

# BROOKINGS PAPER ON CREATIVITY IN MUSEUMS

## Get Your Game On At CMA!

On Jan. 1, 2011, the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) unveiled a newly renovated building. Updated lighting, refinished floors, new coats of paint and a dramatic alteration of a beloved central courtyard bring a fresh look and feel to this historic space. In addition to refreshed galleries, the museum boasts an innovative 18,000-square-foot Center for Creativity that includes galleries, multi-use spaces, a studio and updated auditorium. But the transformation of CMA goes beyond physical enhancements. All galleries now include unique, often experimental, opportunities for visitor engagement. Our museum now invites visitors to *get their game on*.

In recent years, multiple sources highlight the need for a new art museum model—one that is less passive and more participatory. In her 2009 book, *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon, a leading voice for visitor engagement, asserts that “visitors expect access to a broad spectrum of information sources and cultural perspectives. They expect the ability to respond and be taken seriously. They expect the ability to discuss, share and remix what they consume. When people can actively participate with cultural institutions, those places become central to cultural and community life.”

The James Irvine Foundation report, *Getting In On the Act* (October 2011), reinforces the need for a new model for visitor engagement. The report states: “We are in the midst of a seismic shift in cultural production, moving from a ‘sit-back-and-be-told culture’ to a ‘making-and-doing-culture.’ Active or participatory arts practices are emerging from the fringes of the Western cultural tradition to capture the collective imagination. ... This shift calls for a new equilibrium in the arts ecology and a new generation of arts leaders ready to accept, integrate and celebrate all forms of cultural practice.”

CMA accepts and embraces this challenge. For the last three years, teams of curators, educators and designers have worked together to reimagine the drop-in gallery experience. The result is an art museum that provides multiple opportunities for visitors of all ages to “make and do.” We have moved beyond the passive 20th-century museum model to a more holistic 21st-century model that welcomes the voice, opinion and creative energies of our diverse audiences.

The power of play is a guiding philosophy behind the new installations. People of all ages engage through play. We socialize through play, we compete through play and we *learn* through play. In addition to displaying great works of art, our galleries are now peppered with a variety of playful learning opportunities that we call *connectors*.

Connectors are fun and enjoyable for museum visitors of all ages. Yet their main objective is to afford visitors multiple ways to *connect* with art. Connectors provoke, encourage, engage, motivate, welcome and include diverse audiences. They embolden visitors to *do* something, to ignite provocative conversations, and to contribute *their* ideas and opinions. Connectors give obvious permission to talk, play and participate.

**Some connectors engage.** “Making” activities stimulate visitors to think, imagine and do. In our contemporary gallery, a large table with stools beckons visitors to make something. The table is stocked daily with a miscellany of materials such as coffee cup sleeves, paper clips, cupcake liners and rubber bands. Visitors are invited to play and experiment with these nontraditional art-making materials. They may take their creations home or leave them on display for others to enjoy. How does this playful activity help visitors to connect to art? Experimentation with nontraditional materials is germane to the work of the contemporary artists featured in this gallery.

When it opened, the Changing Landscape Gallery featured a diverse selection of works ranging from a traditional 18th-century oil painting to a contemporary minimalistic stone sculpture. A table with chairs placed in the center of the gallery offered visitors two ways to engage. For some weeks, the table contained a tray of colorful magnetic shapes and four magnetic boards. Visitors were encouraged to create a magnetic landscape on the boards. In other weeks, the table housed a tray of rough stone blocks that visitors used to build a stone landscape of their own.

The Center for Creativity is home to a popular connector called “Imagine the Possibilities.” Visitors are invited to imagine and create something with piles of 6-inch, craft-paper twist ties. Visitor-generated creations from elephants to pianos to spider webs fill the shelf-lined wall. Visitors of all ages marvel at the designs of others and pull up a stool to create their own sculpture.

