



# Exhibits Newsline

Have you seen an interesting new exhibition lately – something that touched you, made you laugh, or moved you to action? Consider writing about it for Exhibits Newsline! Entries should be brief (300 words max), breezy (tell what made it so great), and include three to four high-res images.

For more information, email: [NAMENewsline@gmail.com](mailto:NAMENewsline@gmail.com).

INSTITUTION The Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia

LOCATION Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

## A Cautionary Call Becomes Reality in *Spit Spreads Death*

In October 2019, *Spit Spreads Death* opened at the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, marking 100 years since the devastating Spanish flu pandemic. At the time, the exhibition was advertised with a masked nurse, representing a foreign and forgotten piece of history. But shortly after opening, it was clear that *Spit Spreads Death* was an incredibly timely exhibition and a cautionary call for current public health awareness as the spread of COVID-19 began altering our world.

### Fig. 1.

This 1918 parade became known as the catalyst for the spread of the disease. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command Photograph, Catalog # NH 41730, Archives Branch, Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC.



On September 28, 1918, Philadelphia held a patriotic parade to support the efforts of World War I (fig. 1). Within weeks, thousands of Philadelphians were dying from the flu; the city would soon have the highest death rate of any major American city. To acknowledge this event, the Mütter Museum collaborated with artist group Blast Theory to conceptualize a similar parade in conjunction with the physical exhibition. I volunteered for the parade, eager to participate in an event that was performance driven, activated the community, and honored history.

As we marched in silence, each participant would take turns holding up a death record (fig. 2), have the name read, and stand in a moment of stillness as the floats and the crowds continued to march past them. This performance was repeated continuously, as the parade attempted to honor as many lives lost as possible. Hundreds of people silently marched up the streets of Philadelphia. This was the first time that many of the deceased had been acknowledged and honored. The emotional ambience was palpable.

I felt that the emotional engagement and the educational message of the parade transferred into the physical exhibition itself. Although only 875 square feet, *Spit Spreads Death* shared perspectives from overwhelmed health workers to families who lost their loved ones. Medical equipment and photographs represented the large-scale devastation to the city and the spread of uncertainty and fear.

*Spit Spreads Death* effectively chronicled the events leading up to and following the 1918 parade. As I walked through the exhibition, the historical context of the spread was presented through advertisements and war bonds. Bottles of whiskey and red-pepper sandwiches showcased the little-known treatments for the disease, and the simple pine coffins made from shipping crates made real the unprecedented loss of life (fig. 3). All felt eerily familiar given our current state with COVID-19.



Fig. 2.

For the 2019 parade, created as part of *Spit Spreads Death*, participants could sign up to embody and display the death record of a victim.

At the time of its opening, *Spit Spreads Death* successfully showcased the confusion, the panic, and the unknown that comes with a global pandemic. What is perhaps more horrifying is how much hasn't changed in 100 years.

**Chase Dougherty**, MFA Candidate in Museum Exhibition Planning and Design at University of the Arts, Philadelphia



Fig. 3.

Exhibits chronicle the human cost of the Spanish flu.

INSTITUTION N/A

LOCATION San Rafael, CA

## A Murmuration of Starlings: Nature as Exhibition Experience



ALL PHOTOS BY ERIC SIEGEL

**Fig. 1.**

Murmurations occur in the evenings as the sun sets.

In December 2020, in the deepest pandemic lockdown, our family shared a beautiful and moving outdoor experience with 100 others (safely masked and distanced) at a hilltop cemetery in San Rafael, California. The experience was ephemeral, with no signage, no directions, and no interpretation; yet the audience continued to grow through word of mouth and social media. It sounded perfect: outdoors, nearby, and accessible.

A murmuration is a natural wonder in which tens of thousands of birds fly together in organic, complex, and constantly shifting patterns that are breathtaking in their beauty and fluidity. The pattern results from a set of very simple rules: 1) birds follow their immediate neighbors; 2) birds prefer a specific ratio of light (sky) to dark (other birds); 3) birds can make mistakes. Researchers believe that

murmurations provide safety against predators, warmth, and a social framework, all of which have an evolutionary advantage. Some believe that it is a form of play that has no direct connection to the birds' survival.

While the experience of watching a murmuration can be enriched by this kind of background information, the aesthetic wonder of the natural display was clearly what thrilled the audience, which reacted as one might to a particularly exciting fireworks display. Among the oohs and aahs, we heard families asking each other why this happened, if it happened often, and how many birds there might be. This deep and universally engaging aesthetic impact that provoked curiosity is the ideal ingredient for an extremely effective exhibition experience.

