Humanities and Social Sciences
2026, Vol. 14, No. 6, pp. 474–478
https://doi.org/10.11648/j.hss.20261406.13

SciencePG
Science Publishing Group

Research Article

The Educational Functions of Two Museums in Florida, USA

Xiaonan Jiang*

School of Public Education, Shandong University of Arts, Jinan, China

Abstract

Museums are informal educational institutions, yet it remains unclear whether their educational functions vary by type. This paper examines this question through a comparative case study of two museums in Tallahassee, Florida: the Florida Historic Capitol Museum (history) and the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts (art). Data were collected through personal visits, observation of exhibitions and visitors, analysis of museum missions and websites, and interviews with museum educators. The two museums were compared in terms of missions, visitor types, exhibition designs and educational programs. The findings show that both museums share a commitment to serving their communities, adopt visitor-centered exhibitions with multiple entry points, and offer free educational programs, particularly for K–12 school groups. However, they differ in labels, targeted audiences and exhibition designs: the history museum uses descriptive labels grounded in discovery learning, while the art museum offers minimal labels and quiet spaces that support constructivist meaning-making. These differences stem from distinct collections, educational purposes and institutional constraints. The paper concludes that although the educational function varies by museum type, each museum fulfills its educational role in its own specific way, providing opportunities for visitors to explore, interpret and make their own meaning.

Keywords

Types of Museums, Educational Function, Compare and Contrast

1. Introduction

Museums are a wide range of free-choice or informal educational institutions [1, 2]. By preserving and presenting their collections, museums have been playing a significant role in serving the public [3]. What's more important is as stated in *Excellence and equity: Education and the public dimension of museums* [4], museums share the responsibility with other educational institutions to enrich learning opportunities for all individuals. Clearly, of all the museum functions, much emphasis in this report is put on education, that is, to meet the public's desire for knowledge and meaning-making. Museum education is so important because it contributes to value knowledge, encourage individual interpretation and reflect the community-identity in a unique way [5, 6] that traditional and formal educational institutions cannot achieve.

Although museums can be classified into different types based on the variety of exhibitions and collections, such as art museums, history museum, scientific museums, education lies at the heart of museums [7, 8]. However, does the educational function vary by type of museum? If so, how does the

*Correspondence: Xiaonan Jiang (jiangxiaonan0729@163.com)

Received: 26 October 2026; **Accepted:** 19 November 2026; **Published:** 25 November 2026

Copyright: © The Author(s), 2026. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

education vary in different museums? To find the answers to these questions, I visited two different types of museums in Tallahassee: *the Florida Historic Capitol Museum* and *the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts (MoFA)*.

2. Florida Historic Capitol Museum

2.1. Location and Mission

The Florida Historic Capitol Museum is located at the center of Florida's Capitol complex, next to the 23-storey Florida Capitol building. It was the capitol until the late 1970s when the new one was built. Threatened with demolition, the old Capitol was saved through citizens' action and was restored to its 1902 appearance. Hence there is the Florida Historic Capitol Museum. The mission of this museum is "to serve to illuminate the past, present, and future connections between the people of Florida and their political institutions through programs of civic education, historic interpretation, and preservation" [9].

2.2. Experience

On stepping into the building, I was greeted by the front-desk staff with a brief introduction to this museum's construction and restoration history. Even though I am not good at spatial imagination, I could easily figure out the architectural changes to this building after it was built in 1845, with the help of a poster beside the reception desk, which consists of the old capitol pictures during different periods in history. Given a leaflet with the detailed floor plan of the museum, I was informed that there were permanent and temporary exhibitions in this museum and I was welcome to begin my museum experience with any exhibition without following any specific visiting path.

Most of the first floor and all rooms on the second floor consist of the permanent exhibitions. In the Historic Capitol Theater, I watched an eight-minute documentary "Florida in the Balance" highlighting the rich and unique heritages of Florida, which is shown on three screens, each with separate images. Old furniture, photos, and documents are the main objects displayed in other rooms and restored areas of the Governor's Suite, the House of Representatives Chamber, the Senate Chamber and the Supreme Court represent Florida's political history. The labels are explanatory and descriptive, some of them with questions like "Why it matters to you!" which promote visitors' critical thinking.

