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## **New Perceptions and Representation in the Museum. The case of the *Museu particular* from the Perspective of Professionals in the Cultural Sector**

Alexandre Rebollo-Sánchez<sup>1</sup>, Maria Feliu-Torruella<sup>1</sup> & Rafael Sospedra-Roca<sup>1</sup>

1) *University of Barcelona – Didpatri*, Spain

### **Abstract**

The study analyzes and examines the *Museu particular*, project of 2021 that set out to turn everyday objects into museum pieces, thus making us appreciate more the heritage around us while acknowledging the role it plays in our lives. The analysis used a methodological model of evaluation with participative strategies. Semi-structured interviews with a range of professionals from the cultural heritage and museum sector provided opinions and feedback on the project. Consequently, it has been possible to establish the characteristics of the project, highlight its successes and identify areas for improvement in its aim to fully reach its target audience. Furthermore, at a time when the role of museums is in transition, this project has studied the notion of self-representation in exhibitions as well as how the digital environment can act as a space for creation, didactics, education and exhibition for cultural institutions.

### **Keywords**

Museology, heritage education, cultural heritage, informal learning, transmedia communication

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**Corresponding author(s):** Alexandre Rebollo-Sánchez

**Contact address:** alexrebollo@ub.edu

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## Nuevas Percepciones y Representación en el Museo. El caso del *Museu particular* desde la Perspectiva de los Profesionales del Sector Cultural

Alexandre Rebollo-Sánchez<sup>1</sup>, Maria Feliu-Torruella<sup>1</sup> y Rafael Sospedra-Roca<sup>1</sup>

1) *Universidad de Barcelona – Didpatri*, España

### Resumen

El estudio analiza y examina el proyecto del *Museu particular*, una iniciativa desarrollada durante el 2021 y que pretendía dar voz a objetos cotidianos, convirtiéndolos en pieza de museo y valorando el patrimonio que todos tenemos alrededor y del cual formamos parte. Mediante el uso del modelo metodológico de evaluación con estrategias participativas y la realización de entrevistas semiestructuradas se ha recopilado la opinión directa sobre el proyecto de distintos profesionales del sector del patrimonio cultural y los museos. En consecuencia, se han podido determinar los valores, aciertos y posibles mejoras del proyecto como vía para la interpelación del público y la contribución a la autorepresentación y cambio de paradigma de los museos. Así como del entorno digital como lugar de creación, didáctica, educación y exposición, también para las instituciones culturales.

### Palabras clave

Museología, educación patrimonial, patrimonio cultural, aprendizaje informal, comunicación transmedia

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**Correspondencia Autores(s):** Alexandre Rebollo-Sánchez

**Dirección de contacto:** alexrebollo@ub.edu

In 1926, almost a century ago, the Japanese art critic and thinker Soetsu Yanagi expressed in an essay his astonishment at history's disregard for everyday objects. Yanagi was surprised that, despite being used on a daily basis, these objects were often overlooked and forgotten by historians who considered them as vulgar and commonplace (Yanagi, 2020). Soetsu Yanagi wanted to highlight the beauty that is not always immediately apparent in everyday objects, specifically those with a history of craftsmanship, which in the 1920s was almost all of them. He founded the Folk Arts Movement (*mingei*) and the Japanese Folk Crafts Museum which gave everyday objects the opportunity to be on display in the 'temple of the muses'. Yanagi's beliefs contributed to opening up wider debates on the role of museums in society, how heritage should be more valued and the process to determine and decide whether a piece is worthy, or not, of being exhibited in a museum. In the late 1990s, German philosopher Borys Groys defined museum pieces as historical waste only to be part of collections in these institutions when they had lost their use or function. Museums are –according to Groys– cemeteries of things (Groys, 2020). Could this explain why certain sectors of society do not feel a connection with museums and prefer to keep a distance from them?

