

MuseumsForward

Understanding the personal objects families bring to their art museum visit

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Abstract

Almost half of art museum visitors are families. Many art museums are trying to be more accessible to families, but it is typically the parents/caregivers who are often guiding their children, reading labels, and asking questions to engage with their children. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the ways families use personal objects that they brought from home to engage with artworks and each other in art museum galleries. Two research questions were investigated in this study: 1) What personal objects do families bring to the art museum, and why?; 2) How do families use personal objects to engage in the art museum galleries? This study used a phenomenological design to understand what personal objects families bring to art museums through audio recorded semi-structured interviews and a demographic survey. Eighteen participants were recruited from the Seattle Art Museum. Results suggest that families bring cell phones, digital/film cameras, toys, art supplies, and objects worn by family members, called “wearables.” Four themes emerged for how families use their personal objects in the museum: i) to create memories from their museum visit; ii) to distract themselves or keep busy; iii) to connect to the art; and vi) to engage their children. Future research in this topic could understand further how families use their personal objects.

Keywords

Art museums; families; personal objects

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Introduction

Families are a large audience that consistently visit museums (The Audience Agency, 2018). Almost half (42.5%) of art museum visitors are families (Dilenschneider, 2018). Many art museums try to be more accessible to families, with special programming for elementary age children and their caregivers, however, these programs usually need to be planned for and are not always convenient for a casual museum visit. In this case, parents/caregivers must rely on exhibition labels and design to support their family interactions. As families engage with art in the galleries, parents/caregivers are often guiding, reading labels, and asking questions to engage with their children.

As a Seattle Art Museum security guard, I am continually asked by families “Where are the activities?” I have seen firsthand families come into the museum in search of a “makerspace” or art activity in the galleries. Many families, aware of this, bring their own tools to engage with the art. For example, some families play games in the galleries, where they guess painting titles based on what they see. Others bring sketch books and drawing materials. Understanding how caregivers attempt to engage their children with art would help art museums better support their family visitors. Additionally, few studies examine children’s learning through exploration in art museum programs and exhibitions compared to science and natural history museums (Andre et al., 2017). This article describes a research study designed to understand the ways families use personal materials to engage with artworks and each other in art museum galleries.

Literature Review

Family learning in museums

Museums are considered *free-choice learning* institutions as they allow visitors to engage with the exhibitions through their personal interests, goals, and knowledge (Andre et al., 2017; Crowley et al., 2014; Falk and Dierking, 2000). Children’s and science museums offer experiential learning opportunities for families. Families learn through play, memories, and conversation. Play is an essential tool that helps children learn about themselves and their world (Vygotsky, 1967). Children museum professionals and parents/caregivers consider play an important aspect of children’s learning. For example, Luke et al.’s (2021) study investigated children museum professionals’ perceptions of play. Four of five professionals stated that play was extremely important for the mission of the museum and referenced the role play

has for children's social, cognitive, and emotional development (Luke et al., 2021).

Lee (2020) observed children's experiences in the Contemporary Art Museum in Taipei (CAMIT). The participants were seen playing in the galleries. More specifically, the oldest child (11 years old) was able to demonstrate art concepts the museum aimed to teach through play by feeling textures of the sculptures with his hands and body as he wove through the negative spaces of an exhibit. In this same gallery, two younger children used materials to build cities and engage in pretend play to learn about natural disasters common in Taipei. Their experiences in the museum were expressed through their play and influenced by their experiences.

Memories are another element of family learning in museums. Research suggests that families talk about their collective and individual memories in museums, creating new memories and learning through that process. In Rhinehart's (2018) study about personal memories in family visits to history museums, each family shared a median of eight memories in one visit (time spent ranged from 16-35 minutes). Parents/caregivers often were the members of the family who shared memories (70%), however, children still shared memories in 25% of interactions. Children asked their parents/caregivers about objects in the museum, learning about their parent's/caregivers' experience and knowledge.

In a study where children visited an art museum with their fathers, the children's experiences with art became associated with their life according to their memories (Acer et al., 2022). Children made statements about artworks during their tour using humor that connected them with their fathers and built their experience into something memorable. Children demonstrated active learning when they were encouraged to be the guide at the museum, which helped build interest and knowledge. Children were engaged with art, as their artworks were influenced by what they remembered seeing and talking about in the galleries (Acer et al., 2022). Children's opinions on artworks and their interests were revealed to fathers and encouraged them to bring their children back to the museum. Learning in a museum setting happens for children and parents/caregivers. Additionally, just one visit to a museum might not show the full impact of visiting museums. The complete impact may not be noticed until families have time to talk, wonder, and practice the knowledge they experienced at the museum (Crowley et al., 2014).

