

EXPANDING THE GALLERIES

Digital Engagement for Audiences with Dementia

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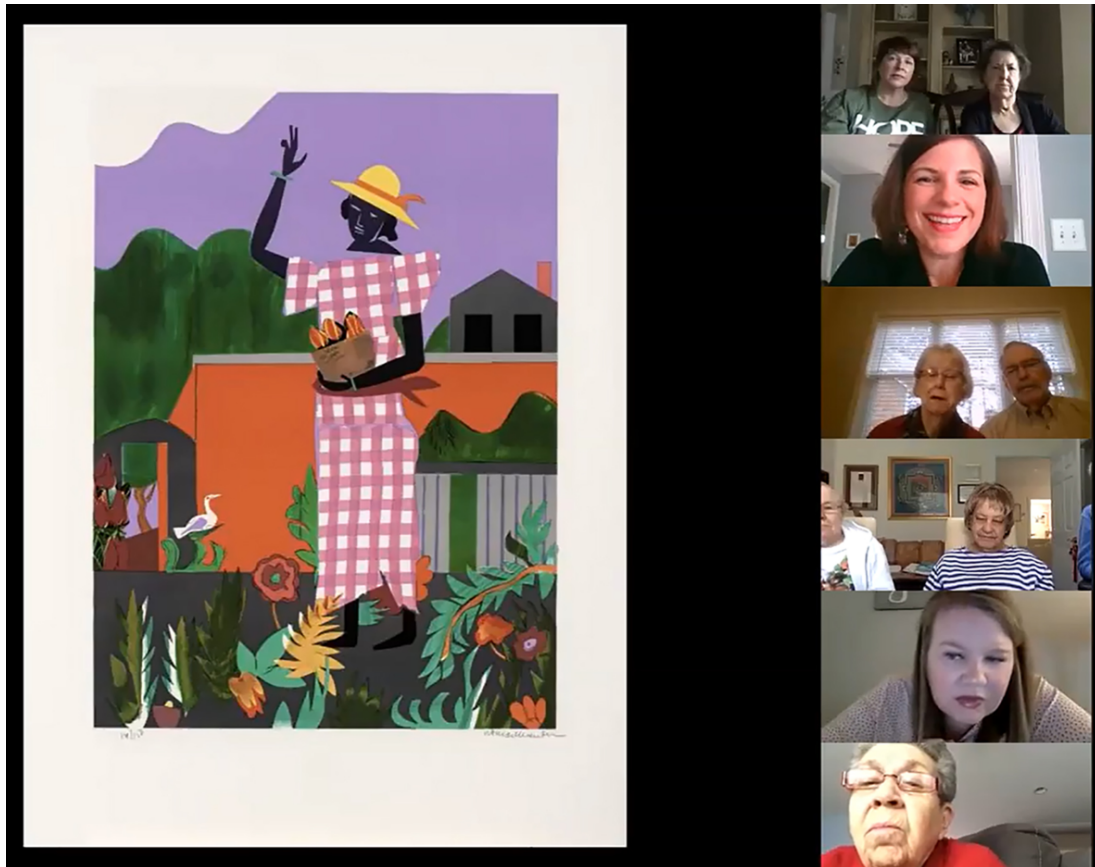
Over the last 15 years, museums of all sizes and specialties have prioritized programs for visitors with dementia to measurably improve quality of life for individuals through engagement and socialization. The global pandemic and related museum shutdowns more negatively influenced adults with memory loss due to the significant health impacts of social isolation on people with dementia.¹

The Nasher Museum of Art began in-gallery programs for people with dementia in 2014. Opened in 2005 on the campus of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, the Nasher features rotating exhibitions and a permanent collection focused on contemporary art by historically underrepresented artists. The museum's mission to promote engagement with the visual arts for both the Duke and Durham communities is supported by the exhibition-related programming for visitors with memory loss, led by the education department. These programs provide individuals with dementia critical ways to express themselves and build relationships with others.

