

**S**MARTIFY IS THE WORLD'S MOST DOWNLOADED museum app. From the National Gallery London and the Met, to the Louvre and the Pushkin, the free app makes art collections accessible for a global audience.

A viewer holds their phone up to a work of art as if taking a photo; the app identifies the work and displays information—whether that's text, audio or video—on screen. "Museums can't afford to build apps so we partner with them to bring their collections to life," says Anna Lowe, Smartify's co-founder.

The app launched in 2016, a time when some leading institutions enforced selfie-stick bans and prominent curators were saying that smartphones detracted from the museum experience. Yet Smartify believed the technology could be a tool for engagement rather than distraction. The team foresaw and pioneered the emergence of the "multiplatform museum" long before the pandemic shut galleries worldwide and clarified the need for a digital transformation. The app has proved a crucial source of engagement and revenue for many shuttered galleries, and a new feature in the app now helps museum visitors socially distance in their favorite spaces.

Lowe, who made Forbes' 30 Under 30 list in 2019 and is the youngest ever Tate Trustee, recently spoke to Brunswick's Fanny Guesdon.

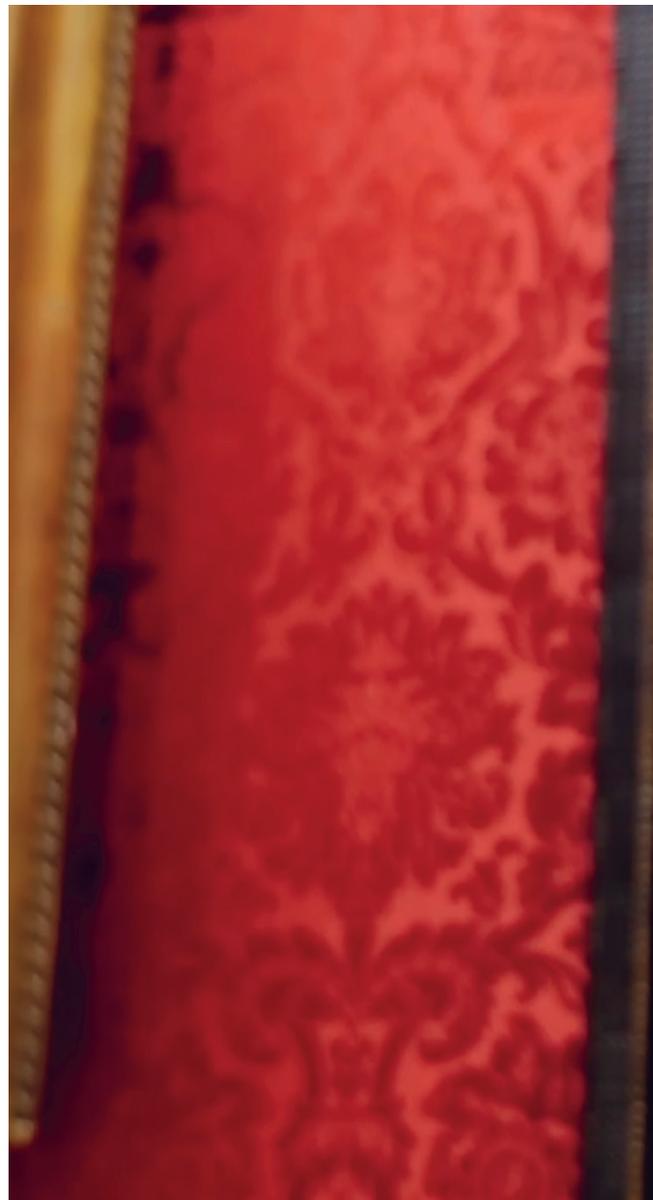
**Was Smartify an idea that took shape over time, or was it the product of an "a-ha" moment?**

There was definitely an a-ha moment. Back in 2015, people were using Shazam to recognize songs. Augmented reality and image recognition technology moved forward a lot. We felt that the technology would be fun and interesting for a museum audience. Not only the idea that you could use the phone's camera to identify an artwork, but also the vision to create a single platform for discovering art and culture, both in museums and at home, similar to the Netflixes and the Spotifys of the world.

