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VIRTUAL MUSEUMS AS A NEW CULTURAL SPACE AUTHENTICITY IN VIRTUAL MUSEUMS: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to analyze the concept of authenticity in virtual museums through the theoretical perspectives of museum anthropology and heritage studies, to assess how digitization transforms traditional understandings of authentic cultural experience, and to develop an anthropological interpretation of authenticity applicable to virtual museums under conditions of cultural loss and armed conflict.

The research methodology combines interdisciplinary approaches drawn from cultural anthropology, museum studies, heritage studies, and digital humanities. The study employs historical-comparative, historical-genetic, analytical, and interpretive methods, together with conceptual analysis of anthropological theories of authenticity. Comparative analysis is used to examine the evolution of authenticity from material to digital heritage, while a case-study approach is applied to the Ukrainian experience of wartime digitization, including the *Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO)* initiative and digital preservation projects undertaken by Ukrainian and international institutions.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in integrating anthropological theories of authenticity with contemporary virtual museology and digital heritage research. The article demonstrates that authenticity in virtual museums cannot be reduced to the technical accuracy of digital reproductions but should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing objective, constructive, existential, and socially negotiated forms of authenticity. The conclusions demonstrate that virtual museums constitute not merely digital extensions of conventional museums but independent cultural environments in which authenticity is continuously negotiated through technological mediation, curatorial interpretation, and community participation. Digital representations do not simply replace material heritage; rather, they generate new forms of cultural experience and memory while expanding public access to heritage resources. At the same time, the Ukrainian experience illustrates that under conditions of armed conflict virtual museums perform additional functions of emergency documentation, legal evidence, cultural resilience, and international heritage protection. Consequently, authenticity in virtual museums should be interpreted as a dynamic anthropological category shaped by the interaction of material culture, digital technologies, institutional practices, and the social contexts in which cultural heritage is preserved, interpreted, and experienced.

Keywords: virtual museums, authenticity, digital heritage, museum anthropology, cultural memory, Ukraine, digitization, material culture, war and heritage

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АВТЕНТИЧНІСТЬ У ВІРТУАЛЬНИХ МУЗЕЯХ: АНТРОПОЛОГІЧНИЙ ПОГЛЯД

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Анотація

Метою статті є комплексний аналіз проблеми автентичності у віртуальних музеях із позицій музейної антропології та heritage studies, визначення особливостей трансформації традиційних уявлень про автентичність у цифровому середовищі, а також розроблення антропологічної інтерпретації автентичності, придатної для аналізу віртуальних музеїв в умовах воєнних конфліктів і загрози втрати культурної спадщини. **Методологія дослідження** ґрунтується на міждисциплінарному поєднанні підходів культурної антропології, музеєзнавства, heritage studies та цифрової гуманітаристики. У роботі використано історико-порівняльний, історико-генетичний, аналітичний та інтерпретаційний методи, а також концептуальний аналіз антропологічних теорій автентичності. Метод кейс-стаді застосовано для дослідження українського досвіду цифрового збереження культурної спадщини в умовах війни, зокрема діяльності міжнародної ініціативи *Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO)* та інших проєктів цифрового документування.

Наукова новизна полягає в інтеграції антропологічних концепцій автентичності із сучасними дослідженнями цифрової спадщини та віртуальної музеології. Обґрунтовано, що автентичність у віртуальному музеї не може зводитися виключно до технічної точності цифрового відтворення, а має розглядатися як багатовимірний соціокультурний феномен, що охоплює об'єктивний, конструктивістський, екзистенційний і соціально сконструйований вимір автентичності.

Висновки. Доведено, що віртуальні музеї є не лише цифровими доповненнями традиційних музейних інституцій, а й самостійними культурними просторами, у яких автентичність формується в процесі взаємодії цифрових технологій, музейної інтерпретації та участі спільнот. Цифрові репрезентації не замінюють матеріальну культурну спадщину, а створюють нові форми культурного досвіду, розширюючи можливості доступу до музейних колекцій та формування колективної пам'яті. Український досвід цифрового документування культурної спадщини в умовах війни демонструє, що віртуальні музеї виконують не лише освітні та комунікаційні функції, а й стають важливими інструментами екстреного збереження культурних цінностей, міжнародної адвокації, фіксації воєнних злочинів проти культури та забезпечення культурної стійкості. У зв'язку з цим автентичність у віртуальних музеях доцільно розглядати як динамічну антропологічну категорію, що формується у взаємодії матеріальної культури, цифрових технологій, музейних практик і соціокультурних контекстів.