In order to change this mentality, museum professionals have been working on the role of museums since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a shift towards more direct involvement of curators, professionals and/or visitors. For example, reimagining the museum spaces depending on the collections in order to engage the audience more (Falk & Dierking, 2013); or, deciding what should be exhibited inside a display case or behind the velvet rope (Thiemeyer, 2015). These new models of museums and narratives in exhibitions were first put forward by the eminent Italian museologist Umberto Eco at the turn of the century. Eco –agreeing with Paul Valéry– said that there was an excessive number of works in museums and instead argued that a museum should be dedicated to a single piece, and all the content ought to revolve around that (Eco, 2019). Another key element to address is how the relationship between visitors and pieces could be improved to appeal to a broader sector of society. This could range from emphasizing objects as receptacles of immaterial memories and values (Latham, 2013), to appealing to micro-context and particular narratives as a way to directly capture the public's interest (Mao & Fu, 2021), or changing the subjects to which the processes of heritage activation are applied (Prats, 1997). Everyday objects could play a fundamental role in opening discussion on people's day-to-day life. Exhibiting these everyday objects under new narratives and media could guarantee both interest and self-representation (Levine, 2015). The ultimate goal is the redefinition of the central axis of museums by moving from the traditional elitist museum, where collections and objects are placed at the center of discourses created by experts, to what some have called the democratic museum (Bosello & Vander Haak, 2022). This is where citizens (the audience) take on a more active and dynamic role and participate in the creation and development of proposals and projects (Witcomb, 2003).

The use of information and communications technologies (ICT) and the digitization of the museum sector –accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic– can also be considered as part of the mediation process for the aforementioned evolving paradigm shift in museums (Ogundipe, 2018). The digital museum offers alternatives to the traditional ways of attracting visitors to the venues (Furini, 2022), although the digital museum cannot and should not substitute the physical museum (Budge, 2017). It is important to conceptualize the digital environment as a space with its own entity to share and create (Racioppe, 2019); and as a space for the creation

of collective memories (Simon, 2012) especially in social networks. Instagram, Twitter (currently X) and TikTok offer clear opportunities for co-creation processes and projects as a way to achieve a symbiosis between museum professionals and the audience (Rhee, Pianzola, & Choi, 2021; O'Hagan, 2021).

At the beginning of 2021 the project '*Museu particular \*etnologia d'anar per casa*' (Museu particular \*ethnology of being at home) was created to disseminate the cultural and patrimonial heritage of our everyday objects. On the one hand, the concept that a museum is a temple and the objects contained within are sacred was reframed into one with a more personal and straightforward type of representation. The project won the award for best experience and activity of Catalan museums at the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the Association of Museologists of Catalonia Awards in 2021, and it is held in high esteem by a large number of museology professionals nationwide.

In this article we will present, analyze and study the *Museu particular* project as an example for new narratives, formats and proposals in the field of cultural heritage and from the perspective of professionals of the sector. We aim to delve into the project's didactic potential and how it could encourage more of the general public to visit museums despite any misgivings they might have. By means of a methodological model of evaluation with participative strategies, we will gather the opinions, perceptions and assessments of professionals in the cultural heritage and museum sector regarding the *Museu particular* project. All in all, this will be a complete study of the project as a whole considering the perspective of the public, as well as the impact generated in social networks (Rebollo, Feliu-Torruella & Sospedra, 2022).

### **Case Study: Museu Particular, Everyday Heritage on Social Networks**

In early February 2021, the project '*Museu particular \*etnologia d'anar per casa*' (Museu particular \*ethnology of being at home) was presented at a press conference at the 'Museu de la Vida Rural' (MVR). From that point on, an 'everyday object' would become a monthly museum piece.

**Figure 1***The Small Window Display on the Façade of the Museu de la Vida Rural Building*

Source. Museu Particular

*Museu particular* operates from two headquarters, one physical building and the other digital, with two different set-ups. The physical headquarters is a building located at the 'Museu de la Vida Rural' of the Fundació Carulla in l'Espluga de Francolí, a town with just over 3600 inhabitants in the province of Tarragona (Catalonia). It is run and owned privately, although it is recognized within the official state system of Museus de Catalunya. Founded in 1988, the MRV is essentially an ethnological museum and has become a benchmark in the Catalan Museum sector for its transversal and unorthodox vision of rural Catalonia in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Museu de la Vida Rural, 2010). It is also noteworthy for its commitment to contemporary art, new narratives in its collections and cultural education in sustainability (Loran & Carbó, 2021). In 2009, a small window display was installed on the façade of the building which looks directly onto the street. This museographic resource (Figure 1) is where the everyday objects were exhibited each month along with a text panel. As of 2021, several objects have been exhibited: a fork, a tampon, clothes pegs, tin cans, a shampoo bottle, 'carquinyolis' (traditional Catalan cookies), postcards, a BIC pen, symbolic ribbons, plastic bags and a teddy bear.

