



Opening the Doors: Engaging Young Children in the Art Museum

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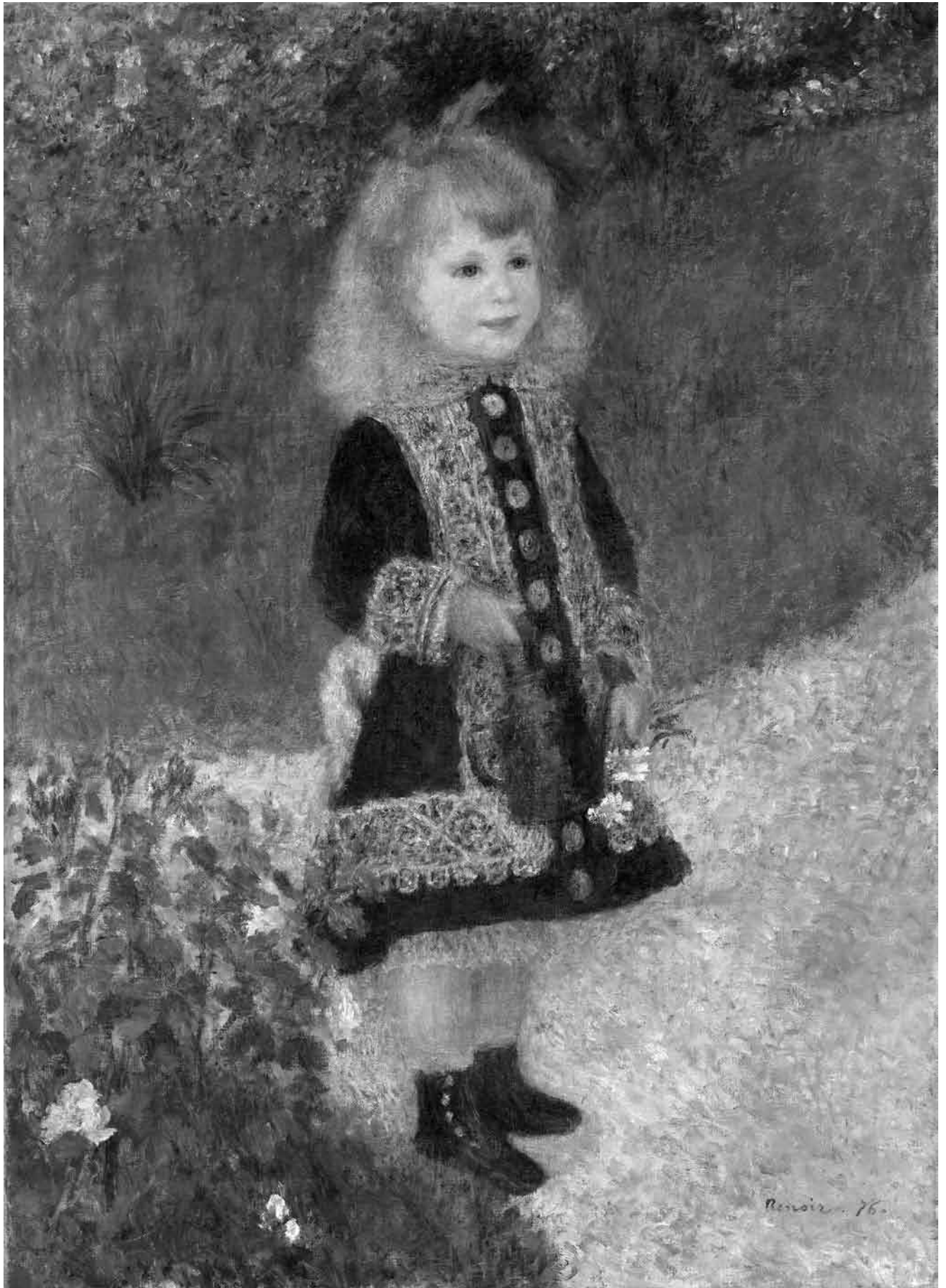
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"Today was great! I saw my favorite painting, Renoir's A Girl with a Watering Can!"