Ключові слова: віртуальні музеї, автентичність, цифрова культурна спадщина, музейна антропологія, культурна пам'ять, Україна, цифровізація, матеріальна культура, війна та культурна спадщина

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Problem Statement. The digital transformation of contemporary society has fundamentally reshaped the ways in which cultural heritage is created, preserved, interpreted, and communicated. Museums, traditionally understood as physical institutions responsible for collecting, conserving, and exhibiting material evidence of human history, are increasingly evolving into hybrid cultural environments that integrate physical collections with digital infrastructures. The rapid development of three-dimensional (3D) scanning, photogrammetry, virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR), artificial intelligence (AI), cloud technologies, and immersive digital platforms has accelerated this transformation, giving rise to virtual museums as a new form of cultural representation. Rather than serving merely as digital extensions of conventional museums, virtual museums increasingly function as autonomous spaces in which cultural knowledge is produced, negotiated, and disseminated through interactive digital environments.

This transformation has generated an important theoretical challenge concerning the concept of authenticity. Since the emergence of modern museums, authenticity has occupied a central position within museum studies, archaeology, anthropology, and heritage scholarship. Traditionally, authenticity has been associated with the material originality, provenance, and historical integrity of museum objects. However, the digitization of cultural heritage complicates this understanding by separating digital representations from the physical artifacts they reproduce. A three-dimensional scan, virtual reconstruction, or immersive digital exhibition inevitably lacks the material presence of the original object while simultaneously creating new modes of interaction, interpretation, and emotional engagement. Consequently, authenticity can no longer be understood exclusively as a property inherent in an artifact itself but must also be examined as a social, cultural, and experiential construct emerging through interactions between digital heritage, museum institutions, and their audiences.

Anthropology provides a particularly productive framework for examining this transformation because it has long conceptualized authenticity not as a fixed objective quality but as a negotiated cultural category shaped by historical contexts, social relationships, systems of representation, and collective memory. Anthropological scholarship has demonstrated that the meanings attached to cultural objects are produced through practices of interpretation, performance, institutional mediation, and community participation rather than residing solely in the material object. From this perspective, virtual museums represent not simply technological innovations but new anthropological environments in which cultural identities, historical narratives, and collective memories are continuously reconstructed through digital mediation.

The question of authenticity has acquired additional urgency in the context of contemporary armed conflicts, particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The widespread destruction, looting, and occupation of museums, archives, libraries, archaeological sites, and historical monuments have transformed digitization from an instrument of accessibility into a strategy of cultural survival. Emergency digitization initiatives, large-scale three-dimensional documentation projects, and

international collaborations such as Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO) illustrate that digital surrogates increasingly function not merely as educational resources but as documentary evidence, instruments of cultural resilience, and repositories of historical memory. Under such conditions, virtual museums assume functions that extend well beyond traditional museum communication, becoming essential components of international heritage protection, digital preservation, and cultural diplomacy.

Although research on virtual museums has expanded considerably over the past decade, most existing studies remain focused on technological innovation, user experience, digital visualization, or the educational effectiveness of immersive environments. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining authenticity through an anthropological lens that integrates theories of material culture, museum anthropology, heritage studies, and digital humanities. Moreover, the implications of wartime digitization for established concepts of authenticity remain insufficiently explored despite their growing practical and theoretical significance.

The purpose of this article is to examine authenticity in virtual museums from an anthropological perspective by synthesizing classical theories of authenticity with contemporary debates on digital heritage. Particular attention is devoted to the transformation of authenticity within virtual museum environments and to the Ukrainian experience of emergency digitization during wartime, which demonstrates how digital preservation reshapes traditional understandings of originality, cultural memory, and museum practice. The article argues that authenticity in virtual museums should be understood as a multidimensional, socially negotiated, and context-dependent phenomenon and proposes the concept of *salvage authenticity* to describe the distinctive form of authenticity that emerges when digital surrogates become the primary surviving evidence of cultural heritage threatened by destruction.

