

Exhibit Review: “Tigers in Picture Books”

Within this online museum curated by the Cotsen Children’s Library, visitors are welcomed to a brief introduction about “Tigers in Pictures Books.” This site has some gaps that include a lack of description for the images shown, an insufficiency of participatory activities that children could follow along with, and the site seems to be made for adults. As Simon states, “there are many casual and infrequent visitors who would like to participate but don’t know how to start” (*The Participatory Museum*). However, participants cannot engage with the artwork if they are not offered opportunities to get involved because museum educators have not understood how to connect people to one another. For example, Simon uses Nike’s “Nike+” app that allows users to challenge their friends online and encompasses all “five stages of user engagement” (*The Participatory Museum*). Similar to online museums, children need a motivator to want to try activities, as demonstrated in the Nike+ app. The Nike+ app attempts to engage people with each other just as Simon’s volleyball coach placed like-minded individuals together.

Another challenge with the online site is the lack of description. The lack of narrative is discouraging because many children view these online exhibits with their parents. Without an explanation, the parents cannot teach their child about the piece or get them excited about it. Simon discusses how artifacts are social objects that can help strangers connect with each other (*The Participatory Museum*). For example, the exhibit has “A Tiger Wizard” (Cotsen Public Library) posted on the site, and all the kids would read about the picture is when it was made, by who, and what book the image was from. In no way, are these pictures made to help start conversations among strangers, let alone among a child and parent. While this is an online exhibit, there are still ways to make it meaningful. Just as Nike has leaderboards and communities, the same could be done with the “Tigers in Picture Books” museum. The curators

could have a discussion board up with simple questions or games that children can answer or play, or a short video could be shown that explains the pictures in silly but engaging ways (*The Participatory Museum*). These are just two examples of methods the site could use to elevate it and make it more attractive.

It is also concerning to see a children's library make a site that is entirely made for adults. In no way, shape or form is this site suitable for children as there are no instructions or directions when you first enter the site to go to the exhibit. Initially, I chose this site because the name Cotsen Children's Library gave me hope of some type of activity or participatory component that I could look at. However, just like the other online museums I had looked at, this one had an inadequate amount of creativity and direction. This site was not child friendly and looked like something adults would mildly enjoy. The lack of description would be okay if adults were the primary users of the site. However, this was made for kids but totally missed their target audience.

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Proposed Revision for the Victoria and Albert Museum's "Winnie-The-Pooh: Exploring a Classic"

Museums influence and educate the general public on various topics such as European history, African history, Art history and even children's literature. Traditional museums offer the general public to become educated on various topics that ranges from European history to children's literature. But what happens when museum education does not consider a child's attention span, learning styles, and accessibility for all? This is where individual exhibitions fail, especially when it comes to online exhibits. An example of this is the Victoria and Albert Museum's (V&A) "Winnie-the-Pooh: Exploring a Classic," which ran from December 2017 to April 2018. In the contemporary world, and amid a pandemic, the only way to keep children safe yet educated and entertained is through online exhibits such as this one. To revise and critique the exhibit, I will use METKids' wonderfully designed website that "made for, by, and with kids" (#MetKids). The site offers many creative engagement opportunities while also resolving many accessibility issues that the V&A held. These accessibility issues include socio-cultural, visually impaired, and hard-of-hearing children who would be unable to navigate the exhibit successfully. These limitations can be seen at V&A based on traditional structures normalized within museums. To further understand the V&A's exhibit in relation to METKids (Metropolitan Museum), one must also analyze the history of the museums, as well as museum culture and education. In addition, museums prioritize whiteness which eliminates insightful perspectives from those of othered cultures. . The idealization of whiteness These concepts have ramifications towards museum education and being socio-culturally accessible for all people. Children's lives during a pandemic have drastically changed. In order to make online exhibits more exciting and

engaging, this paper will look at how that starts with accessibility and revising activities that the V&A's exhibit has utilized already. To learn more about these issues, I will be using multiple sources as frameworks for understanding race, accessibility, child engagement in a museum setting, and how something like a pandemic affects online exhibits.