Opening the Doors:

Engaging Young Children in the Art Museum

BY SHARON SHAFFER

Thinking about three- to six-year-olds rarely brings to mind an image of young children engaged in conversation in the formal setting of an art museum, yet these are actual comments made by preschoolers and kindergartners who spend time on the Mall in Washington, DC, visiting museums as part of their early childhood program. Today, an increasing number of art museums are opening their doors to this growing audience and recognizing the possibilities for connecting children to paintings and sculpture.

A Changing Institution

Like many other cultural institutions, the art museum reflects the ideas and concepts of its time (LeBlanc, 1999). The evolving nature of the museum is evident in many ways, and can be seen in the introduction of new approaches to the display of collections, the redesigned view of education and interpretation, and the desire to be more inclusive.

With the 1980s and '90s came significant transformation within the museum world, building on the issues of social consciousness raised in the previous decades (Zeller, 1989). "For much of the twentieth century the emphasis in most museums was on collecting, with their learning function coming a poor second" (Black, 2005, p.121). A paradigm shift emerged from this priority view of collections to focus

on thinking about the role of the visitor in the museum. This evolution stemmed in part from a debate that was prominent within the art history world, but also a conversation within many fields of study (Mayer, 2007).

The debate was based on an assertion "that knowledge is not a rational, objective truth bringing sense and order to our world, but is the socially constructed meanings we craft within the complexity of our culture" (Mayer, 2007, p. 41). Where early art museums saw knowledge residing in the collection, emphasis moved toward the educator as interpreter, and later to the visitor as the focal point and ultimate meaning-maker. This transformation redefined learning in the museum with recognition of the individual as key to interpretation. Current thinking continues to focus on the individual, based on the belief that learning is

"I hope that we get to see the Botero sculptures today. I just love them!"

"It looks like a sea anemone or maybe a beautiful flower. That's what I think when I look at Point of Tranquility!"

left

Auguste Renoir, *A Girl with a Watering Can*, 1876. Oil on canvas. Chester Dale Collection. Image courtesy of National Gallery of Art.

Oil on canvas, 100 x 73 cm.

personal and related to the individual's connection to prior knowledge in a social and cultural context (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

During this time, museums also made a commitment to reach a broader audience, inspired in part by newly emerging concepts of learning based on theory and pedagogy. With the emergence of theories by Lev Vygotsky and his belief that all learning is socially mediated and embedded in the cultural context of the individual (Vygotsky, 1986/1934) came an increased interest and focus on the importance of social interaction and language in museum public programming.

Professionals within the field were also rethinking the museum's role in society. *Excellence & Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, a 1992 report by the American Association of Museums, contributed to this re-examination of museums from mission statements to institutional practices, as well as thinking about education and audience. This dialogue fostered sensitivity toward a more diverse audience and a change in museum practice. Hence, young children became part of the conversation. By the end of the '90s, the museum field saw increased interest in young visitors.

This redefinition of audience led to new programs designed to welcome 3- to 6-year-olds into art galleries, and introduced an approach to interpretation that was distinctly different from the traditional tour or program. Early advocacy came from several sources, including educators at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the founding of *Museum Looks and Picture Books*, a preschool tour that combined gallery and studio activities. Another pioneer in the field was the Smithsonian Institution, with the 1988 opening of the Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center (SEEC), a model early-childhood program designed to use the rich resources of museums in the nation's capital. Both programs embraced a philosophy of student-centered learning through active, sensory-based experience.

A Young Child's Perception of the World

Young children understand their world by processing their sensory experiences through interactions with the world. Exploring the world through sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell; engaging in imaginative play; observing and interacting with others; looking at children's books; expressing ideas through language and art—these experiences are all familiar to children. Preschoolers and kindergartners learn about their world and construct meaning through social interaction and exploration of objects in a cultural context. They thrive in environments that offer a sense of comfort and support.

Knowledge of the audience—beginning with an understanding of children's natural instincts as learners—helps to build a framework for designing developmentally appropriate programs. It is useful to look beneath the surface of a child's activity by listening to the ideas of theorists who have written extensively on learning. Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Gardner, and Egan—all constructivists at heart—share beliefs about the learning process and offer insight into a child's journey of meaning-making.

