

## Museums and the Elderly. What Can We Do?

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### Abstract

This article is a compilation of activities for the elderly carried out since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**“The museum is approaching,” “Museums just a click away,” “Museums visit you,” “Museums are waiting for you,” “Elderly Art,” “With or without sugar,” “CulturalMENT Project,” “Welcoming the Elderly,” (DIM 2021), “Contrast sessions for projects aimed at the elderly.”**

These activities have been organized by different entities such as Apropa Cultura, the Museums and Accessibility Working Group, the Barcelona City Council, the Public Health Agency of the Barcelona City Council, the Ministry of Culture of the Government of Catalonia, the Management of the Provincial Council of Barcelona, and the Reflection Group of Activities and Publics.

### Background

Until 2019-20, museums in general organized few activities and devoted few resources to the elderly segment of their public. However, this group is the one that visits museums the most, and the one that has the most time to do so.

In March 2020, after the appearance of Covid-19, an important change occurred: all social activity stopped. As days passed, it became clear that this incident would lead to changes in the following months both in the cultural activity—in this case, in visits to museums, which, like other facilities, were forced to close and to communicate digitally—and in the social and recreational activity of the elderly.

After five months of hard lockdown (from March to July 2020), one of the groups most punished by the pandemic was that of the users of nursing homes, where their daily life was significantly altered, as well as that of the users of day centers, which closed and therefore stopped their activities.

During these months, from the Museums and Accessibility Working Group we considered how to turn the situation around. Seeing that they could not visit museums, we asked ourselves how could we approach nursing homes and the elderly people locked at home ourselves, with the fundamental aim of alleviating as much as possible a situation of disconnection, isolation and lack of social interaction that affected the emotional state of the elderly in a very worrying way.

This article compiles the activities that arose from this situation, and that have been carried out by museums and

designed for the elderly since the beginning of the pandemic caused by the Covid-19, based on the experiences we took part in:

—“The museum is approaching.”

—“Museums just a click away.”

—“Museums visit you.”

—“Museums are waiting for you.”

—“Elderly Art.”

—“With or without sugar.”

—“CulturaMENT Project.”

—“Welcoming the Elderly (DIM 2021).”

—“Contrast sessions for projects aimed at the elderly.”

All these activities were organized in collaboration with different entities: Apropa Cultura, the Museums and Accessibility Working Group, the Institute of Social Services of the Barcelona City Council, the Public Health Agency of the Barcelona City Council, the Museums Service and Protection of Movable Property of the Catalan Government’s Ministry of Culture, the Management of the Barcelona Provincial Council and the Reflection Group of Activities and Publics of Museums.

## The first activities

The first activity that came up and could be carried out was “**The museum is approaching,**” when the Municipal Institute of Social Services (IMSS) of the Barcelona City Council asked Apropa Cultura for an emergency action for the four municipal nursing homes to which they are affiliated to offer them cultural activities. From the beginning, three goals were set—that it mainly helped to improve the mood of users, that it worked on the cognitive aspect, and that it favored interpersonal relationships.

Apropa Cultura proposed undertaking face-to-face visits to those nursing homes with activities organized by museums. So, it requested sessions based on art to two institutions in Barcelona—the National Art Museum of Catalonia and the Contemporary Culture Center of Barcelona. A pilot test set off in September 2020 with a good response from users. After confirming that it was a positive experience based on the results of an evaluation with the NPT-ES scale (Non Pharmacological Therapy Experience Scale [Muñiz, Olazarán, Lago and Peña-Casanova, 2011]), the initiative was extended to other museums—first to the Picasso Museum in Barcelona—and from February 2021 on the program was to be called “**The museum is approaching.**” Now, it would be organized with the incorporation of the museums of Natural Sciences of Barcelona, Ethnology, History of Barcelona, Design, Frederic Marés, Antoni Tàpies Foundation and Suñol Foundation. The museums of Barcelona that joined the program were the Museum of Natural Sciences, the Ethnological Museum, the History Museum, the Design Museum, Frederic Marés Museum, the Antoni Tàpies Foundation and the Suñol Foundation. Each museum put forward a proposal for intervention on its programming: the permanent collection, a temporary exhibition, or an action on the building or about an artist. The program continued throughout 2021, with the addition of more nursing homes. During 2022, the City Council maintained its support, and the Montjuïc Castle was added to the list of museums that had already participated in the program. With the desire to expand the cultural programming for the nursing homes, a new program was launched incorporating another artistic discipline—dance.

At the same time, during the strictest lockdown, museum staff continued to work at the monthly meetings of the Museums and Accessibility Working Group, where a group of professionals from museums and cultural institutions met to share knowledge and resources, raise doubts, promote common strategies, raise awareness and work in a

network on accessibility issues. During these months, two proposals for online activities aimed at the elderly were agreed upon to be put into practice.

