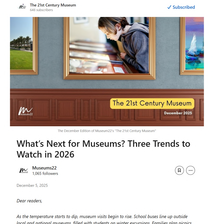

The December Edition of Museum22's "The 21st Century Museum"

What's Next for Museums? Three Trends to Watch in 2026

Museum22
1,683 followers

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Dear readers,

As the temperature starts to dip, museum visits begin to rise. School buses line up outside local and national museums, filled with students on winter excursions, families plan picnics and day outs around galleries and heritage walks during the Christmas holidays.

But it also makes me wonder: why does this energy peak only at certain times of the year?

In 2024–25, we saw museums begin experimenting with new ways of connecting:

workshops that extended beyond the galleries, festivals and game nights that invited communities back after hours, a stronger digital presence, and more personalised visits supported by audio guides, apps, AR, and VR.

And yet, the bigger picture remains challenging. A recent national snapshot in the US found that 55% of museums are still seeing fewer visitors than in 2019, even after several years of recovery.

In this newsletter, I'll explore a few 2026 forcing trends that could help us build deeper, longer-lasting relationships between museums and the people they serve.

With the winter spirit,

Shalini

3 ways museum experiences will evolve in 2026

Based on the past few years, this year's experiments, and conversations with leadership teams and visitors, I believe we'll see three key shifts in 2026:

- Storytelling will become more playful, immersive, and layered
- Journeys will become more personalised and accessible by default
- Digitisation will become a core sustainability strategy

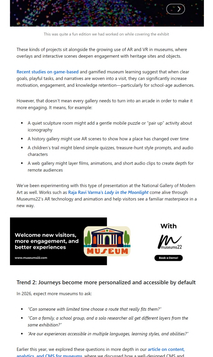
Trend 1: Storytelling becomes more playful, immersive, and layered

We started this year with some of the most anticipated exhibitions for art enthusiasts—from feminist Impressionist icons to Indigenous Australian artists.

In Denmark, at The Dome, visitors encountered a monumental installation where light, space, and the seasons shifted around them through immersive frames.

A brief section from one of our earlier posts covering "The Dome"

Later in Kyoto, teamLab's "massless" sculptures and living light systems made it feel as if the artworks themselves were breathing inside the museum.



This was quite a fun edition we had worked on while covering the exhibit.

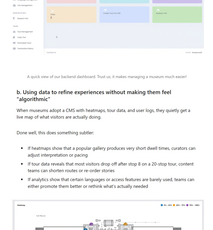
These kinds of projects all alongside the growing use of AR and VR in museums, where overlays and immersive rooms deepen engagement with heritage sites and objects.

Recent studies on game-based and gamified museum learning suggest that when clear goals, playful tasks, and narratives are woven into a visit, they can significantly increase motivation, engagement, and knowledge retention—particularly for school-age audiences.

However, that doesn't mean every gallery needs to turn into an arcade in order to make it more engaging. It means, for example:

- A quiet sculpture room might add a gentle mobile puzzle or "part up" activity about iconography
- A history gallery might use AR scenes to show how a place has changed over time
- A children's trail might blend simple quizzes, treasure-hunt style prompts, and audio characters
- A web gallery might layer films, animations, and short audio clips to create depth for remote audiences

We've been experimenting with this type of presentation at the National Gallery of Modern Art as well, Works such as Raja Ravi Verma's *Lady in the Moonlight* come alive through Museum22's AR technology and animation and help visitors see a familiar masterpiece in a new way.



Trend 2: Journeys become more personalised and accessible by default

In 2026, expect more museums to ask:

- *"Can someone with limited time choose a route that really fits them?"*
- *"Can a family, a school group, and a solo researcher all get different layers from the same exhibition?"*
- *"Are our experiences accessible in multiple languages, learning styles, and abilities?"*

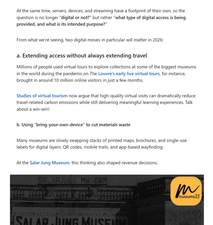
Earlier this year, we explored these questions in more depth in our article on content, analytics, and CMS for museums, where we discussed how a well-designed CMS and analytics layer can be just as important as the exhibition design itself.

a. Designing for segments, not just "general visitors"

A more mature approach to personalization means designing for a handful of key segments.

