



**Museums in the
MENA Region
Journal**



**MUSEUMS
& THE
DIGITAL EXPERIENCE**

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Cover Image: Boutros and Salvia Touma's engagement, Santiago, 18 September 1952. The Collection of Khalil Touma - Digital Archives Project / The Palestinian Museum.

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MANAL ATAYA

Director General of Sharjah Museums Authority

INTRODUCTION

In order to ensure that we remain accessible and to meet the needs of our audiences, Sharjah Museums Authority (SMA) responded with swift action and creativity to tackle the challenges posed by the global pandemic that left all sectors, including the cultural and art scene in uncertainty and pressure to rethink their engagement with the public.

SMA successfully pivoted quickly and attracted new virtual visitors, expanding its digital footprint by leveraging and developing its existing digital platforms to launch virtual tours, making number of its exhibitions and collections available online, and roll out numerous online workshops, seminars and activities for all age groups.

With a stronger digital presence, our collections, exhibitions such as Barjeel Foundation's 'A Century in Flux', and Ethiopian photographer Aida Muluneh's 'Homebound: A Journey in Photography', and our family programs were no longer confined to the walls, but rather made their way to the homes of our local and international audiences.

To this point, I feel I am obliged to commend the authority's and its museums' ability to rapidly adapt to the changing conditions the world has witnessed and successfully come up with solutions to continue to present content that delivers knowledge to the people. There is still much to learn and we do not have all the answers, but this is why sharing the stories of others in this journal is so critical to gain insight and learn ways in which we may overcome challenges facing us and others.

In this third edition of Museums in the MENA Region Journal, we shed light on some of the measures and practices undertaken by SMA and museums across the region, to help mitigate the impact of the pandemic and stay relevant to their local communities. As always, we hope this journal acts to inspire, make connections and encourage solution-based thinking to our family of museums in the Arab world.



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ABOUT US

David Joseph Wrisley is Associate Professor of Digital Humanities at NYU Abu Dhabi. His research interests include comparative approaches to medieval literature in European languages and Arabic, digital spatial approaches to corpora, artificial intelligence for handwritten text recognition in different writing systems, and open knowledge community building in the Middle East, where he has lived and researched since 2002.



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Estelle Guéville is Assistant Researcher at Louvre Abu Dhabi. In 2016, she joined the France-Museums Agency for the Louvre Abu Dhabi project, where she participated in the opening of the museum as Assistant Curator. In July 2018, she joined the Louvre Abu Dhabi in the new "Research and Development" Department, where she is helping to develop academic research in several fields, including research on medieval collections using digital methods.



Niccolò Acram Cappelletto

Niccolò Acram Cappelletto graduated from NYU Abu Dhabi in 2021 with a degree in Art and Art History. Currently, he is a Post-Graduate Research Fellow at NYU Abu Dhabi in the Dhakira Center for Heritage Studies. After joining the NYUAD Art Gallery as a Student Curatorial Assistant for three years, he turned to research, focusing on museum studies, cultural heritage, and curation. He is interested in issues of inclusivity in institutions, new trajectories of art history, and intersections between heritage and museum disciplines.

CREATING NEW AUDIENCES FOR DIGITAL OBJECTS THROUGH MUSEUM-UNIVERSITY COLLABORATION

With the closure of artistic and cultural institutions in 2020 due to the global pandemic, museums witnessed serious challenges in material and physical research of the objects in their collections. By experimenting with new digital forms across their professional activities—digitization of museum objects, modes of communication, dissemination of research results online in conferences and professional webinars—researchers and cultural practitioners have made virtue out of necessity.

This article discusses the Paris Bible Project (PBP), an initiative that started during the pandemic between the Louvre Abu Dhabi (LAD) and New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), with a professional relationship between researchers on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi, turned virtual. This inter-institutional partnership has proven to be a vibrant scholarly exchange, with a growing list of participation in international conferences and papers. In this article, we argue that by studying digitized objects from the museum, not only do researchers break new ground in their fields of study, but the museum objects they study also gain new audiences.

