

## Editorial Introduction

Guðrún D Whitehead, Julia Petrov, Helen Saunderson

### Introduction

Dr Elee Kirk was a graduate of the PhD programme in the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, a researcher with RCMG (the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries) and the School of Law at the University of Leicester, Senior Lecturer in Museum Education at University College London, and an active member of GEM (Group for Education in Museums) and Kids in Museums. Dr Kirk was committed to disseminating her research, including at a Doctoral Inaugural Lecture at the University of Leicester in May 2016. She passed away prematurely on August 1, 2016. Afterwards, her partner, Dr Will Buckingham, prepared her PhD for publication: *Snapshots of Museum Experience: Understanding Child Visitors Through Photography* was published by Routledge in July 2018. In the spirit of celebrating and continuing her pioneering work, we are proud to introduce this special issue of *Museum and Society*, whose aim is to further the work that she did, and to actively engage academics and museum professionals in the wide-reaching themes which touch on her chosen fields of study. The editors would like to thank the authors, reviewers and Dr Will Buckingham for their work, and *Museum and Society's* managing editors for their assistance during the production of this volume.

### Themes

'Sit and daydream, be amazed and thrilled.  
We are creators, so let's all design  
Grown-ups too; don't get left behind...'

Cathy Beveridge, Royal Alberta Museum, Children's Gallery Manifesto, 2018.

The above is a section of a poem displayed in the Royal Alberta Museum Children's Gallery, with the aim of encouraging children to understand that their individual experience is valued. As Will Buckingham recalls in this issue, Kirk similarly valued the experiences of the young participants in her research, like 'Kyle' who showed her a 'sweet spot' for looking through the tuna skeleton in the Oxford University Natural History Museum. This special edition reflects, and builds upon, Kirk's passionate belief and academic argument that the experience of young people in museums is important and worthy of in-depth research and evaluative discussion. In this journal, children's experiences are investigated to address various specific questions: Does attaching a video camera to a child give us a more direct understanding of their museum visit than interviews alone? Can we interpret the symbolic drawings that children make to understand their experience at an archaeological site? Do very young children have enhancing encounters in 'traditional' museum setups? How effective is a gallery designed specifically to use children's prior experiences of nature? What can be done to encourage play in a museum, and can documenting and displaying this children's 'work' be informative? Can technology combined with creative and experiential learning provide an effective museum educational template? These questions are addressed, in order, in the journal articles.

Two major themes arise across the papers in this special issue. Authors Kristinsdóttir, Delgado, Kozak and Charette, Wallis, and Bates lay out manifestos or examples of good practice for improving the educational function of museums for children. Papers by Bates, Wallis, Burbank, McGregor and Wild, and Diamantopoulou and Christidou suggest innovative methods of studying children's experiences in museums. These themes suggest the 'one hundred languages' of child visitors (Reggio Emilia, City of Hundred Languages Project); the multitude of ways by which children can share their experience in museums, galleries, and heritage sites. The authors also advocate for the importance of fostering inquiry about the natural world, art, and history in young children, and how the results of such research demonstrate that they are able to integrate more of that understanding than is generally expected for their age. That articles from international researchers—Canada, Greece, Iceland, and the United Kingdom—share these similarities suggests an international momentum towards emphasizing the important role museums, galleries, and heritage sites can play in facilitating children's learning experiences, both about familiar and unfamiliar topics, from children's toys, to ancient history, to exotic animals. It is clear that children should have a voice, independent from their caregivers and educators within the museum.

### Papers

The first three papers focus on methodologies of researching children in museums; using chest mounted video cameras to capture children's first-hand experiences (Burbank, McGregor and Wild), semiotic analysis of children's drawings (Diamantopoulou and Christidou), and the strengths of the embedded practitioner-researcher approach (Wallis). The latter approach (practitioner-researcher) is also used in the fourth article (Bates), to evaluate the development of a new gallery aimed at young children—namely the Nature Gallery at Manchester Museum. Similarly, the development of a children's gallery in the Royal Alberta Museum is the topic of the fifth paper (Delgado, Kozak and Charette). This theme, that threads it way through the first five papers, is addressed from a more theoretical perspective in the sixth paper (Kristinsdóttir) where an argument is presented that museum education strategies should encourage the use of technology, creativity and experiential learning. An overview of each of the articles follows.

In the first article, Burbank, McGregor and Wild's "My special, my special thing, and my camera!" Using GoPro™ as a complementary research tool to investigate young children's museum experiences', the research evaluates the effectiveness of the method of 'photo elicitation interview', in relation to video footage from a chest camera. The authors propose that photo elicitation interviews can be enhanced by augmenting with video footage, and that despite certain limitations this method has the potential to provide a rich method for investigating a child's eye view.

