Please Touch:
Creating Tactile Experiences in an Art Museum

Amy Greenhouse & Laura Malcolm
ED333B
March 6, 2001
Please Touch: Creating Tactile Experiences in an Art Museum

A five-year old girl walks in small, fast circles around the room. “If it is so upsetting, we don’t have to be here,” the mother whispers loudly to the girl.

Such behavior and comments might be acceptable, or at least normal, at a dentist office, but few curators would want this discussion to take place at their museum. The future of museums depends on cultivating children into life-long lovers of art. If children have pleasant early museum experiences, then they are more likely to come back when they are adults. The Cantor Center for the Arts attempts to make itself a more interesting and engaging space through the use of an animal art hunt guide designed for children, but the conversation highlighted above, and other observed encounters between parents and children, indicate that the museum has had limited success.

The design proposed in this paper will create a more meaningful and more fun experience for parents and children in the museum. We began our design process by recording observations of how parents and children are already using the space. Then, we used the recorded observations to identify the learning problem and a target audience. With this information, we constructed design goals and eventually a design.

Observations:

The Guide
On a sunny Sunday afternoon in February, we observe parents and children walking through the exhibits at the Cantor Art Museum. All the children are clutching a tiny red brochure entitled “Animals in Art.” The booklet is a guided art hunt that asks children to find certain sculptures and drawings in the museum and answer questions about those specific works of art. This largely text-based booklet has a reading level far beyond that of the many pre-kindergartners and kindergartners we observed in the gallery. One girl, around five years old, points to a photo in the booklet and says to her mother, “You know what I want? I really want to find this one.”

At the same time, her younger sister is chanting, “Mommy see,” as she pulls on their mother’s hand and points to a sculpture of an alligator on the wall. The father walks over with the rest of the family to the alligator sculpture. There is a map of Africa below the alligator. The father says to the two girls, “See all these things? They come from Africa. Let me show you on the map.”

“I learned about Africa in my school,” the younger girl responds. “There are elephants and tigers and jaguars.” The older girl adds in her lists of animals as the family walks out of the room and into the next gallery.

This is the most in-depth conversation I hear between parents and children about the art in the gallery. More often we hear parents teaching children how to behave.

Nothing Here for Me
“Can I sit on it?” asks a four-year old girl, pointing to the platform for a statue. “No,” replies her mother.
“Shucks, shucks shucks.”
“You can sit here,” the father says, pointing to a bench.
“Where is your little brochure?” her grandfather asks.
“Oh, Grandma has it,” replies the girl.

Soon after she asks, “Mommy, can I go outside?” We hear this request from other children during our one-hour observation period. In the Rodin sculpture room a young girl around the age of 4 or 5 pleads with her mother,
“Let’s go out! There isn’t anything here for me.”
“I’m reading something, please” responds her mother.
“Let’s go now! Come on!” says the girl in a loud and determined voice gripping her mothers hand and pulling her toward the gallery entrance. The mother acquiesces and heads out of the gallery with the girl. As I move through the gallery, I see two young brothers turn their red guide booklets into fans and cool themselves and another child laying on the floor humming to herself and asking her parents in a sing-song voice “When are we leaving?”

*Do Not Touch*
“What is this Daddy?” a young girl cries as she runs toward a precariously balanced metal sculpture.
“Delia! No!” her father calls. He quickly sprints toward her, scooping her up just after she touches the sculpture sending it into a rocking motion.
He tries to explain to her, “You cannot touch sweetie, it isn’t allowed.”
Her mother looks horrified as she steadies the sculpture and glances around to see if anyone has noticed.
“Put me down!” Delia says forcefully as they head out of the gallery.

This scene is repeated throughout the museum in different variations. Problems with wanting to touch are a common occurrence. On numerous occasions we observe frantic parents running after children who, in their enthusiasm, head for a painting or sculpture and place their hands directly on it. The problem with touching leads many parents to pick up their children and attempt to carry them through the gallery. This creates a problem because many of the children want the freedom to explore the gallery on their own and “lead the tour”.

