Picture books as art: the presence of children's book illustrations in museums and an analysis of children-visitor interactions at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art

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Picture Books as Art:
The Presence of Children’s Book Illustrations in Museums and an Analysis of Children-Visitor Interactions at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art

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Abstract

By exhibiting and displaying picture book illustrations in galleries, children have the opportunity to interact with art that is familiar to them; therefore, picture book illustrations offer an ideal gateway for children to be exposed to and feel comfortable in museum and institution settings. This paper will analyze the presence of children’s picture book illustrations in cultural settings, particularly the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Massachusetts and the New York Public Library in New York City, and determine how children interact within these spaces. This paper also includes a case study on issues that face the Eric Carle Museum and the lack of visitors in the galleries, and recommends modifications in program and design based on educational and developmental theory. These recommendations can also be applied to museums looking to incorporate picture book illustrations into their exhibitions.
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All photographs in this study were taken by the author.
Introduction

The prolific and rapidly expanding field of children’s literature plays a substantial role in the lives of children in the United States today and “picture books are the first visual arts experience many students encounter” (Lantz, 2005, p. 25). Young children are exposed to and encouraged to interact with a wide variety of picture books in their schools, libraries, and homes. Picture books play a fundamental role in exposing children to information, the poetry of words, and visual art. Picture book illustration is employed and viewed as an art form and, like many art forms, continues to cultivate and expand alongside technology.

By exhibiting and displaying picture book illustrations in a variety of museums and cultural institutions, children have the opportunity to interact with art that is familiar to them; therefore, picture book illustrations offer an ideal gateway for children to be exposed to and feel comfortable in museum and institution settings and to encourage and foster aesthetic education outside of the classroom. If museums encourage and support children-visitor and their interactions with visual art, they participate in a greater motion of encouraging children to become cultural citizens; “if children are given the opportunity to contribute to the making of their museums, museums become more democratic institutions” (Mai & Gibson, 2011, p. 356).

The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Massachusetts is one of two museums in the country dedicated to children’s literature illustration. The Eric Carle Museum’s staff members are currently undergoing ‘think tank’ style discussions and planning in order to attract and engage children and their caretakers and to strengthen the kind and quality of child-caregiver interactions. This paper analyzes these issues at The
Eric Carle Museum’s art galleries through in-person interviews that I conducted over a one-month period as well as recent online visitor reviews (both of which targeted parents or caregivers with children in the birth to six range).

I also visited a temporary exhibition at the New York Public Library in New York City on children’s literature called, *The ABC of It: Why Children’s Books Matter*. This exhibition encompasses many aspects of children’s literature including art and illustration and offers some unique exhibit designs from which I gathered inspiration for my recommendations. The recommendations are designed to make the Carle’s galleries more child-friendly, as well as to provide inspiration and ideas for museums or galleries looking to incorporate picture book art in their spaces.
The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art

The Museum

In 2002, Eric Carle, a children’s picture book author with more than 70 published titles, founded with his wife Barbara the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art. It is a museum dedicated to the artwork of picture book illustrators and authors worldwide. Its mission is to “inspire a love of art and reading through picture books” (carlemuseum.org).

The museum itself is not-for-profit, and is funded by visitors, membership, and donors. Its building is located next to Hampshire College in rural Amherst, Massachusetts and is dedicated not only to preserving and displaying original artwork, but also in offering educational programs in art education and literacy for school groups, families, and educators. It also collaborates with a graduate program in Children’s Literature through Simmons College. Its location and offerings provide a great deal of opportunity for learning for the town of Amherst and surrounding towns, also known as the Pioneer Valley or Five-College Area, which has a significant population of students, professors, and families.

The museum boasts a collection of over ten thousand original pieces of artwork, a portion of which are displayed in three central galleries. The museum also has an art space for children, a children’s book library which offers story-time programs, conference rooms, a gift shop, and a café space.

The galleries are located in three medium-sized rooms, in the center of the building, separated by large glass doors. The walls are white, and the art hangs adult eye level, by ADA-suggested guidelines. In the center of the rooms are a few wooden
benches. One of the galleries holds original artwork done by Carle himself, which changes regularly. In November of 2013, the exhibition hosts art from Carle’s newest picture book “Friends”. The central gallery is currently hosting an exhibition called “Robert R. Zakanitch: A Garden of Ordinary Miracles” which features original artwork based on Zakanitch’s alphabet book. This gallery will soon be turned over to a new exhibition, “Barbara McClintock and Natalie Merchant: Leave your Sleep” based on a song-storybook collaboration between the two authors. The final gallery currently is hosting an exhibition titled “Seriously Silly: A Decade of Art and Whimsy by Mo Willems” who is a local artist and author (from Northampton, MA) famous for his “Pigeon” series as well as his “Gerald and Piggie” series.

The following are current images from the Eric Carle Museum galleries.

The Education Department

The education department is made up of one department head and a small staff of both full-time and part-time employees. The department is focused on providing programs (school tours, off-site programs, workshops and classes for children and adults, and professional development) as well as evaluating their effectiveness and the effectiveness of the interaction between visitors and the galleries. Their inquiry-based approach to education is based on Visual Thinking Strategies (within the galleries), the
Reggio-Emilia approach, and a method developed by an educator at the museum— the Whole Book Approach, which views picture books as an opportunity for both visual and auditory input and aims to connect the images and text of the picture book through reading aloud. The Whole Book Approach is a “synthesis of VTS and the Reggio approach applied to the picture book” (carlemuseum.org).

**Child-Friendly Exhibitions**

Because of their short history as well as a recent turn over in management, the Carle right now is undergoing a great deal of evaluation and change in their exhibition spaces and programs. Employees from every department in the museum have been asked to each join a “think tank”, which focuses on one aspect of the museum that requires addressing. The think tank groups are divided into the following categories: visitor centeredness, child-friendly exhibitions, a culture of philanthropy, being data-savvy, and creativity. The groups meet regularly to speculate what needs to be addressed, evaluate what exists already, and to present and later implement changes that they decide are most appropriate. After speaking with the education director about both her and my goals, it was decided that I should focus my study on child-friendly exhibitions and in support of work done by the think tank, which focuses on the same issue.

The think tank dedicated to child-friendly exhibitions is mainly centered around visitor interactions in the galleries, particularly school groups and families. They are particularly interested in how children of all ages approach the galleries, the artwork, and the other aspects of space and environment in the galleries (including sitting/resting space, labels, and special exhibits).
This think tank was given a series of questions that were meant to guide their work based on the needs of the museum. The overarching question provided was “How can we lead the way with child-friendly exhibitions,” with the sub questions: (1) “How can we evolve our exhibitions so they are more inclusive of our child audience,” (2) “What would that look like”, (3) “How do we do that without diminishing the experience for adults visiting the galleries,” and (4) “How do we make the exhibitions a better family experience and a better school experience.”

