

**The Nimbleness of Cultural Heritage Institutions
(The Schomburg Center and The Rubin Museum)**

Kayla Henry-Griffin

In response to COVID-19 being declared a pandemic in March of 2020, changes had to be made with lifestyles and even with managing institutions. People may remember vividly where they were when the pandemic was declared and when companies and institutions started to close down. For institutions that serve and cater to the public, it was a difficult decision to close to the public. Cultural heritage institutions that serve the public, such as museums and libraries, had the concern of reaching out to all during the pandemic. As the months went by, many cultural heritage institutions either reopened to the public, are still closed, or completely shut their doors indefinitely. The purpose of this paper is to compare and analyze how two cultural heritage institutions responded and operate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For this comparison, I selected one institution that is still operating while closed to the public and an institution that opened their doors in order to operate during the pandemic. The Schomburg Center is still operating without publicly opening their doors while at the Rubin Museum they reopened to their patrons. This analysis will explain the difficult decisions cultural heritage institutions must make during a pandemic or major life event. The pandemic has impacted everyone in such a way where not only individuals, but also institutions have to review their policies on major global events.

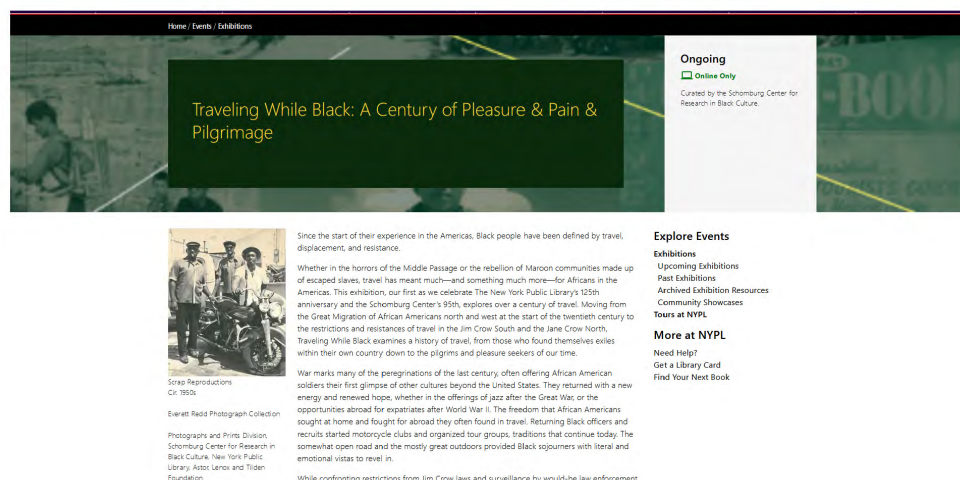
Schomburg Center

I spoke with Novella Ford who is the Associate Director of Public Programs and Exhibitions at the Schomburg Center to ask about the Center's response to the

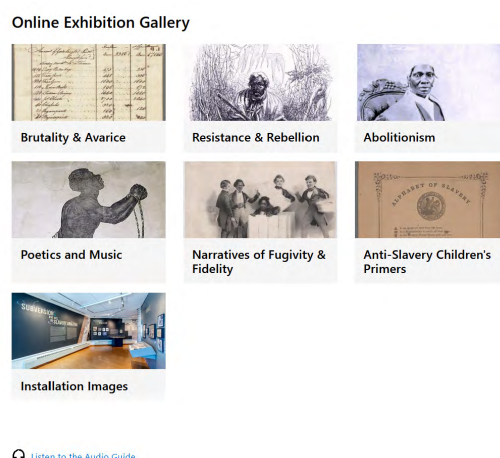
pandemic. Novella has stated that the initial response to the pandemic being declared was a similar response the New York Public Library made. The New York Public Library quickly informed their clients and patrons that they would be closing to the public; the Schomburg Center did the same as well. From a NYPL press release, the initial closing was only temporary, from March 14, 2020 To March 31, 2020.¹ One of the last events at the Schomburg Center was a Women Jazz event that happened only days before the posting of the press release. The next step for the Schomburg Center was to go digital.

