

July 29, 2021 Muse-ings

If you have had a training, work, or job search or hiring experience that you think could benefit others, propose a Muse-ing by sending us a short one-paragraph email that describes your angle at museumstudies@udel.edu. Commentaries no longer than 600 words.

This month's Muse-ing explores how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected museums and related job markets outside the U.S. Responses are excerpted from an interview with Betty Karanja, Senior Curator at National Museums of Kenya's Karen Blixen House on the outskirts of Nairobi, and Alba Campo Rosillo, Terra Foundation Research Fellow at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid.

How has the pandemic affected your museum's operations?

Betty: We closed on March 16, 2020 by government directive, and remained closed until September. Tourists made up 80- or 90-percent of our visitation, with schools making up much of the rest, and both travel and schools have been shut down most of this time, so we have turned to digital programming and marketing to sensitize the community to the museum. There was this notion in the local community (because Karen Blixen was the author of *Out of Africa*) that it is a White person's place. So to entice local visitation we have introduced an arts program that features a facilitator directing you on how to paint, and we have used digital outreach on Facebook and Instagram targeting 18-35 year-olds to create an awareness of Karen's love for her African staff and fact that the neighbourhood is named after her. Visitation has increased and students just went back to school so hopefully that will pick up in the coming year.

Alba: Our visitation also dropped, from about 78,000 per month in February 2020 to 29,000 per month when we first reopened in June 2020, but now it's back up to about 50,000 per month. We also rely on tourists and schools, and turned to digital programming. We have a large membership and our digital programs have gotten 600-800 viewers each time. Our social media manager has become a leader of our marketing division now, because of how important Instagram and social media became.

Much of this will sound similar to our U.S. readers. But has the pandemic affected museum staff in similar ways? Have there been layoffs and closures?

Betty: No one was actually laid off but everyone was psychologically affected. Some got sick or lost family, and economic backlash meant that living costs went up but salaries didn't. Even our casual (part-time) staff were still on duty. We took advantage of the closure and did a lot of renovations like repainting our galleries, electrical work, and digitizing most of our artifacts now housed on Google Arts and Culture. We were also lucky to have had government support to carry us over because our revenues alone would not have done it.

Alba: No permanent staff has been fired and two actually have been hired, but nationwide in Spain there were temporary or contracted staff that were let go, so now there's about 6% less cultural sector workers but more work to do! Part of that is our incredibly intense exhibit

schedule. Because there is some private and also public support, the (Museo) Thyssen puts on a lot of exhibits and programs in any given year.

What does all this mean for the job market new graduates and interns are entering?

Betty: We have a general government hiring freeze so there are some casual positions but none for permanent staff. We also take a lot of attachments (interns), who do not get paid but actually pay a fee to us. Most of them request us to extend their attachment, which we do for a few weeks.

Alba: There's a high demand for internships in the museum because of the institution's high profile in the cultural sector. Even though the internships are unpaid, most interns ask for extensions. But because most museums are national, employees need to take exams and there were no exams offered during the pandemic, so there's a whole class or two of people who haven't even had the chance to take their exams, without which they cannot get a permanent position.