

From Collection Webpages to Digital Exhibition Narratives: A Topic-Structural Analysis of Online Exhibition Texts from the Palace Museum

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Abstract: As museums increasingly migrate cultural interpretation into digital environments, online exhibitions are no longer merely supplementary interfaces for displaying collection information. They have become narrative infrastructures through which museums reorganize objects, histories, spaces, and visitor expectations. Taking the Palace Museum as a representative case, this article examines eight official online exhibition and digital display texts, including the Digital Gallery, Bronze Gallery, Architecture Gallery, Clock Gallery, Painting and Calligraphy Gallery, Treasure Gallery, Ceramics Gallery, and Theatre Gallery. Through a lightweight digital humanities approach combining thematic coding and narrative-structural analysis, the study investigates how museum webpages transform object-centered descriptions into public-facing cultural narratives. The findings suggest that the Palace Museum's online exhibition texts are structured around five recurring interpretive frames: historical memory, craft knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, courtly life, and cultural identity. Rather than functioning as neutral labels or simple online catalogues, these texts actively mediate between collections and audiences by producing coherent, accessible, and culturally authoritative narratives. The article argues that online exhibition texts should be understood as a crucial component of digital curatorship and as an important object of digital humanities inquiry.

Keywords: Palace Museum, online exhibition, digital humanities, museum text, digital curatorship, cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of museums has moved far beyond the technical task of placing collection records online. Museum websites, virtual galleries, digital exhibitions, panoramic tours, and interactive platforms now participate in the production of cultural knowledge. Recent studies have shown that digital technologies are reshaping museum exhibition through new forms of visualization, immersion, participation, and data-mediated engagement [1]. Yet the textual dimension of online exhibitions remains comparatively underexamined. Webpage titles, introductory notes, section headings, exhibit descriptions, and interface prompts do not merely accompany digital images; they actively organize how cultural heritage is encountered, interpreted, and remembered.

This textual dimension matters because museums do not communicate through objects alone. Even in physical galleries, labels, wall texts, catalogues, routes, and curatorial statements help transform material objects into meaningful cultural evidence. In digital environments, this interpretive burden becomes even heavier. Online visitors often encounter museum objects outside the architectural atmosphere of the gallery, without the scale, lighting, sequence, and embodied movement that shape onsite viewing. As a result, webpage text must compensate for the absence of material co-presence. It must provide context, create coherence, and guide visitors through dispersed digital resources.

The Palace Museum offers a particularly valuable case for examining this transformation. As one of China's most symbolically charged cultural institutions, it has developed a broad digital ecology that includes the Digital Relics Database, digital painting projects, panoramic tours, thematic cultural resources, and online exhibition interfaces [2]. Its

official exhibition pages also provide concise but carefully structured descriptions of galleries devoted to bronze objects, architecture, clocks, painting and calligraphy, treasures, ceramics, and court theatre [3]. These webpages do not simply repeat conventional gallery labels. Instead, they condense historical background, aesthetic value, craft knowledge, courtly practice, and cultural identity into compact public-facing narratives.

This article asks a simple but important question: how do the Palace Museum's online exhibition texts transform collection information into digital exhibition narratives? To answer this question, the study uses a small but focused corpus of eight official webpage texts and applies thematic coding and narrative-structural analysis. The aim is not to build a complex computational model, but to demonstrate how a modest digital humanities workflow can reveal the interpretive logic embedded in museum webpages. In this sense, the article treats online exhibition text as a form of digital curatorial rhetoric: a structured mode of writing through which museums translate objects into stories, values, and cultural meanings.

The contribution of this article is threefold. First, it shifts attention from digital museum technology to digital museum writing, arguing that webpage text deserves to be studied as a primary site of curatorial meaning-making. Second, it proposes a simple coding framework that can be reused for other online museum materials. Third, it shows how the Palace Museum's digital exhibition texts construct cultural authority by combining historical depth, craft explanation, aesthetic language, and national cultural symbolism. This makes the case useful not only for museum studies, but also for digital humanities research concerned with how cultural institutions produce knowledge online.

