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**Museums haven't changed for centuries. Embracing the wisdom of crowds, Arkive uses blockchain to reinvent them, coordinating thousands of curators who vote to acquire and exhibit items all over the world. Co-founder Jordan Topoleski tells Mariquita de Boissière how they plan to reshape the cultural landscape.**



"We started off by asking this big, meaty question." On the other side of the screen, Arkive co-founder, Jordan Topoleski, breaks into a wide smile, "What would it look like if the Smithsonian was curated by the Internet?"

Officially launched in July 2022, Arkive is on a mission to decentralise one of the most prestigious institutions of the modern era: the museum. The initiative has made big moves already, partnering with cultural institutions such as Tate in London and Art Basel in Miami, plus the likes of Mastercard and Formula1 around the world.

Away from the corporate glitz, the Arkive Magazine explores *making the invisible visible*, acknowledging how museums built from have historically played roles upholding **elitist and colonial power**. As Arkive CEO Tom McLeod told *Curation*, the Culture3 podcast, many museums have historically been "soft power displays of conquest".

## "What would it look like if the Smithsonian was curated by the Internet?"

— Jordan Topoleski, co-founder, Arkive

But while founders and contributors alike grapple with how to build a museum that confronts issues of accessibility and representation, Arkive's aim is not to overthrow the establishment. "Anytime someone asks me, 'What do you think about existing legacy museums? Is Arkive trying to challenge them?' I'm like, 'No! Go to museums. Enjoy the artwork. They're an incredible cultural institution within society,'" Jordan tells me, adding that, "at the same time, I think there's room for us to ask, 'How do we experiment in moving this forward? How do we think about what the next iteration of these might look like?'"

Matching the scale of an institution such as the Smithsonian, which boasts a collection bordering on 160 million items, is no mean feat. The secret, I'm told, is to leverage thousands of supporters distributed across the globe. In the past 18 months, Arkive has toured the world, picking up around 3,000 members spread across 45 countries, turning the concept of a 'museum membership' from a local one into a global movement.



"The current experience of art and culture tends to be one of being a consumer," Jordan explains. "You go inside, you walk through it, you read the

information that's presented to you. We're asking, 'is there a way to let people switch from being solely consumers to also being producers?'"

For Arkive, web3 technology (they're built on Polygon) has unlocked new frontiers of borderless collaboration. "We're working at this really interesting time where web3 and decentralised autonomous networks let communities form in ways that simply weren't possible in the past," Jordan continues. "It's prompting lots of rich questions about how we think about global involvement."

## “What would happen if you flipped that pyramid around?”

— Jordan Topoleski, co-founder, Arkive

That participation in Arkive is organised around three key pillars that, combined, create the museum experience: curation, exhibition, and storytelling. "If you look at how museums have been run in the past," says Jordan, "there are a few people at the top making decisions about which items enter a collection, and then hundreds of thousands, if not millions, going to see them."

"What would happen if you flipped that pyramid around?" Jordan asks. "What if you gave those same culturally-interested individuals greater decision-making power and more of a say in what enters a collection?"

That is what Arkive's collections, currently comprising 19 items, have explored so far. Following an open call for proposals, members hear directly from those offering items to exhibit, whether they are subversive artworks or pioneering patents. Then, in a nod to the concept of 'museum as a forum', emphasising the role of curators as critics of what they curate, beyond simply elevating those items, members debate and vote which items to select.



Arkive acquired Madonna's feathered fans, iconic props from her 1990 VMA performance of "Vogue", as relics of pop culture history that illustrate the emergence of music television.

The results of this collective curation process is seen in pieces as diverse as the patent for the first general-purpose electronic computer, ENIAC, and the trio of fans used by Madonna for her iconic performance of Vogue for MTV in 1990, to artworks by the likes of duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, whose artwork *Electronic Field* provides a commentary on the inequities of power access in a Puerto Rico rocked by Hurricane Maria in 2017, as well as Josh Kline's *Overtime*, a commentary on the human body as a contested site under "hustle culture capitalism".

