

## PARIS DISPATCH

## *Mona Lisa Is Alone, but Still Smiling*

With the Louvre closed because of the pandemic, museum officials are pushing ahead on a grand restoration and cleanup.

By **Liz Alderman** Photographs and Video by **Dmitry Kostyukov**

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PARIS — From her bulletproof case in the Louvre Museum, Mona Lisa’s smile met an unfamiliar sight the other morning: Emptiness. The gallery where throngs of visitors swarmed to ogle her day after day was a void, deserted under France’s latest coronavirus confinement.

Around the corner, the Winged Victory of Samothrace floated quietly above a marble staircase, majestic in the absence of selfie-sticks and tour groups. In the Louvre’s medieval basement, the Great Sphinx of Tanis loomed in the dark like a granite ghost from behind bars.

Yet out of the rare and monumental stillness, sounds of life were stirring in the Louvre’s great halls.

The rat-a-tat of a jackhammer echoed from a ceiling above the Sphinx’s head. Rap music thumped from the Bronze Room under Cy Twombly’s ceiling in the Sully Wing, near where workers were sawing parquet for a giant new floor. In Louis XIV’s former apartments, restorers in surgical masks climbed scaffolding to tamp gold leaf onto ornate moldings.

The world’s most visited museum — a record 10 million in 2019, mostly from overseas — is grappling with its longest closure since World War II, as pandemic restrictions keep its treasures under lock and key. But without crowds that can swell to as many as 40,000 people a day, museum officials are seizing a golden opportunity to finesse a grand refurbishment for when visitors return.



The courtyard of the Louvre, ordinarily bustling with visitors, was deserted in December.



No selfie sticks in evidence as Jan Fyt's "Display of dead game in a pantry with a cat and monkeys" gets moved.

"For some projects, the lockdown has allowed us to do in five days what would have previously taken five weeks," said Sébastien Allard, the general curator and director of the Louvre's paintings department.

Louvre lovers have had to settle for seeing masterpieces during the pandemic through virtual tours and the hashtags #LouvreChezVous and @MuseeLouvre. Millions of viewers got a spectacular fix this month from the Netflix hit series *Lupin*, in which the actor Omar Sy, playing a gentleman thief, stars in action-filled scenes in the Louvre's best-known galleries and under I.M. Pei's glass pyramid.

But virtual reality can hardly replace the real thing. Louvre officials are hoping the government will reopen cultural institutions to the public soon, although the date depends on the course the virus takes.

In the meantime, a small army of around 250 artisans has been working since France's latest lockdown went into effect on Oct. 30. Instead of waiting until Tuesdays — the sole day that the Louvre used to close — curators, restorers, conservationists and other experts are pressing ahead five days a week to complete major renovations that had started before the pandemic, and introduce new beautifications that they hope to finish by mid-February.



The Galerie d'Apollon.



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Some of the work is relatively simple, like dusting the frames of nearly 4,500 paintings. Some is herculean, like makeovers in the Egyptian antiquities hall and the Sully Wing. Nearly 40,000 explanatory plaques in English and French are being hung next to art works.

Even before the pandemic, the Louvre was taking a hard look at crowd management because mass tourism had meant many galleries were choked with tour groups. While travel restrictions have slashed the number of visitors, the museum will limit entry to ticket holders with reservations when it reopens to meet health protocols.

Other changes are planned — like new interactive experiences, including yoga sessions every half-hour on Wednesdays near Jacques-Louis David and Rubens masterpieces, and workshops in which actors play scenes from famous tableaux right in front of the canvases.

“It’s a callout to say the museum is living, and that people have the right to do these things here,” said Marina-Pia Vitali, a deputy director of interpretation who oversees the projects.

When I walked the halls on a recent visit, I felt a thrill upon seeing the Venus de Milo rise from her pedestal — minus the glow of iPhones — and admired, at leisure, the drape of sheer fabric chiseled from unblemished marble.

In the cavernous Red Room — home to monumental French paintings including the coronation of Napoleon as emperor in Notre Dame, and the Raft of the Medusa, depicting gray-skinned souls just clinging to life — it felt uplifting not to be swept along by throngs.

In the Egyptian Wing, antiquities experts cleaned a two-ton granite stele that will dominate a new entrance. Workers are also refurbishing the Mastaba, part of an Egyptian tomb that is among the Louvre’s most popular artifacts, in a dust-covered gallery scattered with saws and hammers.

Sophie Duberson, a restorer, took a child's toothbrush and delicately removed grime from the stele's hieroglyphs, which provide instructions for reviving Sénousret, chief of the Egyptian treasury during the 12th Dynasty, in the afterworld.

Vincent Rondot, the Louvre's director of Egyptian antiquities, inspected a temporary six-story support structure that had been built around the Mastaba, where a new angular entry wall would be erected in time for the return of hoped-for crowds.

"No one is celebrating the virus," said Mr. Rondot, as sparks flew from a nearby worker's cutting tool. "But we can welcome this situation because it lets us concentrate on the work."

At the same time, social distancing protocols restrict the number of workers allowed in closed spaces, which can sometimes brake progress.



The Mona Lisa is alone.



The world's most visited museum is grappling with its longest closure since World War II.

Artisans applying gold leaf in Louis XIV's rooms, for example, must remove masks to blow on the paper-thin metal. Workers have to keep far apart, so fewer can do the job and the work can take more time.

The pandemic also has wreaked havoc with planning for special exhibits. The Louvre lends around 400 works a year to other museums, and receives numerous loans for special shows.