Literature Review. The issue of authenticity in museums and cultural heritage has been extensively examined across anthropology, museum studies, heritage studies, and tourism research. The theoretical foundations of contemporary interpretations of authenticity were established by W. Benjamin, who introduced the concept of the "aura" of the original work of art in the context of mechanical reproduction, and J. Baudrillard, whose theory of simulacra emphasized the growing autonomy of representations from their physical referents in contemporary culture. Anthropological approaches developed by A. Appadurai and E. Bruner further demonstrated that the meaning and authenticity of cultural objects are socially constructed through their biographies, contexts of circulation, and institutional practices. A significant contribution to the conceptualization of authenticity was made by E. Cohen, who argued that authenticity is a negotiated rather than fixed quality, and by N. Wang, whose distinction between objective, constructive, and existential authenticity has become one of the most influential analytical frameworks in heritage and museum studies.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on authenticity within digital museum environments. The revised ICOM museum definition recognizes accessibility,

inclusiveness, and community participation as essential characteristics of contemporary museums, providing an important institutional framework for understanding virtual museums as legitimate museum spaces. Studies by Y. Evrard and A. Krebs, L. Jin, H. Xiao, and H. Shen, and M. Atzeni, G. Del Chiappa, and J. Mei Pung demonstrate that authenticity in digital and virtual museums extends beyond the material originality of objects to include interactive, emotional, and experiential dimensions. Nevertheless, the anthropological implications of authenticity in virtual museums under wartime conditions remain insufficiently explored, which constitutes the principal research gap addressed in this article.

Main Findings. Museums have never been neutral containers of the past. As institutions, they select, classify, and stage objects in ways that produce meaning as much as they preserve it, and the "authenticity" of what they display has always been a constructed rather than a self-evident property¹. The proliferation of digital and virtual museums over the past two decades – from 3D object scans and panoramic gallery tours to fully immersive virtual-reality (VR) reconstructions – has intensified this problem rather than resolved it. A virtual museum can be defined as a digital entity that draws on the characteristics of a physical museum to extend, enhance, or personalize the museum experience, while remaining committed, at least nominally, to the same mission of public access, preservation, and knowledge organization that the International Council of Museums (ICOM) attributes to museums generally².

For anthropology, this raises a question that is at once old and new. It is old because anthropologists have debated the authenticity of cultural objects, performances, and 'traditions' since at least the mid-twentieth century, most influentially in Edward Bruner's critique of how museums and heritage sites construct historical genuineness through selective staging³. It is new because digitization introduces a further layer of mediation: the museum object is no longer simply displayed but reproduced, and the visitor no longer simply observes but interacts with a model, a scan, or a simulation whose relationship to the original artifact must itself be interpreted⁴. This article asks how anthropological theories of authenticity can help explain what happens to cultural meaning when heritage is transferred into virtual space, and it grounds this question in a case that makes the stakes unusually explicit: the digitization of Ukrainian cultural heritage under conditions of war.

The theoretical starting point for almost any discussion of authenticity and reproduction remains Walter Benjamin's essay on art in the age of mechanical reproduction, in which he argued that the technical reproducibility of a work of art

¹ Bruner E.M. Abraham Lincoln as authentic reproduction: A critique of postmodernism. *American Anthropologist*. 1994. № 96 (2). P. 397–415. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/681680>

² International Council of Museums (ICOM). *ICOM approves a new museum definition*. URL: <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/>

³ Bruner E.M. Abraham Lincoln as authentic reproduction...

⁴ Baudrillard J. *Simulacra and Simulation*. University of Michigan Press. URL: <https://oducks.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/simulacra-and-simulation-by-jean-baudrillard.pdf>

detaches it from the unique ‘here and now’ of its original existence – what he called its aura – even when the reproduction is technically faultless. Benjamin’s argument was not that reproductions are simply inferior copies, but that reproducibility changes the social function of the object: mass-reproduced images circulate, are consumed differently, and lose the ritualistic, situated quality that once tied an artifact to a particular place, history, and community of viewers⁵. Applied to virtual museums, this raises an immediate difficulty: a 3D scan of a Scythian gold artifact or a panoramic tour of a wooden church is, in Benjamin’s terms, an image without an aura – Infinitely copyable, viewable from any location, and detached from the physical conditions (light, scale, material texture, spatial context) that originally produced its meaning.

Jean Baudrillard pushed this line of thought further by arguing that in late modernity, signs and images increasingly cease to refer to any underlying reality at all; they become simulacra that ‘precede’ the real, producing a hyperreal condition in which the simulation is experienced as more authoritative than what it simulates. Baudrillard used the museum itself as an example of this logic, suggesting that institutions dedicated to preserving the past can paradoxically function as machines that absorb and neutralize the very cultural energy they claim to protect⁶. For a virtual museum, the Baudrillardian risk is that the digital reconstruction of a destroyed monument or an inaccessible collection could come to stand in for the object so completely that its absence – the fact of destruction, looting, or war – is aesthetically smoothed over rather than registered.