2. Materials and Methods

The corpus for this study consists of eight official texts selected from the Palace Museum's exhibition page and related digital resource entrances: the Digital Gallery, Bronze Gallery, Architecture Gallery, Clock Gallery, Painting and Calligraphy Gallery, Treasure Gallery, Ceramics Gallery, and Theatre Gallery. These samples were selected because they represent different modes of digital museum presentation, including digital display, object-based gallery interpretation, spatial heritage, craft history, fine art appreciation, and courtly cultural life.

Table 1. Sample sources and page types

No.	Sample	Page type	Main thematic orientation
1	Digital Gallery	Digital project	Digital display and interactive communication
2	Bronze Gallery	Gallery exhibition	Bronze culture and ritual tradition
3	Architecture Gallery	Spatial display	Architectural space and visitor route
4	Clock Gallery	Gallery exhibition	Court craft and Sino-foreign exchange
5	Painting and Calligraphy Gallery	Collection display	Art history and aesthetic appreciation
6	Treasure Gallery	Gallery exhibition	Court treasures and cultural identity
7	Ceramics Gallery	Gallery exhibition	Ceramic craft and civilizational history
8	Theatre Gallery	Gallery exhibition	Courtly life and theatrical practice

Methodologically, this article adopts a lightweight digital humanities approach suitable for a small corpus of museum texts. First, the selected texts were collected and cleaned manually, with navigational elements and repeated interface information removed. Second, each text was coded according to seven thematic categories: historical memory, aesthetic appreciation, craft knowledge, courtly life, spatial experience, public education, and cultural identity. Third, the texts were coded according to six narrative structures: catalogue-based, thematic, chronological, spatial, story-based, and knowledge-based. Finally, representative samples were interpreted through close reading in order to connect the coding results with broader questions of digital curatorship and heritage communication.

The purpose of this method is not to quantify the Palace Museum's entire digital ecosystem. Rather, it is to construct a manageable analytical lens for reading online exhibition texts as structured cultural documents. The combination of coding and close reading is especially useful here because museum webpages are usually short, highly condensed, and institutionally polished. Purely statistical analysis would miss their rhetorical density, while purely impressionistic reading would make comparison difficult. The coding scheme therefore serves as a bridge between systematic description and interpretive analysis.

3. Thematic Patterns: From Objects to Interpretive Frames

The coding results show that the Palace Museum's online exhibition texts are organized around several recurring

interpretive frames. Historical memory, craft knowledge, public education, and cultural identity appear most frequently. The Bronze Gallery, Clock Gallery, and Ceramics Gallery, for example, place objects within longer developmental narratives. Bronze objects are connected with ritual systems and inscriptions; clocks are framed through courtly collection, technology, and cross-cultural exchange; ceramics are situated within a longue durée history of Chinese material civilization. Such texts move beyond identification and classification. They transform objects into evidence of historical continuity and cultural achievement.

This emphasis on historical memory is not accidental. The Palace Museum is not only a collection-holding institution, but also a former imperial space whose authority is tied to dynastic history, material culture, and national heritage. Online exhibition texts therefore need to perform a double function: they introduce specific categories of objects, and they stabilize those objects within a broader civilizational narrative. A bronze vessel is not presented simply as an artifact; it becomes a sign of ritual order. A ceramic object is not merely a crafted item; it becomes part of the long history of Chinese technological and aesthetic refinement.

Craft knowledge is another central axis of interpretation. In the Bronze, Clock, Treasure, and Ceramics galleries, materials, techniques, forms, and decorative systems are repeatedly used to explain why objects matter. This emphasis corresponds to broader digital heritage research, which increasingly understands online exhibitions as knowledge systems rather than passive display platforms [4]. The Palace Museum's webpage texts do not simply tell visitors what an object is; they explain how it was made, how it functioned, and how it participates in a larger cultural order.

