other members of the group.

The use of the chat functionality may be permitted, but with a clear stipulation from the outset to address a message requesting support only to the person in charge of technical assistance (using the private message feature). If the guide is not accompanied by a technical assistant, we advise you not to allow chat requests, in order to avoid disruptions. Chat notifications could not only disrupt the guide's speech, but also that of the participants, who might be tempted to read the message or respond to it.

For subsequent visits, we recommend starting each session with an ice-breaker question to engage participants from the outset. For example, you could ask participants if they have seen any works of art, done any art-related research, or made their own artworks since the previous session. The aim is also to encourage participants to socialize with each other, creating links between the visits and their lives. We recommend this as an ice-breaker rather than unstructured social time, as we have found the latter to be less successful—participants often need a little nudge to move into a more informal conversational mode.
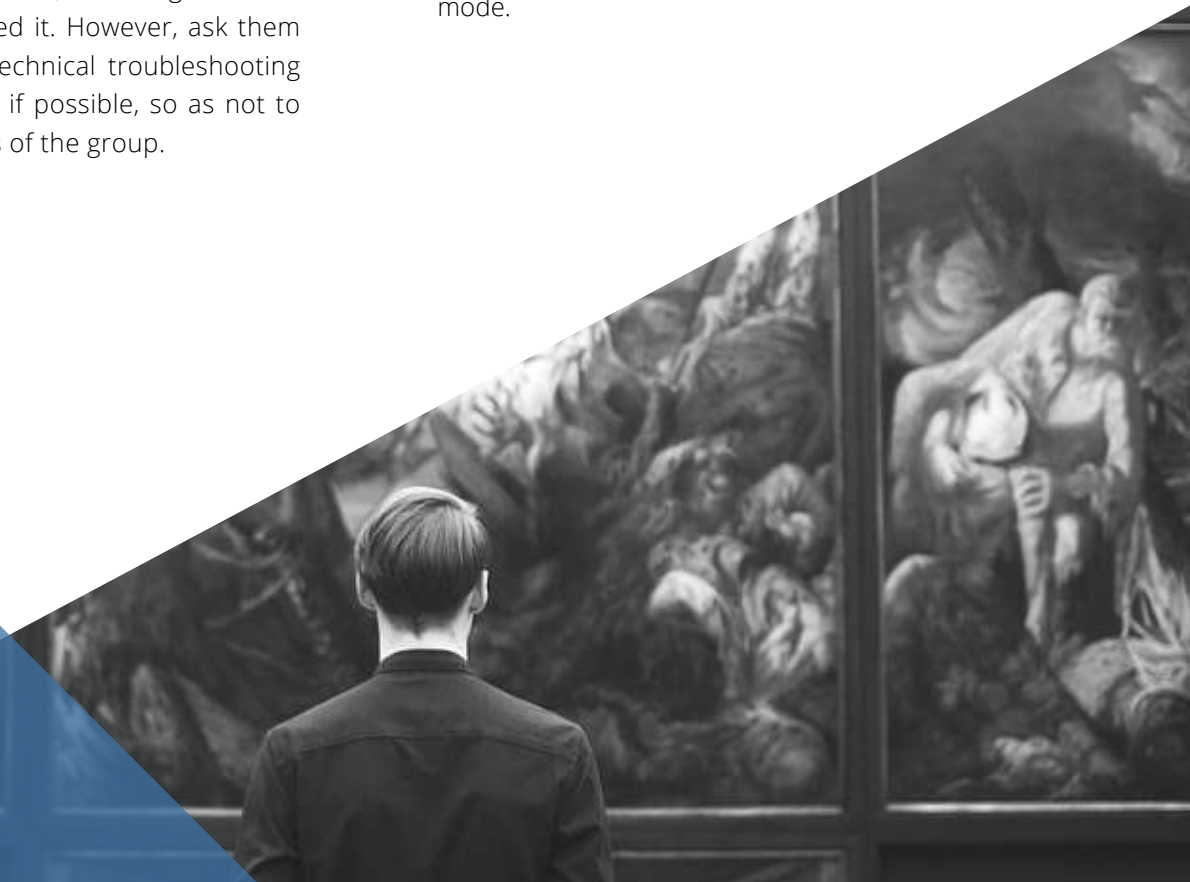
At the end of each guided visit, you can introduce the content that will be presented during the next session. But be careful not to say too much! The aim is to arouse the participants' interest, while still allowing them to be surprised by the works.

By not saying too much, you can also prevent some participants from doing research beforehand. Indeed, the whole point of this project is to have participants discover the works at the same time as the others, so that they can discuss them and share their reactions and first impressions. Doing research beforehand would lead to an intellectualization of the visit, which can be a way of protecting oneself, staying in one's comfort zone and showing off one's knowledge.

We recommend that you simply mention the general theme of the next visit, making the connection with the theme of the visit that has just been completed.

6.3 The midway point

There are a few things you can do midway through your series to ensure that guides and participants are having a positive experience and getting the most out of it they can.