The temporary exhibition is currently *The Moon, Stars, and Sunshine State*, which commemorates the 50th anniversary of the landing on the Moon. Contrasted with the solemn and quiet atmosphere in the permanent exhibition rooms, this exhibition is more lively and visitor-engaging. Through hands-on activities like space word searches, a lunar lander maze, video games and math problem-solving, visitors can re-experience this transformative time in global history. Especially when visitors sit in a restored living room watching the astronauts' original footage in 1969 which actually was launched from Florida, the important role of this state in space exploration is fully demonstrated.

2.3. Visitors

During my visit to the Florida Historic Capitol Museum, I didn't encounter many visitors in the permanent exhibitions. Kenneth Kuhl, a retired government official, said that he and his former colleagues working in the Capitol building used to come to this museum during lunch hours for relaxation. Some visitors with personal association with the Capitol visited the old capitol to reflect on how things were and how things are different in Florida government today. However, the exhibition *the Moon, Stars, and Sunshine State* is more welcomed by family groups. Kids were busy building a spaceship with Lego blocks, doing puzzles and taking pictures with the astronaut's suit while parents stepped back, re-witnessed the historical moment of the lunar landing and enjoyed the comfort of the 1969 living room.

2.4. Education

From the website of the Florida Historic Capitol Museum, education is placed in a distinct division from collections and virtual tours, which indicates that, to some extent, educational function is valued in this museum.

"Programming at the Historic Capitol focuses on the importance of civic education and historic preservation through the use of fun and educational materials aimed at learners of all ages" [10]. *Scavenger hunts*, designed to target different age groups from K-12, encourage visitors to search through the building to identify items and answer questions. In *the Issues in the House of Representatives* program, participants could experience a mock legislative session in the Historic House Chamber where members debate and vote on issues important to Floridians. Pre-visit materials for this program are available online, including animated presentations and worksheets, appropriate for school groups as well as homeschool students. *Capital Visions:2058* is another inspiring online exhibit, displaying art works of fifth-grade students from across Florida about their imagination of Florida's Capitol in 2058. All programs are free and should be allotted a minimum of one hour for participation.

I was lucky to meet Rachel Porte, Director of Research and Programming and learned that each museum program is coordinated with Florida Standards. As the permanent exhibit is prescribed and dictated by the government, there is not much flexibility for them to do except for occasional information update. Therefore, much emphasis is put on the temporary exhibits illuminating a variety of topics and special historical events related to Florida. Each temporary exhibit is usually held for 12 months, together with a series of follow-up themed events. In addition to speakers and panel

discussions, there are also trivia nights with Florida-focused questions and after-hours wine and cheese tours. "We value the visitors' participation." Rachel said, "When we see the messy endings in the exhibit, like crayons and Lego blocks, paintings and notes scattered on the desk, we know people are involved." Annually, The Florida Historic Capitol Museum hosts more than 17,000 students in groups from all over Florida, engaging them with their educational programs.

3. Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts (MoFa)

3.1. Location and Mission

Located on the campus of Florida State University, the Museum of Fine Arts (MoFA) originated as the Fine Arts Gallery for Florida State University's School of Visual Arts and was re-designated as MoFA in 1994. The Museum is "currently home to more than 6000 works by historical and contemporary artists". Its mission is "to enrich the civic and intellectual life of the community through Public exhibitions, events, and educational opportunities that expand the understanding of historical and contemporary art. By introducing diverse audiences to the integral roles that art and culture play in shaping societies, MoFA fosters creativity, collaboration and critical engagement" [11].

3.2. Experience

The current exhibitions for Fall 2019 in MoFA consist of *Combined Talents*, *Identity in the Ottoman Empire* and *Portrait Mode*. Each exhibition is displayed in its distinct area of the museum. As I didn't find any visiting guidance map, I decided to begin my visit with the *Combined Talents* exhibition, which is near the entrance. This is MoFA's annual juried exhibition, showing contemporary art from across the country. This year's exhibition is from the Curator of Contemporary Art at the Birmingham Museum of Art, featuring 39 artists from 24 states. The objects are various in styles and subject matter, including ink paintings, furniture models, handcrafts, videos and mixed media. The label about each object is very simple, only with the names of the work and the artist and the material. Correspondingly, the exhibition room is quite spacious and quiet, allowing enough space and time for visitors to contemplate on the art works.