Table 2. Thematic categories and narrative structures

Sample	Major thematic categories	Major narrative structure
Digital Gallery	Public education; cultural identity	Thematic
Bronze Gallery	Historical memory; craft knowledge	Knowledge-based; chronological
Architecture Gallery	Spatial experience; aesthetic appreciation	Spatial
Clock Gallery	Craft knowledge; courtly life	Knowledge-based
Painting and Calligraphy Gallery	Aesthetic appreciation; cultural identity	Catalogue-based; thematic
Treasure Gallery	Aesthetic appreciation; craft knowledge; cultural identity	Thematic
Ceramics Gallery	Historical memory; craft knowledge	Chronological; knowledge-based
Theatre Gallery	Courtly life; public education	Story-based; chronological

The theme of cultural identity is especially notable. The Treasure Gallery, for instance, does not present precious objects merely as luxurious court possessions. It elevates them into signs of traditional craftsmanship, dynastic culture, and national aesthetic inheritance. Similarly, the Ceramics Gallery links ceramic development with the broader history of Chinese civilization, while the Painting and Calligraphy Gallery positions artworks within an enduring lineage of Chinese visual culture. In this way, the online exhibition texts convert collection categories into cultural symbols. Their

function is not only descriptive, but also ideological and pedagogical.

Aesthetic appreciation also plays a significant role, especially in the Painting and Calligraphy Gallery, Treasure Gallery, and Architecture Gallery. These texts encourage visitors to encounter objects not merely as historical evidence, but as forms of beauty, taste, and cultural refinement. This aesthetic framing is important because online viewing often reduces the sensory richness of museum experience. Text therefore helps restore value by telling visitors what kind of visual attention is expected. It teaches visitors how to look, what to notice, and why the object deserves admiration.

4. Narrative Structures: Digital Curatorship as Textual Design

The narrative structures of the sampled texts further reveal how digital curatorship operates through writing. Two dominant structures are knowledge-based and thematic narration. Knowledge-based texts organize cultural objects through explanations of history, technique, function, and classification. The Bronze and Ceramics galleries are typical examples: both rely on developmental accounts that move from origins and techniques to collection history and cultural significance. This chronological logic gives the visitor a sense of historical depth and disciplinary order.

Thematic narration, by contrast, organizes objects around a cultural concept. The Treasure Gallery combines court workshops, rare materials, ritual use, religious practice, daily life, and imperial taste within one interpretive frame. The Digital Gallery similarly justifies digital display by emphasizing its ability to show fragile objects, architectural spaces, and interactive forms that may be difficult to present fully in physical exhibition. This echoes recent scholarship on museum exhibition in the age of data, which argues that digital exhibition design increasingly depends on meaningful visitor engagement rather than technology alone [5].

The Architecture Gallery demonstrates a spatial narrative structure. Its text is not organized around a single object type, but around architectural nodes and visitor movement. It produces a route-like imagination, allowing the reader to understand heritage through walls, gates, towers, and spatial sequences. This is especially important for the Palace Museum because architecture is not only a background for collections; it is itself a major heritage object. Through spatial narration, the webpage turns the museum site into a readable cultural landscape.

The Theatre Gallery, by contrast, adopts a more story-based structure by connecting court performance, imperial entertainment, political education, and theatrical artifacts. Here, objects are not treated as isolated museum items but as traces of lived cultural practice. The narrative invites visitors to imagine performance, spectatorship, ritualized entertainment, and the political function of drama in court society. This kind of story-based structure gives online exhibition text a dynamic quality. It moves beyond classification and allows the past to appear as a scene of action.

These examples suggest that online exhibition texts are not neutral containers of information. They are carefully arranged textual interfaces that guide visitors from seeing to understanding. In a physical museum, movement through space often creates sequence. Online, sequence has to be designed through links, sections, headings, and explanatory writing. The Palace Museum's texts therefore operate as

narrative maps. They help visitors move conceptually even when physical movement is absent.

