The SAGE Encyclopedia of Out-of-School Learning
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Many art museums offer a wide variety of out-of-school learning opportunities. For example, K–12 school groups often take field trips to art museums and, increasingly, art museums offer multivisit programs for students from preschool age through adulthood. Many art museum programs are geared specifically for out-of-school time including after-school programs, summer camps, summertime and evening events for educators, weekend workshops, internships, and multigeneration programs such as toddler and parent classes. Additionally, many art museums offer the public experiences with art located within and outside museum walls, including sculpture parks, gardens, pop-up installations, and public art in the community. As such, many art museums provide diverse environments for out-of-school learning across the life span. This entry discusses the types of experiences available in art museums, the changing roles of art museums, how learning occurs and what is learned in art museums, and the practice of teaching in art museums.

Overview

Art museums offer highly individualized, immersive, inquiry-based, and collaborative learning experiences. For example, a grandfather, adult daughter, and grandchild can simultaneously engage with a work of art in a museum as a family group, while also experiencing it on each individual’s own level. Art museums offer immersive environments to study and experience out-of-school learning because they largely offer interest-driven opportunities from which learners self-select. At the same time, similar to school-based learning, without the appropriate support, many learning opportunities may be lost.

To better understand the potential benefits and constraints of learning in art museums, contemporary researchers call attention to methodologies that add to and push beyond basic counting and collecting demographic information. Museum education research explores a variety of ways of measuring learning, including interviews with participants entering and exiting the museum grounds, program-based surveys, in-gallery observations, advisory panels, and focus groups. Increasingly, many art museums are led by formative and summative evaluations that inform and transform programs, exhibitions, and mission-based priorities.

As a place of learning, art museums pose challenges that are different from those faced by schools. For example, in contrast with schools, educators in museums plan for an unknown audience. On any given day, the museum audience may consist of a variety of ages, experiences, motivations, skills, cultures, languages, and expectations. Some visit once, others visit often. Adding to the variation, learners in art museums are able to make multiple decisions that result in specific physical paths through the museum or park that are unique to each visitor. Each route through the art museum offers different experiences, contrasts, and opportunities for learning. The experiences of a family visiting galleries with early-European paintings would be different from the experiences of a family visiting European paintings along with contemporary sculpture galleries and art-making stations. Similarly, a group of university students on a guided tour would have different opportunities for group discussion than a group of students guided by an audio tour on their smartphones. While these examples highlight some of the challenges in art museum education, these kinds of embedded choices also advance the educational potential that art museums can provide within the broader education network.

Changing Roles of Art Museums

As school-based arts education programs continue to face cutbacks, art museums have recognized the growing need for cultural organizations to take on a larger role as arts educators, in particular for
youth. As part of the broader educational ecosystem, art museums are particularly well poised to help students learn cross-curricular content in uncommon ways while studying original artifacts. In art museums, students learn best when given opportunities to activate their senses, follow their individual interests, share their reactions through verbal and artistic ways, and interact with real artifacts that connect to their everyday lives.

As places that value and highlight multiple viewpoints that span across cultures and eras, art museums are poised to play a critical role as places of multicultural learning. In particular, museum education and early-childhood research suggest that young children living in underserved populations benefit from the educational potential of art museums. A growing number of art museums offer on-site early-childhood centers of learning, with a focus on serving learners from diverse backgrounds. In the contemporary education climate, the role of art museums continues to expand and to provide experiential, collaborative, student-directed platforms for learning outside school buildings.

Near the end of the 20th century and at the start of the 21st century, art museums shifted their role from being primarily repositories of objects to visitor-centered places of interest-driven learning. Prior to this shift, the primary roles of art museums were to preserve art objects for future generations and to display works of art for the viewing public. To preserve art objects, conservation and conservation science departments in art museums continue to lead the work of studying, repairing, and maintaining art objects. Curatorial departments provide leadership in selecting art objects for a museum’s collection, as well as purposeful display of art in museum galleries. Registration departments in art museums oversee the storage, movement, and organization of museum collections. Other departments take the lead in installing the art, gallery design, fund-raising, and managing the finances of the museum.

