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'A Budding Morrow in Midnight': Facing Challenges and Embracing Opportunities during Lockdown at the Keats-Shelley House Museum in Rome

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Giuseppe Albano discusses the activities of the Keats-Shelley House, Rome during the period of lockdown in Italy.



With the first deaths from Covid-19 reported during the last week of February 2020, and the first 'red zones' duly introduced to restrict travel between affected regions, Italy became the first EU country to be hit by the crisis and the first to employ measures that were unprecedented by European standards. On 8 March 2020 the Italian government announced that all museums, libraries, and heritage sites would have to close with immediate effect as part of the national effort to contain the spread of the virus. Within forty-eight hours of this announcement the entire country was placed in 'lockdown', which most of the rest of Europe later adopted, to varying degrees, following Italy's lead. The initial date projected for the reopening of museums was 3 April, but this was soon postponed as the numbers of cases and deaths continued to rise. The lockdown sent shockwaves through Italy's public museums, not least when the Ministry of Cultural Heritage Activities and Tourism revealed that a staggering 90 per cent of revenues in 2019 had derived from sales of entrance tickets.¹ Italian museums were permitted to reopen, with sanitary and social distancing measures in place, from 18 May, before being closed again from early November 2020 until the beginning of February 2021 in Rome and Lazio (with other regions varying). At the time of writing (March 2021) non-essential travel between regions in Italy is forbidden and the ability of a museum to remain open depends on the status of its region, which is regularly reviewed and subject to change at short notice.

While a handful of high-profile Italian museums were quick to respond to the lockdown with a series of well-publicized online initiatives, the embracing of the digital realm has generally been slower for smaller museums.² At the onset of the pandemic there were almost five thousand recorded museums and heritage sites in Italy, of which, according to a report published in December 2019 by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), only 51.1 per cent reportedly had a website and 53.4 per cent a presence on social media.³ The same survey also found that just one in ten Italian museums were actively engaged in digitally cataloguing their collections (p. 5). ISTAT has not yet published any data from 2020, making it difficult to quantify the extent to which Italian museums have enlarged their digital footprints since the outbreak of the crisis. However, the evidence collected from constituent members of the Associazione Nazionale Case della Memoria, an association of historic Italian house

¹ 'Coronavirus, per i musei statali una perdita netta di 20 mln al mese', *Ag Cult*, 23 March 2020 <<https://agcult.it/a/16410/2020-03-23/coronavirus-per-i-musei-statali-una-perdita-netta-di-20-mln-al-mese>> [accessed 23 March 2021].

² Giulia Tani, 'Musei digitali, la cultura reagisce all'emergenza coronavirus (ma l'impatto economico del lockdown è pesante)', *Icom: Istituto per la Competitività*, 10 April 2020 <<https://www.i-com.it/2020/04/10/musei-digitali-coronavirus/>> [accessed 23 March 2021].

³ 'Statistiche Today: L'Italia dei Musei', ISTAT, 23 December 2019 <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2019/12/LItalia-dei-musei_2018.pdf> [accessed 23 March 2021].

museums, suggests that more small- to medium-sized museums have expanded their digital outreach as a direct consequence of lockdown, with activities ranging from the hosting of talks and conferences on Zoom to the creation of short promotional videos and virtual tours.⁴

At the Keats-Shelley House, the first eleven-week lockdown provided us with the time and space to complete projects which were already in development and to venture into territories previously unexplored by the museum. Launched at the start of May 2020, the house's digital collections archive brought together for the first time our holdings of relics, artworks, and some four hundred autograph manuscripts in one easily accessible archive, where previously only the library catalogue had been available for online consultation.⁵ The archive was accompanied by a new website with an audiovisual resource section and didactic material for schools as well as a vastly improved version of the house's online gift shop. The timing of the launch served us well because it allowed us to reach out to audiences in lockdown with social media campaigns focused on the museum's collections, and because the increased sales of merchandise and donations received via the new website provided valuable income during the crisis. While all of the planning and much of the groundwork for this project had been done before the lockdown, the museum's closure to visitors afforded the luxury of time for remaining items from the collection to be digitized, and for some of our portrait busts to be restored on site before being photographed, once the government permitted non-essential work of this nature to resume (*Fig. 1*).

