

The Mint Museum Lewis Family Gallery & Speed Art Museum ArtSparks: Case Study

by Cynthia Moreno
2021

Shortly after our Speed, High, and Frist FLING project ended in 2011, I put on my traveling shoes and clicked my heels, ready for a new professional adventure. As I departed Louisville, the Speed Museum was about to close for a landmark expansion and I joined the Mint Museum's Education Department in Charlotte, NC, in large part, because of their commitment to family learning and the new Lewis Family Gallery. Consequently, this case study reflects on my experience at the Speed and ArtSparks and weaves the lessons learned there with our current practice at the Mint Museum.¹

When I moved to Charlotte to work at the Mint, we began the first of many conversations on family learning. I could see the commonalities between the Speed and the Mint's approaches, which offered families of all ages a welcoming, creative place to grow together.



Figure 1: Lewis Family Gallery in the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC; Jon Strayhorn, Photographer

During one of our first chats, I recall hearing my colleague, Leslie Strauss, reference an approach I used in Art Sparks to balance the activity temperature of areas. She noted that our idea of “cool, warm, and hot zones” was useful in thinking about how to distribute excitement levels on the floor plan. With my cross-country move, I felt like a time travel leap occurred. As I joined this new branch of museum practitioners, I saw myself

in the mirror watching my colleagues apply learning and lessons from ArtSparks at the Speed Museum. I was struck by how Leslie and the Mint staff skillfully managed to navigate competing priorities and multiple shareholders to create an engaging space during a financial downturn. The Mint's new family gallery highlighted a variety of best practices including being centrally located on the main floor, using intuitive, photo-based didactics, and clear sightlines providing parents with peace of mind. Glass walls invited visitors to see the handsomely designed Lewis Family Gallery with generous wrap-around seating, which beckoned both children and adults. Given our emphasis at the Speed on creating spaces for preschool children, it was affirming to see the Mint's featured space for crawlers and toddlers. The five activity zones showcase works from the museum's art and international design collection, including several works from the collection. Similar to the blend of multi-aged activities used at the Speed, all ages are welcomed

in the Lewis Family Gallery to create art, experiment with spatial building and puzzle challenges, engage in imaginative play, and collaborate on a community project.

After opening Art Sparks at the Speed Museum, we conducted our first evaluation study to create a shared language that described what we witnessed families doing and saying. A decade or so later, the FLING study collected and mapped a rich bank of family visitor data. Many of FLING's central findings about families, audiences, and motivations validated ideas we gleaned firsthand from watching families in the galleries. Mint staff also learned more about family behavior from informal gallery observations.

A key difference in the two museums was gallery staffing. Art Sparks at the Speed had dedicated paid and volunteer gallery staff available during open hours to provide assistance to families. As is the case with many art museum family spaces, the Mint originally planned to have gallery staff but shifted to self-guided

experiences due to budget constraints. Akin to our approach at the Speed, the Mint's gallery was developed from a rich mosaic of sources; these pieces ranged from staff's own museum teaching ideas, surveying examples of interactivity in other museums, and listening to families' feedback on prototypes. When extended travel to experience family spaces in other museums wasn't a financial option, the Mint sought advice from a range of museum colleagues through phone interviews with peers, including reaching out to the Speed Museum and amassing a trove of articles, images, insights, and experiences. Staff also made visits to nearby family-friendly areas, ranging from IKEA, the High Museum, the GreenHill Center for North Carolina Art, science museums, playgrounds, and classrooms.

Both the Speed and the Mint invested energy into the all-important prototyping process. Although both museums previously created interactive offerings within galleries and changing exhibitions, each institution was launching its first dedicated family gallery space. The Mint was fortunate to get an IMLS grant to develop and test gallery prototypes. *ImaginOn*, a unique Charlotte facility housing the children's library and theater, underwrote the project, turning it into an exhibition titled *Art Under Construction*. Area families were invited to help build the Mint's future family gallery by playing and giving feedback. Another thread of commonality between the two museums was that in addition to reaching our family-with-children audience, we wanted to remain welcoming to current museum goers. Our definition of "family" is broader than the standard of adults with children. Family may include a group of senior citizens from a retirement community to college-age friends on an off-campus outing together, to an adult couple. With this recognition that "family" can mean many things, we design our experiences to make all ages feel welcomed and respected.



Figure 2: Shadow Play activity at Art Sparks in the Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY. Janice Braverman, Photographer

Supporting Creativity

We discovered that many parents are motivated to visit art museums to foster their children's creativity. Parents repeatedly told us that painting and making art should be part of a museum visit, so our gallery plans were adjusted to include a spacious hands-on artmaking area.

Supporting families spending time together and making opportunities to play and learn from each other requires making our spaces equally friendly to both children and adults. For example, in the Lewis Family Gallery's Imagination Station, the art-making space is adult-scaled so all ages can sit together to create. We often discover adults happily working away at a drawing in this large, open space while their children keep a watchful eye from the nearby playhouse.

The Power of Play and Inventive Use

... *"the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows the dreamer to dream in peace..."*

Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*²



Figure 3: Exterior of Romare Bearden Playhouse at Lewis Family Gallery in the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC Jon Strayhorn, Photographer

Like Gaston Bachelard's metaphor of the house as a nest or shelter, museums can also serve as a powerful place for imaginative metaphoric thinking. Offering an artistic sanctuary, the museum is a safe haven to foster dreams, memories, and fantasies in ways that can have people returning again and again throughout their lifetime.

FLING parents shared with us their desire to have their children forge a lifelong connection with museums. The Speed's new mission statement *"To celebrate art forever"* captures the invitation to join the lifelong museum tribe in a compelling way. The Mint recently revised its mission

statement to say, *"The Mint welcomes all to be inspired and transformed through the power of art and creativity."*

While many museum educators offer art-making activities, another creative activity is dramatic or imaginative play. Offering this powerful play option allows young children to connect emotionally with others while fostering empathy. Paired with or without art making, dramatic/imaginative play can help participants connect to stories, fellow humans, and the wider world.



Figure 4: Mom offering cake at Lewis Family Gallery in the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC; Jon Strayhorn, Photographer



Figure 5: Romare H. Bearden (American, 1911–88). "Evening of the Gray Cat", 1982, collage on board. Gift of Bank of America. 2002.68.3. Collection of The Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC

To connect children to the art of Romare Bearden, the Lewis Family Gallery planners initially wanted to let children explore the medium of collage. In prototype testing, children were first given large, magnetic shapes to layer inside a shotgun-style house, based on Bearden's collage, *Evening of the Gray Cat*. However, something curious and magical happened. Children dismissed the magnetic activity, and instead stepped into the house to own and rule over their play world. They busily created new families with other children who just moments ago had been total strangers, assigning chores and working together. All adults were suddenly seen as outsiders. Kids threw themselves into newfound work, cooking vegetables, hanging

up the laundry, setting the table, and sweeping the floor. Based on the children's strong responses, the designers dropped the art instruction approach and instead added more imaginative play elements, like an interactive mural with moving parts.

In much the same vein, Art Sparks at the Speed Museum also offered immersive play environments. One popular area was inspired by works from the Speed's 17th century-Dutch Masters collection. The mock Dutch house had real delft tiles, a crackling faux fireplace, faux ham, bread, and pewter mugs and plates. The faux Dutch ship was inspired by *A Frigate and Other Vessels on a Rough Sea*, maritime painting by Ludolf Backhuysen in the Speed's collection. The ship had a wooden gangplank, a pulley system to load cargo, and a stormy battle scene unfolding. We adults loved to watch children working together to pass pitchers of imaginary water from the Dutch house kitchen to extinguish an imaginary fire on the Dutch ship.



Figure 6: Boy hoisting ropes on Dutch frigate at Art Sparks in the Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY



Figure 7: Ludolf Backhuysen (Dutch 1630-1703) "A Frigate and Other Vessels on a Rough Sea" by Ludolf Backhuysen, Oil on canvas, Collection of the Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky 1995.14

Seeing children become intensely creative, often in unexpected ways, is a beautiful phenomenon that I began to call “inventive use.” The presence of inventive use can signal to practitioners how fully children are engaging at the moment. Early on at the Speed, we started using the term “inventive use” to internally signal when children got immersed in their creative zone and started making highly original connections. Similar to stumbling upon a bird’s nest in the forest, a child’s creativity is both emergent and fragile. As educators we can often get prescriptive about how a creative play activity might go. By saying “*Whoa! That's inventive use!*” This reminds us to tread softly and let the creative genius of children have the space to play. Personal meaning and lasting memories are often made when children go off-script. Some examples of inventive use/imaginative play that we've observed include: fighting a fire, taking a custom meal to feed hungry parents outside of the house, or creating and pinning up themed artwork like “Home Sweet Home” or repainting a scene to customize the situation.



Figure 8: Girl faux painting on pitcher at Lewis Family Gallery in the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC. Jon Strayhorn, Photographer

Inspiring Reflective Practice

Observing life's moments and remaining a learner is a part of our museum educator DNA. Watching moments of discovery unfolding before us can inform experiences that we as museum educators seek to consciously create in our work. Through the active observation of situations that invite engagement, it is often easier to find the essence of an idea and engage the public. Trusting our intuition, observing, and gathering data has made us more courageous about what we do.

For me, a transforming aspect of the FLING project experience was having in-house evaluators on staff. At the Mint we've realized that “baking in” an internal evaluator role is an essential step toward becoming an active

learning organization. Last year a colleague became our full-time Audience Research and Evaluation Specialist. It has been exciting to have a full-time partner to build evaluation into the core of our projects.

One of the most satisfying aspects of creating interactivity is that it can be like an encore performance. At the Mint, we've been asked to continue our efforts to make in-gallery special exhibition experiences fun and meaningful. We've learned how our participants use spaces and respond by conducting observations and interviews and using the data.

During the *William Ivey Long: Costume Designs* exhibition at the Mint, we gave visitors a long backlit drawing table and templates to draw and design costumes. Visitors (adults and children) who participated in the drawing activity told us that the hands-on activities really made them connect with the exhibition. Observing that our drawing area attracted 30% of visitors, we wondered what we could do to get a wider group of participants to engage in connecting

activities. Would engaging in these activities increase participants' sense of meaning and connection?



Figure 9: Boy exploring *African Print Fashion Now!* Installation at the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC. Jon Strayhorn, Photographer

We explored this question further while the Mint hosted an African textile exhibition from the Fowler Museum at UCLA. *African Print Fashion Now!* explored the symbols and tactile presence of the iconic African wax cloth. Since visitors couldn't touch the cloth in the exhibition, we gathered similar pieces of West and Central African wax cloth and Javanese batik to create our family gallery activity area. The activities included a variety of multi-sensory modalities: arranging textile patches into different patterns, drawing your own fabric symbols, and a Symbol Hunt to find symbols within the exhibition's colorful fashions. The final activity was a Fabric Challenge. We laughingly nicknamed this subtle activity "sleepy" since it looked like it would only attract serious textile types. The challenge started by reading a handful of aesthetic characteristics of two types of cloth: African wax cloth or Javanese batik. After reading clues, participants could look at, feel, and even smell the eight bolts of fabric and guess which bolts was which. Participants flipped a panel to discover how many matches they made.

In our visitor observations and interviews done during the two exhibitions, we saw some differences. In contrast to the visitors who used the *William Ivey Long* drawing studio, twice the number of visitors participated in one or more activities in the *African Print Fashion Now!* exhibition. Gallery participants also told us that they most valued having tactile experiences and cited that as their main reason for participating. "I wanted to join in the whole museum experience. It's fun, hands-on, to create just after seeing the things in the exhibit." Numerous visitors let us know that while they liked all of the activities, many were taken with the subtlety of touching the fabrics and using their hands to assess the weight, texture, and patterns.



Figure 10: Family doing Fabric Challenge Activity at Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC. Jon Strayhorn, Photographer

The presence of an interactive area within the museum can function as a living entity serving to humanize the museum. Over time these lively spaces with their returning participants may become like an internal heartbeat. Having families repeatedly visiting and growing up within our walls may reshape the museum in ways that largely have yet to be measured. However, seeing words like welcome, fun, and empathy along with phrases like "art for everyone" appearing in today's museum mission statements may reflect the impact of interactive gallery spaces.

About the Author

Cynthia Moreno is the Senior Director of Learning and Engagement at The Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina. Moreno was previously Director of Education at the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, which is Kentucky's oldest and largest art museum, for 18 years. There she directed innovative programs for schools, families, youth, and adults. She successfully implemented grant projects funded by major organizations including the National Endowment for the Arts and the Wallace Fund, and initiated numerous community partnerships. She founded the Speed's award-winning interactive gallery Art Sparks, which serves as a national model for engaging children and families in hands-on learning experiences. Working with colleagues at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and Frist Art Museum in Nashville, she guided extensive research at the Speed on family learning in art museums. She has an active record of presentations and publications and has served in leadership roles with professional associations including the American Alliance of Museums, the National Art Education Association, and Southeastern Museum Association. Moreno has also been recognized by her peers as one of the outstanding art museum educators in the Southeastern United States. A Florida native, she received two B.A. degrees in Humanities and Mass Communications, and a M.A. in Art Education and Arts Administration from the University of South Florida.

Mint/Speed References

Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, translation by Maria Jolas (New York: Orion) 1964.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Thanks to input from my valued colleague, Leslie Strauss, who oversees the Mint's family and studio programs and who developed the Mint's Lewis Family Gallery, which opened in 2010. Special appreciation goes to Gwendolyn Kelly, my long-time collaborator on Art Sparks and FLING evaluation assistant, for weaving in her insights.

² Bachelard, 1964.