Sensoriality, Art, and Scenographic Culture in the Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries:
An Interactive and Inclusive Online Exhibition
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Introduction: Multisensory Events and the Use of the Digital

The most recent theoretical developments in the field of scenography studies, as a result of the disciplinary crossover between performance studies, art history, and visual culture, have opened up new possibilities for understanding and theorizing the material, sensorial, emotional, and performative dimension of architecture and ephemeral events of the early modern period. The involvement of the senses in scenographic experiences is an aspect recently highlighted by researchers such as Rachel Hann (Hann 2019), who has underlined the multisensory character implicit in all staging. The sensorial and emotional relationship established between the spectator and the festive space or environment can be linked to a recent analysis developed from the concept of "expanded scenography" (McKinney and Palmer 2017), whose premises analyze affectivity, relationality, and materiality. Likewise, and in line with these new approaches, the perspective of the esthetics of atmosphere established by Gernot Böhme (Böhme 2017) in relation to architecture and scenography, both understood as manifestations that have made use not only of objects, walls, and solids, but also of light, sound, and color, apart from other conventional media such as images, symbols, or texts, is enriching.

It is not the intention of this section to dwell on the traditional historiographical debate about the possibility or not of recovering an ontologically ephemeral event such as a festive celebration or a theatrical performance (Berlangieri 2017; Sant 2014). Nor do I address recent pronouncements on the ethical issues surrounding the authenticity or otherwise of a digital reconstruction or reenactment. The purpose is mainly to expose the scientific feasibility and possible epistemological contribution of a virtual exhibition format that, in the manner of a multisensory digital archive, aims to

"scenograph" the constituent elements of the holistic reality of ephemeral events and artifacts of the past.

Along these lines, to carry out the task of creating this kind of scenographic archive based on a staging of festive events and artifacts of the early modernity, it is necessary to renounce the evolutionary and teleological schema of a traditional and/or positivist art history. Instead, we propose a performative model closer to that employed by Aby Warburg in his famous *Mnemosyne Atlas*, especially when it comes to showing the features of the moving images of the festival books (Michaud 1998).

The virtual exhibition I am going to focus on in this article is a work in progress of a research-and-development project entitled *Scenographic Culture in the Hispanic Context of Early Modernity. A Holistic Approach*. In this project, one of the goals is the digital staging of ephemeral events between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (both in the strictly scenic context and in the broad framework of the festive), and in this way, we aspire to approach aspects that, beyond the historical, visual, material, symbolic, or semiotic studies, attend to other elements (Salter 2017, González-Román 2021). Following the steps taken in our previous research-and-development project ART-ES, we propose to continue digitally "scenographing" some of the most outstanding examples related to the Hispanic festive context. Along the lines of what was done for this purpose in the abovementioned project, the virtual exhibition: ART-ES, *From Real Life into the World of Art*. To analyze the scenographic and performative dimension of such events, we will also consider their multisensory nature.

Until a few years ago, the digital perspective in research related to scenographic and performative culture in early modern Europe consisted mainly of three-dimensional reconstruction of specific buildings or theatrical environments, as well as in digitization of important collections of festival books. However, digital technology is bringing new ways of thinking about and approaching the analysis of sources used in humanities research. The consequence of this is the emergence of new, wide-ranging, integrating, and involving research perspectives that, based on the digital, are committed to the reconstruction of the extraordinary scenographic culture (material, sensorial, and performative) during the early modern period.

Implementing an Interactive and Inclusive Online Exhibition

Nina Simon, in *The Participatory Museum* (Simon 2019), broadly questions the ability of cultural institutions to promote creative and enriching interaction between visitors, but she was thinking about the real space. In *Museum*

2.0., after spending three months posting about art and museums from her personal TikTok, Simon states that "people are interested in art, but they want information to be served up in interesting ways." The participatory experience in an online space is, in this sense, potentially rich, considering that users are in fact approaching art through the web. The aim, in our virtual exhibition project, will be to design appropriate strategies and provide them with the inspirational tools along the online journey to drive their action.

When deciding on the exhibition format, the following questions were posed. What platform could be suitable to ensure maximum accessibility to a diverse audience? How can we achieve the highest quality in content delivery while making the device pleasant and attractive? What approach should we take to keep implementation costs under control?

Sitting somewhere between an academic publication and a carefully crafted Web site, this online exhibition consists of five routes related to the five senses in art and scenographic culture. Hosted on a Web site located on the server of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and designed by the institution's visual media department, the overarching goal was to ensure that the online exhibition remained both appealing and accessible to a diverse audience, all the while maintaining a high level of scientific rigor.