Due to the mobility restrictions enforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the activity of *Museu particular* was concentrated in their digital headquarters. The social networks Twitter and Instagram were used as they were considered to best suit the project's characteristics and needs. A website was also created with the aim of providing basic information about the project with blog posts by the art historian Anna M. Andvert, and articles were uploaded linking the museum pieces with culture and contemporary art. The social media strategy was based on the creation of content using a story telling technique. The Twitter posts used threads, and incorporated audiovisual support with the use of images, videos or animated GIFs. On Instagram, carousel posts were used since they allow up to ten consecutive images which can

be viewed like a slide show by scrolling left. These images (and occasionally video) were displayed with accompanying text. A consistent approach was taken each month for each piece. First there was the presentation of the object and its history, then there was a focus on more specific issues regarding the object and finally an opportunity for discussion in the comments and replies.

If we take June's piece, the shampoo bottle, as an example, we started with the history of its creation and learned that it is an object that hasn't existed as long as many people might assume. We then went on to talk about hygiene habits in general, changes in the hygiene industry and advertising campaigns for specific products. This was taken further, and we could reflect on hygiene in rural areas; how organic materials such as straw or eggs were used to make hygienic hair products or the practice of covering the head –with scarves, caps or hats– as a method of insulating the hair from dust or dirt. The discussion then moved on to broader topics such as sustainability, inequality or ancestral knowledge. Similarly, pop culture could be used to explain why hats went out of fashion. The trend changed due to an increase in the ownership of private cars in the 1960s and the influence of music idols such as The Beatles with their iconic mop top hairstyles. Finally, and thanks to the participation of the *Museu particular's* digital community, the discussion could also turn to contemporary issues such as racism in shampoo advertising in the United States where certain hairstyles are associated pejoratively to African – Americans.

So, a simple shampoo bottle on display in a small glass case as a museum piece along with the use of social media with a storytelling technique generated comments, opinions and opened up discussion on major social issues.

## Methodology

### Method and Technique of Obtaining Data

The main objective of this paper is to present, analyze and study the *Museu particular* project from the perspective of professionals in the heritage and museum sector. A mixed-method study was chosen due to the nature of the project and to evaluate it in qualitative terms. To comply with the participant involvement in the project, a methodological model of evaluation with participatory strategies was also included (Escudero, 2016).

The qualitative assessment was carried out by conducting and recording various semi-structured interviews with professionals from the heritage and museum sector who were aware of, had had contact or interacted with the *Museu particular* project. The participants of these interviews are authoritative voices in the field and have worked extensively on new narratives, formats and proposals in museology, as well as in the analysis of the didactic potential and usefulness in making heritage more accessible to the public and questioning the very concept of the museum.

The design of the methodology, the instruments, and techniques used in its application were planned in accordance with the Code of Good Practice in Research of the author's University,

complying with the precepts of honesty, responsibility and rigor. The methodology, instruments and techniques were also approved by the Bioethics Commission of the author's University.

### Instruments

The chosen instrument was a semi-structured interview which included a series of open-ended questions allowing participants to express themselves freely regarding specific aspects of the project, such as the design or content of the posts and publications, and other more general questions that reflected the public's engagement with the project or its contribution to the change in the role of the museum. All the answers were used to evaluate the project in qualitative terms by means of opinions, assessments and perceptions of the participants.

The interviews were conducted right at the end of the project, between the months of January and April 2022. They consisted of a single individual session, either face-to-face or online depending on the participant.

### Participants

A total of 12 single individual interviews were conducted during the first few months of 2022 with professionals from the cultural, heritage and museum sector in Catalonia, as shown in Table 1. Participants were selected primarily for being aware of or having had contact with the project but also for being outstanding professionals in fields closely related to the project, such as cultural communication and dissemination (CT1), museum management and programming of cultural activities (CT2) and cultural mediation and/or education (CT3). Furthermore, criteria of gender parity, age diversity and distinction between working in public or private cultural institutions were also applied.

