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Google helps folk art to achieve global reach

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Internet company teams up with Chinese partners for online cultural exhibition

Ancient handicraft skills still practiced today by China's ethnic groups have gone on show in an online art exhibition hosted by Google.

The Art of Chinese Crafts features high-resolution images and videos of more than 1,800 artworks from six folk art museums and institutes.



More than 1,800 artworks made by China's ethnic groups, including the walnut carving and shadow puppet, have gone on show in an online art exhibition hosted by Google. Photos Provided to China Daily



A woman from the Miao ethnic group makes embroidery.

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Handmade puppets collected by the China Intangible Heritage Industry Alliance are also in the online show.

Viewers can get a detailed look at traditional products such as shadow puppets, fans, Tibetan thangka drawings, kites and ancient costumes, or can watch as members of the Miao ethnic group makes silver embroidery.

The Google Cultural Institute opened the exhibition on Aug 23. It comes two years after its first online show of Chinese art, which featured about 1,400 artworks.

This year's show is in partnership with 20 institutes, including the China Paper-Cutting Museum, the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology's Museum of Ethnic Costumes, the China Intangible Heritage Industry Alliance and the Hangzhou Arts and Crafts Museum.

All together, the internet giant's Chinese art partners reaches 20 this year.

Simon Rein, program manager at the Google Cultural Institute, says his company not only showcases intangible Chinese heritage and craft art in high-res images and virtual reality technology, but also funds museums to take videos of craftsmen and women to record their techniques.

Last year, he says, the institute, which works with more than 1,200 museums worldwide, saw 51 million users generate 270 million page views on Google's arts and culture website.

The online exhibition platform helps China's lesser-known museums to reach people overseas, according Lin Wen, digital director for the Museum of Ethnic Culture at Minzu University of China, a college in Beijing that focuses on studies and research into the nation's ethnic groups.

The museum's collections include antiques, documents and books, costumes, and tools used in daily life by various communities.

According to Lin, more than 10,000 people speaking 17 languages visited its online show in the first month after it uploaded 13 collections of pictures last year.

"It's an online expansion of our museum," Lin says. "We specially set up a digital department to prepare for the future trend of digital museums."

This year, the museum visited Miao communities in Guizhou province to shoot videos about the local culture. It completed seven short movies on Miao embroidery, silk jewelry and tapestry, ancient stilt houses, and local customs and festivals. The videos are part of The Art of Chinese Crafts exhibition.

"It's the first time we've tried to take videos for an online exhibition to show our ethnic culture," Lin adds. "We'll do more in the future to show China's ethnic groups to the world."

China Intangible Heritage Industry Alliance, which has provided collections showing stone carvings, clay sculpture and thangka, is also using videos and pictures to highlight handicrafts that are in danger of disappearing, says Wang Shuyun, one of the founders of the alliance.

Rein says the number of people who have viewed the exhibition via a mobile device had surpassed those who used a computer.

He adds that Google will continue to use its technologies to help protect global art and culture - and to show to the world off for free.

Google's services are unavailable in China. Scott Beaumont, president of Google Greater China, declined to answer when asked at the news conference in August whether the cultural institute's cooperation with Chinese museums signals the US company's return to the country.

generation to the fore



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However, Chinese museums that have collaborated with the Google Cultural Institute agree that the online platform is effective for spreading Chinese art and culture overseas.

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