The concept underpinning this digital exhibition format is inspired by an innovative tool that some contemporary institutions refer to as a "digitorial." In recent years, institutions such as the Schirn Kunsthalle and the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, and more recently, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and the Rijksmuseum, have created digital platforms accessible via the Internet in conjunction with various physical exhibitions. These digital platforms are made up of a carefully crafted Web page designed to address specific themes, convey content, showcase artworks, and encourage individual reflection through an interactive scrolling display.

When thinking about interactivity in an online exhibition, an illustrative example is *Closer to Johannes Vermeer* (Rijksmuseum 2023), a Web page created as a complement to the great exhibition on Vermeer launched by the Rijksmuseum in 2023. This platform has been brilliantly built by allowing users to discover the stories, create their own collection, and then share it.

Against this background, the methodology we use to set up our virtual exhibition goes through several phases. In a first phase, it is essential to have content in the form of text, as well as high-quality visual materials (such as images, videos, three-dimensional reconstructions, animations) and sound (music, acoustic effects, recorded voice), both in original and digitized formats. In the second phase, considering the available materials,

a visual script, or storyboard, has to be developed. This storyboard serves as the structure of the digitorial upon which elements like text, images, and sounds will be placed (Figure 1). From a technical standpoint, it's necessary to have a Web site constructed in a clear manner, from which users can access the platform and its branches. Further, the participation of professionals in programming, computer graphic design, and video and sound editing is indispensable for its realization. Once these foundations are put in place, it becomes possible to determine how a user can navigate through the digital journey.

Figure 1. Detail of the storyboard
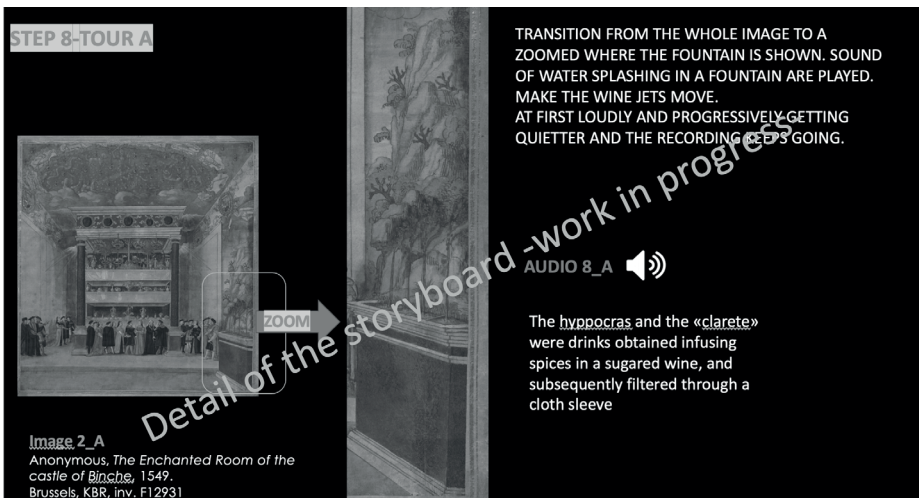
For this virtual exhibition on five senses in scenographic culture, five inter-disciplinary working teams have been established. This working method has proven to be highly effective and enriching. It successfully brings together different analytical perspectives and methods employed by the various disciplines involved in the project, including art history, musicology, and theater history.

In addition to the virtual exhibition we aim to design a specific space within it where users can actively engage by composing their own tours, sharing their experiences, or contributing with texts and images to the narrative content. This represents a novel approach, as yet unexplored in virtual exhibition formats, through which we seek to move toward a new participatory ("performative") digital paradigm. At the same time, we

want to ensure that it is approachable for individuals with visual, hearing, motor, or cognitive disabilities.

An Online Exhibition on the Senses in Ephemeral Events of the Past

Considering the subject of the project, *Scenographic Culture in the Hispanic Context of Early Modern period. A Holistic Approach*, and taking into account the methodologies that have inspired this research, our objectives in this online exhibition are as follows:

1. **Thematic Focus**: The exhibition will revolve around five thematic axes, corresponding to the role of the five senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch) in the ephemeral and artistic culture of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Users/visitors will be able to access the exhibition from their computer screens using a simple mouse. They will be able to chose from different paths, explore thematic content to varying depths, and decide the level of intellectual and emotional engagement with the sensory experiences being conveyed.

2. **Sensory Engagement**: The virtual exhibition intends to engage the user's sensory perception by combining high-resolution images, sound sources, animations, and innovative digital resources. Our goal is to activate the sensory experiences of the user/visitor. To showcase the involvement of the senses of smell, taste, and touch in festive events or artistic objects from those centuries, highly evocative images and particularly immersive sounds will be used.