The Identity in the Ottoman Empire exhibition is displayed on the ground floor. Curated by a professor in the Department of Art History at FSU, this exhibition is the combined efforts of many faculty, students, departments and organizations from across Florida State University. This exhibition clearly illustrated and interpreted the period photograph, stamps, architecture graphs, textiles, calligraphy and documents in the Ottoman Empire with detailed labels. There was also an interactive display labelled as *please touch*, encouraging visitors to use the stereoscope to experience 3D illusion of popular images during the Empire period.

Another exhibition on the ground floor is *Portrait Mode*. I was attracted by its introductory panel saying that "Camera phones and social media fueled a renaissance in portraiture. We are all now photographers and artists, with our friends, family, and pets serving as our inspiration." In the corner of the room there is a photograph studio. Visitors are invited to use this studio and the portrait mode on the cell phone to photograph someone who inspires them. Drawing inspiration from both traditional and new portrait mediums, visitors are placed in the role of artist and influencer.

3.3. Visitors

As Annie Booth, coordinator of Museum Education, shared with me, MoFA has a diversity of visitors, including local artists, faculty and students from FSU, museum committee members and school groups. A survey is now being conducted in MoFA to all the visitors about what MoFA should do in the future on curating from its own collections. From the almost-full feedback box I could tell that visitors enjoy this dialogue with the museum and they would like to contribute their opinions to the future exhibitions in MoFA.

3.4. Education

From Annie and the MoFA website, I learned that MoFA hosts a range of educational and interactive programs to inspire their diverse audiences, including tours, outreach talks to schools, educational packets for use with exhibitions in MoFA, university interdepartmental projects, and a university student volunteer and internship program. Each year, in addition to tours, the Education Program of the MoFA also develops initiatives for K-12 teacher and student participation with the exhibitions. All programs, including visiting artist and scholar lectures are free and open to the public. "From *Make It at MoFA* events, to *Pre-Game at MoFA* on football weekends, to workshops and demonstrations by innovative artists, visitors are encouraged to actively engage with and reflect upon the exhibitions and collections of the Museum and find meaning in Tallahassee's rich array of art and culture" [12].

4. Similarities

The Florida Historic Capitol Museum and the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts (MoFA) share a lot in common in terms of their missions, exhibition designs, visitors' engagements and educational programs.

Comparing their missions, both museums are working on serving the communities where they are located. By displaying the associated objects and interacting with community visitors, the museums try to promote community involvement and reflect community-identity.

As for the exhibitions in the two museums, despite their different themes, all of them have many entry points [13]. Visitors don't need to follow a certain path. There is no beginning or end in each museum. Visitors can walk around and begin their exploration based on their own motivation, interest or life experience. A variety of learning methods are incorporated in each museum including written information, photographs, videos and hands-on activities. Visitors are encouraged to participate in the exhibition by connecting their experiences and interests to the objects on display to make their own meanings.

Even though most museum visitors are from the local community, each museum welcomes visitors worldwide. Both museums are free and open to the public. Tours are offered in both museums to various audiences of all ages, and can be individually designed to meet the needs of the group.

In both museums, there are specially designed educational programs targeting K-12 school groups. Resources and materials for schools in these two museums are similarly designed by museum educators and curators. Instead of a collaborating relationship, museums and schools are similar to an information provider and receiver, respectively [14]. School teachers need to explore museums programs and get the pre-visit material before they bring their students to museums for a field trip.

In summary, both museums value serving communities, emphasizing visitor-centered exhibition [15-17] and involving the public in their educational programs.

5. Differences

Even though both museums value their educational functions in a similar way, there are still many differences between them due to their different educational purposes, collections and institutional constraints.

As a history museum, the Florida Historic Capitol Museum focuses on representing history to its visitors. Therefore, the labels in the exhibitions are usually descriptive, explanatory and informative, trying to enable visitors to understand the background, function and historical meanings of each object. However, as an art museum, MoFA put emphasis on inspiring visitors to appreciate art by providing them with an environment to interpret art works in their own way. This allows museum curators and educators to display art works in a spacious, quiet room with simple and short information on the labels. Instead of being told about the detailed information, visitors in the art museum are more likely to reach their own conclusions. In short, education in the history museum is conducted on the discovery learning theory, while the art museum is based more on the constructivist learning theory [18].