From the work done at the Nasher since 2014, we believe that transitioning museum-based dementia programs to a digital platform can maintain beneficial engagement with this growing audience while individuals stay

A museum visitor with dementia and her care partner look together at an artwork in a gallery at the Nasher Museum of Art.





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Fig. 1. Participants in an early virtual session discussed the use of color in this lithograph by artist Romare Bearden from their homes using the Zoom platform. Romare Bearden, *In the Garden* from American Portfolio, 1979 (published 1980). Lithograph on paper, edition 121/150, 22 1/4 x 16 1/4 inches (56.5 x 41.3 cm). Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel and Carolyn Klein, 1980.81.5.

at home. We also believe that by developing remote dementia programs with the intent of continuing them once institutions reopen, museums can significantly expand the accessibility of exhibitions and build new audiences.

The Reflections Program Transitions to a Remote Platform

The Reflections Program at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University offers guided exhibition tours for people with dementia and their care partners. Designed to be conversational, the tours examine works of art in the museum’s temporary and permanent exhibitions. The art is the foundation for meaningful discussions held at a pace that is appropriate for visitors with memory impairments. In addition to time spent in the galleries, the tours include

art making and live musical performances. When the museum is open to the public, approximately 1,100 visitors participate in Reflections tours annually.

When the state of North Carolina ordered museums to close temporarily in March 2020, the education department at the Nasher Museum – working remotely from home – quickly identified Reflections as a critical program to pivot to a virtual platform. Knowing how quickly social isolation can negatively affect individuals with dementia,² we believed it was urgent that we identify best practices for continuing to engage this audience with the museum’s exhibitions.

In the first full week of stay-at-home orders, educators from the Nasher worked with small groups of participants to determine how to best connect with participants using Zoom.

These first participants were colleagues from other university departments who similarly hoped to engage adults on a virtual platform. By the second week, we offered multiple tours per week (fig. 1) to families with a person with dementia at home. Over the course of the first month working from home, we saw 90 participants – the same number we would have expected to see onsite before the pandemic – engage online. The speed of this transition was possible due to the partnership of community organizations that regularly attend programs in the exhibitions. Their staff was eager to offer individuals engagement opportunities, and assisted the museum by communicating the dates and times to families. After an early remote session, Stacie, a daughter and care partner, commented, “This was such a treat for us. This was the first time Mom has seen anyone other than TV in a while.”

Online, Reflections programs work with slightly smaller groups than they would at the museum in order for the facilitators to engage everybody. Our educators work in pairs, typically leading conversations between six to eight participants per session. During the 45-minute session, groups discuss three to four works of art. To look together, the session host shares their screen and uses PowerPoint slides to display the artworks. The host is able to enlarge images for closer looking. Benefits of the format include the option to make side-to-side comparisons of artworks not installed together in the galleries. Additionally, educators can make use of the full collection and are not restricted to works of art currently on view.

Recognizing some of the strategies and benefits of this format, Eunice, a wife and care partner, shared, “The session was a

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delight. It was lovely to see everybody. The art was so engaging, and [the educator’s] comments brought things together in a very useful and friendly way. Loved it and can’t wait until the next session. Beautifully done!”

Expanding Engagement

After settling into this new format, in the summer of 2020, as the pandemic continued, we experimented with ways to reintroduce art making into the experience. Using multiple senses can improve experiences for people with memory loss and art making can engage sight, touch, and sometimes smell. We believed that by identifying creative ways to encourage art making remotely, we could deepen the experience for participants with dementia and add variety to weekly sessions. In the physical space of the museum, creating art in response to the exhibitions is a key element of the Reflections program. Initially, we recreated that experience by relying on common materials participants might have at home. The first at-home art session focused on collage. We encouraged participants to use everyday materials including magazines, mail-order catalogues, and sticky notes. The following month, we organized a found-object mandala activity that incorporated natural materials from yards and gardens, shell collections, and even food from the kitchen. Using simple materials participants had in or around their homes, these activities allowed individuals to connect their making to specific works from the museum’s collection.



