

MHSO Presentation to the Standing Committee on Finance & Economic Affairs Culture and Heritage Hearings

I'm Elizabeth Price. I worked in the OPS for over 35 years. Since I retired in 2014, I've served as the volunteer Development Manager for the Multicultural History Society of Ontario (MHSO).

The MHSO is a volunteer-run not-for-profit. Established in 1976, it has a dual mandate as steward of heritage resources and educator. It collects, preserves, and makes available records documenting immigrant, ethnic, and Indigenous histories, and it undertakes educational programming to illuminate these histories. The Society's current focus is the establishment of an online repository. The repository will host multiple digital archives created by organizations and facilities with ethnocultural and Indigenous archival holdings, with the MHSO's digital archive serving as the anchor archive.

The MHSO has experienced significant negative impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. Constraints on our activities have affected revenue streams, and our resources were already very, very limited. But I'm not here today to talk about the losses we've suffered. You're discussing how the province might recover from the pandemic and move forward. The MHSO would like to contribute to that discussion.

My colleagues and I at the MHSO are interested in digital cultural heritage. We believe that it has economic potential, especially given the increased need, at present, for us to connect and operate in virtual space. This potential can be realized.

Digital cultural heritage is the integration of cultural heritage on the one hand and information and communication technologies on the other. Given the huge number of collections in the hundreds of heritage facilities and organizations across the province, there's enormous scope for digital cultural heritage.

Digital cultural heritage work includes a number of different types of activity:

- 1) digital recording to preserve, document, manage, and provide access to heritage resources,
- 2) digital research to identify, map, monitor, analyze, and reconstitute heritage resources, and
- 3) digital creation to produce immersive, multi-sensory cultural experiences.

It's the third type of activity – digital creation – that's so exciting. It's dependent on the essential first step of capturing and disseminating digital data, but it entails much more. It focuses on the creative processes of visualization, interpretation, and presentation. Digital creation intrigues many of us in the heritage sector because it'll enable more direct, active, and collaborative engagements with our pasts. And it will lead to the emergence of bold, imaginative forms of expression and communication, some of which are inconceivable to us today.

It's an opportune time to pursue the economic potential of digital cultural heritage. There are a number of reasons.

- 1) Advances in digital cultural heritage are dependent on expanded understandings of cultural heritage and changing practices in interpreting and presenting histories and heritage as well as on intensifying innovation in digital technologies. All of this is happening now.
- 2) Large numbers of young people are pursuing studies in public history, digital history, digital humanities, digital media studies, digital design, and computer animation in Ontario universities and community colleges. They're ready to apply their knowledge and skills.
- 3) Heritage facilities and organizations in Ontario, including the MHSO, are digitizing items in their collections for preservation, documentation, management, and access purposes, so heritage resources are already being converted into usable forms.

The European Union has recognized that the use of digital cultural content presents opportunities for stimulating economic activity and creating jobs. It's established the best-practice network, Europeana Space, to promote creative, commercial reuses for the extensive digital content in the Europeana Collections repository. And the Europeana Labs provide an environment for developing and showcasing sustainable business projects.

It's relatively easy for us to envision initiatives that creatively mine, reuse, and remix digital data. There's economic potential in these types of initiatives. But initiatives that venture beyond these activities have even more potential. Digital media designers and entrepreneurs who utilize the historical knowledge and the research and interpretative skills of historians and heritage workers have the capacity to formulate new ideas and bring new products and services to the marketplace.

Tourism-oriented initiatives evidence the value of public/private sector collaborations in digital creation. Celebrated examples include the Old Summer Palace in China and Pompeii in Italy. Other types of products with commercial value and/or economic impact include immersive site recreations, serious games, and visioning tools to help communities leverage place-based cultural heritage values and assets in transitioning from resource-based to knowledge-based economies.

In the MHSO's view, producing rich, meaningful cultural heritage experiences through digital creation requires a number of things:

- 1) high-quality digitized heritage resources – ensuring suitability for use,
- 2) extensive, meticulous research – ensuring accuracy and authenticity,
- 3) content depth – conveying spatial and temporal contexts, including multiple voices and perspectives,
- 4) creativity and originality – devising imaginative, site and/or subject specific solutions, avoiding superficial, homogenous, look-alike products,
- 5) sophisticated project management – generating exceptional design and ensuring efficient implementation through organized work processes, and
- 6) effective cross-sectoral, inter-disciplinary collaboration and innovation – producing synergies through cooperative effort.

Beyond providing funding for high-quality digitization, the provincial government can start the process of realizing the economic potential of digital cultural heritage by:

- assessing infrastructure and training needs, and commercialization potential,
- investigating copyright and intellectual property rights issues and challenges,
- hosting cross-sectoral knowledge exchanges as a first step in promoting new modalities and opportunities, and in facilitating co-design and co-production,
- creating best practice demonstrators and/or supporting pilots, and
- staging open innovation challenges.

Thank you.