Where Benjamin and Baudrillard treat authenticity largely as a property that reproduction erodes, tourism anthropology has developed a more pragmatic and empirically grounded typology. Erik Cohen argued that authenticity is not a fixed, objectively verifiable quality of an object or a practice but a negotiable concept whose criteria shift according to the observer’s own framework of interpretation; he further proposed that cultural products can acquire ‘emergent authenticity’, gaining legitimacy over time even if they originated as staged or commercial performances⁷. Ning Wang extended this constructivist position by distinguishing objective authenticity (the verifiable genuineness of an object’s origin), constructive authenticity (authenticity as a social and discursive construction, often produced through marketing, curation, or narrative framing), and existential authenticity (a state of feeling more truly and freely oneself that a visitor may experience regardless of whether the toured object is itself ‘genuine’)⁸. This third category is particularly important for virtual museums, because it shifts the analytical

⁵ Benjamin W. The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, from the 1935 essay New York: Schocken Books, 1969. P. 217–251. URL: <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>

⁶ Baudrillard J. Simulacra and Simulation...

⁷ Cohen E. Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 1988. № 15 (3). P. 371–386. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(88\)90028-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(88)90028-X)

⁸ Wang N. Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 1999. № 26 (2). P. 349–370. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(98\)00103-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0)

focus away from the ontological status of the digital object and toward the visitor's lived, embodied, and emotional engagement with it.

Subsequent empirical research applies and refines this typology directly to museum and virtual-heritage contexts. Jin, Xiao, and Shen, working with heritage museum visitors, identified three overlapping genres of experiential authenticity – original authenticity (rooted in historical and material provenance), interactive authenticity (produced through demonstration, craftsmanship, and hands-on engagement), and emotional authenticity (the visitor's affective response) – showing that authenticity in museums is assembled from multiple, only partially object-dependent, sources⁹. In a large-scale study of non-immersive virtual-reality tours of the 'Su Nuraxi' UNESCO site in Sardinia, Atzeni, Del Chiappa, and Pung found that both object-based and existential authenticity independently shaped visitors' emotional response, satisfaction, and attachment to the virtual experience, indicating that a digital substitute can generate a distinct but genuine authenticity effect even without physical presence at the site¹⁰. Similarly, a study of the Louvre's website conducted jointly with HEC Paris examined whether online and on-site visits function as substitutes or complements, concluding that the digital experience does not simply imitate the physical museum but constructs its own, partially autonomous, form of engagement with the question of aura and authenticity in the digital age¹¹.

Anthropological work on material culture more broadly reinforces the claim that objects derive meaning not from an intrinsic essence but from the social relations, biographies, and contexts in which they circulate – a perspective foundational to the study of how things acquire, lose, and regain value and significance across different regimes of exchange and display¹². Museums, whether physical or virtual, are precisely such regimes: they do not merely store objects but actively produce their meaning through selection, labeling, sequencing, and now, through interface design, hyperlinking, and algorithmic recommendation. The 2022 revision of ICOM's official museum definition – adopted in Prague after an eighteen-month global consultation process – explicitly reframes museums as institutions 'in the service of society' that operate 'ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities', foregrounding inclusivity, accessibility, and community participation as core museal values rather than mere collection and display¹³. This redefinition matters for virtual museums because it extends the institutional legitimacy of

⁹ Jin L., Xiao H., Shen H. Experiential authenticity in heritage museums. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*. 2018. № 18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2020.100493>

¹⁰ Atzeni M., Del Chiappa G., Mei Pung J. Enhancing visit intention in heritage tourism: The role of object-based and existential authenticity in non-immersive virtual reality heritage experiences. *International Journal of Tourism Research*. 2022. № 24 (2), 240–255. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2497>

¹¹ Evrard Y., Krebs A. The authenticity of the museum experience in the digital age: the case of the Louvre. *Journal of Cultural Economics*. 2018. № 42. P. 353–363. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-017-9309-x>

¹² Appadurai A. (Ed.). *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press. URL: <https://www.orlan.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AppaduraiEdTheSocialLifeOfThings.pdf>

¹³ International Council of Museums (ICOM). *ICOM approves a new museum definition*. URL: <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/>

‘museum-ness’ to digital platforms that fulfill a comparable social function, even where they hold no physical collection at all.