The think tank’s research has so far been based on surveys that have been provided for visitors when in the art space, personal observation and word of mouth, as well as visits to art and children’s museums in the area and discussions with their directors (Mass MOCA Kidspace, the Berkshire Museum, and the Springfield Museums, particularly the Dr. Seuss sculpture park). The group has decided that there are several areas in which there is room for improvement within the galleries. The first is that the galleries have little opportunity for child interaction and hands on learning or creating. The second is that many visitors do not know how to interact with their children at the galleries due to: (1) parents and caregivers not being familiar with visiting art museums, and (2) parents and caregivers often being unsure of how to discuss or look at art with their children. The third issue is that the galleries have a few benches with no other seating and/or appropriate seating for very young children. The final issue that was identified was a lack of written information for adult visitors on how to interact with children in the galleries.

After sitting in on the initial meeting as well as a follow up, I gathered that the ‘think tank’ was primarily interested in gathering data and finding ways to incorporate
the following components in the galleries: (1) interactives and opportunities for hands-on learning in the galleries (based around deconstructing elements from the book including colors, characters, clothing, etc), (2) programs in the galleries (including tours for drop-in child visitors, programs for moms with infants, and programs for parents on how to interact with their children in the galleries), (3) educational literature, both in brochure form in the galleries and online, and (4) changing the physical environment in the galleries to be better suited for young children. The department responsible for developing these elements of the exhibition is varied, and is based upon this inter-departmental team’s decisions. The actual implementation of these changes would be up to a variety of different people, from curators, to educators, to designers, to the museum’s owners.

Some of the issues they brought up that would pose potential difficulties include: maintaining the integrity of the art space but allowing for young children to move and interact freely, the vision of Eric and Barbara Carle (who conceived of the galleries as an opportunity to elevate picture book art), and budget.

The team has had success with the newest installation, the Mo Willems exhibition in the third gallery. As a way to connect with young visitors, there were cutouts made of the “Pigeon” character (a reoccurring character in Willems’ books), which were placed around the gallery, popping up from behind paintings, up high, and low. The concept was for child visitors to spot all of the Pigeons as they walked through the gallery. They have received positive feedback from visitors on this small, inexpensive exhibit idea and are interested in implementing similar ideas in the other galleries and upcoming exhibitions.
Child-visitor programs and the Whole Book Approach (WBA)

In order to gain a more inclusive perspective on the museum and its offerings, I chose to attend one of their regularly scheduled programs. Currently at the museum, there are a few programs offered to family visitors at the museum. One of the main programs is a story-time offered by the staff librarian on weekdays and weekends. The story-time attracts mostly early childhood-aged children (offered mornings during the week and on weekend afternoons) and the program that I observed had about 15-20 children aged infant to five or six years and their caregivers. I observed this program in order to take a closer look at the Whole Book Approach in action. Since this approach is a cornerstone of the educational at the museum, I thought the content of the story-time could provide inspiration for my recommendations in the galleries.

The story-time is held in the library space, which is a large rectangular room with bookshelves on two of the walls. One of the walls has floor-to-ceiling windows looking into the larger main space of the museum and the other wall is a welcome desk with brochures and information. In the center of the room, there are two large couches, four large comfortable chairs, and a large animal-printed rug. A large table with about ten wooden chairs around it, on which blank paper and crayons were available, stood near the rug space. A small, low table near the rug has several board books arranged on it. The following paragraphs describe my observation in real-time.

The story-time takes place with the museum librarian in a chair near the rug, and the children on the rug, in front of her. The caregivers stand and sit on the couches and chairs, some with children on their laps. Some younger children play with toys nearby or look at the board books on the low table.
Abigail, the librarian who leads the program I attend, seems to have a strong grasp on the Whole Book Approach in her delivery. She begins the session by asking the question “Has anyone visited the galleries yet today?” to which some of the children respond “yes” or “no” and then sing a “hello song” which was short and involves call and response. Before reading the first book, *I am a Frog*, a new picture book written and illustrated by Mo Willems featuring Gerald and Piggie, and corresponds with one of the galleries. She tells the room “If you have any questions or comments about the pictures, shout them out and we’ll talk about them.” This corresponds with the WBA philosophy of allowing children to openly interact with both the text and illustrations while reading picture books.

She starts with the cover of the book and asks, “Who is on the front?” and “What’s happening?” The children offer answers such as “Piggie! He has one eye open and one eye closed”. Abigail repeats, “Oh Piggie has one eye open and one eye closed! He must be winking. Why do you think he’s winking?” The children offer some answers, and she turns to the front-end page and showed the image which was Piggie repeatedly saying “Ribbit, ribbit, ribbit”. One child offers “Oh! He’s pretending to be a frog!”

Abigail continues reading, often referring to the image on the page and asking for feedback (i.e.: “Why do you think Gerald is sweating in this picture?” which both elicits a response based on the visual image as well as inference into the illustration’s feelings and emotions.

The second book that Abigail chooses is *The Pigeon Finds a Hot Dog*, also by Mo Willems. Before she starts, one of the children says, “We saw the gallery of it!” To which Abigail repeats, “Oh! You saw the original pictures from this book in the gallery?”
which there were a lot of “Me too!” responses. She begins to read, and in this book focuses many of her questions on inference of feelings and emotions (i.e.: Why do you think the pigeon says “Wait a second,” on this page? And “What do you think the pigeon should do now?”).

The third book that I observe Abigail read to the children is *Flora and the Flamingo*, a wordless picture book by Molly Idle. She introduces it by saying “This book doesn’t have any words, so you’ll have to help me read the pictures.” The first page, she opens and says “Oh, there’s the flamingo! But I see some of you looking over here… what is going on over here?” The children offer the answers, “A flipper!” “Like the flamingo!” “You can swim under water with them.” At one point during the story, one child says, “Wait… there are no letters on this page.” To which Abigail responds, “No there are no words on any page! This is a wordless picture book. It’s just pictures.”

The final book that Abigail reads to the group is *Count the Monkeys* written by Mac Barnett and illustrated by Kevin Cornell. This book is humorous, and offers a good deal of opportunity for shouting out responses and act out motions such as raising hands, roaring like a lion, “high fiving” and “banging on pots and pans,” all of which the children acted out.

Abigail brings many components of the WBA into her story-time, including stopping to ask illustration-specific questions and inference questions, allowing for children’s questions while reading, encouraging physical response, and analyzing all parts of the text including covers and end pages. She connects the books with the art that the children would be seeing or had seen in the galleries, and refers to the illustrations as
art. She provides the children with the expectations up front, and the children seemed to have an understanding and willingness to participating in the WBA.

The Whole Book Approach at story-time seemed to be very effective, and the participation was abundant, fruitful and held throughout the half-hour program. So far at the Carle, the Whole Book Approach is limited to the story-time programs, but it would be interesting to see how whole book aspects might be incorporated within other realms of the museum.
Educational and Developmental Theory

Developmental Perspective

In this section, I seek to find theories to provide a foundation to the work currently happening at the Eric Carle Museum as well as means to improving their educational offerings. There are many areas of educational theory that can be applied, and prove to support their programs and galleries in different ways. Of those theories, I have chosen to pursue developmental perspective as a major component.

My work is primarily focused on the Eric Carle Museum’s interaction with children under school age, or loosely ages birth to six years old. To address this specific age group, I looked back on the work of respected theorists in the field of child development, specifically Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. By grounding my work in these theories, I hope to build a connection between the museum and its visitors that is child-centered, and align with the general principles of progressive education.

