

FINGERPAINTS AND MASTERPIECES: BABIES IN THE ART MUSEUM

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Abstract

Taking very young children to art museums is not always a positive experience for parents and caregivers, and families may shy away from having such experiences with their children. This poster presents a program designed to provide meaningful and positive experiences for babies (6-18 months) and caregivers in art museums, and an example of its successful implementation at Dulwich Picture Gallery in London, UK. Through rich visual and written text including compelling images and testimonials, this poster presents how this program was catered for one specific gallery and its needs, responding also to broader contextual questions around early childhood explorations of art and education programs in museums and galleries.

Originally designed by a team of art educators/consultants based out of Columbia University (New York, NY), this program is here presented as responding to the context of a specific art gallery. The data presented in this poster refer to the first year of the program's implementation in this location. Through direct observations, surveys, and interviews, data were collected to discuss the need for such a program, successful and unsuccessful aspects of the implementation, and impact on the participants' experiences in the gallery. This poster also presents results from qualitative interpretation of data and offers conclusions relevant to the broader context of education, early childhood, and art education.

Keywords: (max. 5, separated by commas) *Art, Museum education, Early Childhood, Art education.*

1. Introduction

Mini Masterpieces is a program for infants and their caregivers focused on providing meaningful artistic experiences in museum. This program was developed at Dulwich Picture Gallery (DPG) in London UK by the authors of this poster, who are researchers/educators specialized in art education, early childhood, and museum education. This paper presents Mini Masterpieces as an example of an art education program that is specifically design to address the context, population, and resources of a particular art gallery, but that can be adapted to the needs and characteristics of any museum or gallery interested in welcoming infants and families to its core.

2. The program: Mini Masterpieces

As a program serving infants and caregivers, Mini Masterpieces is primarily aimed at offering families with very young children an opportunity to comfortably and meaningfully enjoy and connect with the Dulwich Picture Gallery and its collection. As part of the gallery's education offering, it was designed to fill the previously existing gap in this gallery's programming for families with very young children – a gap that is not uncommon in the field of art museum education. Designed and implemented by trained researchers and educators, Mini Masterpieces also aims to develop and test best practices for working with families with very young children responding to specific needs and characteristics of a particular gallery and its context.

Each session of Mini Masterpieces consists of two separate parts: the first takes place among the artworks in the gallery, while the second part occurs in one of the institution's classrooms. The fact that the core of Mini Masterpieces infants and adults spend time in the museum's prime space and directly interact with it's permanent collection, is of crucial importance to us and one of the design elements that distinguishes Mini Masterpieces. By doing so we actively welcome families with young children as legitimate visitors at a time when the gallery is also open to the general public, potentially interacting with other visitors as well. To scaffold child and adult interactions between themselves and with the artworks, we provide sensory booklets that are designed for each specific session, featuring sensory elements and contextual information relative to the artworks and theme explored in each session. Even

though participants have full access to the galleries and are free to explore at their own leisure, we design each session around a theme stemming from Dulwich's collection and relate it to several artworks that we explore in the booklet. The second part of each session takes place in one of the gallery's classrooms, where children are invited to explore several wet and dry media and different materials specifically adapted to young children, all of them safe and appropriate for the age-range of the young participants.

One of the elements that distinguishes Mini Masterpieces from other early childhood programs in museum education is the fact that it aims to provide meaningful experiences not for the child only (with the caregiver seen as a mere "carrier" or "facilitator" as many mommy and me tours are designed) nor for the adult only (with children being "allowed in" but not always "catered for" as in many traditional "stroller-tours"). Although there is value in these kinds of offerings, we designed Mini Masterpieces with child and adult as equal parts of a dyadic learning unit that is at the core of our program. In this way, Mini Masterpieces aims to offer and scaffold meaningful experiences for both the child (based on sensory art-play) and the adult (based on exhibition-based content).

3. Mini Masterpieces design principles: for the child, for the adult, and for the gallery

Mini Masterpieces is based on the belief that for young children there is no clear boundary between artistic experiences, play, and other interactions within their world. Artistic explorations are part of their ordinary life, and should be taken in a holistic manner. Therefore artistic experiences can only benefit from being based on sensory and physical explorations, since these are at the core of young children's ways of interacting with the world. It is important that all materials are accessible, manageable, and safe for infants, so that through their experiences and explorations with materials children may have the opportunities to understand that their actions have a physical impact in the world (CABRAL, 2014). For example, by working with paint on paper, infants may begin to realize the physical connection between their body motions and the marks they make (BURTON, 1986).

