

Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History

The David H. Koch Hall of Human Origins exhibit in the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History is an exhibit the entire family can enjoy. There is a good balance between artifacts and information that can keep both children and adults entertained. The exhibit unfolds like a story from beginning to end where it introduces the topic and then adds on different details as someone walks through it. Within the exhibit, there are different sections and different sets of information, so the headings allow someone to be brought right to that specific location of the exhibit. One looks through the exhibit and presses the different arrows to zoom in and out of information and move around the exhibit, but the headings are there for users to follow the exhibit in order which turns it into a story. In most cases, navigating with the different controls on a virtual platform can be tricky and frustrating (especially for children), but to eliminate that concern, one can click on the headings “Time Portal” or “Lucy” and it brings them to the exact spot in the exhibit. This element eases the frustration of getting lost within the online exhibit, but it also makes the platform kid friendly. Children’s experience can be overlooked compared to adult experiences (Anderson et al. 254) which hinders the child’s experience, but the set-up of this exhibit understands that children may find it difficult to navigate on their own with the zoom arrows, so they added the headings that can be clicked on and brought to the exact spot.

The exhibit takes into consideration the importance of the participatory museum function introduced by Nina Simon. This function engages the audience with the museum to have the people fully engage with the material within. One keyway in making this happen is connecting with social objects and asking questions. According to Simon (2010) questions spark conversation and allow the audience to think and discuss their interpretations or stories (Asking Visitors Questions, para. 1). In the exhibit, there are “How do we know?” little blurbs posted

behind some of the artifacts that explain the accuracy of them. These blurbs spark conversation and questions between people viewing the artifacts. Although the virtual exhibit does a good job in trying to spark some conversation between individuals, Nina Simon states, “many of these digital platforms experience low participation, even in institutions where visitors are text messaging and snapping photos all over the place” (Gifting Objects and Other Ways to Share, para. 4). This is not the only virtual exhibit that struggles to pull people to communicate and engage with each other, but there can be measures put into place that offer participation. For example, this museum can propose some type of chat box where people can leave comments surrounding certain artifacts, what they found interesting, or any stories they thought of while exploring. This can connect people and build a network of socializing from an online platform. Audiences can engage further with the artifacts, but also, conversing with others.

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Egyptian Mummies: Ancient Lives. New Discoveries. at the Royal Ontario Museum

Museums are a space for visitors to come to explore and learn about the different artifacts and themes that each exhibit has to offer. All around the world, every museum has its unique mission and strengths to show off different artifacts of the exhibits. Museums such as the Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City are popular institutions that come to mind when thinking about a museum. Someone imagines a sophisticated museum where fine art is on display and the items in the exhibit offer a level of prestige. Although these “fine arts” museums offer a great experience for adults, there is a lack in making children feel like they belong in these museums. This is one of the assumptions as to why children are not typically found in “fine art” museums because the exhibits and artifacts on display are too mature or too complicated for a child to understand. These museums limit child participation because these museums are not welcoming for children since the design of the exhibit was not created in the thought of a child. These museums typically have a no touch policy and for children that creates a negative response (Carvalho and Lopes 915). This stops children from attending prestigious museums because children lose interest if all they can do is walk around and not engage with the material. This negative response reflects why young children do not continue going to museums when they grow up because they find museums to be boring and not being able to have a space to meaningfully explore (Kindler and Darras 125). Museums are known to play a role in a child's education experience (Hall and Bannon 231). Children lack a sense of place in museums that do not cater towards their needs to learn and participate. Museums that are not considered “child museums” should start to look at programs that create a space for the child to come and explore to have the child continue coming even when they are older.

There are many assumptions that children will not understand the work of a world class painter and that they will not appreciate sculptures from the Renaissance, but these assumptions are false. Children are creative and want to soak up all the information they can from museums. If children are eager to learn, then why are museums still not catering their exhibits for children? Children museums such as the Boston Children's Museum, are for children, so does that mean that children should only attend museums that are for them? Curators and museum staff often forget the importance of children and how valuable they are in learning and giving back feedback. The idea that children's agendas are not superior to adults (Anderson et al. 254) is problematic because children visit institutions as well and museums should create a space for everyone to enjoy. The following essay will look at the extension of the *Egyptian Mummies: Ancient Lives. New Discoveries.* exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). This exhibit will be extended and re-developed to create a child-centred space where families can come to learn about Egyptian culture. The new exhibit will use different methods to create a creative and inclusive space that allows children to be in the passenger seat and let them take the lead in their learning.