**Netflix and Spotify have profoundly changed our cultural habits. Are you aiming to facilitate a similar disruption?**

We're a social enterprise. We wanted to be a company because it forces you to create value and to respond to your audiences, your customers and your users. We generate revenue through a tiered annual subscription that museums pay. For audiences the app is free to download. They can buy museum shop items, book online museum classes and access premium content which all goes back to the museums. We take a small processing fee on these transactions.

An app that was once rejected by almost every major museum may now help them reopen safely in an era of social distancing—and transform how they engage audiences. Brunswick Arts' **FANNY GUESDON** speaks with co-founder **ANNA LOWE**.

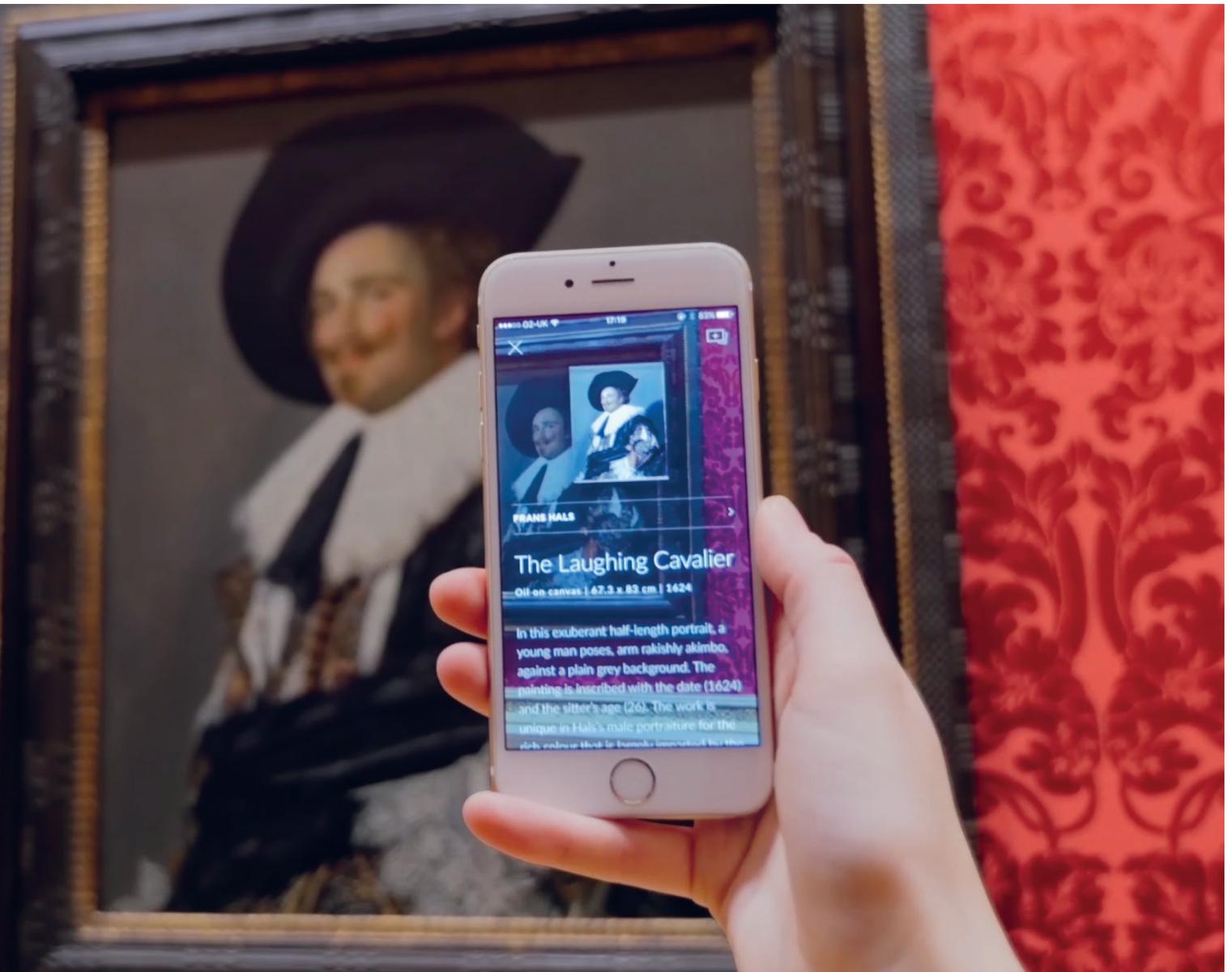


# PUTTING the ART

But it's not about disruption or the winner-takes-all approach. Everything we've developed has been in partnership with museums from the very beginning. What we do has public value. It has to be simple and accessible.

