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PLEASE TOUCH

LOOKING TO ATTRACT NEW AUDIENCES AND ENGAGE KIDS OF ALL AGES, MUSEUMS ARE REINVENTING THEMSELVES IN WONDERFULLY CREATIVE WAYS.

By Hilarie M. Sheets.

Here's what kids find boring about art museums: being dragged from picture to picture while their parents labor over every one. Here's what kids think would be fun: actually playing with objects. Children's museums have long known this, and art museums are starting to wise up, too. In the face of decreasing tourism and government support, many museums are realizing the importance of nurturing a homegrown audience. Taking cue from the interactive approach pioneered by children's museums—the fasted-growing cultural niche in the nations, with the number of institutions increasing 100 percent in the last decade—art museums are learning how to put their collections to work for the entire family so parents won't leave their kids at home or, worse, stay home themselves.

The most successful examples of this curatorial practice allow visitors to handle art and artifacts that teach them something about culture rather than just make busywork from them. That's what the smart people at the Children's Museum of Manhattan have done in their groundbreaking show "Art Inside Out," on view through December. Original work by three world-class contemporary artists – Elizabeth Murray, William Wegman and Fred Wilson – offers kids (and their parents) unlimited opportunities to manipulate the art on display in order to realize their own creative visions and to gain insight into the artists' thought processes along the way.

The walls of the room devoted to Elizabeth Murray, whose abstract paintings are collected by such major institutions as Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and the National Gallery of Art, are plastered with the vibrant color and biomorphic shapes of one her signature pieces, *Plan 9*, to give visitors the sensation of being inside that painting. Then they can experiment for themselves by virtually manipulating the "canvas" are computer projection stations to scramble the painting's elements and to change its palette. In the area given over to William Wegman, who is famous for his photographs of his Weimaraners outfitted as people, children play their own dress-up with props supplied by the museum and then take digital snapshots of one another that materialize instantly on a screen. Fred Wilson, the third artist in the show, was the U.S. representative at last summer's Venice Biennale. He's made his name by taking such museum objects as busts or figurines and arranging the "characters" so that they appear to be engaged in dialogues, many of which deal with power relationships. In his section, children are asked to assemble a set of egg-shaped forms of various sizes in ways that express ideas like loneliness, competition or teamwork.

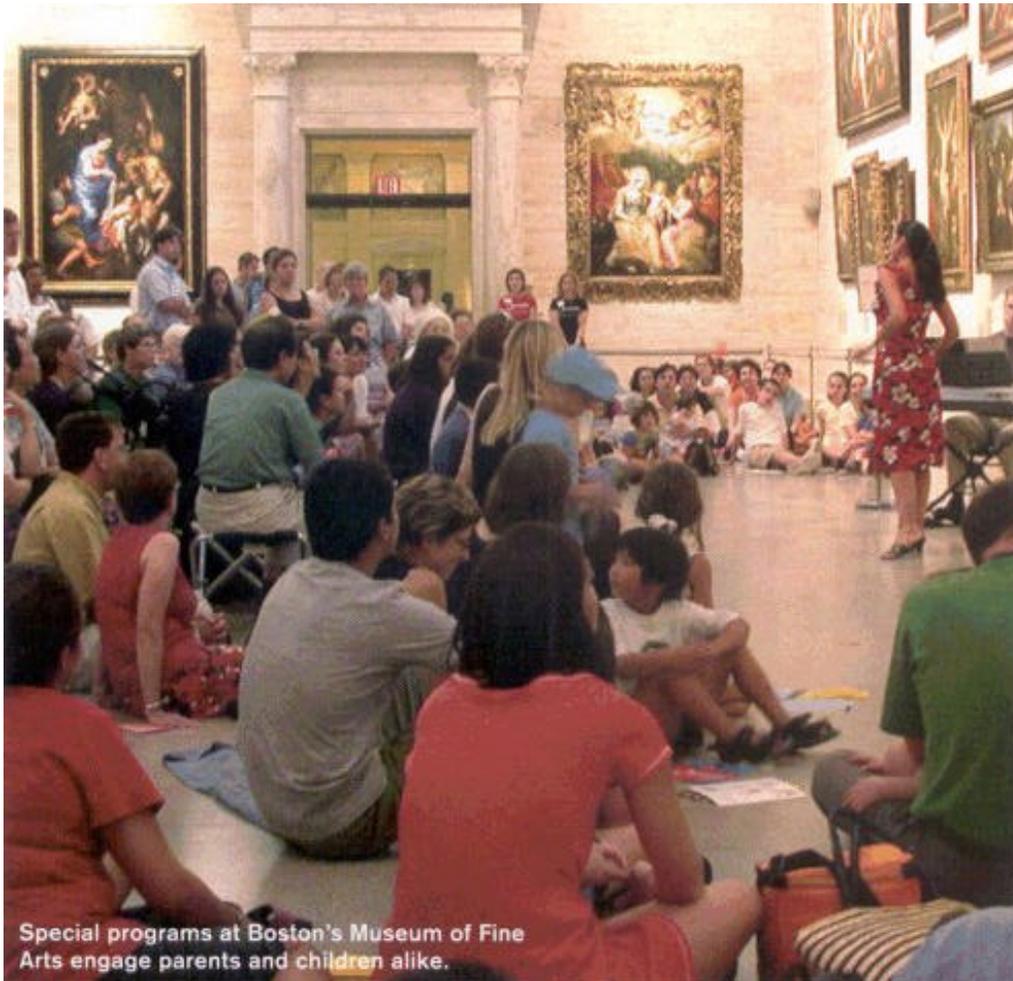
Deborah Schwartz, deputy director for education at New York's Museum of Modern Art, was the guest curator of the Children's Museum of Manhattan show. She says that when she began the work on the exhibition she was warned by some colleagues in the museum world – instilled with the "don't touch" mentality – against messing around with the art. "But once we were working closely with the artists," she says, "it turned out that they were more than happy not only to have kids experiment with their work but also to follow the process with us as we began creating interactives. They really wanted to hear what the kids had to say."