Not stopping at curation, Arkive applies the decentralised approach to how those pieces are exhibited. "The context of where the work is placed in the world matters," Jordan emphasises. "If you see bronze Nigerian statues in the British History Museum, for example, it has very different connotations than if you see it in Lagos or Abuja." Speaking on *Curation*, Tom McLeod illustrated the story behind *Electronic Field*. "It's a great story because we ended up placing it in Calgary, a city reckoning with their status as an energy hub of Canada, and how by 2050 that industry is going to have to shift."

## "Museums have historically been soft power displays of conquest."

— Tom McLeod, CEO, Arkive

In addition to Calgary, Arkive has exhibition spaces lined up in Los Angeles, New York, and Chile. That Chilean location will be filled by photographer Mauricio Toro-Goya, whose fourteen-piece series *Gólgota, Caravana de la Muerte* recalls the memory of those who were disappeared under the Pinochet dictatorship of the 1970s. Retold through a set of images that allude to the Catholic faith's Stations of the Cross, the work takes aim at the false morality of Latin America's conservative ruling class.

Described as "the most important (work) of Toro-Goya's artistic career", by Arkive member and Legal Tech product manager Lia Godoy, Arkive is lending the work to be displayed at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago later this year. "It makes so much sense to have this be at a predominant museum like the Museum of Memory," Jordan says. "It's about the people most directly impacted being able to see those pieces."



Acquired by Arkive in February 2023, 'Gólgota, Caravana de la Muerte' represents a parallel between the fourteen stations of the Catholic Via Crucis and the life and death of a political prisoner made to disappear during Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile.

Without a doubt, Arkive is working towards important strides to challenge a status quo that has seen museums tainted by accusations of cultural exclusion and misappropriation. But to what extent is an organisation with a currently-gated community and the ties that come with nearly \$10 million in venture capital investment the right organisation to be challenging that status quo?

"It's something we've spent a ton of time thinking through," Jordan reflects. "The admissions process is largely a remnant of the 'beta' phase we've been in — a huge part of when you're building any community is making sure there's a strong core, a sense of belonging, and high-quality membership. We don't gate membership based upon whether you have more experience being a curator than others, but we want it to be based on interest and the quality of contributions people are able to make."



Jordan adds that the “next iteration” of Arkive will open from an “exclusively application-based” membership to “one that gives people self-selecting ways to participate.” That includes an open sign-up process and a mobile app that will take Arkive in the direction of having “millions of people involved.”

# “Web3 lets communities form in ways that simply weren't possible in the past.”

— Jordan Topoleski, co-founder, Arkive

As for the funding, “raising an initial venture capital round has provided us with the strongest foundation to fulfill our mission,” Jordan says, noting that the funding has given Arkive the ability to curate and purchase an impressive round of early collections. “It's given us room to test, iterate, and grow. It has also meant not charging members or introducing financial gatekeeping — I think it's a failure if we just have hugely wealthy people funding the entire collection.”

Building out pathways for millions of members takes work. But by flipping the script on what has largely been a passive experience for the vast majority of museum-goers, Arkive has unleashed a new creative vigour and, even, prompted personal identification. “If you go to our LinkedIn page and look at Arkive employees, you'll see several members come up,” Jordan smiles. “Some members have gone out and put ‘Arkive curator’ on their LinkedIn. I think that's a really special example of the power of what it can mean to be a member.”



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Mariquita (she/they) is a freelance writer who lives in La Paz, Bolivia. A late-dx autistic with ADHD, they are in an ongoing process of (re)discovery and self-expression. Originally from Brighton, UK, over the past decade, she amplifies movements for environmental justice and coordinates campaigns to resist the criminalisation of protest.

Listen or read Arkive CEO Tom McLeod's interview on *Curation*, the Culture3 podcast, [here](#).

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