**Table 1**

*Participants in Chronological Order of Interview*

<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Field of work</b>	<b>Work</b>
P1	Male	33	CT2	Private
P2	Male	33	CT3	Private
P3	Female	56	CT2	Private
P4	Male	39	CT1	Private
P5	Male	52	CT2	Public
P6	Female	31	CT1	Private
P7	Male	28	CT3	Public
P8	Male	59	CT1	Public
P9	Female	48	CT2	Public
P10	Female	42	CT3	Public
P11	Female	36	CT1	Public
P12	Female	58	CT3	Private

### **Data Processing and Analysis**

Once the interviews had been completed, they were transcribed by the authors of this study. The obtained data was then transferred to the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti and different descriptive and interpretative markers and codes were established for each question. The analysis of the data made it possible to identify the successes and failures of the project and set the groundwork to develop proposals for reflection and improvement in cultural heritage. All the work at this stage was carried out independently by the three authors of this study in order to ensure the reliability in the processing of the responses. Subsequently, after the pooling and triangulation of the author's work, the results were obtained.

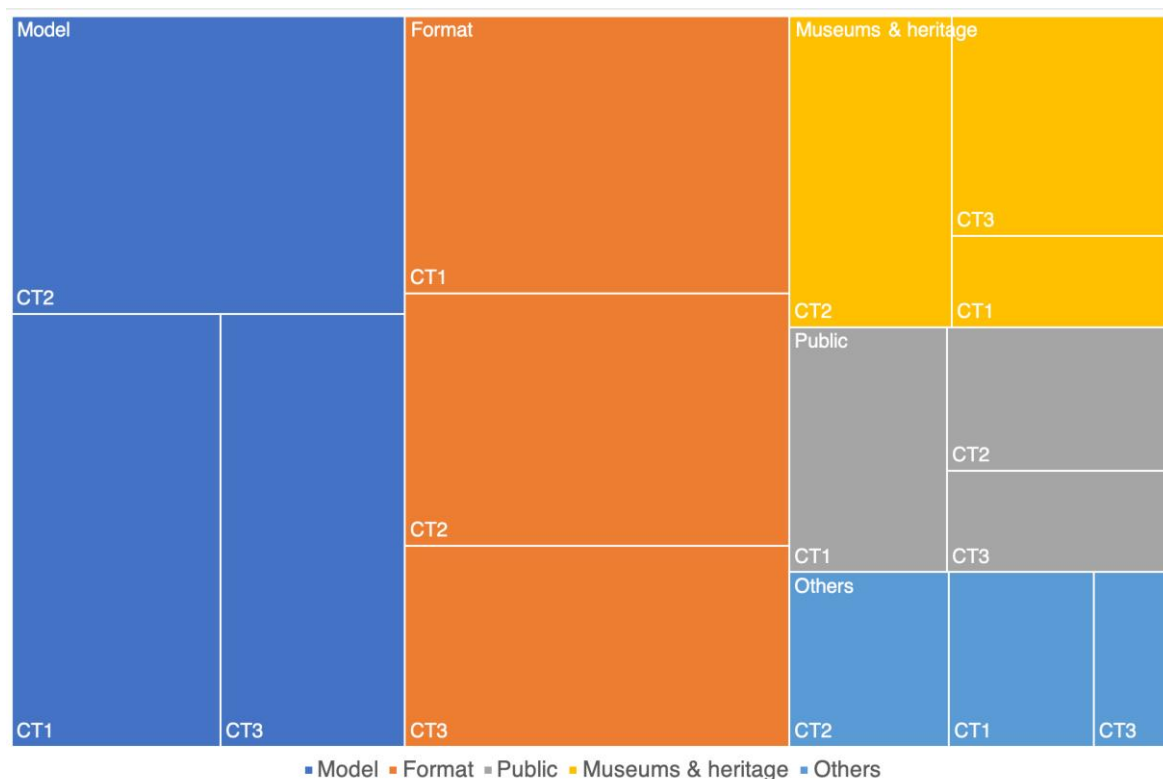
### **Results**

The methodological guidelines were used to analyze the collected data to give the results. In general terms, as illustrated in Figure 2, statements from the interviews that refer to the project model –conceptualization, contents, intentionality, etc.– were highlighted by the participants in CT2. The assessment of the format –materialization, channels, design– followed suit. Similarly, reflections regarding the heritage sector and museums were also noticeable in the interviews, particularly among participants from CT2 and CT3, but not so much among CT1 participants. As well as the case of the project's public who, on a smaller scale, were also cited in comparable proportions among the three fields of work. Finally, other aspects like personal experiences were collected under the heading 'other' and lower in percentage.



