

Getting Children to Look: The Importance of Knowing Your Audience on Object Choice and Installation Design

Marcia Z. MacRae

Interdisciplinary Arts Specialist, DuPage Children's Museum

The DuPage Children's Museum is a midsize museum in Naperville, IL, a large city in the Chicago suburbs. We focus on art, math, science and where they intersect. Founded by professional, early childhood educators, our average visitor's age is 4-1/2, though we serve 0-10. Development of our exhibits is based on knowledge of early childhood development and authentic research with children and with experts in the fields related to our content. In the Creativity Connections Art Gallery we pair a wide variety of mostly original artworks on loan from artists, galleries and museums with interactive elements developed to help visitors explore aspects of the artwork. This paper will discuss issues that inform our choice of artworks, their interpretation and design of their installation.

Goals of a family art gallery in a children's museum may be somewhat different from those of one in an art museum. Our goals may include development of visual literacy and art appreciation, but concentrate on discovering ways that artists creatively interpret a variety of concepts through the creation of work.

This does not mean we stress the art any less. The important similarities between art, history and children's museums, is that we all want children and families to look at objects we feel are important for them to see, for whatever reasons we may have. The more consciously we can get children to look at the artwork, the more creative connections they will make between the artwork and the conceptual content of the exhibition.

Interactives are a double-edged sword

Children will only freely look at art if they want to. Providing alternative ways to access or explore the art, such as with open-ended interactives, may encourage prolonged viewing and address multiple ages and learning styles. The challenge here may be that without staff facilitation, children and parents, more comfortable with physical play together than intellectual play, such as looking at artwork, often run past the art to explore interactives. Now we are more formally examining our choices of artwork and the design of their installation, to ensure that they receive a similar concentrated level of interest from visitors. Many criteria direct our choices of artwork.

Choosing artwork

Developmental appropriateness

Choices are made to address the developmental levels of our audience. The fact is that children direct a family visit. If a child is bored, adults will not force them to look at a piece of art; and if they do it will not be for very long.

Quality

Work must meet a standard of quality. Children are quite capable of viewing sophisticated artworks, though they may understand them at a different level. Furthermore, we don't know what they have displayed at home. That is why introducing them to quality, original work is important if we want them to grow to recognize and appreciate that.

Connect to something in their personal lives

While the inherent importance or artistic integrity of an object is not the determining factor in choosing a work for our gallery, the personal connections that a young audience will make with the artwork is significant. Young children do not necessarily recognize objects of art as "art" or something to be looked at. Why would they? What we, as curators or developers consider art may leave them cold. They will look at the objects that are of most interest to them, even if those are the light switches on the wall next to a Picasso. This means they may not want, think or know to look at things in a gallery without being asked to do so.

We do extensive research with children, interviewing up to 250 children before we develop all aspects of an exhibit. This is vitally important to our development process. If we don't know what children think about a topic, how do we know where to begin or where we can ultimately go with our message. Additionally, children are extremely egocentric. They only see things through their eyes and experiences. This does not change dramatically as people get older. In other words, object choice should begin with the knowledge and interests of the children, rather than with the importance of the objects themselves.

In doing research for our current exhibition, *My Home, My Place*, I interviewed children ranging from lower economic income areas of Chicago to upscale suburbs to find out what they all commonly felt about the concept of "home." While, "It's where my stuff is," came up most frequently in their statements, it was depictions of family that came up in almost every drawing we solicited.

The print, *Cumpleanos de Lala y Tudi (Birthday of Lala and Tudi)* by Carmen Lomas Garza, has proven to be tremendously popular. Children and parents are attracted to it because it has pictures of children, it shows a birthday party, which is something familiar and loved, and it depicts family. It has successfully generated extended interactive viewing and conversations within and between families.



Cumpleanos de Lala y Tudi (Birthday of Lala and Tudi) by Carmen Lomas Garza
© Carmen Lomas Garza

Pique their curiosity

An object that provokes curiosity may pique interest, if the object is familiar enough to provide interest in the first place.

The sculpture, *Untitled* by Jeff Wrona, is actually more popular with a slightly older child. The label asks, "Oops!! What do you think happened here?" They ask questions, speculate on what happened to the cake – this piece bothers them – but they look at it; they talk about it.



Untitled by Jeff Wrona

Provide a fun experience

Children love to move. To create his piece *Frog*, Rufus Seder created glass tiles I will liken to lenticular lenses to create a frog that appears to jump as you walk past. Children don't notice the movement until they pass, then back up and hop along with it. They then stop to look at it carefully, as it looks differently from each perspective. Their connections are that the friendly, familiar artwork only moves if they personally move along with it.

Frog requires interaction in order to see the artwork. Kinetic art may be something that is simply looked at and not interacted with, but it may still bring a high level of interest.

Even more popular is *Washbasin* by Sung Jae Bang. Projected down onto a plywood box, cartoonishly painted to look like a bathroom vanity, is an animated loop of a sink filling and draining. Children climb up the stepstool, drawn by familiarity, curiosity, and the sound of running water. I know children love to fill sinks and watch them drain. I have observed 17-month-old children watch this piece for 10 minutes, "splash" their hands on the plastic top, say goodbye to the water, walk away and come back for five more minutes. I have observed older children and adults watch the loop repeatedly as well. The important thing is that, at every age, they understand the artist's intent to, "take familiar things and transform them into bizarre circumstances in order to trigger associations between those images and the viewer's experiences."



***Washbasin* by Sung Jae Bang**

Getting children to look: new design approaches

Of course there are important pieces of art that children should view that do not fit the above-mentioned criteria. We are now turning our attention to innovative design approaches that either focus looking, or require interaction or connection to interactive elements, thereby encouraging prolonged involvement with the artworks.

Hanging beside each other in the exhibit *My Home, My Place* are a poster of van Gogh's *The Bedroom* and Robert Lichtenstein's version of the same painting, entitled *Bedroom at Arles*. Observations indicated that while children noticed and interacted with van Gogh's piece by redecorating a painting of the room with magnets, they did not notice the small reproduction of the Lichtenstein version, or tie it together with a linoleum-cut crayon rubbing of that painting.



Arles images and interactives in *My Home, My Place*



Close-up of magnet interactive

We decided to move the artwork and magnet activity, and paint the linoleum cut and the entire back wall of the area to look like Lichtenstein's painting. Children now “walk into the painting” and make the connection.



Close-up of Lichtenstein linoleum-cut crayon rubbing.



Reconfigured area with painted linoleum cut and rendering of Lichtenstein's *Bedroom at Arles*
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For our next exhibition, New York's Woodward Gallery offered the loan of a still-cut paper piece by artist Deborah Claxton. Her paper cuts are so intricate that, from a distance, they appear to be paintings. We want children to see the amazing intricacy of her process and will install the work with rolling magnifiers over the glass. As children interact with the magnifiers to see what they do they will view the art. Will the viewing be substantive? This is the vein of our future evaluation and research.

The connection is the interpretation

We all have reasons for wanting children and families to look at art and historical objects, from visual literacy to understanding periods in history, etc. I reiterate, children will look at art if they feel a connection with it or they will find a connection if we can get them to look! That connection is their first interpretation, and relegates to secondary my interpretation as curator. In this light, the interpretation subsumes the object while not diminishing the object's importance. A family audience will neither look at nor appreciate an object without interpreting it in a familiar, comfortable sense or at least starting from that position of comfort. Know what that connection is, choose objects from that informed place, and you have the basis for a successful family interactive gallery.