The PBP aims to understand the medieval Bible in Europe, and the project's goals have important implications for the way that research on written culture might be studied in the future. The written documents of interest to us are known as "Paris Bibles," a product of the development of universities in the beginning of the 13th century in Europe. They were produced following the establishment of the University of Paris, and their production and diffusion are linked to how the biblical books were revised, organized, and translated.

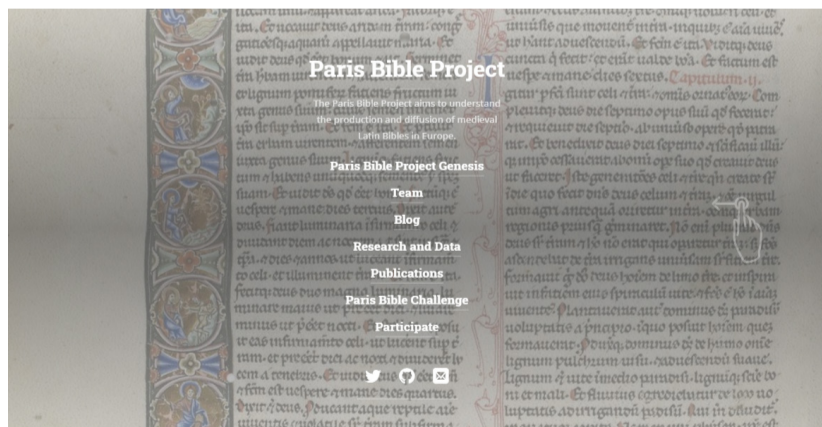


Figure 1. The Paris Bible Project (PBP) website (<https://parisbible.github.io>) in June 2020. Manuscript: Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. Latin 40 - Source gallica.bnf.fr

The spread of this new version across Europe established the Paris Bible as a veritable genre, with a very large number of manuscripts produced over two centuries. We know that they were intended for individual rather than institutional use, and as the Bible became smaller and more portable, one of their key features was the presence

of abbreviations and special ways of lettering (Ruzzier, 2010). The reason that this cultural phenomenon from a faraway time and place is important to Saadiyat Island lies in the fact that the PBP is studying the digitized version of the LAD Bible (LAD 2013.051), comparing it with hundreds of digitized copies of similar Bibles found in libraries around the world. We might say that when objects from a museum are digitized, the PBP illustrates that they can easily be put into a global context and be contextualized for future researchers (and visitors to a museum). In the digital space, we can tell a rich story about museum objects that are rarely found together, featured side by side.

Although there is a danger of damaging precious objects during digitization, the advantages usually outweigh the risks. We digitize manuscripts for different reasons: increasing accessibility of an online collection, engaging with a broader audience, reducing handling, and preserving the object long-term (Burrows, 2017; VanSnick and Ntanos, 2018). It might be said that even though we decrease physical access to an object, digitization increases research access to it. Normally, a manuscript such as the LAD Bible would be on display for a limited time and under strict lighting conditions in a gallery. Of course, people can visit the museum and view the physical object behind glass, but a digitized copy allows us to "flip through the pages" as much as we want, studying it in depth without any damage to the original object.



Figure 2. An image of the gallery in which the LAD Bible (2013.051.001) is exhibited. © Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi / Photo Anna Maria Nielsen

Digitization also creates assets to be managed by the institution and extends the scope of research possibilities, leading to the cultivation of new skills, new ways of looking at objects, and, of course, new ideas about the past of human cultures. Although most institutions cannot afford to digitize their whole collection, some might choose to do so with a portion of the objects that they believe will most benefit from the process (Bauer and Wrisley, 2020). The emergent academic field known as "digital humanities" benefits greatly from the digitization of objects such as the LAD Bible, since it can use technology to gain a deeper understanding of them.

With the recent pandemic, museum, education, and research activities were significantly disrupted, but the availability of digitized museum objects created a surge of interest for those collections. This surge has encouraged cultural institutions to consider making available parts of their collections online, creating modes of engagement beyond the walls of the museum (UNESCO, 2020 and 2021).