One of the most visited and popular visits at the ROM has closed its doors. The exhibit ran from September 19, 2020, to November 20, 2020 (Royal Ontario Museum Website). The ROM has had multiple experiences showcasing Egyptian themed exhibits to school aged children over the years and class trips and family outings were arranged to come view the exhibits. Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic had gotten in the way of children and families coming to visit the exhibit. Since closing its doors on November 20, 2020, a lot of children did not have the opportunity to come and see the mummies in person. The original exhibit showcased mummies of women, men, and kids (Royal Ontario Museum Website) and gave information on

the identity of the mummies. The exhibit was limited to just showcasing mummies and before they bring the exhibit back, I would like to extend the exhibit and create a space where children learn about Ancient Egypt and the culture and interact with adults to gain deeper knowledge. In an article, “this is a Learning Opportunity”: How Parent-Child Interactions and Exhibit Design Foster the Museum Learning of Prior-to-School Aged Children,” research has found that when children interact with adults in an attractive exhibit, children develop a deeper understanding of the information they processed (Degotardi et al. 173). In the extended exhibit, I want children and families to interact together and have children bounce off their ideas to their parents because it is proven that interaction between adults and children is extremely valuable. To prompt the discussion between the two groups, the new exhibit will have questions and facts posted all over the walls for families to ask and discuss. Some of the questions may be, “what was the most popular dish during these times?” and “why were cats important?” The type of questions will be used to stimulate the child and give them the opportunity to give their interpretation on what is being asked.

The most important element in capturing the attention of a child is creating a space in a museum that has the child in mind. The design of a child exhibit is crafted differently than an exhibit for children. In “Sense of Place in Child-Centred Museums: Charting Children’s Place Meanings,” Despina Kalessopoulou explores the idea that child-centred museums give children a chance to express themselves and help them form a sense of place/belonging. Kalessopoulou explains the sense of places as, “is a term coined to express personal and social meanings and emotions attributed to a space and the development of more intimate relations with it” (53). Children who feel welcomed in a place, excel better because the experiences in the exhibit are for children. To create a space where children are in the centre of attention there are six proposed

dimensions by Kalessopoulou to capture the attention of the child, “Enriching (the child has many opportunities to learn), Empowering (The child can take control in the exhibit to learn) , Playful (having elements in the exhibit that allow children to play), Epistemic (incorporating discovery activities), Social/Associative (creating opportunities where children and families can discuss their findings), and Aesthetic (creating a space that is visually appealing)” (67). All six dimensions work together to create a child-centred space which allows the child to feel like they belong in a museum and participate. All six dimensions will be used in the creation of the exhibit that ensure that this specific exhibit is catered for children and families. The ROM naturally is a family museum, but this specific space will give children the tools to discover things on their own.

The proposed exhibit will expand on viewing mummies but turn into submerging yourself into the world of Ancient Egypt. I want to highlight important aspects of the culture and have different activities that will engage participants. The appearance of the exhibit is very much as important as the artifacts found within. Hosting participation, a phrase proposed by Nina Simon in her E-book, *The Participatory Museum* (2010) refers to the practice of having visitors feel welcomed and attracted to come and visit the exhibit. The overall experience of an exhibit is just as important as the artifacts found within, because if children are not interested in the appearance of the museum they will not engage. In an article, “Aesthetic Attributes of Museum Environmental Experience: A Pilot Study with Children as Visitors” Pasini et al., conduct a pilot project that shows how visitors are concerned and interested with the overall experience of the museum. The study concluded, “our research supports the idea of museums as places that contribute to a visitor’s aesthetic experience with a sense of relaxation, peace and calm, or thoughtfulness” (Pasini et al. 13). Considering curators cannot control the build and appearance

of the entire museum, they have range in developing the exhibit within. Following the entrance of the exhibit, the doorway to enter will have its border covered in hieroglyphics (see fig. 1). This key element will let the child see ancient ways of written communication, but it will allow them to get ready to be transported to 3100 B.C. The doorway's border will be carved out of stone replicating the stone in Ancient Egypt, and it will also give children an experience to touch the frame. I specifically would like the doorway carved out in stone because it allows children who are visually impaired to interact with the exhibit as well. They can touch and feel the carved-out hieroglyphics on the wall. This will not limit children who are facing disabilities and it will create an exhibit that is known to host everyone even if someone is faced with a disability.



Figure 1 The entrance to the exhibit. Children will have a chance to feel the carved-out.

