

Learning for the Fun of It

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The Art Institute of Chicago has a long history of presenting exhibitions for young visitors using original works of art. The Children's Museum, sponsored by a group of women's clubs and opened in 1926, featured rotating exhibitions on artists' techniques and topics of interest to children. In 1940, the Children's Museum became the Gallery of Art Interpretation, with exhibitions designed to make works of art accessible to both children and adults. Katherine Kuh, the first curator of Modern Art at the Art Institute, served as Curator of the Gallery of Art Interpretation, and Mies Van der Rohe designed several exhibitions for this gallery. In 1964, the Junior Museum was founded by the Art Institute's Woman's Board under the direction of Museum Education. This facility opened with a gallery devoted to exhibitions for schoolchildren, and original works of art were an integral part of these installations.

The Kraft Education Center, inaugurated in 1992, occupies essentially the same footprint as the Junior Museum. Studios for family and school programs, a Family Room alongside a gallery for original artwork from picture books, a Teacher Resource Center, and an auditorium were contained within 15,000 square feet. The centerpiece of the Education Center was Hammerman Gallery, a 2,500 square foot space for exhibitions using original art from the Art Institute collections with interpretation and accessibility to a young audience as its primary mission.

Since opening, three interactive exhibitions have been on view in the Education Center: *Art Inside Out: Exploring Art and Culture Through Time*; *Telling Images: Stories in Art*; and *Faces, Places, & Inner Spaces*. Each of these exhibitions combines original works of art from several curatorial departments organized around a central theme. They each incorporate both an aesthetic and humanities-based approach to looking at and understanding works of art. The conceptual focus of these exhibitions is the interface between the visual arts and the cultures that produced these original objects.

One of the most challenging problems is how to translate complex ideas about art and culture into interactive components that are accessible to young visitors. *Art Inside Out* included twelve works of art created by people from diverse cultures, geographic regions, and time periods, with very different understandings of art and the meaning of things. We wanted to create an "access point" for each object, a contemporary reference that would help convey to children the essential meaning that the object had at the time it was created. One of the objects was *Grave Guardian Beast* from the Tang Dynasty (c. 700), which was made to protect a deceased emperor in the afterlife. As an access point, our designers suggested a guard dog leaping out of a doghouse when a pedal was pressed to communicate the concept of guardianship and protection. At this point, we realized that there are objects that don't have easy contemporary parallels and that there could be a greater danger of misunderstanding.

Working with the curator of Chinese Art, and using photographs of an actual tomb as source material, we created a simulation of an imperial tomb from the Tang Dynasty as the interpretive environment for the sculpture. This gave visitors an accurate context for the large collection of tomb figures in the Chinese galleries at the Art Institute. Here, the architecture informed the interpretation, as it also did for the *Bell Krater* (450 B.C.), where we simulated a Greek house contemporary with the vase; and for the Torii gate, whose appearance was based on one of the prints in the series *Fifty-Three Stations on the Tokaido* by Hiroshige (1833).

In each of the interpretive exhibitions, original works of art are central to every aspect of interpretation. For the Japanese prints from *Fifty-Three Stations on the Tokaido*, a reproduction of the entire series in postcard form provided an opportunity to show which prints would be on view in coming weeks as the series rotated for conservation purposes. This was the first time that an Art Institute visitor, whether a child or a scholar, could see in one place a view of the entire set of prints illustrating the journey that the artist took when he accompanied the emperor along the Tokaido highway.



Print from the series *Fifty-Three Stations on the Tokaido* (left) and the interpretive environment adjacent to it.

In planning *Telling Images: Stories in Art*, which followed *Art Inside Out*, we built on the successes of the latter and changed elements that were less effective. A professor from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago said, “I need this gallery. They should have a room like this for every object in the museum.” We decided to employ contextual rooms again, but this time the works of art were installed inside the rooms. To aid in the creation of *Telling Images*, an advisory group of children was formed who had the privilege of meeting the director and staff of the museum, and of working alongside an established Chicago architect.¹ The kids provided expansive thinking and were a sounding board as design progressed.

One of the objects included in *Telling Images* was a sculpture of Vishnu, which embodies the concepts of transformation and of good fighting evil. The stories of the god’s ten avatars, or incarnations, who protect humans from disasters, incorporate elements of India’s cultural history and values. *Vishnu* stands in quiet, majestic repose in a temple-like setting, surrounded by reproductions of the ten avatars. By pressing a button, visitors could hear a story told by a child

¹ A process catalogue is available describing the making of *Telling Images: Stories in Art*.

about the avatars' heroic adventures, which saved the world from disaster. Opposite *Vishnu, Saint George Killing the Dragon* (A.D. 1430/35) by Bernardo Martorell was installed in a small chapel environment. Both of these objects are about good fighting evil, but they are two very different cultural interpretations of the principle.