**Some connectors involve.** Games in the galleries involve visitors who want a place to sit, talk, laugh, share and enjoy art together with friends and family. Designing places for visitors to sit and socialize is a new strategy for CMA. Tables with chairs placed strategically throughout the galleries afford visitors a much-needed respite from standing and walking through a museum, and allow them time to gather together à la the kitchen table at home. Visitors of all ages get involve in custom-designed board games. The American Experience game in the Bellows and the American Experience Gallery accommodates multiple players who move pieces along a game board illustrated with works featured in the gallery. Visitors compete to the finish by sharing personal experiences on topics such as religion, natural disasters and celebrations.

Similarly, a board game in the “Don’t Eat the Art” exhibition features illustrations of works of art in the gallery. Designed in the style of the classic Candy Land, this board game is a magnet for families. While engaged in play, visitors share conversations about art, food and their lives.

A current Caravaggio exhibition includes a board game designed by CMA called *Provenance: A Journey of a Painting*. This fantasy game challenges visitors of all ages to move their painting from 17th-century Italy to Columbus, Ohio, despite such obstacles as theft, floods and war.

**Some connectors encourage.** Jigsaw puzzles are without a doubt some of the most popular connectors at CMA. Visitors of all ages gather around tables to assemble plex-covered reproductions of the art on the wall. The puzzles are beloved for many reasons. Like games, they afford families and friends a causal place to sit, laugh, talk and play *together*. Puzzles also encourage visitors to spend more time looking closely at one work of art. On a given day, there may be four to six puzzles placed strategically in the galleries. While piecing together the reproductions, visitors spend an average of 30 minutes looking, wondering and talking. Many visitors express great pride in the successful completion of all puzzles on one visit. On average the puzzles are constructed of about 40 2-inch pieces. However, one puzzle in the “Street Talk and Spiritual Matters” exhibition was comprised of more than 600 pieces. This 5-foot-long puzzle was a visitor favorite.

**Some connectors provoke.** Join the Conversation (JTC) stations provoke visitors to write comments on ideas and issues addressed in great art. Writing materials may vary from note cards to black Post-It notes or speech bubble sticky-notes. The “Street Talk and Spiritual Matters” exhibition featured works by Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson. Her work focuses on her childhood neighborhood in Columbus and the impact of gospel music there. The exhibition included two busy JTC stations: At one station visitors described their own neighborhood; at another they shared the music that most influences their work, art and life.

A unique JTC station in the Creativity@CMA gallery is designed specifically for adult audiences. Designed to encourage adults to recognize creative problem-solving in their own lives, this station invites adults to share their solutions to problems in three categories: home, work and after hours. Specific problems are posted each week. Some challenges begging solutions are bad-breath co-workers, poor restaurant service and grocery shopping. Using large sticky notes, visitors post a variety of practical and comical solutions.

A JTC station in the Picasso and the Modern World Gallery provokes visitors to reflect on the most innovative individuals of the 20th century and to share their opinion about *what* makes them great. Gandhi, Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey and John Lennon are just a few of the innovators visitors have lauded and written about.

**Some connectors motivate.** CMA voting stations motivate visitors to think critically about art. Voting stations come in different shapes and sizes. Visitors have fun making their selection and comparing their choice with others. Visitors place a wooden chip in a clear plexi-glass box that corresponds to their selection. One voting station positioned in the City Life Gallery invites visitors to vote for the work of art in the gallery that *best* illustrates their experience in cities. The voting station in the Monet and Friends Gallery motivates visitors to look critically at seven paintings, compare them and choose the one that best captures the Impressionist's intention.

**Some connectors welcome.** Many connectors, including some mentioned above, welcome and respect visitor stories, perspectives and unique experiences. The Love and War Gallery is home to two of these connectors. A video recording booth in the gallery gives visitors an opportunity to make a video recording about their experiences. For several months the booth focused on love. Visitors were asked to comment on someone they love. Recently the booth focuses on war and poses this question from visitors: How has war, or the images of war, affected you and your family? Video recordings are screened by CMA staff and uploaded to a video monitor playing random selections in the same gallery.