Sensory Integration in Early Childhood. Many of the visitors at the Eric Carle Museum are early childhood visitors between the ages of infancy and six years old. These visitors often come with their caregivers during the day, as they are before-school age. One of the main ways to encourage these small visitors’ interactions with the museum is to focus on the importance of their developing sensory systems and their ways of interacting with the world and environment around them. This is an area that the museum is seeking to expand through interactives in the galleries.

Theorists have outlined the importance of sensorimotor interaction in young children as integral to their cognitive development. Jean Piaget, Swiss psychologist,
established a theory that outlines the stages of a child’s life through their interaction with the world around them by “observ[ing] the child’s surroundings and his behavior” (Phillips, 1981, p. 4). The first two years, Piaget outlines, are labeled as the “sensorimotor period”. During this stage, a child builds meaning through objects in space, where the child begins to “move objects about, and eventually his interest expands to include relations among objects, as opposed to an exclusive concern with his actions on each object individually” (Phillips, 1981, p. 53). Slightly later, children begin to imitate, which is “especially important because aside from perception, it is the foundation of the figurative aspect of thinking” (Phillips, 1981, p. 58).

Piaget’s theories of early childhood development can be particularly useful in creating environments that seek to engage children at their level, and helping them build their abilities of interacting physically and figuratively with their worlds. The Eric Carle Museum could seek to create more opportunities for children in which they can interact with objects as well as be invited to participate in imaginative play, aside from the already offered Little Kids Yoga classes and Materials Play in the studio. These theories can be applied when seeking to attend to the youngest audiences.

**Preoperational Thinking.** Piaget encompasses the second to seventh years of a child’s life as the “preoperational period”, where the child is now capable of “reflecting on his own behavior” and is able to “access a comprehensive representation of reality that can include past, present, and future” (Phillips, 1981, p. 69). This period is particularly useful in art and aesthetic education, when children are able to view process and reflect on their experiences — two aspects integral to creating art and valuing the artistic process.
Children are building self-awareness during this stage, again these are opportunities for interactive museum experiences. One of the ways that the Eric Carle Museum could do this is by providing ways for children to view the process of creating a children’s book. To have an interactive exhibit where this was available would be a way to include the 2-7 year old age group in the museum’s mission (of “inspiring a love of art and reading through picture books” (carlemuseum.org)) as well as meeting them at their developmental stage.

Providing children opportunities to create art in the museum that is inspired by the art they are viewing in the galleries allows them to reflect on their experiences. The museum has an art studio, which changes in theme regularly and offers a variety of materials available to children to create their own art. Often, the theme of the art studio is broad and, most of the time, connected to the art in the galleries. Perhaps a greater emphasis on combining these two spaces would cater to the 2-7 year old preoperational mind and include them in the sequential process of creating art— a process that the artists participated in when illustrating the featured books.

**Play in Early Childhood.** “The influence of play on a child’s development is enormous” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 96). Lev Vygotsky, Soviet developmental psychologist, wrote a great deal on the importance of free play in childhood and educational settings. Vygotsky encourages play in order for children to build meaning in connection with their environments and with other humans. Through play, the children are able to create a situation that reflects and connects to the world around them. His theory is that play is an essential and integral part of human development. “Humans create themselves (that is,
their intellectual functioning) through activity: [or] ‘Humans master themselves from the outside—through psychological tools’ (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 141)” (Miller, 383).

While this theory may be slightly more loosely connected to the happenings at the Carle, it can still be applied in a meaningful and appropriate way. Because Vygotsky suggests that play is essential in order to create meaning, free play opportunities should be available in educational environments. In the museum currently, there is a library space and an art center where children are allowed to explore both toys and art materials. These spaces both provide room and tools for children to explore play; however, the galleries offer little, if any, opportunities for playful meaning making. If the Carle seeks to encourage meaning making in the galleries, there could be a greater emphasis placed on creative and active play.

**Educational Perspective**

The following section seeks to address the importance of aesthetic education to children in the early childhood age group. This kind of education plays the most important role at the Eric Carle, being that the museum is primarily an art space but also caters to young children as one of their primary visitor groups. Two theorists emphasize the importance of aesthetic education and the role of a museum educator in the museum as one to facilitate meaning making. Maxine Greene in her book, *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute lectures on Aesthetic Education*, gives the backbone for the following section, and clearly aligns the values of aesthetic awareness in childhood education, while Rika Burnham, museum educator at the Frick Museum in New York City further emphasizes dialogue as key.
**Aesthetic education.** The Eric Carle Museum offers the children of the Pioneer Valley community and visitors a unique opportunity to view and experience art that has significance to their lives. Many of the pieces in the galleries at the Carle are familiar since children have seen them many times before in their favorite books. The original artwork and the variety of production stages offers a different kind of interaction with art than young children could have at home reading with their parents and caregivers. Aesthetically, the Carle provides one of the most accessible places for young children in building familiarity with art museums; however, “Without the time to engage properly with an object or idea, an opportunity for thinking can feel hollow. It is only through extended inquiry that conjectures can be made, perspective examined, theories weighed, and new understandings developed” (Ritchhart, 2008, p. 143).

Maxine Greene, philosophy and aesthetic education researcher, emphasizes the importance of educational art experiences for children of all ages. She says, “Our core concern, of course, is with aesthetic education; but we do not regard aesthetic education as in any sense a fringe undertaking, a species of “frill”. We see it as integral to the development of persons — to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative development” (Greene, 2001, p. 7). She argues that children have a natural and internal draw towards this kind of experience: “Note the emphasis we placed upon the nature of the encounter between the living person and the work of art…It is clearly the case with children today, for all the fact that they possess a “natural” curiosity, a “natural” potential for fantasy life” (Greene, 2001, p. 59). This kind of ‘natural curiosity’ can be shaped into an opportunity for learning and growing.
**Constructing dialogue.** One of the challenges that faces the Carle and its youngest visitors is the question on how to interact with art in the galleries. Since most young children are in the galleries with their parents and caregivers, there is an opportunity for conversation between the children and their adults. This kind of conversation can provide a rich educational experience for the children, and allow them to be exposed to both viewing art in a gallery setting and learning how to interact with art from an early age.

Greene says that conversation and meaning making are integral in encouraging interaction between the viewer and the work of art, and build upon that ‘natural curiosity’. Greene says “… what we try to do through aesthetic education is to move persons to their own creativity by means of active and participant encounters with works of art” (Greene, 2001, p. 96). Dialogue is that active participation:

… the more you can engage in dialogue about it, the more empowered you are to devise situations in which students can engage with what is made present to them. Of course you will not instruct them on what they are supposed to see or hear, even though you will help them notice, help them attend… [for example] Did such figures make you see more, feel something new, discover some meaning you had never thought of before? Some of you may engage your students in dialogue that stems from questions like these (Greene, 2001, p. 104-105).

Rika Burnham also emphasizes dialogue in the galleries as a way to create meaning and emphasizes that this is a way for visitors to approach art, “On the one hand our goal is for people to gain a greater knowledge and understanding of a work, and on the other for them to connect with it personally, directly” (2005, p. 74). This connection is not only
driven by the museum educator, but is dependent on an educator being present and active, “As museum educators, we are obliged to create a structure of engagement, a means of inviting people to appreciate and understand great works. We implicitly promise visitors that our knowledge will guide their looking” (2005 p. 68).