Approached anthropologically, a virtual museum is not simply a technical artifact but a site of cultural practice: a place where curators, technologists, and communities negotiate what counts as heritage worth preserving, how it should be represented, and to whom it belongs. Digital humanities scholarship on virtual museology has noted that virtual museums extend the theoretical concerns of general museology into digital space, requiring new standards for object documentation and data enrichment while raising unresolved questions about the authenticity and spatial situatedness of a museum object once it is decoupled from its physical location¹⁴. This decoupling is not a peripheral technical detail; it is the central anthropological problem. A physical artifact’s meaning is partly constituted by where it sits, what surrounds it, who has physical access to it, and what rituals of viewing (queueing, lighting, guarded proximity) accompany the encounter. A virtual reproduction strips away most of these situational cues while introducing new ones – interactivity, personalization, algorithmic curation – that themselves carry cultural weight.

At the same time, ethnographic and visitor-experience research increasingly documents that users of virtual museums judge authenticity through hybrid criteria that mix technical fidelity (resolution, accuracy of a 3D model) with narrative and emotional cues (the sense of ‘being there’, the credibility of an accompanying story)¹⁵. This suggests that virtual museums do not simply fail to replicate an aura that once existed; they generate new criteria of authenticity specific to the digital medium itself – a claim consistent with Wang’s argument that existential authenticity operates largely independently of an object’s objective genuineness¹⁶.

The theoretical debate over authenticity acquires a sharper, more urgent character when digitization is undertaken not to enhance an already-secure collection but to prevent the outright disappearance of a culture’s material record. Ukraine since the full-scale Russian invasion of February 2022 offers an unusually clear anthropological case of what this article terms *salvage authenticity* – a mode of authenticity in which a digital surrogate’s legitimacy rests not on its aesthetic or technical closeness to an original but on its status as possibly the last surviving evidentiary trace of an object, building, or archive under active threat of destruction.

Within days of the invasion, three digital humanities specialists – Anna E. Kijas (Tufts University), Quinn Dombrowski (Stanford University), and Sebastian Majstorovic (then at the European University Institute) – launched Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO), an international volunteer initiative to back up the digital footprint of Ukrainian

¹⁴ Wang N. Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 1999. № 26 (2). P. 349–370 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(98\)00103-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0); Evrard Y., Krebs A. The authenticity of the museum experience in the digital age: the case of the Louvre...

¹⁵ Jin L., Xiao H., Shen H. Experiential authenticity in heritage museums. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*. 2018. № 18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdmm.2020.100493>; Atzeni M., Del Chiappa G., Mei Pung J. Enhancing visit intention in heritage tourism...

¹⁶ Wang N. Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience...

libraries, archives, and museums before it could be lost to server outages, cyberattacks, or physical destruction of the institutions hosting it¹⁷. Within roughly a week, the project attracted around a thousand volunteers, and by summer 2022 more than 1,500 contributors had web-archived over 5,000 websites and 50 terabytes of data using tools such as the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine and the Browsertrix and Webrecorder crawling suites. The material ranged from national archive portals and open-access journals to 3D virtual tours of churches and the digital collections of local museums and children's cultural centers¹⁸.

What distinguishes SUCHO from a conventional digitization project is its explicit reframing of authenticity as a matter of custodianship rather than possession. The organizers describe their work as "data-sitting": the goal is not to build a Western archive of Ukrainian culture but to hold digital surrogates in trust until they can be returned – a practice the project's leadership calls digital repatriation – to Ukrainian institutions once conditions allow. A retrospective review of the project observes that less than one percent of Ukrainian cultural heritage had been digitized before the war began, meaning that in many cases SUCHO's emergency captures constitute the only digital record, however partial, of objects and collections that may since have been damaged, looted, or destroyed. In the second phase of the project, volunteers began sending digitization equipment and power banks directly to Ukrainian museums and libraries and organizing training workshops (the 'Memory Savers' program) so that Ukrainian cultural workers themselves could continue the documentation effort under conditions of war¹⁹.

