

Looking at art with your child

How to get the most out of your visit: A guide for the big people

You may know that exposing little ones to art at an early age opens their eyes to different ideas and perspectives, but what are the actual benefits of bringing children to an art gallery?

Cognitive specialists have shared that our brains can only continue to grow and form new synaptic connections when we are exposed to new and novel experiences. Thus, thoughtfully planned visits to art museums and galleries that incorporate multisensory activities can be valuable experiences for preschoolers, a first step towards their aesthetic awareness and cognitive development. These visits provide opportunities for young children to discuss art and beauty with thoughtful adults.

These vital neuron connections in the brain are especially enhanced when parents interact with their preschool children to encourage art appreciation during this crucial stage of cognitive development.¹ Adult intervention is important as we play a vital role in determining what children notice about a particular work and how children feel about works of art. Too often, art experiences for young children only focus on the making of art. As a thoughtful parent or adult, YOU can encourage your child to talk about art objects, the artists and how the objects were made. Looking at art and encouraging conversations about it in ways that relate to children's own experiences not only develops their visual literacy, descriptive language, but also their logical and creative thinking.

In designing our tours, we have always kept in mind that alongside the value of creativity, art has the power to teach many important skills that will last a lifetime. We hope that our carefully curated experiences will help your family to nurture a lifelong love for art, and encourage your little one to look at the world in new ways.

Getting started

For the exhibition Love Me In My Batik, we will discover the story of batik, look at batik painting as a fine art form, learn about how it is linked to Malaysia's history and national identity, and have fun creating our own batik art using a simple "wax-resist" technique during our art-making activity.

A few things you can do with your child prior to your visit:

If there is time to do so, it can be extremely valuable to engage your child in a few multi-sensory activities prior to coming to the gallery, as a first step to developing aesthetic awareness and appreciation for art.

1. To help encourage a great visit, talk to your child about what you are going to see at the gallery ahead of time, and introduce a few art-related terms in your conversation. Look at art in your own home and discuss how your favourite piece makes the both of you feel. We also recommend

¹ Dr. Kathy Danko-McGhee, Director of Education, Toledo Museum of Art.

reading children's books like "Olivia"² or "Molly Meets Mona and Friends,"³ to your child, where the main character visits an art museum, to introduce the concept of going to a gallery.

2. For an added tactile experience, look around with your child for examples of batik you may have at home. Items such as a formal men's shirt, a cloth bag, or even an image of batik found online can be used to represent the artwork you will be looking at. Identify these items as batik, and if your child likes, help him anticipate his visit to "see more batik" and pack them into an "art gallery backpack" that you can bring along on the day.
3. To get your child excited about what he will see and do at the gallery, go to ilhamgallery.com and choose a work of art (under 'Artworks'). This will give you something special to look out for during your visit (as well as the joy of finding it!).
4. Encourage your child to be respectful of the art in the gallery by explaining in advance the importance of keeping the artwork safe (by not touching), because they are a part of our communities and history.

What to keep in mind on the day of your visit:

1. When looking at a piece of artwork, encourage aesthetic awareness and critical thinking by getting your child to talk about what he sees. Ask open-ended questions such as, "What's going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? And what more can you find?"⁴
2. Don't worry if you know nothing about art. Look at it as a shared (intergenerational) learning experience in which you can grow alongside your child (much more valuable than knowing all the answers!)
3. Model a sense of wonder. Use descriptive language and communicate your own imaginative thoughts in order to spark their own.

² Olivia by Ian Falconer

³ Molly Meets Mona and Friends: A Magical Day in the Museum by Gladys Walker

⁴ Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) <http://www.vtshome.org/>

The art adventure begins!

There are many ways to look at modern batik art with children. Below is a guide for your visit to the Ilham Gallery. It covers all the works of art featured on the tour, along with practical information on what your child is learning, as well as suggestions for how to enhance your experience and further engage with what you see today.

I. Welcome: 3rd Floor, Ilham Gallery Lounge (10.00AM)

What happens? Registration, warm-up and hello song.

Some quick tips.

- Go over behavioural expectations with your child: Remind them to help keep artwork safe by not touching anything in the galleries. Also, please take all snack breaks at the designated area as food and drinks are not allowed in the gallery exhibition areas.
- Allow your child to warm up to the new environment by getting him to doodle with other children. You can promote social skills and help him feel more comfortable by introducing him to at least one other child during this time.