Since the Center was operating while closed, the Center needed to find a way to digitally exhibit the exhibition that was now closed for in-person visits. While looking for ways to virtually show the in-person exhibit, the Schomburg decided to highlight their digital collections via their website. From there, they began digital programming. All the public programs they had planned for 2020 went virtual starting mid-June or early May. In the beginning of September, they launched a recently developed online exhibition platform and included the exhibition that was never seen and a new exhibition that started in January of 2021 (*Subversion & the Art of Slavery Abolition* and *Traveling While Black: A Century of Pleasure & Pain & Pilgrimage* respectively). The Schomburg Center already had an online presence in place, where their audience could access videos, images, podcasts, the institution's blog, and also conduct research on the Black experience. One could also schedule a virtual research appointment with the Schomburg Center.

¹New York Public Library. "New York Public Library to Temporarily Close all Locations.", accessed Mar 11,, 2021, <https://www.nypl.org/press/press-release/march-13-2020/new-york-public-library-temporarily-close-all-locations>.



*Screenshot of the **Traveling While Black: A Century of Pleasure & Pain & Pilgrimage** Online Exhibition at the Schomburg Center.*



*Screenshot of the **Subversion & The Art of Slavery Abolition** Online Exhibition at the Schomburg Center.*

Subversion & the Art of Slavery Abolition features how abolitionists used the arts to advocate for the freedom and liberty during the 18th and 19th century. *Traveling While Black: A Century of Pleasure & Pain & Pilgrimage* highlights the experience of traveling from a Black perspective which includes concepts of displacement and resistance.² Both exhibitions are translations of the physical space at the Schomburg Center and a glimpse of the collection the institution holds.

²"Traveling while Black: A Century of Pleasure & Pain & Pilgrimage.", accessed Mar 11, 2021, <https://d8.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/traveling-while-black-century-pleasure-pain-pilgrimage>.

Novella explained that the audience they serve has slightly changed as well. Currently, there is an emergence of a global community that the Schomburg Center is serving. There was already a digital audience, and the people who knew about the Center knew that they could go online for more of the Schomburg's content. However, Novella was concerned about the in-person audience; that particular audience is being served less than the digital and global audience. Novella and the Schomburg are looking for ways to conduct outreach for their traditional in-person audience.

Rubin Museum

However, the Rubin Museum of Art is serving their in-person audience once again. After closing sometime in March of 2020, the museum reopened their doors sometime in September of 2020, with limited staff and restricting to only a number of patrons. Although no one was available to discuss how operations were running, a visit was made to the Rubin Museum of Art to see what it was like for a museum to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic. One thing that was initially noticed was that the museum was more quiet than normal. Rubin Museum was allowing only a limited number of people to come and visit the museum; and in order to visit, one must "plan" for a visit by going to the Rubin Museum's website to buy a ticket and specify a time.³ On the page, the Rubin Museum lists what they "expect from you" when coming for a visit, which includes wearing a mask and other COVID-19 safety protocols. Once within the Rubin Museum, there are traffic patterns marked on the floor to show the patrons where they need to navigate to; the markings are there possibly so that patrons follow the six feet policy the Rubin Museum has enforced.