**Figure 2**

*Hierarchy Diagram with the Distribution of Citations of the Analyzed Interviews Distributed by Subject and Field of work of the Participants*



Source. Authors

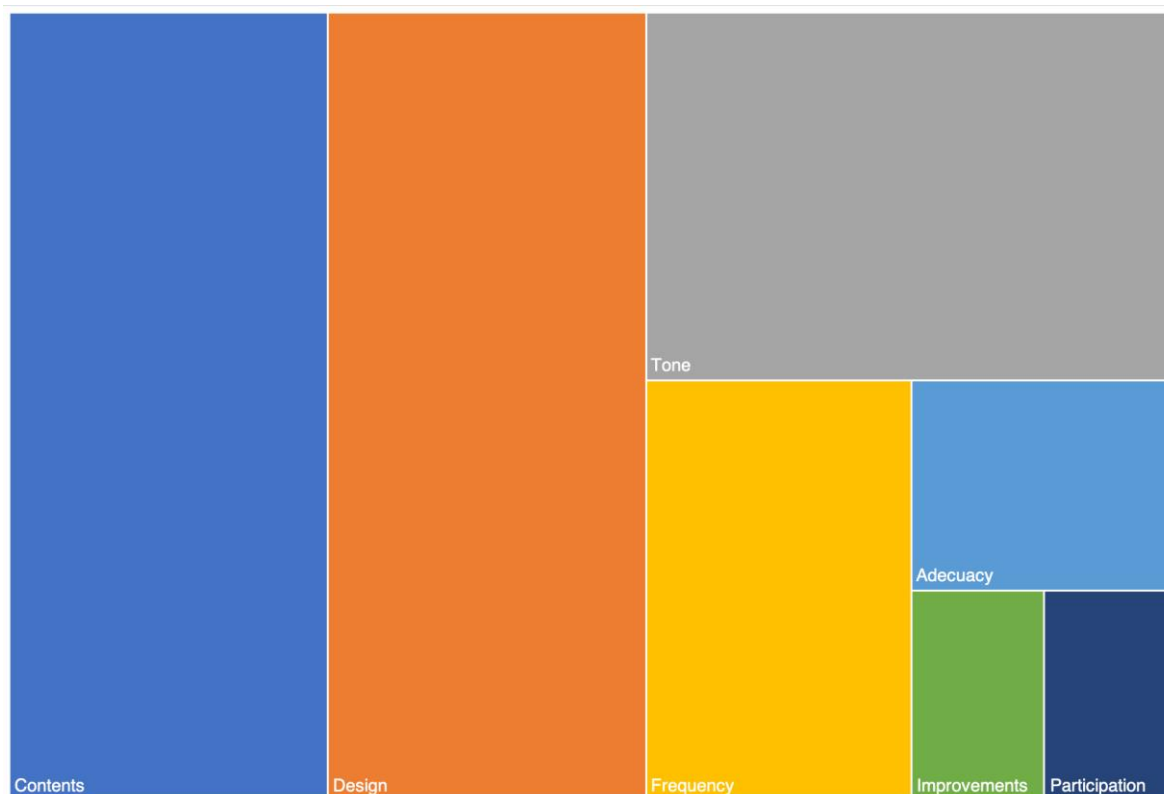
The first question in the interviews asked participants to assess the *Museu particular* project in general terms. Adjectives such as ‘innovative’ and ‘interesting’ were frequently used. For example, Participant 3 said: “I thought it was a very innovative proposal. That is to say, a very different way of approaching old ideas such as the piece of the month, but from a more contemporary and provocative perspective”; Participant 5 echoed a similar opinion: “I thought it was a very interesting initiative with a disruptive approach because, to a certain extent, the dynamics, the inertia of museums tends to be a bit monotonous, there are no big surprises”. More than half the replies highlighted how questioning the role of museums and cultural heritage was a noteworthy aspect of the project. For example, Participant 8 said: “It puts the focus on a type of heritage that often goes unnoticed and allows you to question how you see the museum pieces and the objects that you see on a daily basis”; Participant 3 also touched on the possibility to ask questions: “What does a museum want to say? What do the objects want to convey? In that sense, I think it’s fantastic to address these questions using common, everyday objects such as the ones in the *Museu particular* project”. Other participants noted the intimate relationship the project established with its audience, as is the case with Participant 10: “Sometimes, when we talk about heritage people see it as something far removed from themselves or very.... monumental, but heritage is also this - these little things”; and, Participant 9: “It is a very different way of approaching the language of museums through the use of an object with which you feel very much at ease”; and also, Participant 4: “It is all very clear,

simple and easy and close at hand (...) both online and offline, so it is very easy to reach the audience”.