Due to the pervasiveness of whiteness, the V&A and the MET have impacted museum education. Viv Golding states that the "V&A stands as a symbol of 'Great Britain' --- of the historical imperial might that remains an important element of British identity" (87). All over the world, people understand the kind of magnitude and power Britain holds and the same is done within their museums. Golding also states that the V&A "has been criticized for marginalizing black art" (96), which also displays the attitude they have towards people of colour and their contributions to art and society. However, the effects of whiteness, race, privilege, and the Eurocentrism of these museums extend from Colonialism, which can help explain the history of these institutions. Henry Cole, one of the first directors for the V&A, stated he wanted to create a museum for a wide variety of audiences. However, in many exhibits like "Winnie-the-Pooh: Exploring a Classic," it is apparent that museums have not followed through with this forward-thinking ("100 Facts V&A"). While the V&A has its own white identity, the METkids also follow in its footsteps. The METkids has made great strides to include children in their exhibits. Still, it was also an institution started by American citizens that had its beginning by sharing a lot of European works ("Brief History of the Museum"). It is very apparent that in both of these museums, you will see that the European arts outweigh the art created by non-Europeans (Vartanian), which create a sense of socio-cultural inaccessibility.

The use of race, whiteness, privilege and Eurocentrism are all factors in how museum education is disseminated. This is shown in children's literature and is an important factor in it.

In "Winnie-The-Pooh," the main character Christopher Robin is a white boy, while Pooh and the other animal characters are not identified as a specific race. This story is problematic because it has a lack of diversity, which also outcasts children of colour, again causing socio-cultural inaccessibility. Katherine Capshaw states that oftentimes the most respected children's literature contains "prejudicial constructions" of people of colour or lack people of colour entirely ("Race"). The lack of diverse characters makes it harder for children of colour to understand the exhibit, find it interesting or connect to the exhibit on a personal level. Wendy Ng et al. state that museum workers hold a sense of privilege as they disseminate information; as educators, they have a duty to be critical and put allyship into practice (142). Museum education is then not meeting the standard of catering to the knowledge of the public as a big part of the public cannot participate in the conversation of children's literature. Brynn Welch states that "[t]he pervasiveness of whiteness of children's literature contributes to the cultivation of racial biases and stereotypes" (369). This is proven in stories such as J.M Barrie's *Peter Pan*, which is plagued with Indigenous People who are meant to be violent and savage (Capshaw), one example being Tiger Lily, the "Indian" princess. Welch also states that there are limited books that display diverse characters or even include multidimensional characters (369). If children of colour cannot see themselves represented in the text, they are going to have difficulty understanding their positionality in the world. Jenna Wilson states, "[a]t the time children are reading picture books, studies show that young children are also developing their own racial identities, as well as racial attitudes" (1). Since children develop these skills early on, then there should be an effort to try and find a way to incorporate them into exhibits like the V&A's. Scholar Sarah Dahlen expresses in her article, "A Step from Heaven: On being a Woman of Color in Children's Literature Studies," that her teachers and librarians never connected her to

books that showed her Korean culture (82). When educators and museums do not showcase other cultures, it causes a disconnect for the many children of colour in the world. While the book or the characters in “Winnie-The-Pooh” cannot be changed, it is possible to change how children of colour approach it and make it more open for their understanding. In turn, this alleviates the socio-cultural inaccessibility caused by the children’s book and Eurocentrism.

In addition to socio-cultural accessibility gaps, the lack of addressing physical accessibility issues is also present in the V&A’s website. The website fails to address children with learning disabilities, such as those who are hard of hearing or blind. While the in-person exhibit was multi-sensory, the website deteriorated as they showcased some of the artwork and highlights online. The website opens with their “Exhibition Highlights,” which is large amounts of just text that children may not fully comprehend, be able to read or hear because there is no option for it to be read aloud (see fig.1). According to Nina Simon, “personalizing cultural institutions is to take an audience-centered approach to the experiences offered [...] [and] framing [artifacts] in the context of what visitors want or need” (Ch. 2). This is especially important in terms of including children because the website looks like it is made for adults based on a children’s book.