Other projects sprang into being in response to the lockdown and depleted revenues from visitors. In April we launched our first online poetry-writing consultations and group workshops, which allowed novice and aspiring poets to discuss their work online with their tutor, poet Moira Egan, a long-time collaborator of the museum. We also published our first ever e-book in the form of *Odes for John Keats*, an anthology of work commissioned by the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association from contemporary English and Italian poets as one of the first projects for Keats-Shelley200, the museum's three-year campaign to mark the bicentenaries of the deaths of Keats and Shelley in Italy. Originally printed in December 2019, the book has been available on Amazon

⁴ Three YouTube playlists (*Memoria dalle Case*, *Memoria in Movimento*, and *Terra Nostra*) were created by the Associazione Nazionale Case della Memoria during the first lockdown with thirty-three videos from constituent members <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChD6cLepGUgW_vDZNZX9sWQ/playlists>. Examples of virtual tours created by constituent members during lockdown include 'Il Museo della Badia di Vaiano – Casa Agnolo Firenzuola' <https://emme4video.com/virtual-tour/museo-badia_v1/> and 'Villa del Mulinaccio' <https://emme4video.com/virtual-tour/mulinaccio_v1/> [all accessed 23 March 2021].

⁵ For an exploration of the archive, see Alessandra Gioenco, 'Collections Housed at the Keats-Shelley House: A Digital Translation', *Keats-Shelley Review*, 34 (2020), 88–96. The archive may be accessed at <<https://ksh.roma.it/collections-en>> [accessed 23 March 2021].



Fig. 1: Busts under restoration during lockdown: (left) P. B. Shelley by Mozes Ezekiel; and (right) John Keats by William Wetmore Story. Photo: Rita Canneori, Keats-Shelley House, May 2020.

Kindle since April 2020. For the Keats-Shelley House, online courses and e-books are the kinds of experiments which may not have been attempted had the lockdown not occurred. Such initiatives, together with the heightened activity on the house's social media platforms — the launch of a synchronized reading group, and work with Keats-Shelley200 Ambassadors on promotional video messages — all brought forth ways of engaging the museum's staff and collaborators as well as maintaining our profile online.⁶ Ensuring that all members of the museum team have been involved in challenging projects, ideally with opportunities for professional development, has been a priority from the outset of the crisis. This has been particularly crucial for an organization whose seven members of staff all continued to work, largely from home, during lockdown, with no possibility of furlough from the government. In this sense the Keats-Shelley House has never been closed for business, but, like many museums and

⁶ For media interest in our first lockdown activities, see Rita Italiano, 'Leggere insieme a distanza: Nel nome di John Keats', *La Stampa*, 31 March 2020 <<https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/tempi-moderni/2020/03/31/news/leggere-insieme-a-distanza-nel-nome-di-john-keats-1.38659493>> [accessed 23 March 2021].

cultural institutions, has explored new ways of opening up across the digital domain when its physical doors were closed.⁷

One of the greatest challenges to surface during the first lockdown has led to one of our most potentially sustainable solutions. Before 2020 some 40 per cent of the Keats-Shelley House's annual intake of visitors consisted of educational visits, and we were compelled to find ways of continuing our relations with schools which had been built up over many decades. This was partly achieved through the house's long-running poetry-writing competition for Italian schools, as well as the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association's Young Romantics Prize run from the UK, both of which coincided with the first lockdown. However, the sudden absence of school groups gave us the impetus to start planning a new online visitor experience, which, in its first incarnation, was specifically tailored to meet the needs of schools. A trial version of a panoramic tour using Google Tour Creator was planned in April in consultation with Nicholas Mellor, an expert in social enterprise, and created in-house by staff following the easing of local restrictions and prior to the museum's reopening to visitors. We were fortunate to be able to capture the tranquil rooms of the house with its recently restored ceilings as well as exterior shots including the Spanish Steps and Piazza di Spagna, Non-Catholic Cemetery, and Baths of Caracalla while Rome's thoroughfares and historic sites were largely bereft of people. Working to the tightest of deadlines we managed to get a first working version of the tour ready on time to begin trials with some of our partner schools in Rome before the start of the summer holidays, with the aim of planning a final version later in the year, utilizing feedback from participating schools.

When the word came at the start of November 2020 that museums in Italy would have to close again, we did not lose heart and channelled our energies into preparing for the bicentenary of Keats's death in February 2021, with a new virtual tour at the forefront of a series of digital projects. A few days before the order came to close we had opened 'Gusto', an exhibition of work by British artist Nancy Cadogan which was transformed into a virtual exhibition on our website when the news was announced. It was no easy task putting together an exhibition with works transported from London to Rome at a time of ever-evolving travel restrictions, so we wanted to make the most of it and allow the paintings to be seen by as many people as possible. We also vowed to continue our Keats-Shelley200 virtual events programme which had been launched on 21 September 2020, the 200th anniversary of Keats's voyage to Italy, with 'John Keats Sets Sail: A Bicentenary Reading of Keats and Shelley' by actor Julian Sands, which was accompanied by a Google Earth story mapping Keats's travels. The second event in the series premiered