Recent initiatives in the Arab world include uploading the masterpieces from the collection of the Louvre Abu Dhabi onto the museum's website (LAD, 2021) or the publication of 3D models from the Sharjah Archaeology Authority on Sketchfab (Sharjah Archaeological Authority, 2020). Their placement within a virtual space extends the reach of this cultural heritage, for sure, but it also provides a much wider context in which they can be understood, without the need to consult these objects in person.

Digital Humanities and Museum Possibilities

From its inception, the PBP has been engaging with global audiences. Studying the Paris Bible has proven to be a dynamic topic of investigation, raising new questions and lines of inquiry in Heritage Studies, Digital Humanities, and Medieval Studies. Initial research was based on the analysis of the transcription of the LAD Bible using the AI-powered platform, Transkribus (READ COOP, 2021). This platform allows researchers to carry out "handwritten text recognition" (HTR) on archival documents using artificial intelligence (AI) to decode the digitized document. The process is complex and teaches us that when AI is applied to historical materials, indeed, much human intelligence is required for it to work well.

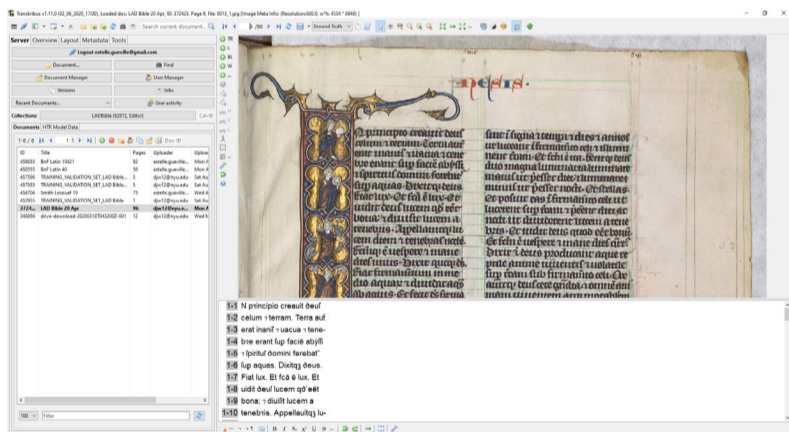


Figure 3. The Transkribus platform with the LAD Paris Bible (2013.051.001). For the manuscript image: © Department of Culture and Tourism – Abu Dhabi / Photo BNF; Transkribus interface reproduced with the permission of READ-COOP.

With transcriptions of documents made by AI, a wide range of array analyses can be performed. Our initial attempts at "reading the Bible with a computer" gave promising results (Guéville and Wisley, 2020). As the research advances, it will no doubt lead to a better understanding of where—and when—these manuscripts were copied, questions that researchers and museum curators are usually only able to answer tentatively. We hope that it will help us to recognize and describe the specific handwriting of copyists from a long-lost past and to better understand how such objects were made. The project has

begun to investigate new avenues of research, tapping into the field of computer vision, to move beyond "reading" the text of the manuscript to recognizing recurrent or shared decorative styles in dozens, even hundreds, of Paris Bibles. By adopting a digital approach, we were able to generate many new pathways for future research.

On account of the digitization of the manuscript, the museum object entered a new realm of research possibilities. By activating the know-how from various cultural institutions, the PBP considers the digital as one keyway to enable rich collaboration. The push of the pandemic led to the object's being investigated and presented to a public that may never have come to see the object at the Louvre Abu Dhabi and helped make the museum's collection known on an international level to a new audience of academics and researchers. We also believe in the potential of similar projects to increase the number of visitors to museums. Even though this new public may not be visiting the museum in person, they are able to get to know the institution and its collections in a "hybrid museum" environment.

The kind of research in the PBP facilitates richer contextualization of the museum artworks on physical display with minimal material interaction, thus maintaining the object's safety and furthering its exploration.

The uniqueness of the manuscript in a museum collection reached various new audiences thanks to the support of the cultural institutions, which, in turn, also benefited from the expanding research. We believe that digital research on collections as part of academic-museum collaboration provides a strategy for other museums in the Arab world and beyond to explore and develop. The model has been elaborated globally in "digital GLAM" (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums). One notable policy for digital GLAM can be found in the UK context (Oxford Museums). Such a strategy is crucial today inasmuch as it puts technology at the service of research and teaching from the museum and engages national, regional, and international publics, increasing accessibility and engagement overall. The PBP is not integrated into the galleries or into educational content, but we are hopeful that in the future, more and more projects will benefit from the use of digital tools for academic and research purposes.

Changing Modes of Communication and Storytelling in Museums

One of our hopes is that the PBP will reach specific audiences not usually considered as targeted publics in museums. By using research as a vehicle of outreach, the museum collection provides new audiences the chance to learn about the museum, its collection, and initiatives. In our case, the vision of the Louvre Abu Dhabi of a globalized humanity through culture resonates well with the PBP's goal to understand a phenomenon that nowadays involves institutions around the world. Taking advantage of the digitized collections available online can foster interconnectedness and invite more partners to join in collaborative projects. Yet, these new horizons of culture require us to be attentive to the changing modes of communication in research, be it in a museum, a cultural foundation, a library, or a university. To achieve an understanding of what digital research is bringing to the cultural sector, sets of new skills need to be developed, including digital literacy, to keep up with new modes of information and knowledge exchange among its various publics.

Often, this question is only framed within the question of social media and how to reach cultural audiences, but we believe that this issue deserves considerably more attention.

The PBP is partly a pedagogical effort involving students, but is also committed to teaching and learning through teamwork (what has been called co-teaching and co-learning), in which the individuals come from different professional, educational, and linguistic backgrounds. Teamwork is an integral part of digital humanities research, owing to the different perspectives and expertise in various fields, and an array of skills is required to carry out interdisciplinary research (Siemens, 2009). A strong lesson from our experience might be that when more actors are involved in research projects, the nature of the engagement with the digitized objects becomes richer. From a knowledge development perspective, collaboration also leads the actors to take these experiences back to the various communities to which they belong.

A project such as the PBP requires manifold types of expertise, from project management, specialized historical knowledge related to collections, technical expertise, and most importantly of all, an openness to experimentation. We are aware that not every institution can leverage such skills, but a collaborative spirit makes it easier. Cultural institutions need to begin thinking about the “knowledge infrastructures” and logistical support required to continue (Koivisto, Kopar, and Wicker, 2018). By connecting people and adapting technologies to the cultural field, the PBP demonstrates how knowledge exchange can occur when promoted by institutions through digital tools for research. Museums benefit from the “digital” in various and multiple ways and through institutional collaborations. We have mentioned above “Transkribus,” an infrastructural collaboration between many European institutions. Other projects, such as “Photogrammar,” an open-source software developed by the Distant Viewing Lab, offer new possibilities for the visualization and exploration of collections. Also notable is the “GLAM workbench,” a collection of resources and tutorials useful for exploring and working with the data from the GLAM sector. Tools come and go, of course, but embracing the digital as a changing landscape, both inside and outside the institution, is essential for engaging with these global trends.

In these practical and theoretical applications of the digital to cultural heritage that we have discussed briefly above, institutions complement each other and combine expertise to attract more people to the museum. By uniting similar objects from different institutions digitally, we always find new sources of information that extend the stories that we are able to tell about our museum objects. Opening a research department in the Louvre Abu Dhabi has opened new doors for sharing collection objects and making them relevant in the world beyond the physical museum, thus attracting different kinds of visitors. Starting from the focus on researchers and academics, the digital approach of the PBP stretches into educational activities and raises awareness of the collection itself for both local and global audiences. By encouraging such collaboration, we grow professionally together and build the knowledge infrastructures of tomorrow within our institutions.

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