

Research Article

Research on the Function of Art Education for Children in Art Museums

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Abstract

Art museums have the functions of collection, exhibition, and education. Art museums create the atmosphere and context of art cultivation through concrete visual objects, allowing children to experience art education that is extremely different from school education. This kind of art education is not a system of knowledge and human civilization that is structured by a system of linguistic symbols and inherited by books and languages, but rather, it is a way of perceiving art based on the great heritage of humanity and works of art. In this way, it provides not only the learning and study of the knowledge system, but also, and more importantly, the development of creativity, imagination, aesthetic sensibility.

Keywords

Art Museums, Children's Art Education, Creativity, Aesthetic Sensibility, Exhibitions

1. Introduction

The term "art museum" commonly used today is translated from the English "Art Museum" or "Museum of Art," and more precisely, it should be understood as shorthand for "museum of fine arts." [1] Art museums are not merely places for collecting and exhibiting artworks but also have an essential educational function within society, particularly in children's art education. Public education provided by art museums plays a critical role in enhancing national cultural soft power and cultivating modern citizens with humanistic spirit, innovation capabilities, and aesthetic taste. [2] Public participation is central to museum activities, forming both the foundation of achieving educational objectives and the critical driving force for realizing the institution's value. Given the new societal emphasis on museums' community services, children (aged 6-14 for cultural and historical exhibits) now represent 40%-50% of museum audiences. [3]

Since the 19th century, museums in Europe and America have increasingly emphasized education as a core function. Nearly all museums have specialized education departments staffed with education specialists. Partnerships between schools, communities, and museums, as well as parental engagement, provide children opportunities to physically interact with exhibits, absorb exhibition atmospheres, and engage in hands-on activities. Such museum-based second-classroom experiences significantly broaden children's horizons, enhance their aesthetic judgment, and stimulate imagination and creativity. Howard Gardner, an American psychologist, insightfully noted: "Museums alone cannot achieve the goal of educating children, as children do not live in museums. But if museums collaborate with families, parents, schools, and other institutions, they can help children understand the world around them, which I believe is the

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ultimate goal of education." Similarly, Shan Jixiang, director of China's Palace Museum, emphasized integrating museums into national education systems, thus aligning museums closely with school and societal education to form a robust social educational network. [4]

When asked if they would support a free community art museum in their neighborhood, more than half expressed interest, showing broad acceptance and enthusiasm for engaging with art in such public spaces. [5] Museums thus constitute crucial educational venues and invaluable public resources. George Hein's constructivist theory argues that museums should create "learning contexts" that align with social contexts, resources, and collaborative environments. [6] Education is not restricted to schools and textual symbol systems; it can occur within families, communities, libraries, and museums throughout one's life. For children, museums offer an informal learning environment significantly different from schools, filled with visually impactful originals and rich human heritage awaiting exploration. Beyond formal exhibitions, museums must create varied activities tailored to children's specific characteristics and objectives.

2. The Mechanism of Children's Visual Education in Art Museums

It can be said that from the day the Louvre was opened to the public, the art museum truly began to incorporate public education into its functional system. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) explicitly defines multiple functions of museums, among which public education is an indispensable duty: "A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment." [7]

The educational role of museums differs from family and school education in that museums house nearly irreplicable artifacts of human civilization and artworks—tangible objects of immense value. One of the museum's primary activities is the meaningful exhibition of its collections within a curated space. Whether curators aim to present the authoritative narrative of art history, showcase an artist's creative journey, or highlight the unique craftsmanship of a particular culture or region, the display of artifacts provides a context for visual and artistic education, mediated through the curator's vision.

Art museums first offer visual stimuli, allowing children to engage with artifacts and artworks not through abstract concepts but through perceptible elements such as color, composition, brushstrokes, and texture. This encourages children to use sensory and visual language to interpret what they see, fostering their ability to express ideas about art history, historical events, and cultural concepts in an intuitive manner—greatly benefiting the development of their aesthetic

appreciation. Museums are vital cultural institutions that serve both as platforms for cultural dissemination and as agents of social education. Children constitute a significant visitor demographic, and to attract young audiences, domestic museums primarily rely on periodic lectures and themed interactive activities. However, due to the often monotonous nature of lectures and the time-limited scope of activities, children's engagement frequently falls short of expectations, failing to achieve broader cultural outreach and even resulting in resource wastage. [8]

Art museums could collaborate with early childhood educators, schoolteachers, and educational experts to develop exhibitions and activities tailored to various age groups, thereby fulfilling their role in nurturing children's creativity, imagination, and aesthetic judgment. For instance, exhibitions can incorporate design elements catering to different child demographics (segmented by age, interests, artistic proficiency, or accessibility needs for children with disabilities), multimedia visual aids, lectures, workshops, and training programs. Through these exhibitions and related activities, children are guided to observe and perceive art, learning to engage with beauty intuitively and immersing themselves fully in aesthetic experiences—gradually cultivating their capacity for self-directed appreciation.

