

New forms of promoting arts and culture in the COVID-19 crisis

Performance audit

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What we assessed and why

Between September and November 2021, we carried out an audit on “New forms of promoting arts and culture in the COVID-19 crisis” at the Museum of Fine Arts in Vienna, the Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg and the Vorarlberg Museum in Bregenz. We examined arts and cultural activities existing before, during and after the government-imposed closure of the museums during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We assessed the three museums’ current strategies for promoting arts and culture, we compared the three museums’ activities to promote arts and culture before, during and after the closure of their visitor areas due to COVID-19, we assessed the uptake of these activities by the public and examined related revenue and expenditure.

We covered the period between 2018 and July 2020.

What we found

We found that:

- The three museums responded differently to the pandemic, including their interactions with the public. They offered new forms of arts and cultural activities while closed, such as online guided tours, lectures, and workshops. After the museums reopened, they incorporated some of the lessons learned into their regular arts and cultural programmes. However, only the Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg continued to offer online guided tours after its visitors’ area reopened.
- Online arts and cultural activities were largely free of charge during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only the Museum of Fine Arts in Vienna developed a plan for generating revenue from digital arts and cultural activities.
- The Museum of Fine Arts’ strategy already included “new forms of promoting arts and culture” before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the province of Salzburg drew up its first strategy for museums in the province, which included the objective of digitalising collections. On that basis, the Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg developed its own strategy. The Vorarlberg Museum’s strategy dated back to 2014. A new draft strategy was adopted in May 2022.





- Unlike the Museum of Fine Arts in Vienna, the Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg and the Vorarlberg Museum have not yet monitored the implementation of their strategies. However, the Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg has defined measurable indicators, whereas the Vorarlberg Museum has not defined any indicators or targets.
- Due to restrictions on visiting from March 2020 onwards, participation in arts and cultural activities in their pre-pandemic forms decreased by up to 80 %.
- The Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg and the Vorarlberg Museum in Bregenz were unable to arrest the decline in participation with the new activities. By contrast, the Museum of Fine Arts in Vienna doubled participation with the new activities it offered from November 2020 onwards. However, the three museums differed in the way they counted the number of people tuning into web streams of arts and cultural events. Moreover, in the Vorarlberg Museum, differences could exist between the database of the cultural mediation department and the ticket system, e.g. due to more people taking part in guided tours and workshops than registered.
- Supporters of the Museum of Fine Arts in Vienna joined forces in a separate association called “Friends of the Museum of Fine Arts”. Members of the association were able to enjoy arts and cultural activities free of charge between 2018 and 2021, even though an internal audit report had previously noted that the museum benefited the association more than vice versa. The museum did not have any agreement with the association regarding association members’ use of the museum’s services.
- In their financial statements, the three museums recorded revenue and expenditure for arts and cultural activities as a whole, without recording digital activities separately.

What we concluded

While closed to visitors during the lockdowns, all three museums offered new forms of arts and cultural activities. After the lockdowns ended and their visitors’ areas reopened, the museums offered their activities in new formats, some of which remained free of charge.

We recommended that:

- The supervisory boards of the Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg and the Vorarlberg Museum in Bregenz should monitor the implementation of their respective strategies based on management reports and measurable indicators.
- All three museums should develop a common standard method of counting participants in digital arts and cultural events. In addition, the Vorarlberg Museum should investigate and regularly analyse discrepancies between the database of its arts and cultural activities department and its ticket system, in order to minimise the risk of corruption.
- In future agreements with Friends of the Museum of Fine Arts, the Vienna museum should ensure that the association provides greater benefit to the museum than vice versa. In particular, free arts and cultural activities for association members should also be included in the evaluation of such benefits, and should in future be covered by a written agreement.
- All three museums, in their financial statements, should break down revenue and expenditure for arts and cultural activities into digital and non-digital activities, in order to be able to assess cost-effectiveness.