



PART 2

Read the text below and answer questions 14–26.

MUSEUMS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: FROM PRESERVATION TO PARTICIPATION

For much of their modern history, museums have been defined by custodianship: they collect objects, conserve them, and present carefully curated narratives that claim authority over how the past should be understood. Digital technology has not eliminated these core functions, but it has widened the boundaries of what “the museum” can be. Collections can now be encountered far beyond the gallery, and the relationship between institution and audience is increasingly shaped through screens, databases, and networked platforms. This shift raises practical questions—about access, resources, and design—but also theoretical ones, including who produces knowledge, what counts as authenticity, and whether a digital encounter can carry the same cultural force as standing before an original object.

Early digitisation efforts were largely managerial and preservational. High-resolution photography, 3D scanning, and collection-management systems allow institutions to record artefacts, track condition changes, and standardise metadata for search and comparison. In conservation terms, digital capture can reduce physical handling of fragile items and support long-term planning by providing reference images and measurements. For researchers, searchable databases make it easier to identify related objects held across different museums, potentially correcting the fragmentation created by earlier collecting practices. Yet digitisation is not neutral: decisions about what to photograph first, what language to use in descriptions, and which categories structure a database all reflect institutional priorities and inherited assumptions.

As more museums placed collection records online, digitisation became a public-facing project rather than an internal archive. Online catalogues and virtual collections can be transformative for teachers, students, and curious audiences who cannot travel to major cultural centres. However, access to images is not the same as access to meaning. Without interpretive framing—context, explanatory labels, and careful description—online browsing can become confusing, and sometimes misleading. A photograph may flatten scale; a decontextualised object may appear to be a purely aesthetic “artwork” rather than a ritual tool, a funerary item, or evidence of social conflict. In other words, digital availability can amplify misunderstanding if interpretation does not travel with the image.

These tensions relate to a long-standing debate about authenticity, famously addressed by Walter Benjamin in his discussion of the artwork’s “aura.” Benjamin argued that an original object possesses a unique presence tied to its singular history, location, and material



continuity—qualities that reproduction cannot fully replicate. Digital copies intensify this problem because they are not merely reproductions but endlessly shareable files, detached from place and physical encounter. Some critics therefore claim that digital museum experiences can only offer informational value, not the affective weight or immediacy associated with originals. Others respond that the aura is not simply lost but reconfigured: digital tools can reveal details invisible to the naked eye, reconstruct damaged contexts, and create new forms of engagement. The question becomes less about whether the digital can replace the original and more about what kind of encounter each medium makes possible.

In parallel, museum practice has shifted from object-centred authority toward visitor-centred participation, an orientation often associated with “new museology.” Digital platforms accelerate this transition by allowing audiences to comment, tag, and contribute knowledge. Some institutions invite communities connected to collections to co-write interpretations, produce digital exhibitions, or supply oral histories that challenge older labels. Crowdsourcing projects can help identify people and places in historic photographs, while participatory archives can include perspectives previously excluded from official narratives. Yet participation also disrupts traditional hierarchies: if many voices contribute, whose knowledge is treated as legitimate, and who decides what becomes part of the record? Participatory design can democratise interpretation, but it can also generate conflict, require moderation, and expose disagreements that curators once controlled through institutional voice.

Social media further complicates authority. Museums can communicate in informal tones, respond quickly to current events, and reach audiences who might never enter the building. At the same time, the logic of viral attention encourages simplification: complex objects may be reduced to shareable fragments, and nuance can be squeezed into short captions. When heritage becomes “content,” the risk is that popularity substitutes for significance. Digital analytics reinforce this tension. Metrics can show which pages are ignored, which videos are replayed, and which audiences are underserved, enabling better design decisions and targeted outreach. But cultural engagement cannot be fully captured by clicks and dwell time, and the most measurable forms of attention may not align with educational or scholarly value.

The promise of digital access is also unevenly distributed. The digital divide is not only about internet availability but also about devices, language, disability access, and digital literacy. A high-quality online archive may exist, yet remain unusable for communities lacking stable connectivity or the skills to navigate complex interfaces. If digitisation is presented as a universal solution, it can obscure these inequalities and produce a new



form of exclusion: heritage becomes “open” in principle while remaining inaccessible in practice. Addressing this requires investment in usability, multilingual interpretation, community training, and design that treats digital participation as a social infrastructure rather than a technical add-on.