The adult is also seen as more than a caregiver in this situation. Our goal is to involve adults and children as equally important parts of this program, encouraging caregivers to engage with artworks and art materials along with their children. This shifts their role from one of "accompanist" to full partnership in exploring and learning. With this in mind, Mini Masterpieces aims to offer adults enjoyable and comfortable experiences in the museum, which is both a requirement and a result for each child's comfort as well. As we design each Mini Masterpieces session, we keep in mind that adults need time to explore and engage with artworks as much as children do, and that this engagement can be scaffolded with, for example, prompts to think about the artwork, child/adult friendly sensory explorations based on each artwork, and contextual information on the pieces exhibited in the gallery.

Finally, we design Mini Masterpieces to serve the museum's specific needs as well: by offering the program in the gallery with experiences that relate both contextually and visually to artworks in the permanent collection, we aim to honor Dulwich Picture Gallery as a space of artistic, historical and architectural significance. Activities and the gallery experiences are intended to help families comfortably connect with Dulwich Picture Gallery in a way that expands visitorship and community awareness.

4. Research study

4.1. Goals and methods

Over the first year of implementation of Mini Masterpieces conducted a formative evaluation to help us assess the program and develop strategies to improve it. Aiming to understand what we could learn by listening closely to adult participants who share their experiences of Mini Masterpieces, we collected data that informed our understanding of what adult participants value about the program; what they found less satisfying; and how might the experiences of these adults inform the design of future Mini Masterpieces sessions and of the program in itself.

Participants in the evaluation of Mini Masterpieces were adults with one child age 6-18 months who elected to enroll in Mini Masterpieces and did so independently through the gallery's website. Data was collected in direct observation of six adult/child pairs as they were attending one of the sessions; six semi-structured interviews of randomly selected adult participants; and a post-session online survey. Data was analyzed with Framework Analysis, allowing us to look at data in a qualitative manner.

4.2. Preliminary findings

Preliminary data analysis shows that overall satisfaction with the program is high. When asked "overall, how would you rate your experience of MiniMasterpieces on a scale of 0-10, with 10 meaning you were extremely satisfied with your experience and zero meaning you were extremely dissatisfied?"

the weighted average of participants' responses is 9, which indicates a high level of satisfaction. However, when prompted to point out elements that they were less satisfied with, some caregivers pinpointed what they thing could be areas for improvement.

Table one shows examples present in data about what caregivers most value about MiniMasterpieces:

Figure 1.or Table 1. What do caregivers value about the program?

Valued Element	Example
Perception of child's enjoyment	"Seeing my daughter explore and delight in her surroundings"
Child's access to art and art materials	"Letting my daughter explore painting and different art mediums [sic]"
Resources provided	"The artworks were brought to life with dry leaves and colored film paper. She still loves her colored film!"

As we can see, caregivers value both access to art and art materials in and with the resources provided, but also the perception of how much their child is exploring her experiences. One aspect that stands out in our readings of these data, is that adult engagement was not pointed out by any of the participants as a strong point of the program, even though our observations showed that some of the caregivers who were interviewed actively engaged with their children in exploring both artworks in the gallery and art materials in the studio. In several occasions we observed that adults were engaging with the art materials on their own, even if their child was not interacting with the same materials hands-on.

As for the less satisfying aspects, we noticed two different strands of opinion in the data we collected: some caregivers perceived their children to be too young for some of the suggested materials ("my child was a bit too young for the paints and so I had to restrain him"), while others would have liked more structure and formal teaching ("I would like more teaching of skills, and less freedom for me to do what I want to engage my son"). Both these ideas relate mostly to the perception of the child being or not "able" to participate in the proposed activities: while most caregivers found the activities and materials appropriate for the age range of the children, some perceived them to be either too "advanced" or "not advanced enough."

4. Conclusion

As we design future Mini Masterpieces sessions taking into account what he have learned from this study, we do so with the following goals in mind:

- Create effective ways to share the reasoning behind our program design with parents and caregivers in order to increase their understanding of how young children engage with and benefit from art activities;
- Diversify sensory experiences for young children in order to accommodate different learning styles and different parental expectations;
- Increase adult engagement with the collection by developing and testing more ways of introducing art historical content.

Although the findings presented in this poster are preliminary and research is still in course, data strongly points to the importance of a program like Mini Masterpieces, which is consistent with the strong acceptance of the program by the local community, shown by the fact that most sessions at Dulwich sell out and often have wait-lists.

As we continue to develop Mini Masterpieces and design similar programs for other institutions and contexts, we reiterate our commitment to our strong belief that babies should be welcomed as legitimate visitors to art museums and that the child-caregiver dyadic learning unit is at the core of the programs we offer.

References

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