Fig 1, “Exhibition Highlight” *Victoria and Albert Museum, V&A, 2017,*

www.vam.ac.uk/articles/winnie-the-pooh-competition. Accessed 2 Dec. 2020.

In terms of the pandemic and the lack of agency for kids on the website, Monica Patterson states that children are often treated as “blank screens” that adults project their own fears and values onto (“Children’s Museology”). During a pandemic, online exhibits are an essential way for children to fantasize, imagine, and learn new ideas. If the website does not cater to every child’s needs, such as having audio or interactive activities, then the website fails to include every visitor to the site. METKids is a quality website because they worked with kids to understand what was needed to make the website accessible, interactive and engaging. The MET follows the slogan “made for, by, and with kids” (#MetKids). This is accurately represented on their site as they incorporate various activities that include drawing, playing with friends, fun facts, and more importantly, are accessible to all types of learners as they include videos and audio (see fig. 2).

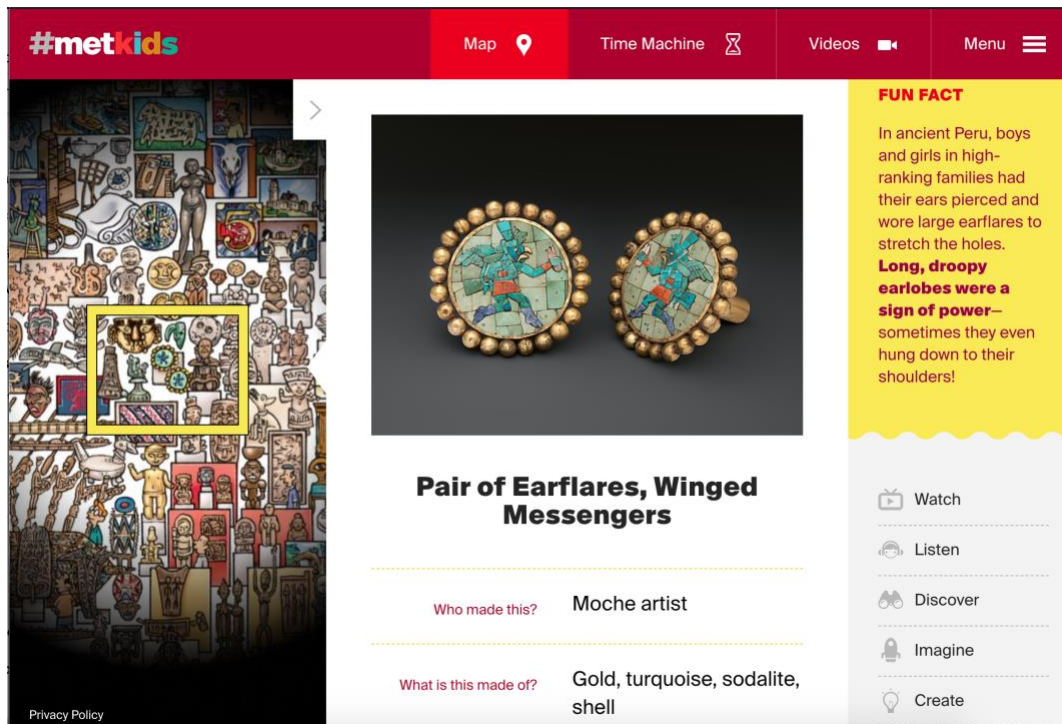


Fig. 2 “Pair of Earflares, Winged Messengers.” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, i.e. The Met Museum*, 2020, www.metmuseum.org/art/online-features/metkids/explore/319459. Accessed 19 Dec. 2020.

According to Patterson, many online exhibits follow a top-down approach where adults design activities such as colouring pages for children which causes a missed opportunity of creating content “by and with children” (“Children’s Museology”). This disadvantage is exhibited in the V&A’s exhibit as it is catered mostly to adults. METKids is an example of what Simon calls a co-development project where the institution consults with participants (in this case, children) to produce new programs, as seen in figure 2 (ch. 7). Due to this co-development model, METKids has strayed from the top-down approach and can be used as a framework to re-examine the V&A’s exhibit.