View of the exhibition *Telling Images: Stories in Art*

With original objects there is the opportunity to conduct original research, which benefits young audiences and adults alike, as well as curators who readily lent these works to the exhibition for an extended period of time. Professor Barbara Blackmun, a scholar on Benin, transcribed the stories that were told on the *Royal Altar Tusk* in the form of images into written text. This new information was incorporated in an interactive device that identified the figures on the tusk, and was used in a story station where a recording of a storyteller told the tales seen on the tusk. Her original research was then published in *Museum Studies*,² the scholarly journal of the Art Institute.

A fundamental challenge art museums face is how to exhibit objects and interpretive materials in such a way that the materials do not interfere with aesthetic appreciation. In *Art Inside Out* we created a central gallery in which all of the art objects were installed. This allowed for comparisons between very diverse works of art, which were adjacent to but not inside their respective learning environments. In *Telling Images* we placed each object within its own contextual environment. These environments were successful as teaching spaces because they functioned as single galleries for individual works of art, which helped focus the children's attention while providing relevant cultural information. Also in the gallery was a discreet interactive space, with computer games, a puppet stage, and writing and drawing stations that referenced all of the objects in the exhibition, but was physically removed from them. The interactive space was intended to supplement the contextual environments with more playful activities. It was very popular, but we discovered from evaluations that some kids never saw the original objects. This lesson learned from *Telling images* was applied directly in planning for the next exhibition.

² *Museum Studies*. Vol. 23, No. 2, African Art at the Art Institute of Chicago



View of an interactive space in *Telling Images: Stories in Art*

In *Faces, Places, & Inner Spaces* (opened in 2003) there is a seamless connection between objects, environments, games, and contextual materials. The visitor moves organically from one space to the next, without interruption, in the same manner as the calligraphic wall that runs through the entire installation.

Before arriving, visitors encounter a 15-minute continuous loop of nearly one hundred faces from paintings, drawings, prints and sculpture in the Art Institute's collection, digitally transforming from one into another, projected onto a large screen. Two computer stations near the entrance loaded with interactive games provide an overview of the exhibition. Beyond this, a green carpeted platform featuring an oversize "magic" *Cabinet of Four Wishes*—a contemporary furniture piece by Richard Snyder—flanks a child-size glowing green entrance arch leading to the interior gallery space, creating an Alice in Wonderland effect. Throughout the installation, spatial constructs and sensory contrasts create a visually heightened experience intended to exercise the eyes and stimulate aesthetic faculties.



Entrance to *Faces, Places, and Inner Spaces*

Proceeding through the child's entry, visitors encounter a re-creation of the rural kitchen pictured in the painting *Thanksgiving* (1935) by Doris Lee, which hangs on the rear wall. The environment is constructed with angles deliberately off-kilter, making it a life-sized, three-dimensional demonstration of the principle of linear perspective. Young visitors can role-play with artificial food and tableware, while their parents or grandparents can peruse a reproduction

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of a newspaper from Thanksgiving Day, 1935. An album of Depression-era photographs and a selection of children's books on Thanksgiving celebrations also supplement the historical content of the painting.

Faces, Places, and Inner Spaces is the most interactive of all three exhibitions. It provides a visually compelling environment that is aesthetically pleasing and playful. It is not as easy as it was in *Telling Images*, however, to teach in the new exhibition. This is because kids get distracted; consequently, a less structured approach to touring is required. Families are provided with opportunities for guided conversation through three types of labels: “looking labels” promote careful observation of the work of art; “discussion labels” are designed to stimulate conversation; and “text panels” provide historical and contextual information about the object, which in turn help to inform the looking- and discussion-labels.

The primary goal of a museum educator is to engage visitors with works of art. For this reason, original works are an essential ingredient in all interactive exhibitions at the Art Institute. How these objects are installed, interpreted, and presented for family audiences in the Hammerman Gallery has been the crucial variable through the years. Recent research indicates that play is an important component of a successful museum experience. These exhibitions provide myriad opportunities for playful interaction through fantasy, imagination, and sensory engagement. Evaluations have shown that adults find them as interesting as kids, and indicate a high level of physical and social interaction in families. Moreover, this gallery is a child-friendly destination in a large institution with an encyclopedic collection that can be potentially overwhelming for a first-time visitor. If children and families have a positive, engaging experience on their first visit to the museum and they want to return, this gallery is a success—and the value of “learning for the fun of it” couldn't be more visible.



A family watching children perform in a *Faces, Places, and Inner Spaces* environment

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