

People create objects – objects bring forth the creativity in people

Using human resources in family activity days on low budgets

By

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As I discussed the agenda of this convention with my colleagues - developing better attractions in local museums, I was advised to share some of our own experiences in arranging family activity days at the Ethnographic Museum in Oslo, Norway. For several years now I have been involved in working on developing and carrying out family activity days – aimed especially at children. The qualities we seek to give the visiting children are the following: primarily we aim at giving them a good experience when visiting the museum. For most of the children it will be their first visit, and our main goal is to evoke their interest and curiosity. Hopefully they will want to visit the museum another time – and then many more times. Oslo has only about 500 thousand citizens. This means we have challenging job in offering a variety of experiences – we have to make sure our visitors come back over and over again – hopefully experiencing new things and learning about different topics.

Seeing and doing

I will now give a brief sketch of how we plan and organize family activity. I will then give a few examples of how we organize these days with special emphasis on the crafts projects. We feel it is very important to have the children to create something – to do something practical on their own. A simple philosophy of "seeing and doing" is the basis for most of our activity days. Let the children see and discover objects – then let them create something inspired by what they have seen in the exhibitions. An other criteria for these activities is that the projects should be possible to complete in just one or two hours.

Cooperation – children and parents

When a friendly setting is established, we urge the kids to open their eyes and discover an exhibition or the objects exhibited, maybe only one – as was the case when we exhibited an Egyptian mummy last year. The kids were absolutely fascinated by the mummy, many of them brought their own cameras to take photographs for souvenirs. Studying the mummy itself was the most exciting part of their museum visit. We also provided them with some explanations about the meaning of the hieroglyphics on the coffin – and simple questions handed out on worksheets urged them to discover more complex theories related to the historic times and the context the mummy belongs to. While the mummy was on exhibition, we hosted a special exhibition for children from the celebration of "The day of the dead" in Mexico. In connection with these two related themes – the mummy and "The day of the dead", we gave crafts assignments to the children. We provided them with clay, and they were free to create their own skulls and spirit animals (alebrijes) I have some photographs of the creative results. The exhibited objects are very inspiring by themselves, I often recruit a local artist to help with these assignments. Elisabeth, also a teacher in crafts and drama, enjoys very much to create some prototypes by the material available in the museum. The skeleton-dolls were very popular, made of cardboard, metal-string and a little paint they were cheap to produce. Some people argued they were too difficult for the kids to make – but we think it is also positive that the assignments require the children and their parents cooperate and help each other. Every modern parent wants to share quality time with his or her children, by making something together. But, speaking as a parent, the planning and the efforts involved in bringing in the materials needed will often limit us in going through with these sweet plans. In the museum we enjoy giving parents and children an opportunity to create something together.

Toys and games are topics we have used several times. The children are invited on a "treasure hunt", and are given a list of questions about various objects. When answering these they are urged to find and discover objects in the exhibition related to children's play and games around the world, dolls, dollhouses, spirit dolls etc. in the exhibitions. Afterwards the reward is to make their own doll. This assignment was very low cost. We went out and cut sticks, then we brought pieces of fabric,

and some yarn. Parents were concentrated for hours enjoying making dolls. We often see parents being the ones who get most deeply involved in the work and this is ok. It is good for the kids to see their parents occupied in playful activities.

Made in Africa

Recently we organized an exhibition with the title: "Made in Africa" a West African marketplace. The Sandaga market in Dakar, was the "model" for this exhibition. This lively and colourful setting provided an excellent space for children's activities. Easy questions about where goods are produced, differences and similarities regarding what items young people in Africa and Norway, would find attractive, recycling of materials etc. We gave the children an opportunity to think about objects; how they travel around the world, what we all like, what children in Africa prefer to buy in the market, compared to what children in Norway might prefer. String toys and toys made from soda-cans were part of the exhibition. These are excellent objects for kids to make by themselves. We provided the materials and tools as well as some prototypes of different simple toys they may make themselves; for example a car, some play-glasses, egg-cups etc. Children also made wonderful things of their own design. And as we always experience, the grown ups enjoy these crafts-tasks most of all. We often see the parents deeply involved in making toys or painting pictures. Initially they are supposed to help their young ones and they end up making the whole thing. This is positive and we enjoy observing this. It is nice if the museum can function as a place where parents and children feel they experience things together and get involved in creating things together. This is strengthening their experiences from the visit in the museum as well as the relationships in the families.

We also had an exhibition about the Yanomami-indians in the rainforest in Amazonas in Brazil. We engaged a young artist to create jewellery inspired by the indian jewellery. She found out what materials we would be able to get in Norway that could be used in children's activities. Then she made some examples that were easy to copy. We provided beads, feathers, string etc and after studying the exhibition, the families were let loose to create their own jewellery. When the kids have answered some questions by studying the exhibition it is their reward to create some object inspired by what they have seen.

One very cheap and easy-to make assignment, after studying masks in the exhibits, is to provide the kids with brown paper bags; crayons and maybe some glue and colored paper. Then they make their own masks.

Performing artists

The opening-ceremony of a new exhibition is always a good excuse to have a party and invite an artist to perform on the opening night. We have various experiences about these occasions. One, which was a great success, when we invited the students of a local acting school to perform at the opening of the "Made in Africa" exhibition, I just mentioned. The students used this performance as a school project, and the limited pay they received was given as donation for the school. It took some extra work to organize rehearsals in the museum, but their teacher was able to organize most of the rehearsals outside of the museum.

In this short presentation I hope to have emphasised the importance of creating a playful atmosphere in the museum – yet have the children experience that the museum is in fact a home of the muses.

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