For example, the diverse studios and workspaces within art museums spark children's curiosity, often leaving a lasting impression. As one museum scholar noted, "For all students, visiting a new place, meeting new people, experiencing novel ways of gathering information, and encountering real objects is an intensely stimulating and motivating process that contextualizes what they learn in school." [9] In these spaces, children can interact with artists, voice their ideas—no matter how unconventional—and participate in creative activities such as painting or other art-related projects through workshops or artist-led programs. Museums should also offer training and workshops for parents and teachers, equipping these key educational figures with aesthetic literacy and an understanding of museum-based pedagogy. After museum visits, both children and adults can take home their creations or high-quality exhibition materials—books, images, etc.—serving as lasting mementos of their immersive experience.

In art museums, children draw boundless artistic inspiration from viewing and, where possible, touching original artworks. While reproductions allow some level of engagement in daily life, the true vitality, creativity, and inspiration of art cannot be fully conveyed through copies. For instance, the original scale of an oil painting, the texture of brushstrokes, or the artist's expressive energy are often lost or altered in reproductions. When children stand before an original, observing or even touching it, this direct encounter far surpasses the educational value of symbolic or text-based knowledge systems. Such experiences ignite greater enthusiasm for learning, questioning history and art history, and constructing personal meaning based on the artworks themselves. They may challenge

widely accepted knowledge, rediscover forgotten techniques, or kindle artistic passion that seeds future creative pursuits. By deepening and broadening their aesthetic sensibilities, children enhance their capacity for self-expression and artistic awareness.

Thus, art museums create an environment and context for artistic cultivation through tangible visual artifacts, offering children an education starkly different from school-based learning. This form of education does not rely on linguistic or textual systems transmitted through books and language but instead anchors itself in humanity's great heritage and artworks. In doing so, it not only facilitates the acquisition of knowledge but, more importantly, fosters creativity, imagination, aesthetic judgment, and taste.

3. Interactive Exhibition Design, Space Design, and Children's Art Education

"Activating Collections" is an exhibition concept aimed at revitalizing artworks stored in museum collections through in-depth exploration and storytelling. By researching, classifying, planning, and exhibiting these artworks, museums can allow audiences to experience visual beauty and convey the warmth and power of art. [10]

Traditional art museums typically emphasize permanent and special exhibitions focused heavily on objects, requiring visitors to possess specialized knowledge or the ability to quickly acquire professional knowledge to appreciate exhibition narratives fully. Although museums meticulously construct exhibition narratives using serious knowledge frameworks, traditional displays such as showcase or suspended installations, accompanied by lighting and spatial design, often evoke a sense of reverence and awe. However, this professional approach can create a sense of distance, coldness, and frustration among visitors who lack an art history background or practical training in art. [11]

Professor Li Yanzu proposed three levels of design ethics: utilitarianism (meeting functional needs), aesthetics (beauty, including form), and ethics (human-centered sustainable development). [12] Nowadays, museums emphasize interactive exhibition design and spatial design with a human-centered approach. Pre-design research is essential to understand children's cognitive development stages, physiological and psychological needs, and interests. [13] Recognizing children as a significant educational audience, many large-scale domestic art museums dedicate specific exhibition spaces and interactive zones. These exhibitions incorporate interactive elements, transforming children into explorers, detectives, or active participants from the moment they receive exhibition guides. Through games that engage their senses—visual, tactile, and auditory—children can meticulously observe details, explore historical narratives via multimedia and holographic presentations, and appreciate the rich imagination and creativity displayed in artworks. [14] Interactive sessions

involving parents and teachers further enhance engagement, fostering a deeper appreciation of museums and art, and inspiring artistic creativity.

For instance, Shanghai's West Bund Museum held an engaging children's workshop titled "Finding Beauty and Balance in Music" in June 2020, coinciding with the "The Shape of Time" exhibition from the Pompidou Centre. This event integrated live streaming with interactive on-site activities, engaging children and parents through yoga and music, deepening their physical sense of balance, rhythm, and harmony. Such immersive experiences, combining auditory and visual stimulation, significantly enriched children's artistic perception and enjoyment.

In addition to exhibition design, dedicated children's play areas and independent learning workshop spaces enable deeper engagement and understanding. For example, Liaoning Provincial Museum has established an immersive children's experience gallery, creating nearly 1,000 square meters of interactive, historical, and cultural playgrounds such as "Stone Kingdom" and "Northern Ethnic Home." Likewise, in July 2021, the National Art Museum of China hosted a summer art camp where, after guided tours, children participated in printmaking workshops and interactive theater performances, enhancing their understanding and emotional engagement with art. Continued enhancements in exhibition design and museum space planning are essential for successfully integrating contemporary art education concepts and museum responsibilities, thus fully realizing children's artistic education and stimulating their imagination, creativity, and Aesthetic ability.