II. Public Sculptures: In Front of Building (10.30AM)

What are we looking at?

BREAST STUPA TOPIARY, Pinaree Sanpitak, 2013. Created by one of Southeast Asia's most admired artists, the eight freestanding objects are designed to support the growth of plants, and is an invitation to play.

DIVINA PROPORZIONE, Ai Weiwei, 2015. An expression of mathematical elegance and beauty, the polished bronze and stainless steel construction forms an industrial aesthetic, perfectly positioned in the high-tech architectural landscape of Kuala Lumpur.

What happens? Children are invited to walk in and around the sculptures to explore the structures up close. They will also be shown various images of everyday objects that share a similar shape to the sculptures.

What your child learns.

- Shapes help children identify, organise and make visual connections. When shapes are being explored, your child is observing same and different, a basic process that will carry forth into all that he sees around him.⁵
- Shapes are also symbols, so the ability to recognise them is a pre-reading and writing skill, as letters of the alphabet are essentially complex shapes.
- Shape sorting is a pre-cursor to analytical, problem-solving skills in children, and sharpens their ability to grasp mathematical concepts as they get older.

⁵ Church, Ellen Booth. Parents, Scholastic.

- Using physical objects to learn about shapes gives children a new perspective of the world - one where shapes do not only exist on paper (in “cartoon” form), but as real things around them.
- Your child’s sense of natural curiosity is nurtured by the enjoyable experience of interacting with the sculptures.

III. Art-Making Activity: 3rd Floor, Ilham Gallery Lounge (11.00AM)

What are we looking at? Batik is a technique of wax-resist dyeing traditionally done on fabric. Batik as “wearable art” will be discussed and examples of various ways batik is made will be shown.

What happens? Children get to make their own ‘batik’ piece of work, using wax crayons and paint (non-toxic and washable!).

What your child learns.

“Open-ended, process-orientated art is nothing but an endless opportunity for making choices, coming to conclusions, second-guessing decisions, and evaluating results...Children become more comfortable with uncertainty and remain flexible thinkers, which is key for creativity and confidence.” - Jean Van’t Hul, The Artful Parent.

- The creative process challenges children to find immersive involvement in tasks, take on problem solving, develop self-motivation, and tolerate ambiguity and anxiety, as they are encouraged to try a task without certainty of the outcome.⁶
- When experimenting with a new art-making technique, children are practicing existing fine motor skills in a novel way, and gaining experience with a variety of materials and methods will increase their willingness to try out new combinations in the future.
- Colouring helps children practice holding writing tools and strengthens their hand-eye coordination as they learn to colour within a specific area.
- Creating a piece of art where several steps are involved fosters patience and a greater sense of accomplishment when the project is completed.
- The simple method of colouring a specific shape or form, helps children recognise patterns - a skill that is used when learning to read and do math.
- As one of the most accessible forms of art for children, the process of colouring and painting is an autotelic activity that has been shown to improve concentration and agency while at the same time decreasing anxiety and self-consciousness⁷ (why do you think colouring books for adults are all the rage now!)

⁶ Deering, Julia. “The Playful Parent.”

⁷ Michaelis, Ben Ph.D. “Why Coloring is Good for the Mind, Body, and Soul.” Huffington Post Healthy Living.

IV. Malaysian Batik Paintings: 5th Floor Ilham Main Gallery (11.30AM)

What are we looking at? Sehati Sejiwa (or One Heart One Soul) by Liew Kung Yu, 2016. Inspired by Malaysia's National Day celebrations, this multicultural piece playfully shows the national flag being sliced up like a birthday cake; a political statement about the irony of these cliché symbols of national harmony.

What happens? The concept of cultural identity and the introduction of a common unifying component in the form of batik dress are explained. Children are shown various images of different ethnicities in their cultural dress, and the history of batik as Malaysia's national dress is discussed. Children are encouraged to identify visual symbols in art e.g. birthday cake, flag, sleeves etc.

What your child learns.

- Increases his or her awareness about different ethnicities in the world, helps your child to be aware of diversity. As horizons expand in preschool, children are exposed to a wider range of differences in people, and may begin to place value judgments on ways they are similar or different to others. Therefore, talking about these points can be a great starting point for instilling interest and positive respect for people of all cultures in society. Also explores how in a multicultural society, we can still find some common unifying components to live well together.
- Show children how to look for visual symbols in artworks, and help them learn that these visual symbols can communicate ideas.
- Being in a formal gallery environment helps children practice their social etiquette and teaches them how to conduct themselves in a controlled setting, whilst still having fun!