A Wish Tree in the Love and War Gallery also serves to respect and welcome visitor perspectives. Visitors of all ages write their wish for peace on a paper tag and tie the tag to a large artificial tree placed in the middle of the gallery. Honoring the Imagine Peace project initiated by artist Yoko Ono, the tags will be forwarded to the official project site in Iceland later this year.

CMA's shift from a traditional "sit-back-and-be-told" culture to a "making-and-doing" model reflects our commitment to our community. We recognize that learning is an *active* endeavor for people of all ages. At its best, learning is lively and playful.

Since the unveiling of our renovated building, CMA has a renewed energy. Visitors welcome our transformation. Membership has increased and new audiences are discovering the museum for the first time. Recently, a mother confided to me that her family planned to spend only one hour at the museum. After three hours, she had to drag away crying children who wanted to stay longer.

A visitor comment from April 2011 reflects the sentiments of many visitors since our transformation:

"... I was also a little taken back, at first, that there was real furniture in the galleries, instead of just a simple bench. It seemed strange. But I saw a couple relaxing in two of the chairs (the chairs really do look comfy), which were in front of a HUGE painting.

It was WONDERFUL!! It seemed as though they were REALLY taking the time to SEE the artwork and in such a comfortable relaxing manner. It was @ this point [that] I started feeling very comfortable and almost ... 'at home' and that I (we) belonged here in the museum ... Here in Columbus, it's relaxing, comfortable & I felt as if the people who run the museum and the artists wanted me/us to be there.

Another pleasant surprise is the puzzles @ tables in some of the galleries. It caught our 4.75 year-old's attention & he really wanted to work on it together. My first thought was, 'We're here to look @ art, why would we stop to do a puzzle?' ... But we went w/the puzzle and ended up having a GREAT TIME! Not only that, when we completed the puzzle (which had been started before we began working on it), I looked up & THERE WAS THE PIECE OF ART of which we had just put together in the puzzle. It gave me the chills—in a WONDERFUL WAY! What an AMAZING WAY to connect guests w/art!! We will certainly be back. I have to talk to my husband about becoming members ... I love that art is so ACCESSIBLE to our family and so comfortable to be around!!

I'm actually teary-eyed about our experience @ the museum. Thank you for doing a WONDERFUL job making us feel so relaxed & comfortable in the museum. It's a very refreshing feeling that will keep us coming back to discover more!! I'd also like to come back on my own or just with adult friends to be able to sit in the comfy chairs & take in what's around me. Sincerely, Sarah."

Another visitor recently sent this comment to a curator:

"Bob and I were there on Mother's Day 2011 and we had a great time. We were so impressed by the collection and by the way it is installed. The galleries were packed, and complete strangers were exchanging ideas about the art. Lots of inviting information and no distracting electronics. Brilliant."

CMA is just beginning to imagine what an engaging 21st-century art museum can look like. In 2011 CMA heralded a bold new shift towards experimentation and implementation of participatory experiences. Many exciting and unique experiences await our visitors in 2012. There will be more chances to puzzle, write, share, build, design and, of course, sit down and play a game.

**By Merilee Mostov**

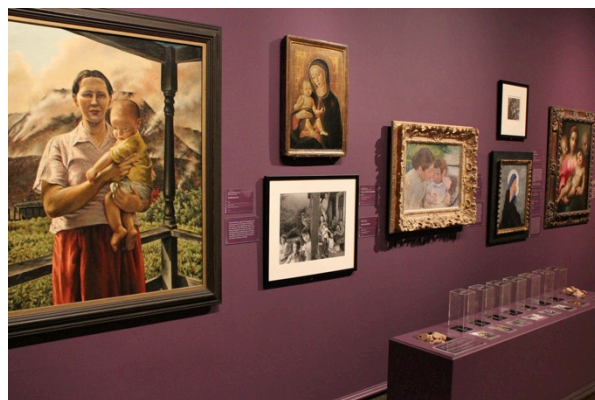
Assistant Director of Education for Visitor Engagement  
Columbus Museum of Art



Jigsaw Puzzle



Voting Station



The American Experience Game



Design a Landscape



Join the Conversation



Wish Tree

