

Institute Early Childhood Education

Historical Highlights of Young Children in Museums

By Sharon E. Shaffer

The inclination to collect is a natural tendency of humans and is at the heart of museums and their place in society. Although the notion of collecting can be traced back to ancient civilizations, it wasn't until the latter part of the 17th century that collections were displayed in public spaces, widening access to a broader swath of society. The privileged class, associated with early cabinets of curiosities, continued to be the most prominent visitors in these new galleries, enjoying leisure time inspired by unique artifacts and objects of beauty. Children rarely, if ever, stepped into museums, and even on those infrequent occasions, young visitors were simply bystanders passing through galleries with families.

During the era of social progressivism in the late 1800s, museums and schools in America created new opportunities for schoolchildren to visit museums and learn from objects. A few major museums recognized that their unique spaces could be places of learning and engagement for children, resulting in the first children's museum (The Brooklyn Children's Museum, 1899) and the Smithsonian's dedicated exhibition for children, appropriately named The Children's Room (1901). These groundbreaking efforts marked the start of a promising future for more child-friendly experiences, growing ever so slowly over time. In the 20th century, innovative practices, from discovery rooms to hands-on gallery carts, changed museum encounters for all visitors, especially for children and families. New beliefs advanced the idea of active engagement rather than a more introspective, passive connection to objects on display. At the same time, neuroscientists focused attention on young children and analyzed the impact of early experiences on brain development. Studies captured the attention of scientists, educators, journalists, policymakers, and the general public and sparked interest in programming for young children in museums. Another factor contributing to this increased interest in children emerged when the American Alliance of Museums endorsed an initiative focused on inclusivity and a desire to serve a broader swath of society. That perspective meant opening doors for individuals representing diverse cultures, abilities, and ages. It might be said that young children entered museums on the coattails of this call for action defined in *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (1992).

As the 20th century came to a close, traditional museums of all types experimented with programs for younger audiences, and art museums were among those institutions welcoming young children into their galleries. Programs once reserved for older children were being reimagined for preschoolers, toddlers, and even babies, marking a shift in thinking about visitors in art museums across the United States as well as Australia, the United Kingdom, and other European countries.

More and more, young children gained a place in the world of traditional museums. As part of this trend, educators looked for opportunities to better understand this growing audience and experimented with new programming. Through seminars highlighting the value of object-based learning, educators from the Smithsonian's lab school introduced museum professionals to strategies for engaging very young children with art modeled after its lab school. The Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden created family-friendly art cards that explained how parents and teachers can talk about works of art with little ones. The Toledo Museum of Art recognized there was a place in museums for babies and based programming on early research from Dr. Kathy Danko-McGhee. Toddler Thursdays at the High Museum of Art succeeded in creating meaningful programs for young visitors and families where young visitors connected with art in galleries. Family activity packets, docent-led tours, and family-friendly programs expanded and added to the offerings of many art museums.

In recent years, more and more art museums are exploring opportunities to connect babies, toddlers, and preschoolers with visual art. The Clyfford Still Museum leads the way with programs like Art Crawl and innovative exhibition design, bringing together museum professionals with very young children. Through cutting-edge collaborations with some of our nation's youngest citizens, CSM's *Young Mind* exhibition opened to high praise from throughout the field. In this new era, engaging young children with art and objects is a growing trend, with exciting, innovative practices on display across the globe and a time to build on the field's success.

Children in the Clyfford Still Museum: Timeline

2011 - Clyfford Still Museum opens

2013 - School program, inStil Gallery Experiences, launches for grades 4-12, developed in collaboration with 8 schools across the Front Range. CSM hires the first cohort of paid gallery teachers to facilitate school programming.

2016 - CSM begins to offer Family Tours, themed interactive tours for families with children ages 4-10. CSM develops the first iteration of an interactive family guide.

Fall 2016 - CSM opens *The Drawing Room*, a temporary interactive hands-on studio space for all audiences.

2018 - CSM opens the Making Space, a permanent hands-on artmaking area for visitors of all ages.

2019 - Collaboration with seven schools across the Front Range begins for the development of *Clyfford Still, Art, and the Young Mind*; October 2019 marked the beginning of the “Art Protector” initiative.

2020 - CSM adapts to provide online school and family programming during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2021 - inStill Gallery Experiences expands to include grades K-3 in collaboration with five classrooms across the Front Range.

March 2022 - *Clyfford Still, Art, and the Young Mind* opens; Art Crawl launches. Through increased exposure to children in the Museum, staff across departments start to see young children and their adults as a critical audience. Tactile books are offered for visitors at the front desk and in programming.

October 2022 - CSM creates a policy for interacting with children.

November 2022 - CSM publishes its first children’s book: *Colorfully Courageous Clyfford Still*

August 2023 - Clyfford Still Museum receives IMLS award to expand access to Art Crawl infant program

October 2023 - Family Program becomes known as Maker Morning, a program for 15-month-old children to eight years old

November 2023 - CSM hires its first full-time Family and Early Childhood Manager

March 2024 - CSM forms pre-k development committee to expand inStill Gallery Experiences to preschool audiences.

April 2024 - Art Crawl is featured in the New York Times article “Children at Museums: You Can’t Start Early Enough”

July 2024 - CSM hosts first fellows in early childhood education as a part of the Institute

August 2024 - CSM licenses Art Crawl program to the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Montgomery, Alabama.

Want to learn more about early learning at the Clyfford Still Museum?

Bibliography on early learning at the Clyfford Still Museum

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