6.3.1 Setting up a social space

First of all, if one of your main objectives is to encourage the creation of social ties between participants, it may be worth offering them a space outside the visits where they can continue to meet and/or converse if they wish to. This space can be offered as early as the preparatory visit or midway through the program, and helps to emphasize the social element while giving participants some time to get to know each other in a more structured environment (the visits themselves). It also allows participants to :

- Discuss topics not strictly related to the visits, or to delve deeper into them;
- Chat one-on-one or in small groups. The idea is for this space to act as a parallel domain for socializing, in the same way as the few minutes before or after an in-person meeting would.

When it comes to choosing a platform for these exchanges, we recommend putting forward a few options and holding an informal vote. For example, a simple format such as a mailing list may suit some, while others may prefer more interactive options, such as instant messaging. Finally, do not forget to stress that participation in this space is optional. This could be as simple as sharing participants' e-mail addresses, or a group chat on applications such as WhatsApp or Messenger, etc.

Our experience: when we worked with Mandarin-speaking participants, we found that they were much more comfortable using WeChat than email, as it was their primary method of communication. The importance of consulting with each group to identify the best means of communication is worth emphasizing if you want participants' buy-in.

6.3.2 Consider a satisfaction survey

Another measure you might take halfway through the project is to circulate an anonymous survey (with a dedicated space for open comments), to be completed by participants, on the guide's performance to date and participants' overall satisfaction.

> **Please note :**
> We advise against using Zoom's survey function, to avoid creating a technological divide between participants, as this adds yet another technical element.
> The aim is to remain in the spirit of a meeting, and therefore to focus on discussion and exchange, by asking participants for their opinion on how to improve future visits and series.

This evaluation both reassures the guides and helps them adjust their approaches, while signaling to participants that their feedback is important and welcome. To this end, it may also be useful to organize a separate meeting with all the guides at this point. You may choose to hold this meeting in addition to the survey or respectively, to allow the guides to come together to share their views and resolve any issues or concerns collectively.

7. THE END OF THE CYCLE

The last visit of the cycle is a little different from the others. The emotional aspect associated with the conclusion of what is experienced as a group adventure needs to be taken into account and anticipated.

7.1 Planning a longer visit

Participants will appreciate the opportunity to look back on the different works viewed throughout the series, on the moments of exchange and sharing, and also to reflect on the program as a whole.

They can be encouraged to take the floor at the end of the visit to respond to the following questions:

- Which work is the most memorable for you, and why?
- Which week/theme did you enjoy the most?
- What did you learn/take away from the visits?

This time can replace or be added to the 15-minute informal discussion time, depending on the time of day the visit is being held.

7.2 Planning an in-person visit

Depending on your institution's or organization's capabilities, organizing an in-person visit with the guide who has accompanied the group for the duration of the cycle is a good way to reinforce the effects on well-being and quality of life, as well as to combat social isolation by strengthening the bonds that have been established. In the context of a pandemic, an outdoor visit should be considered if your institution has outdoor artworks.

This visit was requested by a large majority of participants in the research project. Planning it from the logistics phase onwards would ensure that it is carried out in the right conditions, and would enable participants to end the cycle feeling rewarded. You could also consider integrating the visit into the cycle you are developing.

This visit can also take the form of free admission to a guided or self-guided tour of the museum for all, giving participants the option of bringing family members along. Many participants asked if it was possible to come to a visit accompanied by their loved ones (e.g., spouse, grandchildren), so that they could share in the experience. In addition, this option enables the person to showcase their new skills and enhance their social position within the family by promoting exchanges and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

7.3 Offering a souvenir

Offering a souvenir that chronicles the experience is another measure we have been able to implement, and one that was greatly appreciated by our participants. This souvenir can take the form of a document sent by e-mail summarizing all the works examined during the cycle, depending on copyright conditions. Such a document enables participants to remember the experience, look back on the works analyzed and share their experience with loved ones.

8. EVALUATION CRITERIA

Several forms of evaluation are possible, depending on your initial objectives and the type of evaluation you wish to implement.

8.1 Satisfaction evaluation

This type of evaluation can be carried out by your institution alone. You can set up surveys to gauge the overall satisfaction of participants, including information on preferred works or themes, so as to adapt your future initiative to realities on the ground. We advise you to conduct these surveys at the mid-point and end of the cycle.

Please note :
It is also important to carry out an evaluation with your guides.
This enables you to give them feedback and possibly correct certain aspects during the series.

8.2 Scientific evaluation

This type of evaluation must be carried out in partnership with a research team and within the framework of a specific protocol approved by an ethics board. Scientifically validated questionnaires exist to standardize evaluations.

You will be able to highlight the benefits of the activity on different parameters such as physical health, mental health, social health, frailty, well-being, quality of life, etc.