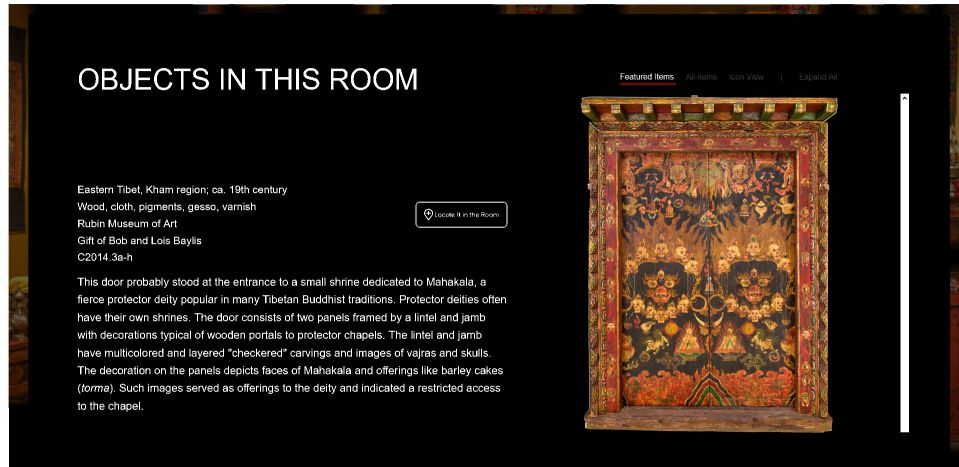
³The Rubin Museum of Art. "Plan a Visit.", accessed Mar 11, 2021, <https://rubinmuseum.org/visit/plan>.

Unfortunately during the visit there was one floor that was being renovated and was blocked off by all patrons; however, all other exhibitions and artworks were available to be seen in person. One particular exhibition that is considered one of the most popular installations is the Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room. The Tibetan Shrine Room is also available to be seen virtually. Patrons have the option to experience the room in person with sounds and flickering lights, or they could experience the room via online with a more research approach. The online interactive could be accessed via the Rubin Museum of Art's website.⁴ Although the striking colors and the intricate pieces are easily translated virtually, people who experience the shrine room via online cannot experience the sounds associated with the exhibition. It is believed that this exhibition is one of the initiatives the Rubin Museum set forth to serve patrons who were not willing to visit the museum during the pandemic. The Rubin Museum has several other virtual projects that they launched during the beginning of the pandemic.



Screenshot of the Virtual Interactive Tour of the Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room at Rubin Museum of Art (<http://shrineroom.rma2.org/>).

⁴The Rubin Museum of Art. "The Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room.", accessed Mar 11, 2021, <http://shrineroom.rma2.org/>.



Screenshot of Pop-up Window in the Virtual Interactive Tour of the Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room at Rubin Museum of Art (<http://shrineroom.rma2.org/>)..

Stated in one of their press releases, the Rubin Museum launched digital initiatives for their global community to “feel inspired, connected, and uplifted.”⁵ Initiatives include the Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room (part of their virtual mind-body practices), The Rubin Daily Offering, and streams on the Rubin Museum’s Instagram feed (via IGTV). The Daily Offering includes ten minute videos where artists and others discuss concepts that are inspired by the Rubin Museum’s collection of art and artifacts. These opportunities to engage with the Rubin Museum were a response to the lack of togetherness during the beginning of the pandemic.

Striving to keep their audience and creating a space of togetherness are concepts that both the Schomburg and The Rubin share; other cultural heritage institutions have the same focuses as well. What has been learned from comparing the two institutions is that there is no one way of responding to a pandemic. The yearn for keeping their audience may be the same, but how it is managed may not be similar.

⁵The Rubin Museum. "The Rubin Museum of Art Launches Digital Initiatives for Navigating Change Including New Video Series "the Rubin Daily Offering"; Digital Care Package, and 2-Hour Stream of the Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room.", last modified Apr 2, accessed Mar 11, 2021, https://rubinmuseum.org/images/content/DigitalOfferings_PressRelease_final_040220.pdf.

What cultural heritage institutions learned from this pandemic is how to be flexible, not only during trying times. In addition, many have looked inward and decided to put more emphasis on their patrons and staff. Novella explained that this pandemic has produced this idea of being nimble for the Schomburg Center. For the Schomburg Center, there is no rush to open up since there is so much to offer virtually for their audience. On the other hand, The Rubin Museum did not have much of the luxury to only offer virtual programming. For some cultural heritage institutions, being nimble meant shutting the physical doors indefinitely, but opening virtual doors while gaining an online community. The future of institutions have and will completely change not only due to the pandemic, but also due to this new-found idea of being nimble during trying times.