Children's museums, beginning with the Children's Museum of Boston in the 1970's, have been trailblazers in the field of learning by doing, which has since become standard practice at science and natural-history museums. Increasingly at art museums, interactivity has begun to trickle up. To better captivate adults, museums are incorporating such new-media tools as Web sites and computer terminals in their galleries. And as attendance has dropped, museums are committing more resources to cultivating the next generation of viewers. "If you don't condition kids to think that the atmosphere of an art museum is something they should look forward to, it's not realistic to ask them at the age of twenty to come back," says David Levy, director of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C.

To that end, the Corcoran is dedicating a significant portion of the gallery space in its yet-to-be-built Frank Gehry-designed wing to family programming. It will have a large-scale model of a prehistoric cave, for instance, that will be the best place in Washington, D.C. to play hide-and-seek and will also expose kids to copies of cave paintings. In the meantime, families can enjoy a "please touch" policy in the Corcoran's current show (through early January 2004) of sculptures by J. Seward Johnson, Jr., who has turned the greatest hits of Impressionism, like Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*, into three-dimensional tableaux through which visitors can roam.

(For its part, since 1998 the Metropolitan Museum of Art has happily sanctioned "touch tours" for sight-impaired visitors of all ages, who can use their hands to appreciate the intricate relief carvings and sensuous form of six sculptures—some dating from the 15th century B.C.—in the Egyptian galleries.)

As museums renovate and expand, they are figuring out ways to go beyond the straight presentation of information and to use their collections to inspire creativity. At the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, families can pick up a kit that provides such self-guided activities as treasure hunts in the galleries. Instead of glazing over in a roomful of Old Master paintings kids can search for certain animals or shapes in the pictures. (My four-year-old daughter recently pioneered her own version of this game at New York's Whitney by gleefully announcing "penis!" every time she spotted one in the paintings.) a program of



Special programs at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts engage parents and children alike.

instructor-led visits to galleries gives children the opportunity to return to a studio and make art based on what they've seen – Frank Stella, say, might provide the impetus for a mixed-media collage. All such interactive activities will be consolidated in an expanded youth and family learning center that will be a part of the museum's Norman Foster—designed addition (to be completed in 2008). Meanwhile, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco has initiated a daily drop-in program called AsiaAlive for families in its new downtown facility designed by Gae Aulenti. There you may find demonstrations involving Indonesian puppets that the children can then manipulate themselves, as well as a video corner and a reading area filled with what may be the city's most comfortable couches.