But, how does a museum educator develop appropriate conversation, especially for children-visiters? Greene’s examples of questions to instigate dialogue about art are beneficial in assuring visitors are active and engaged participants, instead of simply viewers. There are other, similar methods of interacting with art developed by educators in the field. Of these methods, the Whole Book Approach and Visual Thinking Strategies are ways in which the Eric Carle Museum practices and develops as a part of their programs both in the galleries and in the library space during story hours. These methods provide a great deal of benefit in helping children interact with the stories and their illustrations and are outlined in the following sections.

**Museum teaching methods**

At the Carle currently, there are teaching methods in place that reflect the museum’s mission and utilize their expertise in the fields of children’s literature and art education. These applications have foundations in developmental and educational perspectives, and have proven success in different areas of the museum’s education department, including teaching in the galleries and daily story-time hours. The following two sections outline the most prominent teaching methods that I found to apply to the Carle’s current repertoire, the Whole Book Approach and Visual Thinking Strategies.
Whole Book Approach. Developed by Megan Lambert, an educator at the Eric Carle, the Whole Book Approach is a method utilized by educators at the museum during their read aloud/story time programs. The basis of its theory is rooted in “read[ing] with children, rather than to children”, and incorporates aspects of progressive education theory, primarily learner-centeredness. Lambert argues that “the picture book is primarily a visual experience” (WBA handout), particularly for pre-reading-aged children, thus the Whole Book Approach places equal emphasis on images and the written story.

In order to engage children and allow them to interact with the illustrations, there are several tactics used by the reader/storyteller to keep open dialogue. One of these methods is allowing children (particularly the kinesthetic learners) to move around the room as they wish during the reading time. By allowing children to perceive and act out movement that appears to them in drawn images, there is more opportunity for them to interact with the book. This is also true for facial expressions and emotional response.

The WBA also allows spontaneous questions and comments at any point during the story which the reader/storyteller then responds to and encourages further discussion in order to create a space of shared learning. For example, during a reading, one or more children may speak out with comments regarding the character’s face or posture, which allows opportunity for the reader to engage with the child about his or her curiosity. Also, children often respond in other ways to illustration, such as laughing or gasping, which allows more opportunities for the reader to involve the children. This also allows for clarification of responses as well as to “demonstrate active listening” (WBA Handout). The goal of this tactic is to encourage children to participate in their own meaning making.
Visual Thinking Strategies are used to elicit both questions and responses from listeners. The reader/storyteller will utilize VTS to encourage discussion about the illustrations, as well as the images that appear on the cover and back of the book, and the inside jackets. More information on VTS follows.

The Whole Book Approach is applied in the museum, but only to their story-time programs. However, there are aspects of this approach that could also be incorporated in the galleries, such as reading the picture books along side the illustrations, allowing and encouraging movement, questions, and other ways of interacting with images and the final finished book, which will be outlined further in the recommendations section.

**Visual Thinking Strategies.** Visual Thinking Strategies, or VTS, is a series of strategies developed by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and museum educator Philip Yenawine at the Museum of Modern Art in the 1980’s (vtshome.org). Its purpose is to encourage critical and creative thinking when interacting with works of art and to facilitate discussion and inquiry. When approaching a work of art (or in the WBA, an illustration on a page), student are asked to do the following:

- Look carefully at works of art
- Talk about what they observe
- Back up their ideas with evidence
- Listen to and consider the views of others
- Discuss many possible interpretations

These strategies are based around three central questions in regards to an image, which teachers/leaders ask after students have time to observe: (1) What’s going on in this picture? (2) What do you see that makes you say that? and (3) What more can we
find? The teacher’s role is then to “paraphrase comments neutrally, point at the area being discussed, [and] link and frame students’ comments” (vtshome.org).

The ideals of VTS are based on concepts of visual literacy, which Philip Yenawine describes as “…the ability to find meaning in imagery. It involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification--naming what one sees--to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels” (Yenawine, 1997, p. 1). The viewer/student/responder is meant to draw on his/her experiences and knowledge of reality in order to make sense of an image; he or she constructs interpretations and offers evaluations based on his/her responses. A group atmosphere allows for a collective understanding—building off of each other and off of the instructor’s guidance.

I have taken different perspectives in order to build a foundation for both outlining and furthering the educational aspects and programs at the Eric Carle Museum. These theories: sensorimotor development, preoperational thinking, aesthetic education, dialogue, the Whole Book Approach, and Visual Thinking Strategies all combine to target what I believe is ideal when developing a museum space and programs that combine early childhood visitors and art viewing. These theories informed my work by helping me to create connections between visitor responses. These responses were unsurprisingly consistent with the literature, and many of the issues and concerns that parents and caregivers had were relevant to the theories discussed in this section. Because of these similarities, I was able to develop cohesive recommendations that are heavily based in theory as well as actual case study and visitor response.
Interviews and Research

Visitor feedback and analysis

In order to work with the museum’s goal of creating a more child-friendly atmosphere, I focused my interests on identifying and analyzing visitor feedback. It became clear that my goal would be to determine how children are interacting with the gallery space, how the library and art space can support gallery visiting, and how to improve on both young visitor experiences and the experiences of their caregivers visiting with the children in the space. Note that a complete summary of responses is located in the appendix.

Question process and my role at the museum

I collaborated with the Eric Carle Museum’s education staff to develop an in-person questionnaire. The education director mentioned that museum educators have asked visitors to leave feedback through post-visit questionnaires before, but there were a very small number of people willing to respond through this method. We decided that interviewing guests in the galleries would be a new, and possibly a successful way to get visitor feedback “on-the-spot”. The education director and I developed a questionnaire that worked both with the needs and questions the museum had as well as questions that would be appropriate for my study. This questionnaire can be found in the appendix.

of the variety of questions that were appropriate to ask in the kind of interview setting that I was conducting, which I would describe as semistructured. Merriam defines a semistructured interview as one that “includes a mix of more and less structured interview questions” and requires “specific data… from all respondents” with “no predetermined wording or order” (Merriam, 89).

This text also suggested that the questions be varied in style and subject matter, as a means to elicit a variety of responses. I aimed to base my questions around six types of questions that Merriam describes as “good questions”. A few of my questions, such as ‘Where are you visiting from?’ and ‘What are the ages of your children and your relationship to them’, Merriam would describe as “background/demographic questions” which are relevant to my study because of the specific target on early childhood. The questions, ‘What about the exhibit engaged your child?’ and ‘What about the exhibit engaged you?’ would fall under “feelings questions”, which were valuable because I am interested in spatial design and its effects on the child and caregiver visitor experience. The questions that elicited suggestions for change fell under “opinions and values questions”, which aim to find “a person’s beliefs or opinions” (Merriam, 96).

The museum staff made a sign on the front desk that read “There will be a graduate student conducting interviews on guest experiences today,” so that visitors were made aware of my presence and purpose.