In terms of the formal development of the project, the professionals interviewed assessed the project’s approach to Twitter, Instagram, and the physical headquarters at the Museu de la Vida Rural. Their responses (Figure 3) were mostly positive regarding the posts, the installations in the physical headquarters and the ability to create original content. Participant 8 said: “I think the design is spot on, it’s very clear, very good. It’s far from the ‘horror’ that you normally find when doom scrolling on Instagram”. Other elements that received positive feedback were the efforts to promote sustainability, and the careful selection of the objects to open up broader discussions. On the latter, Participant 12: “*The fact of taking an object that is so common, so normal for us, and elevating it to the category of a museum object seems fascinating to me*”. The professionals pointed out tone and discourse as some of the main successes of the project alongside the use of accessible, dynamic and didactic language to establish a connection with the audience. Participant 6 said: “I really like the tone of the message, I think it is very in touch, very informal, and that helps a lot when it comes to disseminating something like culture”. Without being overly commented on, it was noted that the frequency of posts was adequate and not excessive.

### Figure 3

*Hierarchy Diagram with the Rating of the Museu Particular's Channels*



Source. Authors

Another aspect that the participants valued highly was the hybrid model (combining in-person and digital). Overall, the model was assessed as successful and optimal. The hybrid

model's simplicity and engagement qualities were praised by various participants. For example, Participant 1 said: "I think that the hybrid model is the only one that the museum can have", Participant 2 said: "It is a way of making the museum more relevant to people. Put it up on social apps that people actually use", Participant 6 noted: "Super interesting to bring culture closer to people, that is, to talk to people in a language they can speak", and Participant 10 had the following to say about the hybrid model:

The *Museu particular* is a clear example that you should not only use a physical space, but that the digital contents are complementary to the physical space. After all, what you see online will always be different from what you see in the museum building.

Similarly, Participant 11, addressed audience engagement:

The perception we have of museums is perhaps not a very enticing one. This type of social network project has reached a lot of people that would have not heard about the collection otherwise.

However, some participants voiced concern about the location of the physical headquarters in the municipality of Espluga de Francolí, a sparsely populated and quite isolated area which would be awkward to access for a certain public. The digital headquarters does not face such complications. As Participant 8 noted: "The in-person experience has a powerful visual impact that the digital cannot match, and the digital has possibilities to reach engagement numbers that the physical could never dream of." Other participants reported how the window display case also had issues. On this subject, Participant 3 said:

I have the feeling that people who don't know the museum [physical headquarters] and have never been here before find it difficult to understand the physical part (...) there is a certain confusion as to whether this really exists or not.

However, other participants noted the importance of the physical headquarters. Participant 4 expressed: "If there is something physical, something real, it is always a more enriching experience."

When asked whether the *Museu particular* project could change the audience's perception of museums and their role, most of the participants agreed that it was a step in the right direction but there was a lack of unanimity of opinion on the subject matter. Participant 7 argued in favor:

We have the view that museums often present many collections or objects that tell us about the past, and we can't see how these may be relevant to our lives. So, I believe that this *Museu particular* project could be one way to solve this.

Similar opinions were expressed by Participant 9, who praised the use of everyday objects saying: "It's like a Trojan horse, in other words, a totally everyday object, which doesn't generate rejection from us but instead generates a curiosity (...) an intrigue in finding this decontextualized object in a display case." Participant 10 argued that the project is a way to

generate empathy: “It breaks down the barrier that museums often struggle to break down between what is inside the museum and what is outside the museum.” On this matter, Participant 12 addressed the role of museums in society: “It needs to speak to us about life, about ourselves and who we are or why we are the way we are and what we can be in the future...”

