

## The Rise and Development of Interactive Museum Exhibitions in Thailand (2000-2019)

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According to Kengkij Kitirianglarp (2015), in 2004, Thaksin Shinawatra’s government initiated a system to spur the creative economy by establishing the Thailand Creative & Design Center (TCDC), an organization to support and promote knowledge of the creative economy. A decade later, in 2014, Thailand’s creative industry was valued almost 50 billion THB, accounting for around 13% of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). Currently, as the second economy in Southeast Asia and creative industry hub of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), museum developments in Thailand have been taken to a new horizon. From year 2000 to present, there are many new museums opening rapidly under diverse partnerships model, and interestingly, these “new generation museums” are mostly focus on employing interactive and innovative exhibitions to engage and connect with their audiences.



Figure 1: Thailand Creative and Design Center, Museum Siam and Bangkok Art and Culture Centre.

According to Emeritus Professor Dr. Surapone Virulrak (Founding Director of Museum Siam), “museums in Thailand have traditionally been storage places for arts and cultural artifacts. However, in recent years, museums are entering into a new era, digital and multimedia has assumed an ever-greater presence in museums’ exhibitions”. New generation museums such as Thailand Creative and Design Center (2004), Museum Siam (2007), Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (2008), Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall (2010), National Science Museum’s Science Square (2010), ASEAN Cultural Centre (2015), and King Rama IX Museum (expected 2019) are no longer traditional show-and-tell spaces. Innovations in digital technology and interactive exhibitions with multi-layers of interactions have attentively designed to transform visitors’ expectations of their museum adventure. New interactive exhibitions approach such as interactive museum display case, multi-touch scanner table, augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technology, flexible context-management-system (CMS) and digital installations are, at the moment, strategically design and implemented by interactive museums in Thailand.



Figure 2: Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, National Science Museum’s Science Square, and ASEAN Cultural Centre.

In brief, over the last two decades, the digitally enhanced visual narrative and space have been introduced and practices by new museums in Thailand. Digital technologies are often brought into these museums as an innovative gimmick attempting to attract diverse groups of audiences, particularly toward younger audiences. As concluded by Emeritus Professor Dr. Surapone Virulrak, “museums with interactive exhibitions provide a new experience for their visitors in a positive and fun ways. They become a great place for visitors to spend time with family and friends”.



Figure 3: Interactive exhibitions at Thailand Creative and Design Center, Museum Siam and Bangkok Art and Culture Centre.

Literary, interactive exhibitions blurred and blended the fine line between education and entertainment experience in a dynamic way. Through the multi-sensory medium, interactive exhibitions engage and connect audiences’ participation by combining innovative formats and playful programs. For instance, the Museum Siam’s exhibition on “Gender Illumination 2018” highlights the nation’s diverse LGBT community through highly interactive installations comprising of multimedia. ASEAN Cultural Centre employed AR and VR interactive and technological display for its 6 galleries to exhibit information of ASEAN arts and culture. Meanwhile, as an interactive self-learning museum with state-of-the-art 4-D multimedia technologies, Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall exhibiting stories in many aspects of Bangkok city through five senses interactive approaches.



Figure 4: Interactive exhibitions at Rattanakosin Exhibition Hall, National Science Museum’s Science Square, and ASEAN Cultural Centre.

In brief, new generation museums in Thailand are increasingly employing interactive exhibits as a way to increase younger audience engagement. And the result seems reasonably promising. Today, among capital cities in Southeast Asia, Bangkok is transformed into a creative city with a promising number of interactive museums. In a foresee future, under the Thailand 4.0 innovative society development framework, more interactive museums for different groups of audiences, no doubt will be an important agenda on the nation’s new museums expansion.

### **Interactive Museums and Exhibitions’ Challenges and Opportunities**

With the emergence of new technologies and new media, museums have been attempting to further develop the form and content of their exhibits and installations in order to meet the visitor’s evermore

demanding requirements (Su Zheng et al., 2005). Therefore, in recent years, a trend of transforming static exhibition display into an interactive exhibition has shifted the global museum practices. Digital technologies and social media are spreading throughout the museum environment. For new generation museums, exhibitions have moved away from the passive display to dynamic edutainment installation. Immersive and interactive exhibitions with a touch of the latest digital technology have become a very important feature of museography in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

