

## **Exhibitions that excite! What young visitors want to do in museums**

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*Play is our brain's favourite way of learning*  
Diane Ackerman, author and naturalist

### **Abstract**

Why do so many young people loathe visiting museums? What do they want to do in museums? How do we address the “disconnect” and apathy they feel when they step into a historical or cultural exhibition? How can we help connect children and youth to our collections? In order to create exhibitions that engage our visitors as well as convey values of tolerance, respect and understanding of cultural diversity in the face of urbanization and globalisation, we must relook not just what but how messages are delivered to young visitors. This paper will focus on our continual experimentation on interactive experiences in the permanent and special exhibition galleries of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM).

### **Whose space is it?**

Although museums display rare objects of art, very few visitors are specialists or connoisseurs. Then for whom do we put up exhibitions? Whose space is it? Museums in Singapore started as repositories of objects collected during expeditions organised by colonial explorers. More than two decades after independence, the state began to work hand in hand with museums to inculcate values of tolerance, respect and understanding of cultural diversity as part of the nation-building process. Recently, the business of display became a profession and the gallery space became a platform to exercise how good design can heighten the aesthetic appreciation of rare artefacts. Visitors, regardless of age, were accorded the role of a gazer. The birth of an audience development team that brought together museum educators, programming and marketing professionals to promote visitor-centred experiences introduced new museum practices. Our museum is now a venue for constructive debates between different museum professionals. So where does the visitor fit into this new scheme of things?

Our museum is beginning to mean many things to various groups of people. The Ministry of Education in Singapore now sees our museum as a valuable partner that offers alternative classrooms for both teachers and students. We also engage youth to curate their own exhibitions. During school holidays and big family events at our museum, the space is transformed into a lifestyle destination complete with interactive performances, drop-in craft sessions and food fairs. The good news for museums is that traditional spaces for learning and conventional manners of acquiring ideas and knowledge are giving way to informal settings such as student-initiated exhibitions, interactive galleries and programmes or information technologies that promote collaborative efforts. We see that “the distinction between formal and informal learning is also becoming a false dichotomy.” (Hawkey 2006)

While it appears that many more stakeholders have emerged over the last ten years, museum professionals here have only just begun to take a closer look at the lifestyle needs and learning patterns of different kinds of visitors. While lifestyle facilities such as a café may be easily initiated and sustained, changes to the way museums organise the galleries and programmes require much more thought and resolve. Exploring more visitor-oriented approaches in our bid to make spaces and collection more relevant to young visitors require all staff in the museum to relook at how we perceive the visitor. While displaying artefacts and organising events that promote the discovery of selves and others is a good start, we also need to “understand and respect that, in the end, what individuals learn depends not only upon the content of the exhibitions and programs, but equally upon visitors’ prior knowledge, experience, and interest, what they actually see, do, talk, and think about during the experience.” (Falk et al. 2008)

Young visitors are our future stakeholders; getting them to enjoy their first museum visit is of utmost importance. If we do not start to pay attention to how young visitors experience our collection,

we may lose them at a faster rate than we can ever imagine. Young parents with children and young people expect to be educated and entertained at the same time because the leisure industry now provides them with fast, fun and somewhat meaningful experiences. It seems that it is no longer sufficient to provide interactive opportunities in the galleries, we must also be aware of how young visitors want to learn. Our gallery spaces belong to them as much as they belong to the state, the experts, the curators or the museum educators.

### **Interactive spaces in the permanent galleries**

Our museum focuses on ancestral cultures of Singaporeans. The themes ranging from pre-history to religions and material cultures appear serious and boring to young visitors. How do we address the “disconnect” and apathy they feel when they step into a historical or cultural exhibition? Many learning theories in the past treat visitors as blank slates where the voice of authority would prescribe specific learning outcomes. However recent research tells us otherwise. “One should expect learning to be highly personal and strongly influenced by an individual’s past knowledge, interests, and beliefs, and one should expect learning to be influenced by an individual’s desire to both select and control his/her own learning.” (Falk et al. 2008) How do we provide such seemingly customised opportunities without compromising the educational role of a museum?