As a result of the shift to museums as places of learning, education departments are prevalent in art museums too. Under terms such as education, audience engagement, learning, participatory, and public programs, various art museum departments are entrusted with the task of developing experiences and resources for students, teachers, and educational researchers. Education-based departments offer programs, evaluate program success, assess learning in art museums, and contribute new theory on learning in art museums. The rise of education-based departments has ushered in more use of learning outcomes at the onset of museum exhibition design. For example, it is recommended to first develop the desired learning outcomes and big idea for the exhibition in order to determine themes that will lead the selection of objects and experiences that will be included in the featured exhibition. It is also becoming best practice in art museums to visually display the learning objectives for visitors. This intentional transparency offers visitors the opportunity to frame their learning as they experience the art.

**Learning in the Art Museum**

Aligned with changes in education during the past century, art museum educators have shifted from the concept of the learner as a vessel to fill with information to a concept of a multifaceted learner who seeks experiences in art museums for a number of personal, social, and cultural reasons. As such, the learning experience in an art museum is at the center of art museum research. The physical context of art museums has been well studied, such as what to put on museum labels or at what height to place an object in order to best meet the needs of learners. However, the learner’s personal and sociocultural needs present a greater challenge to study and determine. For example, much of the learning that happens in art museums takes place within, and is banded across, social groups such as family and friend groups. As such, researchers may study the banded learning by exploring in-gallery conversations and group types to better understand and plan for opportunities for visitors to experience learning.

The school group is another type of group common in art museums and of interest for studying the impacts of art museum education. For example, a single field trip to an art museum has been shown to increase students’ critical thinking skills, information recall, tolerance of others, empathy toward individuals from the past, and overall multicultural interest. The benefits of visits to art museums span across subject matter and grade level. For example, medical students have shown
increased diagnostic visual analysis skills as a result of examining art in museums.

Art museum researchers also explore how learning is tied to the individual identity of the student as a member of the arts community. For example, those who have had more experiences with art, such as taking art classes or previous visits to an art museum, have better tools for making meaningful connections in the art museum. Similarly, those who have had a play-based experience that activates their senses, personal questions, and prior knowledge before a gallery visit show greater gain in learning objectives than those who have play-based experiences after the visit or not at all. Considering the motivations, or reasons why a learner visits, is also important for art museum educators. Some visitors specifically set out to learn a new concept, while others may be visiting primarily as a social occasion, which may then result in a learning experience. Museum educators consider the visitor’s initial expectations when planning educational components in the museum because different motivations initiate different perceptions and experiences.

Teaching in the Art Museum

The practice of teaching in the art museum can be categorized using two tracts: (1) facilitated teaching and (2) nonfacilitated learning. Facilitated teaching occurs when there is a human educator facilitating the experience. In art museums, facilitators may be museum staff with education training; teaching artists; volunteer or paid guides, also called docents; classroom teachers; or chaperones. For example, students on a docent-led tour experience a facilitated teaching approach. Nonfacilitated learning follows the fundamental principle that the space can be a teacher. Components that make a nonfacilitated learning experience possible include intentional gallery design, self-guided written instructions, intuitive invitation through materials in activity spaces, and interpretive materials such as wall labels, supplemental videos and audio tours, maps, and other supporting technology. A component of nonfacilitated learning includes learners building their own curriculum, or series of lessons, by choosing their experiences. For example, the path selected through a gallery includes decisions about which artworks to examine or which interpretive materials to utilize. If the gallery encourages visitors to go in a certain direction, the environment helps establish the themes, contrasts, and connections available to the learner. When possible, art museums offer both facilitated teaching and nonfacilitated learning.

Participatory practice is gaining momentum in both formats of art museum teaching. For example, facilitators are tasked with engaging audiences through interactivity and dialogue. Tour guides are increasingly encouraged to employ interactive methods that invite and value the ideas of the visitor rather than being the sole voice of interpretation telling visitors about the art. A growing number of art museums are including nonfacilitated learning embedded within more gallery spaces to encourage participatory practice as a form of interpretation. For example, many art museums host activity spaces within art galleries alongside original works of art. These spaces are designed for learners of all ages to engage with works of art through play-based and multisensory activities. Similarly, art museums employ creative use of signs, such as colored dots on the floor, to help visitors find particular themes across various galleries. The increase in participatory, multisensory, and play-based opportunities to interpret and make personal and collective meaning of art indicates future directions for art museum education and research.

Heidi J. Davis-Soylu

See also Children’s Museums; Connected Learning; Museum Learning; Participatory Culture; Visual Arts; Wac Arts

Further Readings