4. The Integration of Art Museums and Children's Art Education Resources

Art museums should not merely serve as beneficial extensions and supplements to traditional and art education but should become essential venues for teaching art courses and experiencing art firsthand. Firstly, cooperation between schools and museums is crucial. As children spend most of their learning time in schools, which house numerous educational researchers and practitioners, it is vital for art museums to collaborate with school education teams when developing children's art education programs. Such cooperation can create art courses better suited to the developmental characteristics of various age groups, nurturing imagination, creativity, and aesthetic appreciation in children.

Schools and museums should prioritize establishing a series of children's art education courses. This approach combines specially designed art education projects aligned with high-quality exhibitions, short-term routine children's art education activities, and regular children's art education programs with long-term educational objectives. Effective integration requires careful coordination of school educational goals with museum exhibition plans and activities, thereby

optimizing the resources of both museums and schools. Such collaboration truly merges educational objectives from both institutions, fostering enhanced artistic perception and aesthetic appreciation in children.

Furthermore, cooperation between museums and schools significantly benefits teacher training and artistic development. Museums demonstrate to professional art teachers in primary and secondary schools how to effectively utilize museum resources, integrating them into art education classrooms. Open museum spaces encourage teachers to guide students in direct interactions with original artifacts and artworks, enabling them to independently conduct art lessons with museum resources. Additionally, fruitful interactions between teachers and museum educators regarding combining exhibitions with practical learning and classroom education create valuable opportunities for artistic education. Only through this beneficial, multi-party collaboration and close interaction between teachers and museum educators can aesthetic and practical competencies among educators be gradually improved, thereby enhancing museum education practices and effectively guiding children into imaginative aesthetic activities.

In addition, not only primary and secondary schools but also universities should engage in profound collaborations with museums. Universities' robust educational research resources and artistic expertise can substantially enhance children's art education. For example, Shanghai's West Bund Art Museum conducted a successful children's public education program aligned with the exhibition "The Shape of Time" on January 16, 2021, in collaboration with East China Normal University's Faculty of Education, Department of Art Education. This collaboration, nearly one year in duration, received significant attention. Although deep collaboration and long-term project tracking between universities and museums remain relatively uncommon in China, expanding such collaborative projects is highly desirable for the future.

Secondly, cooperation between museums and artists is essential. Museums can organize artist-led lectures, courses, workshops, and interactive creative sessions during exhibitions, engaging children in direct and practical art-making experiences. Additionally, involving children actively in artists' creative projects enriches their participation in artistic creation. For instance, in 2005, the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, Berkeley Art Museum, Pacific Art Museum, and International Resource Conservation Organization co-organized an art project to raise awareness of cultural and natural heritage conservation, involving eight internationally renowned artists. Chinese artist Xu Bing designed an automated cyclic reforestation system for Kenya through crowdfunding. Kenyan children aged 7-13 participated, creating artworks around "trees" using symbols from their culture, assisted by Xu Bing. These artworks were auctioned online, with proceeds directed to Kenyan environmental projects. This initiative not only raised funds for tree planting but also demonstrated to participating Kenyan children the social

impact and creative potential of art. [15] Inspired by the profound imagination and creativity of the Kenyan children, Xu Bing continued similar "Wood Forest" projects in Shenzhen and Taiwan, recognizing the limited imagination and sensitivity of urban children due to their distant relationship with nature and standardized art curricula. Subsequent art projects emphasized enhancing children's imagination, creativity, and aesthetic sense, leading to deeper cultural understanding and liberating their artistic expressions from traditional constraints. These artworks, exhibited in museums, gained exceptional significance.

Another example is artist Neil Mendoza's exhibition "Mechanical Masterpieces" at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh, a distinct but equally beneficial artistic project. Unlike Xu Bing's environmental approach, Mendoza created interactive installations based on famous artworks, adding movable and interactive elements. Visitors could manipulate the pieces humorously, altering elements like hats, glasses, and beards, or adding playful details to classics such as Hopper's "Nighthawks" or Van Gogh's "Café Terrace at Night." These innovative reinterpretations, displayed in a children's museum, demonstrated the accessibility and interactive potential of classic artworks. This engaging and humorous approach provided children with an unforgettable museum experience.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, art museums should leverage their distinctive strengths to effectively utilize their invaluable public resources in children's art education. Schools and parents should proactively collaborate with museums, guiding children to experience original artworks and humanity's rich cultural heritage. Such an approach transcends traditional educational boundaries, nurturing children's imagination, creativity, aesthetic sensitivity, and overall quality of life.

Author Contributions

Guo Shuna is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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