

*This month's Muse-ing comes from former UD Museum Studies student, Jane Allen. She is currently pursuing an M.A. in Museum Education at the University of the Arts.*

“It’s so booooringggg.” These were words I was used to hearing on the way to art museums as a kid. With two younger brothers, a small gaggle of cousins, and a grandparent who had a membership to most local museums, we looked forward to places with tree-houses or other active play spaces. When it came to art museums, the biggest hit was always the sculpture gardens, where we could run, explore, and touch the sculptures. But it was usually quite a challenge to get a bunch of young kids to enjoy things *inside* an art gallery.

Who could blame them? Indoors they were told to use an inside voice and stay away from the artwork. There might be a children’s gallery, where they could touch things, pretend to be someone else, create an art project, and do all the things that help them learn. But the galleries themselves were usually too sterile and silent to help young children to make sense of art.

This is a phenomenon I witnessed again and again, first as a preschool teacher and then as an intern. So, as a Master’s student studying Museum Education, my thesis project explores ways to welcome and engage young children within the galleries themselves by using multi-sensory learning strategies.

Adults are often less likely to bring their young children (commonly defined as birth to five years old) to art museums compared to science or children’s museums. There are typically fewer multi-sensory learning opportunities at art museums, aside from those dedicated children’s spaces. There may be great art-making opportunities in those spaces, but separating the families with young children from the rest of the museum disconnects families from the collection itself. For families with young children to feel welcome, included, and fully engaged at the art museum, there should be readily available, appropriate materials for them to connect with the artworks on a deeper level in the galleries.

“Creating welcoming spaces can be done in galleries by setting families up for success—choosing galleries with more space to move, creating programming centered on relatable topics, selecting artworks that can easily connect to stories, rhymes, songs, etc.,” said Denise Gonzalez, Manager of Family and Early Learning Programs at the Dallas Museum of Art. Gonzalez’s team does this by providing [“Library Totes”](#) that visitors can check out and take to the related artwork. The tote includes a key ring with prompts for adults (including “look”, “read”, “imagine”), a children’s book, and other activities to encourage engagement with the broader concept of the art. This may be a jar with a “thunderstorm” scent to imagine yourself in the painting, or dress-up clothes to pretend you are royalty.

The Denver Art Museum is well-known for serving families and kids. Lindsay Genshaft, Senior Manager of Community & Family Programming, suggests making the collections more easily relatable to young children by deciding to “hang art lower to support the height of children [and] having read-aloud text near artworks that adults can read to the kids they bring...” Family

labels, which are texts that are accessible to those of all age ranges, also provide rich learning opportunities.

Working to include young children in the galleries can have effects far beyond this audience. It can improve the accessibility of the content for visitors of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds by making the space more comfortable and less intimidating. It can also increase the museum's reach—a recent study found that [over 60% of recent visitors to cultural organizations attended these organizations as children](#). “We are helping to mold lifelong learners and lifelong museum patrons,” Gonzalez of the DMA says. Institutional buy-in is critical for these strategies to succeed, but as Gonzalez says, “positive museum experiences last a lifetime for people—why not start those at a young age?”