Dewey's belief in learning through experience focused on constructing meaning through purposeful interaction with the environment. Piaget articulated the concept of assimilation and accommodation as a means of forming internal structures in thinking, and refining those structures through new encounters with the world. Vygotsky recognized the influence of social interaction and culture on meaning-making that included the process of identifying similarities and differences as a strategy for sorting, organizing, and classifying to connect and build internal structures of thinking. Gardner placed construction of knowledge as an outcome of personal ways of thinking or knowing. Kieran Egan explored narrative as a framework, suggesting that children construct knowledge through stories and storytelling. Each theorist contributed to the understanding of constructivism by offering a perspective for thinking about the process of learning, emphasizing the internal construction of knowledge by the individual.

Scientific research also contributes to our knowledge base and gives us further opportunity to examine our practices. In the '90s, neuroscientists provided educational

institutions, including museums, with new insights into early learning through brain research. Findings were shared through national reports, such as *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development* (1996), that brought validation to the field of early education. Researchers discovered a link between sensory-rich activity and the physical development of neuron connections (Begley, 1996), building a greater capacity for future learning. Data and implications of the research were shared with the general public through national media, raising awareness about the impact and benefits of multi-sensory activities in the early years.

So what does this say about young children and how they learn? Children are active, curious learners who gain meaning from interactions with their environment; they explore through their senses; they observe their world and notice similarities and differences; they order, sort, and classify; they represent their ideas through play; they interact socially and mimic the behaviors of others; they build on prior knowledge; and they create meaning through narrative and storytelling. Children see their world in a way that is qualitatively different from that of adults, yet still rich with new insights and learning.

Opening the Doors for Young Children in Museums

Translating theory to practice has implications for art museums, offering a framework for thinking about program development. Theories support educators in their planning and ground their thinking about the types of experiences that best serve young visitors. Other factors that contribute to successful programming include setting and emotional environment. Although art museums may be opening the doors for young children, are they really inviting them into the museum and embracing their presence?

Research shows that creating a sense of comfort is essential to learning in the museum. This is true not only for the adult visitor, but also for the young child (Hein & Alexander, 1998; Piscitelli, Weier, & Everett, 2003; Shaffer, 2004). Mayer (2007) suggests that the formal environment of an art museum can have the effect of distancing the visitor from the art, and thereby has a distinct impact on the personal experience. While this may be true, Mayer sees ample opportunity to create a sense of comfort by

promoting an ethic of care as suggested by Nel Noddings (2002). “The museum teacher who is warm, responsive, empathetic, and open can counter the physical chill of formal spaces and cool temperatures as well as the elitism of these institutions of high culture” (Mayer, 2007, p.191). It is the environment, the museum teacher, and the relationship that develops (Mayer, 2007) that is essential for rich meaning-making, and ultimately leads to personal connections to works of art.

Looking at Art with Young Children

The visual world is often thought of as the “first language” for children. A visit to the art museum begins for any visitor, adult or child, with looking, which creates a framework for response and interpretation. Therefore, children are encouraged to **look** carefully at paintings or sculptures to begin a museum visit. Young children are naturally adept at looking carefully, and often notice details missed by more-experienced visitors.

But how do we help children move beyond looking to construct meaning in what they see? Children make sense of their world through interactions with their environment, and develop knowledge from sensory experience with objects. It is the connection between experience and thinking that fosters understanding. Concrete objects **connect** children to the real world and bring sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell into the process of knowing. By linking teaching objects that allow for tactile experience with the visual world of art, children gain deeper insight and understanding. Barry Flanagan’s *The Drummer* takes on greater meaning when children join the rabbit’s parade while playing drums, or feel a piece of modeling clay with lines etched across the surface to relate to techniques visible in the sculpture. Objects engage the visitor in a mind/body connection that is important in the learning process (Lasky, 2009).

To **reflect** requires that children search for meaning within the experience and find a personal connection. What is happening in the painting? How does this make me feel? Informal conversations encourage thoughtful response and allow for seeing relationships to one’s own world. A respectful interplay between educator and visitor creates a safe place where personal ideas are valued and success is likely. The conversation extends the looking, and builds on the experience of connecting to the artwork with objects.

