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Art Museums and Early Childhood: Enhanced Interactions for Young Audiences in Art Museums

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Abstract

Muse House is an engaging experience for young audiences in art museums. This project was conceived as an appealing and creative way to attract families with little children to art museums and galleries, for the reason that these places are not parent’s first-choice of leisure time with their children. Children 3–6 years old tend to explore the environment using all their senses, but in art museums, there is hardly anything they can touch. The content in art museums is usually not meant for the young audiences, and children easily get bored and tired. If tangible objects and age-appropriate activities are provided in the museum, a visit can have a positive impact on children and boost their interest in art and art museums. The project offers not only in-museum activities but also a mobile application that can be used outside a museum. The Muse House mobile app will help children to remember things better and make a connection from their visit to the games on the app. Mobile application features allow storage of scanned activity cards, which helps to keep a record of museums visited. Also, it motivates children to have another visit and makes them curious about other museums and art in general.

Keywords

Art museums
Design for kids
App for kids
Activities for children
Graphic Design
Brand Identity
Introduction

When we think about an art museum or an art gallery, we do not associate those places with children. Indeed, art is a complex phenomenon, sometimes hard to understand or appreciate even by adults. Because of this complexity, solutions that assist children and even adults to better understand the benefits of art are important. This is especially true with children as their childhood experiences affect their future professions, hobbies, interests, and intellectual development in general. There is a lot of evidence that the earlier parents start engaging their children with music, languages and arts, the more successful these kids will be. (Ibuka 1979)

Scientifically, the cognitive development process is at a high point around the 1-year mark. This is an ideal time to begin exposure to new environments that will help foster additional pathways in the brain. (Piscitelli and Penfold 2015). Hence, young audience can benefit from visiting an art museum or exhibition. Moreover, exposing children to art museums will help to prevent a misunderstanding of different types of museums. For the majority of older kids (10–12 years old) “museum” means Natural History museum, Children’s museum or Science museum. And they even ask “where is a dinosaur if it is a museum?” (Clark 2009)

The problem is that children are not the primary audience for an art museum or gallery. But this is how museums exclude and limit the next generation. In addition, with fast paced technological progress, it is getting harder and harder to interest the new generation in an old-fashioned museum environment. This phenomenon can be compared with reading, where reading paper books has gone down and children now prefer interactive screens, tablets, mobile phones and the Internet. (Dredge 2013)

In the last decade art museums have been strongly encouraged to be sensitive to the needs of visitors and to provide a positive experience for them. Although not every museum has its own vision and policy on this, some museums (like Guggenheim, MOMA in New York city) and galleries have started to pay more attention to family visits. The majority of museums provide materials to make the visit more engaging but usually the target age group is 8–14 years old. Those materials are mainly for children who can read, who already can communicate and express their own opinion.
Many museums have art classes or special programs for families and children. But, in this case, the space is divided. There is an actual exhibition and a special room or place where children can do arts and crafts. This means that, in theory, these activities can be held anywhere else.

All of the above is beneficial if a family lives in the city and is enrolled in such programs. The question here is how to provide a better museum experience to any family with little children who occasionally visit a museum? To make art more understandable to a wide range of visitors is the ultimate goal of the museum.
Muse House Project

How can we make the museum experience more engaging for children who are 3–6 years old? This was the main question and challenge for the project. The thesis project acquired the name—Muse House—and became a combined solution in bringing art understanding to a child’s level and merging physical and digital interactions. Muse House merges physical and digital interactions to create a unique experience that will engage a young audience, inspire creativity, and develop a positive attitude towards art.

Methods

A specific target audience and how to design for children were main project-driven challenges and considerations throughout the whole process. Besides understanding the user’s needs and finding a niche in the field, there were clear and distinct design goals. These points were taken in consideration: creating an appealing brand, establishing children’s friendly look and feel, and deciding on engaging color palettes.

The next highly important area was the content. Whether the concept was created to fit in any museum, the topics and age-appropriate tasks must respond to children’s physical and mental development at this stage. Children 3–6 years old cannot concentrate for long periods of time, they enjoy exploring, pushing, touching, they can separate themselves mentally from physical surroundings, they know how to use common items, prefer bright colors, can name basic colors, and can identify body parts when asked. (Fishel 2001)

The concepts that were developed for the activity cards had to connect with concepts on the mobile application. The challenge in designing the mobile app was in bringing the user back, creating it the way that the user won’t get tired or bored and makes a personal connection to the app. That is why there were two possible directions: whether to choose a character-based connection with users or a collection-centered approach. Because this concept can be acquired by any museum around the world, collection-centered approach was universally applicable and more beneficial.
Results

Muse House includes multiple deliverables. The main component is an activity kit: a white cardboard stepping stool and activity cards with age-appropriate tasks and crayons. Besides the activity kit, a mobile application enhances the experience. The mobile app unlocks new games and activities by scanning the filled-out cards from a museum. For parents this scan reveals age-appropriate content which they can share with their children.

Children need to explore the environment using all of their senses, so it is important to include various forms of activities during the museum experience. This is a way to achieve balance between technology and an actual exhibition space, and limit mobile device usage. However, after the exhibit the mobile app device allows parents and children to engage with the content for an extended period of time.

The combination of these materials solves various problems a family faces at an art museum: it engages children and prevents them from interacting with artwork that should not be touched, it provides access to more in-depth information for both parents and children through technology and printed materials so that they can better understand the information at an age-appropriate level.