At that time, all museums were already undertaking and planning activities based on platforms such as Zoom, Teams and Google Meet, among others. All museums were learning how to plan and organize online activities. Most of them had little to no previous experience in this area, and there were many unknowns about their viability, especially since the targeted public was not young. They did not know if the elderly people for whom the activities were intended would have the tools to use them, at a technical, learning and user level.

Two final proposals were finally prepared and carried out by the Museums and Accessibility Working Group.

The first one was **“Museums just a click away.”** This activity arose from the interest of the Alzheimer’s Family Association of Barcelona (AFAB) in being able to offer some activity to their users, and it asked the CCCB to carry out an online activity. After collaborating together for ten years in the Alzheimer’s program of the CCCB, the AFAB wanted to continue offering activities. Thanks to their conviction, it was decided to do a pilot test, and the CCCB explained the exhibition “William Kentridge. That Which is Not drawn,” with such a satisfactory result that they were encouraged to propose to other museums of the Museums and Accessibility Working Group to join the initiative with the goal that the activities of the museums reached directly the elderly people who went to the AFAB day center 1 and 2 during the Covid-19 lockdown.

The “Museums just a click away” program is carried out from February to July 2021, and ten museums take part in it: the Maritime Museum, the Palau Güell, the Antoni Tàpies Foundation, the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site, the Episcopal Museum of Vic, the Catalonia Railway Museum, the National Art Museum of Catalonia, the Ceramic Museum La Rajoleta, the Monastery of Pedralbes and the Museum of Natural Sciences. In total, twenty sessions were held between the two AFAB headquarters, reaching more than two hundred users.

The second activity that emerged from the Museums and Accessibility Working Group, this time in collaboration with the City Council’s Department for the Promotion of the Elderly and the Museums Service and Protection of Movable Property of the Catalan Government’s Department of Culture, is the cycle of online activities **“Museums visit you.”** This program allows museums to enter the homes of elderly people who live alone and are users of the BCN Ties (Vincles BCN) service or of the city’s nursing homes. It is a very diverse proposal, with activities that include virtual visits to museums, conversations around photographic images, objects and works that are part of their collections, or trips to the memories of the elderly. The aim of the cycle was to make elderly people who could not leave their homes due to the pandemic have a good time with themes of a cultural background.

Sessions through the BCN Ties service took place every Wednesday at 11 am from February to June 2021. Some of the proposals of this initiative were a walk through the history of the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site sharing the memories and emotions caused by the photographs of Joaquim Gomis (exhibited at the Miró Foundation), debating the natural and everyday elements that make up the collection of the Museum of Natural Sciences of Barcelona, or visiting the secret spaces of the Monastery of Pedralbes.

Regarding the sessions intended for the users of the nursing homes, the project started as an offer of telematic activity in the facilities of the Gràcia district, with the idea of extending them to more districts of the city. The only requirement to participate was to have an electronic device and a functioning connection. Fourteen museums participated and fourteen sessions were held (one per museum), and there were almost a hundred attendees. The success in participation, as well as the positive reviews by the participants and the results of the evaluation, encouraged us to offer a new edition that incorporated new institutions and combined the online with the face-to-face format.

This program continued on in 2022. **“Museums are waiting for you”** is the name of its second edition held from February to July 2022 and aimed at users of the BCN Ties service and of the nursing homes in the districts of Sarrià-Sant Gervasi and L’Eixample in Barcelona. It is aimed at the elderly in the city with the goal of showing them that museums are not elitist spaces reserved for certain groups, but spaces where they can learn, have fun and socialize with other people too.

In both editions, eighteen museums participated (nine from Barcelona and nine more from outside the city), with four traveling exhibitions from the Local Museums Network (XML) of the Barcelona Provincial Council: The Art Museum of Cerdanyola, the Antoni Tàpies Foundation, the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site, the Episcopal Museum of Vic, the Catalonia Railway Museum, the National Art Museum of Catalonia, the Maritime Museum, the Museum of Natural Sciences, the Joan Miró Foundation, the Suñol Foundation, the Olympic and Sport Museum, Sitges Museums, the Contemporary Culture Center of Barcelona, the Marès Lace Museum in Arenys de Mar (XML), the Printing Museum of Premià de Mar (XML), the Molí d'en Rata Interpretation Center in Ripollet (from the XML), the Castellbisbal Peasantry Museum (XML), and the Enrajolada House-Museum in Martorell (XML). The exhibitions were: “The Naked Man,” “Proximity Summer Vacation,” “Caput aut navis” and “What Do We Eat Today?”