Due to the institutional constraints, the two museums also have some other differences. For example, the Florida Historic Capitol Museum is associated with government, which requires most of its exhibitions to be permanent and somewhat inflexible in the way they are displayed. In contrast, MoFA connects Florida State University and the broader community to art; therefore it has fewer constraints and more flexibility in the selection and duration of their exhibitions. Even though both museums provide educational programs to K-12 school groups, there are apparently more projects and programs in the Florida Historic Capitol Museum than in MoFA because history is a required curriculum in K-12 education, and art is not. Teachers and students utilize history museums as a great source of information to understand society and culture historically.

To summarize, the educational functions in the history and art museums are conducted on different learning theories, educational purposes, and methods of display.

6. Conclusion

Based on the comparison and contrast between the two museums, the educational functions vary between history and art museums in the aspects of labels, targeted audiences and exhibition designs due to different collections, educational purposes and institutional constraints. Each museum is utilizing its own way to fulfill its educational function as an informal educational institution and to provide experience for visitors to explore, interpret and make their own meaning.

Abbreviations

MoFA	Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts
FSU	Florida State University
K-12	Kindergarten through 12th grade

Author Contributions

Xiaonan Jiang: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

[1] Falk, J. H., Dierking, L. D. Learning from museums: Visitor experience and the making of meaning. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press; 2000, pp. 1-15.

[2] Falk, J. H., Dierking, L. D. The Museum experience revisited. New York, NY: Routledge; 2013, pp. 23-34.

[3] International Council of Museum. "Museum definition". Available from https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/ [Accessed 6 June 2022].

[4] Hirzy, E. C. Excellence and equity: Education and the public dimension of museums. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums. 1992, pp. 5-15.

[5] Jiang, Xiaonan. Apart/Together: Challenges and Opportunities For Exhibition Curation During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Curator: The Museum Journal. 2025, 68(1): 107–124. https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12629.2025

[6] Love, A. R., Villeneuve, P., Burns, W. J., Wessel, B., & Jiang, X. Dimensions of curation competing values model: Tool for shifting exhibition priorities. Curator: The Museum Journal, 2021, 64(4), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12442

[7] Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2007). Museums and education: purpose, pedagogy, performance. New York，NY: Routledge. 2007, pp. 1-16.

[8] Hooper-Greenhill, E. Museum learners as active postmodernists: Contextualizing constructivism. In The Educational Role of the Art Museum, Hooper-Greenhill, E., Ed., Routledge: London, New York; 1994, pp. 67–72.

[9] Florida Historic Capitol Museum. “mission”. Available from http://www.flhistoriccapitol.gov/ [Accessed 6 October 2019]

[10] Florida Historic Capitol Museum. “program”. Available from http://www.flhistoriccapitol.gov/program[Accessed 6 October 2019]

[11] Museum of Fine Arts (MoFA). “mission”. Available from http://mofa.fsu.edu [Accessed 6 October 2019]

[12] Museum of Fine Arts (MoFA). “program”. Available from http://mofa.fsu.edu/program [Accessed 6 October 2019]

[13] Hein, G. E. Learning in the museum. New York, NY: Routledge; 1998, pp. 155-179.

[14] Liu, W. Working together: collaboration between art museums and schools. In From Periphery to Center: Art Museum Education in the 21st Century. Villeneuve, P., Ed., Reston, VA: National Art Education Association; 2017, pp. 129-137.

[15] Villeneuve, P., & Love, A. R. Visitor-centered exhibitions and edu-curation in art museums. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield; 2017, pp. 3-10.

[16] Li, N. Museums and the public. The Public Historian, 2020, 42(1), 29–53, https://doi.org/10.1525/Tph.2020.42.1.29

[17] Woodruff, A. The museum can be visitor-centered: An intern’s reflection. Reflective Practice, 2018, 19(2), 179-192. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2018.1437402

[18] Schunk, D. H. Learning theories: An educational perspective (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson. 2011, pp. 228-248.