I went to the museum on three different occasions to conduct interviews during the month of December 2013, usually during the afternoon to avoid the lull that comes at lunchtime. On all three occasions, there were very few visitors at the museum, due to
typically low visitor numbers in the winter months. In fact, on any given day there were less than a handful of families visiting, and I rarely saw visitors without children.

I toured the museum upon entry, first scanning the galleries and then the library, café, and art space. On each of the days I visited, the galleries were completely empty. Most often, the families were split between the art space and the café. While I was hoping to interview guests in the galleries, as the focus of my research is to analyze guest and young-child-visitor experiences in the galleries in particular, the art and café spaces worked well for approaching families because the children were occupied and the caregivers were seated and not motivated to move around the space. When I approached families, I had a folder with interview forms and greeted them with, “Hello, I’m conducting interviews on visitors’ experiences with children and I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions regarding your visit.” All of the families I approached were willing to speak with me. I asked most of the families a majority of the questions on the questionnaire, but made sure to both write down extraneous comments that they made as well as ask additional questions if a guest showed a particular interest in one or more areas of the questionnaire. A total of twelve visitors were willing to interview with me.

The children of the interviewees were aged ten months to six years and the Yelp.com reviews chosen reflected families that had children up to eight years old. The interviewees were a combination of members and non-members. Most of the interviewees who lived in the area were members, while visiting guests from out of town were not. As one visitor mentioned, “If you live in the area and have children, you have a membership to the Carle”. All of the visitors interviewed had young children with them, although the relationships between the adults and children ranged from parents to
caregivers to grandparents. I also emailed the survey to two different families with young children who visit the museum often, one family who has a membership and one family who does not.

To supplement my findings, I also chose some recent reviews from the review website Yelp.com, and specifically chose reviews that corresponded with the questions on my questionnaire. Yelp.com is an online web source that provides a place for people to review sites that they visit (from restaurants, to recreational facilities, to museums and cultural institutions). Users can write descriptive reviews and rate their experiences. People looking for recommendations on where to eat, play, or relax can visit Yelp.com and gain insight into other peoples’ experiences. I found that these reviews were often more candid, since people can remain somewhat anonymous when posting through this site. In my summary, I will identify when a response is coming from a Yelp.com review.

**Summary of responses**

**Gallery experiences.** Since my work is primarily interested in the visitor experiences in the galleries, I first asked guests if they visited the galleries with their children and what their children responded to most in the gallery spaces. The responses ranged significantly, and it seemed that visitors had very different experiences in the galleries. Many of the positive responses were not about the art in the galleries, but experiences that children had in the spaces regardless of the art.

On the positive end of the spectrum, one visitor said that, “the kids enjoyed the scavenger hunts”. Another visitor responded that, “The boys are really young, so they were actually more interested in the open space in the exhibition halls than the art. M
liked finding the birds (pigeons) in the Mo Willems exhibit”. Another visitor attended a special exhibit with life-sized costumed characters of the Mo Willems books, and said that her son “enjoyed meeting Elephant and Piggie”.

In terms of negative responses, many of them were focused around the fact that the visitors’ children had trouble interacting with the art in the galleries due to their age. One visitor said, “It’s been challenging to bring my son to look at the art in the galleries, simply because he is too young. The last time we tried to walk through the galleries, he had a hard time keeping his hands off the pieces”. In a Yelp.com review, one visitor said, “I can honestly say that in probably a dozen and a half visits, our kids have not once been engaged by the main galleries (even if the topic or author featured has been a fave.)”.

Three other visitors made the comments that the galleries were “not at all interesting to children,” that “it seemed like it was geared toward older kids” and “it didn’t seem like it was made for children”. One visitor responded positively to non-art related aspects, but negatively to the art and said, “He enjoyed reading the books and what was on the TV, but he couldn’t see any of the illustrations”.

Two visitors responded negatively to the available art in the galleries, and said that there were, “not enough Eric Carle works” and in a Yelp.com review said, “The art gallery was rather limited. I think they advertise 80 pieces or so on their website. I would've thought that for all the picture books sold over all these many years they might have scrounged up more than 80”.

A few other responses were in regards to functional aspects of the gallery space including the responses, “the labels were too small,” “she responded to the more vibrant displays,” and in a Yelp.com review, “the space was frustratingly un-interactive.”
I asked the visitors if they would be interested in information regarding how to interact in the galleries with their children, and received unanimous “yes” responses.

**Art space and library experiences.** I am also interested in guest and child visitor experiences in other parts of the museum, including the art space and library. Because many of the visitors are not visiting the galleries, it is interesting to see where they are spending their time and what their experiences are in these areas. One visitor remarked that her children “love the art studio- especially the magnet board with magnets!” Many of the Yelp.com comments focused on these other areas, and many of them had positive things to say about the art space. One review said, “They have people in [the art space] to help the kids get stuff/make stuff and there is a lot of space for their brains to create great pictures,” while another said, “Our kids were 8 and 4 when we were there and they LOVED the hands on art room”.

Some of the Yelp.com reviews highlighted aspects of the art space that were less than positive, including the following, which surprisingly, reflect the same space but two very opposite experiences:

We did venture into Carle's project studio, however, and found one of the employees who handed my two kiddos two rectangles of paper, two wooden sticks, pointed at some tools and random supplies in the middle of the table and said, "our theme today is animals". That was the extent of their advertised "direction". I'd hoped for more.

The art room, for instance, which is large and well appointed, is not a place for open exploration by children. It's completely prescriptive - the activities are selected by the staff and are fairly limited (they rotate them from day to day or week to week, but you have a very limited choice).
One of these reviews highlights the lack of direction, while the other emphasizes that the art space is entirely too directive, but both parents seemed to be looking for a richer, more open-ended guided experience for their children.

One of the Yelp.com reviews commented on their library experience, “The library was a nice refuge when she was little and [is] still nice to have down time in”. The library is also the space where story-time programs occur, and I have seen visitors in this space most often when these programs are happening, and not often during regular visits.

**Other questions and responses.** I also asked which other museums the visitors visited with their children to get a sense of what kinds of child-caregiver experiences they have had elsewhere. Of the museums mentioned, the Acton Discovery Museum in Acton, MA was mentioned four times. The Holyoke Children’s museum was mentioned six times (the most of any other museum) and is the closest children’s museum to our location in Amherst. The Boston Children’s museum was mentioned three times, and the New England Air Museum and Trolley Museum in CT were each mentioned once. Of the museums mentioned, the top three (Acton Discovery, Holyoke Children’s, and Boston Children’s) are all very hands-on spaces for children of all ages. Unfortunately, none of the museums mentioned have exhibitions focused on children’s literature during the time of this study; however, the New York Public Library did.

**Children’s Literature**

In the introductory brochure to the New York Public Library’s temporary exhibition, *The ABC of It: Why Children’s Books Matter*, it states, “For more than three
centuries, books made with the young in mind have served as indispensable gateways to literature, art, and knowledge of the world.” (New York Public Library, 2014). Children’s literature provides an opportunity for children to become exposed to culture wherever these books can be accessed. Children’s books play a huge role in modern education, and many children in the US are exposed to these books from infancy. In schools, children’s literature is combined with all kinds of curricula and themes - from math, to social studies and social justice, to identity and diversity awareness - to offer opportunities for children to further understand a topic and help them to develop their own personal meanings. Text and visual art provide a variety of stimuli to awaken children’s thoughts, feelings, memories, and senses and connect them with a larger world.