3. **Layered Content**: Unlike a simple Web page, users will have the option to explore and delve into different senses to varying degrees. Content will be organized in successive "layers" that are easily accessible within each of the thematic journeys in the exhibition. This approach allows users to interact by choosing the type of journey that most interests them within the exhibition.

4. **Accessibility**: We aim to make the exhibition accessible to a wide range of social sectors, including educational institutions at various levels, researchers, and museums. Because this is an online exhibition, accessibility is guaranteed without geographical or linguistic limitations. All pathways will have an English version. Furthermore, by implementing content in layers with different levels of depth in research while maintaining scientific rigor, we ensure access for a wide range of ages

across various educational levels, research contexts, and social and cultural sectors that may have an interest.

5. **Inclusivity**. We want to ensure that it is approachable for individuals with visual, hearing, motor, or cognitive disabilities, for example, by using voiceover, subtitles or applications that describe the image displayed on the screen.

Based on these premises, the content of the exhibition will revolve around the following thematic axes:

1. **Sight**: "Sight Unveiled: Image and Memory of Ephemeral Culture in the Early Modern Period."
2. **Hearing**: "An Auditory Journey through Court Festivals Held in the Iberian Peninsula."
3. **Taste**: "Taste. The Flavor of Magnificence."
4. **Smell**: "As Ephemeral as their Smells: The Role of the Nose in the Festivities of the Early Modern Period." (Figure 2.)
5. **Touch**: "Between Heaven and Earth. Spirituality and Materiality of Touch."

Figure 2. The start of the tours
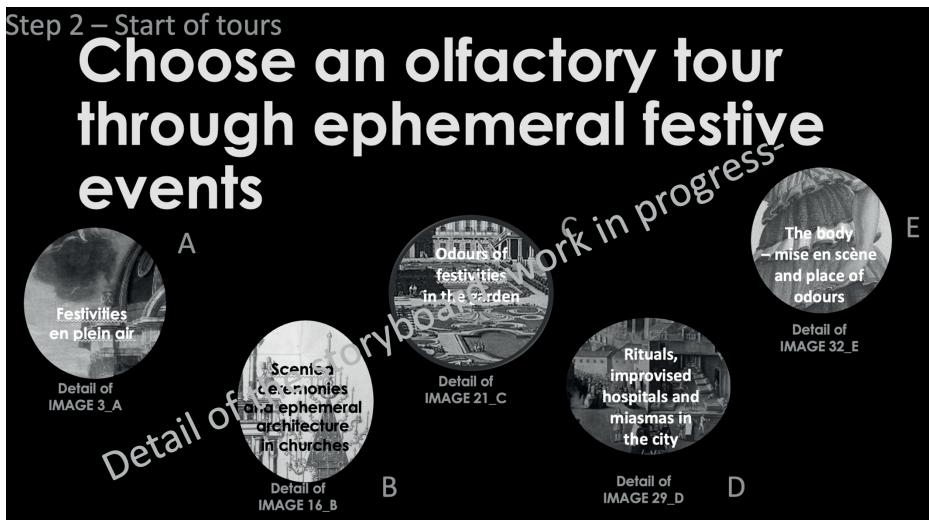
By combining these elements, we aim to create an engaging and interactive virtual exhibition that appeals to a diverse audience and fosters a deeper understanding of sensory experiences in the culture of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.

Conclusions

The exhibition format is rooted in the ongoing research conducted by an international and interdisciplinary team composed of art historians, theater historians, and musicologists, many of whom have experience in designing and developing the type of virtual exhibition proposed here. However, in this exhibition project, the goal is not only to shift the spotlight to the significant role played by all the senses, beyond sight and hearing, but also to adopt an innovative format for the dissemination of this research. Each thematic axis will explore the role of a specific sense in the context of the artistic and ephemeral culture of the Early Modern period, providing a multisensory experience for visitors to the exhibition.

Regarding the inclusive nature of this project, the virtual exhibition's structure facilitates accessibility for individuals with various cognitive difficulties as well as those with visual, auditory, or motor disabilities. We also aim to provide a specific virtual space within the exhibition where users can participate by sharing their experiences or contributing texts, images, or audio sources to the content. It is important to note that the exhibition has an unlimited number of visits, making it a true "multisensory archive" that is easy and versatile to consult.

In short, the virtual exhibition we propose seeks to respond to the expectations and needs of the target audience, especially in terms of accessibility, outreach, and sustainability.

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