Some revisions that I think would enhance the exhibit include a new online activity that includes children of colour and adding audio and video. The original activity included in the

exhibit was the “Winnie-the-Pooh storybook character competition” meant for children ages two to twelve (“Character Competition”). First, looking at the revised activity, all children should be allowed to create their own character, similar to the original activity. However, instead of the children drawing a character who looks similar to them, I am proposing that children use nature to create characters that look similar to them. Since the story of Pooh and his friends takes place in nature, this would be an opportunity to get children outside, especially in the midst of a pandemic (see fig.3). Furthermore, instead of creating a competition, the exhibit will have a rotating schedule to showcase as many children as possible. The rotating schedule will excite audiences with new content and keep the exhibit relevant. . They should also involve some type of chat room to let children talk to each other. Museum educators can monitor the conversation to ensure it is a safe environment. In addition, the educators can include thoughtful questions for the children to engage in and produce productive dialogue. The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago did something similar where they successfully had children record their interpretation of the art and connect it to their own identities (Patterson“Children’s Museology”). By using METKids and Patterson’s example, the proposed new activity ensures that children of colour are able to see someone similar to their cultural backgrounds in the book, which may help alleviate the socio-cultural inaccessibility and the lack of diversity in “Winnie-The-Pooh.”



Fig 3. "Leaf Faces - An Easy, Low-Mess, Nature Craft - Picklebums." *Picklebums*, 19 Apr. 2017, picklebums.com/leaf-faces/. Accessed 12 Dec. 2020.

This activity is also accessible for children who have difficulty drawing because of the use of tactile objects to create a picture by using twigs, stones, and leaves. This activity creates a more inclusive online space for children. According to Aaron Knochel et al., tactile activities and aids can bridge the gap for a wide range of children with disabilities (9). The use of this proposed and revised tactile activity not only gets children to go outside and step out of their house, but it also allows children who are visually impaired to be engaged in an activity because of the hands-on concept. In terms of audio and visual accessibility, Lisney et al. state that discrimination and accessibility do not just include automatic doors and lifts; instead, discrimination towards disabled individuals occurs because of issues like non-navigable websites or misinformed museum workers (359-360). Linsey et al. explain exactly what is happening on the V&A's website as the site is made for adults and lacks audio and visuals to help engage online users. To make museums accessible, a lot of planning must occur to make sure each person is getting the

most of the institution. For example, Cho and Jolley state that audio support is a great way to expand museum spaces for the visually impaired as it is an accessible route (223). Minor changes to the traditional museum space can be included in how they present themselves online as well. In addition to the accessible changes, Patterson stresses how taking children seriously as contributors to the museums can provide more insightful archives as well as diversity and inclusion in museums and society (“Children’s Museology”). Overall, having children voice their opinions and engage in the exhibit through interactive activities can broaden the number of visitors to a site. As the exhibit increases online visitors, a feedback form can be included to gather information to make the website and future exhibits more user friendly. By using METKids as an example, we can see how well they have done in using children as collaborators and innovators.

The way museums represent themselves to children determines whether the exhibit will do well or not (“Children’s Museology”). Children are the key to having inclusive and diverse online and in-person experiences. However, during a pandemic, the most important way these children learn their information is through online means, such as the V&A’s “Winnie-The-Pooh: Exploring a Classic.” When exhibits such as the V&A’s do not cater to different types of learners and are not accessible to children with disabilities, they limit the scope of online traffic. The effects of inaccessibility, socio-cultural differences, race, and whiteness are all factors to consider when museum educators incorporate ways to make exhibits take an audience-centred approach to be inclusive. It is also noteworthy that children’s literature, like “Winnie-The-Pooh,” does not include children of colour, which isolates them from the story and white children. Including activities that allow tactile learning that can be used to make children think about their

own culture helps break that cycle of socio-cultural isolation. It is necessary to understand the effects museums have on society as they are another leading institution for education.

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