In studies conducted by Crowley et al. (2015), researchers traced back indicators of scientific interest from 69 science professionals in academic and career fields. Through 2-hour interviews that focused on participants' childhood and schooling from kindergarten to college, data suggested out-of-school experiences, such as visiting museums with their family, were important in interest-building (45% of conversations). In comparison, only 28% of participants shared the positive role their elementary or middle school had on their initial interest in science (Crowley et al., 2015). Museums are shown to foster the initial-interest in subject areas for lifelong learning.

Families learn in museums through their conversations. Studies focus on conversations between parents/caregivers and their children in science centers, history, natural history, children, and art museums (Acer et al., 2022; Callanan, 2020; Knutson et al., 2011; Leinhart, 2003). Children engaged logical thinking skills and processes when they discussed what they saw in artworks (Acer et al., 2022). In this narrative study, five father-child pairs' conversations were recorded in art galleries at Çankaya Municipality Contemporary Arts Centre (CMCAC) in Ankara, Turkey. After the pair viewed the artworks, they completed an art-making activity and interviews with researchers. Each father-child pair was observed to be guided by the father in how to obtain information about artworks through wall labels. Fathers engaged their children by describing details of art using art language and asking their children about their thoughts on artworks. Children replied describing details seen in paintings and displayed details of artworks they saw in the galleries in their drawings (Acer et al., 2022).

Learning also occurs through translanguaging (bilingual children using linguistic/cultural knowledge to communicate information with parents/caregivers) (Kwon, 2022). Bilingual children in the Seoul Museum of History used translanguaging to engage with signs and objects in the exhibit. One child was driven by his personal interest in maps and asked his father questions. The child read labels and spoke in Korean and English while relating objects to his own experiences (Kwon, 2022). Through translanguaging, new meaning and knowledge was created among families. Learning in museums becomes intergenerational as children talk with their parents and grandparents about their experiences as it relates to exhibitions in museums.

When adults listen to children's ideas, their children's learning experiences become validated. Children are more likely to foster a sense of belonging and engage in learning (Davis & Dunn, 2023). In the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia (MCA), children and their caregivers viewed contemporary artworks and experienced post-visit

art activities. During families' time in the galleries, children looked at art with other groups of families and teaching artists. They listened to adults speak about art, learning how to observe and talk about art, and connect the art they saw to art they made. This environment encouraged children to participate and learn in an art museum (Davis & Dunn, 2023).

Caregiver and child conversations

Conversations between parents/caregivers and children are a primary way families learn in museums. Key themes among research of parent-child conversations are emphasized through family engagement, talk-types, and pedagogical learning strategies. During museum visits, parents/caregivers take the role of facilitator. Research recognizes the role of joint-attention for learning talk (Benjamin et al., 2010; Eberbach & Crowley, 2017; Povis & Crowley, 2015). The role of joint-attention between parent-child learning was investigated at a natural history museum. Fifty-four parent-child pairs explored diorama scenes. Half of the parent-child pairs explored dioramas in the dark while the child held a flashlight to light up parts of the diorama. The flashlight restricted the view to participants and made clear to the researchers what the pair was looking at (indicating joint-attention). Povis & Crowley (2015) found learning talk increased after joint attention was achieved (19% learning talk before joint attention; 71% learning talk after joint attention).

Parent-child interactions are supervisory, instructional, and disciplinary (Acer et al., 2022). Families converse about their observations. Adults and children talk about artworks in detail, discussing size, materials, lines, textures, how art was made, technique, and relationships between details in the artworks (Acer et al., 2022) using art language and mutual dialog about the art (describing, analyzing, interpreting, expressing aesthetic judgements) (Acer et al., 2022).

Various talk-types observed during parent-child interactions, including criticism, context, creation, and connection, moving beyond visual experiences to deeper interpretations (Knutson & Crowley, 2010; Knutson et al., 2011). Some talk-types are seen frequently among families. For example, 50 pairs of parent-child (8-11 years old) participants were observed with historical artworks (Knutson & Crowley, 2010). Although all categories of talk were used at least once by families, the most common talk-type was criticism. Creation and context talk were the least commonly used, however, 93% of families attempted to use them at least once. More support for engaging

conversations beyond visual aspects of artworks may benefit family conversations.

Families talk about their opinions and values in the museum. Children and adults talk about their views on the artist. These conversations build connections to children's lives. One child made statements about artworks in a gallery related to their prior knowledge and experiences. This connection and memory aided in making the artworks more meaningful and relevant to the child's life (Acer et al., 2022).

Children learn about themselves, their family, and how they relate to information in museums through history. Family members share with each other their personal histories, knowledge, and emotions to connect to exhibits. For example, a child learned about their great grandparents migrating from North Korea from an exhibit they visited with their mother (Kwon, 2022).