Ethics have become more visible as collections move online. Open-access policies can support education and creative reuse, but unrestricted circulation may conflict with cultural protocols, especially for sacred items, human remains, or images tied to restricted knowledge. Copyright and licensing practices can also limit access, creating tension between legal control and public mission. In response, some museums are developing tiered approaches that distinguish between what is legally shareable and what is ethically appropriate to share. These debates connect to digital restitution: the “virtual return” of objects through scans, 3D models, or shared databases. Digital restitution can support research and learning and may complement physical returns or long-term loans, but it cannot satisfy every claim—particularly where cultural responsibilities require the physical presence of an object.

In the digital age, then, museums remain spaces of preservation, but they are also becoming platforms where meaning is negotiated with the public. The most credible approaches tend to combine technical innovation with careful interpretation, attention to inequality, and clear ethical policy. Rather than asking whether technology will replace museums, a more productive question is how museums can use digital tools to widen access while maintaining scholarly rigour, respecting cultural rights, and acknowledging that participation changes not only audiences but institutional authority itself.

Questions 14–19

Select the correct answer.

14 How has digital technology changed the traditional role of museums?

- A** It has made the care of collections primarily dependent on creating digital substitutes for physical objects.
- B** It has extended access and participation beyond galleries while introducing new questions about authority and authenticity.
- C** It has broadened the reach of collections without significantly changing the relationship between institutions and audiences.
- D** It has shifted responsibility for producing museum knowledge mainly from curators to database designers.

15 How did early digitisation assist museums in caring for collections?



A It created records that could reduce handling and help institutions monitor objects over time.

B It enabled museums to handle fragile objects more frequently without increasing the risk of damage.

C It physically reunited related artefacts from different museums so that researchers could compare them.

D It standardised descriptions in ways that removed inherited assumptions from cataloguing.

16 Why can simply making collection images available online be insufficient?

A Digital photographs cannot reveal details that are difficult to observe during a physical visit.

B Online databases prevent users from comparing related objects held in different institutions.

C Without adequate context and explanation, viewers may misunderstand an object's significance.

D Public catalogues cannot indicate whether an object originally had a ritual or funerary purpose.

17 What question does Benjamin's concept of "aura" raise in relation to digital museums?

A Whether digital enhancement can reveal aspects of an object that physical viewing may not show.

B Whether virtual reconstruction can restore the damaged surroundings in which an object once existed.

C Whether widely shareable files create a more immediate experience than encountering physical objects.

D Whether reproduction can convey the singular presence associated with an original object.

18 What difficulty can arise when museums invite wider public participation in interpretation?

A Community contributors may be unable to challenge descriptions previously written by museum staff.

B Institutions must negotiate competing claims about whose knowledge should enter the official record.

C Crowdsourcing may identify details in historic photographs but cannot add new perspectives to collections.



D Participatory platforms prevent museums from moderating disagreements among contributors.

19 What tension is associated with social media and digital analytics?

A They can provide useful information about audiences while encouraging attention to popularity and easily measured engagement.

B They can extend museums' reach while providing no evidence about which audiences remain underserved.

C They encourage more nuanced explanations because complex objects receive greater attention in short-form content.

D They measure educational and cultural value more reliably than clicks or viewing time.

Questions 20–23

Complete the summary below. Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the text for each answer.

Digitisation, access and ethical limits

Early digitisation supported museums' internal administration and was therefore partly a

20 activity. When objects are encountered online, their physical size may be difficult to judge because a photograph can flatten **21**, making interpretation more difficult. The digital divide includes not only internet availability but also devices, language, disability access and digital **22** In addition, sharing sacred or restricted materials may disregard community rules known as cultural **23**

Questions 24–26

Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

24 The passage claims that digital copies completely preserve an object's "aura" in Benjamin's sense.

25 The passage states that museums using social media have experienced a measurable increase in visits to their physical buildings.

26 The passage suggests that digital restitution can support learning but may not replace physical return in all cases.

Answer Key

14. B



15. A

16. C

17. D

18. B

19. A

20. managerial

21. scale

22. literacy

23. protocols

24. FALSE

25. NOT GIVEN

26. TRUE