V. Stories of Malaysian Life: 5th Floor Ilham Main Gallery (11.40AM)

What are we looking at?

Satay Seller, 1970 and Kampung Nelayan (Fishing Village), 1959 by by Chuah Thean Teng. These are two of many batik paintings by Chuah Thean Teng. He was a Chinese migrant from Fujian who came to be known as the "Father of Batik Painting" because he elevated the craft of batik from being something people only wore into a fine art medium to be displayed on walls. His work encapsulates the hopes and dreams of a new Malaysia celebrating its independence, with romantic renditions of everyday village life.

Tin Miner, 1968 by Kwan Chin.

Padi Farmers, 1958 and Rubber Trees, 1960 by Tay Mo-Leong. Awarded for his experimental breakthroughs in batik painting, Tay's work reflects the nation at a time of growth.

What happens? Children learn about how art is a medium for story telling and for conveying ideas on important topics. Various stories of Malaysian life depicted in several works of batik are pointed out, and children are asked to observe the people in the paintings and what they are doing. A song about different occupations is sung as different jobs that were important in Malaysia's past are identified.

What your child learns.

- Describing artwork to children builds important pre-literacy skills; a strong narrative helps children "read" what they see in a picture.
- Observational skills are an important first step in science education (the ability to predict an outcome of something begins with first looking closely at the details). A child's visual skills are sharpened when encouraged to look beyond the obvious.
- Singing helps children to absorb new information and is a great way for children to strengthen their pre-literacy skills, as music makes new words and concepts more memorable.

Song: What's My Job? (With Actions) – Tune can be found here:

http://youtu.be/oEF16W_q_dw

What's my job, what's my job? (hand near right ear, then left ear)

Tell me, tell me, what's my job? (hand in beckoning action, then hand near right ear again)

I am a, I am a satay man! (clap, clap, clap)

Subsequently replace with: I am a I am a fisherman / tin miner / rubber tapper / rice farmer.

VI. Realism VS Abstract Art (11.50AM)

What are we looking at?

A Mak Yong (Dance) Performance, 1979 by Ismail Mat Hussin. Scenes of community life and traditions in the East Coast of Peninsula Malaysia, speak of post-colonial identities and imagine the past as a peaceful time and place.

Evolusi (Evolution), 1971 by Ismail Mustam. An abstract composition to demonstrate the new direction batik was moving in during the 70s.

What happens? The major differences between abstract art and realism are explained using two different pieces and several examples. Children are then asked to interpret what they see in a piece of abstract art.

What your child learns.

- Looking closely at art requires focus and concentration (these are skills that technology and fast-paced media full of quick-changes and lots of action, compete for today).
- When children express preferences for certain colours and shapes they are actually making aesthetic choices that can lead to greater cultural sensitivity and promote language development.
- The opportunity to discuss art and take in the beauty of creative expression with thoughtful adults, not only supports visual perception skills, but also logical and creative thinking skills.
- By articulating what they see, children are able to organise their thoughts and sharpen their vocabulary around communicating their ideas.
- Children (and parents!) learn that art is not only about realism (realism is overrated as there are so many different art styles!). Many of us have attended art classes in school and sadly, may have been told or made to feel that we were not good at art because our cows or anything else we drew “didn’t look like a real cow.” However, a “cow that looks like a cow” is about realism, and realism is only one type of art style.
- We want children and parents to go away realizing that we are all creative in our own way and we need children to understand that art does not only consist of creating artwork that looks like something in real life.
- Try not to utter the words “I can’t draw in front of your child. If you can’t do a realistic picture, just use abstract art! Children learn by example. Hey, abstract art is even taught to designers at Apple to show them how to simplify product design – see <http://www.fastcodesign.com/3034240/how-apple-uses-picasso-to-teach-employees-about-product-design>.

VII. I-Spy Batik (12.00PM)

What are we looking at? Commemorative batik blocks, 1960s-1980s.

What happens? Parents and their children are given a list of items to find in the fabric print pieces on display.

What your child learns.