This case complicates each of the theoretical positions discussed in Section 2. In Benjaminian terms, the SUCHO archive is a mass of reproductions entirely without aura in the classical sense – flat images, web crawls, cached pages – yet its cultural authority derives precisely from its reproducibility and distributability, which is what allows it to survive bombardment, power cuts, and server loss in a way the physical originals could not²⁰. In Baudrillardian terms, the risk of the simulacrum replacing and effacing the real is inverted: rather than smoothing over an absence, the SUCHO archive's entire meaning depends on foregrounding the precariousness and possible loss of the original, making the digital copy legible as an index of destruction rather than a seamless substitute for it²¹. And in Cohen and Wang's terms, the archive is a striking instance of constructive and existential authenticity operating together: its authority is socially constructed through the transparent, documented process of emergency rescue, while for Ukrainian communities and diaspora users the encounter with these preserved fragments can carry a strong

¹⁷ Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO). (n.d.). About SUCHO. URL: <https://www.sucho.org/about>

¹⁸ Alcalá R. Ukraine symposium – The Ukraine conflict and the future of digital cultural property. URL: <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/ukraine-conflict-future-digital-cultural-property/>

¹⁹ Bowers K. Review: Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online. *Reviews in Digital Humanities*. 2025. № VI (4). <https://doi.org/10.21428/3e88f64f.bcc70880>

²⁰ Benjamin W. The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction...; Alcalá R. Ukraine symposium – The Ukraine conflict and the future of digital cultural property...

²¹ Baudrillard J. Simulacra and Simulation...

existential charge tied to identity, loss, and continuity that is largely independent of any single object's material genuineness²².

A second, closely related episode illustrates how digitization functions as an anthropological response to imminent physical loss. The historic center of Odesa, including its museum quarter, was inscribed on UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger in January 2023, following a direct appeal by the Ukrainian government²³. Six months later, Russian shelling in July 2023 damaged buildings within the protected buffer zone, including the Odesa Archaeological Museum, the Maritime Museum, and the Literary Museum, in what UNESCO described as a violation of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict²⁴. On the night of 5–6 November 2023 – coinciding almost exactly with its 124th anniversary – the Odesa National Fine Arts Museum, housed in the nineteenth-century Potocki Palace, was struck by debris from a Russian missile attack that cracked walls, shattered windows, and left a large crater outside the building²⁵.

Crucially, museum and regional officials confirmed that the institution's core holdings had been evacuated and placed in storage well before the strike, a precaution taken by many Ukrainian museums since the earliest weeks of the invasion. This evacuation itself constitutes an anthropologically significant response to the authenticity problem: it treats the physical safety of an original object as inseparable from its cultural authenticity, while simultaneously relying on prior digitization and documentation – supported internationally by organizations such as UNESCO and the ALIPH Foundation, which funded both digitization equipment and emergency stabilization of the museum building after the attack – to maintain public access and institutional continuity even while the originals remain hidden and the building itself is under repair. In the following year, stabilization works co-funded by the European Union allowed the museum to reopen its administrative building and welcome more than 12,000 visitors in the first three quarters of 2024, even as reconstruction continued²⁶. Here, the virtual and the physical are not competing regimes of authenticity but interdependent ones: digital documentation preserves accessibility and evidentiary record precisely so that the physical restoration of the 'real' museum remains a meaningful, achievable goal rather than an abstraction.

²² Cohen E. Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 1988. № 15 (3). P. 371–386. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(88\)90028-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(88)90028-X); Wang N. Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 1999. № 26 (2). P. 349–370. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(98\)00103-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(98)00103-0)

²³ Odesa: UNESCO strongly condemns attack on World Heritage property. URL: <https://ukraine.un.org/en/240059-odesa-unesco-strongly-condemns-attack-world-heritage-property>

²⁴ Heritage in flames: Russia systematically destroys UNESCO-protected sites in Ukraine while denying the attacks. URL: *Detector Media* <https://en.detector.media/post/heritage-in-flames-russia-systematically-destroys-unesco-protected-sites-in-ukraine-while-denying-the-attacks>

²⁵ Odesa Museum of Fine Arts rocked by Russian missile strike on 124th anniversary. *The Art Newspaper*. URL: <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/11/07/odesa-museum-of-fine-arts-rocked-by-russian-missile-strike-on-124th-anniversary>

²⁶ Odesa National Fine Arts Museum completes emergency repairs after damage caused by Russian missile attacks. *Odessa Journal*. URL: <https://odessa-journal.com/odesa-national-fine-arts-museum-completes-emergency-repairs-after-damage-caused-by-russian-missile-attacks>

