



Brave new art world: the app that brings galleries into your living room

ArtPassport lets you take a virtual tour of an exhibition from the comfort of your sofa - part a mission by two brothers to demystify the art world

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Imagine being able to view some of the art world's greatest masterpieces from the comfort of your own home - no more jostling to see past the heads of tourists or travelling halfway across the world to find that your gallery of choice is closed for a refurb.

Brothers Tristram and Patrick Fetherstonhaugh, the founders of online gallery guide GalleriesNow, are aiming to bring art exhibitions directly into people's living rooms with a new app offering 360-degree virtual experiences of real exhibitions.

The app, called ArtPassport, also provides detailed information about individual artists and their works for newcomers to the art world. They've provided virtual tours of recent exhibitions including Haroon Mirza and Jake and Dinos Chapman at the Frieze art fair in London this year.

They believe the technology could open up gallery spaces to people who normally may be put off by the art world's somewhat stuffy reputation.

“We want to demystify the art world,” Tristram says. “We want to break down the barriers that can make a gallery visit off-putting.”

The brothers had the idea three years ago while based in their studio close to the burgeoning Eastcastle Street gallery scene in Fitzrovia, central London. “We often found that we would miss shows we had wanted to see, not least as gallery exhibitions aren't normally on for that long,” he says. “We couldn't find a good resource to stay informed, so we started building one ourselves.”



Brothers Patrick and Tristram Fetherstonhaugh, founders of ArtPassport. Photograph: ArtPassport/Fetherstonhaugh

The technology works by taking 360-degree photo spheres - multiple images taken from a single viewpoint with a very wide-angle lens - which are then processed, joined together and viewed through a special interface, either via the app or on the website.

The resulting high-res images can be panned around on a computer, viewed on a phone, or slotted into a viewer for the full VR experience. Tristram says: “You can look around the exhibition space, up, down, behind you etc. There'll often be a number of 360-degrees around the exhibition, to give different perspectives, and we supplement them with pictures of the individual works.”



A virtual view of the Alicja Kwade exhibition at the Kamel Mennour gallery. Photograph: ArtPassport

It's a difficult time for galleries in this country. A recent report revealed that the number of visitors to the UK's major museums and galleries fell by nearly 1.4 million last year, the first decline in almost a decade - for which the Museums Association blamed security fears over terrorism, and a possible lack of blockbuster exhibitions.

But online platforms are poised to try and fill the breach, such as Artsy, an online art platform which has around 800,000 artworks, and comprehensive coverage of exhibitions, shows and fairs. Meanwhile, Google's Arts and Culture app offers access to more than 1,500 museums and libraries around the world and also offers 360-degree virtual reality tours of exhibitions. Earlier this year Facebook livestreamed a virtual exhibition of five versions of Van Gogh's Sunflowers hanging in galleries around the world.

GalleriesNow itself already has about 500 exhibitions at both commercial and public galleries and, according to Tristram, the technology could be a way to bring the crowds back - virtually.

"The art world is completely international. Amazing exhibitions are being put on all over the world and even the most dedicated art lover couldn't visit them all," he says.



The app can be slotted into a viewer for the full VR experience.
Photograph: Laurence J.W. Cannings/Laurence J.W. Cannings

"Our technology means that literally thousands of people view each exhibition - an order of magnitude more than can make a physical visit, and that of course is what the gallery, artist and pretty much everybody really wants."

Some people aren't convinced that an app can ever truly replace the real thing however. Pragya Agarwal, a spatial scientist and architect who runs social enterprise the Art Tiffin, believes the virtual experience is no replacement for a visit to a gallery. "A museum or an art gallery visit is characterised by a real-life experience and engaging all our senses rather than the visual alone," she says.

"Artworks cannot be completely appreciated in isolation, they have to be viewed within the context of other art pieces in the gallery to fully appreciate their scale, colour and composition.

"With apps, there is little perceptual and psychological immersion and although there is video realism, there is no social realism."

Nonetheless, the ArtPassport app is proving popular. After appearing on iTunes in May, its developers say it got 25,000 downloads in the first week and has now had more than 40,000 downloads.

Creative consultant Stuart Goulden argues that new technology such as this will help democratise the art world. He says: "I'm all for art without boundaries. New technologies are advancing the art of storytelling and inviting younger and more diverse audiences into a world that might have previously seemed walled."

Goulden says that digital platforms can also broaden the scope for artists as well as galleries. "Technology can enable a new breed of artist to express themselves in new ways, beam installations to the most unlikely of settings and add an entirely new dimension to the gallery

experience. The possibilities are endless. And for that reason I'd say there's never been a more exciting time to be an artist or a gallery."

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