Also with a focus on the under-fives, Wallis' 'Titian, tapestries and toilets: What do preschoolers and their families value in a museum visit?' involves a case study in which young children take a cuddly toy on a museum visit (around the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), with their family and the researcher. The conclusion demonstrates that young children (and their families) value the opportunities that museum visits offer in terms of: social interactions, space to marvel, providing a special atmosphere, viewing objects, facilitating stories (both individual and in relation to the objects), and inspired children in a way that was beyond the expectation of the accompanying adults.

In contrast, an educational visit involving eight-year-old school children is the focus of 'Children's eye views of an archaeological site: Multimodal perspectives on meaning-making through drawings', by Diamantopoulou and Christidou. Their paper examines four children's drawings of aspects of an archaeological site in Athens, Greece. Using the methodology of a multimodal social semiotic framework, the authors identify that the drawings contain traces of the interlinking aspects of the children's interests, the physical viewpoint available, and educationally disseminated knowledge. The authors argue that analyzing pictures using this methodology can be informative in the context of museum learning, as it goes beyond simply evaluating learning outcomes.

Moving on from conducting research in 'traditional' museums or sites, in the next article, 'Can natural history collections support a connection to nature for young children and

families?' Baites discusses the development and ongoing evaluation of the Nature Discovery gallery at Manchester Museum. The gallery was developed to reflect the importance of young people, especially under-five children and their experience with nature. Subsequently, to address the knowledge and confidence (or lack of) of the adult with the child, museum staff were trained to facilitate the children's experience as well as providing support material for families to enhance the visit.

Similarly, the next article also considers the re-development of a gallery. In 'Stop, collaborate and listen: Reimagining and rebuilding the Royal Alberta Museum for children', by Delgado, Kozak and Charette, the authors argue strongly for the importance of play in the development and learning of children, and that museums can provide an environment that promotes this children's 'work'. It was within this context that a new gallery aimed at eight year olds and under was developed at the museum, in which the individual experience of the child could be promoted within the relatively undirected teaching environment of the gallery, as well as show the value placed on their experiences by documenting and displaying it. This approach is aimed at providing a continuous dialogue between the museum and its visitors, especially the younger ones.

The final article adopts a more theoretical approach. In 'Infectious Virus: *Biophilia* and sustainable museum education practices' Kristinsdóttir considers the *Biophilia* project conceived by the singer Bjork, a musical experience with the aim of encouraging experiential learning. The author argues that this project provides an example of innovative education practice that could effectively be adopted in museum contexts, especially in terms of engaging children.

The key theme across all the articles is the importance of valuing children's actual experience in a museum context, rather than evaluating if they have learned specific outcomes, as is common in traditional educational contexts. Research should aim to capture this, be it by research-practitioner conversations, chest-mounted videos or drawings. This will allow each child to have a unique experience, influenced by their prior knowledge, interests, as well as the social context within which their visit takes place. The opportunity to enhance and facilitate the children's experience should be promoted, and many of the authors argue that children should have opportunities in museums to learn in experiential, creative and playful ways. However, it should be noted that children can also gain rich experiences in more traditional gallery spaces, and in this context the social interactions between children, parents, and gallery assistants should be especially fostered. Indeed, the importance of the social context of museum visits are consistently highlighted within the articles, for example, the influence of sibling rivalry on an experience (Burbank, McGregor and Wild) or the impact of the knowledge of the accompanying adults (Baites). Arguably, in museums there should be the promotion of spaces and facilitating assistants who emphasize the child's experience for its own sake, rather than perhaps a more didactic traditional educational approach.

## Final Words

Going beyond the scope of the articles included here, we suggest that for museums to value the individual visitor and their experience in the museum should be a consideration for all audiences, not just children. If museums strengthened their offerings for children in the ways suggested by the researchers in this issue and were to further adopt the 'grown-up's too; don't get left behind' (Cathy Beveridge, Royal Alberta Museum, Children's Gallery Manifesto, 2018) approach as a philosophy, that would improve inclusion and engagement not just for young people but a broad range of adults as well. It would allow families to engage with the museum on the same level, breaking down the traditional roles of parents and children within that setting. This also applies to adult visitors without an accompanying child, as it will allow them to have different learning experiences within the museum. The child's eye view should also be the museum's and researcher's eye view. This is true not only because children are an important visitor group in their own right (they bring family members along to museums they enjoy and they are the visitors of the future), but also because this perspective allows museum professionals to approach educational programmes in a way which is based on the visitors themselves, rather than the researcher's or museum's preconceived notions of those

experiences. It is therefore the hope of the editors that this volume, inspired by the work of Dr Elee Kirk, will facilitate changes in how museums approach young children's education programmes. The articles in this volume are an important part of that process, demonstrating novel and practical ways in which museums and researchers alike approach the subject. The rich perspectives which can be gained from these interventions can be best seen from Dr Kirk's own encounter with 'Kyle's fish': Kyle collaborated with Elee to show her his new way of looking at the tuna skeleton; a view which was a creative leap, discovered through bringing a sense of play and discovery into the museum.