How museums design and program for families

Children are competent visitors in museums. Although most art museums do not design exhibitions for a children audience (Guffey, 2015; Hood et al., 2022). Children can adapt to museum environments when the museum prepares to accommodate all their visitors, especially families with children (Davis and Dunn, 2023). Art museums typically design for families by layering experiences over exhibitions. The exhibits are not designed for families; therefore, museums create other experiences to help families access art. There are many examples of creative ways art museums aimed to address and enhance visitor experiences in the galleries on a case-by-case basis. Some examples of layered experiences for families are the use of touch-screen kiosks, family guides, audio tours, and scheduled weekend programs (Knutson & Crowley, 2010).

Museums that integrate interactive experiences within their exhibitions are science centers, natural history, and children's museums. These institutions often do not have collections and focus on "providing experiences" (Crowley, 2014). Traditional museums, like art museums, have been encouraged by interactive museums and visitors to design interactive exhibitions and programs in an art context. Most art museums that develop programming for children have art-making workshops, and artist/educator-led discussions (Davis & Dunn, 2023). Some contemporary art museums use a children's museum model to encourage learning through play in art galleries (Lee, 2020). The Contemporary Art Museum in Taipei is a children's art museum that

has interactive art installations created with teaching artists, learning goals, and play opportunities. The interactive exhibition design allows for children and families to play within the art to learn more about artistic concepts through play and hands-on exploring.

Researchers have noted the challenges to creating interactive and educational exhibits that reinforce and extend beyond classroom education (Lee, 2020). For example, Lee's research highlights the purpose of exhibit interactives designed for visitor engagement. Some examples of gallery interactives are touch-screen digital kiosks, interactive maps, audio guides, and video clips. These interactives range from pushing a play button to start the video, scanning a QR code to listen to an audio guide, clicking through touch-screen digitized books/materials, and touch-screen kiosks that allow visitors to "create" something. These museum interactive tools vary by museum; however, families are open to using tools when easily provided in art galleries. Families that are multilingual are more likely to use interactive tools in museums when challenged by a topic, so they can provide better explanations to their children (Kwon, 2022).

Parents/caregivers often take the role of the guide when visiting museums with their children for the first time (Acer et al., 2022). Parents will inform children of museum rules and give reminders throughout their visit and direct their child(ren) around the museum. Franklin and Sansom (2018) found that children should be the ones to guide their parents/caregivers through exhibits for family engagement. When the direction and content of the museum visit is directed by the child, parents/caregivers learn more about their child's interests and limits. Caregivers have many roles when visiting art museums with their children. They coach, guide, and explain by reading labels, scaffold their child's learning, and make suggestions on what to do, respond to obstacles and questions, and encourage their children to lead the exploration (Crowley et al., 2014).

Exhibit signage and labels are another factor in museum design that influences visitors' interactions. For example, families visited an exhibit where paper helicopters were tested. There were two conditions of this exhibit where the signage had visitors focus on a scientific or engineering goal. Families that engaged in the exhibit with a scientific goal showed that families were more talkative and made informal tests to discover how features can change the function of the paper helicopter (Kim & Crowley, 2010).

In Kim's study (2009), families learn more when using signage in museums than not using any signage. Parents with high content

knowledge on exhibit topics typically skip signage/labels and have longer specific conversations with their children. It is less likely that educational goals are addressed from signage/labels that were skipped.

Signage and labels in museums are also great tools that can guide a visit. For example, when parents/caregivers bring their children to an exhibit on a topic they have little knowledge of, the signage helps parents navigate the gallery and answer children's questions. This increased the engagement time with labels when parents are learning about the topic of the exhibit alongside their child. Signage is a support for multilingual visitors. Children who speak more than one language may have more understanding about a topic in one language than the others, although their meaning making can be supported by all the languages that they do know. By reading the labels and looking at objects, children were seen to switch between English and Korean when unfamiliar words came up to support their learning (Kwon, 2022).

The following sections of this article focus on the study of understanding how families use their own objects when visiting art museums as guided by the literature review above, which provides a basis for understanding current literature about families, learning, and museums.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the ways families use personal objects to engage with artworks and each other in art museum galleries. Two research questions were investigated in this study:

1. What personal objects do families bring to the art museum, and why?
2. How do families use personal objects to engage in the art museum galleries?

Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to understand what personal objects families bring to art museums through semi-structured interviews and a demographic survey.

Eighteen participants were recruited from the Seattle Art Museum (SAM). The researcher approached families on 3rd and 4th floor galleries at SAM that appeared to have at least one child under the age of 12 years and were seen holding or using a personal object. Seven visitors that fit the study criteria declined to participate in the study.

Family demographics can be found in Table 1. One parent/caregiver of each family completed the demographic survey describing their family.