*Follow Me*
“Look at this one. He’s got one, two, three heads and there is another one. Now follow me, I am looking for the queen thing. I wonder which one it is. Where’s Mommy? Mommy, there you are, I want you to follow me… I am hunting for the queen thing.”
A young girl directs her parents through the gallery pointing out pieces that interest her. The interaction is going well until she becomes frustrated with the guide.
“Where are the animals? Where are the animals? I can’t find this! Where are we?” she says with a pout on her face, “Let’s go.”

The children we observed enjoyed having control over the tour through the gallery but experienced problems with finding the images they were hunting.
Learning Problem:
A mother and son are looking at a ceramic house with figures. The house is in a glass case, and is low enough to the ground for the children to view. “Don’t touch it. They don’t want you to touch it. It’s not allowed.”

The museum, with its hushed voices and “do not touch” signs, is not designed for children, especially curious, active pre-kindergartners and kindergartners (the majority of children we observed attending the gallery). Children learn through touch, but the museum setting discourages them from using this sense. The sculptures in the gallery visually encourage touch, making it difficult for even adults to resist, but the museum provides no outlet for a child to release the impulse to interact physically with the art.

Additionally, while the children seem to enjoy holding onto a piece of paper that lets them mimic map-carrying adults, they have difficulty locating the artwork featured in the booklet’s treasure hunt. The art guide gives children some control over their learning experience, but they still depend on their parents to read the booklet’s questions, lift them up to see displays above their eye level, and guide them through the gallery.

The children we observed showed natural curiosity and enthusiasm, which was dampened by the experience of constantly being told not to touch, to be quiet and to follow the adults. The children did not want to be passive followers but active guides.

Design Goals:
We propose a redesign of the “animal art hunt” with the goal to provide children with a tactile experience that will promote fuller engagement with the exhibits. In addition, we intend to facilitate the child in the role of guide by designing an easy-to-follow booklet and a specific goal in each gallery.

We believe that our redesign will
- Engage children in the exhibits
- Teach/reinforce basic principles of color and texture
- Guide children to solve simple problems
- Increase engaged time in the gallery
- Give children control over their learning and the gallery experience
- Make it fun for the child and the parent

Target Audience:
Our guide is specifically designed for three to seven year old children because this is the age group we observed the most in the museum and the group least likely to be able to read and benefit from the existing brochure. We are also designing an activity that can be used by parents and grandparents who are not native English speakers. During our observations, we heard a wide range of languages spoken.

Description of our design and how it addresses the learning problem:
The redesign consists of four main components: a tactile necklace based on the artwork in the gallery, a new animal art hunt guide, a child sized stamp table in each gallery, and an entry placard with touch panel and instruction button.

Upon entering the museum parents and children approach the main counter to pick up the necklace and brochure, much like selecting an audio tour in many galleries. The docent at the counter directs the parents to begin at the horse sculpture in the entry foyer in order to explain the hunt to their children and practice with the first page.

**Animal Art Hunt Guide:** The guide is designed to be completed in any order and contains limited text, so that even those who do not read can use it. It is organized by color with a different color rim around each page. The colors in the guide correspond to a colored placard at the entrance to each gallery. For example, the entrance to the Asian Art Gallery will contain a blue placard at a child’s eye level. This will indicate to the child to turn to the page with the blue rim. Inside the colored rim, will be a sketch of a place an animal would live. For example, if the child should look for a horse in the gallery, the picture would contain a pasture and stable. There will be an empty space in the picture for a stamp of a horse to be placed. After the child finds the animal within the gallery (their goal), they will go to the activity table and place a stamp of the animal into their guide. They complete their booklet by going through the gallery and finding the animals.