- Searching for ‘hidden’ objects trains children to set and exercise their visual attention filters, retuning sensory neurons in a way that engages the brain more so than with sensory processing.⁸
- Your child’s working memory and concentration skills will be given a boost, as your child goes through the process of remembering the instructions of the iSpy activity and carrying them out.
- Children benefit when they have many little chances to do something in addition to looking at art; showing them that visiting a gallery can be a

⁸ Levitin, Daniel “The Organized Mind”

varied experience shared with family members increases the likelihood they will want to come again. (Studies suggest that children who enjoy visiting galleries and museums when they are young, continue to do so as adults).

VIII. Contemporary Indonesian Art: 3rd Floor Ilham Gallery (12:10PM)

What are we looking at? Berdeba-beda Tetapi Putus Juga; Lamarlah Daku, Bukan Ibuku by Bambang 'Toko' Wijaksono, 2015. A comic book aesthetic tells a story of a young couple faced with the complex issue of different beliefs and value systems.

What happens? A discussion of pop art and how comic book drawings can be adopted into artwork like batik paintings.

IX. Goodbye Song and End (12.15PM)

Day O', Dayyy O'! We had fun but it's time to go home
Day, We say Dayyy O'! We had fun but it's time to go home
Play all day until the afternoon come, we had fun but it's time to go home
Saw some art, sculptures in the sun, we had fun but it's time to go home
Made Batik and sang some rhymes, we had fun but it's time to go home
Played I SPY, a happy time, we had fun but it's time to go home
Day, We say Dayyy O'! We had fun but it's time to go home
We had fun but it's time to go home!
Yay! (Get everyone to jump) Goodbye!

After your visit...

Thank you for bringing your child to our Tours for Tots! We loved having you, and hope to see you again at another exhibition. Until then, we'd like to encourage you to keep the conversation going at home, and continue to expose your child to art. We believe you don't need to be in gallery for art to have a profound effect on development and one's understanding of the world. We would like to leave you with a few ideas and tips we personally think are great for getting children to appreciate art from wherever you are. If you have any of your own you'd like to share with us, please email them to us!

What to keep in mind.

1. Let go of the notion that you need to have a degree in art history to study art with your child. When you look closely at artwork together, whether it is in a book or on an iPad, it is less about what you know, and more about what you discover WITH your child.
2. Questions are a great place to start. You can use the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) questions mentioned in the Pre-Visit Handout e.g. "What's going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? And what more can you find?" Or try questions like, "Do you think you can create something like that artwork we saw the other day?"
3. Set up opportunities for your child to create for your child at home (temporary or permanent) where your child can play at making something. You can use a low bench or table, or a wipe-clean floor surface as a creative station, and stock it with a few tools and art supplies.

Things you can do at home

We want to show you that you don't need overpriced craft-kits to deliver creative experiences to your child. In fact making your own art activities can be even more effective than anything pre-packaged and more fun! Plus it enhances your standing in your child's eyes, e.g. "Wow my mom / dad is so clever he or she can make that from just a few pieces of paper!" This turns you into a creative role model for your little ones.

- Inside your Tours for Tots gift bag you'll find everything you need to do another wax crayon batik piece at home. We recommend Crayola Wax Crayons (which are nontoxic and washable) as well as Crayola Washable Paints (from Toys R Us or Times Bookstore in Bangsar Shopping Complex) and Global Colours Primary Choice acrylic paints (from Art Friend at The Curve) . Don't forget to share your child's creations with us, as we love looking at original art!
- We've also included a puzzle made from a reproduction of "Satay Seller," to be put together by your child. Reconstruct the painting together, and use descriptive language as you recall viewing the painting in real life. You can make puzzles this way with any pictures your child likes or that are relevant in his life. A colouring sheet of this picture has also been added to give your activity another dimension – put the puzzle together, then do a copy colouring exercise with the sheet.

- Look in art books or online for artwork you can show your child. A list of 20 Great Artworks to Look at with Young Kids⁹ can be found online at The Art Curator for Kids (artcuratorforkids.com).
- Start a collection of artwork your child likes at home. Print them out and make a wordless art book, and get your child to tell stories about what happens next in the pictures.
- Provide creative material for art making. You don't need to be a 'Pinterest Mom' and make insanely perfect things, just follow your child's lead on what to make. Some great websites with super-simple projects you can try: Deepspacesparkle.com, Redtedart.com, Kid Blogger Network Activities and Crafts Board¹⁰

⁹ <http://artcuratorforkids.com/20-great-artworks-to-look-at-with-young-kids/>

¹⁰ <https://www.pinterest.com/playdrmom/kid-blogger-network-activities-crafts/>