Fig. 2. Prepared for Reflections program participants, the at-home kits contained a variety of art materials, including a sketchbook, watercolor paper, paintbrushes, permanent markers, tissue paper, and were mailed by the museum to individual homes.

Positive feedback from participants led to our expansion of this aspect of the program in fall 2020. We wanted to encourage the use of more traditional art materials, which individuals might not have at home. The museum compiled a kit (fig. 2) to mail to each household with materials for three separate activities. The materials included a sketchbook, watercolor paints and brushes, colored pencils and ink pens, as well as ink and a brayer for printmaking. The plan was that for three consecutive months, one of the four, weekly online sessions would focus exclusively on art making. As in the museum, the art activities would connect directly to exhibitions and works from the collection. For example, the printmaking exercise featured in the kit enhanced the group discussions of the newly opened exhibition *Graphic Pull: Contemporary Prints from the Collection*. Before printmaking with participants, educators spotlighted artwork from the exhibition. After individuals created their own prints, the conversations focused on technique and the strengths of the printmaking medium. The remote experience spotlights the connections between an individual's art-making experience and the works in the exhibitions, just as educators would in the galleries.

Additionally, the distributed kits contained more materials than each individual needed for a single activity and suggestions of other possible projects using the materials provided. Our goal was to encourage additional experimentation and creativity by the recipients. Individuals in the early stages of dementia are able to use the kits independently while participants in middle stages experience more success if a care partner creates with or alongside them. People experiencing the later stages of

cognitive impairment can be the least able to use the materials as suggested, but can enjoy experiencing the materials and may utilize them differently than intended. Dementia programs at the Nasher Museum – both in-person and online – aim to engage both the person with dementia and a care partner simultaneously. At-home art kits allow for shared experiences beyond the facilitated discussions.

Participant Feedback

“Nothing about us without us” is an adage shared by content creators at the Nasher as a reminder that audiences should be included in meaningful ways in program design. We work to make this a priority in the Reflections program by regularly surveying our participants with dementia, their care partners, and community organizers.

With our remote programs, we continued to gather feedback both formally and informally. We distributed anonymous surveys via email, encouraging candid feedback. This method allows individuals and care partners the time and opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Informally, educators collected participant opinions during, or at the conclusion of, sessions. We found that deliberate, conversational questions posed to a group can create discourse among participants about the session design and, in the process, offer useful insights into the virtual experience of exhibitions.

The feedback we gathered suggests that the remote programs offer quality of life improvements similar to those experienced during and after in-person Reflections tours. Attendees identify the benefits of socialization, particularly during a time of

heightened stress. One care partner shared, “It gives us something to look forward to and a way to stay connected.” Another care partner comment expanded on the need for connection saying, “thank you all for giv[ing] us something to look forward to. I am struggling with keeping her from staying plastered to the TV watching all the negative and sad news. Her mindset is more fragile than ever.”

“It’s a brave new world and thank God that Zoom is enabling us to connect” said one participant with dementia. Responses repeatedly identify satisfaction with the platform and the ability to connect virtually. A care partner shared, “I thought it went well and was so encouraged by the folks that had never used Zoom before to get on and appear to experience ease with it.” Another offered, “I feel almost cool. COVID has swept the ‘more mature’ into the modern world of communications.”

Participant responses also suggest that deliberate remote engagement can create stronger audience bonds with the institution. Gratitude for the sessions is a common theme in survey replies. In addition to gratitude, survey responses express an enthusiasm for returning to the museum after communities reopen. After viewing an exhibition virtually, one participant wrote, “we look forward to joining you in the gallery when things get back to normal.” Another response echoed that, saying, “Now we are even more eager to tour the Nasher in person!”

Collecting attendee perspectives is a key component to evaluating the experience. However, these responses are not able to identify the barriers that may keep other

individuals with dementia from participating in a virtual program. Issues of access still exist and need to be addressed by organizations and communities as remote programming becomes a more established component to museum work.