Table 1

Demographics of participating families at the Seattle Art Museum

Family visitors (n=18)	Frequency
Age (years)	
1. (18-35)	2
2. (36-50)	15
3. (51-65)	1
Gender identity	
Female	16
Male	2
Non-binary	1
Race	
African/African-American/Black	1
American Indian/Native American	1
Asian/Asian-American	4
Latinx/Latina/Latino/Hispanic/Chicano	3
Middle Eastern/Arab/American	1
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1

White/Caucasian Self-describe	10 Caribbean-American
Children's grade level (age)	
1. Kindergarten-2 nd (5-7)	5
1. 3 rd -6 th (8-12)	13
2. 7 th -12 th (13-17)	3
Relationship to Seattle, WA	
Local	13
Tourist	5
<p>Table 1. A total of eighteen families participated in this study. One adult from each family group completed the demographic survey describing their family through their age, gender identity, race, child's school grade/age, and relationship to Seattle, WA. Some families selected multiple choices in the race category, which explains why there are more frequency numbers than total participants.</p>	

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a demographic survey in 3rd and 4th floor galleries. First, families were invited to participate in the study. If they agreed, families and the researcher settled in museum benches for the interview (see Appendix A for interview questions). The researcher used the OtterAi phone application to audio-record and transcribe the interviews. The semi-structured interviews took between 3-12 minutes.

After the semi-structured interview, the parent/caregiver was asked to complete the 8-question demographic survey. Once the interview and demographic survey were complete, participants were rewarded with \$10 gift certificates to the museum shop.

Once data were collected and transcribed, the interview transcriptions were coded using thematic analysis with the Delve qualitative software tool. The analysis began with a hybrid coding process using deductive and inductive coding. The initial rounds of coding were deductive as direct answers to interview questions were coded. Inductive coding

followed as codes were created from patterns found among the participants' interviews.

Results

1) What personal objects do families bring to the art museum, and why?

The personal objects brought to the art museum by families were categorized into five object types. These included cellphones (n=16), toys (n=4), art supplies (n=4), cameras (n=4), and objects worn by participants, to be called “wearables” (n=3). The personal objects were only counted once within a family. For example, if a family had multiple phones, the family was tallied once for bringing and using a cellphone(s). Eight of eighteen families brought more than one of these personal object types (e.g. cellphone and art supplies). Family members explained reasons for bringing these items to the museum, and explained why and how they used them in galleries.

Cell phones and cameras

Fifty-two percent (n=8) of families that participated in this research brought and used their cellphone in galleries. For all cellphone instances, families explained that their cellphones are always with them regardless of where they go. There were two reasons why cellphones were used in galleries: i) take photos for memories; and ii) take photos for personal use.

Participants who took photos for memories described the ease of using their phone to document memories with/of their family. Families used their phone(s) to photograph artworks they liked. In one family, an aunt was showing her nieces the art museum of her town. It was important for them to take photos of their favorite artworks to send to them later, so her nieces would remember their time in the museum. In one participant's words,

“I want to take pictures, so they [nieces] have them to remember the art they saw and liked. I wouldn't take pictures, obviously, if I didn't have my phone. I think it would be different [without object] because I wouldn't have the memories. We would have to remember the art. You wouldn't get to take it home with you.”

(Participant 8)

Families also took photos of their children with artworks for memory keeping. As a child of a family was engaging with an artwork, the

mother decided to take a picture of their child sharing their thoughts on the art. The parent explained,

“I took a picture specifically over here because he [child] was noting some things that maybe other people wouldn't notice. I wanted to document that and remember the moment of his observations of that.”
(Participant 18)

Participants that brought their film and digital cameras talked about their interest in photography and the importance of using their camera to document their memories. Being ready to capture important moments with their family was the main reason for bringing their digital and film cameras to the museum. These families valued the artistic technique and quality that comes from using cameras to document their family and children growing up. One participant stated,

“I mostly just take pictures of my kids and I have pictures of them from when they were babies at this museum, and they've just gotten taller. And even when they were little, they used to love them. They used to have a series of cars in the lobby. They used to love seeing that.” (Participant 14)

Another participant said,

“I really wanted to capture some images because I do mix media journaling and so I like to document like scrapbook journaling so I can print off pictures and then I can use it in my journal to kind of capture memories and talk about our time here. Like my grandparents, did it with us. So, it's something that I like to do with my kids too.” (Participant 11)

Another explained,

“Usually we'll take a digital photo, and then we'll take a film photo for our family photo chronological, yearly album of what we do throughout the year. So, it's just to document us doing anything. Not necessarily the artwork. Because we're checking out the artwork, this will be a moment in time.” (Participant 17)

Taking photos for personal use (that is not focused on memories) was another theme found for participants' use of cellphones in the art museum. Families spoke about how they would use these pictures for

future references, posting on social media, or sending to family members. One participant said,