The text in our museum is not written with the child in mind, so friendlier interfaces ought to be made available for young visitors. Since the opening of our museum in 2003, we have set aside spaces in our galleries for children. There are four ExplorAsian zones, one for each of the geographical area our collection comes from: China, South Asia, West Asia and Southeast Asia. The zones have since undergone two renovations. The very first zones featured a mixture of hands-on and IT stations featuring a quiz with multiple-choice questions. Each zone had a cartoon mascot and was clearly designed for children. Only families with children would use these zones. The renovations that happened after the first installation attempted to situate learning in certain contexts. We introduced a teahouse in China ExplorAsian zone and a Toraja house in Southeast ExplorAsian zone. These contextualised learning spaces were very successful and managed to attract not just families with children but also students moving about in small groups, teenagers visiting on their own, as well as adults and retirees. The ambience and learning opportunities in the teahouse and the Toraja house helps them to imagine the contexts of the objects on display.

Following the success of these two zones, we decided to apply the same treatment to the other two zones. Although the nomad’s tent in West Asia ExplorAsian zone and the *haveli* drawings in South Asia ExplorAsian zone have always been there, they always served as a backdrop to various hands-on and IT stations. After two rounds of surveys, one observational and the other face-to-face with all kinds of visitors, we decided to transform the internal space of the tent to a home and the *haveli* setting into a palace. These zones were just refreshed and most of the elements that have received thumbs-up by our visitors were retained. Elements such as role-play with the help of costumes or headdresses, hands-on and embossing stations became the focus of the newly renovated zones. The social experiences that occurred at the zones helped visitors make meaning out of objects on display in ways facts and images cannot. (Hooper-Greenhill 1999)

Because it is not possible to increase the spaces devoted to learning in our permanent galleries, we have turned to simple technology to transform all the galleries into a big learning zone for students. We had a pilot project that saw 1000 students comb our galleries for ten objects to solve a mystery through a series of SMSes sent to a mobile telephone shared by four students. Students were totally engaged. At the end of the trail, they could recall facts with excitement. Although all of them learned the same things, they learnt them in a novel way. It is not only the technology that engaged them but the discussion and conversations they had to go through before arriving at the answers. This Quest for Treasures SMS Trail proved more engaging than the individual worksheets traditionally used by school groups. The social aspect of this activity was just as important as its technological feature.

### **Special exhibitions as incubators of ideas**

The quick turn-around time for special exhibitions in our museum offers us the opportunity to carry out experiments on visitor engagement at least three times a year. Front-end evaluation conducted for each special exhibition includes questions on the kinds of educational experiences visitors want. In the

lead up to the Sumatra: Isle of Gold special exhibition, the front-end evaluation results told us that many of our existing and potential visitors, including young people, were most curious about the ordinary people of Sumatra, choosing this theme over its history or material culture. The museum educator collated a series of mini videos that featured archival photographs of the various communities as well as documentary footage of a market and a ceremony in Sumatra. As a departure from the usual computer screens, we developed a simple map of Sumatra with peepholes for young visitors to view these mini videos. The map also had scent boxes that held coffee and pepper, the two trade commodities that made Sumatra the crossroads of many cultures. The change in presentation transformed these videos and scent boxes into mediums of discovery learning.

An archival photograph of a Sumatran family taken in the 1920s was enlarged so that visitors can walk into a context and role-play with traditional headdresses. Many young people and even adults enjoy these social moments as they try on different headdresses for a photograph. Another station was conceptualised as a touch station where pieces of costume jewellery still worn by dancers in Sumatra may be handled; this station was placed just beside the showcase that held the more valuable and rare jewellery pieces. Observational surveys showed that this station was very popular. “Direct interaction with objects allows for visual and kinaesthetic learning that can be far richer and more complex than text alone.” (Borun 2002). Elements that worked in this exhibition are now used in the ExplorAsian zones located in the permanent galleries. Some elements such as light boxes with traceable motifs installed near the textiles on display fascinated the visitor but were not well used. Would an activity that allowed for multiple outcomes fare better?

The idea of providing multiple outcomes with an activity that does not require the “right” answers became a strong area to work on for future exhibitions. The activity booklet and the stamping station for the Congo River special exhibition that came after offered young visitors more room for self-expression. Visitors could create their own hairstyles or self-portraits using motifs from the objects on display. These two activities were for the first time open to all visitors. More booklets and stamping cards were printed and put up at various points in the gallery. Because the activities are no longer reserved for children under twelve years of age, we note a significant jump in the number of adolescents and young adults (early 20s to early 30s) picking up these materials on their own and are motivated enough to carry out the activities on their own.