Imagining Hybrid Engagement

As communities begin phased reopenings, older adults with increased health risks are unlikely to be among the first visitors returning to public spaces, including museum exhibitions. Institutions will not offer group programs for older adults, especially those with greater health vulnerabilities, until communities are significantly safer. Consequently, dementia programs need to actively plan for remote engagement throughout the phases of an institution reopening.

This can allow for greater experimentation with a hybrid model of engagement during reopening phases. When museums are open only to staff, or to small numbers of public visitors, it may be possible to have an educator in the galleries who can connect by video, live, during remote programs. While participants remain at home, they can explore the exhibition galleries through the facilitator’s camera. Similarly, a teaching artist who is in the museum space and using the actual work of art as a reference point, rather than a reproduction, might lead an art activity remotely.

A hybrid model that features staff presenting from the exhibitions can improve the participant experience in a number of ways. A live video feed from the galleries can allow for greater exploration of the scale of the artwork, details such as brushwork

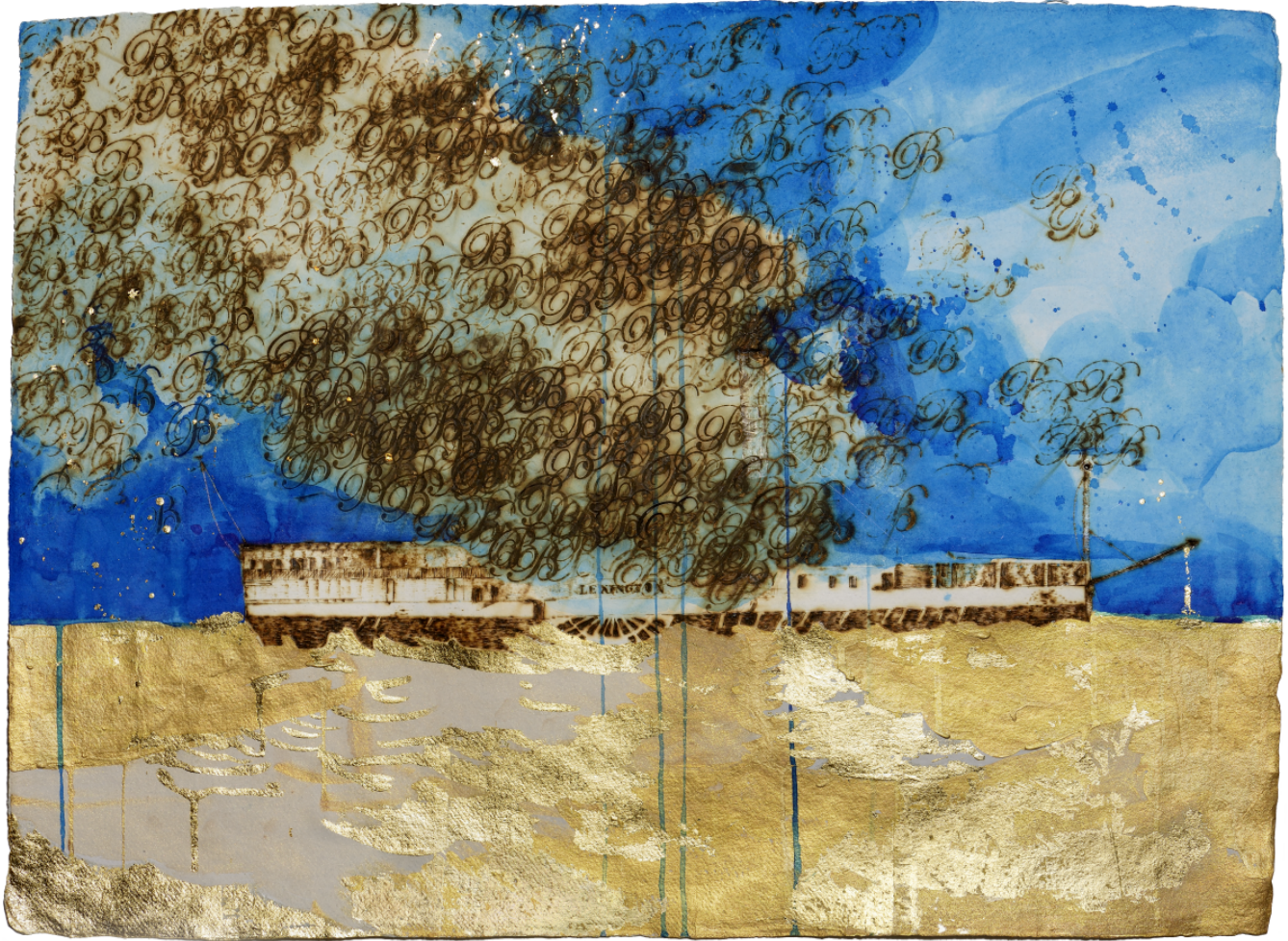


Fig. 3. Stacy Lynn Waddell, *Awful Conflagration of the Steam Ship Lexington (after Nathaniel Currier)*, 1840/2011, 2011. Burned and branded paper with watercolor, gold leaf, and acrylic; 22 x 29 3/4 inches (55.9 x 75.6 cm). Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Museum purchase, 2012.12.1.

or other textures, and the gallery pairings a curator makes. Discussing all of these elements increases the sense of being in the exhibitions at the museum. Although collections can be explored differently using a remote platform, the museum's curated exhibitions can still be at the core of the experience. Rooting virtual programs in current exhibitions reinforces a sense of real-time participation and connection.

Another hybrid program design might pair a hosted virtual session with a self-guided experience in the exhibition ([intro image](#)). The online group discussion can introduce

the exhibition theme as well as selected works. At the end of the virtual session, educators may offer a follow-up experience in which participants visit the museum and extend the experience into the galleries. In this model, educators should offer a prompt for guided looking that relates to the virtual session.