Even simply providing an isolated spot where kids can be uninhibited can enhance the whole museum experience. One mother recently took her seven-year-old son to the Gilcrease Museum, in Tulsa, which has an outstanding collection of Western paintings.

While there, in a room set apart from galleries featuring an exhibition on Mexican culture, she chanced upon a display of musical instruments with which kids could “wreak havoc and not disturb anyone! My son was really intrigued by the use of natural materials—the skins of the drums, the gourds made into shakers—and we talked about how early Mexicans used found objects in inventive ways. He was much more interested in the paintings after our conversation.”

In terms of big-picture idea, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is way ahead of the pack with its launch of LACMALab, a terrific hybrid of children's and art museum, since 2000. LACMALab has asked such artists as John Baldessari and Jennifer Steinkamp to produce art specifically intended to be worked over by little hands as well as bug. A recent show called “Making” included a six-ton mountain of clay that visitors could climb on and pinch from to make their own sculptures. From December 14 through August 2004, the exhibition “NANO” will examine the intersection of art and nanotechnology (the science of the tiniest molecule) through participatory environments that engage all the senses.

Going to a place like LACMALab's Boone Children's Gallery—which has brought in more than 200,000 children, many from the inner city—gives kids the sense that museums do indeed belong to them and that art can be a part of their daily lives. Just ask Amanda Parsons, who was accompanied countless groups of elementary-school children to Boone and always greets them with “Welcome to your museum!” On one visit to an exhibit in which an artist had filled a room with everyday objects that kids could beat on or blow into to create their own orchestra, Parsons noticed a teacher crying. “When I asked her what was the matter, she said, ‘I've spent the entire year trying to get this little girl, who has been diagnosed as autistic, to talk. This is the first time she's ever spoken and interacted with other children,’” recalls Parsons, who says that more than anything this experience continues to motivate her even in the face of arts-funding cuts.

Because physical immersion is such an important component of so much contemporary art, even highly conceptual work often lends itself to a certain youthful activity. This is evident just up the Hudson river from New York City at Dia:Beacon, the vast new museum devoted to large-scale minimalist art. There, Richard Serra's towering, indestructible steel ellipses invite the curious inside their spiraling paths. “I watch children looking at some of this so-called difficult work, and they often seem to get it right away,” says Leonard Riggio, Dia's chairman of the board. “They move freely throughout these pieces, and there's joy of discovery.”

Of course, children can step over the line (or on it, to be more exact), as was the case at Dia:Beacon recently when a young boy, jumping though a Fred Sandback sculpture—a geometric shape “drawn” from floor to ceiling with a single strand of yellow yarn – accidentally tripped, causing the artwork to crumple to the floor in a puddle. No permanent damage was done, but the incident does point to why art institutions would serve themselves and their audience best by offering structured kinds of family interaction.

“There may be many parents who say, ‘We're going to a grown-up museum; we won't take the kids.’ That is truly a barrier that we need to break down,” says Deborah Schwartz. “We need to provide the programming that signals to people that you don't have to leave the kids at home.”

Not leaving the parents at home, though, is just as important, and because four-year-olds don't trump off to the children's museums by themselves, these institutions are uniquely positioned to affect the whole family. The Children's Museum of Manhattan has built an impressively diverse audience, and for some – kids as well as adults – it may be the first museum experience, let alone the first exposure to contemporary art. The museum has extensive programs for schoolchildren, as well as partnerships with fifty community organizations through the five boroughs that help bring low-income families. Even veteran museumgoers may feel out of their depth when it comes to contemporary art, and “Art Inside Out” does a superb job of demystifying it,

“Intimidation is a really big factor, especially in New York City, where larger museums may seem somewhat inaccessible and not always kid-friendly,” says Laurie Tisch Sussman, who is the chairperson of the Center for Arts Education and the honorary chairperson of the board at the Children's Museum of Manhattan. Sussman's private foundation provided funding for “Art Inside Out,” which, she says, “has really demonstrated that art is for everybody and does a lot to explain the decision-making process of creating art—especially contemporary work, which can be a little off-putting. It's a great stepping stone toward feeling comfortable in museums. ❖