Children readily offer their opinions about the relationship between the touchable object and the work of art, and talk about similarities or context.

When looking at a Degas painting of dancers, children are able to talk about the dancer, the costumes, and the narrative. New meaning-making occurs by bringing in a sense of touch to the experience through a collection of objects gathered for use by educators. As a child discovers the hard toe of the ballet shoe (from the museum’s collection of teaching objects) and looks at the ballerina captured in the painting by Degas as she dances on her toes, the connection between the hardness of the shoe and the ability of the ballerina to stand on her toes becomes evident. Without this special shoe, the dancer would not be able to perform as choreographed. Viewing images of other genres of dance leads to comparison and a conversation about the type of shoes that might be required.

Beyond the information gleaned from looking is the possibility to wonder or **imagine**. Children are gifted when it comes to imagination. Their play—pretending to be a ballerina in a performance or an artist at work sculpting—is second-nature for young children and contributes to construction of knowledge. This sense of imagination can take the form of physical action or conversation. What would it be like to be the king in this painting? Pretend to put on your crown. Is it heavy or light? Does it have jewels? The thought process is important as children respond to questions. Engaging children in thinking about why they think what they think is where the learning occurs. Why do you think the crown is light or heavy? A child might connect his thinking to the size of the object (large objects being heavy and small objects being light) or to the materials (a crown made of feathers would be associated with light since feathers are light). The knowledge of whether the crown is heavy or light is relatively unimportant, but the thought process of the child and an open dialogue that explores the child’s thinking is where the meaning making takes place.

Conversation is necessary, but not itself sufficient in children’s programs. Children love to share ideas about what they see, but at the same time they are enriched by active engagement that includes strategies that are fun, and yet bring meaning to the experience.



Child playing near *The Drummer*, a sculpture by Barry Flanagan.

By linking teaching objects that allow for tactile experience with the visual world of art, children gain deeper insight and understanding.



Kathleen Blackshear, *Portrait of Robert Gould*. 1932. Oil on canvas. The Ogden Museum of Southern Art, University of New Orleans.

Each child takes on the role of the boy in the painting, looking closely to capture the exact posture and facial features from the portrait.

Embracing Young Children in the Art Museum

The Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center (SEEC) is the Smithsonian's model lab school that caters to young children. Toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergartners see the museums as their school, and are as comfortable conversing about entomologists, pointillism, and biodiversity as most young children are in talking about bugs, finger painting, and leaves. This is the natural outcome of enriched experience. Art museums in the community—as diverse as the National Gallery of Art (NGA) and the Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden—are places where SEEC children comfortably connect with art. The passion expressed by such young learners, and their sense of comfort of place when visiting art galleries, can amaze adult observers.

SEEC children make friends with art. This idea is not merely a phrase for SEEC children, but rather a practice. When children need to solve a problem, they might suggest a visit to Barry Flanagan's *The Thinker* at the NGA Sculpture Gallery to ponder possible solutions. On another day, the children simply visit some old friends, perhaps seeing birds and other creatures in *Artful Animals*, a temporary exhibition of extraordinary creations in the African Art Museum. Interactive strategies enliven the experience and make it relevant for young museum-goers. In an era when making friends in the art museum is encouraged by museum practitioners for all ages (Mayer, 2007), this practice is second nature for children at SEEC.

Children in New Orleans are also making friends with art at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art. Preschoolers, kindergartners, and first graders from the University of New Orleans Charter Network are exploring the concept of art and place as they discover their community through the work of Southern artists. For most students, the museum field trip is the first encounter with art, artists, and museums beyond artmaking in the classroom. Field trips to the museum

offer opportunities to broaden horizons, develop a sense of identity, and increase the literacy skills that are essential for school success.

In the Ogden Museum project, young children are introduced to the museum by imagining the life of an artist. An educator shares a basket of tools and materials that are used by an artist—a piece of canvas, a palette, a brush, a sculpting tool, clay, and found objects. The artist's tools are carefully examined by the children as they talk about their use. A walk through the galleries leads to discussion, and discovery, that relates to the objects in the basket.