At the Nasher, a virtual program featuring the exhibition *Graphic Pull: Contemporary Prints from the Collection* could discuss *Awful Conflagration of the Steam Ship Lexington (after Nathaniel Currier)*, 1840/2011 (2011) by Stacy Lynn Waddell ([fig. 3](#)). Looking at this piece

online, educators are likely to discuss the vibrant colors and untraditional printmaking techniques used by the artist. A visual comparison can be made between Waddell's artwork and the original piece by Nathaniel Currier referenced in title. To expand this discussion into a hybrid experience, the educator might conclude the session by offering prompts for further examination of Waddell's work in the galleries. Prompts can be printed at home by program participants, or may be picked up at the museum's front desk. Extended looking at the work (describe everything you see in this artwork), a comparison between the artwork and a nearby piece in the exhibition (find a nearby work of art with similar colors and describe other similarities between the two), or a creative exercise (sketch what you see) are all possibilities for the prompt.

Adding a self-guided component to the virtual experience supports families leaving their homes and interrupts the monotony of isolation without the increased health risks of in-person group sessions. For families not yet ready to visit the museum due to health concerns, educators might also design a hybrid experience that utilizes outdoor spaces: the exterior of the building, its grounds, or any sculpture installed on the property.

When planning a hybrid experience that extends across multiple sessions, organizers will want to be mindful of designing the sessions in a way that does not frustrate individuals with memory loss. The second portion may connect back to the original discussion, but it should also be constructed in a way that the experience will not be negatively impacted if a participant is unable to recollect the first engagement.

Making Remote Programs Permanent

Significantly, we have found that virtual programs maintain engagement with regular museum visitors while also expanding our audience to include people who were unable to participate in the galleries. Several participants in the online sessions were unable to join in-gallery tours prior to the pandemic due to extreme hearing loss, physical mobility issues, or suppressed immunity. By moving the sessions to a digital platform as necessitated by the crisis, these individuals were also able to join. Maintaining a virtual program after the pandemic will increase access to exhibitions by continuing to engage those who are unable to visit the museum under normal circumstances.