In terms of visual art, picture book illustrations offer many children an introduction to viewing art and exposure to the work of professional artists. Since “the mid-1800’s… talented artists- led by England’s Walter Crane, Kate Greenaway, and Randolph Caldecott- flocked from the allied realms of satirical illustration, printmaking, and graphic design” to begin illustrating picture books. Soon, “the genre evolved rapidly via bold experimentation” and today, with the expansion of digital publishing, “it continues to mature as an art form” (New York Public Library, 2014).

In picture books, illustrations can help children develop critical skills, such as meaning making and developing characters and storylines. These skills are also beneficial to viewing art in a museum or gallery setting. Children, like adults, can view an illustration and wonder about the figures in it (What are they doing? Why are they doing it?), they can view a setting and be curious about what that place is like, and they can react and respond to the work based on their knowledge and experiences. The benefit of
picture book illustrations, as opposed to any art displayed in a gallery or museum, is that they are targeted towards young people and their unique knowledge and experience base, they can often be familiar to the children who may have seen the books at home or in school, and they still represent a mature art form.

Museums and other cultural institutions have utilized children’s book illustrations in their exhibitions because of these benefits and in 2014, the New York Public Library became no exception when it hosted an exhibition dedicated to children’s literature that heavily features picture book art. This exhibition was designed for the NYPL to engage the public in the conversation of why children’s literature plays an important role in our society.
Exhibition on Children’s Literature at the New York Public Library

Physical Description

An exhibition at the New York Public Library’s main branch in Bryant Park opened in 2014 to glowing reviews. *The ABC of it: Why Children’s Books Matter*, curated by author, historian, and critic Leonard S. Marcus, is an exhibition designed to display children’s literature as cultural and artistic reflections of our societies throughout time. The exhibition “draws from collections across the Library to present literature for children and teens against a sweeping backdrop of history, the arts, popular culture, and technological change” (NYPL, p. 3). I attended this free exhibition on Wednesday, the 26th of March 2014. While the Library offers free, guided tours, I observed the exhibition on my own accord.

At the entrance of the exhibition hall, there are free newspaper-style publications that reflect the organization of the hall ahead. The exhibition is set into six different spaces, each with a different theme, which flow into each other in an organized and clearly defined way. Each of the spaces has a title and wall description of what the space is setting out to represent. These spaces are titled in the following order: Visions of Childhood, Off the Shelf: Giving and Getting Books, Raising a Ruckus, From Page to Stage and Beyond, Artistry of the Picture Book, and Storied City: New York. The hall is set amongst the Library’s statuesque backdrop, with tall, vaulted ceilings and archways, which the exhibition utilizes with high and large wall exhibits.

Each space has books on display, and many spaces have objects and interactive exhibits. Many of the books on display are original copies that the Library owns, and are behind glass. Each of the displayed books has a title and a descriptive label next to it,
that outline the relationship of the piece to the themed space. Some of the rooms also have anchored folders of picture books and chapter books for visitors to look through, as well.

The interactive exhibits vary from room to room and offer a variety of different ways for adults and children to interact with each room. For example, in the Visions of Childhood room, a small car reflecting Milo’s vehicle in children’s book *The Phantom Tollbooth* offers children an opportunity to sit in and role-play (see Figure 1 on next page).

Another exhibit in this space is a life-size, bright green wall painting that mirrors the room layout in *Goodnight Moon*, complete with a window to sit in, and books on a side table that can be read and played with to act out the story.
A small, child-sized, pass-through space cut into a wall that separates two of the rooms has a painting of the White Rabbit from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, denoting an “underground” feeling and invites the child into the rabbit hole.

The exhibition space also makes use of texture quite a bit, with a hairy wall reflective of *Where the Wild Things Are*.

Also, a wall covered in a grassy material in the Artistry of the Picture Book space brings *The Secret Garden* to life, complete with enclosed reading bench and “hidden” books in the garden wall.
Some of the rooms also have book and film memorabilia, including the original toys for Winnie the Pooh and friends and Mary Poppins’s umbrella from the Disney film.

Each of the rooms makes use of color and light to play with the theme and the design of the space. In the *Raising a Ruckus* space, there is a long hallway with high walls painted black, with low-set books backlit along each of the walls.

Throughout the exhibit, television screens offer opportunities to stop and watch videos relevant to the exhibit space. In the Artistry of the Picture Book room, a screen shows a couple-minute looping video, which shows Eric Carle collaging some of his famous books. Hand-held speakers offer guests an opportunity to listen to the film without disturbing other visitors.
A video screen at the end of the exhibition hall has a seating area and displays children’s book trivia questions with quick-following answers, for visitors to play while resting.

**Comparing The ABC of it and the Carle galleries**

The physical floor space of the NYPL exhibition was designed very differently from the Eric Carle galleries. As seen in the photographs, the exhibition at the NYPL uses specially designed walls to section off a larger, preexisting room, while the Carle’s galleries are three, white walled rooms. These walls are sometimes painted corresponding to the exhibition. One of the Carle’s galleries has movable walls inside the space, creating separate sections of one room, which are moved and sometimes painted to correspond with the aesthetic of the exhibitions.

The NYPL exhibition’s walls are colored and correspond to books that are being featured within each designated space. Many of the walls are textured with fabrics, also connecting physical space with the literature. The temporary walls at NYPL ranged in height and shape and were distinctively thematic.

The Eric Carle museum’s galleries are solely focused on the art of the picture books, but a couple of display cases also highlight the process of art making (i.e.: Eric Carle’s collages and storyboarding). There are not obvious evidences of reference to the stories behind the images, or the connections between the stories and the art. This is a significant difference from *The ABC of it*, which is primarily focused on the literature, but also expresses an emphasis on art and illustration. Specifically, one exhibit room (*Artistry*
of the Picture Book) was highlighting illustration, although every area of the exhibition had images from books.

The main personal takeaway from the exhibition at the New York Public Library was that there many ways to encourage children to interact with literature and picture books in a museum space. Picture books and illustrations offer an abundance of opportunities for child engagement, if the child-mind is at the center of exhibition development.
Recommendations

The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book art offers numerous prospects for interacting with young children in the community, as well as becoming a place for families with young children to visit as a destination. The collection of picture book art is unparalleled. The building is spacious, the staff is knowledgeable, and the content of the galleries has the opportunity to be a gateway for children to be introduced to viewing art in a museum or gallery space. The familiarity of the artwork is a bridge between home or school and a museum setting. By adding big or small changes, such as gallery design and programming as well as assisting caregivers in interactions with their children, the Carle can improve on issues that my research suggests are clearly requested by their visitors.

Physical space and question-guides

Perhaps the most significant recommendation I would make would be to hang the artwork at child height. This was an issue brought up through my interviews and in Yelp.com reviews, and is a small change, but would make a big difference. At this point, the art is hung at ADA-suggested adult eye-level. If children wanted to view the art, they would have to be picked up, or crane their necks. If the Carle wants to encourage children to interact with art, they absolutely have to be able to see it. This could be done in the main gallery rooms, underneath the art hung at adult-height, or separate, shorter walls could be added to create a ‘children’s gallery’.