According to Mark Walhimer (2008), an interactive museum and its exhibitions are not only an event “occurring between a push button interactive” between the participants. It actually requires “open-ended” or “branching outcomes”. Literally, interactive museums and its exhibitions focus on the visitor experience, through facilitating the audience to investigate, they engage and understand the exhibitions through the freedom to create and explore. Thusly, an interactive museum's key mission needs to be creating interactive exhibits that can spark creativity, encourage social interaction, and inspire self-learning. Currently, in term of interactive technology development, several museums in Thailand seem able to grow along with the emergence of new digital technology in contemporary museum environments. However, on management and administrative aspects, the biggest challenge for interactive museums in Thailand now is, how to increase opportunities for interactivity and simulated inspiration of self-learning experiences for their “visitors” that is also a “creator” and “users”. According to Emeritus Professor Dr. Surapone Virulrak, to motivate audiences and stimulate their interests to the “age of participatory museum” is still considered a new concept in Thailand. Therefore, for interactive museum practitioners, there are still a lot of works that needs to be done, especially on museum communication, educational programs, and community engagement activities. Meanwhile, to become an effective “engaging museum”, a new approach to interactive exhibitions also needed a refresher in order to foster higher-level audience engagement and interaction. Furthermore, social media’s interactive activities are another aspect of interactive exhibitions that museums in Thailand cannot afford to oversight.

John Kueh (2016), in the digital era, visitors nowadays want to connect with the museum and with other visitors on a more personal level, cultivating a community that is uniquely connected in the digital world is something that was never possible before the widespread of social media sharing and other enabling technologies. For museums in Thailand, in term of “social media interactive engagement”, there is still a large room for improvement. Apart from the conventional digital platform such as an official website, many museums did not have an effective engaging social media to reach and establish their community. Although many museums operating their social and marketing communication on Facebook, YouTube channel, and Twitter, it remains only at the “post and share” dimension. A mature dynamic virtual museum community has yet been fully developed by many museums in Thailand.

In 2017, under the initiative of Thailand 4.0 development blueprint, the Ministry of Culture launched an online 3-D “Smart Museum” project to make 41 national museums’ 40,000 collections available online (Phatarawadee Phataranawik, 2017). According to the Culture Minister, Veera Rojpojanarat, via AR and VR interactive technology, the “Smart Museum,” pilot project aims to draw younger audiences’ participants into the conservation and promotion of traditional arts and culture. Pichaya Svasti (2017), the “Smart Museum” is a creative project in response to demands for information on art and culture and to raise public awareness of national heritage and Thai-ness in different aspects, and leading to sustainable social and cultural development. Hopefully, through this innovative initiation, will able to expand the horizon of an online platform for museums in Thailand, and subsequently develop a new and dynamic virtual museum community in the near future.

## Summary

David B. Arnold and Richard Griffiths (2007), interactive storytelling and gaming technologies have great edutainment potential for engaging visitors with museum exhibitions. From hands-on interactive to touch screen digital displays, interactive approach has become a very important component for museums exhibitions. As known by museum practitioners, today visitors frequently address being more engaged with the museum's exhibit when they have given the opportunities to have more participation during their visits. Thusly, interactive museums and exhibitions have gradually changed the contemporary museography practice. At the same time, the participatory museum with new creative approaches to involve their audiences will be another global trend that sifting the museum environment.

Towards the innovation of the museum's exhibition in Thailand, there are still many aspects that need to be improved and enhanced. Apart from the museums discussed above, due to various reasons, the application of the interactive display design is still not widely used as an exhibition approaches by most of the museums in Thailand. Under the framework of creative industries, sustainable development of museums will definitely be related to specialize in the innovative use of new media and technology. Thusly, new media museology and museography, no doubt will become the biggest challenge and an opportunity for many museums in Thailand in the future. Meanwhile, on digital humanity development aspect, without a strong digital platform such as "Museums in Short", "Heritage in Motion" and etc, it also limited the museums in Thailand and Southeast Asia region to establish a substantial digital network and archive. Therefore, to establish an online regional museum platform might be a workable solution to support the ASEAN's museum development from more integrated perspectives.

By and large, the museum's practitioners nowadays realized the important and positive impacts of using an interactive exhibition as a creative method to engage their audiences in a more exciting way. It is hoped that the practice of interactive museums and exhibitions will be more widely applied by museums in Thailand in order to draw the attractiveness of the future generations in appreciation of the national cultural heritage, and benefits the nation's creative industry sustainable development.

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