Most institutions offer a virtual session and a face-to-face visit to their facilities. To sum up, the cycle consists of seventeen online visits and nineteen face-to-face ones. Sessions do not follow a specific thread, but each museum makes its own proposal: virtual visits, workshops with old photographs, dialogue through the works or the collections, and so on. However, all visits (both virtual and face-to-face) share the characteristic feature of being very participatory and promoting conversation between participants.

## Evaluations of the activities

An evaluation has been carried out in two of these programs, pending publication. One for “Museums visit you” by Andrea Granell (DIDPATRI Didactic and Heritage research group of the University of Barcelona) and Mònica Molina (TUDISTAR research group of the Autonomous University of Barcelona), and one more for “Museums just a click away” by Teresa Pérez (psychiatrist and coordinator of the CCCB, Alzheimer program, from 2010 to 2021), Pilar Aceituno (occupational therapist at the Alzheimer’s Family Association of Barcelona, AFAB I and AFAB II), and Susana Pérez (PhD in Psychology from Ramon Llull University).

The evaluations of these two online projects have made it possible to verify that this format works. It allows user participation, and emotional moments can be generated even through the screens. While the value of face-to-face visits is irreplaceable, virtual visits make it possible to reach seniors who, even before the pandemic, had some difficulties leaving the house and suffered from unwanted loneliness. The presence of a therapist or facilitator, as a reference person for the elderly and a support figure for museum professionals, is essential for a smooth functioning of online sessions.

## Expanding the offer

During 2021 new projects were launched to expand the available offer. These complemented and expanded the scope of the first ones.

Perhaps the most popular one was **“Welcoming the Elderly (DIM 2021).”** As part of the International Museum Day 2021 (DIM), the Museums Service and Protection of Movable Property of the Ministry of Culture encouraged museums to organize activities with people suffering from dementia.

The Museums Service reached out to Catalan museums to invite their nearby elderly communities or those they usually dealt with to return to museums and to welcome them in a special way.

Sixty museum facilities in Catalonia joined the initiative and organized special activities for stable groups of elderly people. To properly carry out the activity, an online training session was organized (by Teresa Pérez and Janina Berzosa) in which advice and recommendations were given to choose an activity, prepare the reception and receive this group in the best possible way.

Among the organized activities, some such as “The Museum is for Everybody!” of the Museum of Alcover stand out. This one proposes a guided tour and a conversation between users of the Alcover Day Center and Catalan language students from the Fonts del Glorieta Institute in Alcover to share experiences and memories and confront

intergenerational views; a show by the Museu d'Arenys de Mar that offered a storytelling workshop with a local storyteller in the municipal nursing home around the objects of the local collection to work on aspects of memory and offer the elderly the possibility to reminisce festivals, trades and characters of local life; the virtual activity "Shared Memories" of the Joan Miró Foundation, which awakened the memories and stories of the elderly through the visualization of images; or the tour through the old district of Vielha "Es carrers des nòsti pairs-sénhers," organized by the Musèu dera Val d'Aran.

A special mention must be made of the initiative by Museums of Olot, a project that they introduced in multiple facilities for the elderly in the city. For starters, thirteen users visited during the month of April 2021 the museum warehouses, where they chose a particular piece. Later, the museum technicians took it to their residence, where they both coexisted for more than twenty-four hours. In this period of time, the photographer Pep Sau visited users and photographed them with their artwork. The result could be seen in large canvases installed on the different facades of the Hospice La Caritat and the Montsacopa nursing home.

A second project is the one proposed by the Culture Service Management of the Barcelona Provincial Council to promote the organization of cultural activities aimed at elderly people with mental illnesses (involving dementia) and their relatives and caretakers. The **"CulturaMENT Project"** was registered among the twenty-one transformative projects of the Action Plan of the Barcelona Provincial Council, aligned with the 2030 Agenda.

It started in July 2021 with a study on the situation of the cultural activities that took place in the demarcation of Barcelona before the pandemic, and from 1 to 15 November a pilot test was carried out, where museums received economic aid and training to support professionals in city councils from twelve different municipalities, one from each region: Berga, Castellarçol, Igualada, Llinars del Vallès, Manresa, Montcada i Reixac, Sant Boi de Llobregat, Santa Coloma de Gramenet, Tordera, Vic, Vilafranca del Penedès, and Vilanova i la Geltrú.

The fields of action were multidisciplinary—museums, music, theatre, dance, visual arts, libraries and cinema. The councilors involved in each case were from the Culture and Social Services departments.

The participating museums with different proposals were: The Leather Museum of Igualada and the County of Anoia, the Manresa Casino Cultural Center, the Manresa Casino Cultural Center, the Sant Boi Can Castells Art Center, the Can Sisteré Contemporary Art Center and the Torre Balldovina Museum in Santa Coloma de Gramenet, the Episcopal Museum of Vic, the Vinseum on Vilafranca del Penedès, and the La Sala in Vilanova i la Geltrú. This resource is currently part of the service catalog of the Barcelona Provincial Council.