Taken together, the SUCHO initiative and the Odesa case suggest that existing authenticity typologies, developed largely in peacetime tourism and museum-visitor contexts, need to be extended to account for digitization under conditions of existential threat. Object-based authenticity, in Cohen and Wang's sense, ordinarily asks whether a digital copy accurately represents an original that continues to exist and can, in principle, be checked against it²⁷. Salvage authenticity, by contrast, describes a situation in which the digital surrogate may be the only remaining verifiable trace of an object whose physical fate is uncertain or already lost – its truth-value derives from urgency, documentation practice, and provenance of capture (who recorded it, when, and under what conditions) rather than from any ongoing comparison with a stable original. This is a fundamentally anthropological category, because it locates authenticity not in the object itself but in the social relations of trust, custodianship, and testimony that surround its digital capture – relations that are especially visible in SUCHO's self-conscious framing of its work as temporary stewardship pending the war's end and the archive's eventual return to Ukrainian institutions.

The case also underscores that authenticity in virtual museums is inseparable from questions of ownership, custodianship, and power. SUCHO's explicit commitment to eventual digital repatriation distinguishes it from earlier, more extractive models of Western institutions digitizing non-Western heritage for their own archives, and this commitment is itself a claim about authenticity: that a digital surrogate is authentic to a community's heritage only insofar as it remains oriented toward eventual return and community control, not merely technical preservation²⁸. This resonates with the broader anthropological insight that authenticity is not a property objects possess in isolation but a relationship – between object, community, and the institutions that mediate access to it.

Conclusions. This study has demonstrated that authenticity in virtual museums cannot be understood solely as the faithful digital reproduction of material objects. From an anthropological perspective, authenticity is a multidimensional and socially negotiated phenomenon that encompasses material provenance, institutional authority, curatorial interpretation, community participation, and visitors' lived experiences. Rather than eliminating authenticity, digital technologies transform the criteria through which authenticity is produced, perceived, and validated within contemporary museum practice.

The theoretical analysis indicates that classical concepts of authenticity remain highly relevant but require reinterpretation in the context of digital heritage. Benjamin's notion of the loss of aura explains the inevitable detachment of digital surrogates from the unique material presence of original objects, while Baudrillard's concept of simulacra highlights the risk that digital reconstructions may eventually obscure rather than reveal historical reality. At the same time, anthropological approaches developed by Cohen and Wang demonstrate that authenticity extends beyond material originality to include

²⁷ Cohen E. Authenticity and commoditization in tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*. 1988. № 15 (3). P. 371–386. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383\(88\)90028-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(88)90028-X); Wang N. Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience...

²⁸ Bowers K. Review: Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online...

constructive and existential dimensions, emphasizing that meaningful engagement with cultural heritage can emerge through interpretation, participation, and emotional experience, even within entirely digital environments.

The article further argues that virtual museums should be conceptualized not merely as technological extensions of physical museums but as independent anthropological spaces in which cultural meanings are continuously negotiated. Digital interfaces, curatorial narratives, metadata, and interactive environments actively shape how heritage is interpreted, remembered, and appropriated by diverse audiences. Consequently, authenticity in virtual museums should be regarded as a dynamic relational process rather than a fixed property inherent in digital objects themselves.

The Ukrainian experience under conditions of full-scale war substantially expands existing theoretical understandings of authenticity. The analysis of initiatives such as Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO) and the emergency digitization of endangered museum collections demonstrates that digital preservation increasingly functions not simply as a means of improving accessibility but as an essential strategy for cultural survival. In this context, the article proposes the concept of *salvage authenticity*, referring to situations in which the authenticity of a digital surrogate derives primarily from its role as a documented and trustworthy record of cultural heritage threatened by destruction, looting, or irreversible loss. Under such circumstances, authenticity becomes grounded in provenance, documentation practices, custodianship, and public trust rather than in the continued physical accessibility of the original object.

These findings suggest that future research on virtual museums should move beyond technological determinism and place greater emphasis on anthropological questions concerning memory, identity, ethics, community participation, digital repatriation, and the governance of cultural data. As virtual museums become increasingly integrated with artificial intelligence, immersive environments, and global digital infrastructures, authenticity will depend less on technological sophistication alone than on transparent curatorial practices, responsible stewardship, and meaningful engagement with the communities whose heritage is represented. In this sense, the future of virtual museums lies not in replacing physical museums but in complementing them through new forms of cultural mediation that preserve both the material and the social dimensions of heritage in an increasingly digital world.

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