“The use of visual communication in panels is an easy way to enfranchise (not only) the pre-literate. Photographs and video of artists, the art-making process, and how the exhibition was planned and hung communicate the context within which art is created
and displayed” (Mai & Gibson, 2011, p. 362). This concept is key, and could definitely be done to a greater extent within the Carle galleries. Showing process also relates to preoperational thinking, addressed later in this section.

In order to help parents and caregivers assist their children in viewing and responding to art, handouts with VTS-style (‘What do you see?’) questions could be offered at the front desk. The front desk attendant could give a short 1-minute introduction to the handout, which could highlight themes, characters, or key art pieces for parents and caregivers to focus on in the galleries. By having the front-desk attendant show parents and caregivers of young children how the questions work, they are engaging with them and making the information more accessible; they are helping parents and caregivers be the teachers when educators are not available. Offering a similar handout in the galleries might prove to be confusing. Even this small and simple gesture would encourage adults to bring their children to the galleries and give them examples of ways to interact with their children and the art. Because parents unanimously answered ‘yes’ to my question of whether they would appreciate tips on how to bring children to the galleries, this seems like a very easy and necessary way to respond. However, Rika Burnham (as mentioned on page 18) designates the museum educator’s role to be one that facilitates meaning making. Therefore, the presence of an actual educator in training and teaching caregivers is ideal.
Aesthetic education and dialogue

Maxine Greene and Rika Burnham emphasize that dialogue is integral to creating aesthetic experiences in an art space. Museum educators, trained on methods such as WBA and VTS can create these opportunities at a variety of different times during a child’s visit. Usually, there is an employee present in the galleries, or at least walking around the museum during open hours. This employee can be trained on how to engage with children and their caregivers, and offer questions to encourage valuable conversation. By asking an appropriate question or two to children and caregivers, this conversation is started, and caregivers are directly given examples of how to interact with their child and the art.

Another way to encourage educator participation in dialogue building is through creating connections between the galleries and the library and art-making spaces. “Art production need not be confined to education programs but can be made available to private visitors (who form the majority of the visitorship to museums) in the main gallery space, ideally in front of the original artwork” (Mai & Gibson, 2011, p. 363). The story-time programs offer a prime opportunity for educator interaction and conversation building because they are pre-set times when both children and educators are present and available. However, these story-times could be in much greater collaboration with the art in the galleries, and educator-facilitated viewing the in galleries before or after a story is read would structure a connecting thread between the areas of the museum. These collaborations, between the spaces in the museum, would reinforce relevant theories and concepts such as art making, book making, line, color, motion, feeling, etc. The same kind of collaboration could be made through the art-making space. An educator could
engage children in dialogue about a particular piece and then have them create something relevant in the art-making space.

**Sensory integration and play in the galleries**

As mentioned previously, the ‘think tank’ at the Eric Carle Museum identified the galleries as a space that parents with young children were not visiting as much as preferred. During all of my visits to the museum, I was never able to interview guests in the gallery due to the lack of presence. Consistent visitor interview responses as well as a voiced concern from museum staff identified the lack of hands-on and interactive experiences with children to be a vital reason why there was a lack of young children in the gallery space. Since sensorimotor experiences are critical in engaging with young children, integrating opportunities for children to physically experiences exhibits through movement, touch, sound, and light are highly recommended. The exhibition at the New York Public Library on children’s literature has multiple chances for children to interact physically with the exhibition space and provides outstanding examples of how to incorporate sensory-relevant design and encourage play. These are present throughout the exhibition room and are located in every space as one travels through the different sections. These displays and examples are the foundation for my recommendations for the Eric Carle Museum.

Sensory opportunities can be integrated in a museum space in many different ways. Texture is a medium that is utilized by the NYPL exhibition and is an easy and simple way to encourage children to interact through touch. By adding a textured wall or object that corresponds with a gallery theme, children would have a chance to make a
connection between a story and their physical environment. Eric Carle utilizes a variety of paper and fabric types in his art and children could respond to these in sheet form or glued onto a flat surface.

Another way that the Carle could integrate touch and texture is through objects in the room, such as stuffed or plastic animals and figures that represent images in the photos. These objects could be physical literal or figurative representations of what the images would look and feel like if they were in real form. For example, a feathery pigeon and a fluffy bunny in the Mo Willems gallery space could sit on a floor space that a child-visitor could pick up, carry around, and return when done in the gallery. This is an easy way to encourage the youngest children to play, and offer a chance for creating connections with the art.

Colored walls corresponding with story themes offer a simple way for an exhibit to stand out. Small spaces built for children, such as crawl spaces, nooks, small chairs, and floor cushions provide an opportunity for children to be comfortable in a gallery, and take time to stop and read a book with a caregiver or friend or view art from a different angle. A puppet theater or stage could provide more opportunities for children to interact with characters and stories and would also offer an opportunity for children to engage in play. This kind of space could be set in a corner, as to not disturb guests viewing the art.

**Preoperational thinking**

As a way to integrate the theory of preoperational thinking with hands-on activities, the Carle could offer an exhibition designed to show the process of creating picture books, illustrations, or collages and offer art-making programs or exhibits in the
galleries to correspond with the art and exhibit displayed. The hands-on aspect could be something small, such as paper folding, or a simple crayon drawing, but would be a way to engage children with the art in the galleries. This kind of project could also be tied in with art making in the art room. From my experiences and interviews, there seems to be a variance between what child-visitors are making in the art room and the art that is displayed in the galleries.

Another way to foster valuable connection making is by having child-visitors in the art space visit the galleries with a docent, and the art being made could correspond with a particular work of art. The art space could also offer worksheets, which request that children find certain images in the galleries, or worksheets that offer children a chance to sketch their favorite work of art and then come back to the art space to add color through a variety of mediums.

Another way to incorporate preoperational thinking is to display children’s art made while visiting the museum in a children’s gallery. This is currently incorporated in school and community group collaboration projects, but could also be built into the work made in the art space, and submissions made by children who visit the Carle could be displayed. This kind of display would show that the cycle of art making does not end at completion, but also with viewing and appreciating. Further, child-made books could be incorporated in a small library somewhere in the museum.
Conclusion

The opportunities and benefits that literature written for children provides are expansive and essential for developing a child’s ability to play an active role in modern-day culture. Picture book illustrations offer ways for children to engage with visual art from home and school, but also in cultural institutions seeking to encourage children-visitor. These illustrations can provide a familiarity that can be comforting to children who may otherwise be intimidated by traditional art museums. Illustrations also offer a wide variety of relevant projects and activities that engage even the youngest children in viewing art and becoming a part of the artistic process. The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art has a unique opportunity in that it houses an impressive collection and can utilize all of the benefits that come with displaying children’s picture book illustrations in galleries. This kind of opportunity also brings many challenges, which the Carle is actively working on adjusting and improving. It is important to note that since this study, the think tank has made recommendations to the museum as well as some changes in the direction of making the galleries more child-friendly including educational literature, a summer program, and an online gallery for visitors to submit their own work. The Carle also receive a grant to create family engagement materials written for application in the gallery space.