The third project is the one led by the Barcelona Public Health Agency (ASPB), where elderly people participate in cultural workshops while an evaluation was carried out on which improvements emerged of the participation in such workshops with the aim of alleviating unwanted loneliness for these people, which was exacerbated by the pandemic. This **"Elderly Art"** project was prepared during 2020 and 2021, and started to be implemented in the spring of 2022.

It is a pilot test aimed at demonstrating the benefits that art brings to the health of the elderly. "When someone goes to the doctor, in addition to relevant drugs, cultural prescription can alleviate their discomfort," states Rosa Puigpinós, the project coordinator. Going to the doctor and leaving their office with a prescription to visit a museum may seem like a novelty. In addition to increasing the visibility of cultural heritage and artistic appreciation, art can improve emotional well-being and prevent loneliness for many elderly people who still do not dare to go outside as a result of the pandemic.

To find these people, the ASPB works actively with primary healthcare centers, the social services and active institutions and entities such as neighborhood centers and civic centers.

Users must be over seventy years old and come from certain neighborhoods: Porta or Prosperitat, in the Nou Barris district; Vila de Gràcia-Camp d'en Grassot and La Salut, in the Gràcia district; and Montbau-Vall d'Hebron and Guinardó-Baix Guinardó, in the Horta-Guinardó district. This activity consists in the fact that users go to a museum or art center for ten weeks to do a program of workshops and activities that has been prepared. Six museums and art centers are involved in this project: The National Art Museum of Catalonia, the Barcelona Museum of

Contemporary Art, the CCCB, the Picasso Museum, the CaixaForum, and the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site.

Some participants commented: “For me, it means being able to leave the house, meeting people and learning new things. In short—it means enjoying;” “At first they didn’t know each other, and now they stay to chat from time to time;” “For me it’s very gratifying, we’ve established a strong close relationship after a few weeks.” All the members of each group come from the same neighborhood, and the initiative is carried out with the intention of promoting social relations between people who suffer from unwanted loneliness.

A fourth project is the one created by an activities and publics think tank, a group made up of ten museums in Barcelona that prepares a set of visits for elderly people who are interested in visiting museums. In March and April 2022, a pilot test of the **“With or without sugar”** project will be launched. Elderly people sign up independently and a guided visit of forty-five minutes is offered, followed by an informal meeting of another forty-five minutes in a coffee break format at a cost of 5 euros

In the first edition, the Maritime Museum of Barcelona, the Contemporary Culture Center of Barcelona, the Joan Miró Foundation, the Archaeological Museum of Catalonia, the National Art Museum of Catalonia, the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art, the Picasso Museum, the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site, the Museum of Natural Sciences and the Botanical Garden are participating.

And finally, as a consolidation of some of the projects, the Museums Service and Protection of Movable Property of the Ministry of Culture organizes the **“Contrast Sessions,”** which were already held to help museums in different areas and now will be specific for projects aimed at the elderly. During 2022, the Museums Service proposes to receive training and advice to design visits and activities for the elderly. The Girona History Museum, Banyoles Museums, the Museum of the Mediterranean (Torroella de Montgrí), the Cambrils Museum, Reus Museums, and the Toy Museum of Catalonia (Figueres) participated in these sessions.

## Conclusions

One of the segments of the public that is growing the most in our population is that of the elderly. Most have good physical and cognitive conditions, which allow them to access museums independently, as they are safe and comfortable spaces, but there is an increasing number of older people who have more difficulties. Museums have learned how to organize activities aimed at people who have some degree of dementia and how to approach those who are socially isolated or have difficulties leaving their nursing homes.

Museums sought solutions to continue carrying out activities at a difficult time, such as the emergence of Covid-19, and turned their attention to the elderly who needed them. Now, it can be confirmed that their proposals have turned out to be an option that will be incorporated into their usual programming. During this time, new projects have been created in which different museums participated in multiple themes and areas with other cultural institutions and the healthcare and social affairs sectors. A working relationship has begun between culture, social affairs and healthcare, which should be intensified in the immediate future until it forms a basic triad for the elderly group.

Some of their projects have shown that the digital gap of the elderly group is a reality, which can be overcome with the help of a mediator. In short, technology does not have to be an impediment for the elderly. In the midst of recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, attendance must continue to be the priority in the range of activities in museums. It is worth saying that for certain groups of elderly people, such as those admitted to nursing homes or at home but with limited mobility, online activities are a real option, and that in some cases they can be combined with visits to museums.

These projects pushed all the parties involved to rethink what was already known, to ask new questions, and to invite a search for resources in order to find new approaches.

(This article had the collaboration of Janina Berzosa.)



Activity at the Fort Pienc residence. Photographer  
Joan Monfort

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