Additionally, increasing access to rural populations by moving dementia programs online is significant. People with memory loss living outside of urban centers have the fewest options for socialization and cultural engagement. Remote programming allows people to visit museum exhibitions in a way that is not limited by location.

Long-term investment in remote programming will also create opportunities for research partnerships to understand better the impact of various program formats. Neuroscientists are rapidly advancing research done with Mobile Brain Imaging (MoBI) technology that allows for measurements of brain activity in real-world environments, as opposed to in laboratories. Collaborating with researchers using MoBI may lead to a better understanding of how participants' brains experience various engagement models. Comparisons could examine and compare the full spectrum

of remote programs to programs that take place exclusively in the galleries. Adding this research to more qualitative studies of the participant experience could lead to a more beneficial experience design.

Social isolation threatens the physical and mental health of older adults and, in particular, individuals with dementia. Like many other museums, pandemic-related closings and restrictions pushed the Nasher Museum to transition exhibitions and select programs to remote platforms. Our initial feedback suggests that this unexpected aspect of engagement has been especially valuable for participants with memory loss. We believe that by collaborating with communities, other cultural institutions, and researchers, museums can continue to expand upon this important work, thereby expanding our galleries in ways that better support and enrich audiences. ■

1 Mary Ellen Klas, "An ALF Tragedy: COVID didn't kill Rita at age 95, despair and loneliness did," *Miami Herald*, October 1, 2020, www.miamiherald.com/news/coronavirus/article246114855.html.

2 Christina Ianzito, "Loneliness During Pandemic Can Lead to Memory Loss," AARP, August 20, 2020, www.aarp.org/health/brain-health/info-2020/pandemic-isolation-memory-loss.html.

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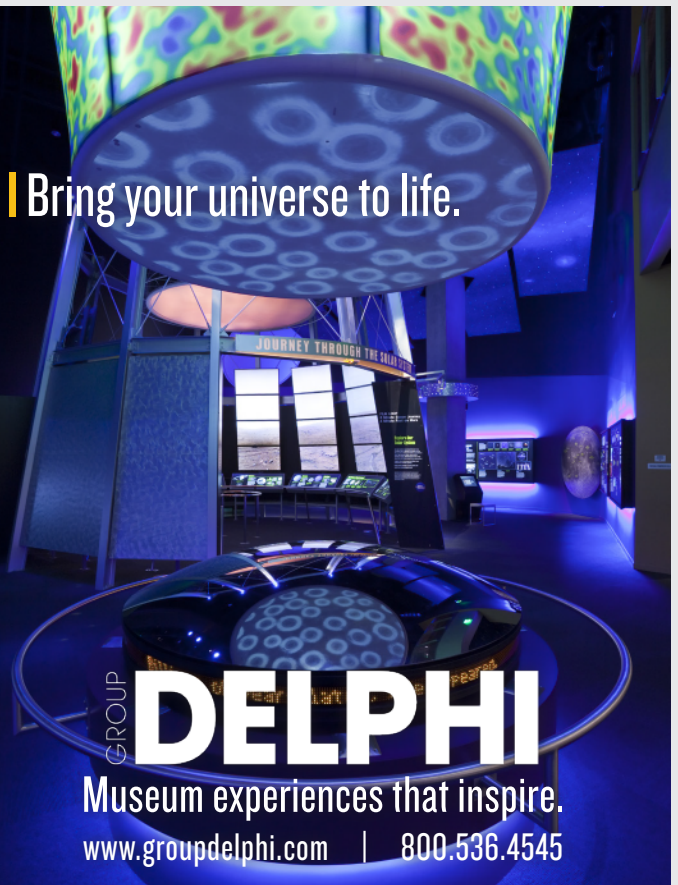
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