Calling the murmuration we witnessed an “exhibition” may be counterintuitive, but it invites us to a clearer and perhaps more expansive sense of what an exhibition can be. What distinguishes this public experience from what you might encounter in a zoo or aquarium, a nature center, or the natural phenomenon-based exhibits in a science center?

The murmuration in San Rafael was publicly and physically accessible in a cemetery with plenty of parking, paths, and seating. It was inspiring for a diverse audience and filled with meaning; it was social to the extent that the COVID-19 era allows. But one might reasonably ask if it invites visitors to learn, as there was no mechanism for interpretation. I would argue that the very beauty and mystery of the murmuration is a compelling invitation, and beyond that, virtually everyone had their smartphones and was taking movies, selfies, and – judging by the excited conversations we heard – was using web resources to drill more deeply into what they were seeing.



**Fig. 2.**

The audience eagerly documented and shared the experience.



**Fig. 3.**

The venue was informal and unexpected: a hilltop cemetery with plenty of parking and seating.

This begs the question: with the availability of ubiquitous information and social media for communal engagement, can any sufficiently compelling phenomenon become an exhibition, whether it is a stand of redwoods, a busy city street, or a remote landscape?

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**Eric Siegel, Independent Consultant**

INSTITUTION Morton Arboretum

LOCATION Lisle, Illinois

## Drive-through Comfort Reignites a Holiday Exhibition

### Fig. 1.

In Crystal Promenade, chandeliers and spotlights evoke a natural ballroom in a reconfigured display designed by Lightswitch, Inc.

For several years, my family bundled up to walk the one-mile path of *Illumination*, the annual holiday season exhibition at the Morton Arboretum. Icy temperatures and biting wind strained us as we wandered on foot up and down some steep inclines. I always felt the potential for a spiritual experience surrounded by trees gracefully illuminated with evocative lighting design by Lightswitch, Inc. But with young and aging family in tow, whining and worry

diminished the impact. As for “seeing trees in a new light,” the exhibition’s tagline, I sometimes only caught a fleeting glimpse.

This year, with the pandemic raging, Morton Arboretum reimaged *Illumination* for its eighth season as a socially distanced drive-through experience: six new and five reconfigured displays along a two-mile, 35-minute driving route.





**Fig. 2.**

Ornament Meadow featured lighted orbs arranged across a field. The presence of snow and the synced soundtrack heavily shaped the feel of this display.

So, barely bundled this time, we headed out to give this reimagined exhibition a try. As we pulled in, signs directed us to tune our radio to a curated soundtrack – and my children called out gleefully as the lights around us began to pulse and change color to the music – a mix of holiday fare from Sinatra to Guaraldi to the *Nutcracker*.

The line of cars crept at 5 mph through the heart of *Illumination*: nontraditional displays highlighting the beauty of trees in winter. Rather than traditional light strings, techniques such as spotlighting and silhouetting gave each display its own aura. Dapples of laser dots (pixies, my children dubbed them) danced across the trees, bringing our eyes up and across the intersecting branches. Uplighting on trunks accentuated textures. “I never noticed how shaggy and all different bark can be,” one of the kids said.

Laser lights arched through a slight fog, highlighting the architecture of bold, thick trunks and cantilevered branches. “Reminds me of your grandmother always pointing out the strength of tree trunks,” my mother shared, bringing a wave of memory of long forest hikes growing up.

Brooding music played as we wound our way into a grove draped with sparkling chandeliers (fig. 1), while the upbeat

rhythm of “Rockin’ around the Christmas Tree” synced with pulsing, glowing orbs arranged across Ornament Meadow (fig. 2). We returned to see *Illumination* a second time a month later. This time, the orbs brooded with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra and the chandeliers twinkled to upbeat music – offering an experience that felt new all over again.

Each time we left *Illumination*, we chatted about trees much of our journey home. Somehow, driving through warm in our car supported our comfort and removed distractions. Instead of a soundtrack of kids complaining about the cold, my ears took in music that prompted a range of emotional lenses through which to observe. A few subtle, brief voice-overs offered meaningful takeaways amidst the affective, personal experience.

*Illumination* gave us a greater appreciation for trees – their details, architecture, inspiration, and value. The reimagined, pandemic-altered exhibition stripped away some of the previous comfort barriers we’d faced and more than delivered on the promise to “see trees in a new light.”