“Because in the age of social media and all that, I usually post something about the new exhibit because I love the museum and I like to try to get other people to come too.” (Participant 14)

Another participant explained,

“I like to take pictures of interesting things, especially abstract art, because I love to just look at it later when I get home. And, you know, there's so much to see in one visit, right? So, I find that I snap pictures of things or the captions of it and I check it out later when I'm in bed. I'll scroll through and I'll go live those moments.” (Participant 12, see Appendix B)

Another participant shared,

“I paint a little bit so sometimes I take pictures just for inspiration of looking back afterwards and kind of like that, I'll take them for that reason. Like, ‘oh, I like the color scheme’ or ‘the patterns that are going on’ and with my own painting I can explore something that I saw, or I took a photo of.” (Participant 16)

One participant mentioned how their child took a photo to inspire art making at home:

“She did take a picture of one of the mobiles in the Calder. She was interested in...maybe she might make one at home.” (Participant 5)

Art supplies

Four families brought art supplies for creativity and art engagement in the galleries, or to pass the time while other members of their family were still looking at art. Families shared that art supplies provide creative experiences different from taking photos. They shared memories from past visits to art museums and what it was like to participate in art-making activities. Parents/caregivers indicated interest in using art supplies to engage their child in creativity. One caregiver gifted coloring pencils and a sketchbook for their child's birthday. The child described themselves as being an “artsy person.” They shared,

Child: "We brought art supplies like this book..."

Caregiver: "Sketch pads and pencils because pencils are allowed in the museum. Not markers or crayons but pencils. So, we brought what we were allowed to bring in case you were inspired by something. I thought it would be a fun idea in case there were things that she noticed."

Child: "Give me ideas..."

Caregiver: "To give you ideas because we love ideas. I thought there were a lot of ideas in the museum."
(Participant 6)

Another participant who shared their interest in mixed media journaling and memory keeping talked about using their journal in the museum. They shared why they would bring a journal,

"My journal just to write down what I'm seeing and I'm big on memories. So like documenting things, keep track of it." (Participant 11)

The two other families that brought art supply objects described their purpose for passing the time. Although these objects were not brought for engaging with artworks in the galleries, art-making was occurring. When asked about how a member of a family would use their sketch book at home or other places they said,

"I don't really take it out at home. What I usually do is I just like to draw random stuff. Like, I just put a bunch of lines and stuff like that." (Participant 5)

Another participant explained,

"I have knitting with me too, I was thinking of knitting if I was going to get bored if I had gone through everything, and people were still looking. I might sit down and knit."
(Participant 16)

Toys

Children in 4 families brought toys to the museum. Three of four toys were stuffed animals (called "stuffies"). The other toy was a Rubik's Cube which the child kept in their pocket to fidget with while they were

in the galleries. These participants explained the reasoning for bringing these objects to the museum,

“I’m a stuffy connoisseur. Mostly specifically animal stuffies like this. I bought this one at the store and every single time I go someplace new, I always bring a new stuffy ‘cuz I think they’re alive. I think that they might as well have a good time, for the experience...If I were to not have a stuffy when I’m looking at just one piece of art, I would feel kind of lonely, just thinking about it.”
(Participant 12, see Appendix B)

Another explained the reason for bringing the Rubik’s Cube: “I get a little bored looking at one piece for a long time.” (Participant 4)

“Wearables”

Three families brought objects specifically to be worn at the art museum. These objects were categorized as “wearables.” Families described “wearable” objects as an intentional part of their visit. “Wearables” included a beaded bracelet, a child’s necklace, and costume unicorn horn. One participant explained,

“I brought my bracelet. When I thought about going to the museum today, I said, because it always reminds me of some beautiful art. Mexican vibes, my husband is Mexican. He got this for me for Christmas.” (Participant 12, see Appendix B)

Another shared,

Caregiver: “How about you Alexa. You got everything prepared.”

Child: “I have my purse and the phone is inside, and my stuffy her name is Leaf and then my necklace.”
(Participant 15)

Participants that talked about items they were wearing described their interest in joining the art atmosphere. For example, one parent shared their desire to be among the art. They explained that art galleries are full of color, so she wanted to engage with the art through her accessories. She shared,

“I believe in wearable art. I have a place called Be Art Curates. And that’s kind of what I encourage people to do is to be the art that you want to see in the world. So,

this reminds me that I am a part of art.” (Participant 12, see Appendix B)

2) How do families use their personal objects to engage in art museum galleries?