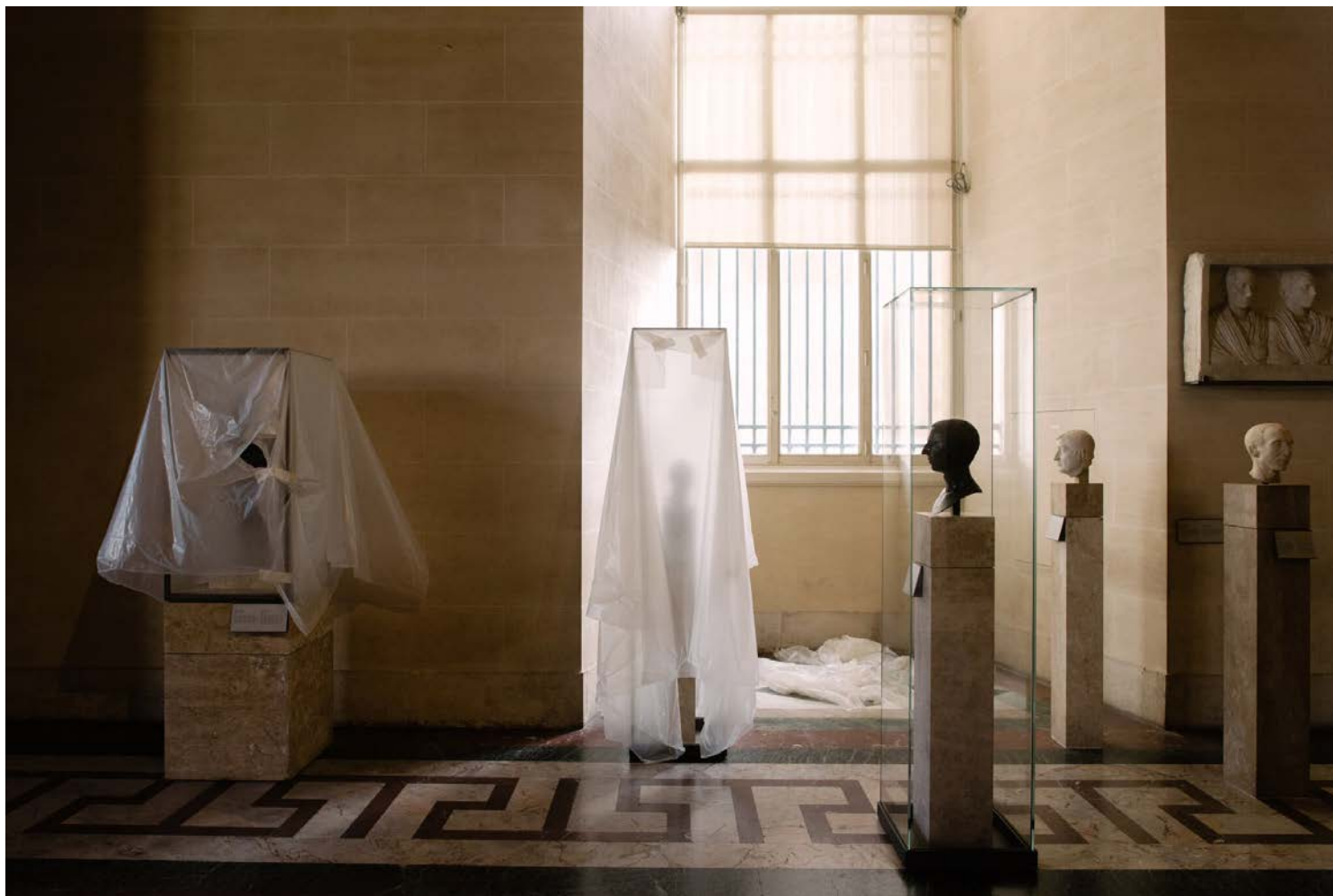
"It's really complicated because all museums in the world are in the process of changing their planning," Mr. Allard said.

As governments order new restrictions to contain a resurgence of the virus, special shows are being pushed back. A loan reserved for exhibits at several museums may get caught in confinements, making it tricky to deliver the promised artwork, he said.

On a small metal dolly nearby, the self-portrait of a young Rembrandt, resplendent in a jaunty black beret, a thick gold necklace and a confident smile, rested in an ornate oval frame. The 1633 blockbuster had been lent to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, but was stranded for three months there because of coronavirus travel restrictions. A few days earlier, he had returned to his home at the Louvre by truck through the underwater Channel Tunnel linking Britain and France.



The Winged Victory of Samothrace floating quietly above a marble staircase.



Protecting Roman sculptures during the restoration.

Blaise Ducos, chief curator of the Louvre's Dutch and Flemish paintings collection, typically accompanies loans to and from their destination, but could only watch the Rembrandt's removal by video. He drove to Calais to get the masterpiece when it emerged from the Chunnel, and was at last overseeing its rehung in the Louvre's Rembrandt room.

"We're happy to have him back," Mr. Ducos said.

Nearby, workers climbed a rolling scaffold to remove an enormous Van Dyck painting of Venus asking Vulcan for arms. Destined for an exhibit in Madrid, the painting was whisked through the Dutch halls, past Vermeer's Astronomer studying an astrolabe, before getting stuck in front of a small doorway in the Rubens room.

The workers turned the painting on its side and slid it on pillows to the next gallery, where it would go on to be packaged and — pandemic restrictions permitting — sent on its way.

"Covid has been a force majeure," said Mr. Allard, as a duo of Dutch paintings were hoisted to replace the Van Dyck. "At the moment we have so many question marks — it's hard to know what the situation will be in two, three or four months," he said.

"But despite Covid, we continue to work as always," Mr. Allard continued. "We must be ready to welcome back the public."





A view of the Louvre from the Tuileries Garden.

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