The theme of a second field trip is *chairs* and begins with the reading of *Peter's Chair* by Ezra Jack Keats. In the gallery, a child sits on a small, wooden chair similar to the one in the nearby painting of a portrait of a young boy. What is the boy thinking about and how does he feel? One by one, each child takes on the role of the boy in the painting, looking closely to capture the exact posture and facial features from the portrait. In the next gallery the children see the imaginative work of George Andrews and his art created from everyday objects. The colorful patterns and imaginative work captivates young viewers and inspires creativity. His decorative chair exemplifies his unique style of art and inspires children in their own creations. Thinking about *chairs* continues with an innovative exhibition that captures the diversity of form, design, and material used in making chairs. At the end of the day, children create their own chairs with Popsicle sticks and other found objects. These experiences, fashioned after the SEEC model, utilize children's literature and objects to support children's interpretation of paintings and sculpture.

Museum Strategies that Open the Doors for Effective Practice

In this new era, art museum educators increasingly welcome young children to their galleries. By focusing on some simple strategies, educators can create programs for this audience using works of art in their own museums. The framework for success begins with an understanding of the need to create a sense of comfort, but also recognizes that programs need to be based on strategies that honor the learning style of young children, and at the same time respect the art museum environment. An understanding of developmental theories and stages, as found in the work of Bredekamp and Copple (1997), provides a knowledge base for the practitioner.

Theory and practice remind us that active, sensory-based experiences engage children; objects help them connect body and mind; stories incorporate a child's natural approach to understanding the world. All of the senses build on the initial visual encounter, and serve as a format for informal conversation and meaning-making.

Successful programs actively engage children in the gallery and encourage the most natural mode of exploration, which is sensory learning. Consider bringing objects into the gallery that children can touch, and ask them to make connections to what they see. A few packets of seeds and a simple watering can offer a tangible connection to the Renoir painting *A Girl with a Watering Can* (1876), leading to a discussion about gardens. By examining the seed packets, children might even notice flowers in the painting that are similar to those on their seed packages. The watering can opens a discussion about caring for plants, and further allows for role play where a child pretends to water flowers, inspired by the young girl in Renoir's painting. Much like the toe shoe offers insight into the painting by Degas, the watering can and seeds create connections to the real world, and expand thinking for children viewing Renoir's work of art.

The passionate connection to art that results from making friends in the museum will certainly make a difference in the lives of our children and our society.

There are many possibilities to engage children actively with art. Suggest that children pose like a dancer, pretend to be an artist holding a palette and brush, or create an imagined movement of a painting or sculpture. Memory of the experience is kinesthetic and associated with the physical as well as the cognitive.

Children relate to storytelling. There is a wealth of children's literature with boundless opportunities for connecting story to art. *Color Dance* (1989) by Ann Jonas explores mixing colors and provides insight into the painting *Point of Tranquility* (1960) by Morris Louis, while *Tiny Seeds* (1987) by Eric Carle relates to a discussion of gardens and provides a perfect complement to Renoir's *A Girl with a Watering Can*.

A child's world is playful and yet at the same time thoughtful, focused on meaning-making. Well-designed gallery programs recognize the nature of children and their learning styles. Each program includes strategies that engage young children in actively connecting to selected works of art, and providing an opportunity for informal conversation.

Conclusion

Today's young children are tomorrow's leaders and problem solvers. They will be responsible for preserving our cultural histories and documenting our world views through art and objects. And we hope that today's young children will be tomorrow's patrons of the arts. When museums open their doors to welcome this audience, an important relationship begins. As we honor the learning style and developmental needs of our youngest visitors and create a sense of comfort in the museum "that fosters meaningful conversation, it is important to remember that what will grow is the visitor's care for the works of art, the museum, and the society beyond the museum doors" (Mayer, 2007, p.192). The passionate connection to art that results from making friends in the museum will certainly make a difference in the lives of our children and our society. Our respect for children, and an understanding of the way in which they construct meaning about their world, sets the stage for a life-long relationship with museums.

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