How families use personal objects

Across all eighteen families, four themes about understanding how families use personal objects in the museum emerged: i) create memories from their museum visit; ii) distract themselves or keep busy; iii) connect to the art; and vi) engage their children. Cellphones and cameras were the most used tool for memory-keeping. The two categories combined show 64.5% of families researched in this study brought and used personal tools for capturing images with the purpose of memory-keeping and documentation of art and their families. This was important for families as picture taking is one of the only accessible methods for families to take an experience or memory home from the art museum. For example, one participant stated,

“I feel like for me, it makes it more intentional. Like I’ll look for a photo of these two, with a background instead of just cruising through [the museum] checking it out. So just a fun moment to take a picture.”
(Participant 17)

Another explained,

“I think we try to make it [taking photos] so that it’s more artistic or not artistic, but like think about the angles and getting everything in the in you know...here I tried to like, I got him in there with the sculpture.”
(Participant 18)

Some families described their objects as tools to keep busy while waiting for other family members to go through the museum and to provide stimulation for boredom. Tools for knitting, drawing in sketchbooks and Rubik’s cubes were used for these purposes.

Objects were used to connect to art. This was shown when families took photos of artworks they liked and wore items that made them feel like they were a part of the museum experience. For example, one participant talked about her bracelet saying,

"I feel inspired with it on. I feel like the colors, you know, I feel like I'm a part of it [the art]. So, you know, art beckons to art." (Participant 12, see Appendix B)

One parent stated that bringing her camera to the museum is a way she engages her kids at the art museum. She knows her kids are not particularly interested in art, although she takes them to art museums often. She uses her camera to keep them busy and engaged. In her own words, she stated,

"Honestly, it's [taking photos] kind of like a little distraction for the kids because this one's a ham so I was like, 'Wow, that's really cool for sure. Want to take a picture of it?' And he immediately jumped in front of the camera for anything, whatever it takes to get kids, keep kids engaged. I'll take that as a win. Like, okay, he's not admiring the brushstrokes on that painting. But he's not complaining about being in the museum. So that's good enough for me." (Participant 14)

Object impact on families' museum experience

When asked if they thought their visit would be different without using their personal objects in the museum, half of participants thought it would not change their experience and the other half thought their museum experience may be changed by using their objects. Families who thought there would be a difference shared that personal objects as tools in the museum may be distracting them from viewing the art. One parent connected the interview question asking how their museum experience might be different without their object to her daughter's smartwatch:

Caregiver: "We had a conversation about not texting her friends at the museum. And she said, 'I'm still looking at the art.' So yeah, just to take a break for an hour so you can look at the art. And then I think of research if you take a photo of it [artwork], you don't remember it as well. It doesn't encode in your memory as well." (Participant 4)

One child brought up how their experience may change when their parent takes photos for memory-keeping:

Child: "Yes, sometimes I get annoyed because she takes too many pictures. It is kind of nice to see them multiple

times. Like we don't live in these parts we come from Gladstone. So, if we want to see these paintings again, we can look at the pictures."

Caregiver: "I was just going to say yes, I suppose that having my phone out and taking pictures and trying to make the memories with him probably distracts or detracts from remembering in the moment what you're looking at." (Participant 18)

Another participant said,

"It [taking pictures] helps you remember the art but also disrupts your interaction when you're standing in front of it...Because sometimes we get so focused on taking pictures of whatever, we're not seeing the art and I'm guilty of that too. I try not to, like back in March when they had the Hokusai and everyone was taking pictures with the great wave, not looking at it, and I do it too. So, it's kind of like yes, it helps you remember the art but also disrupts your interaction when you're actually standing in front of it." (Participant 14)

Other families stated that using their objects helped them remember their visit or focus on the art: "If you forget that you came here you could just look for your phone and then like, 'Oh, I forgot I came here.'" (Participant 10) Another participant stated,

"For me, I think it's important for me to capture memories so that I can remember because I have bad memory. So I want to be able to look back on those things and you know, be able to frame them eventually things like this." (Participant 12, see Appendix B)

Objects families want to bring to the art museum

Participants were asked to think of objects they would like to use in the art museum. There were six general categories that arose which included art supplies, technology, comfort items, food/drinks, and money. Only three categories were analyzed: art supplies (n=9), technology (n=7), and comfort items (n=5). Families shared they would like to bring paper (sketchbooks, notepads, journals), pencils, paints, canvas, Legos, easels with big drawing pads, crayons, and a book. Painting is not typically permitted in galleries; however, two families described their interest in painting at the museum. Other families were reminded of past experiences at art museums, and seeing others make

art inspired their answer to this question. The Legos and book were items shared by a family who would use them to engage a bored child:

“I think it'd be cool if there were art supplies. If there was a space where kids and families could just create art. Because that would be a way people could engage with art making when they might not normally have that setup at home. You know, like when he was younger, it would have been cool to look at Calder and then give him a bunch of wire to play with. It'd be cool for a person of any age.” (Participant 1)

Another participant shared,

“I dream of the day where we could, they do it at the sculpture park sometimes, they have an easel setup with big drawing pads and personally, I've always wanted to just sit in the gallery and sketch. They would never go for that my kids never go for that type. That would be such a great experience, right? Just in the museum and sketch or whatever. Like look at the art and appreciate someone out there, that's my dream.” (Participant 14)

Another family said,

Child: “Maybe some crayons if I ever want to draw something. Because I like writing stories and pictures and words. Anyways, if I ever wanted inspiration for a story, I might come here or another art museum that's more close to my house.”