For example, here are the questionnaires we used in the project:

- Well-being assessment: The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)
- Quality of life assessment: EQ-5D
- Social health assessment: The Duke Social Support Index (DSSI)
- Frailty assessment: CESAM and ESOGER (questionnaires developed and validated by professor Olivier Beauchet's team)

These tools are available free of charge, subject to certain conditions. Qualitative studies can also be planned to gain a better understanding of needs and expectations, as well as the limitations and strengths of the activity you are setting up. The research team at the Montreal Geriatric University Institute Research Centre can help and advise you. Do not hesitate to contact us: you can find our contact details in Chapter 9.

8.3 Marketing evaluation

This type of evaluation focuses on the impact of the initiative on your institution.
It can focus on measures of the museum's public image or attendance, on the number of memberships, and so on. These measures can be very useful for fundraising through philanthropy, for example.

9. RESOURCES

9.1 Links to scientific publications

2022 : Scientific publication on the results of our quantitative study, demonstrating positive effects on quality of life, well-being and health in all its components:
Benefits of a 3-month cycle of weekly virtual museum tours in community dwelling older adults: Results of a randomized controlled trial
https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36052331/

Other publications from our research team on the subject of arts and health (workshop cycles, in-person visit series, virtual guided visits series):

- 2020 : Evaluation of a museum workshop pilot project for seniors: *Participatory art-based activity, community-dwelling older adults and changes in health condition: Results from a pre-post intervention, single-arm, prospective and longitudinal study*

  https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32143777/

- 2020 : Evaluation of the Museum Workshops for Seniors project: *Effects of "Thursdays at the Museum" at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts on the mental and physical health of older community dwellers: the art-health randomized clinical trial protocol*

  https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32787893/

- 2021 : Evaluation of the Museum Workshops for Seniors project: *Health benefits of "Thursdays at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts": Results of a randomized clinical trial*

  https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34654525/

- 2021 : Evaluation of the Museum Workshops for Seniors project after long-term follow-up: *Long-term effects of the Montreal museum of fine arts participatory activities on frailty in older community dwellers: results of the A-Health study*

  https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33051855/

- 2022 : International evaluation of the Museum Workshops for Seniors project: *Improving the mental and physical health of older community-dwellers with a museum participatory art-based activity: results of a multicentre randomized controlled trial*

https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35578103/

Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

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9.2 Contact information

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10. CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

Implementing a guided virtual visits program offers exciting prospects for museums/art institutions and other organizations. Indeed, offering virtual guided visits makes it possible to provide an immersive, interactive experience for visitors, wherever they may be in the world, enabling them to discover the collections in a more flexible way than ever before. Such experiences were offered to the general public at the MMFA as part of the "3 minutes with an artwork" program prior to this project. Many of the data relating to the visual criteria of the works and facilitation strategies originate from this prior program and have been adapted for this context.

Moreover, it has now been scientifically proven that this activity has positive effects on well-being, quality of life, health and social inclusion. It can therefore serve as an asset for public health prevention, underlining the important role that cultural institutions can play in public health. Nevertheless, the number of visits required to achieve such an impact can represent a challenge when crafting an institution's offering to its audiences. Further research is needed to assess the minimum number of visits required to achieve a positive effect, and the persistence of said effect over time.

The benefits of virtual museum visits are not limited to existing visitors. Cultural institutions can also take advantage of this innovation to increase their reach and accessibility. Museums can reach a wider and more diverse audience with virtual visits, which can also stimulate interest and further participation.

Although virtual visits are not a complete substitute for in-person experiences, they can offer a practical and innovative alternative, especially in times of health crises or travel restrictions. Virtual visits can also complement physical ones, offering visitors additional information and insights.

This guide, based on four years' experience in real-life conditions, is intended as an aid to implementation in any institution or organization, which may present potential challenges.

Generalizing collaborative artistic initiatives aimed at health prevention in all its facets, and validating them scientifically and rigorously, will in the long term cement the leading role of cultural institutions in public health.

Scientific evaluation of the positive effects of these initiatives is essential if we are to bring about changes in public policy, resulting in long-term funding from health ministries, for example, or reimbursement for such interventions from group insurance providers.

Our team would be happy to support you in the scientific evaluation process and offer you the chance to join our international consortium, which currently includes over 12 university-museum partnerships around the world. Join us to participate in a community of shared experience and scientific research.

VIRTUAL GUIDED MUSEUM VISITS AT A GLANCE

1 IDEATION

- Define your objective
- Define your target audience
- Define visitor profile
- Define technologies
- Establish a budget

2 DESIGN

- Matching artworks to purpose and audience
- Choose mediation approach
- Determine number and duration of visits
- Define themes and sub-themes
- Select works of art

3 PREPARATION

- Prepare visual aids
- Anticipate participants' questions and conduct research beforehand
- Select and train guides and resources
- Purchase equipment as needed

4 IMPLEMENTATION

- Communicate with the public
- Register and train participants
- Set up introductory visit
- Ensure attendance
- Offer a souvenir or a face-to-face visit

5 EVALUATION

- Assessing satisfaction
- Scientific evaluation
- Commercial evaluation
- Confirm positive effects
- Sustain the visit offer

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