



Families are doing it for themselves, in art museums

One thing I like about using audioguides in art museums is that no one can hear what I am listening to. This is because if I am offered the choice, it will often be tuned to the children's tour. I still always manage to learn something new, but I also usually get to have a laugh, enjoy looking at objects in other ways, and get to see the world a little differently for a while.

I'm often in museums, both through choice and for professional development. And while I get to look and learn about the objects on display, I also spend time trying to understand more about the museum itself as well as its visitors. I have learned, for example, that due to limited resources museums have long given up trying to be everything to everyone, and instead many focus on trying to serve key audiences and doing this very well.

Children at school are a highly targeted audience and have been for many decades, with pre-visit, post-visit, and on-site programs focused on the curriculum offered almost everywhere from big city museums to smaller regional ones. The continuing diversity in these resources strongly reflects that of the very museums themselves.

Children and families are another key group which have long been the focus of art museums. One aspect that appeals to this group is undoubtedly the price, as a visit is often free or negligible, and even for the blockbusters, family passes allay the costs of what can otherwise become an expensive day out for five people.

In comparison with the school visit, family visits are differentiated by their informality. Rather their focus is generally on leisure, pleasure and perhaps nothing more than just spending time together. The interactions are more likely to be between the individuals of the group, instead of between the object and the individuals. These visitors set their own pace and structure, and are driven often more by curiosity than by learning.

Exhibitions and collection displays are perfect enablers for such afternoons in, and a pleasant memory of a childhood visit to a museum will often guide adult visitors in their choice to visit again later in life. Museums then are partly also investing in their long-term sustainability by catering to the family market.

Activities for this group are often included as part of an overall public programme package, which might otherwise also include something for the specialist, the practitioner, master classes, those wanting a basic introduction to the artist, or simply something which goes nicely with a drink or afternoon tea.

On rare occasions, such as recently at the National Gallery of Victoria, visitors (of all ages) are actually able to participate in creating the work itself. Consisting of over 400,000 white Lego blocks, the Olafur Eliasson sculpture *The cubic structural evolution project* was quietly built by visitors, either alone or in small groups.

Even if you were just watching, the total effect was mesmerising, especially because of its brilliant siting in front of the much beloved *water wall*. The various approaches to the work and interpretations of the task at hand were interesting to watch, and the companionship a pleasure to see. The sheer numbers of blocks would certainly have appealed to a child's love of superlatives – surely it was the *most* Lego blocks in one place *ever*.

In contrast, some institutions such as the National Gallery of Australia provide a dedicated gallery focusing on themes, ideas and objects which appeal to children, and their grown-up friends. Operating since at least 1998, these shows have explored topics as diverse as the magic in conservation (*Abracadabra*), the weather (*Come rain or shine*), and animals in rainforests (*Creeping through the jungle*).



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The objects are the same as you would find anywhere in the Gallery, they are just presented in a manner more appealing to a younger audience. Hanging the objects closer to the ground is one consistent design element, but the wonderful labels, the inquiring language used, the fun titles, and the bright colours in tight, small displays ensure their continuing popularity.

Furthermore, terrific temporary child-focused exhibitions, such as *Colour* at the Queensland Art Gallery were as much a treat for the adults as the children visiting, although the low doorways throughout certainly reinforced the key target audience. The orange room contained Papunya paintings as well as an aquarium with goldfish, and the green room a Sonia Delaunay tapestry and lidded boxes with green smells to be guessed at inside. The exhibition introduced children to how artists use colour to express emotions and moods.

Alternatively, stories were the focus of *Tell Me a Picture: An Exhibition Selected by Quentin Blake* some time ago at the National Gallery in London (2001). Here twenty-six paintings were simply hung in alphabetical order according to their subject matter. Blake is widely known to families for his illustrations to the books of Roald Dahl, and his selections served to introduce his audience to works in the Gallery.

The longer-term displays of museum collections also provide an endless source of inspiration and activities, even if the hang remains the same. At the Art Gallery of South Australia new *small talk* labels are scattered throughout and include children's commentaries offering us their own observations on the paintings. Move over curators.

Versions of their *Eye Spy Club*, aimed at five- to ten-year olds and an accompanying adult, can be found in various forms in many art museums. Here a specialist guide will lead the group around the galleries exploring particular themes, such as gods and monsters, children or animals, where the objective generally is simply learning to look. The ubiquitous

artcards are now also everywhere, a testament to their enduring popularity.

In support of my argument that art museums and other heritage institutions have been focusing on families and children as specialist audiences for a very long time now, I direct you to an early theoretical text first written in 1957 which still continues to impact our industry's practice.

Freeman Tilden in *Interpreting Our Heritage*⁽¹⁾ outlined six key principles for successful and effective interpretation. The sixth of these was that *interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.*

Following his advice ever since, art museums continue to run these particular programmes with great success, although let's not let the kids keep all the fun for themselves. Jump in and join them when you can.

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(1) F.Tilden (1977) *Interpreting Our Heritage*, The University of North Carolina Press, p.47.