Caregiver: “Yeah, I think that's a good idea. We can bring some things to sketch in so that we can remember the moment.” (Participant 18)

The technology families wanted to bring were cellphones, a tablet, cameras, and earbuds. Every family that talked about bringing their phone and camera explained they were to take photos of the art and/or their family. Many participants shared that they would be satisfied bringing similar items that they had already brought. One participant shared, “I saw someone with earbuds in so maybe like if I'm by myself probably earbuds. Yeah, to listen to music or something” (Participant 13). The tablet was described by a child of a family as an object to pass the time. One family said,

Child: "I would bring my tablet. So that I can watch my tablet."

Older sibling: "I would say probably my phone not to watch on it. But like, just because it's nice to take pictures of the art that I find interesting." (Participant 5)

When families were asked this question about bringing anything to the museum, they also thought of ways they could use their personal objects in new ways they had not thought of before. One family shared,

Child: "Well definitely my [digital] camera."

Caregiver: "Yeah, that was a good reminder, right? Yeah, next time. She likes to film herself. Because it also has a video camera. She likes to film herself doing fake YouTube videos—You could do like a blog about the art that you see? Right? Yeah, maybe next time." (Participant 16)

Lastly, participants thought about bringing comfort objects to the museum. They expressed feelings for comfort in the museum, which included sitting in a comfortable chair while looking at art or a large blanket/cloak to provide that comfort. One caregiver said, "I'd like a big comfy chair. You can move around to different pieces on a couch." (Participant 4) Another participant said, "I think the first thing that comes to mind is like a cloak...I'd put my cloak hood on. You know, like one of those ones that are long, and I just want especially the darker ones and be a part of the art." (Participant 12) Another member of the same family shared,

"I'd bring a blanket because being in art museums makes me feel comfortable. I just feel at peace. I don't have to worry about what's going on in the outside world. There was an installation where it was a video going on, so we had to watch it. So, I'd just bring a blanket, you know, watch the video." (Participant 12)

One participant shared their interest in bringing a stuffed animal:

Child: "A stuffy!"

Caregiver: "A stuffy? Does it make you feel cozy? (Child nods yes) Do you think they would like to see the art

(Child nods yes). Really? Your stuffy would want to see the art. Okay.” (Participant 2)

Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the ways families use personal objects to engage with artworks and each other in art museum galleries. The two research questions investigated were: 1) What personal objects do families bring to the art museum, and why; 2) How do families use personal objects to engage in art museum galleries? The findings of this study show that families bring a variety of personal objects to art museums, including cellphones, digital and film cameras, toys, art supplies, and “wearables.” Some objects were intentionally brought to the museum for use in the galleries, while others were described as always being with the family.

Cellphones and digital/film cameras

Families explained why they brought these objects to the art museum. Many answers were similar when they talked about their cellphone. Parents/caregivers described their phone as an object that goes with them everywhere, however when asked what they were using their phone for in the museum, all families said it was to take photos of their child/family and/or the art. Parents/caregivers explained that these photos would be used for memory-keeping, posting on social media, and sharing with other family members.

Families that brought digital or film cameras described their interest in photography and thought of their camera similarly to their cellphone. Especially families traveling from out of town, their camera was a key item for memory-keeping. They explained the camera was not brought to the museum because of the art, but because it was a moment of their time visiting Seattle. One parent shared that using her camera at the museum was a way to distract and engage her children at the museum. The photos taken on cellphones and digital/film cameras were described as very intentional.

Families value evidence of their memories through taking photos on cellphones and cameras. This relates to studies that show families make memories during their museum visits (Acer et al., 2022; Rhinehart, 2018). In this study, families used their objects to explicitly make these memories. Local families that visited SAM many times before described the importance of taking photos of their children and new art exhibitions at the museum. The reasons for taking photos were also a part of many families' interests in continuing familial traditions or

intergenerational experiences. Kwon (2022) discusses how intergenerational experiences can occur through translanguaging; this may also be true with the parents/caregivers whose goal is to make physical records of memories through chronological photo albums or mixed media collage/journaling.

Some studies describe engagement in exhibits through “joint-attention” (Povis & Crowley, 2015; Eberbach & Crowley, 2017). Families explained that interactions with artworks came from taking photos or drawing to help remember the art later. However, some families thought about how using their phones and cameras may inhibit their experience with the art. It was unclear when families took photos of the artworks and whose attention was on the artworks. Looking at the art alone even if they were in a group would not support the memory-making that comes with joint-attention.