The importance of creating an atmosphere will continue with the incorporation of music being played throughout the exhibit. In a documentary called, *Museum in the City (2011)*, the importance of music was brought forward which will be incorporated in the exhibit. Traditional

instruments of that time will be played as children discover the exhibit. Music carries people into that time, and it allows the individual to immerse themselves into that world. The exhibit will cover different senses such as sight, touch, and hearing that will all work together to get children to want to participate. The basic human senses will work together to create an attractive space to look at. After entering the doorway there will be a life-sized model of the ancient pyramids in the middle of the exhibit (see fig. 2). This will be the focal piece of the exhibit and everything else will work around it. The pyramid itself will have a carved-out doorway where children can go inside and see a mummy in its tomb. This will visually appease the child because they can interact with the model and see what it feels like to be “inside” the pyramid. An activity that I would be incorporating will be for children to write down on a pyramid-shaped post-it notes how they believe the pyramids were built. This will stimulate thinking and incorporate contributions for educational purposes (Simon Contributing to Museums). I want to incorporate contributory participation (Simon Contributing to Museums) in this exhibit and have members work alongside the museum staff in creating a new space for children. Bringing in members will create a true and accurate representation of the display that will be presented.

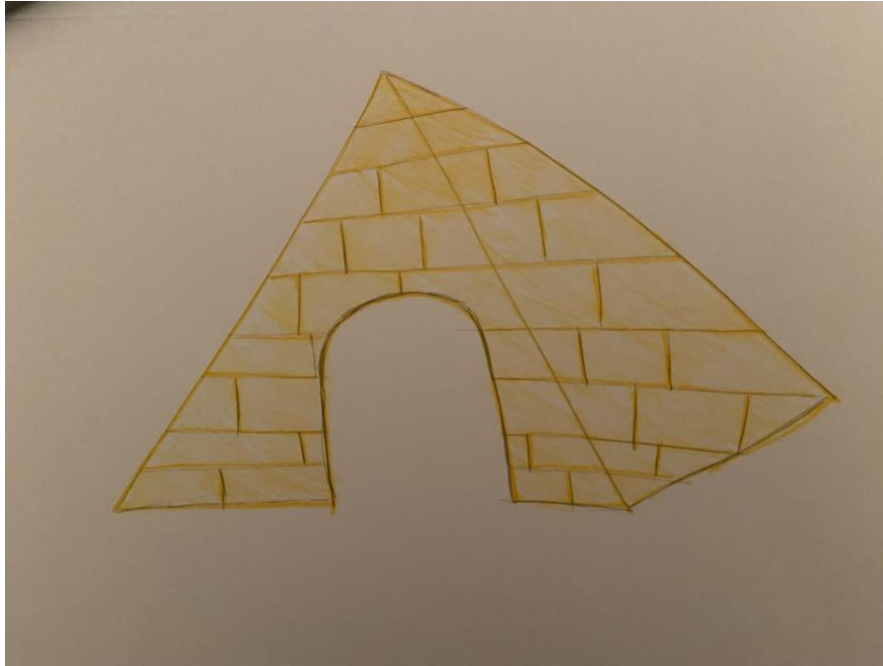


Figure 2 The life-sized pyramid will be in the centre of the exhibit. Children can go inside and discover a real-life mummy.

It is important to note that times are evolving, and new technology is present and ready to use. Children these days are technologically advanced and know how to work their way around most pieces of technology. Not only do they know, but they are interested in learning how a piece of technology works, therefore technology captures the attention of the 'Nintendo Generation' child (Hall and Bannon 232). Incorporating technology into an exhibit for children is beneficial because children seem to learn better with something they can experience like a hands-on activity opposed to reading an information blurb. The most important element about adding technology to an exhibit is to attract the child and have the child become interested in the exhibit to walk away and a) want to come back and b) to have learned something. In the new exhibit, there will be different forms of technology spread out throughout the space giving children a chance to play around with the technology. First off, there will be a projector that creates an immersive experience of the pyramids as a backdrop that children can go take pictures with.

Secondly, there will be a voice recording system that allows children to talk and answer the question, “how do you think the pyramids were built?” This question allows children to think creatively on how one of the wonders of the world came to be built, and it gives them a chance to play with the technology to record their answers. Children will find speaking into a voice recorder machine to be much more interesting than writing down their thoughts on a piece of paper. Technology will be a useful component in making sure the children of this generation are engaged and give children a chance to state their opinion in a different form.

Children are an important part of our society, and their agendas should be taken seriously when museum staff create an exhibit. Museums offer a learning opportunity for children and creates a space for them to be creative. The new exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum will have children in mind when creating an exhibit for them. Museums fuel education for children and if exhibits start creating child-centred places, children can depend on museums to learn about a variety of things. To create an exhibit for the ROM, the focus was to create an attractive exhibit that would stimulate conversation amongst children and adults. An attractive exhibit draws in the child, but it allows them to learn in a creative way without walking around and just looking at the different artifacts. The new methods and new changes to the exhibit will make sure that children feel welcomed and feel safe to participate in the museum. This new child-centred space will maximize all aspects for children learning and drawing families in to spend the day together and learn something interesting.

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