**Did you face any particularly biting or blunt rejections as you were getting off the ground?**

We had rejections from almost every major museum at the beginning. For a lot of people, using your phone in the museum felt like a distraction. We



# in SMARTPHONES

wanted to reframe the use of phones in galleries as engagement. We all have these supercomputers in our pockets; there's no reason to have clunky audio guides. You return them at the end of your visit and lose all the information you've learned.

## **You're now the most downloaded museum app in the world. How did you get there?**

We pioneered putting the audience first. Many museums had invested huge amounts of money in amazing digital teams and strategies that focused

Museum-goers can use Smartify to instantly access background on artwork such as "The Laughing Cavalier" by Frans Hals, above.

on their collection and their website. That's not how audiences think. We were asking: "Where and when do people want this content, and how does this fit into people's lives and routines?"

The museum of the future is a multiplatform museum. People do see museums as centers for knowledge, learning and thinking about cultural objects and cultural history. A dedicated online space, which gives opportunities for real learning and real community building, could provide huge growth for museums if they put a value on digital and don't make all content available for free.

## **What does digital transformation mean for storytelling?**

Collections can be used as a starting point for thematic storytelling and connecting objects from

different museums in new ways. There's going to be more value placed on nuanced knowledge and diverse viewpoints from outside the building, just as much as the museum curators. You can only do it with a digital label because it would take up the whole room with various labels on the wall. A lot of art historians and educators who have their own voice will monetize content separately, like journalists do.

**When the pandemic hit, museums around the world shut their doors and moved online. How have Smartify and museums responded to COVID-19?**

It's all at home. Before the pandemic 50% of the audience used Smartify on site, and 50% at home. There has been a huge growth in users, both in terms of time being spent on the platform and new audiences. We helped museums translate their existing audio tours into at-home experiences so they could change artworks each week and we made it a lot more engaging via desktop for our 2 million users. We've been building an e-shop to help them raise revenue and pulling all merchandise in a single place. We also published a Museum Social Distancing Toolkit in partnership with CCD wayfinding specialists to support museums as they begin to plan reopening.

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**Have you observed a change in the mindsets of museums?**

The past year has been a huge time for change, like forced R&D. Museums are really thinking about new experiences, and are willing to fail and try things, which I've not ever seen before. We've always been thinking about the before, during and after of the museum visit. How do we connect with this person again? Digital business models are the future.

**What's the next frontier for Smartify? Is there any plan to incorporate technology beyond the smartphone?**

The hardware part will inevitably change. At some point, we will have smart glasses that can pull an image recognition, and headphones to replicate the immersive nature of being in a physical space through sound triggers. We're always looking at new technologies and what we can do with them. But hardware is the last part of the equation.

Wikipedia is a good parallel to what we're trying to do. We work with corporate collections, hotels, private collectors, heritage sites, historic houses and social history and sciences museums.

The key thing we're doing, going back to the point about curation, is we're collecting the data about different collections and the stories that go along with them to make relevant connections between them. A curated experience by a person and based on your interests is always the best version that you can get.

Audiences expect personalization in every other cultural field now. We are also doing a project on wayfinding to improve visits.

**There's a growing backlash—and fatigue—toward both social media and smartphones. Do those worry you as you think about Smartify's long-term trajectory?**

We don't see ourselves falling into the bracket of social media. Digital platforms like Netflix and Spotify don't have an issue with fatigue and their content is pretty much endless. Screen fatigue is obviously real, but you can offer an experience that fits into people's routines in a meaningful way and adds value to their daily life.

We want people to engage with the history of the world through different collections across the planet. It shouldn't feel like a distraction, or, at least, it should feel like a great distraction. ♦

**FANNY GUESDON**, an Associate with Brunswick Arts, is based in London.