Teaching Museum Behaviors in an Interactive Gallery

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The role played by an original object, not a replica, both depends upon and determines the role played by a gallery targeted to children and families within the larger museum institution. Whether and how we choose to use original objects in these spaces sends messages to our public about how we expect them to experience the museum as a whole.

Museums should be clear about why they have separate galleries targeted to children and families. To a large extent, art and history museums have developed these spaces in an attempt to combat perceptions that they are non-family friendly; that they are esoteric, passive and boring. Many art museums are in competition for family audiences in their community with science centers, zoos, children's museums, sporting venues, all of which have the reputation of being active and participatory. And not least, there is the recognition that children (primarily) and novices of any age learn some tasks more easily via hands-on experiences. But there are sub-texts or messages to each of these stated reasons. James Bradburne has noted that everything we do in museums generates a user-language or set of expectations for how to interact or act.[1] By having a physically separate targeted gallery space, we may suggest that what happens within it is different from what happens elsewhere in the museum. By having a children's gallery, we suggest that children learn differently, which is, of course, true; but many adults accompanying these children need to learn the same basic lessons about art and museums as their children. We must also consider what we are saying in these spaces about the purely visual experience allowed in the "main galleries." By contrasting objects with "interactives," or interactive galleries with main galleries, are we suggesting inadvertently that visual experience is not engaging (boring), or conversely too hard and too high an expectation for our young visitors? There aren't hard and fast answers to these questions. They are presented merely as important considerations that may determine if and how original objects are used in "children's" galleries, and how the gallery is situated within the museum at large (assuming one has a choice).

One of the most important reasons for having a children/family gallery, speaking as an educator, is that the institution may allow staff to do things there that they cannot do anywhere else in the museum! We can play with color palettes, try new interpretive approaches, create context, supply visitors with prompts, all those things we are generally prohibited from doing in the "main" galleries out of RESPECT for the OBJECT. Oftentimes, respect or concern for the object is the stated reason why educators are prohibited from using or choose not to use original objects in their galleries. But what is our true goal in these galleries? Our true mission is to increase appreciation and enjoyment of objects in our care throughout the museum. As art historians and/or museum educators, we must believe at our core that original objects provide unique experiences unavailable through replicas. People come to museums to see the real thing, even though it may be hard for them to recognize the real thing when they see it. We need to reward their trust in us to present real objects, and not muddy already murky waters when it comes to the public's understanding of authenticity. Objects are our unique resource; as educators, don't we

want to teach from the best? As Graeme Talboys noted in his *Handbook for Museum Educators*, we want to "instill an appropriate **reverence** for the resource, the requisite **skills** for using the resource to its fullest extent, and the **confidence** to do so."[2]

Confidence

One role of a family gallery is to instill confidence that the museum welcomes families and that families can find something worthwhile there. Most targeted galleries welcome families with kid-friendly furniture, works hung at lower heights, a variety of books and activities. The galleries may be devised as a kind of transition zone from familiar environments where things are physically comfortable, bright and touchable. Families also appreciate the feeling that the children are not going to break a priceless object. Object safety may be cited as a reason for using replicated objects. A replicated object can be handled, drawn upon, manipulated, all with excellent educational intent. But what is the visitor relationship with that avatar and with the real object when/if he encounters it? Do we wish to instill confidence in drawing upon an object? Confidence in touching? What if the replication looks better than the original, or is easier to see? Have we only instilled confidence in the ability to see things larger than life?

Another option is to use objects protected by vitrines or plexi barriers. Barriers may be emotionally and intellectually off-putting. But they also present an opportunity sometimes to direct attention to the real object. Barriers can be used to carry messages in a very direct way using labels or vinyl. Applied on top of the barrier, messages can direct viewing, identify motifs, guide sight lines. Phoenix Art Museum has done this with some success using Asian objects, both in the ArtWorks Gallery for Children and Families, and in the main Art of Asia Gallery. Another approach is to present the protected object more or less as it would be encountered in a main gallery and reinforce skills that one might reasonably exercise in that main gallery. This brings us to the choice of what skills we want to engender or reinforce in children/family galleries as related to increasing appreciation of objects.

Skills

Without social interaction, it is easier to deliver content about objects than to teach skills in discovering content in any object. That is why in the main galleries we find the curatorial voice expressed via written materials. When we want to impart skills, we give tours (school groups, etc.) or use audioguides. As educators, we recognize the importance of discussion and guided observation. The use of interactives in children/family galleries is perhaps an attempt to achieve the give-and-take of live facilitation without the facilitator. We want to reveal the uniqueness of each object in our collections. To this end, I think most educators would say that they want to build skills in discussion, observation, imagination, and evaluating information for interpretation. These are skills that can be applied to every artwork with unique results. Moreover, they are skills that transfer outside the mediating environment of the children/family gallery. As Heath and vanLehn noted, the greatest difficulty lies in making "systemic connections" between an activity and an object.[3] Non-object related activities and non-transferable skills will not ultimately achieve our goal of enhancing appreciation of objects in the "main" galleries. Many of the skills we most want to teach are best modeled. We need to teach whole families appropriate

physical behaviors as well as potentially satisfying intellectual behaviors around and toward objects. We want to create museum-goers. Phoenix Art Museum has experimented with this modeling concept through the use of "peer teacher" cartoon-like characters that observe, comment, and question in ways we hope our visitors will.

Reverence

Reverence is not a popular word in museums, art museums particularly, because it seems to denote elitism and snobbery. But reverence means to hold something in high regard, and that is how we must regard the works entrusted to us as museum professionals. The fact that something cannot be touched does not deny engagement; we can observe, perceive, imagine. Museum educators, myself included, occasionally use mechanisms deemed irreverent by curators to build or prompt those skills. Sometimes those mechanisms encourage open-ended interpretation that contradicts the concept of a curatorial authority (if not contradicting a specific interpretation). Sometimes these mechanisms are considered visually intrusive to the aura surrounding the artwork. The guideline in these discussions should be whether the mechanism draws attention to the object, or away from it.

In the quest for building transferable skills, the role of content information remains vital. A children/family gallery must satisfy adults who want to feel knowledgeable in front of their children. While children generally won't read labels, adults may read directions or information if it only takes a few moments. In the main galleries, object labels are the museum's best way of directing attention to the individual merits of an object. In the family gallery, an educator could devise the perfect scenario of how to look in the main galleries – the child finds a work he/she is drawn to, they observe, imagine, discuss with the family, and an adult provides supporting information drawn from a label.

The role of the children/family gallery is to transition groups unfamiliar with the museum to a state of confidence in their ability to visit any gallery. We should send them off with a desire to discover objects and stand in awe of artists' achievements. It is our responsibility and joy to convey to our visitors the intrinsic power of objects throughout the museum and open the mental channels for them to feel that power for themselves.

[1] Bradburne, James M. *Museums and Their Languages: Is Interactivity Different for Fine Art as Opposed to Design?,* conference paper presented at *Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design*, 17-18 May 2002, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (online publication).
[2] Talboys, Graeme K. *Museum Educator's Handbook.* England: Gower, 2000, p. 97.
[3] Heath, Christian and van Lehn, Dirk. Miscontruing Interactivity, conference paper presented at Interactive Learning in Museums of Art and Design, 17-18 May 2002, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (online publication).