⁷ For a fuller exploration of the house's activities during the first lockdown, see Giuseppe Albano, 'Report from Rome', *Keats-Shelley Review*, 34 (2020), 75–78.

on 23 December and took the form of a concert titled ‘Bright Star: A Concert to Mark the Bicentenary of Keats’s Time in Piazza di Spagna’, comprising songs by various composers inspired by the verse of Keats and Shelley and performed by tenor Christian Collia and pianist Giacomo Refolo. One of the precious few upsides of the pandemic is that it has encouraged us to think beyond our book-lined walls and strive to reach audiences in greater numbers and across greater distances. Our aim is for the Keats–Shelley200 virtual events programme to grow into an enduring audiovisual resource for poetry lovers the world over, with the emphasis on providing carefully curated quality over quantity of material. Attention to detail is imperative in order to recreate, as far as possible, the dramatic mood, tension, and atmosphere of a physical performance in the house, which is why our events since lockdown have been filmed in 4K.⁸

Faced with the prospect of the museum still being closed and/or geographically off limits to most potential visitors on the bicentenary, we began to explore new ways of telling Keats’s story and entered into an inspiring partnership with the Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA). A rich, varied Keats–Shelley200 programme had been launched in February 2020, but in the months following lockdown many of the large-scale events planned to coincide with Keats’s anniversary were pushed back till autumn 2021 and beyond. Roger Michel, director of the IDA, came up with the idea of creating a computer-generated image of Keats’s face based on scans of the poet’s death mask and other portraits. The Oxford-based team proceeded to bring Keats to life by giving him a voice, body, and clothing, collaborating in the process with Ranjan Sen, a senior lecturer and specialist in diachronic phonology at the University of Sheffield, and Jenny Lister, curator of fashion and textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum. CGI Keats, as he came to be known, created considerable media interest when it was announced that on the day of the bicentenary he would read the sonnet ‘Bright Star’ in a livestream from his bedroom in the Keats–Shelley House (*Fig. 2*).⁹

We also enlisted the services of Twiceout, a Rome-based studio specializing in virtual, mixed, and augmented reality, to produce a first tranche of digital projects in the run-up to the anniversary. With the museum devoid of visitors once more from 5 November 2020 we devised a series of immersive videos employing virtual-reality elements, a small but brave step forward for the Keats–Shelley House and one that

⁸ For a fuller exploration of the house’s activities during the second period of closure, see Giuseppe Albano, ‘Report from Rome’, *Keats–Shelley Review*, 35 (2021), 3–6. Keats–Shelley200 virtual events may be viewed on the museum’s YouTube channel: <<https://www.youtube.com/user/TheKeatsShelleyHouse>>. The Google Earth story may be seen at <<https://bit.ly/KeatsFinalVoyage>> [both accessed 23 March 2021].

⁹ Examples of media coverage include, Simon de Bruxelles, ‘CGI wizardry to bring Keats back to life after 200 years’, *Telegraph*, 6 February 2021 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/02/06/cgi-wizardry-bring-keatsback-life-200-years/>> [accessed 23 March 2021].



Fig. 2: CGI Keats, Institute for Digital Archaeology/A. Karenowska, February 2021.

involved the creation of an advisory digital outreach sub-committee. The first two such projects emerged in the form of an ‘**Immersive Video Tour of the Keats-Shelley House**’ and ‘**The Death of Keats: An Immersive Video Story**’, both narrated by legendary rock star, philanthropist, and Keats-Shelley200 Ambassador, Bob Geldof. The plan was to have the videos ready to premiere for the bicentenary of Keats’s death alongside the new virtual tour, and the team worked tirelessly and wholeheartedly to get them delivered on time, making the most of the long winter nights spent in curfew. Although the immersive videos are best enjoyed with a VR headset, which allows viewers to enter the world of the tour, giving the sensation of being in the house, in Rome, and in the Non-Catholic Cemetery, we have tried to ensure that they are fully accessible while watched on a regular screen, and viewers can also enjoy them as ‘traditional’ videos from start to finish, or move around the rooms and outside scenes to explore things that interest them. The videos attracted substantial attention from the press in the UK and Italy amidst the publicity for the bicentenary.¹⁰

¹⁰ Examples of media interest include, Laura Larcán, ‘Onore a John Keats, poeta dall’anima rock: Intervista con Bob Geldof’, *Il Messaggero*, 17 February 2021, p. 20; and Alison Flood, ‘A joy forever: poetry world prepares to mark bicentenary of John Keats’, *Guardian*, 19 February 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/19/poetry-world-prepares-to-mark-bicentenary-of-john-keats>> [accessed 23 March 2021].