To conclude the interviews, participants were asked to indicate any shortcomings or suggest possible improvements to the project. Although the participants did not find any areas in urgent need for improvement, some did put forward proposals regarding the digital side, including the introduction of new formats and platforms. For example, Participant 1 suggested the use of video platforms such as YouTube and Participant 10 argues that more personnel are needed to prepare and deliver the contents. Other aspects touched upon for possible improvements were from an educational stance. On that subject, Participant 2 said: “It would be interesting to work with and involve schools”, and Participant 7 argued that the inclusion of schools or the creation of pedagogical material was the natural next step. On the issue of increased audience participation, proposals were made. Participant 5 noted: “A participatory process could be carried out to see which objects are part of the project”. Participant 3 suggested activities with audience participation would be a way to gain more attention, and Participant 11 recommended the extension of the project to other museums and cultural territories nationwide.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

There is no disputing the ever-changing nature of our world. These changes can happen suddenly and rapidly and affect every aspect of our everyday lives. In recent years, communication, learning and entertainment have been shaken to the core by the digital environment. This new context does not exclude –nor should it– the cultural heritage and museum sector in its endeavors to embrace a move towards new formats, initiatives, paradigms and realities all at once. At the end of the 1940s, André Malraux spoke about the idea of a ‘*Musée Imaginaire*’ –a space without walls– where museum pieces, free from traditional museum restraints, could be popularized and made more accessible (Malraux, 2017); this idea has become more relevant than ever in the era of the digital environment. Furthermore, this ‘new’ museum format could even reach audiences that hitherto had never taken much notice of or interest in the museum sector.

In the analysis and study of the *Museu particular* project and with the aid of professional voices in the sector we are able to compare, contrast and discuss various facts and opinions. First of all, the imperious need to challenge the establishment with a drive towards change in creative proposals, products, activities and initiatives in the hope of reaching, engaging and consolidating new audiences. In that line of thought, the definitions previously given regarding innovation, format adequacy and content play a central role in the *Museum particular* project. This was confirmed in the interviews with the sector’s professionals and noticeable positive feedback on the direct engagement of the audience which is a move away from stereotypical concepts regarding museums and the outdated ways to establish audience connection. The concepts of cultural heritage and museum pieces play an essential role when it comes to

focusing on everyday objects. These objects have a potential that was made explicit and generally praised by the participants in the study, as quick, agile and easy ways of connecting with visitors. These everyday objects talk to the audience about themselves despite the fact they have not always paid much attention to them.

Similarly, another success of the project according to the professionals is the hybrid model. On the one hand, social media is an important communication tool allowing interaction between users. This is especially important in the field of culture dissemination and didactics, cultural heritage and museums in challenging times of social interaction, as was the case due to and in the aftermath of COVID-19. On the other hand, having physical headquarters improves the general perception of the project and the fact it is developed within an already consolidated museum validates the questioning of concepts such as the museum itself, cultural heritage or museum piece. That being said, the maintenance of a physical headquarters could also be a handicap in the long term. It is in these circumstances that the importance of a digital environment in an evolving museum model grows stronger. It becomes a useful tool for accessibility and direct contact, provided that there is an attractive design and/or appealing visuals with relevant text and a pleasant tone and appropriate register in language.

The *Museum particular* project contributes to the change which is occurring in the audience perception of concepts such as museums and cultural heritage. Although it merely scratches the surface regarding this change, the example set by *Museum particular* for cocreation, communicative participation and self-representation by means of cultural heritage should be considered as a key procedural standard for museums. This is a step closer to reframing people as a focal point in the center of the museum discourse and community being reflected through the pieces and the collection itself. Ultimately, the objective is to achieve the democratic museum - a concept established by theorists in the sector. That being said, in this project, audience participation could have been encouraged more by creating opportunities for direct interaction beyond social media.

In conclusion, the *Museu particular*'s idealistic strategy, as confirmed by its audience, has proved to be effective and can be considered as a positive example for the museum sector to follow. The modern world seems to favor the hybrid model in general and this is no different for museum strategies. Social media is set to stay as a space for creation and cocreation that not only challenges but also offers an alternative to the conservative vision of the museum as an institution with a physical space that is solely concerned with pieces commissioned and selected by professionals with any additional information taking the standard form of posters, audiovisuals or panel texts in that physical space.

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