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**Kris Nesbitt**, Chief Strategic Initiatives  
Officer, Chicago History Museum

INSTITUTION Thomas Cole National Historic Site

LOCATION Catskill, New York

## An Inspiring Suite of Interpretive Tools



PILOTGIRL (CC BY-NC 2.0)

### Fig. 1.

The gardens and grounds of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site remained open throughout the pandemic, providing a peaceful respite to locals and visitors to the region.

This year my perennial search for innovative examples of museum experiences took me online and outside due to pandemic shutdowns. I found an exemplary range of experiences that integrated the outdoors and virtual at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site. Their team has leveraged resources, local relationships, and their award-winning digital practice to create an invaluable suite of out-of-doors opportunities, or exhibition-like experiences. Like many museums, the main buildings were closed by the pandemic (fig. 1). Despite that, the organization's full range of offerings engages people with their

collection and the surrounding Hudson Valley environment, advancing the museum's goal of contextualizing art, history, and ecology.

I first visited the site in response to the *River Crossings* collaboration, a partnership spanning the Hudson River between the site and the Olana State Historic Site. I've been a fan ever since! I appreciated the organization's thoughtful interpretive approach that links past and present and uses it to help people think about our shared future. The full suite of tools used –

and deft skill in deploying their interpretation – has always been strong, and it distinguishes them during the shutdown.

Like many museums during the pandemic, the Thomas Cole National Historic Site offers digital proxies, including virtual exhibition experiences like their “360 Explore” VR tours and Zoom programs and lectures (fig. 2). Having been to the house and studio in the past, I found the fidelity of these online offerings impressive. It probably helped that the organization had a robust digital strategy in place before the pandemic. Their offerings and the quality of integration was high. Through their virtual and outdoor exhibition/experiences, the museum uses Cole’s art, collections, and the grounds to connect the community with the landscape and mission.

An excellent example of this is their existing Hudson River School Art Trail, which encourages people to discover 20 iconic landscapes that inspired 19th-century painters by going on hikes. The Art Trail and its collaboration with area parks is an offering that is enormously appreciated now,



PILOT GIRL (CC BY-NC 2.0)

since it capitalizes on a safe outdoor activity while telling the artistic story of the Hudson River School. This year, podcasts were added to complement the outdoor exhibition experience. I was inspired to visit Kaaterskill Falls by my visits to the historic site (fig. 3).

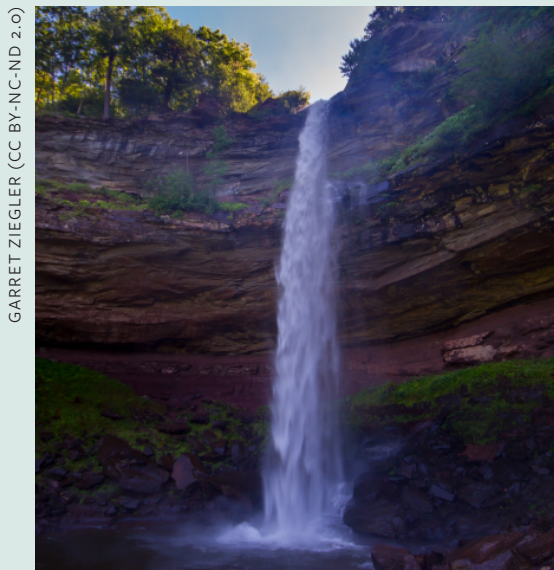
**Fig. 2.** Digital tools, like the 360 VR studio tour, took the place of in-person indoor visits.

On their grounds, they provide outdoor, site-specific art exhibits and the predictable interpretive kiosks. Families can arrange to pick up an Outdoor Discovery Kit at the visitor center before exploring the grounds. These include hands-on exploration and interaction that takes advantage of the museum’s grounds and encourage artmaking, slow looking, and storytelling.

The Thomas Cole National Historic Site team has collaborated with local artists, leveraged community partnerships, used place-based interpretive strategies, and connected visitors with their mission and core narratives in reliable, relevant, and humane ways. Many of the techniques they’ve used are not digital and are well worth other organizations emulating. As an experience creator, I find these layers of outdoor interpretation inspiring and sustainable.

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**Sara DeAngelis**, independent culture worker and Associate Professor at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York



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**Fig. 3.** I imagined a hike to Kaaterskill Falls without the benefit of modern trails.