Taking centre stage in our second period of closure was the creation of a new interactive virtual tour, which came to be named 'A Panoramic Tour of the Keats-Shelley House with a Live Guide'. The tour consists of meticulously photographed 360° scenes inside the house, including the terrace, temporary exhibition room, and gift shop, as well as the library and Keats apartment, and we drew on the insight gained from the first version of the tour created during the first lockdown (Figs. 3, 4). One of the most salient points arising from feedback in earlier trials was the importance of including a live guide to allow participants to interact and ask questions during the tour. We have always cherished the connection with our visitors and find that the experience of visiting the house is enhanced by an exchange with our guides, so we were glad to find a way to build this into the online experience through our own video-conferencing platform broadcast from the house through OBS Studio. While the trial version of the tour was created specifically with school groups in mind, the second enforced closure of the museum and ongoing stringent travel restrictions necessitated a rethink. Would it not be wonderful, we asked ourselves, if on the day of the bicentenary of Keats's death we could be joined by visitors from anywhere in the world for a tour of the poet's final dwelling place at a time when a poetic pilgrimage to Rome was all but impossible for anyone living outside Lazio?



Fig. 3: The Keats Room of the Keats-Shelley House, photographed from 'A Panoramic Tour of the Keats-Shelley House' created by Twiceout and launched for the bicentenary of John Keats's death in February 2021.



Fig. 4: The Salone of the Keats-Shelley House, photographed from 'A Panoramic Tour of the Keats-Shelley House' created by Twiceout.

'A Panoramic Tour of the Keats-Shelley House with a Live Guide' was launched on 23 February 2021 as part of the day's programme to commemorate Keats's death. This was a long, exciting day, with conferences, events, new plays, and poems commissioned and arranged by a host of organizations alongside the Keats-Shelley House, including the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, Keats House Hampstead, the Keats Foundation, the Keats-Shelley Association of America and Keats Letters Project, the British School at Rome, the British Institute of Florence, ArtHouse Jersey, the Poetry Society, the Institute for Digital Archaeology, the South Downs Poetry Festival, BBC Radio 4, Wireless Theatre, and the Museum of Rome in Trastevere.¹¹ The day would not have been the exhilarating success it was without the collaborative spirit which brought so many institutions together with the common goal of celebrating Keats's extraordinary legacy. And the occasion might not have been quite so collaborative had we not been living under varying degrees of lockdown in the UK, the USA, and Italy, for the channels of communication flowed freely and unreservedly thanks to the culture of

¹¹ For a summary of the day's programme, see <<https://ksh.roma.it/news/bicentenary-john-keats%E2%80%99s-death-rome-23rd-february-2021>>. For a preview of the 'Panoramic Tour' and related digital activities, see Matthew Carey Salyer, 'The Keats-Shelley House Commemorates the Death of Keats', *Forbes*, 2 March 2021 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattsalyer/2021/03/02/the-keats-shelley-house-commemorates-the-death-of-keats/?sh=6581474972ae>>. The tour itself may be booked from <<https://ksh.roma.it/panoramic-tour?lan=en>> [all accessed 23 March 2021].

online meetings, and participating organizations were willing to share their ideas and support one another, rather than tend exclusively to their own projects.

There are many uncertainties facing the museums sector in the age of Covid, not least the current restrictions on international travel. While tourism has often been identified as a major risk to the preservation of cultural heritage, the lack of tourism may yet prove to cause even greater damage to our sector, particularly in Italy, where tourism accounted for 13 per cent of GDP in 2019.¹² Out of every challenging situation, however, opportunities arise and the marked increase in the levels of innovation and quality of the Keats-Shelley House's digital output over the last year will alter the way people interact with the museum and its collections for years to come. Since the launch of our 'Panoramic Tour' we have welcomed school and university groups as well as individual visitors, couples, and even families online to the Keats-Shelley House. It is unlikely that visiting the house virtually will ever rival the visceral experience of standing in the room where Keats drew his last breath but the online tour will allow us to maintain and even expand our outreach to schools, increase the number of visitors we can accommodate without fear of contravening social distancing guidelines, and allow lovers of Keats's poetry to connect with the house and with each other. When travel restrictions are eased and international tourists are able to return, the tour will live on as a resource for visitors and school groups. Finally, but crucially, the 'Panoramic Tour' will help ensure that the Keats-Shelley House is able to earn income from online visitors as well as from its online shop in the event of another lockdown.

¹² 'Total Contribution of Travel and Tourism to GDP in Italy from 1999 to 2019', Statista Research Department, 15 February 2021 <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/627988/tourism-total-contribution-to-gdp-italy/>> [accessed 23 March 2021].