Toys

Children were the individuals who brought toys. The children who brought the stuffed animals described them as being an important part of their lives outside of the museum and said they take them everywhere. The stuffed animals provided comfort and company for these children as they explored the galleries. The fidget toy provided stimulation for boredom. Davis and Dunn’s (2023) study show that establishing a sense of belonging for families and young children in museums supports both adults’ and children’s participation and confidence. Bringing stuffed animals is one tool children use to enhance their safety and comfort in public spaces.

Art supplies

The art museum is a place to become inspired, get ideas, and practice creativity, described by families with art supplies. These families were found sitting on benches, doodling and sketching objects they saw. Some parents/caregivers that did not bring art supplies during this visit shared that it would be something they would like to do with their child at the art museum. Parents/caregivers explained that seeing people draw in the galleries made them feel inspired.

Families consider art-making a logical activity to experience in art museums. Families shared their experience making art at museums, even though no interview question asked families about previous art-making experiences. These art-making activities were valuable experiences for families. This shows that art-making experiences in art museums can become a prior experience to recall (Acer et al., 2022;

Leinhart, 2003; Benjamin et al., 2010). The use of their personal objects may even aid in deepening memories in museums.

“Wearables”

The last type of objects brought by families were selected to be worn to the art museum. “Wearable” objects were worn as a form of self-expression at the museum. One parent/caregiver described the way the beaded bracelet her husband gifted her was a perfect object to wear to the museum, allowing herself to feel fully immersed among the artworks. In this study, the items categorized as “wearables” were jewelry and a costume headpiece. The costume headpiece was a unicorn horn worn by a child, who had gotten it from a birthday party earlier in the day. With costume types of “wearables,” there is an element of play that is not typically experienced in art museums.

It is well known within learning research that children learn through play and there are various types of play. In this case, using objects to express feelings and ideas such as wearing color, and becoming a part of the art while wearing beaded bracelets and unicorn horns calls to embodied meaning-making (Callanan et al., 2020; Davis and Dunn, 2023).

Limitations

The limitations of this study are the result of short-term research using only interviews. Using only one data source, interviews, rather than multiple data sources, such as observations and interviews, only demonstrates thoughts and spoken experience from participants. If observations were included, there would be stronger evidence to understand how families use their objects, what conversations families had while using objects, how frequently objects were used during their visit and much more. Interviews are the start of understanding family practices in museums.

Implications

Practice

This study provides evidence to art museums that families are an important audience to design and prepare programs for. Local families and out-of-town families visit art museums to make memories and look at the art together. Understanding what families are doing to engage on their own in the art galleries can help inform curators, exhibition designers, and education departments how to meet families where they are and provide them with a memorable art experience. One

question art museum professionals can consider is: how can art institutions be more responsive to the tools families choose to bring to the museum? Additional study for art museums is to understand what the better design choices in galleries for families are, especially those who are bringing objects, such as cameras for pictures, toys for comfort, or art supplies for creativity and inspiration.

Research

As described by some limitations above, there is much to explore about families' engagement in art museums and their personal objects in art museums. In this study, families bring personal objects to make memories, be creative, and provide comfort or distraction from boredom. Future research in this topic could understand how families use their objects. One study can explore how families use personal objects through a case study design. A comparative study that aims to understand how families engage in art galleries with their personal objects versus museum provided materials is another interest.

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Interview Guide

Recruitment

By observation, I will look for family units (at least 1 adult and 1 child between the ages 5-12) in the museum. Some families might have their items out with them, some might have them stowed away still. I will engage with the families by introducing myself, a UW graduate student who is studying families in art museums. I'll then ask if they (adult or child) brought anything specific/special to use in the museum today.

If they say no, I will thank them for their time, and move on.

If they say yes, I will ask if they are interested in participating in my study. I will explain the only requirements being:

- A short interview in the galleries about the item, and an 8-question demographic survey to help know who my participants are

Interview Questions

1. Have you been to the Seattle Art Museum before?
2. What did you bring to the art museum from home today?
3. Why did you bring [this item] to the museum? (What made you decide to bring something at all? Why did you bring this item as opposed to something else?)
4. How do you use this item? (anyplace; home, store, etc.)
5. How do you use this item at the museum?
6. Do you think having this item with you at the museum changes the way you engage with the art? If so, how?
7. Are there other items you have brought to the museum today, or when you've visited before? What were they?
8. If you could bring anything that you have/own in the museum to use, what would it be and why?

Appendix B

Image 1

Three personal objects brought by the family of Participant 12: a stuffed animal, a digital camera, and a beaded bracelet.