The Muse House provides solutions to meet families’ diverse needs at an art museum. The initial research was focused on how to engage little children within a physical space. Based on multiple research projects, such as interactive exhibition and experiential learning in Australian Art Galley (Clark 2009), digital Pen at Cooper Hewitt Museum, various printed materials at MOMA, Corning Museum of Glass, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, these insights for the Muse House project were emphasized:

- collection-centered approach (children’s engagement with artworks is the main component);
- activity-centered approach (cards, giving children something they can interact with);
- experiential approach (combines various activities while in an art museum and after the visit);
- knowledge-centered approach (based on a visit, keep learning and apply knowledge).
Stepping stool

The stepping stool addresses multiple problems. As it was mentioned before, the stepping stool limits children’s desire to touch artworks and increases their engagement into actual exhibition space. (Figure 01) The stepping stool handles corporeal needs too. Children can get tired, so they can sit on the stool at any time. Children can stand up on it, which increases their eye level and as a result make a positive impact on the museum experience.

The stool is provided individually for each visitor and can sustain up to 77 lb (35 kg). It is made out of thick white cardboard, providing additional white surface to draw on. At the same time the material is light and can easily be moved by a child 3–6 years old. The stepping stool is made out of white cardboard, an inexpensive and recyclable material, easily affordable for museums. (Figure 02)
Activity Cards

Activity cards are designed for 3–6 year old children, featuring the concepts that are already familiar for this age group or right about the time to learn. These concepts include: basic knowledge of colors and shapes, time and seasons; “family”, “love” notions; and recognition of animals. The cards also expand the children’s knowledge of genres and painting styles, and recognition of world-known artists. (Figure 03) The tasks develop attention, mental agility, concentration and logical thinking. Activity cards keep children engaged in the actual space and provide an opportunity to learn about the art.

The concept was created to be universal for every art museum. The content on the cards can be different and based on a particulate collection or a museum. To illustrate the concept and to do user testing, the State Hermitage’s collection (St. Petersburg, Russia) was chosen.
Mobile Application

Children are tech savvy from an early age, and this is the reason to include interactive games in this project. The main design goals and outcomes for the mobile app are: to make the experience more memorable and meaningful, and also to bring children back to a museum.

The Muse House mobile application enhances the experience both for children and for the whole family. Games on the app provide age-appropriate additional interactions and foster interest in art. By scanning the cards with a mobile device, children unlock new games and activities. Scanned cards are stored in the gallery section and keep records of visited museums. Empty cards remind them that there are more places to visit and more cards to collect, which also motivates children to come back to a museum. (Figure 04)

A variety of games feature concepts that appeal to children in early childhood development stage. A few games were designed to illustrate the concept. (Figure 05)
“Painting Styles” Game.

The game unlocks by scanning “Find 5 differences” card. Children have to find all paintings made by a particular painter. After finishing the game, the next level becomes available. This game develops attention to details and introduces artists’ painting styles. (Figure 06)

![Figure 06](image)

“Coloring” Game.

The game unlocks by scanning “What can be a green color?” card. The task is to color outlined artwork that children saw in the museum. There is a help tool – a magnifying glass that reveals original artwork underneath. After the user finishes the game, the next level becomes available. This game teaches simple color recognition and attention to details. (Figure 07)

![Figure 07](image)
User Testing

Activity cards and the stepping stool were tested at the Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, NY with four children of various ages: Alisa (6 y.o.), Maxim (3 y.o.), Sasha (4 y.o.), Ethan (5 y.o.). (Figure 08) Upon observing families interacting with cards and stool, it appears that there are obvious pros and cons of the project.

The successful decisions include:
• the stepping stool as a personal object; children interacted with it for the purposes that it was designed;
• children used cards in a proper way; they filled the cards, drew on them and looked at paintings.

The weak points of the project include:
• information on the card divided the way directions were missed by parents;
• crayons were not the best drawing material (more testing of various types paper and crayons needs to be done);
• seven cards at the same time were too many, and children didn’t finish all of them.

Refinements of the project:
• cards should be stored directly in the room when children interact with it. This will solve the misunderstanding of where to fill out the card and with which card to start;
• information on the cards has to be rearranged, and detailed explanations should be right after the main question.

Figure 08
Conclusion

How to make the museum experience more engaging for the younger audience?

Children are curious by nature. And while this curiosity lasts, it is the parents’ and adults’ obligation to help them grow in the right direction. At the age of 3–6 children are interested in exploring varied environments and are able to play in new social situations. Everything they interact with helps to shape the brain for thinking, feeling and learning. Hence, young audiences can benefit from visiting an art museum or exhibition. It is crucially important that art museums and galleries consider young children as part of their target audience and instead of isolating them integrate appropriate content within the existing art museum space.

It is hard to compete with other places which are geared towards children, such as Science museums, Natural History museums and Children’s museums. But by considering topics and age-appropriate content and taking basic principles that children can understand and interact with, it is quite possible to attract more children to art museums.

This is also important if we want to raise the next generation who can appreciate art, history, and heritage.
Bibliography


Museums visited for research purposes

Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY), August 2016

Baltimore Museum of Art (Baltimore, MD), October 2016

Museum of Play (Rochester, NY), January 2017

Corning Museum of Glass (Corning, NY), March 2017

Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA), August 2017

Mobile Museum of Art (Mobile, AL), August 2017

Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum (New York, NY), December 2017

Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY), January 2018

Memorial Art Gallery (Rochester, NY), March 2018