Traditionally, the computer stations in our museum can only be used by up to two persons; this approach does little to enhance the social experience of our collection. We have initiated research and development of installations that allow up to six persons to access computer-based experiences at the same time. The Talking Masks Multi-touch Interactive table in the Congo River special exhibition is an experiment that will inform our choices for the technological improvements we will make in the permanent galleries. Previous IT stations always featured a tutorial or demonstration, as they were not very intuitive to use. This interactive table, however, employed the use of light to indicate activation zones and only a few words – “Place Mask Here” – as instructions. Visitors can choose to see the monologue of a mask or bring two masks together to witness a dialogue. The outcomes are varied; some visitors prefer to discover one mask at a time. Some jump straight into bringing two masks into a dialogue and others animate the dialogues with their own voices. Although the conversations were based on ethnographic studies and the work of art historians, they were scripted with humour and made more accessible to younger visitors with the use of greetings and facts rewritten as short spontaneous exchanges

This setup promoted communal learning within social groups such as families, friends and small groups of students. And if these experiences are shared by visitors that come from different social and cultural backgrounds, their interaction will present very interesting results too. Besides being incubators of ideas, special exhibitions also allow us to build up an eco-system of fabricators, designers, programmers of creative technology that is needed for the creation of safe, fun and meaningful experiences in our museum.

### **Adventures with Mulan: An exhibition without artefacts**

This is the first year our museum will join hands with some twenty-five public and private museums to organise Children’s Season. During this period, we shall be hosting the Terracotta Warriors special exhibition. This inspired us to look at the “Chinese Warrior” theme. We wanted connect the children’s experience to the exhibition. Hua Mulan was a good choice as her duo character as a filial daughter

and as a warrior will appeal to both girls and boys. We plan to transform a function room in the museum into an interactive gallery for children between the ages of five to ten. This story-based initiative will bring children through the life of a Chinese heroine named Hua Mulan who disguised herself as a young man in order to serve the army in her father's place. The values of bravery and filial piety are clearly demonstrated by this Chinese tale and are universal values found in many cultures.

This make-believe world of Mulan is conceptualised to promote positive attitudes in children towards museums. While the weekdays are set aside for organised pre-school groups, the weekends are reserved for large-scale festivals that support family learning. Engaging communal settings encourage interaction between children and also between parents and their children. This exhibition without artefacts is designed to put children first.

Children may start the journey at the Terracotta Warriors special exhibition where they take a look at the clay army. Storytellers will guide young visitors into Mulan's house where they can experience her daily chores as a girl. Behind the house is a training ground for the imperial army where they can jump into the yellow river created by hundreds of plastic balls, ride a toy horse as well as try their hand at a rock climbing and archery. Mulan became a celebrated war hero and was decorated by the Emperor of China. Children can also meet the emperor and dress up as one. Throughout the exhibition, references to the Terracotta Warriors will be made through fun facts and costumes.

They will then go down a reflection tunnel where the life of Mulan will unfold before them as a pictorial story wall. Before they leave the gallery, children will be asked to think about what emotions Mulan has gone through and to draw her facial expressions on blank Mulan faces. To extend the learning, each child will go home with a rub-on sheet that carries the cartoon images of Mulan's home and family set afar from the army camp. The rub-on sheet with the story of Mulan is not just a souvenir or marketing tool, it also as a way to recognise that learning takes on different timeframes for each individual.

## **Conclusion**

It is time to stop doing and start thinking. We need to think hard about who really owns the museum. "At the root of the problem usually is the power structure of the museum or gallery." (Reeve: 2006) Who gets to decide what or who comes first? Any changes to this structure will affect our relationships with visitors. Increasingly, we are asked by the state and patrons to look into the social use of museums. One of the ways we can heighten the social function of our museum is prioritise interactive installations (not restricted to computer-based experiences) that promote social experiences for children and youth. We need to make such installations an essential part of any exhibition; we need to create exhibitions that excite!

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