5. Discussion: Online Exhibition Text as Interpretive Mediation

The most important finding of this study is that the Palace Museum's online exhibition texts mark a shift from object display to cultural interpretation. Traditional object labels often emphasize name, date, material, size, and provenance. By contrast, the texts examined here place objects within larger frameworks of historical memory, craft expertise, aesthetic value, spatial experience, courtly life, and cultural identity. They answer not only "What is this object?" but also "Why does it matter?" and "How should it be understood within Chinese cultural history?"

This shift is inseparable from the communicative conditions of digital museums. Online visitors do not experience the atmosphere, scale, route, or material presence of a physical gallery in the same way as onsite visitors. As a result, webpage text must perform additional interpretive work. It must compensate for the absence of physical space, guide attention, and produce coherence among dispersed digital objects. In this sense, digital exhibition text functions as interpretive mediation: it stands between the collection and the remote visitor, translating museum authority into accessible narrative form.

This mediation is also institutional. The Palace Museum's online exhibition texts do not present heritage as open-ended raw data. They frame heritage through carefully selected values: continuity, refinement, craftsmanship, imperial memory, artistic excellence, and cultural confidence. Such framing is not problematic in itself; all museum interpretation involves selection and emphasis. But recognizing this framing allows us to see digital exhibitions as cultural arguments rather than simple digital services. They make claims about what counts as valuable heritage, how it should be appreciated, and how audiences should relate to the past.

This finding also contributes to digital humanities discussions about the relationship between method and interpretation. Recent work in Digital Scholarship in the Humanities has emphasized that digital humanities research should not be reduced to technical application, but should remain attentive to textual, visual, cultural, and institutional meaning [6]. The present study follows this logic. Its contribution lies not in computational complexity, but in showing how a small corpus and a transparent coding scheme can illuminate the narrative mechanisms of digital heritage communication.

The study also suggests a practical implication for museums. If online exhibition texts are central to digital curatorship, then writing should be treated as part of digital design rather than as secondary documentation. Curatorial teams, digital media teams, educators, and interface designers need to consider how textual structure shapes visitor understanding. A visually impressive digital exhibition may still fail interpretively if its texts do not provide coherence, context, and narrative orientation. Conversely, even a modest webpage can produce meaningful cultural experience when its textual architecture is carefully designed.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined eight online exhibition and digital display texts from the Palace Museum in order to

understand how museum webpages transform collection information into public-facing cultural narratives. Through thematic coding and narrative-structural analysis, the study finds that the Palace Museum's online exhibition texts are shaped by five major interpretive frames: historical memory, craft knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, courtly life, and cultural identity. These frames are further organized through knowledge-based, thematic, chronological, spatial, and story-based narrative structures.

The conclusion is clear: online exhibition texts are not secondary decorations attached to digital images. They are a central component of digital curatorship. They organize objects into stories, translate specialist knowledge into public culture, and construct institutional authority in digital space. For museum studies, this suggests that digital exhibitions should be analyzed not only as technological platforms or visual interfaces, but also as textual systems. For digital humanities, it demonstrates that modest methods such as thematic coding and close reading can still produce meaningful insights when applied to concrete cultural materials.

The study is limited by its small sample size and by its focus on one institution. Future research may expand the corpus to compare the Palace Museum with the National Museum of China, Shanghai Museum, or overseas museums with Chinese-language digital exhibitions. It may also combine textual analysis with user studies to examine whether visitors actually receive and interpret these narratives in the ways intended by the museum. Such work would connect institutional discourse with audience experience.

Nevertheless, as a focused case study, this article shows that the Palace Museum's online exhibition texts offer a

productive site for understanding how cultural heritage is narrated, authorized, and made publicly intelligible in the digital age. The broader point is that digital heritage is not only built through databases, interfaces, and images. It is also built through words. To study those words is to study one of the key mechanisms through which museums make the past available, meaningful, and persuasive online.

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