Children’s museums seeking to include art in their exhibition space and art museums looking to attract children can also benefit from original picture book illustrations, and can participate in encouraging young children to appreciate and be inquisitive about visual art. The values and skills that children can learn to develop through visual art appreciation can stick with them through their lives, and perhaps act as
encouragement to visit art museums as adolescents and adults. By connecting with children at an early age, museums in turn can help to strengthen their relevance in the modern-day and help to ensure their survival in the future. “It is our hope that if today’s children are invited into art museums as citizens they will, in turn, grow into adults who will strive to entrench cultural rights for all” (Mai & Gibson, 2011, p. 368).

As educators, we should strive to encourage each child to have opportunity to connect with and learn to appreciate visual art. We can advocate for aesthetic education by becoming active facilitators in their museum visits and by helping parents and caregivers learn how to actively engage their children as well. The world of picture book art is an incredible and valuable resource that has infinite potential in teaching and connecting with children, and museums can and should utilize this resource if they seek to reach out to young and promising museum visitors.
References


VTS. “What is VTS?”. (www.vtshome.org).

WBA Handout. PDF. (http://www.simmons.edu/enews/alumnet/harris/WholeBookApproach.pdf)

Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Which exhibitions did you visit today?
   - The Art of Eric Carle: Friends
   - Natalie Merchant & Barbara McClintock: Leave Your Sleep (opens 11/26)
   - Seriously Silly: A Decade of Art & Whimsy by Mo Willems

2. Which exhibition (current or prior) most engaged your child?
   2a. What about that exhibition engaged your child?

3. Which exhibition (current or prior) most engaged you?
   3a. What about that exhibition engaged you?

4. What other museums have you taken your child(ren) to?

5. We are looking to make our exhibitions more engaging and inviting to children and parents. What suggestions do you have that might be useful for us?

6. What is your relationship to the child(ren) you came with? (parent, grandparent, caretaker) How old is/are the child(ren)?

7. Did you (or will you) attend the story-time program during your visit?
8. How often does your visit include attending a program? Always  Usually  Seldom  Never

9. Are you a member?

10. Where are you from? ____________________________________________
    (city/state)

11. If you would be interested in giving us feedback in the future as we explore ways to make our exhibitions more engaging for young children, please fill in your contact information below. We will not use your information for any other purpose.

   Name_________________________________________________________

   Email________________________________________________________

   Phone________________________________________________________
Questionnaire Responses

| # of visitors with children interviewed at the museum: 7 | # of visitors interviewed via email questionnaires: 2 |

1. Which exhibitions did you visit today?
   - The Art of Eric Carle: Friends
   - Natalie Merchant & Barbara McClintock: Leave Your Sleep (opens 11/26)
   - Seriously Silly: A Decade of Art & Whimsy by Mo Willems

-5 interviewed said they visited none of the exhibitions.
-4 interviewed said they visited all of the exhibitions.

2. Which exhibition (current or prior) most engaged your child?
   2a. What about that exhibition engaged your child?
   - He recognized some of the images.
   - He enjoyed reading the books and what was on the TV, but he couldn’t see any of the illustrations.
   - The boys are really young, so they were actually more interested in the open space in the exhibition halls than they art. [M] liked finding the birds (pigeons) in the Mo Willems exhibit.
   - It’s been challenging to bring my son to look at the art in the galleries, simply because he is too young. The last time we tried to walk through the galleries, he had a hard time keeping his hands off the pieces.
   - Not enough Eric Carle works.
   - Not at all interesting to children.
   - The kids enjoyed the scavenger hunts.
   - It didn’t seem like it was made for children.
   - He enjoyed meeting Elephant and Piggie.
   - It seemed like it was geared toward older kids.
   - She responded to the more vibrant displays and art.
   - The labels were too small.

3. Which exhibition (current or prior) most engaged you?
   3a. What about that exhibition engaged you? This question was omitted from live interviews as to focus on the child’s perspective. Two interviewees responded via email:
   - The art from the books (some of which I wasn’t previously familiar with), and watching my son “meet” the characters.
   - I had previously seen a lot of Eric Carle’s background and process, but I loved seeing the information about Mo Willems- the sketches and the little back stories behind different books.
4. What other museums have you taken your child(ren) to?

- Acton Discovery Museum (x4).
- Boston Children’s Museum (x3).
- Holyoke Children’s Museum (x6).
- New England Air Museum.
- Trolley Museum in East Windsor, CT.

5. We are looking to make our exhibitions more engaging and inviting to children and parents. What suggestions do you have that might be useful for us?

- Buttons, or other ways to interact.
- Cushions or bean bags for the kids.
- A variety of media would keep his interest more.
- Music would be great.
- Whenever possible, it would be great if the library story time on Friday’s could feature a story from a current or upcoming exhibition.
- There should be things to touch.

8. What is your relationship to the child(ren) you came with? (parent, grandparent, caretaker) How old is/are the child(ren)?

- 8 said they were attending with their children.
- 1 said they were attending with their grandchild.
- Ages of children: 10 months, 18 months, 2, 3, 3½, 4, 5, 6, 2

10. Did you (or will you) attend the story-time program during your visit?

- All responded, “no.”

11. How often does your visit include attending a program? Always Usually Seldom Never

- 2 responded seldom.
- 7 responded never.
12. Are you a member?

-2 responded “yes.”
-7 responded “no.”

13. Where are you from? _________________________________
   (city/state)

-7 responded that they live locally in Western Massachusetts (Amherst, MA, Northampton, MA, Hadley, etc.)
-1 responded that they live in Central Massachusetts (1 hour away).
-1 responded that they live in Boston, Massachusetts (2 hours away).

14. If you would be interested in giving us feedback in the future as we explore ways to make our exhibitions more engaging for young children, please fill in your contact information below. We will not use your information for any other purpose.

   Name____________________________________________________

   Email___________________________________________________

   Phone____________________________________________________

Yelp.com review excerpts

- The space was frustratingly un-interactive.
- The art gallery was rather limited. I think they advertise 80 pieces or so on their website. I would've thought that for all the picture books sold over all these many years they might have scrounged up more than 80.

- We did venture into Carle's project studio, however, and found one of the employees who handed my two kiddos two rectangles of paper, two wooden sticks, pointed at some tools and random supplies in the middle of the table and said "our theme today is animals". That was the extent of their advertised "direction". I'd hoped for more.

- They have people in [the art space] to help the kids get stuff/make stuff and there is a lot of space for their brains to create great pictures.

- The library was a nice refuge when the girl was little and still nice to have down time in.

- The art room, for instance, which is large and well-appointed, is not a place for open exploration by children. It's completely prescriptive - the activities are selected by the staff and are fairly limited (they rotate them from day to day or week to week, but you have a very limited choice).

- Our kids were 8 and 4 when we were there and they LOVED the hands on art room.
December 11, 2014

Dear Jennifer Cusworth,

I give permission for you to include the name of The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in your Independent Study. I understand that it will be available as a pdf through the Bank Street Library online catalog.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Alexandra Kennedy
Executive Director
The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art