**Entry Placard:** The colored entry placard contains two features that help direct the child to the animal they seek. First, they can interact with the touch panel made out of the material of the animal sculpture or painting. For example, if the animal they seek is painted on canvas, they will have a piece of painted canvas to touch. By touching the canvas and then trying to make a link with a work in the gallery, they will develop a connection between visual and actual texture. The touch panel can facilitate questions and answers between parents and children. Parents can ask their children to describe the texture, building an understanding of texture and descriptive skills. Next to the touch panel will be a button to press for a clue. Older children may choose to use only the setting in the guide and the material for clues, while younger children may need more help through the audio button. This allows for multiple levels of help based on the children’s needs. The audio button will give a clue based on the animal they are hunting in the gallery. For example, the audio may say:
“Look for an animal that makes the sound sssssssssss.” (the ceramic snake in the Asia gallery)
“This animal lives in water and flies in the sky.” (the wooden heron in the Leland Stanford room)
The audio clips will vary in order to keep interest and require children to use a variety of skills.

**Stamp Table:** The stamp table contains a stamp of the animal they are seeking in the hunt. After children have found the particular animal for that gallery, they then get the satisfaction of stamping their booklet with the animal – putting it into the habitat where it lives. The stamp would be at a child-size table near the artifact with room for the child to
stamp their booklet. The stamp must be a self-renewing stamp attached with a rubber cord to the table in order to prevent damage to the gallery.

**Tactile Necklace:** The necklace given to the children at the museum entrance contains beads and pieces of materials found in the gallery objects. The beads match the color on the gallery placards – a red bead for the Stanford room, a green bead for the jade room etc… and the material matches the animal the children are to find in the gallery and the touch panel at the entrance. For example, a piece of wood on the necklace matches the wood used in the carving of the heron. The necklace becomes a constant source of tactile engagement, which the children can use to help find the animals or parents can use to direct children to touch when they want to touch the “real thing.”

The necklace not only helps to guide children through the museum and gives them something to touch when they feel the need, but also serves as a connection to the museum for further discussion. The child can take the necklace home and have a tactile reminder of their museum experience.

The goal for our design is to improve the content and quality of parent-child interactions in the museum. By providing a way for children to physically interact and be engaged in the gallery, we hope that discussions will turn from discipline to color, texture, animals and art.

**Implementation Suggestions:**
Taking into consideration the limited resources of many museums our design can be partially implemented or implemented in stages.

Stage 1: Booklet, Stamp Table and Simple Placard: The simplest and easiest implementation of our design would add only a colored placard and a small stamp table to each gallery for very little cost. The change in design of the booklet would allow children more control over their trip through the gallery using color to give them a sense of where they are and what they are looking for. We believe the addition of the goal of finding the animal and collecting the stamp will add engagement and satisfaction to the interaction in the gallery.

Stage 2: Tactile Necklace: While the necklace may seem like an extravagance, it could be made with inexpensive materials, substituting a faux jade and ivory for the real materials without sacrificing the fidelity of the texture. The necklace could also be created for purchase. Many people pay between five and ten dollars to hear an audio tour in a museum, so we believe parents would happily pay as much for a necklace that is educational, engaging and can be taken home to expand the gallery experience.

Stage 3: Entry Placard - with touch panel and audio clue: The touch panel and audio clue increase interaction and expand the opportunities for learning. By offering these additional clues, engaging the senses of touch and hearing, the museum moves to a more interactive space and away from the stoic, quiet space that is unwelcoming to children.
Additional Design Suggestions:

- Touch Placards: Place touch placards throughout the museum next to objects with interesting texture so children and adults alike can satisfy their desire to touch.

- Step benches: Small steps located in front of displays so children can step up to get an eye-level view of the objects in the gallery.

- Voice Recorders for Commentary: The museum is a very quiet place, where parents spend more time telling their children to be quiet than asking them to comment on the art. If the museum wants to encourage art commentary, they can provide the parents and children with mini tape recorders where they can record their comments on the pieces of art. These tape recorders can come with a guide of suggested questions that will prompt parents and adults to discuss the art.

Necklace Prototype:
7. Can you find any dragons here? What do these dragons look like? If they were in color, what colors do you think they would be?

8. Listen to the title of this painting. What does the word "wild" mean? What is "wild" about the painting itself?

Who lives here?

Animal stamp example: