

# How Might *You*...? Seeking Inquiry in the Museum Studio

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**Abstract** Hands-on workshops in museums have become ubiquitous. What is the best approach to leading these materials-based experiences and how might they relate to gallery teaching? This article outlines best practices for facilitating museum workshops. Describing a framework for designing activities, giving feedback, and sharing information, it draws examples from the authors' classes at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. By posing a "motivating question," educators can set up an open-ended activity that connects to both visitors' experiences and a museum object; participants then respond using materials. Adopted from principles of progressive art education, this approach is relevant to educators looking to apply inquiry-based teaching to hands-on learning.

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On a tour at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 3rd grade students spend 25 minutes discussing a Van Gogh landscape, *Mountains at St. Remy*, the third stop on a tour focusing on places. They consider colors and brushstrokes. They observe the little house nearly hidden by a row of trees and wonder if it reflects the artist's desire to hide. They learn about Van Gogh's life: his love for the South of France, his belief that color can convey emotion. They learn that although, at the time, Van Gogh was staying in a hospital, he believed nature and the act of painting had the power to heal. One boy comments that perhaps painting made the artist feel "free," and he gestures to the undulating mountains.

The educator tells the group to follow her into the studio where they will be doing an art activity. The children move through the galleries, talking about different topics: the gift shop, the guards, and subjects unrelated to the

museum. The group seems energized by their gallery experience — one boy tells another about Van Gogh's ear (a story that had not come up in their discussion). The children file into the art studio, and find a child-size apron slung over the back of each chair. They are told to sit down and listen for instructions.

Art is a language through which we speak about our experience. As educators in both the museum galleries and art studio, we strive to capture the spirit of inquiry: a feeling of endless possibility, a spontaneous exchange between artwork, children and educator, and a collective sense of purpose. But while methods of inquiry in the art museum are well researched, a methodology for studio art teaching in the museum remains less well explored.<sup>1</sup> This article identifies concrete strategies that promote open-ended learning in the context of museum-based art-making: (1) introducing an activity by posing a "motivating question," (2) designing open-ended activities that link to children's experience and museum objects, and (3) using individualized instruction to provide feedback and share information.

There are many benefits to offering art-making workshops in museums beyond the sheer delight children often feel while working with materials. The pairing of gallery-studio experiences encourages children to see art objects, not as masterpieces born fully-formed, but as things created by human beings. In the galleries, we might discuss how a work is made; in the art studio the process is made tangible. A nineteenth-century Dutch painter, a twentieth-century African-American sculptor, and a twenty-first century 3rd grader are exploring similar questions as they manipulate materials and meanings. Moreover, engaging in the creative process — where materials surprise and frustrate, and ideas are formed and transformed — invites modes of decision-making particular to hands-on learning. Lastly, tactile exploration engages a wide range of learning styles. Children who do not speak in the galleries (they may be shy, disinterested, or English Language Learners), can suddenly communicate through color, texture and form.

Investigating the nature of studio teaching in museums is increasingly relevant as many art museums devote more resources to tours and multi-session partnerships combining gallery visits and art-making. Yet the pedagogical foundation of studio art instruction in the museum — and its relationship to gallery teaching — has not received the attention it deserves.

While each type of museum program is bound by its own constraints, our interest here is in a pedagogical outlook broad enough to apply to a range of studio experiences for children in the museum. Even more broadly, this approach to hands-on learning may be relevant at a variety of institutions.

After all, inquiry does not favor any particular content. Rather, it is a way of thinking, an open-ended dialogue with materials and ideas, a process used — by artists, scientists, and historians — to create and interpret the objects museums are built to preserve. Above all, it is a process in which who we are — our qualities and experiences, what we know and what we don't know — drives the creation of meaning.

## **Inquiry with Materials? Ask a “Motivating Question”**

In 2008, the Solomon R. Guggenheim's education department created a document entitled the “Ideal Tour Plan.” Written in the spirit of a flexible blueprint, it outlines the goals, objectives, and elements of an inquiry-based museum tour. It reflects the department's understanding of how children learn — by building upon what they already know, by forming relationships, by doing and making — as well as the belief that art's meanings are manifold — that art, itself, is an open question. Inspired by this project, we wondered what best practices for studio art teaching in the museum might be. Using our classes as a laboratory, we set out to develop an approach that, like inquiry, invites genuine exploration and personal meaning-making. We have pulled from principles and techniques of progressive art education, and adapted them to the context of a museum program. Our ideas are drawn from the work of education scholar Viktor Lowenfeld who studied developmental stages in art, as well as the art education model used at the Bank Street School for Children, taught at Teachers College Columbia University, and championed by educators Nancy R. Smith, Lois Lord, Judith Burton and Nancy Beal.<sup>2</sup>

Just as we often initiate a gallery conversation by posing an open-ended question, in the studio we ask a “motivating question” to introduce an activity.<sup>3</sup> We might ask, for example, “How might you arrange solid and patterned papers?” or “What do you like to do with someone else?” We formulate the question to inspire an immediate, personal response. It also acts as a challenge, often beginning with “How might you...?”<sup>4</sup> Contrast this with the language still heard in many art classes: “Today we will make X. First we will do Y, then Z.” A slight change of wording can be significant. Rather than say, “Today we are going to make portraits,” we might ask, “Who is an important person in your life? How might you show that person in a painting?” As in the galleries, our emphasis is on children's experience. As educator Nancy R. Smith writes, “In order for lessons to be directed towards the creation of meaning, they must be focused on the significant experiences of children.”<sup>5</sup> We lead a brief

discussion where students can put their thoughts into words and share ideas, and then we distribute materials.

Open-ended teaching requires us to trust that, given the question we pose and the materials we provide, children can respond meaningfully. The materials we offer must be suited to exploring the questions we ask students to consider. Pen and ink lends itself to showing texture through marks and lines; easily-smudged charcoal is wonderful for drawing from observation. As students respond to the motivation, they choose how they would like to work. We do not structure activities using pre-determined “steps.” (Examples of “steps” in art-making include asking students to rip up a painting they have made and rearrange it in a “Surrealist” style, asking students to create a background behind a still life drawn from observation, or asking students to transform a drawing into a sculpture and then photograph it.) These steps are no doubt well-intentioned, motivated perhaps by a desire to echo the work of a museum artist, the perceived need to “loosen students up,” or the effort to introduce a mix of materials. Yet these interventions dictate the final look of the artwork and often rob children of the satisfaction of finding their own way. A student-driven process encourages problem-solving, permits risk-taking (failure *is* possible), and promotes personal investment in the work. Meanwhile, freed from guiding the class through a series of steps, we can focus on supporting students individually or simply take pleasure in observing them at work.

## Pairing Art-looking and Art-making: What Matters to Children?

A motivating question also sets up the link between gallery and studio experiences. With each new opportunity to teach, we begin by asking ourselves: where is the overlap between the art object and children’s lives? Which materials might best allow for an exploration of those ideas? After viewing Picasso’s *Lobster and Cat*, we might ask, “How might you show a friendly or fierce animal?” After viewing Degas’s sculptures of dancers, we might ask, “What do you like to do when you exercise? How can you show this in clay?” After viewing an installation by James Turrell, we might ask, “How might you create a work of art using light?” Sometimes we pose the motivating question *during* the gallery inquiry, which primes students to begin working. Occasionally, the class begins in the art studio. After asking, “How might you

combine colors, lines and shapes in painting?” we might head into the galleries to look at a Kandinsky *Improvisation*.



Our most successful classes bridge children’s innate interests and the authentic concerns of the museum artist. We chose the theme of “change” to link gallery and studio experiences during a week-long summer camp in 2012. Our class of eight, nine, and ten-year-olds studied Rineke Dijkstra’s series of a young girl photographed in a similar pose over many years. The final image showed the girl, Almerisa Sehric, now a young woman, holding her own baby. Observing what changed and what stayed the same from image to image, many students commented on differences in Almerisa’s clothing and in her attitude towards the viewer. After learning Almerisa’s story — she was a refugee from Bosnia whom Dijkstra met in an asylum center in the Netherlands — they looked for evidence of assimilation into Dutch culture. Back in the studio, we asked: “How might you show a change in your life?” Students listened carefully to one another as they considered transformations in their own lives. One girl showed herself getting braces, her mouth agape in the orthodontist’s chair. Another child painted himself giving his new baby sister a bath.

A motivating question can also set up a formal problem. Recently, after looking at the façade of the Guggenheim and the buildings around it, we asked a group of 3rd graders: “How might you combine square and/or round

shapes in a construction?" This motivation was wide open, pointing towards abstract arrangement yet leaving room for imagery to emerge. As the students selected pieces of cardboard, boxes and tubes of different lengths and sizes, they found myriad ways to join, build, and arrange. As the saying goes, "the materials do the teaching." A long unsupported spire fell off a building and had to be buttressed, and paper towel rolls were stuffed and stacked, used as legs, abstract design elements, and laser shooters. As they worked, some students tackled the question of site, referring back to our discussion about the museum's urban context. Others focused on decorative or fanciful elements — adorning each window with a balcony, creating an elaborate system of waterslides — and a few students decided to join forces, constructing a bridge between their buildings. Their work reflected our study of Frank Lloyd Wright, the museum's architect, the lessons of the materials, the influence of other students, and the imaginative world of each child.

### **After the Motivation: Providing Feedback and Information**

While students are working, we circulate, describing what we observe. Our description of children's art and process is akin to paraphrasing students' comments in the galleries (where we try to reflect the child's true meaning while using elevated language to validate his thinking). By articulating students' choices, they are able to see their own work more clearly. Peering over the shoulder of a seven-year-old working on a collage, we might observe, "You've alternated solid and patterned papers, using colors from the same family of purples and blues." Whether she continues in the same direction or begins to introduce yellows and greens, her decisions become more deliberate, rooted in an understanding of her own process and the confidence that comes with knowing others are paying attention. Students are often emboldened by new vocabulary. Last summer, a student began to mix washes directly on her paper. Delighted to learn that her colors were "bleeding," she continued to drop pigment into planes of wet color, creating a dreamy landscape of dissolving biomorphic forms. Commenting on what children have already done, we avoid questions such as "How can you add more detail?" or "What will you add in the background?" which push an adult agenda (although we might challenge a student on his terms: "You spoke about a windy day — how might you include weather in your drawing?"). Inquiring, "Why did you decide to do it like that?" can be perplexing to children whose work is so

intuitive, just as prompting “tell me about this” can sometimes be disruptive as it requires switching from visual to verbal modes. By describing students’ artwork, we signal to children that they — through pencil or marker, clay or paint — have *already* spoken.

Yet our role is not merely to observe and describe. In the Guggenheim galleries, providing contextual information is considered important, not only in its own right, but as a tool of engagement. We take the same approach in the studio, presenting information to the group upfront or one-on-one in response to students’ work. We demonstrate how to use materials and discuss formal elements such as composition, color, and line — skills and concepts that strengthen students’ ability to communicate visually. We might help a child draw a figure in motion by enlisting a classmate to assume the pose. By teaching technique we establish trust. Children seek to gain mastery of materials and build their representational skills — we communicate our high regard for our students by responding to these developmental needs, thereby encouraging the confidence to make personal work. Knowledge and know-how are ultimately instrumental, a conduit for meaning. As art educator Viktor Lowenfeld wrote, skills “must remain a means to an end ... It is not the skills that are expressed, but the feelings and emotions of the artist.”<sup>6</sup> Information can also help bind art-looking and art-making. During the gallery inquiry we observe with an artist’s eye — noticing how a canvas “breathes,” or how a sculpture is joined. Conversely, during the workshop we use art history to broaden students’ frame of reference — pulling out reproductions of famous artworks to show how a child’s gestural brushstrokes resemble de Kooning’s, for example, or how his simplified profile could have guarded an Egyptian tomb.

The strategies outlined here — employing a motivating question with well-matched materials, avoiding step-by-step projects, and giving descriptive feedback and information in response to students’ work — have made our teaching more meaningful. We have come to see how gallery and studio experiences mirror each other. In both, children explore art as a means to understand and represent the world around and within themselves. In both, the experience is truly one of “inquiry”; neither child nor teacher has all the answers. Towards the end of each class, we gather to look at the freshly completed artwork. We restate the motivating question, and then open the floor for comments. Just as a gallery discussion can illuminate the value of multiple perspectives, the array of visual responses to a single question is testimony to the diversity of human experience and expression.

Just as the Guggenheim's "Ideal Tour Plan" was written collaboratively as part of an ongoing effort to refine museum teaching, the approach we have described is only a starting place for what we hope will be renewed attention to studio teaching in the field. We are not blind to the challenges of promoting a robust studio program in the museum — materials are expensive, messy, and difficult to store; logistics are challenging; and open-ended art-making may be less popular than more structured, collections-related projects. Yet we believe that museums are uniquely positioned to provide quality hands-on experiences. Museums, of course, can offer the gift of original objects that can make a studio class so rich. Perhaps most importantly, the inquiry method that is now *de rigueur* in the galleries can be the model for personal, open-ended art-making.

Back in the studio space, the educator addresses the group: "Upstairs, we looked at paintings of places. Can you think of a place that is important to you?" A handful of students share their ideas: one boy chooses Yankee stadium (he had recently attended a game with his cousin), another child proposes a park where he likes to play freeze tag. The students are using tempera paint — the primary colors, plus black and white, dispensed in baby food jars — with long-handled bristle brushes and large, flat mixing trays. The educator demonstrates how to clean a brush, and how to use the tray to mix colors.

*The children begin painting as the educator circulates, responding differently to each student, helping one to clean his brush, discussing skin tones with another. The paper is big and blank — daunting to some — but the children sense that they are trusted to find their way. One girl shows her bedroom, paying special attention to the stuffed animals lined up across her bed (the educator shows her a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Bedroom in Arles* as she is finishing). A student who did not speak in the galleries paints his grandmother's garden, organizing the flowers into rows and including a white hammock painted over a dark blue sky. The children have moved from Van Gogh's landscape into the full, bright world of their own experience as they engage in the exhilarating and challenging task of representing the places, people, and things that matter to them.*

## Notes

1. In our review of the literature, we found little written about studio art pedagogy within the museum context. For an overview of gallery teaching practices, see Rika Burnham and Elliot Kai-Kee, *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2011), or Melinda M. Mayer, "A Postmodern Puzzle: Rewriting the Place of the Visitor in Art Museum Education," *Studies in Art Education* 46, no. 4 (2005): 356–368.

2. See Nancy R. Smith, *Art and Experience: Teaching Children to Paint* (New York: Teachers College Press Columbia University, 1983); Lois Lord, *Collage and Construction in School Preschool/Junior High* (New York: Bank Street College of Education, 1996); Judith Burton, "The Practice of Teaching: Devices and Desires," in *The Handbook of Research and Policy in Art Education*, eds. Elliot Eisner and Michael Day (Reston, VA: National Art Education Association, 2004); Nancy Beal, *The Art of Teaching Art to Children* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).
3. We use the word "activity" instead of "project," which can connote a pre-planned outcome, or we say, simply, "Today we are painting/building/using collage etc."
4. When asked to speculate on the history of the "motivating question," Ann-Marie Mott, Professor of Education at Bank Street College, commented "I can only guess about the origins. For me the origins come from times throughout human history when thoughtful artists, teachers and parents have asked leading questions that would further stimulate children's inherent curiosity about the materials and their desire to express and communicate their thoughts and feelings through visual means." Ann-Marie Mott, email message to authors, May 14, 2013.
5. Smith, *Art and Experience*, xiv.
6. Victor Lowenfeld and W. Lambert Brittain, *Creative and Mental Growth* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 149.

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