

The coronavirus museum: how historians are documenting the pandemic

The New-York Historical Society has started collecting artifacts for a collection aimed at teaching future generations about the current crisis

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Homemade mask in progress, Heidi Nakashima. Photograph: Courtesy of the New York Historical Society

[Nadja Sayej](#)

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks in New York City, a museum on the Upper West Side, the New-York Historical Society, began collecting items from the tragedy – from scraps of the World Trade Center to public signage, letters and firefighter helmets.

“There was little time to collect the debris that was littering downtown streets – trash to some, but treasure to us,” said the museum’s former president Kenneth T Jackson.



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Now, they're turning to the coronavirus pandemic to build on their [History Responds](#) collection. The museum is collecting ephemera, photographs and personal items from New Yorkers that detail the current crisis.

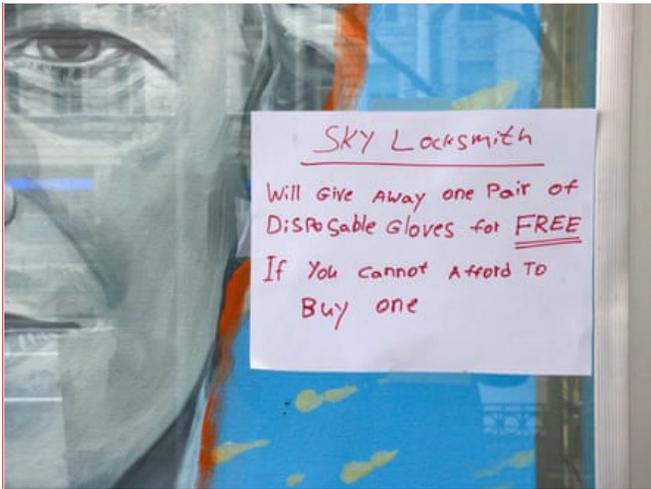
"This is a history that everyone will be looking back on," said Margi Hofer, museum director. "We hope people will be able to learn from it and be better prepared in an event like this in the future. To be better prepared to cope, as well."

The coronavirus collection follows in the same vein as their 9/11 collection, which includes objects, images and stories connected to the people of New York, and the world. In the case of the coronavirus, there will be a focus on health and medicine, household items, life under quarantine and social distancing. They're also planning to feature new product design in relation to the virus, as well as public art and community projects.

"We started collecting mid-March," said Hofer. "We were already alert to what items might be potential for collecting – hand sanitizer, masks, gloves – now evolved to a bigger story than we've imagined."

Commented [WU1]: What's the helmet for? Is the infirmity spiteful to head also? In the nation i am in, I haven't seen inhabitants wearing helmets? That's the similar board we have it in the nation that I am in also.

Commented [WU2]: Have the infirmity become a history by now. At my place we are still not permitted to be in public and that indicates it is still a current subject.



Business sign 3.20.20, photo by Stephen Harmon. Photograph: Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society

Among the items they have already collected, there is a photo of Alan Balicki, one of the museum's conservators, seated at a sewing machine making fabric face masks. "It taps into the variety and creativity of DIY face masks, which will be an interesting angle to explore down the road," said Hofer.

While closed business signs across the city of New York each have their own special slogan (many starting with "Dear customers"), a photo of one business sign here reads: "Sky Locksmith will give away a pair of disposable gloves for free if you cannot afford to buy one."

There are also shots of empty New York streets taken by photographer Stephen Harmon. One shows an empty Columbus Circle dated 28 March, another is a shot of a building being sanitized by workers wearing hazmat suits.

Commented [WU3]: The infirmity have been with us for further than 4 months, 1 pair seems entirely remarkable in a severely impacted nation. In my nation they have a soap and a place to cleanse. It is such a unceremonious inscription?



Columbus Circle 3.28.20, photo by Stephen Harmon. Photograph: Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society

“Our photo curator is in touch with street photographers who are ready to provide photos of topics that are of interest,” said Hofer. “People in protective gear, whatever they witness that tells the story of what it’s like to be in New York at this time.”

It’s more than just photos, however. Among the objects, there will be an emphasis on creativity throughout the crisis – and how art-making has surged under quarantine.

“We don’t want anyone risking their lives on our behalf,” she added, “but there are a lot of people documenting what’s going on in the street.”

Among the objects, there is a painted rock that reads “This Too Shall Pass”, as well as children’s paintings of rainbows. “We will be looking for objects that can help tell the story of how New Yorkers and people in the surrounding area are managing life and coping under these extraordinary circumstances,” said [Rebecca Klassen](#), one of the museum’s associate curators (one photo she spotted online was hand sanitizer bearing the caption “Liquid Gold”).

Commented [WU4]: It was how it was at the initial of the coronavirus in nation I am in but in further it is not similar to that.

Commented [WU5]: And have the “risking their lives on our behalf” revised the number of patients .



Rainbow by Lizzy (age four), Kew Gardens, Queens, photo by Leeka Murphy. Photograph: Courtesy of the New York Historical Society

Klassen mentioned the range of objects that could make their way into the collection; from creative personal protective equipment, such as plastic Yoda Halloween masks worn on the subway, to smart thermometers, which transmit data in real time to spot high-risk areas.

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“We curators are grappling with the whiplash right along with everyone else,” added Klassen. “Our conversations are evolving as we observe how the crisis is unfolding, and how that is being reflected in artifacts.”

In 2001, the museum’s curators made visits to ground zero, as well as to shrines across the city. “We knew if we didn’t act quickly, the evidence would be gone,” said Hofer. “We collected thousands of items.” (Today, the 9/11 Memorial has more than 450 objects in their permanent collection from the museum.)

But lifting found objects from the streets and donating them to the collection won’t be as straightforward. “We will be seeking professional guidance, but it isn’t clear at this point how long we need to wait before handling items,” said Hofer.

It makes sense, then, that the submissions process will purely be digital, for safety reasons. “For the most part, we’re telling people to hold on to things and we’ll collect them when the time is right.”

Commented [WU6]: It is not that it is not going to be suitable but it is about when it is going to be. In nation I am in we have such statements from govt on numerous subjects.

Commented [WU7]: Where is the professional guide coming from. Could it from their own country? Who says whether it is professional or not?

One thing they're interested in is the stories of medical professionals, healthcare professionals, hospitals and their equipment. "We have reached out to some hospitals to let them know we'd like to document their stories when there is time," she said.

For now, they're collecting children's artwork and digital photos, "things that represent lives", she said. "In one case, we have a chart of a child's daily schedule. Art, too, as there is so much creativity happening. As people are stuck at home – it shows how people can quell their anxiety and stay busy."

The society, which started in 1804, has a history of social documentation.

"Our founders lived through the British occupation and American revolution," said Hofer. "They were interested in preserving documents of that time, things were quickly disappearing. Without preserving them, we wouldn't have our history."

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Commented [WU8]: Why are they influential in the inception to begin with. Is it because they are failures and such are the inquiries of inhabitants in the nation I am in have?

Commented [WU9]: Its seems it is a influential organisation. Is it effective to consider, interrogate and expose the incompetence and indifference of those in power, without fear after they have become influential or before?

Commented [WU10]: Are they permanently in search of for improving or does it also involve ridding.

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