- A 45-minute highlights trail in two or three languages
- A child-friendly path that leans on audio, games, and visuals
- A deeper, object-level route for enthusiasts or students
- A remote journey for those who may never visit in person

In our own work at Museum22, teams use the M22 dashboard to tag content by audience, language, and theme, then assemble different routes from the same underlying stories. The **content doesn't multiply**, but **the paths through it do**.



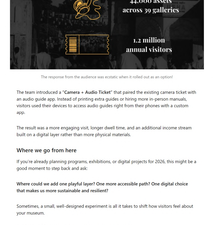
A quick view of our backend dashboard. Trust us, it makes managing a museum much easier!

b. Using data to refine experiences without making them feel "algorithmic"

When museums adopt a CMS with heatmaps, tour data, and user logs, they quietly get a live map of what visitors are actually doing.

Done well, this does something subtler:

- If heatmaps show that a popular gallery produces very short dwell times, curators can adjust interpretation or pacing.
- If tour data reveals that most visitors drop off after stop 6 on a 20-stop tour, content teams can shorten routes or re-order stories.
- If analytics show that certain languages or access features are barely used, teams can either promote them better or rethink what's actually needed



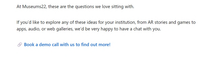
c. Accessibility built right into the planning stage

Accessibility used to be treated as a secondary checklist: add a ramp, add a caption, add a QR code. That's changing.

As more countries strengthen regulations and expectations around inclusive design, **museums are starting to treat accessibility as** part of the concept phase. We're seeing this firsthand with our clients as **we expand our services into museum design.**

Increasingly, institutions are partners like us to design exhibits and floors *from the outset* with different disabilities and challenges in mind:

- clear sightlines and high-contrast labels
- audio descriptions and sign-language content baked into digital layers
- intuitive navigation for visitors who may process information differently.



Trend 3: Museum sustainability through digitisation

Over the last few years, climate has moved from a "future concern" to an everyday reality in museum conversations. Alongside energy efficient infrastructure and greener materials, **digitisation has quietly become one of the tools on the table.**

When it's done thoughtfully, digital work can support:

- **Environmental goals**—fewer unnecessary journeys, less printing and single-use materials
- **Financial resilience**—programs that travel digitally, not just physically
- **Social access**—more people, more often, regardless of location or mobility

At the same time, servers, devices, and streaming have a footprint of their own, so the question is no longer "**digital or not?**" but rather "**what type of digital access is being provided, and what is its intended purpose?**"

From what we're seeing, two digital moves in particular will matter in 2026:

a. Extending access without always extending travel

Millions of people used virtual tours to explore collections at some of the biggest museums in the world during the pandemic on The Louvre's early live virtual tours, for instance, brought in around 10 million online visitors in just a few months.

Studies of virtual tourism now argue that high-quality virtual visits can dramatically reduce travel-related carbon emissions while still delivering meaningful learning experiences. Talk about a win-win!

b. Using "bring your own device" to cut materials waste

Many museums are slowly swapping stacks of printed maps, brochures, and single-use labels for digital layers: QR codes, mobile trails, and app-based wayfinding.

At the Salar Jung Museum, this thinking also shaped revenue decisions.

The response from the audience was ecstatic when it rolled out as an option!

The team introduced a **"Camera + Audio Ticket"** that paired the existing camera ticket with an audio guide app. Instead of printing extra guides or hiring more in-person manuals, visitors used their devices to access audio guides right from their phones with a custom app.

The result was a more engaging visit, longer dwell time, and an additional income stream built on a digital layer rather than more physical materials.

Where we go from here

If you're already planning programs, exhibitions, or digital projects for 2026, this might be a good moment to step back and ask:

Where could we add one playful layer? One more accessible path? One digital choice that makes us more sustainable and resilient?

Sometimes, a small, well-designed experiment is all it takes to shift how visitors feel about your museum.

At Museum22, these are the questions we love sitting with.

If you'd like to explore any of these ideas for your institution, from AR stories and games to apps, audio, or web galleries, we'd be very happy to have a chat with you.

🔗 **Book a demo call with us to find out more!**