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OPINION | COMMENTARY | CULTURAL COMMENTARY

# *The Staying Inside Guide: Art History for All Ages*

Even though schools and museums are shut down, curious kids can still engage with the arts via a variety of online resources.

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By Cammy Brothers

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Exterior of the Parthenon

PHOTO: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

**Never have I wanted** to take my children to the museum more than in the past weeks, when we have all been stuck at home. Of course the museum doors shut the same day as the schools. Although I teach college students, I've never been able to imagine having the patience to execute home schooling well. But since the closures, out of desperation, I have cobbled together a skeletal curriculum with a few friends, each of us offering a short virtual class to a group of children, ages 6 through 14, every weekday. Subjects have ranged from ancient Egyptian architecture to supply and demand curves to the physics of flight. We've been meeting with some success: Even the youngest in the group have responded to the stimuli offered by the unfamiliar topics.

Art history in particular is rarely if ever on the menu of elementary or middle school. But many bright children find that their particular strengths do not match the academic agenda of their classrooms, leaving them feeling not up to the job. Art history draws on a wider array of capacities. Even if you can't easily read a book, you can read a picture or a building, observe and describe. And art history can open up both the past and the present. Why might Queen Hatshepsut, a female pharaoh of Ancient Egypt and a great architectural patron, have presented herself with a beard? How should Notre Dame Cathedral be repaired?

A range of websites and digital tools help bring historical sites to life. Google Earth can take children to the Pyramids at Giza, while the Harvard Digital Giza Project, with its videogame-like interface, allows explorers to search the interior of pyramids. To give young armchair travelers the feeling of immediacy, Columbia University Media Center for Art History has a series of navigable panoramic photographs, making it possible to contemplate the Parthenon in one direction and turn to gaze out at the city of Athens in the other, all as if you were standing right there.

Beyond architecture, museums have become extremely sophisticated in making their collections accessible online, and Google Arts & Culture Streetview allows many virtual walk-throughs of entire museums that may also be engaging for children. These are not always easy to navigate, especially if you don't already know the museum layout. But any confusion can be offset by the many ways individual museums offer to interact with their collections. The British Museum's collaborative timeline with Google has an impressive interface allowing viewers to shuttle among time periods, geographies and themes. It is essentially an interactive version of "A History of the World in 100 Objects" by Neil MacGregor, the British Museum's former director.

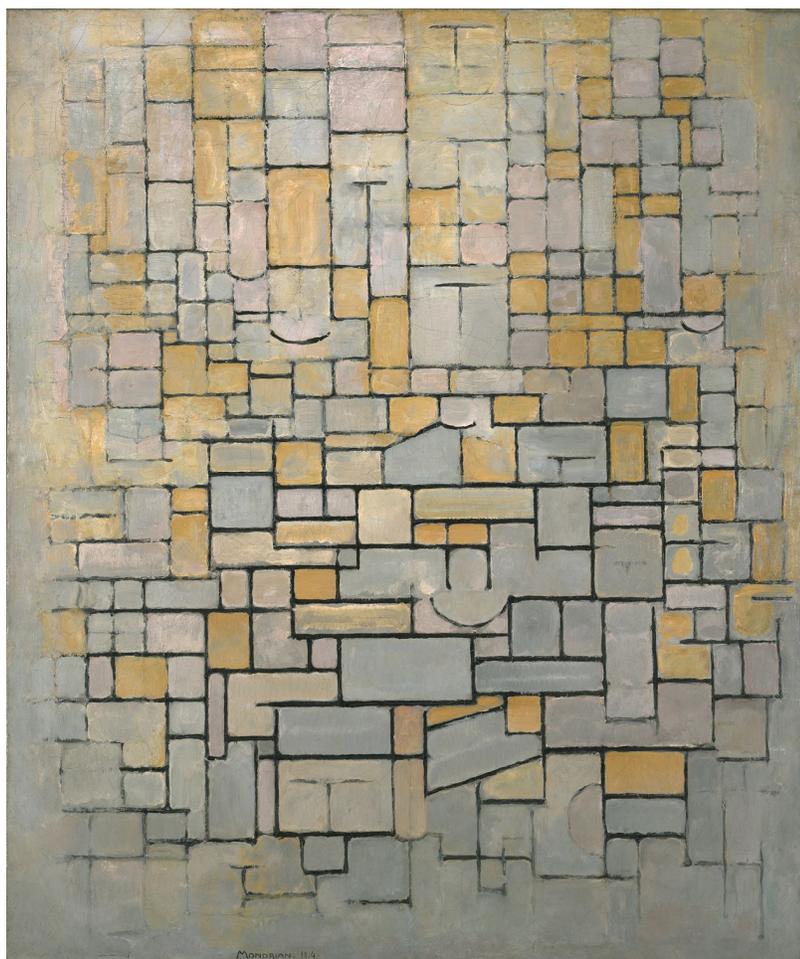


3-D model of the Giza Plateau from the Harvard Digital Giza Project

PHOTO: GIZA PROJECT AT HARVARD

The Kimbell Art Museum and the Museum of Modern Art also provide brief audio accounts specifically tailored for children while avoiding condescension. In the Kimbell's account of Mondrian's "Composition" (1914), a soft-hued grid of gray, pink and orange, the narration manages to provide a clear definition of abstraction, likening the grid to the verticals and horizontals of tree branches or buildings.

Short explanatory videos, on enticing topics such as "How to Catch a Unicorn" (about medieval art), on the British Museum's YouTube channel, or "The Mummification Process," on the Getty's, tackle topics of perennial interest to children. In other videos from the Getty, such as "Making a Spanish Polychrome Sculpture" or "Making Manuscripts," conservators re-create historical techniques, providing windows into how differently artists worked in past centuries.



Piet Mondrian's 'Composition' (1914)

PHOTO: KIMBELL ART MUSEUM

For younger children, the PBS "Nova" series (available on their site and Amazon Prime) includes several excellent segments focused on historical buildings and their construction, from "Decoding the Great Pyramid" to "Building the Great Cathedrals" and "Secrets of the Forbidden City." The account of Beijing's Forbidden City describes how the large blocks used in construction may have been brought to the site by sliding them on pathways of ice. Also for the

grade-school set, the National Gallery of Art in Washington has a versatile and engaging iPad app, NGAkids, that allows children to create their own variations on works in the collection.

Despite the fact that arts institutions are facing an uncertain future, there may be a bright spot in the midst of our present calamity. With any luck, a little stimulation of the younger generation during this fallow time will mean that when the museums finally reopen, children will be the first through the doors.

—*Ms. Brothers is an associate professor at Northeastern University and the author of “Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture” (Yale).*

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